

What others are saying about  
*The Second Coming*

*“Beautifully written, dark and eerie vision of an apocalyptic future.”*

— **Margaret Weis, New York Times Bestselling Author**

*"David H. Burton is a dark new talent in the genre. This one will make you leave the lights on for a week!"*

— **Cathy Clamp, USA Today Bestseller**

Words of the Prophecy:  
The Second Coming

by **David H. Burton**

Published by: David H. Burton - Smashwords Edition  
Copyright © 2010 by David H. Burton  
Cover art and design by David H. Burton  
Monk © Sven Rabe – 3D Artist – [www.3dbasemesh.com](http://www.3dbasemesh.com)

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. All rights reserved. No part of this publication can be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, without permission in writing from David H. Burton.

Visit David at <http://davidhburton.com>  
Words of the Prophecy: <http://wordsoftheprophecy.com>

### **Smashwords Edition, License Notes**

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment. Although this ebook is DRM-free, this ebook may not be re-sold. If you would like to share this book with another person, feel free to do so, or purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then feel free to return to [Smashwords.com](http://Smashwords.com) and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

## **Acknowledgements**

First, I would like to thank my agent, Christi Cardenas of The Plains Agency, for her unrelenting support. It has been an incredible journey up to this point and I can't imagine having anyone else at my side.

Needless to say, I owe a huge thank-you to Margaret Weis and Cathy Clamp for taking the time to read and blurb the novel. Thank you!!

And to my parents, I thank you for instilling in me the love of the written word. It is the greatest gift you ever gave me.

This book is dedicated to Humberto Carolo: best friend, loving partner, and the greatest father I know.  
Thank-you for your love and support through all the years.

This book would not be possible without you.

*Then he told me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy, because the time is near.  
Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does  
right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy.  
Behold, I am coming soon!"*

(Book of Revelations 22:10-12)

## Prologue

Catherine looked at her watch. The battery had passed on to more alkaline pastures, so it read the same as it always did — quarter to eleven. Its delicate, cartoon hands were frozen in a timeless Charleston pose. It was a reminder of simpler times, of safer times.

Groaning, she pried her backside from a faded canvas lawnchair and leaned it against the wall. She fisted her hands on her ample hips.

“Where is my Ben?”

The question was aimed at no one in particular. It might have been the cat she spoke to, but the cat was dead — three days gone.

*Sadie. Poor Sadie.*

She stared into the distance, beyond the edge of scotch pines and white cedars. Dark clouds hovered on the horizon.

“He's not usually gone this long.”

Catherine grunted her displeasure and opened the screen door. She strode into the kitchen where she grabbed a plastic cup and dipped it into a cast-iron pot. Her lips quivered over the piss-warm liquid.

*Water.*

She hated it. She tired of boiling it every day. What she wanted was a tall glass of lemonade — pink, with three ice cubes. Yet Catherine knew there would never be lemonade again.

She forced herself to swallow and took her cup with her to the orange sofa bed. Her reflection stared back at her from a dust covered relic on the floor. Its black plastic casing had barely a scratch.

Catherine missed television, if only for its connection to the remainder of the world. It stopped working after the Shift, two years prior.

Two years since the world fell apart.

*Two years since everything went to shit.*

For months she had wept, longing for everything lost to her; her parents, her friends, her brother — all gone.

Yet Ben had helped her through it. Ben was her life now. There was only her Ben.

Her gaze wandered to a tattered blue afghan crumpled in the corner.

*And poor Sadie.*

The cat had been snatched up by vile beasts, things she had never heard of. They crouched low to the ground, yet could stand on two feet. At first she thought wolf, but they were weightier and crooked. And they possessed a cunning no animal should. Catherine had no idea of their origins. She knew only that they were unnatural — not something of this world.

At least, not the world Catherine knew.

Her Ben assured her they were gone, but Catherine wasn't convinced. Even that morning she thought she heard their hideous cackling in the distance. She pleaded with Ben to avoid hunting in the forest, yet he refused to listen. They needed more food, he said; she ate for two now. So, dressed in his khaki pants and green plaid shirt, her Benjamin Green stepped out the door with makeshift bow in hand.

Catherine bit her lip and placed her hands over her swollen belly, a reaction she was prone to of late. He had been gone for the entire day.

In the distance, the storm churned and a harsh rumbling shook the walls.

*Soon the winds will come.*

She wondered how their cottage still stood, battered as it was; as if their insignificant lives weren't worthy of the storms that swept the lands. She looked back to the television, and it sat as a sedentary reminder of what once was. The man on the newscast said the Earth had shifted on its axis, aligning itself with the magnetic poles.

She continued to stare at the lifeless screen, remembering what it had shown, as if the little black

box was a window to the past. She could still see the darkened skies torched with volcanic fire, the ground splitting open to swallow cities, and land masses arising from the depths of the sea. The Shift had released some kind of darkness upon the land, and brought with it creatures that had no business walking the Earth. Dead relatives could be seen in spirit form, shadowy creatures swept past windows in the night, and spirits rose even in the light of day. Then the newscasts stopped.

*Everything stopped.*

For months the storms persisted, the earthquakes continued, and life in some twisted form endured. The east and west coasts were lost, a cloud of death drifted through the land, and ordinary people manifested strange abilities.

Catherine knew all about the latter.

She said nothing to Ben for fear of rejection. It happened to her, sometime after she got pregnant; she was able to do things she never could before, like when she called forth a power that scared off the wolf-like beasts. She had no idea what it was or how to summon it again, but it terrified her. Her Ben called these things sorcery, witchcraft, an abomination to God.

She rose from the sofa, passing the antique grandfather clock with its mechanical sparrow dangling over its perch. Twenty minutes before nine, it read. It still worked.

A chill sat on the air, or perhaps it was just a cold notion coursing through her veins. Either way, the result was the same, and Catherine waddled over to the wood-burning stove. Her toes were cold.

She ripped pages from an old science textbook, grabbed a small log, and shoved them in. Ben always tended the fire. Never let it go out, he said.

The flames ravaged the paper, and the fire flared to life once more. She remained for a moment, warming her feet and hands, before shuffling back out the door.

The storm no longer ambled in the distance, but loomed on the edge of the trees. The wind tousled her scarlet hair, and Catherine watched as destiny floated towards her with dark clouds clenched in its fists. At the edge of the woods, the great pines bowed to the wind's might.

"Where is my Ben?" she asked.

There was no reply.

She held on to her ragged yellow dress as she peered over the railing, and pellets of frigid rain pricked her skin. On the borders of the forest, mounds of creeping phlox littered the ground with their trails of blue flowers. They spread out endlessly, never dying off. Winter was no more in this part of the world; a place where snow once offered a light dusting at Christmas — rare, but beautiful nonetheless.

*Yet never again.*

The Shift had seen to that.

The wind sighed through the leaning trees, and her nostrils caught the scent of musk. Movement skirted the shadows, and hope surged within her.

"Ben?" she called.

Silence.

Then wicked laughter.

Catherine stared into the woods, and as lightning speared the sky something caught her attention. She wobbled down the wooden staircase. Her pale hands gripped the railing. The steps groaned under her weight.

Lightning pulsed again across the heavens, illuminating the copse of swaying trees once more.

"No," she breathed.

Her heart pounded in her chest, and one of her tattered shoes fell off as she raced to the edge of the woods.

"No," she muttered, her worst fears being realized, "no, no, no."

She stooped to the ground.

Lying among the delicate blue flowers was an arm, severed at the shoulder. The hand still clutched a makeshift arrow. She might have fooled herself were it not for the green plaid sleeve.



“My Ben,” she sobbed, caressing the hand.

Twigs snapped and Catherine turned. A wolf-like muzzle inched toward her face, viscous tongue licking jagged teeth.

The child inside her stirred and thunder pounded in her chest.

The dripping maw opened.

Catherine clutched Ben’s arm. His blood stained her fingers.

She called upon anything that would help her.

*At any cost.*

“Please.”

## Chapter 1

The masses received the Lord's blessing and confessed for transgressions against their fellow man. With strained voices, they praised the Lord with song, and begged forgiveness for the inborn sins of their self-righteous souls. And as the church bells pealed, dismissing the congregation from the stiff wooden pews that reeked of pine oil, Paine Robertson slipped out the door like the serpent out of Eden.

He walked across the dirt road, with the late June sun scorching his tawny locks, to the freshly-swept porch of Fillmore's Leathers. He plopped upon the wooden planks and waited for his parents to finish mingling with the rest of the Lord's flock. Off to the side the wind dusted their horse and cart with a light layer of dry earth. The few provisions they procured, as well as the goods they failed to sell, sat as a reminder of their misfortune. It was getting worse every week, fewer and fewer of the townsfolk willing to barter with them. Paine knew why.

*How dare they judge him.*

Even his parents' frustration was surfacing at the rumors, evident in their recent shortness of temper and talks of parting ways. A few weeks prior they spoke of Paine and his sister moving on — of starting their life elsewhere; preferably in another town. It made him feel like a dirty rag no one wanted to touch unless there was nothing left to use. He suppressed those feelings, refusing to even mention it to his sister.

He did that a lot of late, keeping things to himself. It started when the visions in the mirrors began, two years prior. The voices taunted him, tempted him with knowledge of things unknown, and tantalized his innermost wants. He had followed their instructions, sacrificing small birds and squirrels to the blood spells they had urged him cast, but their promises were false, and amounted to nothing. As a result, he scorned them, ignored their whisperings.

And then one evening he had made the singular mistake of revealing their presence to his parents. His mother immediately set about destroying all the mirrors in the house and then turned on her son and beat the evil out of him.

After that, and threats to send him off as a laborer, Paine censored what he revealed. He held his tongue and took his beatings with a quiet resolve because despite their firmness of discipline, he needed the elderly couple that had raised him.

*At least for now.*

Things had even been calm for awhile; pleasant, in fact. Yet over the last few weeks matters worsened. The change in his mother's attitude was noticeable. Slow was the indoctrination, but evident enough. The beatings were becoming more frequent. Something was changing her, and that something was connected to the arrival of the Reverend Chapman.

It sat like a bad apple within him.

Paine winced as he leaned against the post; the strap marks had not yet completely healed.

He watched his parents as they waited, like bleating lambs lining up in front of the slaughterhouse. Many of the parishioners waited to speak with the good Reverend, thanking him for his eloquent sermon about the evils of witchcraft. It was a message Paine thought typical of the new Church of the Ascension and the man who came all the way from the Confederation to lead it. Schooled at Ascension College he was; a son of aristocrats; learned.

*Arrogant was more like it.*

The Church was in service four weeks now, replacing the battered chapel that had been used for centuries. The relic sat like a forgotten silhouette to the white, stone splendor that rose above the willows with a single, shining pinnacle. Although he never enjoyed Sunday sermons, Paine possessed a fondness for the old chapel, with its ancient smell and creaking floors. Its stone foundation was from the old world, from the time before the Shift ripped the Earth apart. That made it over five hundred years old.

Paine's parents passed through the line at a lagging pace as they spoke to all and sundry before

finally reaching the good Reverend. The three spoke at length. Gwen would raise her aged hands to the air as she spoke, her words slow and precise. Due to her stutter Paine's mother spoke little, but when she did her arguments were deliberate and sure. Charles, with his gray wisps of hair combed over the bald spot on his head, paused to look at Paine. He gave a slight nod and a smirk before Gwen pulled his face towards her and thrust the open pages of her newly-minted Confederation bible in the Reverend's face. The Reverend nodded to her line of reasoning, yet his gaunt face remained puckered.

Paine pricked his ears to catch what words might flit across the road but two young men stepped in front of him; Billy Chapman, son of the good Reverend — seventeen and built like the blacksmith's outhouse, and Jake Notman, same age, same size, but more eager for trouble.

Billy sucked on a stick of Confederation tobacco and exhaled through the corner of his lips — something Paine once thought sexy.

*Now it was just plain ridiculous.*

Jake squeezed his own between his thick fingers and then flicked it away. "Good sermon, huh Robertson?"

"I wasn't impressed." Paine looked Billy in the eyes. The boy averted his gaze.

Jake scowled. "Why do ya think that is?"

Paine said nothing.

*The fool could think what he wanted.*

Jake leaned over. The smell of his breath was like ash. "I saw your sister light a fire with her bare hands. I know she's a witch."

"Prove it," Paine replied. He let his gaze slide over to Billy once more. The boy stared at his dust-covered boots.

Paine couldn't help but wonder how much Billy had revealed of their encounter. There were too many rumors lately, ones that would not have cropped up unless Billy had been squawking like an old hen.

Jake's lips curved into an unctuous grin. "I won't have to. The Confederation is planning to annex Fairfax and the surrounding farms. The Witch Hunters are coming with them. And they're ridding the land of filth like you."

"I don't know what you're talking ab—"

"Hello, boys."

The two boys jumped and turned to the voice. Paine did not. He knew she was there, lurking. Like some hidden shadow upon his heart, he could sense her presence. She was always there, and when she wasn't, he could barely stand her absence.

From the corner of his eye he watched his twin, Lya, saunter towards them in her black gown. She always wore that outfit on Sundays, despite protests from Gwen to wear something less suited for a funeral.

She adjusted the folds of her dress, like one of the high class ladies at tea time, and nestled her head on Paine's shoulder. He wanted to shift over but was cornered against the post. Besides, it wouldn't look good if he seemed repulsed by his own sister.

Lya coiled her black locks around her finger and then plucked one of the strands. She examined it and then licked her teeth.

Billy backed up and lowered his head further.

*Any lower and he'll be licking his own boots.*

Jake ignored her. He focused on Paine. "Watch yourself, Robertson. Your time is short." The two then departed, giving a wide berth around his sister.

"They give you trouble?" Lya asked. She backed away from Paine, as if just as revolted.

"Not much." He glanced over to his parents. They were gathered with the other members of the Village Council. "Looks like we're going to be here awhile. Let's go wander."

The two rose and strode past a few shops and houses. Those on the porches did not offer the

customary greeting or even a nod of the head. One woman hissed at them and some clutched the silver crosses that hung about their necks. They continued on and strode past the Apothecary where Old Lady Burns sat in front of her shop. She knitted a wool blanket for her newly-born grandson. The child was born a month prior, with knotted stumps for legs. It was the second such birth for that family. There were tears in the old woman's eyes.

Paine stepped on to the wooden porch and the faint smell of mothballs tickled his nose.

"Good morning, Mrs. Burns." He liked the old woman. She had always been kindly to him.

She sucked in her breath at the sight of Lya, an occurrence not uncommon among the townsfolk. She covered it with a feigned yawn.

"Interesting sermon this morning," she said.

Lya grunted.

"I thought it was a pile of horse shit," Paine said as he looked over to the Church. The Reverend spoke with a broad-shouldered stranger. Whether he was with the Confederation, or if he was just another traveler heading south to the ruins of ancient Dallas, it was hard to tell. The pepper-haired stranger glanced in Paine's direction for a fraction of a moment.

Old Lady Burns continued knitting. "The Reverend is not here to make friends. He is here to convert others to his way of thinking."

"He spews garbage from that cesspit of a mouth," Paine muttered.

"Not everyone follows him gladly." She offered him a timid smile, but one with enough reassurance to ease his anger.

Old Lady Burns had been accused of witchcraft countless times, especially after the birth of her grandson. It was common knowledge she did not get along with her son's wife. Yet few believed she was capable of such an atrocity. Paine had seen true witchcraft, and its power was beyond anything an innocent mind like Old Lady Burns could conjure.

He nodded. "We better get moving. Have a pleasant afternoon, Mrs. Burns."

"Thank you, dear."

The two then wandered towards the cemetery, almost directly across from the Apothecary. It sat behind the old chapel.

They strolled through the maze of haphazard tombstones to the oldest part of the cemetery. Upon one of the newer monuments sat a mourning dove. It cooed and barely masked the croak of an unseen raven.

Lya always kept Paine silent company on the trips to the cemetery, although she had her own notions about this place. She had mentioned several times she wanted to come into town at night to call forth the souls that resided there. It was an intriguing notion, but some things were better left undisturbed.

*At least for now.*

Usually when Paine called upon the dead, more than one emerged. And commanding one to do your bidding was challenge enough; commanding an entire cemetery was begging for a permanent possession.

Paine shuddered at the thought. Two towns over, a man invited a legion of souls unto himself. The man went insane and threw himself off a cliff, squealing like a pig.

Paine's feet led him, as if by rote, to stand before a statue of an angel whose wings had long crumbled to dust. He could barely make out the words etched into the base.

*In remembrance of Catherine and her beloved Ben.*

The dates were no longer legible. He then moved on to the others.

The mourning dove cooed again and they ambled towards the old chapel. Paine gazed through a crack in the boarded window. Three shafts of light pierced the battered cedar roof and lit the pews. Fresh prints disturbed the neat carpet of dust that covered the floor; prints that appeared as if someone had let a cow loose in the derelict structure.

“Odd,” he commented, and walked up to the double wooden doors.

Lya was at his side. “What’s going on?”

“There’s footprints inside.”

She shrugged. “So?”

“Hoof prints.”

She shoved past him to peer through the cracks in the doorframe. “What are you talking about?”

Paine examined the doors and found no sign of forced entry. He pulled on the iron handles. They were locked.

He was about to go back to the boarded window, but noticed the stranger watching them from the Apothecary. Paine swallowed the lump in his throat, but stared the man down.

“What was that about?” Lya asked, poking him with a thin, iron finger. “Do you know him, or has someone else in this little spit of a village caught your eye?”

He shook his head and turned. “No, I do not know him.”

As they walked back towards the Church, the dove cooed a third time.

\*\*\*

Within his cell, Friar John hummed; there was little else to do. His imprisonment was now at four days — four days of praying and meditation. Oddly, he found little to complain of. The feather bed was comfortable, if a little musty, and not quite long enough for his lanky frame, and his captors were as good to him as their conscience allowed them to be.

His punishment for heresy was a little severe, but his musings were not well tolerated. He wondered when they might release him. The Iberian monastery was a prison, placed at the southern tip of God's wilderness, where few would hear his truth.

*Not my truth*, he corrected himself, *the truth*.

He continued to hum, a refrain from a hymn that always brought him comfort.

Crow's-feet lined his face, every one earned over the last forty-three years, as were the gray flecks in his mud-colored mane. He cinched the belt about his brown robes to suit his narrowing midsection. His appetite had waned of late.

The smile on his face was wry. He wondered when the cardinal would realize that shutting him away like a criminal would do little good. It was him the Pope wished to see. He laughed when they told him he was to remain in this dark pit of a cell, in the deepest reaches of the monastery. The ears of God's representative were not to be tainted by his words.

*They were in for a surprise.*

He sat in silence, watching as a cockroach scurried across the dirt floor, looking for the scraps of his morning gruel. He tossed some crumbs in its path, knowing even the lowliest of creatures needed to eat.

It was difficult to tell the passing of time in this place. A moist chill permeated the stone walls, unwavering — day or night. Yet the faded glint of torchlight seeping under the door gave him some indication that the noon hour had recently passed. His humming continued, but for only a few bars of Ave Maria before he was interrupted by a clamor outside the door — the sound of heavy panting and fingers fumbling with keys.

*Miguel. The breathing was unmistakable.*

John waited with the patience of Job as the man made attempts with numerous keys, but exasperation sighed from someone else in the hall.

“Hurry, man. The Pope doesn't have all day.”

The clanking of keys increased and after countless attempts, the door finally opened. Flickering torchlight danced its way into the cell and the cockroach scampered towards a crack in the stone wall.

“Good day to you, sirs,” John said. “You're a little late for our morning walk. The noon hour must

have passed by now.”

Miguel, large as life, had a dejected look upon his round face. The morning walk had been cancelled, yet John knew fault did not lie at the feet of the good brother. Miguel had always been kindly to him and the only one to request that they not confine him to the dungeons.

Yet his frail voice of support was of little help. The cardinal always got his way.

*Except this time*, John thought, taking in the striped, billowing uniform and plumed helmet of the other man who stood in the entrance — a member of the Vatican Guard.

“Come with me, heretic. You are summoned to the Pope.” The guard pointed his spear at him. “Mind your tongue.”

John said nothing, knowing his words would be wasted on one such as this, and followed quietly, winking at Miguel as he stepped into the passageway.

Soft torchlight lit the moss-covered corridors, the sound of the guard's polished black shoes clacking on the stone floor. Bells chimed in the distance, but their music was muted by the stone depths in which they walked. Numerous cells lay open, all with decaying wooden doors and empty since long before the Shift.

Only his was occupied.

They wound through the stone maze, John and the guard stooping often to avoid the sheer tapestries of spider web.

Finally, after climbing an aged stairwell, they reached ground level, and John covered his eyes from the bright glare of daylight.

He stopped to let the sun's rays warm his soul.

Something sharp poked him from behind.

“Keep moving.”

They continued, and when they reached the abbey Miguel and the guard knelt to gesture the sign of the cross before they turned and left him. The iron doors closed with a heavy clank.

John made no such signs of piety and strode amidst the rows of wooden pews towards the pulpit, the floorboards creaking with every step. The Pope waited for him, alone.

“Your Holiness,” John said, standing to face one of the most powerful leaders in the new world. He could imagine what she must have looked like in her youth. Even with white hair and the fine lines that adorned her face, she was stunning. She stood tall for a woman, almost rivaling him in stature. The Pope was garbed in a white robe, her hair spilling over it. She held out her hand to which he feigned a kiss, his lips not quite touching the emerald ring.

“I want to hear your heresy,” she said as he faced her. Her voice echoed off the vaulted ceiling. It was painted with vivid images of the Archangel Gabriel.

John gazed upon the wings that adorned the angel's frame, pristine and white, and wondered how much more in this world he would discover was a lie.

“The cardinal seems to think it is not for your ears.”

Her round eyes hinted annoyance. “Cardinal Aloysius is an overambitious fool who cares for nothing but his own advancement.”

He reserved his opinion, yet his lips formed a smug curve.

“I am a politician, and have attained this position by learning how to read people and their motives. I am sure you have heard otherwise, but give me more credit than that. I am the second woman to sit in this position since the Shift ripped the world apart. It has not been an easy road. Now,” she said, sizing him up. “I want your truth.”

“Why have you come all this way? Cardinal Aloysius, in all his wisdom, saw fit to have me removed to this place where only some patient brethren would ignore my words. Then, when he knew you were coming to the very place he banished me, he had me placed in the furthest depths of the monastery.”

She held her hand aloft and mouthed an incantation he did not hear. The doors and shutters swung

closed. Scars were made visible as her sleeve slithered down her pale arm. They were old wounds.

*Bloodcraft.*

The Pope lowered her arm and adjusted her sleeve with a curt tug. For the briefest hint of a moment, he caught fear flitting across her eyes.

She leaned in to whisper. "He is coming."

John swallowed. "Who?"

"Do not play coy with me. I did not come this far to bandy words with an idiot. The Second Coming is upon us."

"I suppose you know who I am." He shifted where he stood, and the cherry floor groaned under his weight.

She smiled. There was no mirth there. "I know what lies within that darkened heart of yours. I also know what will happen to the person that orders your death. Your soul is cursed. That's why I've let you live."

He stared, offering her nothing, yet he smiled inwardly.

*Cursed indeed.*

Anyone who had anything to do with his death would suffer for all eternity.

"I knew of your blasphemy and did not contest the cardinal's decision to put you away. There is too much at risk to let you run around spouting your so-called truth. I come here now to ask what you know. And when you are finished, I have an errand for you."

He masked his intrigue. "An errand?"

"Hoofed and horned, we believe he is loose upon the world once more, maybe even in physical form." She paused. "You're going to find him."

"How?"

"Beings of great power are being summoned, but to where we do not yet know. My sources have been unable to penetrate this secret calling. They've all gone mad in the attempt. We know only that it is being called by someone high in the echelons of the Fallen."

"And what am I supposed to do when I learn of this summoning?"

"You will attend." She paused, and lowered her voice to a near whisper, "And you will kill him."

He refrained from commenting on the futility of the request. John's command of the dead was limited at best, although there were other powers in this world, and ways to negotiate with the unliving.

"You must know by now that my gifts are inadequate."

She nodded. "But your blackened soul is the only one that may be able to get close enough without suspicion."

"And how will this deed be done?"

From the pulpit she pulled out a shroud-wrapped object. It was about the length of his forearm. She peeled back the layers of delicate cloth to reveal a sharp metal object. John knew it the moment he saw it.

"The Spear of Destiny," he muttered.

"It will be the only thing that can draw his soul from his body. Once it is done we can imprison his spirit and keep the world safe for a thousand years. You will have only one chance." She studied him as he ran his fingers along the length of the spearhead.

He nodded as her logic revealed itself to him. "And if I cannot kill him, then my own death will be a blight upon his soul."

There was cunning acknowledgement in her eye. "Now, what will it be, assassin? I want to know what you know."

John pondered his options. Go on a treacherous hunt that would likely result in his own death or remain under the cardinal's watchful eye. His decision was quick and concise, so he motioned her closer, opened his mouth, and spouted truth from the sacrilegious fountain of his soul.

## Chapter 2

Paine opened a collection of parchment and papers that were bound loosely with thinning twine and shoddy leather. He found the odd assortment under the floorboards just after the voices in the mirror came to him. He did not know its origins and chose not to tell his parents they had it. The grimoire's discovery would have likely done more than merely upset them. There were quotes by someone named Cyprian of Antioch, but if that man was the author, Paine did not know. What he did know was that had his parents caught them practicing the bloodcraft that lay within its brittle pages, Gwen would have had them flayed, skinned, and hung.

The fact their children were different from others never rested well with his parents. It was part of a heritage Paine never fully understood. They spoke little of his birth mother. All Paine siphoned from them was that she could no longer care for Paine and Lya. And the two were reminded often that they were not Gwen and Charles' seed.

He handed the book to his sister and stepped outside of the barn. He feared his parents might come around the bend at any moment, but smirked as they lounged in the hammock under the old beech.

*Perfect.*

Paine looked back to Lya. With her pale fingers she delicately flipped each page. It amazed him that her features were so different from his own. Although not identical twins, he expected some resemblance. Where Paine's features were subtle and ordinary, his sister's face was inimitable; her slanted eyebrows, pallid complexion, and strong cheekbones were unlike anyone he knew. The only feature the two siblings shared was the shape of their slightly snubbed noses and round eyes — and those seemed more coincidental than anything.

She caught him staring at her and squinted her annoyance. "I'm not sure if there's anything in here. Most of this is about how to call upon different souls, heal an injury, or how to summon a rainstorm. It's the usual — summoning, bloodcraft, and divination."

Paine scuffed his feet along the dry ground. The buckthorn and black willows that littered the farm had long folded up their dried leaves in a prayer for water.

"Rain would be good."

"That requires bat's blood. You got any?"

If he did have a bat, she would take it from him and slice its throat without asking. She was a little eager, but he supposed that bat would be just as dead at his own hands. It was the price of the craft.

*Blood.*

Paine shook his head. "Keep looking. I want to know what that Reverend is up to."

A screech caught his attention. A nondescript, dappled falcon stared at him; its only distinguishing quality was the missing appendage on its left foot. Lya had healed the injured bird three years back and the two had been inseparable since. She could sense Talon's thoughts, a skill Paine did not possess.

He scowled at it.

*The fucking bird hated him.*

His sister continued to thumb through the pages, scanning each one. "Wait, there's a divination that might work. You can spy on the object of your affection. You still got that knife Billy gave you?"

Paine shuffled over to the wall where he left it stabbed into the wood, thrust there in anger when he learned that Billy had succumbed to Lya's charms. What rankled him was not that she had beguiled him. Billy Chapman was merely a lustful proclivity; nothing more. What got under his skin was that Paine had to use a potion to have his way with Billy where Lya could seduce the boy with a few choice words; an enchantment. And she did it for no other reason than to see if she could.

Paine had tried to learn that talent when he was alone with the chickens or out in the field with the goats, but failed. He would have to ask Lya to teach him.

He yanked the knife from the wall. He hated asking.

"He's hardly the object of my affection," he said.



"I know, but it's the knife that matters. It once belonged to him."

He offered a smirk. "Maybe we can send the knife sailing at the Reverend."

"No, but maybe at Billy with the right summoning," she said. Her lips did not curve, but the smile still lay within her eyes. "You should have let me put a curse on him."

He shook his head. He might still have need for Billy. Some nights could be lonely, and Billy could be coerced into some otherwise unthinkable acts.

Paine licked his lips. "So by spying on him, you think you'll learn what the Reverend is up to?"

"Billy's his son, isn't he?" Her black hair spilled over her face as she focused on the page in front of her. She drew the strands back like a curtain. "Gwen said he's been seen with some strange men in town — from the Confederation."

"Then let's get on with it. What do we need?"

"It's an elemental — earth, air, fire, and water. And we need the knife and the eye of something living."

Paine groaned. "I'm not killing anything for this." The last time he killed a frog for one of Lya's summons, the spirit she called upon slipped straight into his body. It took a stab to his leg with a powder-covered knife to release him. He blanched thinking about it. Sometimes she overreached her grasp.

Lya rolled her eyes. "It's a divination. It doesn't need to be dead. But it should be big because we need to look in its eyes."

The biggest thing in the barn was old Gertrude, and he knew how the cow felt about his sister. Even now the Holstein was as far back in her stall as she could stand, silently watching Lya. She wasn't even chewing.

He sighed. This was going to take more work than he cared for.

"Just get the stupid cow," she said. "I'll get the other items and draw the circle."

Paine instructed Lya to leave the barn before he even bothered to move the cow. He knew from past experience and a bruised ribcage when they had tried something similar.

Once he secured Gertrude in the center of the barn, he called Lya back. He did not ask how she came by the lit torch. She wouldn't have ventured close to the house as it would have attracted their parents' attention. And she came from the other side of the barn.

That was what most of their trouble was about. Three months previous Jake Notman caught her lighting a fire with just her hands and that rumor had been almost impossible for Gwen and Charles to quell. It was absurd they would raise a daughter who practiced witchcraft.

Despite those public protests, a beating followed, and it wasn't Lya's to receive. Paine suspected she had enchanted the old woman into letting him take the brunt of their anger, but again, he kept those notions to himself.

To make matters worse, the recent night they had shared with Billy Chapman rekindled those rumors. He shook his head at his own foolishness. Obviously the boy had talked. So not only were they casting spells and summons, but Lya was now hailed as a succubus and she was in an incestuous relationship with her brother. It was no wonder Gwen and Charles were encouraging them to leave.

Lya glided around the cow, drawing the circle with precise motions. She sprinkled some powder from one of the leather sacks that hung on her belt before stepping inside the circle. Paine joined her, patting the cow's flanks. Lya placed the torch at the south end of the circle, a pile of dirt at the north, incense at the east, and a bowl of water at the west.

"Be ready," she said. "Since the stupid cow won't let me near her, you're going to have to look in her eyes to see what's going on."

Paine nodded and grabbed the harness. He stroked Gertrude's muzzle.

"Easy, girl."

Lya raised the knife into the air and whispered her call to the elements. She then waved the knife in front of the cow, as if teasing it, letting the light that reflected off the blade flicker in the cow's eyes.

Paine pulled Gertrude to face him.

He saw nothing.

He continued to stare, letting his sight focus on the back of the cow's eyeballs, straining to see anything. It was nothing like scrying in a bowl of water under the moon. It was nothing like a mirror either, but then mirrors were doorways for things unmentionable; things which should not be seen standing behind you as you looked upon your own reflection.

Gertrude snorted and he shook his head.

*Still nothing.*

Lya shoved him and snatched the harness. She stared into Gertrude's eyes. The cow groaned; either at her presence or her firm grip.

She clung to the cow and her mouth dropped open.

Lya shook her head. "No," she muttered.

"What is it?"

She withdrew the knife from her belt and slid it across the top of her forearm, reopening an old wound in a swift motion. Blood dripped into the straw at her feet and Lya mumbled words under her breath. Paine caught only "bidding" and "dark".

Biting cold pierced his skin.

*Oh, shit.*

Lya pulled Gertrude's head closer to her and the cow's eyes widened. The barn doors slammed closed. There was something else with them; and its intent was anything but good. Cold swirled through the barn, and the air misted with Paine's breath. The unseen presence hissed words Paine could not make out, but its voice sounded willing, eager.

Lya nodded and muttered some words in return. The cold slipped through Paine again, slow and bone-deep. He sucked in his breath as it passed. The barn doors flew open and the presence departed. Paine granted his feet some latitude and took a few steps back into the sun's rays. He rubbed his arms.

Lya released Gertrude and the cow pulled back, lowering its head almost to the ground. She sprinkled a powder on her bloodied arm and then wrapped it in a ripped piece of cloth from her shirt.

"They're coming," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"A number of men — including Witch Hunters."

"How can you tell?"

"Billy Chapman is following them and I saw through his eyes. They're traveling along the Fairfax Road, heading in this direction. I've bought us some time, but not much."

"You may have given them reason to hang us for witchcraft."

"They're going to hang us anyway. I saw the rope. And they're all armed with silver."

*Silver?*

Paine had seen its effect once, when a witch was clamped in silver cuffs. The man had been reduced to a whimpering dog. For those that dabbled in bloodcraft, silver not only prevented them from casting spells and summoning, but it did things to the body that was unnatural. The man did not survive the ordeal long, and wasted away to nothing over a period of weeks. Paine never forgot the image of that man, and swore to himself it would not happen to him or Lya.

"We need to leave," she said. Her voice was solid, iron.

He shook his head in disbelief. There had to be some way to avoid this. Yet he knew there was nothing. Those men were coming as surely as God's wrath. He pressed his lips together and looked over to the old beech. The hammocks were swinging, and empty.

"I—"

Shouts echoed from the house, followed by shattering glass. Gwen screamed and then heavy silence drifted across the farm. Even the wind hesitated, as if waiting for their reaction.

Immediately Paine dashed towards the house. The goats fled from his path, stumbling over each

other to get out of the way. Paine and his sister scrambled inside.

Scattered about the immaculate kitchen were smashed dishes and the splinters of a broken chair. The small pine table was upturned on the floor. Shards of broken glass lay strewn about, splattered with blood.

They stepped across the floor and heavy breathing emanated from the family room. They rounded the corner and found a man standing over Charles' body, his head nearly touching the ceiling. He wore blood-stained leathers and a dull metal helmet that half-covered his face. On the front of his vest was stitched a pearly white cross, spotted with crimson.

*Witch Hunter.*

His parents' bodies lay on the floor, butchered.

The Witch Hunter bore a silver cross. It was bulky and crooked. He swept his crossbow in front of him. Lya growled and dropped to her knees. She put her hands in Gwen's bloodied wound and mumbled a curse.

"Your sorcery doesn't work on me, witch. See the Holy Silver. I am protected by the Almighty." He aimed the silver-tipped arrow at Lya. "Now, surrender in the name of the Confederation and I will make this quick for you."

Lya's curse surged towards the Hunter in an invisible rush and thrust him against the wall. The man held up the cross and wriggled free.

He stepped forward. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me!"

She spat out another curse, calling upon a throng of hornets. He swatted the air around him, aiming his cross above and below him. The Hunter screamed and covered his face.

"Back you fiends of darkness! You cannot harm me. I bear the silver cross!"

The curse was broken.

"I will not be deceived by your lies!"

He aimed the crossbow once more at Lya.

Paine's feet moved as if an unseen force dragged him forward. He cried out. "No!"

In his mind he called upon anything that would help him; anything within miles that had the ability to end this. He did not care the price.

Souls sprouted around him, responding in a single heart's beat. They were eager to serve. Paine sent them forward, every one.

The man screamed as they swarmed him. He recoiled from their touch and raised his cross once more. It was futile. Each soul dove within him, taking their life's pain and misery with them. The Hunter bent over, convulsing. The crossbow tumbled from his hands, misfiring and knocking over the oil lamp. The glass shattered and the oil spilled across the wooden floor. He gripped the silver cross holding it forth once more, but it seared the Hunter's fingers and the scent of burnt flesh fouled the air. He foamed at the mouth. The Hunter slid down the wall and writhed on the floor. The cross slipped from his fingers. His body tensed and convulsed. He choked on his own tongue, and then finally went still.

The souls of the dead withdrew from the Hunter and slid towards Paine. He stood his ground, waiting for them.

*The price had to be paid. It was always in blood.*

He braced himself as each one slipped across his skin. They touched his heart. It was biting. He exhaled with the pain of each and clenched his fists, waiting for one or all to take him. He knew he would go mad.

Yet there was nothing; nothing but the cold; the cold and a sudden knowing. There were things in his head, memories that were not his own. Paine shook his head. They belonged to the dead Hunter. Images of the man's life flashed, too quickly to make out. Only one memory offered Paine any hint of clarity—a female voice that had ordered his parents' death.

*"Kill the old man and woman."*

It was a pitiless voice.

Then the memories were gone. And so were the souls upon whom he had called.

A puddle of red formed on the ground, streaming from his parents' bodies.

*Perhaps there was enough.*

Lya studied the dead Hunter. She bit her lip and kicked the cross. It slid towards the oil, where it smoldered. Charles shifted, the wound in his chest sucking air.

Paine dropped to the floor beside him. He took the man's large, gnarled hands. They had always been gentle.

"Father."

"Box...in the bedroom," he gasped.

"See to him," he said to Lya, and then ran down the hall. His heart raced, hot and fast.

Inside his parents' tiny room, beyond the four-poster bed, were loose floorboards. He lifted them, and grabbed the black polished box that held the valuables. He scrambled back to find Lya still standing over Charles.

The old man's body lay still, his eyes wide open.

"What happened?"

"He's dead."

"No!" He knelt at Charles' side. He put his ear to his silent chest. "Why didn't you heal him?"

"I need a spell and ointment, and he has been too badly hurt. What did you want me to do?" She turned her back to him.

Paine clenched his jaw. Gwen and Charles were dead.

"We can't stay here," he growled. "We'll be hanged."

Lya wiped her face with her sleeve. "We can only go north from here."

Paine looked at what he held in his hands. He smashed the box open and found everything his parents had saved. He dumped the contents on the floor and peered into the box. A yellowed piece of parchment was stuck to the bottom.

He removed it, unfolding it with care. There was a fine script dancing along the page, the lettering indecipherable. On the back was written a few lines he could read. It appeared to be a spell; a spell that summoned names Paine recognized — all from Sunday sermons. He dropped the parchment on the floor and wiped his hands on his trousers.

Lya snatched it up. Her lip was bleeding. "What does it say?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

He gathered the coins and Lya folded the parchment to put it in her pocket. Paine eyed her and then shrugged.

*She could have it.*

The oil ignited and flared to life. The fire inched towards them.

Paine rose. "We have to leave."

They each ran to their rooms, and Paine scanned the small space that was his own. The bed sheets were still piled in the corner, a reminder of his nights of unrest since Sunday's sermon. Some junk from the old world sat on a shelf; plastic bits and shards that were of no value. He even owned pieces of a relic gun, a device rumored to kill a man from almost a mile away. But like most things from the old world, it was thought to be cursed. It was whispered that the Earth herself had ended the Age of Marvels and most thought it best to avoid objects of the past. Paine found them fascinating, yet they would serve no purpose now. Instead he bundled some clothes and a blanket into a sack and ran out into the hall.

"Are you ready?" he shouted. The fire was moving towards the kitchen.

Lya stepped from her own room, sack in hand. "Yes."

"Then, let's get out of here."

Lya ran out and Paine paid his final respects to his parents. He set his father's tattered bible between his hands, the book from which they had learned to read, and on Gwen's chest he placed the string of beads she always carried. He paused to close his father's eyes. Despite all of the hardships and the rigid rules, he had still loved the old man. This was not something he had ever wished upon his parents, not even Gwen.

He then ran after Lya.

When Paine reached the barn she was stuffing the grimoire into her pack and Talon was perched upon one of the watering troughs, screeching. He herded the two horses in to tack them; Sable for his sister, Shadow for him. When they were ready, they mounted and looked back to the house. The fire was reaching out the windows with fingers of orange flame.

A voice from down the road jerked his attention.

"The girl is a succubus!"

Paine glimpsed a shadow of a figure, a cloaked being on the edge of the woods. The hood was pulled back. It was Billy Chapman.

Another Witch Hunter stepped from behind the house — blonde, towering, and swift.

*A female voice.*

She raised her crossbow and Paine didn't wait. He dug his heels into his mare's flanks. And as he fled north he swore to himself that when the time was right, that woman would pay with more than just her life. And if she had orders from someone else, he didn't care how many of them there were or how high they ranked; he would find them.

*And they, too, would pay. They would all pay.*

### Chapter 3

The morning's silence immersed Paine in his guilt and the damned events of his life. Perhaps his desire for knowledge was to blame. Maybe if he hadn't gone snooping under his parents' bed, searching for some sense of who he was, he might not have come across the grimoire under the floorboards. Perhaps he might not have learned of the spells that lay within its hand-written pages. And maybe his father would still be among the living and not left to a bloodied fate, dealt by the hands of an overzealous minion of the Confederation.

Had he known this might happen he might have choked his curiosity and buried it deep within him, or he would have left ages ago. Now it was too late. He had never wished ill upon the people that had raised him, but now their blood was on his hands.

His silent mourning was interrupted by a thud and he untangled himself from the thin blanket that cocooned him. Lya was already up. She flung her knife at one of the trees, her aim sure.

There was something in her eyes — irritation, anger; he couldn't tell. He wished they shared the typical connection of other twins, but he was never able to sense her thoughts. He only could feel her presence. And the yearning for her nearness had worsened since that shared night with Billy; like it had bound him to her further. He knew it would be his undoing. It was unnatural. Yet her closeness offered him comfort.

"You all right?" he asked.

Lya hurled the knife once more. It struck the same spot.

"I don't understand," she muttered.

"I can't believe they're dead either."

She flung it again and the sugar maple bled, slow and thick. She retrieved it and licked the knife.

She avoided his gaze. "We better go."

The two packed their belongings in silence, all coated in beads of cold dampness. Paine's stomach growled as he climbed upon Shadow's back. In their haste to run, neither of them had considered rations. And he wasn't sure where they would go. He jangled the bag of coins and wondered what it would get them. He possessed limited knowledge of things beyond their village. Little was safe in this area of the Outlands. And he couldn't help but feel the road they traveled upon was leading them towards the Westwood, a forest that no one entered if they wanted to be seen again.

The two rode in silence along the deserted road, their only companions the occasional jackdaws which Talon glared at while perched upon Lya's shoulder. The air was dead, not a breeze to be found, and with the morning sun beaming relentlessly upon them, Paine started to sweat. He wished for a flask of water and vowed to stop at the next stream.

They passed remnants of the old world as they traveled — the occasional stone foundation of what was likely someone's home; larger stone buildings for which Paine had no idea their use; the occasional rusted pile of metal he knew to be cars; and even old bridges that collapsed into mounds of rubble. Through it all, the forest was ever present, trees and wild shrubs poking through the ruins. Paine had a burning fascination with the old world, but Lya's furious pace prevented him from pausing to study the remains. He spurred his horse to catch up to her.

Eventually, as the morning dragged on and the sun teetered past the brink of midday, they came upon a man riding ahead of them. He kept a leisurely pace, and would often pause to stare into the trees. As they drew near, Paine recognized him as the pepper-haired stranger from the village.

They did not want trouble, but before he could make any decision, the man brought his horse around. He waved, and rode north once more.

Paine brought Shadow to a slow trot.

"That's the man from the village on Sunday. What if he's with the Witch Hunters?"

Lya withdrew a rusted knife she carried in her belt loop. The blade was blackened with some kind of sticky substance.

"Then we'll be ready." There was a coldness to her voice that made Paine uncomfortable.

He faltered, then nodded. Their pause on the road was already long enough to stir suspicion, so he urged Shadow onward.

In silent time they drew alongside the man and his black mare. From up close, the stranger was even more broadly-built than Paine remembered. He appeared to be of Paine's height and perhaps ten years his senior. The man was not too hard on the eyes and, for a brief moment, Paine thought of the concoction he had used on some of the men back home; even the married ones. It sat under his bed.

*Damn.*

A dog stepped out of the woods, loping along at the horse's side. Shadow fought with Paine as he rode in close, her head swaying and whinnying in fear. He struggled to gain control and looked down at the dog. On second glance, it was no dog, but a wolf — gray with dark eyes and a rough muzzle. But with its tongue lolling down the side of its mouth and the strange grin that adorned its face, it appeared almost comical.

Paine patted Shadow's flanks and whispered in her ear. "Easy."

Regardless, Shadow kept one eye glued to it.

"Good morning," greeted the man, his voice hinting at caution; a likely tone out on these roads.

"Can you tell us how far to the next village?" Lya asked. She kept one hand free from the reins, hovering over the knife.

He studied them and pointed north. "About fifty miles down this road."

Lya spurred her horse onwards. Paine nearly followed suit, but the man interrupted him.

"Are you two newly married?"

Paine shook his head. "We're twins."

Lya reined Sable to a trot. She wore irritation in her furrowed eyebrows.

The man laughed. "My apologies, you don't look it. I'm heading towards the next town and wouldn't mind the company for awhile. My name is Diarmuid." He held out a calloused hand.

Paine shifted in his saddle to reach over and shake it. "Paine."

"Is that your name, or how you feel?" he asked with a dimpled grin.

Paine returned the smile. "Funny." He'd heard that joke before.

"And you are?" asked the man, turning to face Lya. Both hands held the reins and the suspicion in her eyes dimmed.

"Lya."

"Well met," he said and took her hand. His grip lingered for a moment as he gazed at her bandaged arm. He then pointed towards the wolf.

"This is Fang."

Its ears perked at the mention of its name, but it stared into the woods, seemingly oblivious to their presence.

He studied Paine for a moment. "I saw you on Sunday. You live outside Fairfax?"

"About ten miles west."

"Within the new boundaries of the Confederation?"

Paine nodded.

"You're witches aren't you?"

Lya's hand twitched at her hip.

Diarmuid failed to notice. "Do your parents know?"

Paine's face flushed.

*What could he say?*

"I see," Diarmuid muttered. "The Witch Hunters got them."

Paine clenched his fists.

*They would pay. They would all pay: the Reverend, Billy Chapman, and that Hunter— her most of all.*

"I'm sorry for your loss. How did you manage to escape?"

"I killed him," Paine uttered. It slid off his tongue, so easy.

Ravens croaked in the distance, the only thing to be heard above the slow cllop of hooves on the dusty road.

"There's something I should tell you," Diarmuid continued. "It's not a coincidence we met. I waited for you to come up the road. You see," he said, and reined his horse to a halt. "I was sent to find you."

Paine yanked on the reins and Shadow grunted her displeasure.

"Us?" he asked. Fang scratched behind her ear, watching Paine's reaction before her attention shifted to two squirrels that chased each other across the leaf-strewn road.

"I was sent to find people like you. I was in the village when the Hunters arrived, but when I reached your farm the house was already burned to the ground."

"Where are the others?" Paine asked. "There was a woman." He clenched his fists once more and shook off his anger. It was causing something to brew inside of him, something cold and angry.

Diarmuid shook his head. "I don't know. There was no one on the farm when I arrived."

"Will they follow us?"

"Not likely. They won't waste their time. There is much cleansing to be done when they annex a new area."

"Cleansing?"

"They search for the signs of bloodcraft, especially dead animals, and then arrest or kill whom they suspect as witches." He looked at Lya. "I found carcasses around your farm, sloppily covered. I also found this," he said and held up a shard of red-stained glass. Paine caught a glimpse of Lya's reflection in it and the unsettled look upon her face.

Diarmuid pointed to her arm. "You must have been desperate to have cut yourself."

She said nothing and stared him down. He turned to Paine.

"Why didn't you kill the other Hunter?"

Paine recounted their story, crafting it anew so as not to make himself appear a threat. Paine never had much luck calling upon the dead, but whatever had come to him had left him untouched. This man did not need to know that.

"Come with me," Diarmuid said. "I don't know how much you know of the old world, but I'm from a place in what used to be Northern Michigan. It's called Haven. There are people there that can help you."

Paine waved him off. He knew all about Haven; the possessed, the deranged, and the desperate fled there. "I'd rather take my chances in the Outlands," he said.

"The Outlands are not safe. The Confederation has long begun to cross the Mississippi and their full influence is not far behind. The river no longer separates us from them. They are sweeping through these lands and cleansing it. And there is a war coming, one that will require anyone who can summon or cast spells. In Haven, we can enhance your gifts, teach you things."

Paine pondered his limited options. Things were moving too fast and he needed time to sort this out. He hated rushed thinking, yet what sort of life could they have as fugitives from the Confederation?

There was something in Lya's eyes — intrigue, desire? She nodded her head a little too quickly.

"All right," Paine said, somewhat reluctant. What choice did he have? "We'll go to Haven."

With that, the pepper-haired man spurred his horse and led them north.



## Chapter 4

If Brahm Hallowstone could count herself among the fortunate, she would have lived her life as something else.

*A bear maybe, or a wolf.*

She looked around her.

*Maybe not a wolf.*

She sat amongst the human equivalent of a pack, snarling at each other and ready to take the lead at the first sign of weakness. Haven was like that these days, with various individuals yearning to take leadership now that Gregor was dying. The factions were split between those content with the status quo and those eager to confront the Confederation.

Brahm harrumphed.

*Fools.*

As much as she loathed the Confederation, she knew which side she would choose. War with the Confederation was suicide. One need only remember the fate of Sanctuary and the butchery that occurred there. Brahm shivered as she thought of the men and women that were crucified, hung, drowned, or crushed under stones. The children had been taken. And she knew their fate. That made her tremble, yet whether it was anger or fear she wasn't sure.

While the power struggle raged, she picked at the cuticles of her fingers.

She held them up. Even with the calluses they were good hands. They were one of her better features, next to her chestnut skin. Someone once commented that Brahm must have been born in buttermilk. She smiled. That woman was rewarded well for her compliment — a night of buttermilk delight.

She pricked her ears. The conversation had turned. They now discussed the Missionaries — those sent out to lure witches to Haven. In particular there was concern about Diarmuid, a Missionary they had not heard from in some time.

“... I know he's had five years to recover, but he was one of them for ten years,” said one voice. Brahm could not see the speaker, but his nasal whine was familiar. She flicked a piece of dirt from underneath her nail.

“Can he be trusted not to surrender witches to them?” questioned another, a young man whose personality grated on her like a jagged stone in the sole of her foot. “Brahm,” he called, “you spent considerable time with him. What do you think?”

She wondered why she had been invited to the meeting. She was no witch, not even a necromancer. Bloodcraft and the dead were of no interest to her. But she had become close with Diarmuid while he was in Haven. And therein lay her purpose for being there.

She glanced up from her haphazard manicure and rose. All eyes followed her towering frame. She smirked as their heads tilted.

“I understand your concerns,” she said. There was haughtiness in her voice, an inflection she had practiced over many years. “Others have brought back witches while he hasn't returned. But I would trust him with my life. He would rather die than return to his old ways.” She wasn't sure if they wanted more than that, eager for anything they could use for their own machinations. It was all they were getting. She returned to her seat and stretched her legs in front of her.

Most in Haven weren't sure of Brahm, or of her loyalties. She preferred it that way. It kept them on edge. It also kept her safely out of the infighting. She reverted to her grooming.

The woman who led the meeting paced. Despite her annoying traits, Brahm liked Ira. Unlike some in Haven, her heart was true.

“As much as his absence concerns me,” the woman said, “what I fear worse is what it implies. I would like to re-focus our discussion on the reason we are here. The Confederation has plans to deal with us.”

A flurry of gasps and muttering followed.

*Far too much commotion.*

Ira gestured for quiet, just shy of histrionic in her waving.

“Due to the sheer number of Hunters, I recommend we halt all Missions. We cannot afford to lose our people now. We must now consider the defense and safety of Haven first, above all else. Remember the fate of Sanctuary. We must recall the Missionaries.”

Ira sat, her dark, knobby hands fidgeting in her lap. Despite her theatrics, there was cause for concern.

*War with the Confederation.*

The faction of warmongers looked pleased.

*Perhaps it was time to leave.*

A frail-looking man who'd been standing by the window, and whose thin form cast a long shadow upon the floor, hobbled forward. Mumbling filled the room. It was Gregor.

*God, he's aged.*

In the last few weeks he'd spiraled downwards, as if his well-preserved life was coming to an abrupt end. He was Haven's oldest member and wielded a quiet resolve that kept the two factions from ripping each other apart.

Someone called out. It was the first voice again. “We need a weapon of great power; something to defeat the Confederation. Otherwise we will become like the others. It is said Gregor knows of such power.”

Others chorused their agreement.

The old man limped to the center of the floor. He looked quietly into the audience, as if surmising who the jackals were.

Brahm smiled.

*He already knew.*

“I know of which power you suggest,” Gregor said. His voice was hoarse. “And using it was tried once already, to our peril. It will not work. There is none among us that can wield it. Its will is too great.”

“But there are those among us that can summon the dead and command the elements with greater purpose than...” The man paused, knowing he was insulting Gregor with such a statement. Gregor was unfazed by the insinuation. His face showed no reaction, but the sag in his shoulders indicated he might be giving in.

He looked up once more. “I suggest we let everyone think it over. This matter can be settled tomorrow. Hasty decisions are often the ones we regret the most.” A chorus of mumbles followed, accompanied by both nodding heads and sour faces. Brahm took the opportunity to escape and swept out the door.

She strode towards her living quarters as the others remained to gossip and linger. Her gaze wandered to the great pines and maples interspersed among the rustic dwellings as she walked. There was something unnatural about the trees and their undeviating trunks that shot straight upwards. And somehow their rigidity made her think of Diarmuid.

She laughed aloud, hearty, unsure of where that thought originated. She hardly thought of him in that light. She did miss him though; Diarmuid and his unwavering integrity. Usually Missionaries sent word if they were delayed, but in a year there was nothing from him. But her gut told her Diarmuid was fine, and Brahm Hallowstone's gut never lied.

She headed north to the stable yard. As usual, the horses left a more than healthy supply of work. After donning work boots, she grabbed the closest pitchfork.

The cleaning and sweeping persisted for a couple of hours, the stench making her head feel light. But the horses were good, quiet company.

Eventually Brahm stepped out of the stables, desperate for air that didn't reek of shit with a side of

rotting carrots. In the distance, a young woman approached. She wore a red scarf about her neck, a symbol of her desire to be rid of the Confederation. Brahm rested the pitchfork against the fence while she waited for her. The woman was short, her mouse-brown hair framing a homely face. Farin was not one of the prettiest women she knew, but she was one of the nicest. And despite her inclinations towards war-mongering, she was foremost in seeing to the care of Gregor in his weakened state.

*She wasn't a bad lover either.*

Brahm perched herself on the rails of the wooden fence and wiped the sweat from her shaved head.

"What brings you here?" she asked and pictured herself running her tongue along the nape of the young woman's neck, a particularly tender spot that would get her moaning. Farin was fifteen years her junior; and at twenty-one everything was still perky and firm — the way Brahm liked it.

"There is a messenger here that needs your talents with the Tongue."

Although the Tongue comment might warrant some playful banter, Brahm allowed those thoughts to fall into the straw at her feet. There would be time to toy with Farin later. Brahm's talent with both tongues was legendary, but this one involved communing with animals.

She leapt from the fence. "Let's go, then."

Brahm shed the work boots to put on her own supple, leather ones, and left the pitchfork against the fence. It would be waiting for her.

They walked along the path and as Brahm veered off towards the pigeon house, Farin grabbed her arm.

"The birds arrive over there," Brahm said.

"It's not a bird."

"What is it?"

"A wolf."

Brahm left Farin where she stood, and ran.

\*\*\*

A recent gale had passed north of Fairfax, uprooting the trees and leaving their remains strewn across the roads. It made passing difficult at times, but Paine followed Diarmuid's lead. The man seemed to know what he was doing.

Monstrous storms ravaged the lands and Paine's family, like others, simply dealt with the aftermath of cyclones and lightning that didn't just drift; they hunted. And when they preyed upon a village, almost no one survived. Yet from what Paine had heard it was mild compared to the hundred years that followed the Shift. Those storms possessed something unnatural, powers beyond what the old world was prepared to comprehend. And they had swept the land clean, as if the Earth had rid herself of a plague of sores that had festered on her surface for far too long.

Paine studied Diarmuid as they walked. He enjoyed watching the man. He was agile and lissome, which was surprising for someone of his stature. He was wide in the shoulders and had legs with the girth of small tree trunks. The combination should have made him slow and cumbersome, but instead he moved like a cat. Paine licked his lips at what he might do with a man like that.

As the sun dropped beyond the treescapes, they stopped for the night and soothed their weary feet by a stream that flowed through the woods in a gentle winding. With a makeshift spear in hand, Diarmuid departed to hunt for dinner. He returned with a few pheasants and wiry hares, the latter of which had the mange.

It was not the finest of meals, but satisfying enough to settle the hunger in Paine's gut. After eating, Lya sat off to the side with her distant thoughts and Diarmuid unsheathed an arm-length silver dagger from a scabbard. He polished it as they sat.

"Diarmuid, how long have you and Fang been together?" Paine asked, trying to make some form

of conversation. It wasn't one of his stronger points, but Lya's silence was getting uncomfortable. It was not the first time she had retreated within herself, but this was one of the longest.

*What was eating at her?*

The dagger glinted orange in the firelight and Paine wondered what might happen if he touched it, curious if it would trigger a response. His parents never owned anything made of silver, mostly due to cost. Silver was expensive — the price of defending one's self against bloodcraft and the dead.

"Six years," replied Diarmuid. "She's a great companion and friend. I would be lost without her."

Paine settled onto his blanket, letting the warmth from the fire seep into his sore leg muscles.

"Is she tame?"

Fang turned her head to glare at him.

"Tame?" Diarmuid chuckled. "She could leave anytime she wants." He leaned back further against a small log. Paine moved to avoid the smoke that wafted in his direction, settling himself at Diarmuid's side. The man shuffled closer, his sinewy, iron leg pressed against Paine's. The fire seemed to emanate more heat.

"I don't understand. Then why is she here?"

"I met up with a pack of her kind one evening. When we met, she chased the others off and remained with me. She's been with me since."

"Why did she leave her pack?"

"I don't know," he said. "I may never know. I can sense when she's near, but I cannot communicate with her like Lya. I don't have that talent."

Lya remained silent, but poked at the fire with a large stick. Her ears were pricked.

Diarmuid stared into the flames and then went quiet.

"Well," said Paine after a time and feeling enough awkward silence had passed. "It's been a long day. Perhaps it's time to retire for the night."

Lya rose from where she sat and strode towards the woods. Diarmuid looked at Paine in confusion.

Paine shook his head. "Let her go."

Lya then disappeared into the dark, unchallenged by either.

Paine figured she was going to dance skyclad with the spirits. Once, he had tracked her into the woods on the night of the new moon and caught her dancing with an unseen apparition. He never followed her again. Not only did women not interest him, but the sight of his sister frolicking naked amongst the trees was almost repulsive.

*Of course, there was that shared night with Billy.*

Paine cloaked himself in his blanket, listening as the sound of his sister's travels took her further into the night. He looked to the sky. Other than the stars that filled it, it was empty.

*She would definitely be dancing.*

He rolled away from where Lya had disappeared, closed his eyes and slept.

## Chapter 5

“... *delapsus ordo...*”

Paine woke.

Something whispered in his ear, faint, yet audible enough that he could make out a smattering of words.

“... *tua sum domine...*”

He smelled blood.

He already knew the presence before he turned his head to see a shadow in the night. Lya knelt at his side, eyes open but rolled back, one hand raised to the air. She was trembling.

“...*te obsecro* ...”

On Paine’s chest was the shard of glass that Diarmuid had found and next to him lay a dead squirrel, its open throat smiling at him.

He sat up and snatched Lya’s arm. His grip was harsh and there was a faint grin on her face before her eyes returned from their upturned state. She plucked his fingers from her arm, each one removed with deft firmness. She seized the dead squirrel and then departed his side without a further word or glance.

Paine looked at Diarmuid as she strode into the woods. The man was huddled by the embers of the dying fire, asleep. Fang was nowhere to be seen. So Paine lay there for a time, listening for the sounds of his sister. The forest offered him nothing and so he lay there further, waiting and wallowing in the pain of his sister’s absence as she strode deeper into the woods. And with every step she took, the suffering in his heart worsened.

\*\*\*

The late morning sun baked Friar John's freckled skin as he trudged along the road. He took a swig of water from the flask that hung about his shoulder, and then poured a small amount on his head. The air was hot and sticky and made walking just slightly worse than uncomfortable.

A hushed quiet breathed across the land, despite the presence of travelers along the dusty road. He said little to the passersby, mostly mumbled greetings and comments on the weather. John wanted to put as much distance as possible between himself and the cardinal. He had departed at an ungodly hour, hastening from the monastery.

Beside him waddled Miguel, breathing heavily through his bulbous nose, a faint whistle occasionally emanating from his hairy nostrils. Miguel was the cardinal's parting gift — an escort. Pope Esther had not objected.

The two friars attracted little attention as they traveled through the southern valleys of Iberia, a land once known as Spain. It was not uncommon for their kind to be seen in these parts. He spoke the language fluently, as did Miguel; both were raised on the border of Portugal. His gift for languages was many: Portuguese, Latin, Iberian, and even some Valbain, though he had little opportunity to practice the latter tongue. He had learned a mere handful of words, gleaned from a few members of the Rebellion.

A single name resonated in John’s mind.

*Liesel.*

The Pope said the members of the Rebellion would recognize it, and would point him in the right direction. He did not know how anyone could help him find his quarry, but he had to start somewhere, and Liesel was it.

“Can we rest?” panted Miguel.

John stopped. A small grove of trees waited in the distance, enticing them with its offer of shade. He pointed to it and Miguel nodded his satisfaction. When they reached it, the fat friar dropped to the

ground, leaning against the old sycamore fig. He gulped down water and continued to pant. John dropped his pack on the ground. Its contents were heavy.

"How far did you say it is?" Miguel asked.

"Five days on horse. The next village should be half a day's journey. We can purchase horses there." He paused. "I'm sorry you were asked to endure this, brother. If you wish to depart, I would not blame you."

Indignation settled into Miguel's thin, pursed lips. He whistled even harder through his nose.

"I have been given this task and I will see it through, brother. Besides, I am curious as to where this will lead. Can you share with me what we are looking for?"

"How much do you know?"

"I know only that we are meant to get to Barcelona."

He envied the fat friar his ignorance. John remembered when the visions had come to him, and when the Virgin had shown things that had changed everything. His life was forever altered with that nibble from the Forbidden Fruit, a bite he wished he had never tasted.

And now they were on a mission to find the very thing he had long hoped to avoid.

And not just find him, he thought. How in the seven hells am I supposed to get close enough to kill him?

"Then live with that knowledge for now and give thanks."

Miguel shrugged and rose, gripping a low hanging branch for support.

"I am ready to move on again."

John nodded, placed his burden on his clammy back, and the two strode out of the shade.

\*\*\*

Paine was not an early riser, so dawn was an affair of mumbled curses. He would have slept longer, but his bladder was so full he could almost taste the piss. He groaned, stiff and sore from travel, not to mention a night of restlessness. When Fang had returned from whatever foray she had taken into the thicket, she had spent the remainder of the night kicking him in the chest, ruining any chance of recovering from his encounter with Lya. Paine rubbed his aching ribs.

The wolf grinned at him, licking him on the face as she rose and then stretched her nimble form. Her tongue reeked of things unmentionable and he wiped it from his face. Lya was already awake, and her dark mood had subsided.

"Good morning," she said. Her chipper greeting was feigned.

"Morning," he replied, eying her with care. He said nothing about the night, not wanting to appear divisive in front of Diarmuid, and then relieved himself in the shrubs.

The morning passed without much incident. The travel was light and comfortably quiet by the time they reached the outskirts of the next village. Paine and Lya waited for Diarmuid while the latter went in for supplies. Diarmuid was unsure how far the Confederation's reach now stretched, and after passing a makeshift gallows and a tree with three sawed off nooses swaying in the breeze, they agreed it would be safer if the two of them weren't seen.

Fang remained with them.

Now alone, Paine considered raising his concerns about the previous night but clamped his mouth. It was not worth the battle. He would wait until the moment was right. But he needed to kill time and the tension between them was palpable.

"Now that Diarmuid's not here, why don't you ask Fang why she left her pack?"

The wolf's ears pricked.

"Why don't you?" Lya asked. "You seem to have all kinds of hidden talents you haven't told me about."

He paused. "What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

Paine remained silent.

Lya walked over to him. There was a forced sureness in her stride, an anger to the click of her boots upon the ground.

"How did you command seven souls to do your bidding at once?" she asked, circling him. "How did you summon them without blood? And how come that fucking silver cross didn't stop you?" She poked him in the chest. It hurt. "It stopped my curses, why not your summons? What else have you learned that you haven't told me?" She was starting to shriek. Her eyes were wild.

*Is that what's eating at her?*

"You think I'm hiding something from you?"

"Aren't you?"

Paine shook his head. "I was willing to pay the price for the summons and they took nothing from me. I thought I would go mad. Perhaps enough blood had already been spilled, but I won't risk doing it again." He clenched his fists and faced her. "You care to share what you were up to last night?"

"I was dancing."

"After that."

She hesitated.

*Something was brewing in that mind of hers.*

"Trying to sense if those souls you summoned were still inside you."

"That's all?"

"Yes."

Paine said nothing.

She smiled, again contrived. "I forgive you." Her voice was now honey and sunshine and she plopped in front of Fang.

*Forgive? Maybe not brewing; more like fermenting.*

Lya held out her hands to let the wolf smell her. She then scratched her behind the ears and leaned into her face. The whole process took time, his sister obviously not wanting to force herself upon something that might tear a piece of flesh from her.

Paine fidgeted where he sat. He blocked out his concerns of whether Lya had lied to him. He couldn't deal with that now. He would learn the truth.

*All in time.*

As for Fang, he wondered why a wolf would leave her pack for a human. It didn't make sense. There had to be a reason. And getting the answer was taking far too long for Paine's liking.

Lya told him more than once that conversing with animals worked differently. They communicated in vision, smell and instinct. It would take time. Paine understood, but it was little consolation. His curiosity itched, and he needed to scratch.

After a time, Fang growled, low at first and then rising in volume. Lya paused.

"What's going on?" Paine whispered.

She held up her hand to him, her eyes never leaving the wolf. The snarling became throatier. The wolf turned her head towards Paine and then glared into the forest, her rumbling rising once more. Paine followed Fang's gaze into the trees.

He rose.

Fang fell quiet, watching the dense brush that coated the forest. Lya crouched and edged forward with the wolf. A presence lurked in the trees. Paine could feel it. He could sense it watching them.

He stepped forward to check, but then, as if nothing had ever been there, Fang stopped. The silence of the forest vanished and the birdsong returned. The presence, or whatever it was, was now gone.

"What was that?" he asked. He reached for the flask of water at his side. Burning apple edged its way up his gullet.

"I don't know," Lya whispered, "but I could sense it. It was studying us."

He gargled and spat. "Does Fang know?"

"I doubt it. And I got nothing from her. It's like trying to communicate with that stupid cow."

They strode over to the brush for a look, Paine holding a heavy stick as a weapon. They inched forward, careful not to move too swiftly. Lya's dagger was sheathed and she crawled behind Paine on all fours. With care he pulled back the branches and jumped when a small bird flew out of the bush. His heart raced and he nearly screamed. As it fluttered about them and then flew off, Paine paused. In the mud were etched mangled hoofprints. He supposed it was from their own horses because there were no other signs anyone had been there, and they certainly would have seen a person on horseback.

*At least someone on horseback who was still alive.*

That thought made his stomach turn a little.

Paine broke the silence as they wandered back to where Fang lay in the clearing.

"I wonder if the Witch Hunters are following us."

Lya said nothing, but they sat close to each other, watching the trees for anything. Living or not.

When Diarmuid returned he examined the vicinity as well, but found nothing to add to their own observations. As a precaution, they kept a closer vigil as they rode.

They continued north along a road that still favored a westerly tangent; the wind that blew from that direction smelled thick of something cold and unsavory. It worsened with every mile. Eventually they came upon a hamlet, or that's what Paine thought to call it. It was too small to be anything else; the paltry buildings and homes would hardly have warranted such a grand title as village.

It seemed abandoned with its doors closed and windows boarded up, yet there was a trickle of life. A few people walked the streets, but their pace was far from casual and their glances were furtive. Those who ventured into the streets would hasten from one building to another, pounding on a reinforced door. It would open a crack, and an arm would yank the person inside before slamming closed.

Diarmuid inquired about a place to stay.

His response was swift and without apology — there was nowhere to put them up for the night.

*No room at the inn.*

As they approached one of the buildings, he caught some muttered talk on the other side of a poorly shuttered window.

"Last night Emma saw a serpent drinking from the cow's teat," said a voice.

"Vile!" responded another.

They went on to blather about snakes crawling down the mouths of babes, suffocating them in their sleep; the oak trees in the grove bleeding from their stumps; and young women disappearing before their wedding day — some never returning and others being found three days later, naked and branded with the symbol of a goat.

"Those women, they had no memory left. They didn't even recognize their own mothers," shrieked the first voice.

She was hushed and then talk of the Confederation's salvation was whispered. Paine slipped from the window's edge.

A stalk of a man named Clem was willing to speak with the travelers. He informed them the village elders would be speaking with the Confederation representatives in a week. The three said nothing, trying to draw little attention so they might not be remembered in seven days time. That plan was laid to ruin when an old woman shuffled along the road. She pointed a gnarled finger at Lya.

"Succubus!" she yelled, gurgling and spitting up. "Succubus!" she screamed again and foamed at the mouth. The she dropped in the street, dead.

Paine looked in horror at Lya who shook her head.

"Not me," she mouthed. He wasn't sure if he believed her.



They departed soon after, leaving the town to gossip behind their bolted doors and battened windows about who had just passed through, and the misfortune that followed in their footsteps.

Two mornings later Paine rinsed his face in a nearby stream, letting its cold touch wash away what remained of the night's slumber. He swallowed some dried fruit for his morning repast, avoiding the apples. His throat still burned.

The day passed without much event. There were a few shrines upon the road — mostly crosses with dried flowers to mark where someone had met their end. Paine knew those markers well. There were five along the Fairfax Road back home, all to mark the deaths of young men who tried to drive away the wolfen — crooked and twisted versions of their smaller cousins, with much more cruelty and cunning than should befit any animal.

Paine visited those shrines often and even summoned one of their souls forth. One man's specter appeared, but refused to speak; refused to even look at him. It was one of Paine's first attempts at necromancy and he had failed to command it.

*Stupid ghost. What good was summoning it if it wouldn't do your bidding?*

In his anger he had cursed the soul back into the netherworld. It spoke then, and screamed its agony as it disappeared from sight.

Paine cursed it one more time and then adjusted the cross of one of the shrines, straightening it.

As the end of the day approached, they stood facing the remains of the old world.

"I'm not sure which city this is," Diarmuid said.

Paine found it difficult to remove his gaze from the skeletal ruins. The remnants of mammoth structures stood guard in the distance, stone watchers over a wasteland of broken buildings and lost lives.

"Incredible," he muttered.

Diarmuid laughed. "Yeah, I guess it's something when you've never seen it before."

Lya harrumphed beside him.

Diarmuid urged his horse forward. "Come on, it's a little bit further and we can camp within the city for the night."

The road was in shambles and they meandered along its broken course. From this vantage point Paine noticed the details of the buildings. None had windows left, the glass pillaged or broken from the storms after the Shift, and rusted beams jutted at strange angles. They traveled for some time along the potholed road, bordered by the remains of what Diarmuid referred to as the suburbs. When they reached the main part of the city, the concrete sentries towered over them and Paine arched his neck. It dwarfed his own village hundreds of times over.

There was a lure here. Paine couldn't put his finger on it, but it was as if something within the city called to him, summoning something within him — perhaps his childhood passions, or maybe his desire for something awe-inspiring in his life. He urged Shadow forward, enticed by the stories of the old world and enthralled by the lives of the people that had lived in such a wondrous place.

Later that night, he stared into the heavens and watched the moonlight dance along the remains of the great towers. He looked over to where Diarmuid lay beside him, eyes closed, chest rising and falling in a slow rhythm. There was something more than appealing about the man, in his strength and giving nature. He had offered Paine his blanket and Paine accepted it with a shy nod of gratitude. He was not accustomed to the generosity of others. Most often, people wanted something in return.

He wondered if perhaps Diarmuid shared his preference for male companionship. The difference in their ages was about the same as that of the couple that had raised him.

Diarmuid cocked his head and caught Paine glancing in his direction. Paine held his gaze for a brief moment and smiled before he turned away. Maybe this time he wouldn't need a potion.

He stared back up at the sky, and it was some time before he slept.

The following morning greeted them with a sky coated in a patchwork of gray, the sun struggling to pierce the medley of cloud. Paine rose, feeling groggy. Talon glided through the firmament above, swerving between the skyscrapers of old, wingtips adjusting with the shifting currents that lifted her higher into the air. She nearly shit on him.

*Fucking bird.*

They packed and began the slow trek through the cityscape. Paine was engrossed with the ancient marvels that surrounded them. His attention was cleaved between his own wandering mind and Diarmuid's pointing to a hodge-podge of rusted metal that lay in the street.

"That was once a bus, I think. They could carry over fifty people."

Paine walked over to inspect it. The remains of small benches lay between the weeds that grew among the scraps of metal, looking like closely placed tombstones. He pulled the tangled foliage aside and discovered a treasure of intricate metal parts. Smaller piles of the same corroded refuse lined the streets. He knew them to be cars, the horseless carriages he had heard so much about.

They passed concrete poles that rose from the ground like broken fingers pointing skyward. Few were left standing. Many had fallen across what were once smooth roads, and were now dishevelled piles of rubble that weaved around the buildings. The whole place oozed a serenity Paine had known only in one place — the cemetery in Fairfax.

No breeze blew through the streets, as if the city was between breaths. On they traveled, altering course and veering off the main streets when they were blocked by the fallen corpses of the buildings. They turned down another side street, and Diarmuid halted them with one upheld hand. The birds were silent. Paine held his breath as Diarmuid surveyed the area. Fang emitted a low growl, her hackles risen.

Diarmuid dismounted and unsheathed his sword in a jerky, hesitant motion.

"Go beside that tower and stay hidden."

Lya rode to the side of the street, dismounting beneath a gnarled oak. She released Talon to the sky. Paine paused, questioning if he should obey Diarmuid's instructions or follow him. In the end, he thought it wise to do as he was told. He followed Lya and watched Fang bound off after Diarmuid.

Paine fiddled with Shadow's reins. "What do you think is going on?"

"I don't know," Lya said. She gazed toward Talon, closing her eyes in concentration. After a time she responded. "There are six people coming down the next street. They're heading right for Diarmuid."

"We need to warn him," Paine said and charged forward, running after the man. He ignored Lya's hushed calls for him to wait.

Upon reaching him, Diarmuid gestured for quiet. Three men and one exceptionally tall woman marched down the street, all dressed in leather pants and half-helmets. Between them struggled two people clasped in silver collars. One was obviously female, not much older than Paine. He couldn't see if the other was a man or a woman; the black hair covered the face.

Lya rounded the corner. She cast her gaze skyward once more, searching for Talon. She caught sight of the falcon and closed her eyes as she connected with the bird. The four Hunters turned their attention towards her, a deliberate, unified motion that made Paine shudder.

"Talon cannot see any others," Lya whispered.

The woman gave orders for the three men and the young woman to go forward. She took the other captive to the side of the street and waited, crossbow in hand.

One of the Hunters called out. "We know you are there! Under the authority of the Confederation, come out and surrender yourselves!"

Diarmuid looked at Paine. "You think you can take one of them?"

"I—"

Lya pulled out her dagger. "I can." The black liquid had almost solidified.

"Fine. Go to the other side of this building. Don't do anything until their backs are to you. Take

them from behind.”

The two left Diarmuid and hurried around the corner. Paine felt like a third tit, useless to someone of his proclivities. He held no weapon and he was unsure about summoning the dead once more.

*Not this time. He got lucky once.*

They clambered over rubble and fallen trees as they scurried around the massive structure. By the time they reached their destination, Diarmuid stood in the middle of the street. Three of the Hunters faced him, one holding the captive face down to the ground. The female Hunter, with her long legs and blonde hair, still stood off to the side. The white cross on her vest gleamed in the sun.

*Oh God!*

Paine sucked in his breath. It was the same Hunter from their farm. A righteous anger throbbed in his neck. He fisted his hands.

*She would pay. They would all pay.*

The Hunter’s captive struggled, but was no match for the impressive woman. She was easily twice as powerful and with the silver collar, her captive was incapable of summoning any sort of spirit or spell.

One of the male Hunters, the one with his booted foot upon the young woman’s back, called out again. “By the authority of the Confederation, we command you to surrender.” His teeth glinted. They were silver.

His captive cried out a faint plea. “Help me, please.”

“The Confederation holds no authority here,” Diarmuid retorted. There was a tenseness to his stance. Fang sat at his side, a smarmy grin adorning her hairy muzzle. She ignored two rats that scampered across the road.

The men continued forward, strides unwavering. All three were built solid, appearing to be more than a match for Diarmuid over whom they towered. Paine wasn't sure if Diarmuid would be able to fight them all. That made him uneasy.

Would he need to call upon the dead?

*There could be thousands in a place like this.*

“Do you know what you're going to do?” he asked Lya. He knew who he would target first.

She stared at the Hunters. “I’m going to kill them.” Her voice was chill.

“Can I help?” he asked.

“Stay out of the way,” she said. “You’ll know—“

She was cut short as Diarmuid ducked to his left. An arrow scratched his face and blood seeped down his cherub-like cheeks. The man ran forward, letting it drip. Paine’s insides twisted as the Hunter nocked and fired again. Then Fang bolted towards them. The wolf dodged the next arrow; one that was meant for her throat. She flowed with liquid movement, streaming towards the middle man.

The one with the silver teeth then dropped to his knees and drove his sword through the young woman’s back before Diarmuid had a chance to reach him.

Paine gasped.

The woman moaned her agony and her shackled legs and arms shook before she lay silent. The Hunter dipped his hand into the wound in her back that ran with red. He licked his fingers and grinned before Diarmuid reached him in time to swipe his sword at him. The Hunter rolled backwards, avoiding the swing.

Paine reached for the young woman, as if he could somehow help her from this distance, but then retracted his hand as Lya leapt from behind the building. She flung her dagger at one of the Hunters. It struck him in the back and he dropped to his knees, struggling to reach for the blade. He coughed up blood and collapsed in a heap.

Diarmuid fought the Hunter with the silver teeth, meeting him stroke for stroke. The man towered over Diarmuid, but the shorter man held his own. The Hunter brought his sword down and Diarmuid dove out of the way, the blade missing its mark and striking rock with a loud clank. Diarmuid rolled to

his feet, sword defending against the man once more. He barely got to his knees as the metal thudded into the ground.

Fang engaged the second Hunter, darting around his massive legs and biting at his knees. The Hunter's sword missed the wolf, his movements languid compared to Fang's calculated raids. Lya ran up to him and flung a powder in his eyes. He screamed in pain and she pulled out the parchment from her pocket. She smeared the blood of the dead woman on her hands.

The female Hunter threw her captive to the ground. She lifted her crossbow, a heavy and cumbersome weapon she flung with ease. It was aimed at Lya. Paine felt a stirring within him, bubbling and ready to spew forward. He clenched his fists and almost called forth the dead, but Talon screeched and launched at the woman. Her shot fired amiss. The falcon veered for a second assault, but the woman was prepared and dodged. Lya raised her crimson hands to the air and completed the summons.

A faint breeze stirred behind Paine, its breath frigid and stale. Realizing her predicament, the Hunter turned and ran. She disappeared among the ruins, whistling for her mount.

Of the two remaining Hunters, one raised a silver cross at Lya, but it was too late. A whirlwind of dust swept around her. Her face turned ashen and hollow. Her eyes rolled back and her body shook. The Hunter was thrown to the ground by an invisible force. Slashes striped his body as if he was being ripped by bear claws. Bite marks appeared on his legs. He screamed and tore at the ground with bloodied fingers. He lost a nail. The Hunter was then pulled backwards into an empty building, where he screamed further and then went silent.

Diarmuid continued to fight the last Hunter. While he fought, the body of the young woman and the other Hunter were slowly dragged into the same building. The silver-toothed Hunter swung at Diarmuid again, but slipped on the streaming blood of his comrade and Diarmuid didn't hesitate to pierce his chest with his sword, groaning as he shoved it in. The Hunter fell to the ground. Then he, too, was hauled by invisible hands. The broken doorway waited like an open maw. He was sucked inside screaming, the sword still piercing his body. He left a trail of red. When the screaming stopped Paine shuddered. He unclenched his fists and found he had been biting his lip. The taste was salty and he wiped the blood with his sleeve.

Lya dropped to her knees, teeth clenched. She continued to shake and put her hands to the ground. Her fingers gripped the dry earth and she shook her head. Then she groaned and sat still. The spell was finished. Diarmuid offered to help her up, but she waved him off. She sat a moment, recovering, before rising. She picked up a loose sword from the ground and handed it to Diarmuid.

"You don't want to go after yours. Take this one instead."

Diarmuid looked towards the building and then back at Lya. He accepted the sword and said nothing.

There was a look of satisfaction in Lya's eyes, one she made sure Paine noticed.

*Is she insane?*

He turned from her and walked towards the captive, who appeared to be praying.

Paine couldn't help but stare. Even up close, he found it difficult to distinguish gender. The captive had a hard-angled jaw that indicated male, but there was a softness in the facial features that said female.

The deep voice betrayed his gender. "Thank ... you," he muttered. His voice was like thick syrup. "God ... help me."

Diarmuid offered a hand to help him up. "I'm Diarmuid. This is Paine, and Lya."

"P-P-Puck," he responded and held out his hands with the silver cuffs.

Diarmuid unclasped the cuffs. "Where are the horses? We have to get out of here before she returns."

The young man pointed behind him, to where the Hunter vanished into the ruins.

"You three go and wait. Fang, you stay with them," Diarmuid said. He then bolted around the corner.

Paine was still aghast at what Lya had summoned. She smirked, and they both said nothing.  
*Careless.*

It was Puck who broke the silence. "You ... p-p-pretty," he said to Lya. He seemed to think before each word. His eyes hungered for her, a look he had no sense to hide.

*He's simple.*

Lya looked at him sidelong and smiled. It wasn't shy.

"Are you all right?" Paine asked.

Puck nodded. "Yes."

Lya remained silent and walked away. The other two followed, just as quiet as they gave a wide berth around a pool of crimson that coagulated. Lya retrieved her dagger, sheathing it without wiping it clean. Paine let the other two walk ahead, watching the doorway into which the others had been pulled. He studied where the young woman had lain and noticed a small kerchief. It was embroidered with the emblem of the crescent moon and a goat. It fluttered away with the faint breeze. Paine let it go and continued after the others.

As they reached the horses, Diarmuid rode around the corner on a honey-colored gelding.

"Quickly. She may be looking for help. Puck, we can take you home or you can come with us. We're going to Haven."

The young man's slow voice seethed. "I ... have ... no home."

"Neither do we," Paine said. "Our parents were killed by Witch Hunters." He chose not to mention the same Hunter was responsible for Puck's capture. There was a saying his father had often used about salt in the wound.

*No need for that here.*

But he wondered how she had caught up to them.

Diarmuid dismounted and handed the reins to Puck who climbed atop the horse with a strained, clumsy effort. Diarmuid and Paine mounted their horses as Lya waited for Talon to alight on her outstretched arm. She swung aboard Sable and they all sped north.

Charging through the ruins they fled, and within little time they reached the outskirts of the ancient city. There was no sign of the Hunter chasing them, but they rode for almost an hour, their mounts snorting heavily. The sweat of Shadow's flanks seeped into Paine's trousers.

Eventually, Diarmuid brought his horse about and faced them.

"How are you all holding up?"

"Fine," they resounded. Puck gave an exaggerated nod.

"We need to get off the main road. It will take us longer, but we'll be less obvious." Diarmuid paused, looking back to the valley of ruins, deceptive in its tranquility. His eyebrows furrowed. "The Hunters don't usually come into this area, and certainly not the ruins. Perhaps the influence of the Confederation has spread faster than I thought. From now on, no one casts a spell or summons. If there are Hunters swarming this area, we don't need the extra attention. And there isn't anywhere to turn between here and Haven, unless we go through the Westwood."

A tingling sensation danced along the nape of Paine's neck at the mention of the forbidden forest. He thought of the Confederation army that had ventured into the Westwood to cleanse it of evil. They were never seen or heard from again. What sort of devilry lived there, he did not know, and did not care to know. He took one last glance back at the city.

*What had Lya summoned? And was it still back there?*

She had barely remained in control of her own body. She had struggled to release herself from the spell.

*Next time she might not be so lucky.*

He frowned. Her presence was getting more distant and his heart began to ache. He wallowed in it for a moment, trying to bear it, and then followed the others.

Hours later, Paine's thighs and backside were in a constant ache that would not let up no matter how much he adjusted his position in the saddle. When they stopped for the night, he groaned.

He tied up Shadow before lying down at the foot of a small oak, ignoring the gnawing feeling in his stomach. Puck cried until he crumpled from fatigue. Paine remained awake for a time before exhaustion finally took him. The respite did not last long. The sun still had sleep in her eyes, barely rising above the hills, when Diarmuid nudged him awake.

"Sorry Paine, but we have to move on again." Diarmuid helped him up, his hand holding on to Paine's a little longer than what would be considered proper.

He blushed as Diarmuid released him.

Paine then packed his things and mounted for the long ride once more.

Almost the entire day passed at the same rapid pace before they stumbled upon a small village. It was rather unexpected this far west and there seemed to be a health to the village that surprised them all. Things grew here; pine trees laden with cones, wild grasses with buttercups, and shrubs with red berries — redder than Paine had ever seen. He was pleased at the sight, especially the awaiting inn. He felt exhausted, and smelled so bad he was certain even Fang would turn her nose up at him. A bath was in tall order.

Dismounting outside of the small, but inviting establishment called Luna's Tavern, they handed the reins to a stable-hand. Diarmuid gave the young man a second, protracted look, before leading them onwards.

Entering the inn, the smell of fresh bread inundated them. Lya and Puck both licked their lips. Paine planned on stuffing himself so full they would have to roll him to Haven.

"Good day to you," said the innkeeper as she wiped her hands on an apron that clung to her buxom form. She was a short, red-headed woman, with a lavender blouse that barely concealed her ample bosom. Her lips were red like the berries, and she bore a heavy perfume.

Fang sneezed.

The woman took a small step back. "I'm afraid there are no dogs allowed."

"She's well trained and will remain in our room. I will pay extra if you think she will be an inconvenience." Diarmuid then explained their story to her. Paine and Lya were his nephew and niece and they were moving to live with him after their parents had died in a fire. Puck was the hired help.

"I'm afraid I have only one room left and it has only one bed. It's a little drafty, but it's better than the barn. I'm sure the young ones and your hired man would be fine in it and we could find another bed for you." The innkeeper stared at Diarmuid with a look that could only be described as yearning.

Diarmuid looked unfazed by the insinuation. "No, thank you."

The innkeeper shrugged. "Let me show you to your room then." She turned on her heel and marched up the stairs, the trail of perfume lagging behind her.

Sparsely decorated, the room was small, and the innkeeper had grossly understated the draft. Taking a bath was their first priority and one of the maids showed them to the bathing rooms. Diarmuid undressed. Scarred lacerations ran across the man's chest and back. Some looked like they had been fairly deep. Paine wanted to run his finger along them.

Diarmuid caught him looking and grinned.

"A gift from the Confederation," was his comment.

Feeling somewhat sheepish that his roving eye had been caught, Paine lowered his head and stepped into the large, copper tub.

The bath was just shy of piping hot and in a short time Paine regained some composure as he washed with soap that was a bit too acrid. It felt good to be hot and clean. Diarmuid sang a strange song about three men in a tub. Paine had never heard it before, but the tune was catching and before he knew it he hummed along. Had it been two men in a tub, his thoughts might have drifted to something a little less proper. He was relieved Puck was there; his fat, pasty frame deterred any such inkling. He splashed in the water like a child.

As the bath settled to lukewarm, Paine scampered out of the tub and dressed in a hurry. They rejoined Lya and made their way to the small, yet welcoming, common room.

Dinner was hearty; goat stew and fresh bread. Puck barely chewed his food, nearly swallowing it whole. Paine barely had any room for the rhubarb pie. When they finished dinner, they each sat and nursed a mug of gritty beer, listening to a rather gaunt woman crooning a ballad in the corner. Idle chatter filled the room, but some murmurings fouled their spirits; whispers of Witch Hunters amassing, rumors of purging Haven, the Westwood spreading and flooding over a place called Lindhome, and claims of wolfen attacks along the roads in the Outlands. There was also talk of someone named Pan keeping the Westwood from spreading this far south, but he was looking for a bride. With the comment a number of eyes cast glances towards Lya.

Diarmuid fidgeted in his seat. "We should retire for the night. It's going to be another early start in the morning."

They did not question him as he rose, but followed his lead, smuggling stew and bread for Fang. They thanked the innkeeper for dinner and headed up to their room, Diarmuid rolling his eyes as the woman winked at him.

Paine remained awake for a time, staring at the ceiling, lost in what was said in the common room. He wondered what the rumors meant, especially the part that someone named Pan had been seen dancing in the midnight hour with goats that stood on two feet.

Eventually, weariness got the better of him and he slept.

Memories of what his sister had conjured plagued his dreams and he nearly cried aloud when they were woken by a sudden knock at the door. He sat up, and in the dark of the room, barely made out Diarmuid motioning for quiet. The gleam from his knife reflected what little light shone through the small window. Fang looked ready to pounce and Lya had her bloodied dagger drawn. Puck sat in the shadows, a deadpan expression on his face.

Diarmuid edged closer to the door. "Who is it?"

The voice of the innkeeper was hushed, yet hurried. "I must speak with you."

Diarmuid ushered her in, the candle in her hand inundating the dismal room with soft, flickering light. "What's going on?"

"There was a woman asking about you. She described all four of you exactly, including the dog. She was flanked by three others, all of them Witch Hunters. I told her there were no such people here and to leave. I don't think she believed me, but she was distracted by two women in the common room. She took them away in nooses and dragged them into the forest by their ankles. If they start asking questions in the village, it won't take them long to figure out you're here. I don't want further trouble. I suggest you leave immediately." The stern tone of her voice demanded obedience.

"We're leaving," Diarmuid said. "Get your things." He then handed the innkeeper some coins.

"These are for your trouble and your silence. Thank you." Leaning over, he kissed her on the cheek.

She escorted them down the stairs, flowing with an agility that was surprising for a woman of her girth. She cast the candlelight before her, banishing the shadows, as she sped them through the halls to the front of the inn where she bid them a quick farewell.

As the three waited for Diarmuid to fetch the horses, four men escorted a staggering young woman down the road. She was drunk with red berries and wine, her lips as crimson as the innkeeper's. The men spoke of goats, weddings, and virgins. They snorted and laughed as they stumbled along the cobbled road. They appeared almost as inebriated. Then the drunken lot disappeared before Diarmuid returned and the four rode off into the midnight hour, leaving the town of Cabra behind.

## Chapter 6

Brahm crouched until the tawny wolf bounded off into the woods. As its wiry hide disappeared into the shrub, she envied the wolf its simple life.

*Eat, sleep, hunt, and fuck.*

A part of her ran with it, wishing she could go in its place. A restlessness itched inside her with its desire to get out into the wilds, to be one with the Great Mother.

*It was time to leave Haven.*

She rose. "Diarmuid is fine," she said, facing Gregor and the others that gathered to hear what a wolf would have to relay. "He's found a young man and woman in the southwest. There is bad news though. The Witch Hunters are gathering."

Gregor leaned on his walking stick. "Can you tell how long ago? Where?"

"I'd say a week ago. From what the wolf indicated, west of the Mississippi, but human affairs are of little concern to the wolves."

Silence filled the air, each lost to their own thoughts and the implication of the wolf's message. A putrid sigh emanated from Gregor.

"It looks as if we will need to consider this matter sooner than we thought. Summon the others."

The meeting was concise and to the point. No hand waving, no gasps, and no long-winded explanations. War, plain and simple, was now knocking on their door. If the Confederation decided to wage war upon Haven, they would need every last person they had at their disposal — witch or not. Haven was recalling the Missionaries, a unanimous decision. The war mongers of Haven, some of which had fled the butchery that had befallen Sanctuary, left the meeting with sickening grins.

Brahm marched back to the stalls and finished her chores. She would be leaving on the morrow, an early start. After a hot bath, and declining an invitation to join Farin in her room, she turned in for the night. She wondered if she might regret it later, but some things took precedence over pleasing a young woman for hours. Sleep was one of them.

With morning came a cloak of cool mist that shrouded the land. Brahm could barely see twenty paces in front of her, yet the fog filled her with exhilaration. Others waited indoors or stumbled through its hazy, white maze. Brahm Hallowstone marched through it, its chill touch caressing her dark skin like a phantom lover.

Her hands hovered over the two silver daggers she carried at her sides, just to make sure they were there. It was an obsession, she knew, but readiness was worth the price of a little paranoia. Besides, the kahbeth were irreplaceable.

They were fashioned by the Obek from the north, a tribe of beings not of the old world. They appeared after the Shift and were an unwelcome sight, something much larger than humans; slower in both speech and movement, but powerful. And the weapons they bore were lethal. The kahbeth was a double-bladed weapon; one smooth and sharp, the other serrated if sawing was required. Both blades had reverse spikes to rip flesh when pulled from their victim.

As she walked she thought of Gault, the shaman that trained her in their use. He had some odd notion that he owed her a life debt for saving one of his clan from wolfen. Brahm hadn't seen Gault in some time and hoped he fared well. He had been surprised by her prowess with the weapons. She had found that a little insulting, but then the Obek thought humans weren't good for much except ferreting dark things out of small caves. Designed by a race that thrived on hardships, hunting, and clan wars, the kahbeth's thirst for death could overpower those that did not know how to keep the desire in check.

Brahm struggled with that part, controlling the hunger. Regardless, they were her weapon of choice.

There was no one to see her off as she marched through the fog; no one to wish her well. She prepped her sturdy charger, adjusting the sidesaddles, and then mounted him to head north.

"Come on, Roan. It's time to go."



She was to meet with their allies to ask their assistance. The Obek roamed the North Moors, a vast land sparsely decorated with pines and spruces among the predominant sea of heath and moss. She could not possibly hope to find them. Instead, she sent a message. As for their other allies, the Iroquois, she would travel to the land where her heart belonged. They were close enough for Brahm to make the journey and they knew her well. They were a generous and caring people, but wary of strangers wandering into their lands. Centuries of colonization had taught them that.

The days and nights passed without event and she thanked the Great Mother for the time to herself, though there were moments when she yearned for the companionship she once knew. Parts of her ached for Gray Wolf and she often had to put the woman from her mind. She missed her winning smile, her dry humor, and the way she would dig in her heels if she thought she was right. She had been one of the most stubborn people Brahm had ever known. And Brahm had loved her; she had loved her raw.

Her thoughts also dwelled on Diarmuid, for his charming smile and determined nature. What she would not give to have him traveling with her now. He was some of the best company she had ever kept. A part of her grudgingly understood Haven's fears about him. He had been subdued and tainted for years. It was a wonder he was ever freed; a greater wonder he had come out of it sane, but she knew she was not fooling herself in trusting him. He would never return to his old ways. Diarmuid had healed.

It took Brahm three days to arrive in the heart of the Haudenosaunee lands. She knelt to the ground and placed the palm of her hand on the earth giving thanks to the Great Mother. Rising, she found herself face-to-face with a man just shy of her own height. He startled her.

She masked her surprise with a dry smile. "White Feather."

He had an aquiline nose and auburn hair that brushed his shoulders. His striking looks would have made most women fall to their knees, but Brahm was not most women. A smile stretched across his face in a half-moon and a look of triumph shone in his almond-shaped eyes. She cursed herself for not having heard his approach.

*Careless.*

"It's good to see you," he said. "I was beginning to think you'd forgotten about us." He said nothing of his triumph in startling her and hugged her close. The smell of the land emanated from him.

"I could never forget that fool grin. It's good to see you too." She returned the embrace, allowing him to have his victory. She swore to herself it would not happen again and then immersed herself in the moment. His presence gave her a sense of comfort.

Sizing her up, a look of concern crossed his face. "You have not been eating well. You're too thin. My mother will be forcing food down your throat when she sees you. And if you ask my opinion, I think you would look better with a little more meat." A miscreant look sat in his eyes, accompanied by a smirk. A part of her missed that grin and a part of her wanted to slap it clean off.

Heat rose in her face. "I have important matters to attend to. I must speak with the Council. When is their next meeting?"

"The Chiefs are together now. Things are not good. Not since the time of the Wendigo have we seen such hardships. The crops fail and the wolfen attack more often."

*The Wendigo.*

Brahm shivered. That name brought back terrible memories — ones she'd sooner forget.

"Then I need to see them right away."

He looked her over and smiled. "My mother may still insist you eat first," he said.

Putting his hands on his hips, he drew himself up and gave an uncanny imitation of the Clan Mother. "One cannot face the Council on an empty stomach! You will eat first!"

She feigned laughter as something inside her stirred, a presence that, for a brief moment, Brahm had almost forgotten. It had not appeared in her dreams for months. She tried to beat it down, willing it back into its secret lair where it hid from her, but it was futile. The sight of the Haudenosaunee warrior

brought it screaming to the surface.

- *We are one, Soul Runner.*-

She sighed. *Go away.*

Within Brahm Hallowstone a second soul resided, one not her own. She knew the woman to whom it once belonged, and with her presence came the guilt of her death.

- *We are one.*-

\*\*\*

Paine would have huddled under his cape over the last two days had Lya not taken it. Not that he minded being wet, but the sporadic gobs of rain that doused the land had become an annoyance.

*At least the rain was warm.*

They rode hard for the better part of two days after fleeing the inn. Lya sent Talon back to see if anyone followed. There were now ten Witch Hunters on their trail. Diarmuid was reserved since the discovery of that information. He had no idea why they pursued them. Paine couldn't help but wonder if what he had heard at the inn had anything to do with it.

Fortunately, as they followed the direction of the weather-beaten road, they did not stumble upon a soul for which Paine gave small thanks.

He distracted himself by talking to Puck and listening to the young man recite children's tales from his village. Paine shared some of his own childhood tales and rhymes. It lightened his mood. Lya rode in silence. Between showers she reviewed the parchment, at other times she scoured the grimoire.

Diarmuid paused at a fork in the road. A battered path with trees leaning into it led north. The better traveled thoroughfare led northeast. The man looked at Lya from the corner of his eye. She was too focused on the grimoire to notice. Diarmuid didn't look to the others. He then took the northward road. Puck followed blindly.

Paine hesitated and then followed. They would come upon the Westwood following this road.

He was proven correct when, a day later, no longer on the road, but riding through a vast land of marsh and mist, there was an abrupt change in their surroundings. It felt as if they breathed oil.

"You can taste something in the air," said Lya as she dismounted Sable, whispering in her ear before coaxing her onward. She reached over to touch one of the trees. It was lifeless, like everything that lay before them. They stood on the edge of death; a forest of it.

She jerked her hand back as she came within inches of its roughened surface.

"What is this place?"

Diarmuid did not look pleased. He paced in front of the wilted trees.

"This is the Westwood. It's not supposed to be this far south. What I was hoping to find now lies inside."

Paine grimaced. "Why are we here? I want nothing to do with this place."

The forest made him uneasy.

That feeling worsened as a horde of twisted creatures emerged from the trees; misshapen beings that Paine would have difficulty calling human. And they were armed with knives and bows.

\*\*\*

Brahm approached a palisade of thick, wooden stakes that surrounded the Haudenosaunee village. Strips of bark intertwined the posts. It was a feat of work that was woven with a power she did not understand. There was some connection with the Ancestors and the Great Mother, one she knew little of. What she did know was that this far north, such measures were vital. Unexpected attacks from wolves were more frequent here. Strangely, the vile beasts no longer raided Haven; at least not since the last attack, when Farin had been found, battered and ravaged.

Roan gave a heavy snort, and she stroked his neck.

Men and women weaved new twine between the wooden stakes. It tweaked her curiosity.

"Has the Council chosen a location to relocate the village?" she asked of White Feather.

He nodded. "Six of them. The tribes are going to separate. Since we are now over four thousand strong, it is difficult to feed this many in one location. Construction has begun on the new villages. Many have left to build them." He paused. "The wind has whispered the Confederation may attack Haven. Is that why you're here?"

Brahm nodded her response.

"I don't know how many we can spare, but I think the Council will recall the others." He lowered his voice. "I've been expecting you."

Her mouth twitched into a smirk. "I suppose that's why you were lurking in the forest...to surprise me?"

White Feather closed his mouth, and Brahm was sure his tanned skin contained a hint of red. She smiled inwardly and continued on.

To their right a group of women tended a field of vegetables. Young corn stocks protruded from the ground, close to a patch of tobacco plants being cultivated by some men. Haudenosaunee warriors that were perched atop the entrance to the village hailed her in Iroquois. Brahm waved back and, for a brief moment, felt her troubles abandon her at the gates.

They walked past row after row of elongated wooden buildings. Little had changed; everything was as she remembered. Small holes at the tops of each longhouse billowed out the aroma of smoked fish and made her stomach howl with anticipation. Animal skins stretched over crooked branches lay prostrate in the sun.

Waves and slight nods greeted her as she strode into the village; frowns and turned backs as well. Though she was Mohawk by adoption, there were many since Gray Wolf's death that refused to openly accept her as Haudenosaunee. She held her head high, preventing the stinging in her heart from showing on her face. It was the sole reason she did not visit more often. The last thing she wanted was to bring shame upon the Clan Mother.

Children in tanned clothing dodged around her, carrying hoops and javelins. When one yelled out he was the Wendigo, the rest scurried off to hide among the longhouses.

*If only they knew the true horror.*

The women scolded the children for scoffing at such an evil, one they had not been privy to, and then shooed the children out of their way as they performed their daily routines. But not before they scanned the village in fear of the creature that had wreaked such terrible pain upon their people.

Off at the far end, two teams played at Ga-lahs. Brahm watched the players run across the field and toss a ball with netted sticks. The game called to her.

Brahm decided to take White Feather's advice and visit the Clan Mother first. Since being adopted into the Wolf Clan, she became like a daughter to Little Doe, despite some muttered protests. Yet none openly challenged the Clan Mother. Most assumed that if she chose to adopt her daughter's alleged murderer, then that was her business.

White Feather left Brahm at his mother's longhouse which was marked with the simple image of a wolf. She entered and walked the dark corridor, passing the living spaces of others to Little Doe's humble quarters. The air was saturated with the scent of sage.

"Orenda! It is good to see you, my child," the Clan Mother said with a wide smile that matched her open arms. Brahm's Iroquois name sang in her ears, a melody she did not hear often enough. The old woman looked well for her age, now seventy-five. Her white hair complemented her tanned, leathery skin; the results of a hearty existence of toil. Her face shone with the simple happiness of a life well-lived.

"She:kon, Mother. It is good to see you," she said and returned her hug. As with her son, the smell of the earth and a leafy richness emanated from the old woman. Brahm felt the worries of life dripping

away like the wax of the bitter candles in the corner.

"I have missed you, child. Have you met anyone?"

Brahm rolled her eyes. It always was, and would always be, her first concern.

"No, there isn't anyone. Not yet anyway. And I'm fine, thanks for asking."

"You look thin," she muttered, poking Brahm in the stomach with a thin, strong finger. "Have you been eating?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm here on an important errand. The Witch Hunters have begun to gather in the south and we think they may attack soon. We have also recalled the Missionaries and need you to watch for them."

"How is Diarmuid? That one would be good for you."

She knew where this line of questioning was leading.

"He's fine. And we're just friends, Mother."

"Sometimes good friends make good lovers."

"And sometimes they don't."

A mischievous look twinkled in the old woman's eyes, one that resembled her son's. "Well then, we'll just have to find you someone else."

Brahm just glared at her in return.

The Clan Mother quickly changed the subject. "Well, we should have you talk to the Chiefs. War is the realm of the Hoyaneh and they should know about this right away."

Taking Brahm's arm, the old woman led her out towards the Onondaga meeting house, where the Council sat. They entered the building and the smell of tobacco was so thick Brahm coughed. The room was barely lit and she waited for her eyes to adjust to see the circle of fifty men that gathered.

"Welcome, Clan Mother."

"Hoyaneh," she addressed Brown Bear, the Council Leader. "Orenda is here. She is on an urgent errand from Haven."

Knowing, silent nods passed around the circle.

"She may speak."

"Nia:wen," said the Clan Mother and gave Brahm's hand a squeeze as she left.

Brown Bear rose to greet her. His hands were dry. "She:kon, skennenkowa ken?"

She nodded. It was a lie. She did not really carry the Great Peace. She carried something else.

*Someone else.*

And she needed to get rid of it.

"Orenda, we have not had the pleasure of your company for some time. We miss your bright smile." There was affection in Brown Bear's eyes, but frowns soured a number of the faces present.

"I wish I were here under happier circumstances, but Haven needs your help."

He resumed his seat. "We know. We too have heard the rumors. We've been expecting you."

Brahm looked about the room, sensing trouble.

"We must ask some difficult questions of you, Orenda. You hold in your head much knowledge of the Confederation."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. Her gut churned and the second soul that dwelt within her body stirred again.

"The rumors of your past flit about like fireflies. There is some doubt about you among the tribes, but all have agreed if they leave here satisfied with your answers, there will be no doubt about your standing among us. We must have the truth, Orenda, and we must have all of it. Will you give it to us?"

One of the Oneida Hoyaneh offered his pipe to her. Without hesitating, she accepted it and sat next to him. It would bring good thoughts. Perhaps the truth might help to purge her of the guilt, of the horrors of a past she kept trying to outrun, and of whom she had once served.

The second soul inside her laughed and then screamed at her.

*-Repent!-*

“What do you want to know?” Brahm asked, and braced herself for the bitter remembering.

## Chapter 7

Hours later, Brahm almost stumbled out of the building, her steadfast feet failing her. Her face was caked with dried tears. She felt dirty and used, and swore to herself she would not relive that again, for despite her hopes of redemption, there was no forgiveness, no cleansing. There was only the guilt, the remorse, and the shame. She half-wondered if Gregor knew she would be put through this. She smelled a conspiracy and decided she would have to have a talk with the old codger — a long one.

The Hoyaneh were satisfied with her answers and would discuss the request for aid. They were going to send help, and her gut told her they would have despite her interrogation. The questions were a test of her loyalty. That was the sole reason she endured the humiliation of facing what she hated most about herself. She had bared the truth, every last scrap of it, and it felt like a steel bear trap around her heart.

The Chiefs gained from the knowledge, as it would help in the coming war, but it was the proof of her worth they wanted, and she had proven it in a torrent of tears. There would never again be any question of her loyalty. Brahm was Haudenosaunee.

Upon exiting, she found White Feather sitting on the ground waiting for her, hair shifting in the slight breeze that swept through the village.

“Are you all right?” he asked, and reached towards her.

She flushed and recoiled from his touch, a civil move on her part. He was lucky she didn’t lop off his arm and beat him senseless with it.

“I need to get away.”

He retracted his hand, nodded his head, and led her through the village, out the main gate, and into the woods. She followed him through the forest, her sole focus to put one foot in front of the other. She was capable of little else. She could do nothing. She felt nothing. She was nothing.

After traveling for some time they stopped in front of an abandoned beaver dam, the water flowing freely in areas that had been neglected for years. Brahm dropped to her knees and immersed herself in the cool stream, trying to find redemption in nature's holy water, to wash away the grime and soot that clung to her heart. She cleaned the stains from her face and plunged her head in the water.

- *Murderer!* -

Brahm tossed her head from the water, venting her frustrations, her rage, and her bitterness in a growl that was worthy of a wounded grizzly. White Feather remained stolid behind her, unflinching.

Two large rocks waited for them, places in which to let the summer breeze caress the skin and carry away the troubles of life. Brahm let the sun warm her soul and listened to the sound of the water trickling over the edge of the dam, trying to let the memories wash away. For a long time they sat in silent meditation, and somewhere in her drifting mind, she thanked White Feather for having brought her there. It was precisely what she needed.

Time passed like the water that flowed over the dam and Brahm let herself float in its passing. Until something niggled at her. Someone was watching her. She opened her eyes, irritated her rest was being interrupted.

Standing before her was a man like none she had ever seen, tall and majestic, with brown skin and long black hair that remained still, despite the wind. His eyes shone with an ancient knowing, and he stood three heads taller than she. Brahm held her breath. She knew who stood before her, from tales spoken among the tribes — the great Peace Maker, the being of Iroquois legend who had helped to found the Haudenosaunee nation hundreds of years ago. How she knew it was he, she could not explain, but she possessed enough sense to remain still and wait to see what he would do.

The man said nothing, but motioned for her to follow him as he walked into the woods. Brahm took a quick moment to look at White Feather who was so deep in his supposed meditation he was now snoring. Cautious not to disturb him, she stepped along the rocks and followed the Peace Maker into the forest. He ran far ahead of her and she hurried, fearing she might lose him. None had seen the Peace

Maker since the Shift, when he guided the Haudenosaunee to re-settle in these lands.

One single question troubled her as she pursued him.

*Why had he come to her?*

\*\*\*

Friar John eyed Miguel squirming in his saddle. It was now the morning of the fifth day on horse, and despite the fact the portly friar filled the saddle well, he struggled to keep from falling out. John could not help but grin. His own upbringing on a farm had given him the skills to ride. Sitting in the saddle was as comfortable to him as the overstuffed chairs of the Vatican library; a place he had spent his early days researching. That was when the truth had unfolded. It seemed a lifetime ago.

Their journey took them past the Pillars of Hercules, and up the south-eastern coast of Iberia. They traveled through countless olive groves, fig farms, and orchards, and now faced one of the last remaining cities of the old world — Barcelona. It had been reborn from the ashes of the Shift, a place of trade and commerce now, where markets sprouted to replace the rubble of the ancient world.

The Temple of the Sacred Family loomed over the city. Built from the designs of the ancient world, it was born again in blocks of bone white. Its tapered spires stretched towards the heavens, the tallest with a great cross sitting at its pinnacle. Each spire, as well as the south entrance, appeared as if stone wax had melted down the sides, giving the gothic Temple the appearance of a giant candelabrum.

John had once seen its majesty in his youth, and remembered well the intricate statues that littered the elaborate structure, yet he had never set foot through its holy doors. Imams, priests, and rabbis all gathered and spoke around its base, debating theology and aspects of the great Joining.

There were still some among the new Church that thought the joining of the three religions a mistake. But after the Shift, with the appearance of devils, apparitions, and fiends from a cursed realm, the three religions banded together and did everything they could to maintain control. The Shift had changed everything. Spirits openly walked the Earth once more — good and not so, and unknown beings inhabited barrows, deep wells, and the hollows of trees once more. And then there were the Firstborn, a fey race hell-bent on imposing their dominion over humans. They brought with them their dark witchcraft and religious sacrifice and it took decades to truly bring order once again. At least the Church was consistent in its thoughts on only one God.

*Fools.*

John covered his eyes from the glare of the white walls of Casa Milá — a building with sinuous curves and elaborate ironwork that wrapped about it in a twisted spiral. Its great chimneys of masked heads craned their necks far above the rooftop to stare out upon the city. It was another re-creation of the old world, and home to the King of Iberia — a man with a taste for wine, a fondness for lavish parties, and an eye for powerful women.

John urged his white mare down the cobbled road, Miguel groaning behind him. The late morning sun rose above the central pinnacle of the Temple, casting the shadow of a cross upon them as they descended into the city.

The markets bustled with trade and activity. The two friars dismounted, choosing to walk through the busy streets, leading their horses through the goods-laden market. John waved off numerous peddlers; rugs from famed Persia, stallions from Phoenicia, oils and wine from Rome, and even antiques from the old world; all carried by the Portuguese galleons.

Whores waved from windows, peddling their own merchandise, and children danced through the streets, selling small trinkets to any who would pay them mind. One of the children tugged on his dust-ridden robes, a scarlet-haired street urchin with a bashful smile. John knelt, dwarfing the girl's hand in his own. She could not have been more than seven years old. Her pointed ears revealed her Firstborn heritage, though her face appeared somewhat human. She was a half-breed and almost as much an outcast here as she would be in Valbain.

At least here she was free and let to live.

“What can I do for you, little one?” His words were in Iberian, but she wore a turquoise charm about her neck — a translation amulet.

The gleam in her eye indicated she understood as she pulled from her red rags a handful of the same stones, each attached to a leather cord. John reached into his robes and took out a small silver coin from his drawstring purse. He took two of the amulets from her, and passed one to Miguel after donning his own.

A timid smile crept across the girl's face. She spoke Valbain, but the charm worked. “You have paid too much.”

“No I haven't, little one. But if you feel it is too much, you can do me a favor. I need information.”

“Are you from the Temple? There are others like him, with his hair.” Her delicate finger pointed towards Miguel, and his manicured patch of round baldness. The tonsure was something John had refused. Instead he grew his hair in a great shaggy mane.

A warm smile decorated Miguel's face. “No, we are not from the Temple, but I would like to visit there.”

The girl frowned. “I'm not allowed.”

Miguel's eyebrows furrowed. “Why?”

“My mother doesn't like your God.”

John chuckled. “What makes you think He is my God?”

The look of surprise on her face was mirrored by Miguel.

She smiled. “I like you.”

“Thank you.”

“What do you want, Churchman?”

“First of all, what is your name? I can't keep calling you little one.”

“Meega.”

“Well, Meega, I am looking for someone called Liesel. Do you know that name?”

Meega leaned in close to whisper. “She's crazy.”

“Can you take me to her?”

She nodded, and smiled a toothy grin. “Follow me, Churchman.”

The half-breed led them through the market square, past the scents of coffee from famed Eritrea, as well as cinnamon and curries from distant India. Scattered throughout the marketplace, standing sentinel at every corner, were the King's Infantry. The soldiers were dressed in sand-colored pants and tunic, black breastplate, and masks that matched the faces on the castle rooftop. Each held a long pike, with dark feathers hanging from the base of a diamond-shaped spear. They watched as stone-faced statues.

Meega led them along the beach, with the sun reflecting off the still waters of the Mediterranean in a pillar of blinding yellow light. The beach followed a small escarpment on which were perched rows of small houses with stucco walls and brightly painted window panes in hues of yellows, oranges, and blues. Finally, she took them up the escarpment to the borders of the city, to a region shrouded in a cloak of treecover.

They strode deep into the thicket of cork oak and beech, the shade giving little relief to the humid forest. Yet it was not long before they came across a small assembly of derelict structures — crude homes constructed from the debris of the city. Scattered among them were half-breeds milling about.

John knew he walked amongst the forgotten and the frail. All were either old enough to be nearly dead, or too young to be of use to the Rebellion. Most of the half-breeds stared daggers at the two friars. They did not trust anyone, human or Firstborn; especially the latter. John understood why.

The half-breeds were the result of a Firstborn breeding with a human; Revenants they were called. They were mostly beings of incredible beauty, but there were those that had been born as hideous mutants. And the repulsive freaks, in the unfortunate event they bred with themselves, strangely



produced children that bore the strength of two Firstborn and, when angered, the cruelty of four. They were called the Lastborn.

It was a vindictive hoax of nature and one the Firstborn did not find amusing. They wanted them dead, half-breeds and Lastborn. If they could, they'd rid themselves of humans as well.

John wrinkled his nose at the heavy scent of musk and sweat on the air. Miguel sneezed. Tattered garments hung about on makeshift clotheslines all about the clearing.

Meega approached one of the small huts. It was surrounded by a sea of torn fabric. She knocked on a chipped wooden door.

Something shuffled inside before a raspy voice spoke. "Come in, Meega. I'd know that timid knock anywhere."

John ducked into the small hut, and once inside had to adjust to the dim light offered by one lone candle that stood on what appeared to be a stone altar. Standing before it was a pile of rags that covered a wisp of a woman with wild gray hair, fine slanted eyebrows and pointed ears. She was Revenant. John stared into the piercing blueness of her repugnant gaze.

"Old and ugly am I, Churchman?" she asked.

John looked at her with calm. "I didn't say anything."

"I didn't say you did, and I wasn't talking to you, heretic. I was talking to the fat one."

*Heretic?*

The woman hobbled over to Miguel and poked him with a bony finger. "Old and ugly, am I?"

Miguel stammered and then closed his mouth. Even in the dim light, his face crimsoned. Meega covered her mouth and giggled.

The old woman patted the little girl on the head and then shuffled over to a wooden chair. It creaked as she settled herself in it.

"No matter. I've been called worse in this life and I can't deny I am old. I've lived longer than anyone should." She reached into her rags, pulled out a small vial with a blue liquid and took a hearty swig. She belched and wiped her mouth with her torn sleeve. "So you're looking for someone?"

"Yes."

"You won't find your quarry here."

John's nose twitched. The place smelled of defecation. "Are you Liesel?"

Her mouth stretched into a toothless smile. "Sometimes," she said. "When I remember."

John eyed her with care.

*She has lost her wits.*

"Do you know who I am looking for?"

A light flashed in her eyes. "I know all too well." The old woman gave a mad cackle.

"Has he taken physical form? I must find Him."

She gurgled, something akin to laughter. "I suppose the Pope sent you."

John nodded.

"And what makes you think you can find Him?"

"My soul is cursed. I can find him."

A shadow of understanding passed across her pallid face. "I see."

He hesitated. "What can you tell me? How much do you know?"

"Enough to drive a woman mad. And no one believes this crazed old fool." She took another swig of blue liquid. "You won't find Him, but you may find something just as important."

"Oh?"

The old woman motioned him closer with a crooked twig of a finger. Her breath was sour, and a cold smile crept across her lips. "His child."

John shifted under her gaze. "His child?"

Liesel nodded, the light in her eye getting brighter before she gurgled once more. "You have trouble with your ears, heretic?"

John tried to swallow, but his mouth was dry as the deserts of Babylon. "Who would have borne such a child? Was it Lilith?"

At the mention of the ancient name, Miguel made the sign of the cross over his ashen face. He reached into his robes and pulled out the rosary.

John cast him an inward smile.

*Futile gesture.*

"Lilith?" remarked the old woman. "Bah, she knew the truth before any did. That's why she left Eden, and why she was cursed to bear only demon children. She would never have borne such a child."

"Then who?"

"Sephirah."

The first woman pope.

*Oh, God.*

He had known her.

The reality of his past settled over him like a burial shroud. John could think of nothing to do. He fidgeted where he stood. And in the end he, too, gestured the cross.

## Chapter 8

Sweat seeped down the side of Brahm's face as she pursued the Peace Maker. Up ahead, he remained on the edge of visibility. She raced through tunnels of trees and shrubs, running until illusions of light blurred past her. She had passed out of the known world and into some bizarre pocket of unreality. It unsettled her gut like bad venison. Yet the Peace Maker had meant her to follow, and follow she would.

Eventually time and the blur of unreality caught up with her as she came to an abrupt stop. Her momentum flung her into a clearing well before her feet were prepared and she stumbled to the ground. Brahm grunted.

*Not very dignified.*

She brushed herself off and recovered her poise.

"Kwe kwe, Orenda." The Peace Maker's voice was cool as an autumn morning, the words almost a rustling in the breeze.

Brahm tried to gather her bearings, but the trees shimmered around her and the clouds sat like sedentary puffs of stone. An eerie silence settled on the clearing. She sniffed at the raw air.

"What is this place?"

"Where few will look to find us," he said. "I can only hope we are not noticed."

She grunted again.

*Fucking cryptic answer.*

"Please," he said, gesturing to a stump in front of him, "sit, child. Sit with me and listen to what I must tell you."

*Child?*

His face held a smile that bordered on patronizing. Brahm would have strode out of the clearing had anyone else spoken to her in such a manner, but this was not just anyone. Instead, she perched herself on the large stump, and waited for him to elaborate.

He folded his hands in front of him. "War is coming and the Haudenosaunee will be a part of it, but not you. You must walk a different path. Though you may feel you are betraying your people, you must abandon them. The Great Mother needs your assistance. Both of you. Heed her call, Orenda."

*Both?*

Brahm shook her head. "I don't understand."

"In time, you will. For now, you must leave. If you stay, you will die."

*What?*

The Peace Maker looked about, and for a brief moment fear played across his face.

"Leave tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Wait—"

"I must leave you now. I need to speak with the Council and light a fire under them. Perhaps more lives can be spared if I convince them to move quickly. Heed the Great Mother's summons, Orenda, and be wary. Now, I can say no more. There are eyes and ears everywhere."

"Wait, who would be listening?"

He leaned in close, his voice a hiss on the wind. "God."

The Peace Maker vanished in a haze of color and a blur of motion; so had the peculiar place in which they had conversed. Brahm looked to the sky. The clouds soared through the firmament once more and birdsong swept in. The musty scent of the forest floor tickled her nose.

*She would die?*

She rose from the stump and searched for any trace of the spirit being. There was nothing.

She looked back from where she had run. The stream foamed and surged behind her. She was close to where she had first encountered the Peace Maker — barely steps into the forest.

*How was that possible?*

Brahm groaned. It was not worth pondering.

She stepped from the trees and let the sun rid her of the slight chill that danced along her skin. White Feather still lay on the rock, no longer in meditation, but basking half naked. She needed the visual distraction of seeing his hardened body glistening in the sunlight. Like the Clan Mother had hinted, he was a good catch. A sly grin crept across her face. Were he not Gray Wolf's brother, he might have at least made for some interesting nights.

Brahm paused.

*What was she thinking?*

She shook it off. That was the other soul lusting for him. Brahm knew where her tendencies lay.

White Feather covered his squinting eyes from the late afternoon glare of the sun and turned towards her.

"Where did you go?"

"I met the Peace Maker."

"You pull on my leg, Orenda. Too bad it's not my third," he said with a grin.

*Third leg, indeed.* She remained silent.

"You're serious."

She nodded.

White Feather bolted up. "Where is he?"

"He is gone to address the Hoyaneh."

"Do you know what this means? No one has seen him in over five hundred years. What did he say?"

"We are going to war. He didn't say when, but I would guess soon if he needs to address the Chiefs. He also told me I have a different path to walk. I must leave." She chose to leave the dying part out. No sense in getting him too worked up.

"I don't understand. What path?" He grabbed his shirt and slipped it over his head.

"I wish I understood myself."

"We should go back. I want to see the Peace Maker with my own eyes." He ran off into the forest, back along the trail. Brahm hesitated, looking back to where she had conversed with the Peace Maker. There was still nothing there, other than a small blue bird that chirped and hopped about, pecking at the earth.

He knew she was twin-souled.

*Did he know about the incident that caused it? And, better yet, did he know how to get rid of it?*

Walking into the village, Brahm found it robust with activity. Men and women ran in and out of the longhouses, bundles carried on their backs as many of the Clan Mothers gave orders, pointing and guiding each to their respective roles. She heard whisperings of the Wendigo among them, but they were silenced as she approached.

*The Peace Maker had lit a fire all right. A God-damned forest fire.*

The village bordered on chaos. Brahm searched for White Feather and spotted him with the Chiefs. They called out orders and plans of their own.

Approaching Little Doe, Brahm wanted to smile, but found it impossible. She felt too much confusion inside her to fake it.

"What troubles you, child?" the Clan Mother asked. She took Brahm's hand in her own. The softness in her eyes spoke well of the love the old woman had for her.

"I don't want to worry you."

She shook her head. "There is little that is worse than war."

Brahm sighed. "I met the Peace Maker. He told me I must leave you. He said if I stay, I will die."

The Clan Mother hesitated. She swallowed. "What do your instincts tell you?"

"I don't know; that I am needed, that I could save lives."

"And do you believe what he said?"

"How can I not, but I know that you'll need me. People are going to die."

Little Doe stood on her toes to hold Brahm's face in her weathered hands.

"Orenda, you cannot save us all. People are going to die whether you are with us or not. And if it has already been fated that you should die fighting with us, then you should take the Peace Maker's advice and go. Defy the Fates, spit in their faces, and do what the Peace Maker suggests. Leave us and do not return until we have dealt with the Confederation. If not for yourself, then for me. As your Clan Mother, I command it."

*Damn.*

The woman had her cornered. If Brahm considered herself Haudenosaunee, then she had no choice but to obey her Clan Mother. Little Doe changed the subject before Brahm breathed another word.

"We will be leaving tomorrow for Haven. Messages have been sent to let them know we are coming. The Peace Maker said none are to remain behind. We are taking as much as we can of our supplies. Two Moon will be sending messages to summon the tribes back from the new villages."

Brahm pleaded her case. "How can I be sure the Peace Maker was right? You know the feelings I get and how they must be obeyed." It was a losing argument, but the stubborn side of her refused to subside.

A deep look of sorrow settled on the Clan Mother's face. She knew all too well about Brahm's premonitions. If Gray Wolf had heeded them, the woman might still be alive.

"I know, child, but if the Peace Maker has advised you to ignore your better judgment, I think it would be wise to follow his advice. There is a path being laid out for you that you must follow. The Great Mother has a purpose for us all, even in death. But if the Peace Maker believes your death will serve no good purpose, then you should challenge the Fates and do what he suggests. Orenda, I do not want to lose another daughter." The Clan Mother's hands shook.

Brahm stood in stubborn silence, trying to face the old woman. Looking into the eyes of the one person that could bring her world crumbling down with a command, Brahm lowered her head and resigned herself to Little Doe's wishes.

"Mother, the Peace Maker said I should heed the summons of the Great Mother. What does that mean?"

Little Doe's eyes lit up, and she sat upon one of two stumps that were perched outside of the longhouse.

"Sit," she said, and patted the vacant one. Brahm settled herself as the Clan Mother spoke. "Years ago, before Gray Wolf brought you to us, I had a dream; a dream that came from the Great Mother.

"In the dream, I stood on a great lake. My eyes could not see its end and I walked its surface, lost. I walked until I thought I could walk no further. The hot sun burned my skin. Then, in the distance, a great land rose out of the water. I climbed onto its beautiful shores. I rested there for a time and, as I sat in the shade, a naked woman on a white horse approached. She held out her hand to me and took me upon this great steed and we rode across a vast plain with the wind blowing in our hair.

"In the distance, I saw mountain ranges and we reached them fast, as if the horse had wings. In the midst of the mountains there was a valley with a great cave, dark and bleak. It was a crevice of despair and hatred, a festering welt upon the Earth. The woman took my hand and led me into the depths of the cavern.

"Down and down we went, deep into the belly of the Earth. Finally, we came upon a doorway, inscribed with writing I could not read. We stepped forward and the fear almost killed me, for staked to the walls were the writhing bodies of people. Men, women, children; they covered the walls and the roof of the cave from end to end, top to bottom. They were alive and suffering. I slipped on the floor that was slicked with their blood.

"There was a small spot left on the wall where I saw the bare rock. It was stained red and was just large enough for one last body. I feared for my soul, that the space left was for me, and that I would

remain there to suffer for all eternity.

"Then I saw a woman on an altar. Cuts and bruises covered her body. I knew she had been tortured long. The stone surface of the altar was wrapped around her wrists and ankles. She was alive, but barely. I walked towards her, but the woman with the flowing hair held me back.

"No", she said to me, 'you are meant only to witness. He must not know we are here. Orenda will save her. You will know her when you meet her. Your love for her will be forever bittersweet. Tell her of this when the time is right. Tell her to heed the call of the Great Mother. Her true destiny leads her elsewhere.' Then the woman on the altar screamed. The walls of the cave and the people nailed to it laughed with the most loathsome sound I have ever heard. Then I woke up."

Little Doe grabbed the deerskin flask that hung about her shoulder and took a long drink. She wiped the water from her chin before she spoke again. "For months I could not sleep and prayed I never be shown that dream again. I think of it from time to time. It was a message, and the moment I laid eyes on you, I knew who you were. That is why I named you Orenda. I do not know what the meaning of the dream is, but I know the Great Mother will have need of you. Now that the Peace Maker has come and told you to heed the call, I can finally relieve myself of this burden. The woman from my dream was right about you. I love you like my own daughter, but you are a constant reminder of Gray Wolf. It is a bittersweet love I have come to embrace. You are dear to me and I would hate to lose another daughter."

Brahm reached over to grab Little Doe's hand. "Mother, I don't understand any of this. Who was the woman in your dream? How am I to save her?"

"I wish I had an answer for you, child. But perhaps she can help you if you help her." She pointed to Brahm's chest.

Brahm offered a slight nod. Only the Clan Mother knew about the presence inside her. She had tried various concoctions and ceremonies to be rid of it. Nothing had worked. But if the Clan Mother was right, maybe she could be rid of the thing that was leeching to her soul.

*Freedom.*

Brahm gazed about the village, at the mass movement of supplies and wagons. If she had to leave, she at least wanted more time to enjoy herself. Her shoulders stooped.

"Do not fret, Orenda. When the time is right, you will come to live among us. Perhaps by then you will be ready to settle down with someone," she said with a grin, changing the subject to her insidiously favorite topic.

Brahm rolled her eyes and laughed. With any luck, White Feather would leave for Haven and all thoughts of settling down would be lost for a time.

And in that moment, born from something deep within her gut, she decided she would venture out on the morrow as far away as possible. She would search for Diarmuid. It was the only thing that gave her any sense of sureness.

The Clan Mother rose and offered her arm. "Come."

Brahm took it with neither smile nor grimace, and let Little Doe lead her into the longhouse.

\*\*\*

Friar John ducked through the doorway of the crude hut, desperate for air. Dark clouds inched across the late afternoon sun as Liesel's laughter trailed him through the frail opening.

He paced, trying to think.

The old woman hobbled after him, a toothless grin adorning her leathered face.

"You did not know this."

"The first woman Pope," he muttered.

Miguel stumbled after the woman, holding Meega's tiny hand.

"What does Pope Joan have to do with what we are looking for?"

John sighed. "Have you ever read the works of John the Evangelist?"

The fat friar hung his head. "The Book of Revelation. I did not like what it said."

John pulled a tattered bible out of his sack. He thumbed through it until he found the passage he was looking for.

"And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: and upon her forehead was a name written, Mystery, Babylon The Great, The Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth." He paused. "I always thought the Whore of Babylon was the Church itself."

Miguel's eyes widened. "What are you talking about?"

"I was mistaken. The Whore is not the Church, but the head of that Church, the first woman Pope."

Miguel's mouth fell open and he stammered, his fingers fumbling with the rosary. "Do you know what you are saying?"

John ignored the comment, and skimmed the passages.

*Strange.*

"It says nothing of her carrying a child," he said.

Liesel eyed him. "Are you sure?"

John gave her a silent look.

"Is there only one woman mentioned in that little book of yours?" she asked.

*One woman?*

He flipped through the brittle pages. "A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: and she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered."

*But what did it mean?*

"Are you saying Sephirah was the second woman?"

"One of two, or two as one," she said. She cast her glance upon the bible in his hands, and nodded.

*Two as one?*

He read further. "And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born." He looked at the old woman. "But it says nothing about them being the same woman, and why would the Dragon devour his own child?"

Liesel cackled. "Are you a master of prophecy now, heretic? Do you know the mind of the Fallen One? Do not let your feet trip over the steps of literalism. Read further."

His eyebrows furrowed at the old woman before he turned his gaze back to the fine script. "And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God."

*She escaped Him.*

"A place prepared of God," he said. "But where did she go?"

"What place on Earth is mired in the worship of your God?"

The answer came to him, swift as the Lord's wrath. "The Confederation."

John read further. "And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood. And the earth helped the woman; and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood which the dragon cast out of his mouth." He eyed the old woman. "She fled over the sea."

Mirth lit her eyes like a Nightwatcher's torch. "You are learning, heretic."

The clouds rolled across the sky, laying the sun to rest in a grave of heavy gray.

"And the child is who I think?"

Liesel nodded.

Miguel pulled out his own bible. He fumbled with it. "Who?"

The words caught like phlegm in John's throat; this was worse to him than any evil he could have imagined. And he had had a hand in its making.

John grimaced. He was going to have to kill this child. He looked at Meega.

"The Beast."



## Chapter 9

The Westwood emanated a damp chill that seeped into Paine's bones. Like a tentacled shadow the forest's presence inched across the ground. It leeches the life and verdancy from everything it touched. The shrubs and trees withered as it crawled towards Paine. He side-stepped its reach.

The hunched, pale creatures that surrounded them somehow made him less uneasy than the forest. They gnashed their teeth and brandished crude weapons, but something was out of place. Three of the twisted creatures cocked their heads to the side, studying them like a new bird. Beneath their repulsive visage lay a look of curiosity. It left Paine unsure if he should laugh or run.

One of them stepped forward.

"Diarmuid," he said. His appearance changed, from something that was one with the dark woods to something human, or almost human. He was regal and stunning with sharply defined eyebrows and angled features reminiscent of—

From the corner of his eye, Paine glanced at Lya. She was focused on the being that now clasped arms with Diarmuid. The two spoke in a strange language that sounded vulgar and clumsy. Paine clicked and twisted his tongue, trying to emulate the sounds.

The tall man put his arm around Diarmuid's shoulder. Then the remainder of the host sheathed their knives and lowered their bows. They stepped forward from the forest's shadow as well, yet for most, their hideous appearance remained. For only a handful, it melted away like yesterday's lard on a hot, summer day.

Paine inched forward, cautious not to stir any hostility. He tried not to stare at the ones that looked almost freakish. It was difficult.

"Diarmuid, what's going on?"

The pepper-haired man reached into his pack. "Here, take this. It will help you understand." He pulled from his ragged sack three turquoise amulets, each on a leather string.

"What is this, and who are they?"

"Better yet, what are they?" asked Lya. The freaks shrank back into the shadows at her advance, weapons bared once more. Only the ones of beauty stood their ground.

Diarmuid raised his hands in an appeasing gesture. "Relax. They live near here. I was hoping to reach them. The amulet is a translator. Its craft is similar to how you talk with animals, Lya."

Puck donned the amulet without hesitation. Seemingly excited Lya slipped it over her head just as quickly. She frowned when nothing appeared to happen. She hid it beneath her shirt. Paine examined it before placing it over his head. Like for the others, he felt nothing.

"Welcome to the Westwood. I am called Truitt," said the man who greeted Diarmuid. He appeared to be a few years older than Paine, with brown hair that flowed just past the shoulders. He wore a neatly trimmed goatee and a stern look upon his face. He was garbed in a green tunic and blue pants, matched by the others. He glided toward Lya, taking her hand in his. There was something in his eyes that Paine found unsettling; it was part caged animal and part something else, yet he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

*Restraint?*

"Feel welcome in our lands, friend."

The others lowered their weapons once more, seemingly placated by Truitt's ease.

And for the first time in Paine's life, Lya looked like Gertrude; eyes unblinking. Except it wasn't that stupid look that lay in her eyes. It was the same forced restraint that lay in Truitt's.

Paine stifled the groan that surged up his gullet. He rolled his eyes instead.

"Lya," she finally sputtered.

Truitt continued to hold her hand along with her gaze. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Lya. I am at your disposal should you need anything." Had Truitt's voice been oozing with fake charm, Paine would have made more sense of the situation, but the exact opposite was true. The man was sincere. And it

looked as if he was ready to rip off her clothes and take her right there in front of the lot of them.

Paine couldn't help but snicker.

Lya glared at him for a moment and then cleared her throat. The tension that permeated the group was suddenly saturated with her cold, self-possessed air. The freaks were smiling and it was obvious they were all thinking the same thing; whatever it was.

"Thank you," she muttered. "I've heard of strange beings in the Westwood, but you look—"

Truitt stepped back from her. "Surprising, I thought you were... well, never mind. By the look on your faces, I can see your travels have not been kind. There is something afoot in the Westwood, sightings of devils and strange spirits. I would prefer not to linger much longer, even upon its borders. The Westwood is agitated of late and I would not care to scrape your remains off the trees." There was no humor on his face.

Diarmuid eyed the forest. "We're being tracked by Witch Hunters and we need safe passage through your lands."

"You're fortunate we did not shoot you on the spot. You're one of the few outsiders we allow to walk these lands, Diarmuid."

Truitt then slung his bow across his back and led them into the forest. The others followed in his wake.

From his shoulder bag the man pulled out a small furry rodent. It had large ears and a small tail. It was the cutest thing Paine had ever set eyes on. Truitt slit its throat before Paine had a chance to even get a further look. Then the man cast a blood spell that created a circle of protection about him. The others chanted a similar spell to surround them all, each of them slaughtering more of the small fuzzy creatures. Paine shuddered.

The spell cast nothing Paine could see; it still felt as if their skin was coated in thick oil, but there was something less dark about the vicinity of the small troupe. It was a trifle easier to breathe; barely, but noticeable. Paine looked to Lya, but she was busy studying the forest as they traveled. Puck shifted in the saddle, his gaze focused on some distant place within the trees.

Truitt and the others flung the carcasses into the forest and Paine noticed the remains being dragged through the shrubs by an unseen force.

A shriek pierced the silence, and a chill tickled Paine's spine.

"What's out there?"

Diarmuid stared into the forest. "I don't know."

"I thought we would be safer here."

"I didn't know the Westwood had spread this far. We will be safe once we are in Lindhome. They will guide us north out of the woods from there. Then we'll have a clear path to Haven."

Paine felt as though the trees cast hidden eyes upon him. He did not want to think of what might happen if he fell behind. Especially with the freaks bringing up the rear. They were nattering behind them, often pointing at him and Lya, whispering with their twisted mouths. He made sure Shadow remained right next to Diarmuid.

After a time the Westwood changed, and Paine welcomed the sight. The area was less dead, if there could be such a thing. The slick feeling on his skin lessened here.

"Welcome to Lindhome," Truitt said.

There was likely something beautiful about this place once, but now it looked like a hideous face caked in makeup. The buildings flowed with delicate lines, cloaked in afghans of trailing ivy, but the leaves were wilted. Rounded doorways peeked out of the rolling hills, each wrapped in a blanket of dying grass.

"Ugly," whispered Puck. "Cabra ... nicer."

Truitt harrumphed. "That's because they give up their maidens to Pan. He's sworn to protect their town, but he might have difficulty with the Westwood. Even his power has its limits."

"Who is Pan?" Paine asked.

Truitt did not look impressed. "Someone who thinks too highly of himself."

He escorted them towards a colossal tree, one of many that dotted the landscape. Its roots had been shaped to embrace a round wooden structure. Its bark was pale and chipping off. A gathering of men and women congregated at its base, all of them staring in their direction, primarily focusing on Lya. She either ignored the stares, or appeared as if she didn't notice.

Paine leaned towards Diarmuid. "Why are they all staring at Lya?"

A middle-aged, bald woman strode towards them. She was draped in a long, gossamer dress that slunk along the ground. There was a significant gap between her teeth, but she was what Paine would consider one of the beautiful ones. She extended her hand. Her grip was like iron.

"Because she has the look of the Firstborn of Valbain," the woman said. "Although perhaps she is something else."

Paine watched his sister's unflinching expression. She remained silent.

"I am Alwhin," she said. "Feel welcome, friends." Her face cracked with a pleasant smile, yet there was something firm and dark about it. "I will come to you later as I am sure you will have many questions." She then disappeared and a light muttering plagued the host who gathered. Among the freaks, some looks of distrust were cast in Lya's direction.

His sister leaned in close. "What did she just say about me? Firstborn?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Well I intend to find out. And I know exactly who to ask. Where's that fine young man who was so polite earlier?" Lya disappeared among the crowd to search for Truitt.

Paine waited, fiddling with his clothes. Diarmuid was off speaking to some of the members of Lindhome. An ugly little troll of a man was doting on Diarmuid's every word. Paine wanted to see him removed from the picture.

He shook his head and laughed at himself.

*Jealous already?*

Paine distracted himself walking around a fenced in area that held hundreds of the small rodent creatures, obviously being bred for one reason.

When Lya returned, Truitt offered them a tour. They departed quickly, Paine eager to extricate himself from the stares and hushed murmurs.

As they walked, Puck ran his hands along the flaked surface of the wilting trees.

"D-D-Dying?" he asked.

Truitt nodded. "Yes. There is a barrier that protects Lindhome, but its effect is weakening." He returned to his rather private conversation with Lya.

"H-H-How?" Puck asked.

Truitt rolled his eyes, obviously irritated with a simple mind.

"B-B-Blood," he mocked, and eyed Puck with a condescending look. He smiled suddenly. "And a special jewel. It's magic!" He waved his hands and made conjuring gestures in the air.

Puck clapped his hands. "Jewel!"

Truitt turned to Lya and Paine caught some of his words to her.

"We hold some of it back with spells, but the blood sacrifice requires a constant flow now. And the Westwood has been growing more deadly, out of our control. But there is a powerful charm at the heart of Lindhome that keeps the Westwood at bay. It still holds. For now." Truitt took Lya's arm in his own and walked ahead, speaking of other, more private, matters.

Diarmuid then took it upon himself to show Puck and Paine around during the remainder of the tour, as the other two eyed only each other. The three chose to remain a short, but polite, distance behind.

Paine still had a curious itch. "Diarmuid what is the Westwood?"

"One giant, living entity. It is alive, and I don't think Lindhome expected it to grow this far. It's completely covered the town." He paused, staring at the border of the woods. An abrupt wall of

darkness was trying to push past the barrier. "I haven't had a chance to find out what problems they've been having."

They journeyed along a leaf-strewn path that snaked around the giant trees. Paine felt lured to this place, with its once intricate gardens. The flowers had withered and dropped to the ground. They now decayed with the foliage upon the forest floor. Regardless, it seemed a place of peace. They continued past the stone statues that littered the path.

In the midst of the garden towered the statue of a woman. She was not fully human, appearing more like the taller, majestic-looking members of Lindhome — the beautiful ones. Blue stones were set in place for eyes and they sat above a streamlined nose and full lips. She stood close to a stone doorway, leading into the earth. Puck ran over to inspect the door and the writing etched into its arches. There was an inscription inset at her feet.

*To Sephirah. Lest we forget your courage.*

Her features were strong, unforgettable. He figured she was related to one of the members of Lindhome.

Diarmuid urged them to hurry along before he could ponder the matter further. Yet something about the statue bothered Paine, something not obviously visible. Whatever it was, it remained out of reach, like a forgotten word.

He let it fall into the piles of dead leaves at his feet, shrugged, and followed the others.

\*\*\*

John closed the tattered bible and wiped his sweating palms on his robe. He suspected for some time that the Dark One was stirring once more.

*Wasn't this what the Virgin had shown him?*

The reality of his predicament wrapped about him like a burial shroud, suffocating him in fear.

*And he was to find this child?*

Miguel rounded on him, his usually composed face aflame with rage.

He spat his words. "This is your heresy?"

John said nothing, but returned the brother's anger with a look of calm.

Miguel stammered, as if he might say more, but he was interrupted as a swarm of men and women stepped out of the cork oak and almond trees, weapons bared. All of them were half-breeds.

Hollers and screams pervaded the small encampment. The children among the decrepit village attempted to run, but the entire clearing was surrounded. They were sectioned off. Ugly children on one side, pretty ones on the other. He didn't want to think of what was going to happen to the ugly ones and the use they were going to be put to.

Liesel grabbed Meega and put the little girl's hand in John's.

The old woman offered him a stern look. "She has no one, Churchman."

*What?*

A gray-cloaked man stepped through the crowd, plucking out some of the children, separating them from the rest. By the ease with which he lifted them John knew his heritage.

*Lastborn.*

He approached and spat at John's feet. "Come to preach to the outcasts, Churchman?"

John returned his cold stare. "Do you now collect children to fight your war? Or do you collect them to breed?"

The Lastborn's face reddened. "The Rebellion is no business of yours." He eyed Meega. "Give me the girl."

Meega hid behind John's robes, gripping them.

Liesel gave John a slight nod and a knowing look. A sick feel roiled in his gut.

*Was this a wise choice?*

He lifted Meega up, and she slid her arms around his shoulders, resting her head in the crook of his neck. It felt strangely natural. He struggled to lie and skirted the truth instead.

“I am human, and suffer human failings. I have had trysts in the past, and sometimes they come back to haunt me. Can you not see the resemblance?”

John held his breath as the man stared at the two of them. A light mist of rain sprinkled the friars.

The man spat on the ground again. “Take your bastard child and go, Churchman.”

Liesel stepped between them. “Keep hold of that little book of yours, heretic, and take good care of Meega.”

John grabbed the reins of his horse. He turned back to Liesel. “What happened to ...” He paused, noticing the Lastborn watching him, “... the woman clothed in the sun and the moon?”

Pangs of white lightning stabbed the sky. The old woman stared silence at him, and a multitude of raindrops streamed down her weathered face.

“She was set free.”

## Chapter 10

As they made their way through Lindhome, Paine noticed a difference in the barricade that blocked out the Westwood. It wavered at times, in which darkness would reach inwards, like eager fingers ready to strangle what life was left on the inside of the barrier. And with it came screams from the depths of the forest.

As he and Puck walked near its border, three trees broke through the barrier, their sagging branches drooping low enough to swipe at him. They scratched his face and, horrified, he watched as his blood soaked into their parched leaves. Then they withdrew.

Paine reached to his face, but found no mark, not even a scratch. He looked to Diarmuid, but sudden shouts from ahead caught all of their attention. From what Paine could gather over the chaos was that the Westwood was breaking through the north border of Lindhome. Truitt wished Lya well and ran off. His stride was like that of a stag.

The others hustled back towards the main square, unsure of what might happen. They approached the host that gathered where Alwhin advanced upon Paine and his sister.

"I think it is time for answers," she said, snatching the two by the arm.

"But what about the Westwood?" Lya asked, jerking her arm from Alwhin's iron grip.

The woman seized her once more. "This is not the Westwood's time. Lindhome will hold."

Paine looked to Diarmuid who nodded his head to him, and then turned to mingle with the others. Puck clapped his hands and followed. Paine had no choice but to let the woman take them. Her strong grasp wouldn't have allowed any other option.

Alwhin led them along a path lined with mounds of creeping phlox and silver thyme. Its rotting sweetness sickened the air.

Quiet wavered about them, until Lya broke the silence.

"Where are you taking us?"

Alwhin's grip hardened. "Where we can speak freely."

Lya nodded her satisfaction and nothing further was said. Paine thought it best to remain quiet. Any further questions and her pincer-like grip might break his arm.

They came to a clearing encircled by statues similar to the ones situated along the barrier of Lindhome. Alwhin glided over to a stone tablet, and placed her hand upon its stippled surface. The eyes of the statues flashed briefly, and the sounds of Lindhome were suddenly shut out.

Lya studied the stone table, obviously impressed with its power. She could hardly hide the glee that lay in her eyes.

"Silence has been cast upon the clearing," Alwhin said. "You have many questions and I need not be a Seer to sense that. Ask what you will."

Lya walked around the clearing, examining both the invisible barrier and the statues.

"Who would want to know what we have to say?"

"I believe that your presence here would interest the Overlords of Valbain. The Firstborn are always watching."

"Who?" Lya asked.

Alwhin motioned them closer. She pulled out a leather-bound book. Paine recognized it instantly.

*A Bible?*

"You must be joking," he said.

"This book I have studied. Do you know it?"

"Yes."

"Then you must know that on the sixth day it is written that Man was created."

Paine nearly rolled his eyes. "So?"

"Now what of the beings that came before him?"

He pursed his lips. "There were none before Man."

“Oh?” Alwhin smiled and then raised her hands, a motion reminiscent of the Reverend Chapman. “And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.” She lowered her arms. “Do you know this passage?”

Paine nodded.

“He was supposed to be the only son of Adam and Eve after killing his brother. He was so marked that he might be killed — but by whom? Who would see him and desire to kill him if there were only three living beings.” She raised her hands once more. Lya smiled. “And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden. And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bore Enoch: and he built a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son.” Alwhin’s gaze turned hard. “Who was this wife? If Cain and his parents were the only sentient beings, where did he get a wife? Did he marry a goat? Did he have incestuous relations with some unknown sister? Is your entire race a result of inbreeding? And who builds a city for three people?” She studied him.

Paine said nothing.

“There were creatures and beasts created before Man, on the Fifth Day. And the Firstborn were just that — first.”

Paine shook his head. “But there’s nothing said of these beings from the old world. They didn’t exist before the Shift.”

“Long ago, the power of the dead and the beings of the Fifth Day once dwelt upon Earth like Man. All of your old tales tell of them, but the memory of them was treated as nothing more than fanciful tales to frighten children. Even this little book mentions them, but only a few.”

“So what happened to them? Where were they for thousands of years?”

“When the Earth shifted on its axis, not only did the power of the dead return, but so did the beings of the Fifth Day; back from another realm — one where man was but a myth. It was as much a surprise for the other races when they found themselves shifted back to a world that was a part of their legends. And it was a world in which humans ruled, not the Firstborn.”

Alwhin motioned them towards the stone tablet. A jagged script was etched onto its surface, and Paine studied the writing. It was identical to the note that Lya possessed; not the side with the spell, but the other — the side with the foreign script. He looked at Lya, but she did not return his gaze. Paine focused on the words in front of him, trying to make them come together in his mind. He grabbed the translation amulet, but it was futile. It wasn’t working.

There was something odd about the script, in how its deep lines scored the surface of the stone. It was as if the words whispered in his ear, a deep and terrible voice trapped within the slab of stone before him. He leaned forward, studying. Each line and curve rearranged themselves in his mind’s eye, creating a new language, a new script. The forms realigned themselves. They were almost converging, revealing their secret. Paine concentrated harder, to the point it felt like his eyes were being forced from their sockets. He stretched his mind, straining to force the words together.

Liquid burst from his nose, and he gripped the tablet, leaning in closer.

“Paine!”

He jerked his head back, as if released from a vice. The images in his head disintegrated.

Alwhin pulled out a kerchief and wiped his nose. “You are bleeding.”

Paine took it, wiping the streams that stained his face and tunic.

“Are you unwell?” she asked.

His head felt light. “I’m not sure.” He plopped to the ground and put his head between his knees. “What happened?”

Lya didn’t look pleased.

Alwhin offered her hand.

Paine took it and she pulled him up with ease.

The bleeding had reduced to a faint trickle, yet he continued to dab at his nose.

"I think I'll be all right." He turned back to the tablet, tracing his fingers along the script. "What is this writing?"

Alwhin hesitated before speaking. "It is an old language. Only a select few are able to read it. This altar has been in the possession of the Rebellion for centuries. I cannot read the writing. None here can."

She pointed to the dirtied kerchief. "Perhaps we've had enough for today."

With that, the sounds of the rest of Lindhome flooded in. Paine continued dabbing at his nose. He followed Alwhin and Lya down the path, wondering if the Seer knew more than she let on.

\*\*\*

Paine checked his nose. It bled at intervals throughout the day and he wondered if he shouldn't be wearing a smock to protect his new tunic. His nose didn't just drip, it gushed. He looked to his fingers, trying not to draw attention to the fact he was being obsessive. They were dry.

He sat in front of a simple fire, listening to the stories and songs told by the people of Lindhome. He could not help but stare at the Revenants; the ugly ones at least. Their contrast in appearance to the others was more than remarkable. And so was the distance they shared.

They gathered in clusters, those that were beautiful beyond compare and the hideous freaks. The former had taken to calling themselves Nymphs. The latter didn't seem to care what they were called. There was a third clustering, those that were as beautiful as the Nymphs, but taller and stronger. They also had a tendency towards a cruel look. They called themselves the Lastborn, and they seemed to hold the Revenants in high regard, encouraging them to flirt and cavort with one another. Paine shuddered at the thought.

There was an awkward silence in the clearing. And the tales were filled with tragedy and despair. Paine didn't care for more sadness. Puck left after the first few tales — the theme focused on the slaughter of entire races by an ancient vengeful god, some human and some not.

Paine's mind wandered for most of the evening, unable to focus on much else after their conversation with Alwhin. They never had the chance to ask about Lya's supposed heritage, which of course called into question his own lineage.

*Who was he? For that matter, what was he?*

And he wondered if he was actually a twin with Lya after all.

Diarmuid gulped down a blue concoction, his fourth. The pepper-haired man swayed where he sat, half perched upon a sculpted stone, and leaned on Paine's shoulder.

Paine laughed, yanked from his slump by Diarmuid's charming smile.

Diarmuid grinned. "What are you laughing at?"

"You're drunk."

"Almost. I need a few more. You want some?"

Paine shook his head. Too much ran amok through his head. He needed clarity of thought at the moment. Besides, too many of those and he might make a fool of himself.

He took another swig and then gave Paine a drawn look.

"You know there's something I —"

"Oy!"

He was interrupted by an elderly man with white hair and a matching beard that drooped in layers to his waist. The Loremaster was Nymph and wore a robe of sunset orange. His sleeves skirted down his arms as he raised his hands.

"I have not told this tale in many years, but I suppose it's a good time for it. It's a tale of glory, an old tale to be sure, and one so old that many have forgotten. I am sure it has been enhanced over the generations. Still, it is one worth telling."

A chorus of cheers and encouragement filled the night air.



The Loremaster raised his voice above the din. “As you know, the Firstborn have told many stories over the years about how they fought the Fallen One and his minions long ago, and how, over the centuries, it was their might that kept him at bay. But there is one story they do not tell, for it is the true reason we enjoy our freedom.”

Shouts and grumblings of Firstborn propaganda passed through the host.

Again, the Loremaster lifted his voice above the crowd.

“This one is told even rarely here, where we remember the truth. It is a dark tale. It is the Lay of the Nephilim, and for our human friends, I will do my best to recite it in the Common Tongue.”

Smiles shone in Diarmuid's direction and calls for him to rise and sing filled the air. He waved them off, blushing, which only caused more hoots and hollers. It was some time before they settled, but when all was quiet, and the Loremaster held the attention of the entire congregation, he began.

It was sung in a deep baritone — a story of nine champions. They were sent out to destroy the Fallen One. In the end, their only choice was to transport those of the Fifth Day and the powers of the dead to another realm. Their gods were taken as well. But before they could finish their spell, the Nephilim were betrayed. They never saw the new world they created.

There was silence when the Loremaster finished. The crowd raised their goblets to toast the Nephilim. Paine's head drooped. He jerked awake when Fang nuzzled him. He stroked her behind the ears and yawned.

Paine's soul ached. Lya was distant, clearly on the other side of Lindhome according to the pain in his heart. He'd seen little of her since their encounter with Alwhin. She was probably dancing, with or without Truitt. And likely naked either way.

Eventually, more songs followed the Loremaster's tale, somber in tone, but Paine felt so tired he hardly noticed. At Diarmuid's suggestion they retire for the evening, they bid the host good night.

As Paine walked he heard a low chuckle from beyond the boundaries of Lindhome, something from within the Westwood. Diarmuid failed to notice as he stumbled along. He bid Paine goodnight with an awkward and potentially suggestive handshake, but too much weighed on Paine to try to take advantage of the inebriated man.

*It wasn't worth the risk.*

He needed Diarmuid to get him safely out of Lindhome and he needed to be sure about Diarmuid's intentions. Or at the very least, he needed to be able to cast a spell to coerce him and have the man forget the entire encounter. Otherwise he'd jeopardize things.

Paine returned the gesture and trudged to his own quarters.

Then he slept.

## Chapter 11

Friar John walked the streets of Barcelona.

*How would he find this child among the Confederation? And for that matter, did he really want to?*

He looked at Meega.

*Could he bring himself to kill this child?*

The little girl's shrill laughter jerked him back to reality. He strode along a pitted, dirt road on the east side of the Temple of the Sacred Family. Heavy rain doused the decrepit buildings and peals of thunder shook their thin walls. Meega, perched upon John's horse, reached up to the sky allowing the heavens to anoint her. Her tiny mouth opened wide as she licked at the drops of rain. Despite his annoyance at the weather and his misgivings about finding the Beast, John smiled at her innocence.

Beside him, Miguel huddled beneath a cloak that was too small for his rotund frame, eyeing the roadside with a shifting gaze. John walked with his head held high, his shaggy mane whipped about by the wind. Though he had little idea where Meega directed them, he walked with purpose. The east side of Barcelona was filled with a seedy lot, the buildings as unkempt as the people that lurked in their doorways. Shutters hung off window frames, flapping in the bitter winds that swept through the street. Weeds stretched out of holes in the stucco walls, as if desperate to catch some small ray of sunshine. The smell of rotting fruit and urine hung thick on the air, and Miguel pinched his bulbous nose.

John asked Meega to take them to her mother so he could see her safely returned before he and Miguel departed for Portugal. He was now glad they accompanied her, as the looks on some of the men on the street made his skin crawl. He heard that the poor and the dispossessed went missing at times, never to be seen again. John remembered when hundreds had disappeared, cleaned from the streets. He knew those hundreds, each one of their faces forever burned into his mind.

He glanced towards Miguel. He had said little since leaving Liesel. The fat friar thought his heresy was centered around the Book of Revelation. John failed to correct him.

Perhaps he should tell him everything.

*It was becoming a burden.*

Meega giggled once more, clapping her tiny hands. She pointed to a door with chipped blue paint, one of ten that lined a large stone building. The slate roof was in desperate need of repair.

"Is this your home, little one?" John could not help calling her that. It slid off his tongue like warm butter.

"Yes!" She clapped once more, and raised her hands to the downpour of rain. Lightning flashed in the distance, followed much later by rolling thunder.

They approached the building, and found no place to tie the horses. Miguel said nothing, but took the reins of both as John lifted an excited Meega out of the saddle. She held his face in her hands and stared into his eyes. Then she smiled and it felt as if time had stopped and there was nothing in the world except John and this little girl. She giggled, her smile stretching across her face with the most innocence John had ever witnessed. It pierced his heart and he found himself smiling back.

Meega wiggled in his arms and John put her down, following her through a blue door that creaked as it opened. The wind slammed it shut behind him.

"Hello," John called.

Meega ran down a dark corridor and disappeared into a room near the end.

He strode forward, side-stepping the wooden blocks and stones that littered the dirt floor. The walls were as chipped as the paint on the front door, and pocked with holes through which mice and small beetles scurried from his approach. He looked into the first room. A wood table stood awkwardly on three legs. Next to it sat a small cupboard with only one door.

*Empty.*

He heard Meega's bare feet running through the hall, and another door opening. The little girl

called for her mother.

John continued down the hall to find a wooden door on the right. He opened it and stepped back as a rancid smell flooded his nose. He performed enough Last Rites to know it.

*Death.*

He stepped into the room and let his eyes adjust. On a blanket on the floor, clutching a small wooden doll, lay the body of a Firstborn woman. Her eyes were open, but John knew no soul took residence there. In the midst of her chest a gaping hole glared at him and branded to her forehead was a symbol from the Firstborn alphabet. He knew what it stood for.

*Blood traitor.*

He turned back to the door, to catch Meega, to spare her the sight, but the little girl stood in the doorway. Thunder shook the walls. Her eyes stared, wide as the harvest moon, and her mouth hung open. With his amulet, he caught the only word she muttered, a faint whisper that fell from her tiny lips.

“Mother.”

\*\*\*

The next day was one of rest, at least for Paine. The Westwood’s attempt to break through Lindhome had been thwarted by Truitt and the others, leaving Lindhome in peace for a time. The sentries, however, now stood guard, careful to observe its movements and behavior. So far, it remained quiet, as if waiting. Its stillness did nothing for the other members of Lindhome. It set them on edge. Fortunately Paine and the others would be leaving Lindhome behind on the morrow. He would be glad to go. He had no desire to remain in a place that felt like a pot on the verge of boiling over.

Lya had left Paine to patrol the north border with Truitt, who from Paine’s deduction was definitively Lastborn. The man was powerful, strong, and had a cruel streak that was unlike the Revenants or the self-proclaimed Nymphs. He seemed to take pleasure in killing the small rodents they used for blood spells — chinchillas they were called.

Puck was off roaming about Lindhome, fascinated with the Nymphs. That left Paine alone with Diarmuid. His heart ached at the distance that Lya was generating between them. With every footfall she moved further away. He held his chest and then turned his attention to Diarmuid. They sat among the knee-high grasses that cascaded from the north stream. Its muddied waters flowed through Lindhome, feeding the wilted willows that littered its meandering path. The water smelled stale.

Paine was pleased to finally have a moment alone with the man, but Fang lay between them so he tried to keep his thoughts and intents wholesome.

Three Revenants passed by, smiling at them with crooked teeth. Paine offered a smile back, but found it difficult to be sincere. They were repulsive.

He looked back to Diarmuid and blurted out anything to get his mind off the foul-looking freaks.

“Diarmuid, were you born in Haven?”

Diarmuid nodded to the Revenants as they shuffled past. His smile was genuine.

“No,” he said when they were finally out of earshot. “I was born in the east, just south of New Boston. My parents were hanged for witchcraft when I was young. A friend of my parents brought me to Haven. She didn’t want to see me fall to the same fate.”

Two more Revenants passed by, followed by eight children — apparently their offspring. They appeared and dressed like the Lastborn.

Paine paused to study them.

“You don’t get it, do you?” Diarmuid said.

“What?”

“When two Revenants mate, the result is Lastborn.”

Paine’s loins convulsed at the thought. “What about the Nymphs?”

Diarmuid shook his head. "Sterile."

"I guess that explains why the Lastborn keep encouraging the ugly ones to breed and wear all that make-up and fancy clothing?"

Diarmuid nodded.

"They're building an army to fight the Firstborn, aren't they?"

Again the man silently concurred.

"Have you been to Valbain?"

"No, it's over the sea, but I've been all over the Confederation and the Outlands, except for the north where the Obek live."

"Obek?"

Diarmuid chuckled. "Surely you've heard the stories? Massive beings that roam the north moors. They hunt caribou."

Paine shrugged. "You hear stories around fires to scare people. Monsters that are eight feet tall, things that lurk in the Westwood, spirits that curse the newborn, ghosts searching for vengeance, and the wolfen of course. But no one ever mentioned Firstborn or Obek, only that there were devils and monsters."

"There is much that people deceive themselves with, especially under influence of the Confederation."

"And the Witch Hunters," Paine added. He paused, thinking of how they had followed them and taken Puck. "Why didn't the Hunters just kill Puck? They held him as captive."

"They take those that are young enough to be trained. Those that are too old are destroyed. The Witch Hunters are witches themselves."

Paine furrowed his eyebrows. "I don't understand. Why would any witch want to work with the Confederation?"

"The Witch Hunters are controlled with an herb. It's called Wormwood. It binds with their soul and their ability to cast spells and summon the dead. Its addiction is deadly."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Diarmuid's voice dropped to a low murmur. "I used to be one."

Paine sat as if his brain had shut down. He had no words.

The corners of Diarmuid's lips jerked into a shy smirk. "Don't worry. The Lastborn freed me years ago."

"What happened?"

Diarmuid leaned back against the willow that sheltered them from the sun's late afternoon rays. He gnawed on a blade of dried grass.

"When I was eleven, I was captured by a Witch Hunter — stolen from right out of Haven." Diarmuid tossed the blade into the stream.

"All the way to the Heartlands I prayed that someone would rescue me, and when we finally reached Charleston, I knew no one could. The place was swarming with Hunters. There were others like me, all bound and gagged. One by one we were stripped of everything except a silver collar and put in a dark room. The smell of that place made me want to vomit. Most of those kids had soiled the floor where they stood. I found my way to a wall and sat. Not long after, the collar fell off. Then, everything went black.

"I don't remember a lot of what happened in the first few years after that. I have vague memories of learning to cast spells, and summon spirits. I remember hunting witches and not being able to control what I was doing. I hated what they made me do. I hated the Confederation. I hated everything. And I could not resist them because they supplied the herb — the Wormwood to which I was addicted. Without its regular dose I would die. I tried to run from them once, but the withdrawal was excruciating. I ran right back after a single day. I remember every child I captured and every man and woman I killed. I was under their control for ten years. Then one day, on the trail of a young witch, I

stumbled on Fang.”

At the sound of her name, the she-wolf thumped her tail on the ground, grinning at Paine.

“What I told you about her abandoning her pack was true,” he continued. “What I didn't tell you is that something in her compelled me to follow her. I couldn't help myself as she led me across the land. Her hold over me was stronger than the drug they controlled me with. I rationed the herb and despite the withdrawal I was suffering, she led me here, to Lindhome. I was lucky they didn't kill me, but Alwhin wouldn't allow it. She said I had some purpose to serve and that they should find a way to free me.”

“So you can summon the dead?”

Diarmuid shook his head. “When they removed my dependency upon the Wormwood they also removed my ability to cast spells and summon. It did something to my soul, like they took a piece of it. Somehow, the two were so intertwined they couldn't remove one without the other. And the withdrawal was difficult, painful. I spent a year here before I returned to Haven.”

Paine put his hand on Diarmuid's arm. “I'm sorry. I won't tell anyone.”

“It's all right. I wish I could have told you earlier, but how would you have reacted if I had told you I was once a Witch Hunter? Would you have come with me after you just killed one? I had to wait until you trusted me.” Diarmuid tossed another blade of grass into the stream. It sank under the surface.

“I thought the Confederation outlawed witchcraft,” Paine said.

“They did.”

“But they use it.”

“They fight fire with fire, enslaving an army of witches to destroy those that wield it freely.”

Paine watched the murky river. Clumps of mud and rock tumbled into it as it swept through Lindhome. As the water tore chunks from the bank, it darkened further.

“And once they have cleansed the land, what will they do with their army of Hunters?” Paine asked.

“Exactly what you think; they will be executed.”

Paine lowered his eyes and nodded. He felt shame at the thought, but could not help it. The bitterness was strong. Someone had to pay.

*Good.*

\*\*\*

Paine sat upon Shadow's back as the last of the preparations were made before they departed Lindhome. A woman with blonde hair waited beside him. She had something of a masculine look about her. He could not say that he had made fast friends with Hella over dinner, but there was camaraderie nonetheless. She was easy going and Paine liked the quiet demeanor about her. The Lastborn woman was going to accompany them to Haven.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

He looked north. “I'm not looking forward to crossing the Westwood.”

She gripped his shoulder. It hurt.

“All will be well,” she said.

Alwhin came to stand before Paine and Lya, guiding them to the side for a private conversation.

Lya quickly spoke. “You never finished telling us of our heritage. Do you know who we are? Do you know who our parents are?”

The woman turned her back to them and ran her fingers along one of the trees that was nearly dead.

“I cannot say. They certainly do not reside in Lindhome.”

“So am I Lastborn or Firstborn?” Lya asked. There was hunger in her eyes.

The woman's face shone with pride. “I took your hand. Your grip is strong.”

“So we’re Lastborn,” Paine said.

She looked at him. “Not you.”

“But that’s not possible. We’re twins.”

“Are you?” She seemed amused by the notion. Her grin was patronizing.

Alwhin was then summoned to the front. Her stride was lengthy as she escaped his pleading for more information. The crowd parted to let her pass and then reassembled behind her. She spoke brief words of encouragement to all, but few with advice, to which Paine overheard murmurings about her failing Sight.

He looked at Lya who seemed quite settled. Whether she was disappointed with the cryptic answers or not, she was outwardly showing that she had all she needed. Paine, however, did not. Nothing made sense any more.

He looked to Puck who was licking his lips as Alwhin sauntered away. No longer was Lya the sole focus of his hungry stares. The young man had walked around Lindhome with a permanent firmness between his legs that had garnered snickers and some harsh rebukes. When he got caught snooping and watching someone undress he was mostly ignored, but Paine knew there was relief among the Nymphs and the Lastborn that the simple-minded deviant was departing.

Puck had cast that ravenous look at Hella but once. The woman struck him across the side of the head and after that Puck cowered in her presence. He remained on the other side of Paine, out of her reach, still rubbing his face.

With a quick wave and farewell, Truitt led the group towards the northern borders of Lindhome. Half the day passed before they came upon the Westwood where the wall of darkness waited for them. From what Truitt indicated, it had spread five feet in the last day. Paine was loath to enter. He looked for reassurance, but found none. The others wore apprehension like a thin veil over their faces.

Truitt pressed forward, barely hesitating as he sliced open the throat of another wiggling chinchilla. Paine urged Shadow to follow, and after five long strides the mare shivered. The shadow of the forest coated him, caressing his skin with cold oil. The Lastborn cast a combined spell that banished the darkness, making the air less foul, but it did little to ease the tension.

Truitt paused for a status check. Everyone nodded their heads in silent response. His gaze lingered longest on Lya and then passed to Diarmuid, who held up his thumb.

Paine leaned in close to Hella, he whispered so low he barely heard himself speak.

“How far is it to the edge of the Westwood?”

The woman said nothing, but splayed her fingers, then closed her fist. She repeated the motion once more.

Paine sighed.

*Ten miles.*

They rode through silence, interrupted by only the crackle of dead leaves under the horses’ hooves. The forest was still, no breeze, no movement, yet there was the sense that if the barrier wasn’t surrounding them, the trees would spring to life and rip them from the saddle.

A weight sat in Paine’s gut, worsened by a screech from the depths of the Westwood. Shadow whinnied in response and Paine patted her neck, trying to ease her worry while attempting to relieve his own. He looked to Fang for steadfast support, but found little. Even the wolf appeared on edge. She watched the shadows as she crept.

Hours later, Truitt called them to a halt. A foul smell filled the air and Fang gave a low growl. She eyed the trees ahead of them and two shapes emerged. They were triple her size and lingered at the edge of the darkness. Gray, matted fur shrouded their twisted forms.

*Wolfen.*

They inched forward. Their muscles rippled. The beasts circled the horses with cautious steps and Shadow whinnied. With muzzles as long as their broad necks they sniffed at the ground.

The Lastborn were already armed, each one holding a blade or bow. No one moved. The wolfen

paused. Paine looked to Fang. She seemed undaunted by the beasts, paying them little heed. Her attention was focused elsewhere, towards a shadow of a shadow; something that advanced towards them from the depths ahead. The trees groaned as they bent to avoid its touch. The shrubs in its path wilted.

Paine gasped. Walking in the midst of the shadow was a little boy. He was dark of hair, with black marbles for eyes. His skin was pale as the moon and he could not have been more than four or five years old. He opened his mouth, a black pit of rotting teeth, and spoke words in a hideous tongue. The only word Paine caught was abba. His translation amulet gave him the meaning — *father*.

The boy looked at the wolfen and the beasts suddenly lunged.

The Lastborn dodged and scattered, fending off the snaps of their jaws. Sword met air as the wolfen danced around their parries and thrusts. Three of the men stumbled, their ankles suddenly entwined with roots. One struggled to recover, but not before a wolfen stole a chunk from his leg. He screamed in agony.

He stumbled back from the others, clutching his thigh. Blood flowed, fast and red, and the wound blackened. He writhed as a dark rash spread along his leg, edging upwards. It crept along his body and he wriggled on the ground, screaming. The dark rash took him in a fit of convulsion. He then lay still, eyes staring skyward.

Lya leapt from her mount and sliced open her arm. Her blood dripped onto the blackened ground. She began a spell to summon aid and the wolfen turned their gaze upon her. Their attack changed. One of them weaved around Diarmuid, almost reaching Lya, when Paine heard a voice behind him.

“No!”

A flaming green stone flew past, striking one of the wolfen in the muzzle. The creature yelped. Licking its lips, it looked to Puck, who stared defiance at the wolfen.

“No touch her!” he shouted.

With fury in their eyes, the beasts leapt over the horses. Puck had no chance to respond before they plucked him from the saddle and bounded once more to drag him into the forest screaming. Three men ran after him. Paine nearly joined them, but the ground trembled beneath his feet.

The boy and his darkness stood before him. Shadow whinnied in rage.

Diarmuid pushed Paine back. He stepped in front of the boy. With the twitch of a finger, the boy cast him aside. The pepper-haired man collapsed in a heap as his head struck one of the trees.

Fang growled and the boy paused, cocking his head to study her. He smiled. The air and the earth shook as he stepped forward. Fang inched back.

From the trees a scream caught Paine’s ear.

*Puck?*

Three of the Lastborn ran to face the boy, including Hella. She struck him in the head with a broken branch. His head tilted with the blow and he looked at her. There was no anger there, no annoyance, simply a blank stare. He twitched his finger once more and Hella flew into the forest where the shrubs and trees covered her. The other two men swept their swords towards the boy and he cast them into the forest behind her.

Paine then heard a voice in his mind, clear like a bell.

*-Help. Else we all perish.-*

He shook his head. He was hearing things. More screams emanated from the forest. He looked at Diarmuid, lying in a heap on the ground. Blood trickled from his lips. Tree roots were beginning to wrap themselves around his legs.

Truitt and the others ran forward. One by one, the little boy batted them aside. Lya pulled the parchment from her robes, her face glowering in rage. The boy’s gaze slid in her direction, his mouth opened, and the trigger in Paine was released.

“No!”

He then lost himself in the crushing swell of cold, biting anger that flooded out of him. He called

upon the dead of the forest, all souls within miles. Feeling as if his heart exploded from his chest, a dark shadow burst forth. The boy faced him, his black hair shifting with the power that surged towards him. A multitude of souls surrounded him. His eyes squinted and he flicked his hand, muttering under his breath. The howling souls sailed towards Paine. Paine clenched his fists, his fear mixing with his anger. He reached to the souls.

“Come unto me. Serve me.”

The boy jerked and opened his mouth. One of his teeth fell to the ground. The souls swept down and delved into Paine. He shivered with their touch. Paine commanded them to turn against the boy, willing them with everything he had to destroy the creature.

*At any cost.*

The souls sailed back towards their former master. The boy stumbled back, his tongue flickering in his mouth, his vacant eye sockets weeping with brown tears. He mumbled words and opened his mouth to scream. His black locks dropped from his head in clumps.

The dark shadow that surrounded the boy swept forward and enveloped Paine. The fire within him burst. He cast a curse of darkness and death and funneled it towards the pale being. The boy screamed. His bellow shook the trees. He doubled over, twitching. He staggered forward, reaching for Paine.

“Abba.”

His face collapsed inwards, leaving a hollow shell. His skin sagged like white drapes. He gave one final, hollow wail before his shell crumpled upon the ground.

Paine tried to reel the souls back, but they were ravenous. They wanted blood. And his righteous anger still burned like hot coals.

Lya stepped back from him, horror etched upon her face. The souls at his command probed at her. Jealousy and rage over her use of Paine to satisfy her own ambitions flickered in his mind and danced along his skin. Something in Paine strained to control it, but another part of him delighted in her horror.

The parchment from his parents lay on the ground and he picked it up, placing it in his pocket. His angry eyes challenged her to take it from him, and she lowered her head.

A shuffling of dried leaves behind him turned his attention. He spun around.

Puck stepped from the trees, cut and bruised.

“Paine, no! It's me!”

The souls flew towards the young man. Puck cried out.

The voice sounded in his mind again.

*-No, child. That is enough. -*

The souls paused and Paine fell to his knees.

They reeled back towards him. And they brought the memories of the vile creature that had assumed the shape of a little boy. And there was knowledge, terrible and old. Not to mention a deal; a deal made with a woman cloaked in shadow. Then it was gone. And the darkness embraced him.

It was cold, and excruciating.

\*\*\*

John pulled Meega close to him as they rode along the cobbled road, leaving Barcelona by the light of the half-moon that hung in the sky. The girl sat quietly, stroking the straw hair of the wooden doll she clutched in her tiny hands. From time to time she leaned back against him and her hand would silently reach up and touch his face. He considered leaving her with the orphans of the Temple. Miguel had insisted upon it. Yet something about the idea did not sit well with John. He couldn't help but wonder if he could somehow make amends by caring for this child. Or perhaps it was what Liesel said to him.

*She has no one, Churchman.*

It made him wonder.



*Did the old woman know the girl's mother was dead?*

Meega might have been better off with the orphans, for what sort of life would she have with him, but he would not subject her innocent mind to a twisted religion; especially when the little girl and her mother feared God.

*For our God is a consuming fire.*

A smile of irony twitched inside him.

*Wasn't that the point?*

Miguel rode beside them, cloaked in anger and silence. The fat friar was still upset with him for his comments about the Church. John wasn't sure if the man believed what they had discovered with Liesel. He wondered if the good friar was like all the others, burying his head in books and rituals to ignore what loomed on a desolate horizon.

*Others have ignored the truth, so why should he be any different?*

John sighed.

He had penned a missive to the Pope to let her know of his findings, but he did not leave it in the hands of the Church to deliver. When he informed the Pope of what he knew, she had given him specific instructions on how to reach her. He did as he was told, and hoped the letter made its way to the Vatican with all haste.

As they reached the top of the hill, John peered into the valley. Torch-lit windows shone back at him, tiny embers of light compared to the fires that lit the Temple and its towering spires. Miguel continued onward, leaving him to stare back at the city like Lot's wife. It was all he could do to turn his gaze away, feeling like a pillar of salt himself. Meega stirred in front of him, leaning back to rest her head against his chest. She still clutched the tiny wooden doll.

John turned his horse around, but not before he caught a shadow slide across the face of the moon. He scanned the skies, searching, but found only fear in the pit of his stomach.

\*\*\*

An old, haggard woman watched the two friars and the little girl ascend the hill that led out of Barcelona, leaving the city behind. She buried her head in the tattered rags that clothed her, muffling her cackle. She wondered if they would find the Beast. She knew one thing, someone else searched as well.

*Perhaps if this friar gets there first. Perhaps ...*

She could only hope, for hope was all she had.

The tall friar — the heretic — took a last look upon the city before turning around. Far above him, a winged being soared west through the sky.

*The Archangels are awakened.*

Liesel wondered if the friar had noticed.

*Liesel. Yes, that is my name. Sometimes.*

The old woman wrapped a midnight-blue cloak about her and ignited a power within her. She groaned. The change always caused her pain. She morphed to another form, one of a dark-haired woman with emerald eyes, and a voluptuous body. When it was complete, she pulled the cloak about her shoulders to ward off the night chill.

Then Lilith, first wife of Adam, turned on her heel, and strode down the path back into the city of Barcelona.

\*\*\*

Paine woke, his head pounding to the rhythm of Shadow's steps. He felt an unexplained tightness

around his chest and legs.

He was tied with rope.

Solid arms surrounded him, and callused hands held the reins.

*Diarmuid.*

Warm breath tickled the nape of his neck. "Relax, Paine. You're with me."

Paine sank back into him, feeling the man's chest rise and fall against him.

"What happened?"

His throat was parched.

"You destroyed that boy-thing, whatever it was, but the wolfen escaped. The others saved Puck, but all three died in the attempt."

"What was that thing?"

"I don't know. Truitt thinks it might be a part of the Westwood."

Paine swallowed the lump in his throat. "Where's Lya?" he asked, although he knew she rode beside him.

"I'm here." Dark half-circles framed her eyes and her lips were gouged with bite marks.

He regretted what had happened, but could not bring himself to apologize.

Lya's voice hesitated. "I think you should get some more rest."

"How long have I been out?"

"Most of the day."

His eyelids weighed heavily.

Diarmuid stirred behind him, pulling Paine into him.

"Sleep. We're long out of the Westwood and on our way to Haven."

*The Westwood.*

Its memories and knowledge were lost to him with the singular exception of a deal and the woman with whom it was made.

*She would pay.*

"Thanks, Diarmuid," he muttered.

Sleep took him once more.

\*\*\*

Fang watched the young man sleep once again, exhausted from the use of a power that threatened to consume him.

*If he does not learn to deal with it, it will destroy him.*

She looked to his sister.

*She has great power as well, and the skill to wield it.*

Such power Fang had not seen in a long time, so long it seemed like another lifetime. It awoke something in her, something she thought long dead.

A squirrel ran past and leapt into a tree; one that was good for shade. Its shadow made her think of the Westwood and of what they had found there.

*Devil spawn.*

She always had her suspicions about that dark place, but there was something more. She could not put her paw on it, but something was amiss, and she cursed herself that she could not see it. The wolf retraced the steps in her mind, but knew she missed some small thing that flaunted itself in front of her.

It itched.

She sniffed at the air and smelled the change on the wind. Its stench was unmistakable.

*If this is any sign of what is coming, the others will need to know.*

Not much frightened Fang, but this made her smell her own fear. So much so, that something inside her edged its way up her gullet and tickled the back of her throat. She knew of only one way to

voice it, but she stifled the howl that begged to come forward.

## Chapter 12

The morning sun was hidden behind a cloud that looked like a giant mountain, casting a shadow upon the land. It was reminiscent of the one that was cast upon Brahm's heart. She always hated leaving this place.

She led her brown charger through the gates of the Haudenosaunee village and a voice cut through the mist.

"Orenda, wait!"

White Feather chased after her.

Exasperation escaped her lips in a sigh.

"Were you going to leave without saying goodbye?" he asked. The look in his eyes was hopeful.

She grunted. "I hate goodbye."

"No need," he said as his appaloosa trotted up to them. He adjusted the bags on Wind's saddle.

"I'm coming with you."

"What?" Brahm failed to mask the irritation in her voice.

A wide grin crept across his rugged face. "I didn't think you were hard of hearing, Orenda. I said I'm coming with you."

She turned her back to him and mounted. "I go alone."

"Mother thought you might need help."

Brahm gave a hearty laugh and shook her head. The Clan Mother's motives were as evident as the twinkle in her son's eyes.

"Very well, but you do as I say."

He mulled it over. "Agreed, but not if your life is in danger. I would hate to see anything happen to that pretty hide of yours."

That grin lodged itself in his face again and Brahm felt a fresh desire to slap it clean off. She rolled her eyes instead.

"Let's go."

She urged Roan to a trot, leaving White Feather muttering something about women. They both knew she could outmatch him in a heartbeat.

*If anything, she would end up saving his pretty behind.*

Five days later, with the land blanketed in pine, box elder, and beech, Brahm found herself in the dales of the upper Outlands. She once heard a saying about a needle in a pile of hay. Searching for Diarmuid was similar. Yet something was guiding in her in this direction. Whether it was her instincts or not, Brahm was unsure. And the second soul within her had been disturbingly quiet.

*Too quiet.*

Two days previous, her overwhelming desire to run back to the Haudenosaunee village had disappeared—a whisper of a memory. So she followed her gut after that, or what she thought was her gut, in the hopes it would lead her to Diarmuid.

For most of the trip she was gripped by the meaning of the Peace Maker's visit. The spirit being had placed the fear of God in her. And that made two things Brahm Hallowstone had little tolerance for: fear and God.

Her thoughts were interrupted as a raven alighted in her path. It hopped twice, croaked, and fluttered its wings. She yanked the reins, and Roan whinnied.

White Feather pulled up beside her. "What is it?"

Brahm dismounted and approached the bird with a slow, steady pace. She never understood why so many thought them harbingers of death and bad omens; they were highly intelligent. She crouched when she was within range.

The bird croaked a few times and flapped its wings. Its message was short and simple—a warning. Brahm nodded and reached into her pack for some flat bread. She gave it to the raven with her

thanks before it croaked once more, and flew west.

White Feather's feet padded the ground behind her. "What did it say?"

"There are humans beyond the next ridge. The raven didn't like the smell of them. We're also being followed."

White Feather stared into the eastern breeze. "Then we should go on foot."

Brahm nodded, and whispered in Roan's ear as they led the horses off the road. She tied them to the bough of a silver beech. Her gut was laden with anticipation, and with sweaty palms she gripped the kahbeth. She sensed their tug, their hunger for blood, reaching deep inside her. White Feather gripped his war club, his bow slung over his shoulder. His eyebrows were lowered in concentration, his breathing slow and rhythmic. He wore apprehension well.

They prowled the forest, silhouettes that slipped between the trees. Brahm moved forward, every step carved from a honed instinct. Her iron grip on the kahbeth pearly her dark hands. They traveled in stealth for more than a mile, without sign of human presence.

She was about to call a return when she sensed an oddness about the forest. White Feather sensed it as well. With hand signals he indicated he would go left, she should go right and they would meet up in one hundred yards. She nodded, and he vanished into the shrub.

*Time to dance*, Brahm thought, and called upon the one skill that would serve her here. Even the kahbeth was second to her ability as a Soul Runner.

*It was time to become one with the Great Mother.*

Brahm calmed her mind, and let the sounds of the forest beat in her ears like a ceremonial water drum. Her lungs drank of the musty air. She smoothed her hand along the earth, its presence seeping under her skin. She became one with the trees, and felt their longing to touch the sky. Her soul lifted from her body and the wind breathed through her. She rose above the shrubs, forsaking her physical form. She soared past birds and rustling leaves. Two deer raised their heads, yet could not see her as she brushed past them. She sensed White Feather, his feet dancing along the ground in a silent waltz.

Then she found what she sought.

The kahbeth pulsed in the fingers of her physical form. They tugged at her for blood. Her soul fought with them. She needed to see more. Her prey was near, twenty yards away. Her soul danced a little further. The hairs on the back of her neck bristled.

*A Witch Hunter.*

The kahbeth yanked, and the sensations slipped from her grasp. Brahm shuddered as her soul reeled back to her body. A wave of fatigue stole over her, as it sometimes did, but she shook it off and listened.

There was nothing.

The blades of the kahbeth warmed in her hands. She gripped them harder. The Hunter was casting a spell or a summons; the kahbeth could smell the blood. She waited as the wings of fate perched upon her shoulder and breathed down her neck; its breath was rank with anticipation.

There was a sharp thud.

Feet pounded the forest floor.

Brahm rose, and grunted at the sight of White Feather chasing after a helmeted man in leather.

*Damn!*

She bolted from the trees.

Brahm leapt with stag-like strides. Her heart thrummed. Her breath flowed. She joined in the chase, and sped through the forest. With fluid motion she sheathed the kahbeth as she hurdled fallen pines. Reaching to the small of her back, she slid out a jagged knife. A smile edged across her face as she gained ground on them. Within moments she caught up to White Feather and bounded past him.

The Witch Hunter was a worthy chase and Brahm howled with excitement. She liked a good hunt. The Hunter's legs propelled him through the forest, the trees offering little to impede him.

*No matter. He would be hers.*

She gained on him, stride by stride. She blew past the trees.  
Brahm smelled his fear now. She licked her lips.  
The knife in her hand felt like northern frost, cold and heavy.  
*It was time to put an end to this. There might be others.*  
She hurled it.

As the knife cut through the air, she unsheathed the kahbeth. The knife struck the Hunter in the back of the knee, and he tumbled to the ground.

The kahbeth pulsed. Brahm gave herself over to their hunger. She raised them into the air and then pierced the Hunter's hide, thrusting it through his back. They pinned him to the ground. The Hunter thrashed, his soul fighting to cling to his body.

The struggle did not last long, and Brahm shuddered as he fell limp. The kahbeth screamed in her mind and she convulsed with their pleasure. They were satiated. She ripped the blades from his body, flesh dangling from the spikes. As she wiped the kahbeth on the ground, White Feather approached, and the grin on his face faded at her grave look. She rolled the Witch Hunter over with her foot, and stared at the smooth roundness of his face. He was young. She searched him, but found nothing of interest.

A snapping noise caught her attention. The kahbeth were ready, screaming for more, but she lowered them when she noticed a lone white horse partially obscured by the trees. She stepped over to it, and noticed the lack of side packs.

*No supplies.*

It could only mean one thing.

"Scout," she said.

"Where are the rest?"

A loud crack sounded behind them and they rounded to find twenty Witch Hunters on horse, armed.

"Behold," muttered White Feather.

"Put your weapons down." The leader's voice rumbled. "By the authority of the Confederation, I command you to surrender."

Brahm recognized the woman, remembered her from an ancient past — a ruthless Hunter. One that wore the finger bones of her victims as a necklace. The half-helmet veiled a face that Brahm recalled well, hardened with lines of age and battle. A faint tickling sensation edged at her heart. She shook it off. She refused to fear this woman.

White Feather's hand tightened around the war club. He nodded to her as if he read her thoughts.

*The Hunters would hang them anyway, so why not die fighting.*

Brahm gripped the kahbeth.

Her feet itched to surge forward, but froze in place as cries echoed from the east. Brahm turned, wondering whether she would face death regardless if she ran from it. She thought of the Clan Mother, of Diarmuid, of Gray Wolf, of White Feather, and of a face she had not thought of in ages, a face not unlike her own.

Would he mourn her passing?

*And what of her second soul, she wondered. Would she finally have peace?*

The voice was silent.

Brahm took a single step forward and paused as ten Haudenosaunee warriors crested the rise in the east, with Roan and Wind in tow. She grinned. The tides of fate were rising in her favor.

The Hunters were mired in confusion, but within moments silver daggers and bags of lethal powders were in hand. Two muttered a summons and flames danced along their fingers. A host of souls emerged from the trees.

The warriors sped forward, a whirlwind of fury sweeping through the forest. Brahm's heart swelled with pride.

*My people.*

She would fight at their side after all. She joined in their war cries, but paused at another echo; this one from the west. Again, fate smiled upon her, and Brahm nearly knelt to kiss the Great Mother. Men and women weaved through the trees, swords bared and arrows nocked. But these were more than what they appeared. The cruelty in their eyes spoke their nature — Lastborn.

A crest of peppered hair, sword in hand, led the charge. A gray wolf ran at his side.

“Diarmuid!” she called out, kahbeth pulsing and alive once more. Brahm charged forward.

The lead Hunter, broad as a bear, waited for her.

“The penalty for treason is death,” she roared.

Wasting no time on words, Brahm swung the kahbeth. The Hunter raised her sword and the clash of metal vibrated through the trees. Rage from the kahbeth surged up Brahm's arm. She swung with the second one, but the Hunter dodged. The blades of the kahbeth howled as they neared the woman's flesh. The Hunter leapt back to avoid their touch.

Brahm raised the blades to strike again, but the Hunter was faster, planting her booted foot on Brahm's chest and shoving her backwards. Breath rushed out of her lungs as the ground met her, hard and fast. Seething anger welled inside her and she shuffled to avoid the sword that plunged towards her. The Hunter wrenched her sword from the ground.

Brahm rose, panting. She smiled.

*The woman was good.*

The Hunter beat down upon her again, this time with a force that knocked Brahm from her feet. She rolled backwards, slicing her arm upon a jagged stone. The kahbeth rang in her ears. They smelled blood.

Brahm rolled to her feet and swung at the Hunter once more, bringing both blades around in a wide arc, separating them at the last minute. The Hunter blocked one, but missed the other, and moaned as it tore open her leg. She jabbed in anger at the air.

Sweat trickled down Brahm's head, and a sly grin crept across her face. The Hunter hobbled backwards, struggling to block parry after parry. Gathering all the strength she could muster, Brahm locked the sword with one of the kahbeth. The Hunter stared defiance at her as Brahm brought the other forward, and pierced her chest. The woman struggled to stand, but the life in her fermented in a heady brew from which the kahbeth drank in thirsting gulps.

The Hunter leaned forward. “They will be ours, traitor.”

“Who?”

The Hunter gave a chill smile and then collapsed at Brahm's feet.

*Damn!*

She had no time to ponder as another Hunter lunged towards her. Brahm gave herself over to the kahbeth, swiping at him. He stepped back and she swung again, blinded by bloodlust. He shifted back once more and a summons to retreat sounded on the air. Her opponent turned on his heel and ran with the others. She marched forward, furious, determined to take the coward.

*She would destroy them all.*

A strong hand clasped her shoulder, restraining her. Brahm gripped the kahbeth, and glared at her new opponent.

*This one will die well.*

“Brahm!” called his voice.

Barely recognizing the face through a haze of hatred, she swiped at him.

She missed.

White fury glazed over her eyes.

*Die!*

She stabbed at him again, but pierced air.

“Brahm!”

She knew that voice. She struggled to drop the weapons, fighting with their iron resolve.  
She swiped again.

“Brahm, it's me!”

The man struck her across the face.

A voice screamed at her from inside her own skull.

*-Fool!-*

The kahbeth tumbled from her hands. The fit of rage and thirst for blood melted.

“Diarmuid,” she breathed.

His heavy arms pulled her close. She returned his embrace. She'd almost killed him.

Diarmuid retrieved the kahbeth from the forest floor. “Are you still using these things?”

*-Fool!-*

Brahm shook her head and grinned. It was good to see him. “Is that all you can say when you haven't seen me in so long?”

She secretly thanked the second soul within her. Somehow the woman had helped release her from the kahbeth's hold.

Diarmuid handed the blades to her. “Just worried about you. It's good to see you. What are you doing out here?”

She smiled. “Looking for you.”

White Feather approached them, cautious. There was a look of confusion on his face.

“Diarmuid,” he said, “it is good to see you. I trust you are well.” He offered his hand.

Diarmuid took it.

Another Haudenosaunee warrior approached them from behind White Feather. He was tall as a young elm and solid as the oak. His partial Obek heritage was evident in his long strides, double that of most men.

Brahm held out her arms and greeted him. “She:kon, Great Bear. I'm glad to see you.”

A craggy smile stretched across his oversized face. The man towered over her by two heads and Brahm felt like a rag doll as he hugged her. She had saved his life once, and neither he nor his shaman uncle let her forget it.

“We were sent after you,” he said. His rich voice hesitated as he studied the remains of the dead Hunters. The Lastborn had butchered them. “The Clan Mother had a feeling you might be in trouble. She was specific with her instructions: don't let them know you're there until they need you. So, here we are. I have a life debt to you, Orenda— my life for your life.”

Brahm thanked the Mother Earth for the wisdom of Little Doe. She nodded to the man.

“Come,” Diarmuid said, tugging her. “I want you to meet someone.”

He led her to the western rise, but halted as they reached its crest. A Witch Hunter, her blonde locks shifting in the breeze, stood over two young men prostrate on the ground.

Diarmuid unsheathed his sword. “Paine!”

The Hunter braced for Diarmuid's strike. When he reached her he swung, but she pummeled him with one fist as she brought the sword down with the other. Diarmuid's stance didn't waver and his sword met hers. The metal clashed, but the woman fell back as an arrow sliced through her shoulder. The Lastborn were howling in rage and running towards her. Great Bear advanced upon the Hunter first and pinned her to the ground. He clamped a silver collar around her neck with a deft motion, and then held up his hands to the Lastborn.

“Peace,” he said. His voice was like stone. “She is taken.”

The Lastborn slowed, the anger still smoldering.

“Peace!” he called out again.

Then they paused. The rage in their eyes subsided and they withdrew to the trees.

Diarmuid sheathed his sword and knelt beside one of the young men.

“Paine?” He reached over to the other. “Puck?”



Brahm crouched at his side. "Diarmuid, what's going on?"

He stared into the forest. "Lya!" A frantic look filled his eyes.

Diarmuid ran past the horses, still crying Lya's name. Brahm knelt and checked for a heartbeat on the one called Paine. It was rapid, but he was alive. Something within her awoke as she leaned over his chest.

It was the second soul that was leeching to her own. It wept.

Paine stirred in her arms, putting his hand to his head. When he pulled it back it was covered in blood.

He moaned. "Where's Lya?"

"Diarmuid went to look for her. Who is she?"

"She's my sister." He sat up. "Where's Puck? Is he okay?"

The one with the black hair groaned. Brahm reached over and put her hand to his chest. His heartbeat was strong and he had no visible sign of injury. Her second soul still wept.

"He's fine. What does—" She was interrupted by a screech.

A falcon took flight and Brahm managed to catch something from it — sharp images of a pale woman with onyx hair invaded her head. Brahm sucked in her breath. Her second soul was now screaming.

*-Mine!-*

Brahm shook the image from her mind.

*This was insanity.*

"Diarmuid!"

Diarmuid bounded out of the woods.

"That falcon is hers."

Diarmuid knew to seize the opportunity before him. "Get your horse, we're going after her."

White Feather strode over with Roan in hand, Wind trailing behind.

Brahm took the reins, but before she mounted, she looked towards the Witch Hunter and then towards the Lastborn. They ambled among the trees, retrieving swords and arrows. They appeared tranquil now, but she wondered if their wrath would surface once more. Her instincts spoke to her.

"Make sure the Hunter lives. Take her back to Haven and free her of the Wormwood. We need to know what the Confederation is up to."

The large man nodded. "I will see to it."

As Diarmuid mounted, Fang growled. The she-wolf settled between Paine and Puck.

Diarmuid nodded. "Fine. Take care of them."

White Feather climbed onto Wind's back with a fluid motion.

"I'm coming with you," he said. He looked at Brahm with a firm gaze. There would be no deterring him.

*Stubborn fool.*

Brahm nodded, and mounted Roan.

And as the falcon climbed into the southern skies, the three of them followed.

## Chapter 13

A heavy breeze blew through the ruins of old Madrid and up the escarpment to where John stood. It carried the scent of decay.

In the midst of the rubble a river cut a winding path, splitting the ruins in half. The source of the putrid smell lined its edge; massive Death Lilies that grew along the shores in clumps of orange and white blooms.

John tied a scarf around his face to muffle the scent. It lessened the urge to vomit, yet the smell was ever present. He waited as Miguel finished retching at the side of the road and wiped his mouth with a rag from his pocket. The woolen scarf did not help the fat friar's delicate senses.

Meega sat astride a mule they had purchased two days prior, her blue eyes shining above the rim of the scarf wrapped about her porcelain face. She had not spoken since departing Barcelona six days prior, but he knew from her eyes she found some comfort in the gangly, brown pack animal that was aptly named Mule.

The girl gave no indication of what she felt about her loss, despite Miguel's prodding. She stroked the wooden doll she carried.

*When will you open up again, Little One?*

The absence of her shrill laughter cleaved John's heart.

The sun crested the Gredos mountains in the distance, and John took a moment to trace their path south and west. The mountains would guide them to Baleal, to Portugal. He sighed. It had been a long time since he had visited the land of his birth. If they were fortunate, they would catch a Portuguese galleon heading for the Confederation.

*And then what? Kill a child?*

He turned his back to Meega as Miguel tied his scarf about his face once more. John took shallow breaths, trying to focus on skirting the ruins of the ancient city and its lingering smell. The Death Lilies had sprouted in the ruins after the Shift and thrived for five hundred years. He prayed for a downdraft.

The stillness of the valley was interrupted by Miguel's incessant gagging.

"Try breathing through your mouth, brother. It may help."

Miguel nodded, and the sound of his nasal wheezing disappeared.

Yet four hours later, after trudging through miles of rolling hills, the wheezing returned. The scent of the lilies faded to a bad memory and John removed his scarf, casting it off to the side of the road. It was laden with the flower's odor, as was the rest of his attire.

"We need to get out of this clothing."

Miguel reached into his pack, and his bulbous nose sniffed at the robe he pulled out. He gagged and stuffed it back in.

"Everything smells. Where are we going to get a change of clothing?"

John motioned with his chin. "Carnero is just beyond the next hill."

Miguel's face crimsoned. "That hedonistic place? I'd rather stink."

John laughed. "Don't be ridiculous, brother. We cannot ride naked and I don't care to ride any further with this smell. We'll find a quiet inn, have a bath, buy some clothing and be on our way."

Miguel said nothing further, but his neck and ears matched the rosy glow of his face.

After another hour, they entered the brightly flowered city of Carnero. Etched into the keystone of its arches was a goat's head surrounded by five flowers in the pattern of a pentagram. Over the horned head was a goblet filled with grapes. John smiled. The goat's head was symbolic of the god they worshipped, yet the city's title held another meaning, one the obvious name of the horned head did not infer. It held the ancient roots for the word flesh, and rightly so, as it was known as the carnal capital of Iberia.

Towering honeysuckle bushes surrounded the city, their scent like manna to his nose. They grew to twice John's height, and were a match for the tall hedges that lined the intricate mazes within the city.

proper. John had heard plenty about the mazes as a young man, and the nightly rituals of lust performed within their confines. That lure was no longer. Not since his body had been taken and forced into unspeakable things — things which had no forgiveness.

He sniffed at the air, heavy with the scent of the roses intertwined between the hedges; red, white, and plentiful. They walked along the main street, greeted by drooping, yellow blossoms of the laburnum trees lining the streets.

Children ran between the trees, hiding and chasing each other. Meega paid them no heed.

Laughter and merry talk filled the city and the people that walked the streets continued about their business, yet some cast the two friars a strange look. It was not just for the smell he needed a change in clothing. His friar's robes stood out in such a place. Yet some of the women cast him looks of longing, eyeing his tall stature. John felt his face flush.

The city's Guard stood at the corners, men and women armed with only a tall, intricately carved staff. Their scant clothing hung on hardened bodies. A number of people muttered faint greetings, those native to the place. They wore loose-fitting garb of vivid colors and flashy patterns. The clothing reminded John of the bright, billowing pants of the Baron's Guild. The visitors dressed much more conservatively, and hung their heads at the sight of the two friars. John stifled his laughter.

*Guilt. A gift from God, and one of the mightiest weapons of the Church. That, and fear.*

As they strode down the cobbled road, a plethora of inns offered them what they sought, but most had men and women hanging in the doorways wearing only enough to cover their most private of regions. Even that was a stretch as one woman lifted her top to show them a pierced nipple. Miguel's face rucked.

They walked past a small inn in which no one lurked, a quaint stucco building called The Golden Fish. John supposed the name could have hidden meanings, but as Miguel carved a bee-line across the road to its yellow door, he saw what caught the brother's attention. A small cross hung in the corner of the window. He now knew the meaning of the name.

*The fish. The symbol used before the cross.*

Miguel stood in front of it, grinning as if the Second Coming was just announced. John sighed.

*If only he knew.*

John rolled his eyes and dismounted. "I guess we'll stay here then."

He handed the reins to a plain-faced young man in a sand-colored robe and plucked Meega from off Mule's back. She still clung to the doll, but slid her delicate hand in his as they followed a seemingly ecstatic Miguel through the door of the inn.

As they entered, a tall, ample-hipped woman greeted them. She was shy of beautiful with her slightly angled features, but she appeared sultry with her dark hair and eyes, along with the slight eyebrows that betrayed her mixed heritage. *Firstborn? Nymph? Sidhe?* Over her gaping cleavage dangled a cross and John found it difficult to turn his eyes away.

"Good afternoon, my name is Ingrid. How may I be of service?" The smoky accent announced her heritage — Sidhe.

John stepped forward, and Meega hid behind him, hugging his leg.

"We would like food, and a room for the night. We also need to find a change of clothing."

Ingrid nodded. "I can see to all of your needs. You smell of the east, and must desire a bath. I will have water boiled." She clapped her hands and two young women came forward. Both were dressed in similar sandy robes as the young stable hand outside. Ingrid ordered them off to prepare baths and then turned back, eying Meega. She knelt and touched the girl's hand. "Do not be afraid, little one. Your kind is welcome here."

Meega stepped forward, an uncertain smile on the corners of her lips. She stroked the wooden doll, yet remained silent.

Ingrid tapped Meega's chin and smiled. "I understand. You need say nothing more."

Miguel looked at the woman, his face blank. "She didn't say a word. She hasn't spoken in days."

Ingrid winked at him. "Sometimes silence says all." She glided over to a small table, her strides as smooth as the Persian silk robe that hung from her tall frame like violet drapes. "While you wait, sit, and tell me what two friars and a little half-breed are doing in a city filled with carnal pleasures. Something tells me you are not here to fulfill your innermost desires." Her lips coiled into a sly smile.

Miguel blushed as he plunked himself in a wicker chair, and words burst out of his mouth. "We are making for Baleal."

John inwardly cursed the brother's loose tongue.

"Baleal. Interesting." Her stare lingered on Miguel for a moment and then scanned Meega. "She is neither of yours."

Again Miguel opened his mouth. "Her mother is dead."

"And you chose not to leave her with the Church?"

Miguel's face reddened and he cast an angry glance towards John. "One of us made that choice."

She gazed at John, fingering the cross about her neck. "You do not trust the Church?"

*What should I tell her?*

Miguel had already given away too much, but as John faced the woman, he felt the desire to speak only the truth to her.

*A spell?*

He shook it off, and of his own volition spoke no lie. "No, I do not. Our religion is a sham."

Miguel's face paled and he reached into his pocket to pull out the rosary.

Ingrid nodded and smiled. "Indeed. It is a sham."

The fat friar's jaw dropped open. "But," he stammered, "you wear the cross. You have one in the window."

The woman smiled. "Yes, it draws an interesting crowd. You'd be surprised how many people feel safe staying here because of this symbol. It's as if it redeems their actions somehow. I would sooner give up my soul than follow your God."

John laughed. "Clever. Not just the Church can capitalize on guilt, I see."

A twinkle lit her dark eyes. "You spoke the truth of your own accord."

John remained silent as Miguel wrenched his bible from his pack. "You could save your soul." He slid the book across the table towards her.

A smirk crept across her face. "You would have me read your little book? Your false religion? Why would I follow only one God when there are many?"

He pulled back the bible, slipping it into his pack. Anger smoldered in his round eyes. "There is only one God."

"No," John said.

*If she wants the truth, then I will give it.*

The burden of his cross lifted from his shoulders like no confessional could ever provide.

"Everything that is said outside the Church is true. There is not one God. There are many."

\*\*\*

Straining to see, Paine blinked. He made out the blurred edges of a figure that loomed over him; a brown-skinned man with hair that spilled down his back in reams of black silk. A craggy face with black orbs for eyes smiled at him. The man was not fully human. Neither was the deep voice that rolled off his tongue.

"Welcome back." The words resonated in Paine's chest. And then so did a sudden agony. He clutched at his heart.

*Lya!*

She was far, and moving south. As if by itself, his head rolled in her direction. He knew exactly where she lay; or rode. He could sense her moving further away from him, and fast.

The sun shone overhead, breaching the crest of pines and maples that surrounded him. Paine groaned, his mind and memory sifting through heavy fog. He reached for the back of his throbbing skull, fingers caressing the dangling threads of a makeshift bandage that was wrapped about his head.

"Where's Lya? And who are you?"

Paine tried to sit up, but with a gentleness surprising for someone of his size the burly man forced him to lay back.

"I am called Great Bear. Diarmuid left you in our care while he goes after your sister. She was taken by the Witch Hunters."

Paine propped himself up again, his head throbbing harder. He rubbed his chest. His heart ached. "I have to find her."

"Easy." Again, the gnarled hands eased him down.

Paine struggled. "You don't understand."

Great Bear's black eyes widened. "You have the courage of a badger, little one, but there is nothing you can do for her. Orenda is with Diarmuid and she can track your sister's falcon. Do not fear. They will bring her back."

Something moved at Paine's feet. He yanked them back, startled.

A wolf's head appeared and he exhaled.

"Fang." Her presence gave him relief; even the pain in his chest subsided. The wolf sniffed him, turned her head at his soiled pants, and then wet his face with her leathery tongue.

Paine wiped the drool from his cheek and heard a voice from over Great Bear's shoulder.

"He's awake!"

Puck ran around from behind Great Bear. "You ... awake." He crawled beside Paine and patted his leg. "You okay ... Paine."

Paine returned his awkward grin. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Puck nodded. He appeared fine with the exception of a red mark on his face.

"Have you been near Hella again?"

The young man lowered his head. His nod was slight this time.

Truitt approached them, his stride slow, but steady. His angled features were solemn. Puck cowered at his approach.

Truitt turned Paine around to examine the back of his head. The man was nowhere close to Great Bear's size, but his manhandling was far less gentle. Paine tried not to wince.

"You look better than when we found you," Truitt commented. "I suppose you know what happened to Lya." Truitt released him, like from a vice. Paine leaned back.

"Not really," he said.

"From what we can gather from your simple-minded friend here, the Witch Hunters struck you from behind. They took Lya. The Witch Hunter that attacked you is clasped in silver."

Puck panted next to him. "They let her ... live," he muttered.

Paine had a sudden thought. One he hoped was wrong. He attempted to stand.

"I want to see her."

Great Bear held him down. "Not yet, little badger. You will get nothing out of her. She is being taken to Haven to be freed of the herb that binds her. We must learn what she knows. There is much at stake."

He gritted his teeth. "What does she look like?"

*He had to know.*

Puck cleared his throat. "Same one ... t-t-take me."

\*\*\*

Smoke sifted from the corner of Ingrid's lips, its scent pungent and thick, and rose to drift along

the rafters of the small inn. John's tongue bonded to the roof of his mouth at the smell.

*Wick.*

She exhaled, and the herbal concoction tantalized a long-lost craving in him. She recognized it, and the half-breed smiled.

“Would you like one? Most humans can't handle it.”

In her fingers she deftly twirled a thin, coarsely wrapped wick and offered it to him. He took it and lit it from the tip of hers. John inhaled, and the mixed flavors of tobacco, hemp, and Wormwood wafted down his throat. He closed his eyes to savor the taste. It had been years since he had last smoked the leaf of the Wormwood, a forbidden, soul-binding substance. In small doses, its addiction was mind-numbing, but when taken pure, the craving was lethal.

John had finally turned to a life in the Church to get himself off it.

*And to escape.*

Ingrid studied him for a moment, her eyes shifting over his frame and face.

“Your fat friend left for his bath in a hurry. He didn't like what you had to say about your God.”

He thought of the passage he had read to Miguel.

*And Elohim said, 'Let us make man in our image.'*

“He cannot accept that Elohim is a plural term; that there might be more than one god is unfathomable.”

She laughed. “But it's written many times in your little book.”

“It's not my book,” he said.

*Not anymore.*

“Does he know the rest? About who his God truly is?”

There were many passages spelling it out, but one in particular was etched into his memory; the genocide, one of many, ordered by one of the ancient gods that could not stand to share his glory.

*But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves: For thou shalt worship no other god: for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.*

John shook his head. “I must break this to him over time. Too much at once he would not be able to handle.”

“Why does he accompany you?”

“I think he was sent to update the Cardinal. Miguel has a good heart, and has always been kind to me, even when the Church imprisoned me for heresy, but he would crawl up the devil's ass if the Cardinal asked him. I don't think he's fond of our Pope.”

Ingrid nodded. “I've heard she was once a blood priestess, but that was years ago. Does he oppose her?”

“I don't know.” He paused to put the wick to his lips, flicking the tip with his tongue as he took another drag. He closed his eyes as the effects of the Wormwood tickled the recesses of his mind.

*The ecstasy.*

His loins stirred and his eyes shifted to the glint of the gold cross lodged between Ingrid's breasts. His face flushed with embarrassment and he averted his eyes to stare into hers.

*That was enough.*

He couldn't do that again — *ever*. He was tainted.

John butted the wick in an earthenware bowl and coughed.

“Many are waiting for this Pope to abdicate. I'm not sure Esther is the sort though. She's strong.”

Ingrid examined the wasted wick in the bowl. “The same was once said of Pope Joan.”

He nodded. “I suppose.”

“Did you know her?”

He coughed again.

*Yes.*

“She was the opposite of Esther, dark where Esther was light, a mystery to Esther's sureness.

Esther is purely human, Joan was not. But rumor has it she was either Lastborn or Firstborn. I always thought she might be Sidhe.” He studied Ingrid for a moment and the fine lines of her eyebrows.

She sucked hard on the wick and blew the smoke from the corner of her mouth. “For all the good that does anyone.”

“Are you?”

She cleared her throat, but her voice was still low and chalky. “My father was. My mother was human.”

“I thought Sidhe blood was never mixed with others.”

“Like most Sidhe males, my father had little ability to control his carnal desires. And when there’s no one left to mate with, what choice is there? He fucked all kinds of humans, and not just women.”

John nodded. He had heard that.

Ingrid brought the wick to her lips and a stirring in his loins vexed him again. The smoke drifted in his direction, dancing along the rays of failing sunlight that clambered through the window. Outside the inn, a pilgrimage towards the Maze paraded along the street. Some played the flute as they walked; an eerie melody.

*Pan’s flute.*

John had heard he was looking for a bride. And he’d also heard that the horned being frequented the Maze.

He looked back at Ingrid. “The Sidhe are scattered. Why?”

She shook her head. “We lost the last surviving heir to the throne.”

“Who?”

She winked at him. “Pope Joan.”

John nearly choked. “What?”

Ingrid leaned in. “She kept that secret to herself. Sephirah’s mother was Queen Maeve, who bred with the former Emperor of Valbain, among others. Sephirah would have been the ultimate ruler that would have united all the races, for she was bred from the all. Of course, any power she had was lost when Sephirah joined the Church. She discovered what sort of bastard child she was, rejected her position, and became a priestess. It is said she lost her skill when that happened. By the time she abdicated and joined the Rebellion, her talent in necromancy and bloodcraft was lost. Then she disappeared, and the hopes of the Sidhe with her.”

Ingrid shifted in the wooden chair. It creaked and scratched the worn, wooden floor. She folded her hands on the table, her arms pressing her cleavage together.

“Tell me something. Why did my spell not affect you? I felt you brush it off. No man has ever avoided spilling his heart to me.”

John chuckled. “I sensed it. I have a talent myself. I can smell truth. I know when someone is lying to me. It is a gift I was given when I found my own.”

“Yet you still spoke true to me. You could have lied.”

He smiled. “Ah, but that is the curse of my gift. I cannot lie.”

The corner of her lips curved slyly upwards. “Well then, tell me true, Churchman. I’ve been told some of your order still cling to the ancient notion of celibacy like a Razor Leech to a fat Baron. How long has it been for you? Would you like to take me in the Maze?”

Ingrid’s chest rose and fell in a rhythmic motion, reminiscent of a leisurely tide. Warmth surged up John’s neck and he longed to run his fingers along the thin, gold chain that traced a delicate line across her white flesh. He caught the scent of her over the Wormwood — faint lilac.

He lifted his eyes to meet hers, and nearly drowned in the pools of lust that waited for him. The lingering Wormwood numbed his senses and his will. It had been so long, so agonizingly long.

He shook his head and swallowed the lump in his throat.

*No. Never again.*

The longing faded, and he smiled. “I can choose not to answer you.”

A smirk slid across her lips. "The fat friar returns. Perhaps it is for the best."

From the stairs, Miguel waddled towards them, Meega at his side. The friar wore multi-hued patchwork pants with billowing cuffs and a blue, silk top that hung nearly to his knees. Meega stood next to him, her hair clean and moist, hanging limp down the side of her face. Dressed in a bright red dress with a bow in her hair, she smiled at them; the first since the passing of her mother. The wooden doll hung at her side, its straw hair clenched in her tiny fist.

John rose from the table, careful not to bang his head on the ceiling beams. He picked up the little girl.

"You look very pretty."

She smiled, and held his face and his gaze. The innocence that shone within those blue eyes seeped into him and yanked at his heart. Then she plugged her nose.

John laughed. "I guess I need a bath."

He put Meega down and she ran over to sit beside Ingrid who clapped her hands to summon the servants. A young man and woman, siblings as far as John could tell, slipped into the room from behind a sheer, violet curtain.

"Prepare another bath and guide the good friar upstairs." She then turned to John. "It was an interesting chat, Churchman. If you need anything from me later, you will know where to find me. You will likely not see me in the morning."

"Thank you, Ingrid. You have been most generous."

"Good luck to you."

John then followed the two servants to the bathing room.

The hot water was scented with petals of lilac and honeysuckle, the former of which reminded him of Ingrid. He supposed he could have accepted her offer, if that's what he could call it, but this was no time for indulgences of the flesh. And he wasn't sure he could anyway. After the incident where that spirit had seized his weakened mind and used him, he wasn't sure that he could be with anyone again. It was too much remorse to bear some days. And he knew he wasn't free of guilt entirely.

Perhaps if he had not been addicted himself, he could have held out; perhaps he could have fought it.

He shook his head at the folly of that notion.

No. Who was he fooling? There was no fighting.

*Not that spirit.*

He poured water over his mangy head, as if to baptize himself.

*How much sin could he wash away?*

He remembered the encounter like it was burned into his mind.

He poured water over himself again.

What ate at him over the years was that some fraction of him took pleasure in the encounter. Hidden beneath his struggles to free himself from the god-damned spirit that had occupied his body lay longing, ecstasy, and power. His loins stirred at the memory of it, and another pitcher of water flooded over him.

*Why?*

He castigated himself, silent as he dug his fingernails into his skin.

The pain sometimes provided relief.

Then John wept.

Five towering candles flickered in the corner, casting yellow light and dancing shadows throughout the room. Night settled in by the time he was sure he scrubbed out the last of the stench. He stepped out of the tub and dressed in the silken orange nightclothes that awaited him. They were the perfect length, if a little loose, and he made his way to the room prepared for the three of them. He felt like there was an iron cross hanging from his neck.

Miguel and Meega were already settled in for the night, the tonsured man reading to her from the



Bible. He closed the book as John entered and said nothing. John blew out the candles and settled into the blankets himself, dreaming of mazes, a hoofed devil, castration, and a pregnant Pope.

The following morning John did not see Ingrid in the common room, and after paying for their services, the two friars and Meega made their way out of Carnero, all dressed in lavish, brightly colored clothing with pairs to spare. John rather liked his new garments, but Miguel muttered something about trading it along the route.

He got his wish in a small parish, three days later on the border of Portugal, where he traded the garb for friar's robes and reset his tonsure once more. John kept Meega far from the derelict stone church, insisting upon taking her into town to find her a riding outfit while Miguel saw to his spiritual needs. He could not allow Miguel the chance to leave her with the Church.

He walked through the town where rumors swarmed like locusts. The sighting of an angel near old Madrid stirred religious fanaticism while the fear of horned demons near Rome drove the people to frenzy. John had heard such rumors numerous times before, along with sightings of Ganesh, Athena, and Isis. They were getting more frequent of late and they were always followed by reports of odd births — babes with stumps for arms and legs; children begat with claws or horns; and infants born with the tongue of a snake. He'd even heard of a little boy who'd been whelped with hooves for feet. That child did not live long.

He penned another missive to the Pope before moving onwards, realizing he had little time to squander.

Two days further, as all three stood upon the white, sandy shores of Baleal, he wondered what the Pope thought of his writings to her.

*Had she even received them?*

Meega splashed about in the waves. He picked her up and she put his face in her hands once again, staring into his eyes. It was a moment where nothing else existed, but her porcelain features and smiling face. She still said nothing, but she didn't seem to need to.

He held her to him for a time before she wriggled free to splash about once more. John breathed deep, inhaling the briny air, and watched the little girl laugh as the waves knocked her over. He removed his boots, and waded through the shallow waters, feeling purified by the ocean's cool caress. It was a moment's peace before the journey over sea; a moment of heaven before stepping into hell. He gazed out. Four Portuguese galleons set sail as two returned.

*Would the Pope know what to do? Did he? And could he bring himself to do what was required?*

John relished a further moment of peace as they strolled northward. Gulls crossed overhead, squawking as they scoured the beach. They approached a small stucco building with a framed archway perched at the edge of the port-town. They stepped through the doors, where they were greeted by a man who was two heads shorter than John, yet his face was set with the same definitive jaw.

The man smiled wide, opened his arms and gave a hearty laugh.

“John! It has been a long time, my brother. How are you?”

John returned his fierce embrace. “Manuel, it is good to see you. You look well.” He took stock of the small bar with its white and blue fresco tiles that climbed half the wall, some a little chipped. Manuel had run the establishment since they were young men.

He sat at a round, wooden table and grabbed a ceramic bowl of olives, popping two into his mouth. Meega and Miguel pulled up chairs next to him, both sampling the black olives. Meega's face grimaced as she put them to her tongue.

Manuel looked at Miguel and then Meega.

“Hello, little one. How about some fresh pineapple juice? Perhaps some cod cookies? Rosa made them this morning.”

John smiled at the mention of Manuel's wife. “Rosa. Where is she?”

As if on cue, the woman stepped through the kitchen door, an apron tied about her waist. Her dark hair was shorn in a bob that highlighted a round, pleasant face.

*Both the sun and the moon reside in those eyes. If only...*

She laughed as she sized up the tall friar, music to John's ears.

"John! I am so happy to see you. How are you?"

She kissed him on both cheeks and held his hands. "We miss you. You don't visit often enough." She glanced at Miguel and Meega. "Who are your friends?"

John made introductions and Rosa patted Meega's head. "Look at the little angel. I have something special for a girl so sweet." From under the counter she pulled out a plate with a small serving of cake. Meega practically swallowed it whole. Within moments John's brother and sister-in-law brought out mounds of food. John savored every bite, from the cod dish to the goat stew.

How he missed this. How he missed her. If only she had chosen him.

He looked at the two of them and sighed. He did not begrudge his brother her love, only wondered at what might have been.

When they finished eating, and a small glass of port sat in front of each of them, Manuel leaned back in his chair.

"So tell me what brings you here. It has been years since we saw you last."

John tossed back the contents of the glass and it warmed his gullet. "We are making for the Confederation."

His brother straightened in the chair. "You've lost your mind! Don't tell me you flee like the others. So many washed up on shore. Only the Baron's Guild can provide safe passage, but their price is high."

He smiled. "I will take one of the Guild's ships. And I do not flee, I chase."

Rosa sipped at the port. "Who do you chase?"

Miguel pushed his glass away and leaned in to whisper. "The Beast."

Both Rosa and Manuel laughed, yet cast a nervous glance towards Miguel.

Manuel rose from the table. "What do you mean you chase the Beast?"

John sighed. "The Pope has sent me to search him out."

Rosa tossed back the port, her small hands trembling. "And you expect to find him in the Confederation? The Baron's Guild says the Hunters are dangerous."

"I have heard of these Witch Hunters. Perhaps the one I search for is among the Confederation."

Rosa eyed Meega, and her eyes gave John a stern look, a look he once loved.

"You can leave her with us if you want. The Confederation is no place for a little girl."

John studied Meega.

*I would miss you, Little One.*

"Meega, would you like to remain here with Manuel and Rosa while I take a trip? I will try to come back for you."

Meega leapt from the chair and put her arms around John's leg, clinging so tight his toes prickled. He smiled inwardly, yet still worried for her safety.

"I guess she is coming with us."

Miguel slammed his glass on the table, giving John a look of the devil's anger.

Manuel took the glass. "There is a galleon moored in the docks, the Lady Misia. It is leaving shortly. Go and speak with the captain, a man named Baron Jorge. Tell him I asked him to give you safe passage to the Confederation. He owes me a favor. He will take good care of you. But you should leave now."

John rose. "Thank you. I'm sorry I cannot stay longer."

Rosa hugged Meega and the two friars in turn. "Come back to us, John."

*Is this the last time I will set eyes upon your face, my Rosa?*

"I will, if I can."

The three walked out the door and down to the docks.

## Chapter 14

Paine rose from his makeshift bed and took a whiff of his clothing. He'd soiled himself while asleep.

He didn't care.

*He'd roll around in his own shit if he wanted to.*

His head still hurt, less than before, but his heart — how it wrenched.

*Lya.*

The bandage was still wrapped about his skull, and tight. No one seemed to notice that he was up so he decided to change clothes. He checked the sidepacks on Shadow, looking for something to wear. They were crooked, as if someone had been rummaging through them. He grabbed some fresh clothes, or at least fresher than what he wore, and examined Sable. Her sidepacks were disturbed as well. Fortunately the grimoire was still there. Underneath it was a shard of mirror, splattered lightly with drops of brown.

He checked his pocket. His fingers found the parchment. Fortunately, it was not sullied.

Paine slipped out of his clothes and wiped himself down with his shirt. He'd need a stream and some soap. He couldn't ride around smelling like this.

He stroked Shadow for a time, lost in what happened in the Westwood. He closed his eyes, trying to sense another presence within him, but found nothing. Whatever he had summoned had left him untouched once more. It made him uncomfortable, like he owed some debt he could not pay; one that would be remunerated in vast amounts of blood.

And then there was the lingering question of the deal that was made with the Westwood. He fisted his hands.

*That woman would pay.*

Puck approached, running his hands along Shadow's flanks. "You... up," he said.

Paine gave the saddle strap a tug and Shadow grunted. He noticed the bags under Puck's eyes. "You look tired."

"No sleep ... well," he muttered. His speech was languid. "You stink," he said, plugging his nose.

"Come, Puck," interrupted Truitt. He shoved the young man, giving him little time to get his footing. Puck stumbled and fell.

Truitt glanced at Paine as if daring him to confront him. Paine lowered his head, yet his blood simmered. He felt unable to challenge him, and hated himself for his cowardice.

Puck recovered and ran off before Truitt could get to him a second time.

Great Bear strode past and nodded to Paine. He led a horse upon which the Witch Hunter rode. Her arms were bound with rope and she sat upon her steed with a deadpan look. The silver collar around her neck was dull and tarnished, reflecting little of the morning sun, yet she still bore her uniform in which the pearly white cross shone. She looked at Paine for a brief moment. Then her face contorted and she turned away as Great Bear led her forward.

Paine closed his eyes. His heart ached.

*She should have been killed.*

And Paine knew that he would have to find a way to take care of that himself.

He climbed aboard Shadow and the horse snorted at his rough mount.

The small troop traveled the valleys of the upper Outlands, eventually skirting the northern coast of Lake Nanabijou with its namesake's Island of the Sleeping Giant. Paine's nights were spent huddled with Fang. She never left his side. It helped lessen the suffering. The wolf would often cast a glance in the direction of the Hunter, and Paine wished once again, he could speak with animals. That made him think of his sister.

*Lya.*

A touch of guilt flitted through his mind. He didn't feel he'd apologized for what had happened in

the Westwood. But then, had she ever apologized to him? She'd used him repeatedly over the years.

As he rode, alone and behind the others, Paine pulled the note out of his pocket, examining the flowing lines of the script and wondering what his parents might have known. He struggled to call forth whatever he had used at the tablet in an attempt to decipher it, but it failed him. He caught the Hunter staring at him as he pored over the parchment. He then folded it and placed it back in his pocket.

*Why had she been tracking them for so long?*

The woman had been relentless. How had she followed them through Lindhome and the Westwood? He felt sick with rage — he'd lost his parents and his sister to this woman.

*Was she the one who made the deal with the Westwood? And if so, why? What did she stand to gain?*

He shook his head. *Too many questions.*

He knew one thing. She would pay.

*Dearly.*

The days passed without event, a routine of travel, food and sleep. Finally, after the fourth of such, they came upon the Haudenosaunee village. Paine stared at the palisade that surrounded it. He sensed some form of spell weaved into its making, but knew he would be hard pressed to find it. He wondered if Lya could do it.

*She would sacrifice almost anything to learn how.*

He grunted at the tugging of his heart and urged Shadow forward.

They approached the massive gates. The place was deserted. Row upon row of long wooden houses lay in isolation.

Great Bear sighed behind him. "I can feel the presence of my people even now. I never thought to see it so bare, but I feel at home still." The large man left him to stroll into the village, as if discovering it anew. He tied the Hunter's horse to the village gates.

Paine wandered off on his own, searching out the Iroquois village with Fang at his side. He peered into one of the longhouses, taking in the smell of sage that lingered.

"Paine!"

He turned as Truitt rode up to him. "We're leaving."

"But we just got here."

"There are strange tracks here, hoof marks that are far too numerous. They head south toward Haven."

*Hoof marks? Did an army of Witch Hunters precede them?*

Paine caught the Witch Hunter glancing in his direction. Her eyes shifted and she turned her head from his gaze.

*Did she know something about this?*

Paine shook his head. It couldn't be. He mounted Shadow and followed the others, leaving the village lifeless once more.

They rode well into the night, some of the men and women hoisting torches to light the way. A small clearing offered them a place to rest, but it reeked of skunk. Before Paine knew it, they rode again. The journey continued into the following day, and Paine was exhausted. He ate in his saddle, almost slept in the saddle, and practically wet himself in the saddle. He was thankful for the nightly stops.

Two further days passed, and with legs aching he lay awake feeling every chafe and cramped muscle. Their arrival in Haven was expected on the morrow and they would be departing within hours.

*What he wouldn't give to be at an inn, he thought — perhaps with Diarmuid.*

Gazing at the pinpricks that shone through the blanket of night, Paine listened as the earth slept. Other than Great Bear's snoring, the night was still as the old cemetery back in Fairfax. He rolled over to look at Fang. The wolf stared into the forest, ears pricked. A faint growl emerged from her throat.

Paine followed her gaze into the forest, straining to see into the darkness. At first he saw nothing,

but then two eyes appeared in the trees. He barely made out the form emerging from the shadows, stooped over on two legs with claws that scored the ground. Matted hair covered its legs down to its cloven feet, and the elongated ram's horns on its head were silhouetted by the moon. Paine stared, unsure of what to do. He opened his mouth to yell out, but choked on his voice. Something else inched its way up his gullet. He gulped it down, feeling like it was about to spew from his mouth.

The creature leaned forward and whispered in an ugly tongue that could barely be discerned. Paine caught only one word from it and it escaped the creature's thick, twisted tongue with a sigh. "... waaaaaiting...." It almost bleated like a lamb.

Fang's growling elevated, loud enough to stir some of the bodies next to him. Paine turned at a rustling behind him. Truitt held aloft a torch with a towering flame. It lit the clearing and Paine shielded his eyes. He turned back to the forest.

The creature was gone.

"What's going on?" Truitt asked.

Paine swallowed the bile and whatever else had risen in his throat.

"There was something at the edge of the camp, with hooves. It had yellow eyes."

Great Bear walked over to the edge of the clearing, hands gripping his massive war club. He searched the place where the creature had stood. "Truitt, I need more light over here."

Paine rose to find two large prints, twice the size of Shadow's, burned into the earth. Fang sniffed at the prints and growled. She looked off into the forest, and then settled herself on Paine's blanket.

Great Bear peered into the dark. "I don't think any of us are going to get any sleep now. We just as well pack up and move on."

The flame on the torch diminished. Truitt nodded. "I agree. I don't like the feel of this."

Paine found Puck on the other side of the clearing, close to where the Hunter lay bound and gagged. The young man retched in the shrubs.

Paine ran over to him. "Are you all right?"

Puck wiped his mouth with a rag from his pocket, trembling. "That was ... demon. I remember. They take ... my village. Only I live."

*Demon?*

Paine shook off the nauseated sensation that swept over him.

"Come on, we're leaving. You'll be safe in Haven," he said, trying not only to reassure his friend.

The wind rustled through the trees. The smell of burnt earth was thick on the air.

Puck gave him a blank look. "I hope ... you right."

\*\*\*

Fang ran. She kept pace with the horses, twisting through the forest road as they sped through the night. The encounter with the demon had lit a fire inside her.

She alerted the others in time, but it was not she that had scared the demon off. It was not the man with the blood of the Obek running through his veins, or the Lastborn either. Fang knew now, more than ever, her purpose.

She slowed with the horses.

Trouble was thick and pungent on the air, as was the heavy scent of ash and burned wood. And something else.

*What was that smell?*

They halted and Fang trotted to the crest of the small group. She peered down the ridge.

The she-wolf inched forward, sniffing the air. She recognized the smell now, from a past long gone.

*Burnt flesh.*

She sniffed again and closed her eyes. She prayed for the lost.

*How many had died?*

\*\*\*

For three hours the trio rode, the jagged mountains of the Black Hills funneling them south through a lush valley of balsam fir and gangly cedars. Brahm had heard that heads were once carved into the mountain's surface, but as she scoured the craggy range she found no trace of them.

Roan's flanks heaved under her as she rode past the collapsed bodies of two Confederation horses. Their throats had been slit. And if they didn't break, she feared that Roan might share a similar fate.

"Diarmuid!"

He rode twenty yards ahead of her, his gaze cast skyward towards the falcon that circled above the Witch Hunters. The man slowed his horse. A dark hood of irritation shrouded his usually bright features.

Brahm reined her horse to a halt.

"They have horses to spare. We can't save anyone if ours collapse."

Diarmuid considered her proposal and dismounted. "Fine, but we leave at first light."

Brahm slid off Roan's back. "We will find her, but we can't exhaust ourselves in the effort."

The pepper-haired man stared into the trees. "The Witch Hunters followed us all the way from Fairfax."

Brahm patted Roan's neck. "You passed through the Westwood and Lindhome. How could they have tracked you?"

He hung his head. "I don't know. Something isn't right about this. I've never known them to spend this much time on a couple of witches. They are either desperate or something else is driving them."

A thought niggled at her. "Diarmuid, one of the Hunters said something to me. She said, 'They will be ours.' Does that mean anything to you?"

"No." He shook his head. His shoulders stooped. "I should have kept watch."

Brahm took his callused hands in her own. "Don't put that burden on yourself. There was no way you could have known they would follow you."

White Feather dismounted and cleared his throat. Brahm caught his gaze sliding from their joined hands before he spoke.

"We will find her, Diarmuid."

Diarmuid's face crimsoned. They had ridden through a swarm of locusts, over fallen trees, and had had to gather what little silver they could to ward off four spirits that spooked the horses to near panic. Had it not been for Brahm's ability with the Tongue, Roan would have thrown her.

Diarmuid strode into the woods, taking his air of frustration and a silver dagger with him. She knew what he planned. She wasn't sure it would help him. The wraiths and spirits of the wells and trees were never easily appeased. What deal he might make with them could be dangerous. Brahm pressed her lips together and said nothing as he left. White Feather shuffled towards Brahm, his eyes shifting between her and where Diarmuid disappeared into the trees.

"Aren't you going after him?"

"No, he'll return when he's ready."

The Haudenosaunee looked again to the trees. "Start a fire. I will catch dinner."

Brahm watched him for a moment, the spring in his step diminished as he walked into the forest. She turned back to where Diarmuid disappeared, then gathered wood as the sound of White Feather's footsteps faded.

Brahm waited next to a meager fire that she had struggled to start. Her thoughts wandered during the time she had to herself. White Feather was taking his time hunting for food and Diarmuid was still brooding in the woods.

*Or maybe worse.*

She sat by herself, although she wasn't truly alone. She never was.

*-Mine! Mine!-*

Brahm groaned. "Shut up."

*Was her past coming back to haunt her?*

White Feather stood at the edge of the woods, two hares in hand.

His look was filled with perplexity and concern. "Who are you talking to?"

"No one important," she muttered. She took the hares, and worked at preparing their meal.

Diarmuid returned much later, the creases in his forehead faded. His arm was bandaged with shreds from his shirt. The blood was still seeping through. She remained still when she noticed the cinders of his anger still evident in how he re-bandaged himself. He tore off fresh pieces and grumbled. At points he wavered where he stood. She assumed the price asked was more blood than he had been prepared to part with. And the bags under his eyes indicated that whatever it was had taken more than just blood. She hoped it was worth the price.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He looked at neither of them and sat, head between his knees. Brahm took the hint and ate in quiet as the night sky settled on the land.

After eating in a rush, White Feather retired without a word.

*Just fucking great. Nobody's talking.*

Diarmuid hardly ate, so not only did his silence unsettle her.

"Whatever you did, it took a lot of blood," she said.

She first thought of a Nix, but the spirits of deep wells or bogs could almost never be trusted. Diarmuid knew that. The same was said of the Undead; those that dwelt between the worlds of the living and the departed. And their price was as costly as the true dead.

He stared off into the trees. "When I was freed from the Wormwood, I lost the power to summon and a lot of my memory — I still have blanks. I have enhanced all the skills I learned as a Hunter, yet there are moments when I would trade it all for being able to summon one dead soul, or cast a spell. We're losing them and I had to rely on help." He pulled up the bandage, and there, wriggling upon his arm was a flat wormlike creature that was red and puffed as it fed.

"Oh, Diarmuid," she muttered. She knew it when she saw it, and so did the second soul within her.

*-Soul leech!-*

He made a pact with a ghouel.

He rolled the bandage back down and prodded at the remains of the fire with a knotted branch.

Brahm winced, wishing it hadn't been visible. She imagined that the thing sucking on his arm was painful — a constant reminder of the pact.

Brahm put her hand on his arm. "We will get her back. And we will find a way to deal with that thing. What price did you agree to?"

He continued to poke the embers.

She looked to the ground with his silence.

*It was heavy.*

There was nothing that could be done at the moment. There was no removing that thing, not without killing Diarmuid where he sat. The soul leech was for assurance. Once he called upon the ghouel for aid, it was time for payment. And if it wasn't delivered within the time agreed the hungry, soulless fiend would take his soul.

*What price did he offer?* She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

"We should get some sleep," she said. "We must ride early."

Diarmuid nodded, but remained still.

Brahm settled into her blanket. The ground jutted into her back.

Her second soul prayed.

*-Please let us find her:-*

Brahm prayed with her.

\*\*\*

Two days later, under clouds of somber gray and an ill feeling that turned Brahm's skin to gooseflesh, they stumbled upon a mining town set in the midst of the Outlands —a place called Underwood. Diarmuid pulled them to a halt along the bend in the road, just at the entrance to town. His spirits were raised somewhat, but he continued to remain quiet in the evenings.

"We're here for one night, we get supplies and we're gone," he said.

Brahm nodded as did a silent White Feather. Her eyebrows furrowed as the warrior rode ahead of her, following Diarmuid's lead. She tried to make conversation with him a couple of times, but his responses were curt. Something was eating at him too. She shrugged it off. She didn't have time for men who pout and she was more worried about Diarmuid.

As they approached the entrance to the town four men hailed them, each bearing a crossbow. The tips of their arrows were crude and mottled with silver.

A burly man limped forward. He wore an unkempt beard and soot on his face.

"State yer business."

Diarmuid pulled his horse to a halt in front of the man. "We're making our way east and are looking to spend the night and buy supplies."

The man's eyes scoured White Feather like day old pots. "Are you Sioux?"

White Feather shook his head. "Haudenosaunee."

The man scratched his beard. "I suppose you're not bloody Witch Hunters in disguise."

Diarmuid shook his head. "Have you seen any pass through here?"

The man spat on the ground. "Aye, a band o' them came riding through here a day ago. Nearly run me down."

"Did they have a young woman with them?"

"With raven hair? Aye, I saw her."

"Did you try to stop them?"

"Couldn't. Look at me arrows. Little silver left to us now. The Confederation came and took our silver a week ago. Took Jimmy Jackson in chains with 'em too. Not a finer blacksmith in these parts. They even walked into the church and took the silver goblets." He spat again. "We's a part o' the Confederation now, for all the good it does. We'd be better off without 'em."

Diarmuid dismounted. "We will not be here long. We are after the Witch Hunters that rode through here."

The man chuckled as he lowered his crossbow. "There were ten Hunters in that clan that rode through here. You won't catch 'em before they reach the rest."

"The rest?"

"An army of 'em. A day's ride southeast."

Brahm's gut turned.

*An army?*

Diarmuid gave Brahm and White Feather a quick glance. There was a defeated look in his eyes.

Brahm urged Roan a few steps forward. "Do you have a place we can stay?"

The man looked the three of them over, and then to his men.

"Back off boys. These look to be good folk." He hobbled back a few steps. "The inn is the third building on the left, with red shutters. Greta's the innkeeper and she'll feed you well enough. Tell her Mumford Banyon sent ya."

Brahm nodded. "Thank you."

Diarmuid mounted his horse and Brahm led the way along the road that snaked its way into the town. Blossoming lilac trees and potted flowers lined the cobblestone road, but it was rouge that



covered festering sores. Wooden boards covered broken windows and doors, as did a light dusting of black powder. The scent of the lilacs did nothing to cover the acrid smell that wafted on the air. The few people that walked the streets, the elderly and the pregnant, eyed the trio with suspicion.

Men and women armed with crossbows lurked in windows or on rooftops. They retracted at her gaze, sliding into the shadows.

The three made their way to the inn, handing the reins to the stable hand, a young peach of a woman that caused Brahm to take a second glance. White Feather caught her looking. Her face flushed.

Later that night, after a thick vegetable stew that warmed the gut and a hot bath that cleansed the soul, Brahm sat in the common room with Diarmuid and White Feather. She nursed a beer that was meaty enough to make a meal. She had not tasted beer in weeks and savored this one's bitter bite.

The common room was barely lit by the hearth in the corner and a few meager torches and oil lanterns. Drove of men and women overfilled the place, all covered in soot and grime as they emerged from the mines. The heavy smell of earth filled the air, masked only by the scent of pipe tobacco. The innkeeper, Greta, was a thin stick of a woman. She greeted each by name as they made their way to the bar.

An old man with tanned skin sat in the corner, wearing a single, dirtied feather in his long black hair. Brahm guessed he might be Sioux, but he wore the typical garb of the miners, dark overalls and a black jacket. A handful of women and men gathered as he told a tale of a Sioux woman named Winona, and how she threw herself from a cliff to escape the untrue love of a man.

Brahm looked closer at the crowd. Beneath the dark powder of the silver mines nearly half the faces held tanned features similar to that of the Sioux man. She heard other bits of conversation over the din, piecemeal talk that made her ears itch. She took another sip of gritty beer, straining it through her teeth, and focused on a young man at the table next to her.

"...and they didn't touch the horses of Elora Gorge neither. All they wanted was our silver."

A young, frail woman who was covered in the same soot looked him up and down.

"That's ridiculous."

"No word of a lie. Ask that dark-haired fella at the bar havin' a smoke. That there's Paul Cathman from the Gorge. Arrived today. Horse trader. Told me himself. Word has it he's a horse whisperer too."

The young woman cast a glance towards the bar. The man had wavy, black hair and lips red enough to make any woman jealous. He puffed away on a long pipe.

"Well, he's a looker." She smoothed her hair and attempted to rise.

The young man's hand held her down. "Don't bother, Cat. I hear he has an eye for Jimmy if you know what I mean."

She pouted for a moment. "What's he doing here?"

"He heard about the Confederation comin' here and takin' Jimmy off in chains. Paul said he relied on him to shoe his horses, but rumor has it there was more between the two. He's here to get him back."

"If those bloody Hunters had come when we weren't in the mines, why I'd of let 'em have it." A flicker of fire danced along her fingers.

With a deft motion, the young man grabbed a towel and covered Cat's hands. His eyes hinted caution and the woman cast a wary gaze in Brahm's direction. Brahm nodded and smiled.

*The woman's a diviner. She can summon the elements.*

Brahm looked about the bar. A large number of the men and women were as frail-looking as the two sitting next to her, yet they were coated in soot. Not the hardy sort she would have expected for such difficult labor. She knew their secret instantly.

*The miners are witches.*

She was about to lean over to Diarmuid, but the young man and woman still watched her. Brahm sifted another sip of beer and feigned interest in the old Sioux's tale. She nearly dropped the mug as the door to the bar slammed open.

Three Witch Hunters stormed in, weapons bared. The crosses on their vests glinted orange in the

bar's torchlight.

Brahm rose, as did Diarmuid and White Feather, but before they could react, an arrow sliced through one of the Hunters from one of the Sioux women. The Hunter dropped and a dozen men and women rose. The Hunters cast their gaze about the bar. Fire flitted on the fingers of seven miners, and others had knives drawn, ready to call upon the dead using their own blood. From the looks on their faces, the Hunters knew they were outnumbered. They seemed to struggle with what to do. One of them finally spoke.

"Surrender in the name of the Confederation."

Paul Cathman strode forward to face them. His ice blue eyes stared down the Hunters.

"What did you do with Jimmy Jackson?"

They stared back, mute.

His face leaned in to theirs. Brahm thought he might bite them.

"I think we should make them talk," he said.

Something stirred in Brahm's gut. She voiced it.

"Wait! There may be another way."

All eyes turned in her direction.

"You could free them," she said. Perhaps they knew about Lya and how they could retrieve her.

She looked at Diarmuid. Perhaps if she found a way to retrieve the girl, he could avoid calling upon the ghoul.

The old Sioux from the corner walked over.

"Who are you, stranger? What business do you have in Underwood?"

"My name is Brahm Hallowstone. I'm from Haven."

He nodded at the name. "What is this about freeing them?"

"The Witch Hunters don't act of a free will. They're mind-controlled with an herb." She snatched a pouch that hung at the Hunter's belt. She dumped the contents on the table closest. The Hunter reached for it and Paul Cathman snapped the man's finger. The Hunter voiced his pain aloud, whether at the loss of his herb or the broken finger, Brahm wasn't sure. She assumed the former.

Grumblings emerged from the crowd in slow, steady waves.

The old man standing in front of Brahm looked her over.

"What sort of devilry is this?"

"The Confederation uses this herb to control witches. It is the most addictive substance known and it binds to your soul."

The grumblings grew louder.

"So what would freeing these Witch Hunters do? How do we know they will help us?"

Diarmuid stepped to Brahm's side, but she spoke before he had a chance to open his mouth. "You don't. They could be just as committed to the cause without the herb. But it can be done. These Hunters might know something that can help you, once they overcome the withdrawal. So, you can either kill them where they stand, or you can try to gain some understanding of what the Confederation plans to do with your town, its silver trade, and its people."

The old man pondered for a moment. "I think someone better get the mayor."

The mayor turned out to be Mumford Banyon, and as he hobbled from the back of the bar, the murmurings among the crowd lessened. The Witch Hunters were herded to the far corner and were surrounded by eight men and women, all wielding arrows, bags of powders and fire.

The old Sioux, who called himself Yellow Hawk, whispered in the mayor's ear, as did Paul Cathman before they both walked out the door.

Mumford Banyon approached Brahm and sat across from her. She took another sip of beer. He leaned in close, and the caustic smell of him stung her nose.

"What's this about lettin' Witch Hunters live?"

Brahm smiled at the unkempt man, and then told him about the secret of the Witch Hunters. When

she finished, Mumford reached over and took a long draught of her beer.

“Well, that's some tale. Let's suppose you're tellin' the truth. How do we free 'em?”

“I see that you have a good number of witches here. They must band together and sever the powers of the Witch Hunters. If you sever their souls from the herb, the effect will be lost. But they will suffer for awhile before you can use them.”

“And what if these blasted Hunters still don't talk. Then what?”

“They may not remember things for a time, but if you don't get what you want, do what you will with them. Kill them now or kill them later. But you stand to gain something from them if you wait.”

Mumford pondered the notion and studied the Hunters in the corner. “I need to think on this.” He rose from the table, and called to the innkeeper. “Greta, time to close up.”

Greta nodded her head, and ushered everyone out the creaking door. After the masses departed, Mumford turned back to Brahm.

“I think you should retire for the night. I won't be makin' a decision right away.”

Brahm took the hint and rose, Diarmuid and White Feather following her lead. She looked back to the Witch Hunters, wondering what they might get out of them, and then followed the innkeeper to their rooms.

The following morning, the common room was empty. Only thin Greta, with her dirtied apron, waited for them with a plate of hot eggs and fresh bread. They savored every mouthful and pondered their options.

Diarmuid gulped down a mug of water. He dribbled some. He looked tired. “I wonder how much the mayor knows.”

“About what?”

“About the Hunter army.”

“We'll have to ask him.” Brahm looked over to the innkeeper. “Greta, we'd like to speak with the mayor.”

“Mayor's gone to the Gorge — left first thing.”

“And Yellow Hawk?”

“Went back to his people.”

Brahm nodded.

“Mayor left a message. Says you have to go.”

“Why?”

The woman shrugged her bony shoulders. “Said you had to go first thing.” She adjusted her sleeve, covering a tattoo on her shoulder. It was that of a goat.

Diarmuid nodded. “We don't want to overstay our welcome.” He paid the innkeeper and they rose from the table.

They found the horses waiting. Roan whinnied at the sight of Brahm. She stroked the charger's nose and mounted.

“We should just head east then, and search out this army?”

Diarmuid nodded. “We'll have to be careful. There could be more Hunters along the way.”

Brahm led them out of the stables and gasped as they rounded onto the main road. In the midst of the town, two bodies hung lifeless from makeshift gallows. They had been branded. The pearly-white crosses on their uniforms gleamed in the morning sun.

A faint bell chimed in the distance, not like the obnoxious bells of the Church of the Ascension, something more delicate. Brahm shook her head and spurred Roan to a gallop, leaving the hanging bodies of the Hunters, and the town of Underwood, behind.

\*\*\*

Favorable winds swept the Lady Misia across the sea, her sails unfurled and tight. Beside her sped

her sisters, the Lady Milene the Lady Saldanha. Friar John searched the seascape for land and anxiety welled inside him at the sight of it. On the horizon, New Boston slipped towards them. Beside him, Miguel leaned over the rails, retching incessantly. The Baron had offered him a potion to stop his heaving, but he had refused.

*Stubborn fool.*

Meega danced with her wooden doll near the prow of the ship, the wind playing with her hair, blowing it about like scarlet feathers. He told her to stay within his sight and to remain out of the bowels of the ship. The Barons were known to sail with the Nameless Ones in the depths of their galleons — ravenous beings that plucked out their own eyes and tongues in service to their god. He wanted her nowhere near them.

He smiled as she frolicked, and hoped that one day he could find a quiet place to raise such a child. Somehow his heart thought it might help to redeem his former actions, but a part of him thought otherwise. Some things were beyond forgiveness.

The men called out orders and clambered up the rigging, adjusting the sails. Off to the side of the ships a whale spouted and splashed its tail before submerging. John smiled at the great being and her calf.

*The wonders of this world.*

He looked back to Meega, but she was no longer there. He stepped towards the front of the ship, searching for the little girl.

*Where is she?*

Her doll lay upon the deck, its straw hair straggled and knotted.

“Meega?” he called.

He thought he heard faint giggling, and perked his ears.

“Meega?” he called again, his voice louder.

Worry settled in the pit of his gut.

Miguel stumbled over. “What has happened? Where is Meega?”

John searched for the girl as he clung to the hair of the wooden doll. He hastened his stride as he scoured the deck.

“Meega!”

*Oh God, no!*

He ran to the stern of the ship and peered over the edge, searching the wake and the water. His heart pounded as he searched for stark red hair, but found nothing.

He turned around and Miguel waddled up to him, Baron Jorge in tow. The man carried a look of concern.

“What has happened to the girl?”

“I don't know. She was dancing near the front of the ship and then she was gone. Here's her doll.” John held it up, the straw hair slipping through his sweaty fingers.

“Did you see her fall over?”

“No.”

The Baron ran to the edge of the ship and scanned the waters. The ship swiftly approached the docks of New Boston. Regret dappled his eyes.

“I must see to mooring my Lady. If you did not see her fall over, then likely she is still on the ship.” He paused. “My keen eyes do not see her floating on the water, but if she has fallen over I am afraid she is lost to us. Wait here and I will help you search for her once we are docked.”

John wanted to protest, but as the ship neared the dock, he knew the Baron could do little. He nodded and the man left them.

Miguel rounded on him, his face puffed and crimson.

“I told you we should not have brought her with us! It is too dangerous for a little girl. We are on a fool's errand, don't you see that? The Pope sent you out to be rid of you. There is no substance to your

so-called truth. And now you have jeopardized the life of an innocent girl with your folly.”

Doubt riddled him.

*Was I wrong to bring her? Was he right about the Pope?*

He gripped the rails as a thought niggled him. It sat in a dark place within him and he rebuked himself for thinking it.

*Perhaps it was for the best.*

She might get in the way of what he needed to do. Guilt caught in his throat and he swallowed it down. He then cast his gaze out to the water as they sailed to port, losing himself in the swell of the sea and thoughts of a little girl's shrill laughter.

\*\*\*

They rode for half the day, and Brahm scanned the firmament, watching for any sign of Talon. There was nothing.

The bird was absent from the skies and a heavy feeling sat in her stomach.

The ride had been quiet, all three keeping to themselves, until Diarmuid halted and dismounted, leading them off the main road and well into the brush. White Feather sat on a moss-covered log, sharpening his dagger with slow, meticulous strokes.

“It seems we have an advantage in not being expected.”

Diarmuid nodded. “We have to be careful. They might kill Lya. The Witch Hunters are probably aware of Talon and we can't afford to lose the only advantage we have.”

White Feather continued to whet the blade.

Brahm sighed. “I wish Fang was here. We need a wolf to scout.”

“I've seen no sign of Talon. Do you think she's in trouble?” Diarmuid asked.

She looked up through the canopy of trees once more. Still nothing. Her gut twisted.

“I don't like the feel of this,” she said.

“Are there wolves in the area?”

“I don't know,” she said, scanning the trees. “I can try to find them.”

White Feather remained seated, but cast her a glance of concern.

“I'm coming with you.”

Brahm shook her head. “Wolves tend to avoid humans. The less of us, the better. I go alone.”

“I don't like this, Orenda. I was sent to watch over you.”

She stared him down. “Keep watch with Diarmuid for any Hunters that pass through here. I will return as soon as I can.” She grabbed a small pack and filled it.

As she walked into the woods, White Feather called after her.

“If you're not back within a day, I'm coming after you!”

She waved backwards to them and strode forward, alone.

For five hundred yards Brahm crept, past columns of cedar and sugar maple, careful not to trip on the underbrush that grew in clumps between the trees. It was a long walk, and with every step her second soul muttered in her head.

*-Mine. Mine. Mine.-*

Brahm forced the voice down and eventually found the prey she sought; not the wolves, but deer. They were jittery creatures, sensitive to the slightest noise.

*Not surprising, she thought, with wolfen scouring the land.*

Brahm crouched. For some time, the deer chewed on leaves from the underbrush, oblivious to her presence. The larger of the two snorted when it finally noticed her. Brahm remained still and let their thoughts seep into her mind.

The deer were surprised, almost enough to scamper off into the woods. She issued calming images to them, reassuring the deer she posed no threat.

*Not this time.*

Although a meal of fresh venison was long past due. She inquired about wolves, and an overwhelming sense of dread emanated from the deer. Reluctantly, they stared south — the direction from which the wolves always came. Brahm thanked them, and they sprinted off into the woods, a potential dinner lost.

She walked for hours, the kahbeth her only companions. The deer not only warned her about wolves in the area, but also of an evil that skulked near the army of two-foots — Nightwalkers. Horned and hoofed, they walked upright, stalking the midnight hour. Brahm could not decipher what those might be. Either way, it was best to be prepared. She kept the kahbeth in hand.

She estimated it would be well into the following day before she found any sign of wolves. She only hoped they would be willing to help. Wolves were notorious for avoiding humans, and with good reason. Staying clear of mankind had become a creed; where two-feet walked, trouble followed. Fang was the exception.

Brahm let her spirit slip into its dance, as if summoned to it. She was one with the forest, immersing herself in the life force of the trees, the stones, and the land. The leaves rustled in the depths of her soul, the birds singing with the thrum of her heart. Reaching out with the wind as her fingers, she probed and searched as her feet glided through the woods. Sensing from which direction the animals aimed their fear, she sailed forward. For hours her soul danced, and her spirit relished its freedom.

Finally, as a curtain of darkness draped across the sky and the creatures of the night stirred, Brahm came back to herself. Withdrawal tore at her soul as she stepped back into the reality of the world, and she sheathed the kahbeth. Sitting against a dying oak, she pulled out her water skin. She felt exhausted. Soul Running did that to her, but it was worth the effort, if not for the high.

The wolves were not in the vicinity, so she decided to rest and try again in the morning. Brahm wrapped herself in a blanket for warmth, not daring to make a fire. If anything, it would drive the wolves away.

As darkness settled on the land, sleep came to her.

*\*Orenda.\**

Brahm jerked awake. Eyes were set upon her in the dark.

She reached for the kahbeth, thoughts of wolfen and Nightwalkers foremost in her thoughts. She waited, opening herself to whatever was out there. She heard a low growl.

*Wolves.*

Knowing this was their territory, Brahm waited on their thoughts. They had the right of first greeting. The lead wolf crept in closer, the scent of it flooding her nose; dank fur, blood and dirt. The others hung back, waiting for the first one to inspect her. For what seemed forever she lay there, waiting as it inched closer, sniffing the air before it finally gave greeting.

*\*Orenda, we have been expecting you.\**

Brahm stared at the wolf in disbelief. It used language to communicate with her.

The wolf sensed her astonishment.

*\*You are surprised that I speak to you in this fashion. Few are so gifted. I sensed your dance through the woods. What do you want of us, two-foot?\**

She passed her thoughts in plain language.

*I need your help for a young woman. She has been taken by Witch Hunters.*

Her second soul stirred.

*-Mine! Mine!-*

Brahm remained silent. As she stared into the wolf's eyes, she caught a faint image of his name.  
*Night.*

*\*The fate of two-foots are not our concern, but you have been marked by Fang.\**

*Marked?* She wondered how the wolf had managed that.

*\*Fang has my respect and devotion. She will have my help, as will you. At first light we will*

*return.\**

The wolf then turned his back to her and faded into the darkness.

## Chapter 15

The morning birds were silent, and a hush settled upon the dawn with the fine mist that drifted through the burnt stumps of Haven.

Fang nudged Paine.

He groped to pet her.

A razed wasteland awaited them; buildings that lay in piles of still smoldering ruin; stone foundations on which homes no longer sat; and slaughtered livestock, some of which were half-burnt.

Eventually Great Bear led them forward. Each member of the troop scoured the landscape in quiet, searching for some sign of life in the charred remains.

Smoke wafted from what remained of the buildings. Their feet crunched burnt stalks of young corn as they cut across the blackened land. Paine thought of Lya, and of Diarmuid. He could sense that she no longer sped away from him. She'd been stationary for a couple of days. Perhaps it was time to find her.

*Now that Haven is lost.*

He hoped he would find Diarmuid with her. Then he considered what would happen if he found her.

*Where would they go after that?*

He almost voiced that thought, but reserved it in front of Truitt, knowing that the Lastborn would scarcely care.

Truitt scanned what was left of the village. "I have no desire to linger here any longer than necessary. This place makes me uneasy."

*It made him uneasy?*

Truitt then led Paine through the north end of Haven.

The two took crept through the ruins, cautious of what may still be there. After a few steps, Paine found hoof prints in the ashes, mixed with oversized paw prints.

"The same prints as last night, hundreds of them," he whispered. Fang growled as she sniffed at them.

Truitt nodded. "Wolfen and demons."

*...waiting....*

"But there are no bodies."

"They would have taken them back to a place of sacrifice."

"Maybe we should look for them. We might find them."

The man shook his head. "They eat them. Alive."

The two continued searching through the smoldering ruins. Paine's nostrils were flooded with the scent of scorched earth. More footprints marred the ground, cascading from the north.

The two continued through the mists to join most of the group that gathered at the south end of Haven. Puck wandered with Two Moon along the perimeter. He would pick up small items and clap when he found something shiny.

Great Bear's shoulders sagged, but there was hope in his black eyes.

"My people left signs, so we know they made it here. The survivors have made for Lindhome through the southern pass." He shook his head. "I found a funeral pyre, still smoking. Many fell here."

Paine looked at Great Bear. "So what do we do now?"

The towering Haudenosaunee looked to the sky, towards two crows that had cast their shadow upon him.

"We follow the survivors."

\*\*\*



Ten miles south of what remained of Haven, Paine chewed on a piece of dried meat, thinking his saddle less tough. He might have offered it to Fang, but she disappeared into the woods, as she often did of late. It made the longing for his sister all the more painful. He needed to rid himself of this curse. He couldn't live the rest of his life yearning for his sister. It was unnatural.

He put the meat down, his appetite quelled. He was forcing himself to eat. Along the way, they had found a small village that had been pillaged and burned. Bodies had been staked upside-down to makeshift crosses. The carcasses of dead animals littered the ground, and the earth had been stained black and red with their blood. Fresh skulls had been set upon spikes, the skin and flesh gnawed from the bone, leaving only the hair.

Paine tossed his food into the brush.

*Who was he kidding?*

Great Bear tended a fire before them, adding kindling to it.

"I cannot help but wonder where the demons and wolfen came from," he said.

Two Moon spat on the ground. With his hair pulled back in a braid, the firelight glowed on his protruding forehead. "I say we hunt them down."

Great Bear said nothing, but simply looked at the wiry man.

"We should avenge those that have fallen," he continued, pleading his case for revenge. It was not the first time he brought it up since they had departed Haven.

Great Bear shook his head. "We would stand no chance."

Two Moon's face was still as the night. He said nothing and stalked away from the fire.

Great Bear spoke after a time, his voice soft as a summer breeze.

"He is still angered over the loss of his parents. Two years ago they were killed by wolfen. He has not forgiven himself for failing to save them."

Nods from some of the other Haudenosaunee passed around the circle. Great Bear placed a log on the fire.

"I am troubled by the Confederation. We heard rumors of their plans to attack Haven, so what happened to their army? I did not see signs of them in Haven."

One of the women of Lindhome looked up from where she sat — Nissamin. She was a rather muscular woman with hair the color of autumn wheat. She was Nymph, but almost looked Lastborn with her iron gaze and powerful hands. It was obvious she hated her heritage and preferred to be of another.

She tossed about some odd stones with runes. "A shadow has curtained my heart. I fear some ill has befallen Lindhome."

Truitt said nothing, though others of his kind nodded their agreement.

For the remainder of the evening all were silent, wrapped in their individual thoughts as the fire dwindled to embers.

As the night grew chill, sleep took the group, except for Paine, who lay gazing at the whiteness of the half moon and wondered about his sister. He heard a slight stirring and thought Fang had returned, but found Puck sitting awake, close to the woods.

Paine rose and tiptoed around the sleeping bodies that lay about the camp. He approached Puck and found him toying with a small black orb. It dangled on a dirtied chain.

Puck did not turn as he approached.

"Paine, no sleep?" he asked, and hung the amulet around his neck, placing it beneath his shirt.

"No. I cannot sleep well without Fang. You?"

"No ... there are ... demons."

"What is that around your neck?"

Puck stared off into the woods. "My mother's. She is d-d-dead now."

"I'm sorry."

Puck remained silent.

Paine looked around, and noticed something was awry. "Where's Two Moon?"

Puck shrugged. "He go with ... horse. I see him."

"Where would he go?"

"He kill w-w-wolfen now." Puck lowered his head. "My family ... killed too, by ... demons. I ... kill them all, like T-T-Two Moon."

"Killing the demons or the wolfen will not bring your family back."

Paine regretted the words the moment they slipped off his tongue.

Puck turned his back to him. "I ... be alone now."

Paine swallowed the lump in his throat. He wanted to apologize, but withheld.

*What good would it do?*

Instead he crept back to his blanket, pulled it around him, and fell into a sleep filled with nightmares in which he pined for demon lovers.

\*\*\*

John panicked as his search for Meega dragged. They had been at port for hours and the men on the ship rushed to unload and take on fresh supplies. Baron Jorge had been of little help. Miguel searched the docks in case Meega had left the ship unaware.

John ran his fingers through his shaggy mane, pulling his hair as he searched. Even the darkest recesses of the ship revealed no trace of her, and the Nameless Ones, with their silent gestures, had no knowledge of her. He had sensed only truth from them.

*What had he done, bringing a little girl on such a trip?*

He felt sick.

Baron Jorge approached him, his eyes no longer set with a twinkle.

"I am afraid I have not seen her." The man hung his head. "Perhaps the sea took her as an offering."

Tears welled up in John's eyes. He clutched the wooden doll to his chest and pulled his pack against his back; its rigid contents pressed against him.

*Little One, what have I done?*

And John knew that redemption was never to be his. He looked to his hands, hands that were never meant to heal or to love, but only to inflict pain and death. He felt his heart solidify in that moment, like it had once been, like when his brother had been chosen over him.

*Stone.*

He let the doll fall to the deck of the ship and wrenched the drawstrings of his pack once more. The ancient blade pressed harder against him.

He said nothing to the Baron, simply nodded his head and then strode from the man's presence. He collected what few things he had brought with him, a few tools of his former trade. He stared at the steel objects before him; all dull with lack of use over the years. He would need the blades sharpened.

He placed them with care among some of Meega's clothing to mask their rattling. She would no longer need them. He packed his worn leather bible as well as a shard of mirror that he took from the Baron's chambers. With these slung over his shoulder, Friar John made his way down to the docks, abandoning his senses and Friar Miguel at the port city of New Boston. He had been chosen for a task and he would now see it done.

John strode to the edge of the city, marching through its cobbled streets.

The place stunk. It wasn't just the city. It was the land. It smelled of stagnation and refuse.

Heated blood coursed through his veins. In the commercial part of the city, the area where the rich Barons sold their wares, he found the place where he could whet his blades. He aimed for the one that had older stones and sold his services to the less fortunate. A man like that, in the interest of making money, would keep his fat trap shut and not question the sorts of devices that John required to be

sharpened.

And it was as expected. The near toothless lout did just that with no word or look at what sort of man would carry such diabolical devices. And he smelled as bad as the land.

John then set out for the crossroads of need and insatiable desire. Along its rubbish-strewn streets, he eyed a young man, dressed in enough rags to barely cover areas that most would consider private. At the other end was a woman garbed in much the same.

The sun caught her stark-red hair and John knew exactly which path to take.

He walked to the entrance of an alleyway and motioned for his victim to join him. He gave a coy smile, one that alluded to a desire other than what he intended. With his newly sharpened tools, he waited with patience and a different form of desire set in his eyes — one that would rid himself of any softness.

He thought of the book of Revelation as he waited.

*I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first.*

With every step she took towards him he thought of his chances for redemption, lost.

With every footfall, he contemplated the challenge before him and immersed his heart and mind in a sea of darkness he thought he had long abandoned.

*Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols.*

His skills were old, unhoneed, and required practice.

The cold blades in his hands slid against each other, a clean and deliberate slice. His ears delighted in their slow grating.

*And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.*

His victim sauntered towards him, a stride of those that have practiced this profession well. She was a half-breed; and the part of her that was Naiad had taken control. Her yearning was ravenous; her footsteps intense.

She drew near.

*Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds.*

She stood before him and exposed her white flesh. She waited for his hunger, and he gave it to her with all his might. The blades pierced her, in a place that suppressed her scream.

*And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.*

The scarlet hair spilled over his arm and John trapped her soul in the crude ceramic urn he had purchased in the market. It was set with a spell and sigils to house souls. John left her body in the alley as well as his outer robe. It was stained crimson.

He strode into the street, making for the edge of the city and then hummed a few bars of *Ave Maria*.

It somehow brought him comfort.

\*\*\*

Seven days later, after hugging the shores of Lake Michigami and then heading south and west to trace the broad path of the Illinois River, Paine and the others tracked the footprints of the survivors to a small town called Perry. It lay ten miles north of where the Illinois River shook hands with the mighty Mississippi. Great Bear chose to leave Two Moon to his own fate, determined not to delay finding the survivors of Haven. No one had disagreed with him.

The Mississippi River, lined with white oak and red buckeye, swept past them. The soft sound of the waters greeting the rock-strewn shore soothed Paine's frazzled state. He was tired of running.

As the midday sun melted into the horizon, they were greeted by some of the survivors — Haudenosaunee warriors on lookout. Great Bear spoke with them hurriedly in his native tongue, and then charged on. The others spurred their horses to follow.

When they reached the camp, they found a large clearing full of people, their faces drawn and filled with desolation. The few greetings they received were only half filled with cheer. Great Bear and Truitt approached an old man and woman. Two men from Lindhome stood with them, Lastborn. They were both dark of hair and eyes, brothers from what Paine could tell.

Paine dismounted and approached, catching Truitt's words. "Lindhome is gone?"

The taller of the brothers clenched his fists. "Demons and wolfen poured into Lindhome from the north — hundreds of them. They came upon us in the night. The protection of Lindhome was breached and the full evil of the Westwood flooded in."

Truitt looked up. "How is that possible? The barrier should have kept the Westwood out."

The shorter one hung his head. "Elenya's Soul was lost."

The old man that stood beside him reached to his chest, pressing his hand over his heart. He muttered something inaudible. He looked at the brothers, bags under his aged eyes.

His sagging jowls quivered.

Truitt looked at the old man. "Gregor, you were there when the orb was created, how could it have been lost?"

Gregor poked his staff into the ground. "Someone has discovered the nature of its power and turned it against us."

The taller of the two brothers eyed the Witch Hunter who stood beside Great Bear, still clamped in chains. He spat on the ground.

"What is her kind doing here?"

Great Bear stepped in front of her. "She is to be freed of the Wormwood, and questioned."

"I want to be there when you question her, for as we ran from the demons, the Confederation was waiting for us. It was a slaughter. I want to know what she knows."

Truitt's eyes aged. "What?"

"We had been expecting the Confederation after you left. There was rumor they were invading the mining towns, but they reached us sooner than we expected. We fought hard, but in the end, many were lost. Those that escaped are heading this way, a day behind us, running from the Confederation. A few of us were sent ahead to prepare for crossing the river." He spat once more, this time striking the Hunter's face. "If we do not get answers from her, I will gut her myself."

Gregor cleared his throat. "How many of Lindhome are left?"

"Four hundred."

"Out of two thousand?"

Silence sat heavy on the air until the old man lowered his head. "Then we must flee."

\*\*\*

Paine woke to find Fang at his side. He remembered her crawling in beside him before sunrise. His head swam with fatigue, tired from another night of terrors. The demon that stalked his dreams was relentless.

The day brought little to keep him distracted. Those he traveled with were busy making preparations for a potential defense. Even Puck was busy, enthralled with a young woman from Haven. Paine caught her name in passing — Farin. Apparently she was responsible for sending Diarmuid to them. She, too, was from the south and knew that a great many needed saving. Thankfully, Paine thought, Diarmuid had taken her advice.

He looked at Puck. Yet again the young man failed to hide the type of interest he had in the woman. Farin didn't seem to mind.

Later in the afternoon, after seeing Great Bear talk to a short, older Haudenosaunee woman, Paine finally found some company.

“Greetings, child. I am Little Doe, but most here call me Mother, for I am a Clan Mother among our people.”

Her smile was warm and made him think of hot stew on a cold day.

“I have heard of your long journey. I can see on your face the weariness you bear from the great hunt. They are wearing you down, but you must find courage, Little Badger. There will be rest in the end.”

*Little Badger.* The name made him smile.

She reached out and Paine took her hand without thinking. They walked through the camp, no one paying them heed, except for Fang, who loped along at his side. Little Doe stopped in front of a deer-hide tent, the smell of freshly tanned leather and sage emanating from it.

“Sit.”

She gave him some dried venison to eat and he accepted it gratefully. They sat in silence for some time, Paine enjoying the peace — an easiness that seemed to be a part of the Earth itself. And somehow the woman’s presence, in addition to Fang’s, made the aching in his heart almost completely disappear.

She put her hand on his shoulder. There was comfort in her touch.

“Your worries are great.”

He swallowed. “What happened to Haven? There are so few here.”

“We fled Haven as the packs of wolfen and demons invaded. Their numbers were too many.”

“But your people were there.”

The old woman shook her head. “We did not have the full strength of our people. If the others had come, we might have stood a chance against them.”

“Where were they?”

“Building our new villages.”

“Didn’t you send for them?”

“Yes, Two Moon sent messages for them to meet us in Haven. Something must have gone wrong.” She shook her head. “Foolish boy. He went on a futile hunt to avenge his family. We will probably never see him again.”

“I’m sure he’ll come back.” He tried to sound reassuring, but his voice lacked the sincerity.

She shook her head. “Not since the Wendigo have I had such an ill feeling in my gut.”

“The what?”

She seemed hesitant to answer. “The Wendigo —a creature that stalked us long ago, taking our people in the night. I used to get a bad feel when it came and the night it slaughtered over fifty of our people I was sick for three days. I have not shared this with others, Little Badger, but I can see honesty in your eyes. Keep this to yourself, young one; my gut churns over this.”

“Is it the Wendigo?”

She shook her head. “No, that creature—“

Sudden shouting turned her attention. At the river, near the water’s edge, Paine saw a crowd surrounding the Hunter. She lay on the ground, convulsing. The Clan Mother ran over, fast for her age. She knelt at the woman’s head and held it as the Hunter shook. Her arms flailed and legs kicked and then a sudden stiffness took her. She was rigid, like a plank. She shook her head in a slow, jerky motion. Each turn looked painful. She showed teeth, a grin of either glee or malice, and her eyes turned from side to side. Paine felt as though she strained to see him where he stood, like she searched him out. Then the Hunter spoke and it was like her tongue was not her own.

It was a voice that was grinding and deep, an old voice that was slow with its words. “... I know who you are. I feel you. I am coming ...” She paused as her voice rasped. She strained to breathe.

The Clan Mother fiddled with a pouch at her side. “Speak true, fiend. What are you called that we may name you?”

The voice of the Hunter chuckled. "...I have many names, ancient and new. Tell me, where is the fruit of your loins? You will share her fate, old woman."

Little Doe paled.

The Hunter's head jerked for a second and opened her mouth, but the voice that came out was softer. "...ake'nihstenha...yothore.," it whispered.

Paine's amulet caught the words. ...*mother... it is cold.*

Little Doe wept. Her fingers tore at the earth. "Eksa'a,...", she said.

*Child...*

She stroked the Hunter's face.

"Mother...", said the voice, and then struggled to speak once more, like it was fighting with the other presence within the Hunter, or the Hunter herself.

The hunter chuckled once more, gurgling as the first voice laughed.

"She is mine, old woman, as you will be. All of you—"

The Clan Mother cried out and then stabbed the Hunter's leg with a yellow-coated knife. The woman shrieked in agony; Paine was unsure if the pain was hers or that of whatever had taken her body.

"Mine!" it shrieked and then hissed. It spat at the Clan Mother and then the Hunter went still. Her breathing was labored and her body and head were moist with sweat. The Clan Mother put an herb in her mouth and saw to the wound that she had inflicted. Everyone else stood around, saying nothing, waiting to see what would happen to the body that had hosted the strange presence. Then the Hunter's breathing suddenly eased and she relaxed. As she exhaled, so did those that watched. Each then departed with their thoughts and their fears, except Paine.

He stood and wondered when his chance to pay retribution to this woman would come.

## Chapter 16

Paine strode through groans of fatigue and laments of loss. Half way through the previous day, the remainder of Lindhome had crossed the river. The pale faces of the survivors had appeared drawn and haggard, with the exception of the Lastborn. They had surrounded the Revenants with a hardened look and a single-minded purpose; save their progenitors.

Paine noticed there were few Nymphs among the survivors.

Like onlookers anticipating the traveling sideshow, a large group had gathered along the river's edge. Paine walked among the crowd, the silver moonlight dancing along the water, to where the Clan Mother motioned him over. Puck stood next to her, his weight favoring his right leg, his arms folded across his shallow chest. What was before them was hardly as interesting as the Wolfman, the Lizardchild, or even the Horned Woman with the tail — and Paine always took a secret joy in visiting them at their cages.

He briefly clutched at his chest with the tearing at his heart and then moved his hand away as Puck looked at him. Lya remained stationary still. He breathed shallow breaths, trying to let the suffering pass.

Before him stood Alwhin, Truitt, Gregor, and six others that formed a tight cluster around the Witch Hunter. The woman knelt in the midst of the circle. The silver collar was no longer around her neck and her hands and feet were unbound. Yet, she did not try to flee. Instead she rocked herself and howled at the night's cloudless sky.

Alwhin's voice rose above the crowd, tinny like a dented cowbell.

"We will try to sever the link. Follow my lead." She closed her eyes and chanted. The others joined her and a faint wind swept through the clearing. The sound of the combined voices rose and fell, reverberating through Paine's chest. The wind and song bore something else with it as well. A host of spirits converged upon them; some flooding through Paine, awakening the cold fire within, some whispering things to his innermost desires.

*\*Summon us. Use us.\**

They hovered over the circle, sweeping in and out, enveloping the entire gathering. Paine stepped forward for a better look.

The Hunter murmured words, a summons of her own. Her fingers danced with flame. She shuffled back and swiped at the air. She called upon other spirits to aid her and flung fire at the man that stood in front of Paine. He buckled as it struck, but then recovered as the fire winked out. The Hunter cast a curse upon him and he groaned, gripping the others next to him for support.

He stood once more.

The Hunter's lips curled. Paine saw that look once before, in an injured bobcat surrounded by a pack of armed men. But here, he felt little sympathy.

*She deserved it.*

Puck shifted at his side.

The battle raged, the Hunter flinging fire and summoning winds and spirits to strike down the ring of enemies that trapped her. It was futile. Tears of anger streamed down her face. Her teeth clenched and she collapsed to the ground. The spirits surged towards her, converging upon her flailing body.

The man in front of Paine faltered, his legs trembling, his grip tightening on the two beside him. The souls of the dead continued to probe at the Hunter, and again the man stumbled. Paine grabbed him before he fell, and as his arms embraced the man the hum of the souls thrummed in Paine's ears. The voices of the dead thundered in his mind. And like the voices he once heard when gazing into the mirror so many years ago, they tempted him.

*\*Call upon us. We offer knowledge.\**

The scent of the dead was tenfold and he breathed a lungful of fetid air.

*Who are you?*

*\*We are Legion.\**

Something surged from within him, a cold anger that surfaced like vomit. It brought with it his supper and spilled down the back of the man he held.

*\*Take us unto yourself. Call upon us. We can sever the link your sister created.\**

It seemed as if the world paused.

*Lya created? Had she now the gift of Sight? Had she known they might be separated and she would need to find him again?*

The Hunter screamed. She rolled towards Paine, still convulsing, yet in her eyes lie hatred and fear. He stared the Hunter down, and righteous anger consumed him — for the loss of his parents; for chasing him unremittingly; for taking his sister; and finally for his sister's unconsented invasion of his body.

*How dare she do this to him?*

His anger brimmed and he vomited again, this time unable to stop whatever was inside him from lunging forth. Paine moaned. The man slid from his arms, and voices sounded in his head.

*\*We are Legion.\**

The dead flooded towards him.

He yielded to them.

*Come unto me.*

A clear voice rang out above the others, steady as a rock that stood against the swell of thoughts — the voice from the Westwood.

*-Hold on, child. Do not let it overwhelm you. Concentrate on the Hunter.-*

Paine struggled to take hold of the force that flowed out of him, to control the spirits that wailed in his mind. He fought.

*-Surrender to it.-*

He wrestled for control.

*-Let go. I will help you.-*

*No.*

Paine gritted his teeth, struggling. He sensed the others fall, and their screams echoed in his ears. The circle broke, and Paine choked on the dried venison that stuck in his throat. He gagged, struggling to breathe. The souls of the dead swept through him, each one an ice dagger to his heart. He fell to his knees. The pain was excruciating.

He heard shouts of his name, and again the voice in his head sounded above the din.

*-Let go. Surrender to it, or it will kill you. Trust me, child.-*

*Who are you?*

*-One who watches over you. Now let go.-*

Paine surrendered, immersing himself in the river of darkness. He was one with it, and the dead were a part of him. There was only the black river. He flowed with it, breathed it. And the souls of the netherworld waited for his command.

The voice sounded in his head, strong, comforting.

*-Good. Now, focus on the Hunter.-*

Paine did as he was told and turned the spirits towards the Hunter. Fear played across her face as he drove the howling legion into her. She mouthed a scream that had no sound, and her fingers gripped the air. He took great pleasure in her pain, and his anger resurfaced.

*You did this to me!*

He drove the pain of his heart into the woman, forcing her to feel what he had been feeling since his separation from Lya.

The Hunter shrieked.

Rage seeped from him, tainting the will of the legion. They howled joy at his hatred.

*I hope you die.*



The voice, calm and resolute, sounded in his head again.

*-You do not want her death on your hands. Find the link to the Wormwood and sever it. Let go of the anger. Let go of the pain. She is as Diarmuid once was.-*

But he couldn't. The hatred was a part of him, as much as his own soul. He couldn't let go of the anger, but he acceded to the voice's wish. He wouldn't kill the Hunter, although Alwhin and the others had nearly killed her anyway.

*Her time would come.*

Focusing his rage on the links that welded her soul to the Wormwood, he thrust the souls of the dead into her and unlocked it. The bond melted away.

The Hunter screamed, flailing on the ground.

He turned towards the link within him and the spell that was weaved around his own heart. It was a knot, complex and woven well.

He reached towards it, ready to untie it, and then retracted. He needed to find her still, so he let the bond remain, painful though it was. It angered him that he had to suffer with this alone so he spun another incantation, one where when he suffered, Lya would as well. It held a hint of vengeance.

*Feel my pain.*

With the spell finished, Paine looked around. The others around him were still upon the ground and the Lastborn were running towards them.

Now what, he wondered. The souls needed release. The legion still swam through him. They wanted blood.

*\*Call upon us. Use us.\**

The voice was with him once again.

*-Sleep, child.-*

Paine collapsed, and the souls reeled back into him, wracking his body with searing cold. They still wanted blood. And they had it, inside him. The souls of the dead and the damned swam within his veins, in his heart. And they gloried in their toll.

Then there was knowledge, vast and dark, but fleeting; and then there was blackness.

\*\*\*

When the wolves returned to Brahm, the sun was hidden behind a blanket of gray clouds that roiled across the sky. She stretched as she rose and ate a meager breakfast while she walked.

The wolves scouted ahead or loped along as rearguard. Brahm watched them, intrigued. In her many years she had never encountered an entire clan. In the past, her exchanges had been limited to a single wolf, involving a brief message before it would scurry off. Never had she engaged more than one. And Night's ability to communicate with her was unsettling. Fang had never shown such a talent. It made her wonder what other beasts might show such intelligence.

*Was the world changing?*

When she arrived at the clearing, the wolves hung back, leaving Brahm to meet with White Feather and Diarmuid. Both grinned at her return, White Feather's smile more pronounced than usual.

He hugged her close to him. "You're back."

She returned his embrace, although she was confused by the change in his demeanor.

"I found the wolves, but they would prefer to remain in the woods until they are needed." Brahm smiled a full grin of teeth at Diarmuid. "They don't want to get too close to the man who took Fang from her clan."

"Yeah, he smells bad," White Feather said. He clapped Diarmuid on the shoulder, and the ridiculous grin had returned. It stretched across his tanned face to the point she thought he would swallow his own head.

Brahm studied the Haudenosaunee for a brief moment. It pleased her to see that grin again; he was

too somber of late. Diarmuid still seemed distant, but the contrived smile on his face was somewhat reassuring.

*But what had changed?*

"It looks like you two got along fine without me," she said.

White Feather winked at Diarmuid.

*A private joke.*

She wondered what it was about, but left it alone.

*If the dog was sleeping, let it lie.*

"Any sign of Talon?" she asked.

Diarmuid shook his head, his lips pursed.

She felt the same.

*Where was the falcon?*

Night stepped from the shadows and Brahm jumped. A sense of pleasure emanated from the wolf for having caught her off guard.

She let it slide and gave him the approximate location of the army. His thoughts came to her once more.

*\*Be ready. I will return.\**

Brahm nodded, and the wolf bounded off into the trees.

The following morning, after a dreamless night, Brahm woke to a murderous headache. The effects from Soul Running still inundated her, and it was all she could do to lift her head and rise. She had overindulged.

*Shit.*

She remembered well her first experience, and still thought her skill connected with the blue-eyed woman she had encountered — the Lastborn woman.

*The woman whose fucking soul was living inside her.*

After that encounter and her first steps as a Soul Runner, she had had to sleep for days to recover.

Upon breaking fast, she headed into the woods to wait for Night's return, leaving White Feather and Diarmuid in the clearing to watch the skies for Talon. She leaned back against a young maple that twisted its way towards the sky, overshadowed by towering cedars and sycamores. The wolf expected her to be waiting, and wait she would.

The song from a meadowlark drifted from an open patch of long grass about twenty feet from where she sat. Brahm let her thoughts drift as it sang, pondering the Clan Mother's dream.

*Did Lya have anything to do with the woman in the cave? Or for that matter, did the Lastborn-woman? Would saving one of them get rid of her?*

The second soul stirred again.

*-It's her!-*

Her attention shifted as Night came to her. She sat silent and showed no fear in his presence.

*Not this time.*

His eyes gleamed and he lowered his head.

*\*We have seen the girl. She is surrounded by two-foots, tens of hundreds of them. Most smell of witchcraft and death.\**

Brahm rose and summoned the others to join her.

Night's tail hung in a shallow arch.

*\*We leave now.\**

He bounded into the woods, his thoughts trailing him.

"We follow," Brahm said, and ran after him.

Night led the trio at a fast pace, the wolf remaining barely in sight. Only once did he stop to drink from a small puddle, giving them a moment's rest from the sun that blinked through the canopy of leaves. The feeling of heaviness in Brahm's head grew with every step.

She considered pausing to rest. The wolf kept a strong pace, but she was determined not to show weakness; no matter the cost. She suppressed her fatigue and trudged onwards.

Finally, thoughts from the wolf came to her.

*\*We are close. Your footsteps must be lighter here. Orenda, you are with me. The others follow Bane.\**

As he said it another wolf appeared, a tawny brown that was slightly smaller than Night. Brahm motioned for White Feather and Diarmuid to follow Bane while she clambered after the larger wolf.

For some time Brahm crept through the trees. Unsheathing the kahbeth, she breathed in steady, slow breaths. She slipped into her ethereal dance, drawn to it once more. She became an entity of sensation, one with the Great Mother and the forest. With a sweeping grace her soul floated onwards.

She sensed Night stop and crouch low. Brahm's body paused with him, but her spirit traveled on and she sensed the size of the encampment. Within was the pulse of human lives, too many to count. Slowly, she glided among them, searching for a soul that would seem different from the others, one that would be frightened and alone. Yet the entire encampment was a field of fear, full of souls trapped and bound to a will not their own. She sensed the struggle among them, the struggle to be liberated and the hatred and jealousy of all things free. The tumult of emotions rose from the camp like the stench from a pit of carcasses, thick and putrefying. It made her soul want to gag.

She whispered through the camp and gasped as she came upon a long stake in the ground. Skewered upon its roughly-hewn spike was Lya's falcon, still and lifeless, its body emanating a cold void.

Brahm continued on and found Lya, seated upon a crate, surrounded by Hunters, generals and a man in white robes. His face was covered. The generals appeared to be inundating Lya with questions, but the words Brahm could not hear. The girl shook her head, her face angered. Brahm probed further and Lya peered about her, as if sensing Brahm's presence. Then Lya grabbed at her chest as if in sudden agony. With what little energy she could muster, Brahm tried to brush the girl's essence with her own, but her soul reeled back before she could reach her. As it was yanked backwards, she noticed something. Someone had witnessed the encounter. Something had sensed her.

With a jolt, Brahm dropped to her knees. The kahbeth tumbled to the earth. They were screaming at her, or was it her second soul? She put her hand to her head. The pain was blinding and she groped along the ground.

Night's breath was on her neck, moist and rank.

*\*You were sensed. We must leave. Quickly.\**

She groaned as she rose, grasping for the kahbeth to sheathe them once more. Then she stumbled after Night.

When she met with the others, White Feather dropped to the ground, his shoulders stooped.

"They are at least three thousand strong. Not all Hunters, but I'm not sure how we're going to get her out. We'd be caught before we took two steps."

Diarmuid eased himself down. "We didn't see her. Did you?"

She gave a shallow nod, her head still feeling like it was being cracked open from the inside.

"She's close to the north end. She seems all right." A thought troubled her. "I can't figure out why the Hunters are gathered this far west of the Mississippi."

Diarmuid shook his head. "I'm not sure, maybe they came for the silver of Underwood. This army will plow through Haven if they're not prepared. Even then I'm not sure they would stand a chance." Diarmuid cast a glance towards Night. "We need to send a message."

The wolf's thoughts echoed in Brahm's head.

*\*Whatever message you need sent, we will deliver. Decide your next move and come to us when you have need.\**

The following morning, after what little rest they could manage, they took the horses and began the trek forward. The weather was hot and the moisture in the air saturated Brahm's lungs. Her head

still ached, and her vision was clouded.

She needed rest, a lot of it.

For hours they traveled, giving a wide berth around the encampment of Hunters. The wolves acted as scouts, brief flashes of movement in the periphery. At times they would herd the three of them north and at others back south again. Brahm yawned. Fatigue weighed on her like a miller's grindstone around her neck. She fought to stay awake as the steady sound of Roan's trotting practically lulled her to sleep in the saddle. Her eyelids felt like flaps of dried leather. Finally, Diarmuid called a halt near a small river so they could cool off. Brahm gave thanks to the Great Mother and collapsed to the ground.

\*\*\*

Brahm woke to a gentle nudge and a whispered summons.

"Orenda."

The nudge became a shake.

"Orenda, wake up."

There was urgency in that voice and the shake persisted.

"Orenda, the wolves are here."

Brahm opened her eyes and shielded her face from the stabbing sunlight.

"What's going on?"

"Orenda, are you all right?" White Feather leaned over her and stroked her cheek, his touch tender. "We need you."

Brahm attempted to sit up, but collapsed. Consciousness slipped from her feeble grasp. She needed sleep.

She was faintly aware of Diarmuid and White Feather backing away from her as something large leaned in. The pungent smell of earth and death flooded her nostrils — a wolf. She opened her eyes to find Bane sniffing at her. Then Night approached. He growled at Bane, and sent him scurrying off.

*\*Orenda, you cannot rest now. The Hunters come. They bring the girl. You must rise.\**

A renewing energy seeped into her with the breath of the wolf on her face. Slowly, her vision returned, the fog lifting.

*\*This gift is temporary.\**

"Lya is coming," she said to the others and groaned. "The Hunters are bringing her."

White Feather pulled her to her feet. "Then we could not ask for a better opportunity."

Diarmuid cast a wary glance towards her. "He's right, but this is too convenient. Something smells funny about this." He rubbed the bandage on his arm.

"I agree," she said, watching him. "Someone caught me while I searched for Lya. I think it might have been another Soul Runner."

Diarmuid frowned. "What do you mean?"

She shook her head. "I'm not sure, but I have a feeling I was noticed."

He pursed his lips. "I don't like this. It could be a trap, but it's the only chance we have."

White Feather took the horses to hide them among the trees, the wolf leading him.

Diarmuid took a moment to study Brahm. "Are you going to be all right? We had a hard time waking you."

She faked a smile. "I feel fine."

Diarmuid said nothing, but disbelief lingered in his eyes. Diarmuid knew of the skill she possessed, and the fact she was using it blindly. His steady gaze penetrated her lie. She turned it back on him as his fingers fiddled with the bandage.

"Don't you dare summon that ghoul. We can do this without help."

He turned from her and cast his eyes towards White Feather as he returned from the woods.

On the man's heels was Night.

*\*They bring the girl to the river. We wait in the shadows, Orenda.\**

The wolf stole into the forest, his casual lope now one of stealth.

The three waded across the river and spread out, each finding cover. They agreed to wait until what seemed to be the right opportunity to strike.

Brahm unsheathed the kahbeth.

Ten Hunters headed towards them, making for the river. Lya was surrounded by the entire group. She marched with purpose, her face defiant and haughty. Brahm had seen that look before.

*-It's her!-*

Brahm's spirit was hauled forward without consent, dragged by the second presence inside her. She sailed towards Lya in a mad frenzy. Her soul careened towards Lya's as Brahm's fingers clutched the kahbeth. Like iron filings to lodestone, her soul reeled back before she reached her. The voice in her head was screaming again.

*-It's her! It's her!-*

*Shut up!*

She rang her finger along the blade of the kahbeth, forcing blood. The pain silenced the voice once more.

Three Hunters stooped to fill their flasks at the river. The others remained watchful, but casual in their stance. Perhaps this was good fortune after all, she thought. Perhaps this wasn't a deliberate move by the Confederation. Night watched her from the shrubs. The wolf nodded, but his thoughts did not come to her.

Brahm fidgeted as she waited, flicking the blades of the kahbeth with her thumb. The Hunters took turns and when one of the last ones finally stooped before the waters Brahm knew their moment had arrived.

So had White Feather.

He loosed an arrow that dropped one of the Hunters face down into the river. The arrow protruded from his back.

The Hunters reacted quickly, four of them bounding towards the source of the strike. White Feather ran towards them, war club in hand.

Diarmuid joined him from where he hid in the trees, sword bared.

The wolves leapt from the shrubs, their snarling echoing through the trees.

All but two of the Hunters scattered to face their attackers. Two stood guard over Lya, backs to Brahm. The kahbeth shrieked at Brahm for blood, but she deprived them.

Instead, she crawled across clumps of bull thistle, wincing as they pierced her skin. She made steady ground, yet cautious not to make any sudden moves or sounds.

The wolves pulled two of the Hunters to the ground. Brahm heard their screams. So did the kahbeth. They yearned.

White Feather hurled his war club at one of the Hunters. It struck her in the face.

Diarmuid fought with another, and pierced his thigh with the sword. The blood ran fast and red.

Again, the kahbeth screamed in Brahm's head. They thirsted, they hungered.

She inched forward.

When she was close, Lya noticed her and Brahm motioned for her to wait. Lya disobeyed that command and dashed towards Brahm, holding out her roped hands in front of her.

"Break these!" she called.

Brahm growled and leapt from the shrubs. She raised the kahbeth and with a swift stroke she sliced through the bindings. She reached over to release the collar from Lya's neck, but her fingers faltered as the ground shook. The collar slid off on its own. Then two of the Hunters, palms sliced and dripping, summoned something from the earth.

"What the—"

The dirt around Brahm's feet exploded and sent her flying. She rolled, and paused, shaken. Lya

was free and standing, as if the blast had not even touched her. She took a jagged rock and sliced open her own hand. She screamed and uttered words in a hideous tongue while she etched symbols into the dirt.

Waves of energy flooded through Brahm. The air shimmered. The two Hunters rose into the air. Fear blazed in their eyes and they reached for their throats. They gasped for breath. The rage in Lya's face was seething. A silent scream emanated from the Hunters' mouths as they burned under an invisible fire. Their flesh trickled from their bodies. A cold presence swept through the trees and Brahm cradled herself. She kept her soul resident in her body, not wanting to touch whatever the girl had unleashed. The carnage lasted for what appeared an eternity as the Hunters' bodies dripped to the ground in steaming puddles.

Brahm turned from the sight.

White Feather, waist-deep in the river, removed his dagger from the chest of another and abandoned the body to float downstream. Diarmuid parried with one of the Hunters. Lya divined dark fire with one hand and flung it at the Hunter. The flames licked at the man's body, and he shrieked in pain. He dropped his silver cross before he could stop her.

The remaining Hunters fled for help.

Lya screamed again and the power she had summoned flooded off her in waves. The trees shook as she lowered her arms and then dropped to her knees. The souls of darkness she had called upon wailed as they departed. Brahm crawled over to the girl. The second soul within her sobbed.

They were interrupted by Night's presence.

*\*More come. We will lead them astray, but you must go. You are marked as one of my own, Orenda. Word will go through the land. You will always have aid. Be well. And remember, the gift is temporary.\**

Brahm smiled inwardly as she nodded to the wolf. She had a bond with him she never expected.

"He talks," Lya croaked.

Brahm looked at Diarmuid. "More Hunters are coming."

*-It's her!-*

Despite the fatigue that swept over her, Brahm rose. She brushed the thick strands of black hair from the girl's face. "We have to go. Now."

Lya nodded, her eyes still shining with the remnants of whatever she had summoned. Her legs faltered.

"Talon is dead," she whispered.

Brahm pulled her up. "I know."

Within moments, White Feather approached with the horses in tow. They mounted, Lya clinging to Diarmuid, and made for the road as fast their horses would carry them.

\*\*\*

Night watched as the horses galloped down the road, a cloud of dust marking their trail.

*Humans.*

An amused grin stretched across his muzzle, a memory from long ago.

He scratched at the back of his ear, and sniffed the air, catching the lingering smell of the Lastborn girl.

*Not fully, though. There was an interesting mix.*

Some human, some Sidhe, and, when he savored the smell long enough, even something not seen in countless years.

*Her powers are impressive, but tainted.*

The wolf sniffed again and recalled Fang's summons. Yet her message through the clans was vague. *Change is coming. Watch for the Lastborn girl.*

She had left something out; something too important to be carried on the howls of wolves. It sat like week-old mutton in the depth of his bowels.

Night sneezed. Bull thistle always tickled his nose.

He caught the scent of the twin-souled woman, still thick on the air. He gave what help he could to Orenda, but it would not be enough.

*She requires rest.* He could smell it on her.

Her power intrigued him as well. He had not seen its kind, not once in his long years.

*A new power to match the old, perhaps?*

Fang whispered of it once. He wondered how many others possessed such a talent.

*At least one, within the encampment. One who was watching.*

He sneezed again. He would keep that to himself until he met with Fang.

Bane approached him, head lowered, gaze shifting.

*\*The Hunters come. \**

The river trickled with blood.

*More will die before the day is out.*

He craned his neck and howled, and then scampered west.

*Good luck to you, Orenda. May you return from the Forgotten Realm.*

\*\*\*

Hours later, the four stumbled upon a small village. An overwhelming weakness stole over Brahm as she dismounted. She reached to Roan for support, but missed and collapsed to the ground. Her head sagged and her eyesight clouded, a milky white haze covering the world. Blackness overcame her and Brahm heard two things — White Feather calling her name and her second soul screaming at her.

*-Fool!-*

## Chapter 17

The winds of the North Moors were sodden with the scent of caribou. Gault scratched his nose and then cleared it in a small puddle, the yellow mucous staining its clear waters. He sheathed the kahbeth across his back and perched himself upon a large rock, letting the late afternoon sun bake his thick hide. He removed the polar bear head from his crown, the sign of his status as a shaman among the Obek. About twenty yards before him stood a wolf with its head cocked to the side.

He let out a hearty laugh at the sight of it. "What is it, brother wolf? Never seen Obek?"

The wolf lowered its head, its eyes never leaving his. Gault sat, waiting. It studied him before it took two more cautious steps. He knew why it was there, and he waited with a crooked smile upon his gray face. The wolf inched closer and then delivered its message, the smells of hatred and loathing accompanying its visions.

The Obek cleared his nose again and the wolf darted off, heading back to the forest of scotch pines that thrived to the south. Its news cast a curtain of despair on his heart. Haven and Lindhome were lost. Perhaps the Obek were next. He muttered a curse, and plucked a clump of purple heather from the earth. It would bring inner peace.

The old Obek rose, looking towards those he had hand-picked to accompany him. They meditated in a circle, giving their bodies a rest from the great run.

*But a run to where now?*

He had received Orenda's message, and they were on their way to Haven's aid. He lowered his head, and muttered a small prayer for the souls of the dead.

*May the Gods keep them.*

He thought of Orenda and raised his face to the sun's rays. Something was not well with her. A chill swept through him, as if Sedna, the great Sea Goddess of the north, breathed down his neck. He sensed that Orenda's presence in the world was lacking, weak, like she lay between the world of the living and the land of the dead. He owed her much for his nephew's life.

*Soul for soul, life for life, blood for blood.*

He grabbed the rabbit-hide sack tied to his waist, and shook its contents three times. He uttered a small prayer to the gods to grant him vision, and then upturned the sack on the moss-covered earth. Four Obek finger bones collapsed to the ground; two in a heap and two off to the side. The Bone of War, red for blood, pointed southeast.

He examined the two piled together, the black and the green. *Life mixing with Death.*

*Orenda walks the Forgotten Realm.*

His fingers immediately began twitching a spell. His thick lips muttered other words; a second incantation — a spell of complement. He then sluiced off a portion of his own soul and winced with the pain of it.

*Soul for soul.*

The portion flew off into the world, with a voice to summon her back from whatever dark abyss she had descended into. Then Gault examined the fourth bone, stark white. It was crooked and had fallen into a small crevice, pointing into the depths of the Earth. Gault was unsure of how to read the Bone of Peace.

*What did it mean?*

He scooped up the bones and returned them to the sack, making his way quietly to the rest of his clan. He settled his aging body in the spot reserved for him at the northern crest of the circle. He closed both sets of eyelids, and slowed his breathing.

*The answer would come.*

\*\*\*



Paine drifted in a land that was not land, in a white void where sensation was an empty feeling inside him. He attempted to step forward, but could not move his legs. His arms hung limp at his side. He opened his mouth to speak but no words fell from his lips. His head sat like stone upon his shoulders. He tried to breathe, but his chest would not move.

A darkness inside him worked its way up, brimming at the edge of his throat. It threatened to vomit. Paine swallowed it down.

In the white void of a distance, he caught a glimpse of a tall, dark-skinned woman. She looked familiar. He knew her. He opened his mouth to speak, but a low, wicked laugh vibrated in his bones. Paine struggled to see what was behind him. He recognized the voice.

Something whirled him about, and before him stood a demon, the one that haunted his nightmares. With it were the dead, hundreds of souls. And they were bedecked in robes of red. They danced around him with cloven feet.

The demon cocked its head, watching Paine and it moved forward, muttering the words of a spell he could not hear. Its yellow eyes glowed within the dark hood and it wore a tattered robe that fell short of its hooved feet. In its claws it held a black leash, which circled Paine's neck. The demon leaned in towards him, its breath heavy and wet, and pulled back the hood.

Paine opened his mouth in a silent scream as his own horned face stared back at him.

\*\*\*

A tall, dark-skinned woman stood in a land inundated with trees of green bark and sable leaves. She did not recognize the towering giants that shot upwards. They were rigid and tall. That made her want to remember someone, but who?

She laughed, but did not understand why.

A carpet of moss and peat covered the bog that was the forest floor, and she sniffed. She found only dead air.

A dark feeling overshadowed the forest, a presence that could only be described as despair. She shuddered.

*Where am I? Who am I?*

She lifted her legs to step through the moss, and struggled to pull her feet from the soft ground. She slogged forward and twitched her ears to listen.

No sounds. *What is this place?*

She didn't remember coming here. She didn't remember anything. There was nothing but the present, as if her life had begun in the moment she found herself standing among the great trees. She felt no thirst or hunger. She felt nothing. There was only the bog forest, a never-ending maze of mammoth trees.

Through the marsh she walked, her breathing labored, her legs sore. Something moved at the corner of her eye and she thought she saw the horns of a great stag, but it vanished before she could make it out. She continued on and wondered when she would find the end of the forest, and stumbled upon a large body of water, a muddied reflection of what she knew it should be.

*How do I know that?*

The trees disappeared, leaving her standing on the still, shimmering surface of the sea. She looked about, but found only water, smooth as glass.

The woman thought it strange. She knew she should not be able to walk on water.

*How do I know that? What happened to the trees?*

She strode forward.

Across the water she walked, and the sun beamed upon her naked form. Her long fingers caressed the smooth dark skin of her arms. They were like buttermilk.

That made her want to pleasure herself, but neither the mounds upon her chest nor the opening

between her legs took delight in it.

The water under her bare feet felt dry as earth and offered no cooling touch. Time was lost to her as she walked; yet in a time that was not time, she came upon land. She stepped onto the beach and the water abandoned her as the trees had done, leaving her to stand in the midst of a vast desert. Wind blew and sandstorms rose, yet the sands did not sting her bare flesh. She strode across the desert and did not feel the heat that scorched the land.

Before her, a small bush rose from the sands, its branches aflame with tongues of red fire that did not consume the lush leaves or course bark. She approached the bush and in her mind a voice thundered.

*\*I am.\**

The fire spread, igniting the land in a sea of crimson flame, searing everything except the woman and the bush. The voice thundered again.

*\*I am.\**

The bush succumbed to the flames and burnt to dust before her eyes, leaving the woman to walk across a lake of fire and brimstone. She continued on, knowing of no other purpose.

*Where am I going?*

She stepped onto a land filled with green grass, the tall blades tossed about by a hollow wind that blew through her, sparing her the feel of its cool touch. The grass did not rustle with the wind, nor tickle her skin, nor delight her ears with a faint whisper.

Time, or the lack of time, passed, and in the distance a stone city waited for her, armored in shining white. As she walked closer, a red substance trickled down its towering walls.

*It bleeds.*

The blood pooled on the ground and flowed towards the craggy mountains in the distance, a river of crimson.

The iron gates to the city stood open, revealing a gaping entrance that waited to devour her. She strode forward, and as she entered the city, the walls appeared to shift. The woman looked closer. Countless bodies, all painted white and nailed in place, squirmed. They opened their mouths to cry out, but no words fell from their ruby lips. The sight of them sent a shiver through her body, but the dark-skinned woman did not avert her eyes. She knew she must bear witness.

An altar lay in the midst of the empty city and upon it sat a young man. He had mouse-brown hair, and something about his eyes looked familiar to her. Blood seeped from the corners of his mouth.

*Do I know him?*

She stepped towards him, but a look of horror swept across his face and he disappeared. But not before she saw a black leash around his neck.

No other signs of life did she see within the city. Rows of gnarled, lifeless olive trees lined a bone-littered path, guiding her towards a white building with spires that stretched for the heavens — a church.

*The Church.*

The dark-skinned woman walked the path, her feet stepping upon the skulls and bones that paved it. The bones made no sound as they cracked and crumbled beneath her feet.

She entered the church and strode into an airy room painted with scenes of human sacrifice; dark-winged demons holding swords, seven-headed beasts, dragons, horned creatures carrying scythes of death, and above them all a shining man clothed in white. Below his sandaled feet groveled the peoples of the land, praying for mercy.

The woman turned her attention to a golden throne upon a dais, far above which shone windows of stained glass. Seven was their number, and in each was painted an angel of shining white, yet with wings black as a starless night. She walked towards the throne and pressed a lever beside it. The throne swung aside, across the white marble floor.

Behind it lay a corridor, wide and beckoning. The woman entered, and touched its walls of ancient

stone, which breathed beneath her fingers. She jerked her hand back as rats the size of dogs flooded into the corridor and climbed the walls in droves; rats that opened their mouths to squeal with voices she could not hear. They ran out of the church, spilling out into the streets of the city.

The woman walked the corridor, either forever or a mere moment, and stepped into a large cave where she found three people. One was a man, with a seven-spired crown upon his head. His skin was pale as the city walls, and he wore a robe of holy white. The man's right hand, with its dark fingernails, lay upon a woman's stomach. She was naked and chained to the wall. Her head hung on her chest, and her black, matted hair hung down to hide her face. Bruises covered the woman's body. A second man sat off in a corner, naked and cowering. He picked at the bugs that crawled through his unshorn hair, and ate them.

The man with the crown uttered words of sinister and terrible power. He turned and the dark-skinned woman froze, for he had no eyes, just empty, bloodied sockets that stared at her from an ashen face. A brief look of surprise crossed his face as he beheld her with his eyeless gaze, his teeth bloodied and smiling. His chill grin made her skin crawl. Yet in that brief moment, where she caught him unaware, all was laid bare to her and she knew the truth.

She opened her mouth to rebuke to him, but a black leash appeared in the man's hands. Its loop was wrapped about her. It was like ice to her skin and she sucked in her breath with the pain of it.

It did not deter the dark-skinned woman. She stepped forward to free the other from her chains. She ran with bare feet across the stone floor. It, too, was cold and her feet burned from it.

She reached the woman, whose hands were warm and comfort. She held them to her, and caressed her own face with them. Then the dark-skinned woman heard a voice calling.

*\*Brahm.\**

She reached for the steel shackles.

*\*Brahm.\**

*Is that my name?* She struggled to remember.

The leash about her tugged and the dark-skinned woman froze in place. It burned her buttermilk skin. She gritted her teeth.

Then she felt a breeze and another voice calling her. It was warm like summer's breath and smelled of heather and caribou.

*\*Orenda. Be free.\**

She felt another tug and the other man, the one with the bug-infested mane, removed the leash from her with the utmost care. He wrapped the leash about himself and nodded his mangy head to her. He stepped back and giggled.

She felt another tug. Something was pulling her from this world. She fought and reached for the woman in chains once again.

*I must free her.*

The woman on the stone altar opened her eyes. The dark-skinned woman knew her and her eyes of sapphire. She embraced the chained woman, pulling her close to her breast. The other woman mouthed silent words that echoed in her mind and the woman's soul bonded with her own.

*-My soul to your soul. We are one, Soul Runner.-*

The first voice called again.

*\*Brahm!\**

*No, I am not Brahm.*

*-And I am not Sephirah.-*

Her voice was matched by that of the woman on the altar.

*We are Orenda.*

*-We are Orenda.-*

The white king reached for them, his open mouth screaming words of silent rage.

Then Orenda, the twin-souled woman, was pulled into the blinding light.

\*\*\*

Paine woke to a throbbing headache and found himself prostrate on a ramshackle cart that shifted forward at jerky intervals. Fang lay beside him. She barked.

Paine grabbed his head and groaned. "Not so loud."

She then soaked his face with a tongue that smelled faintly of rotten meat.

Great Bear's smiling face appeared next to the cart, riding on his massive Clydesdale.

"Welcome back, Little Badger. How do you feel?" The large man's eyes flickered with concern. Paine caught something else there as well.

*Fear?*

"What happened?" he moaned, trying to think of the last thing he remembered. Then it hit him, in a wave of regret. "Oh god, what did I do? Is anyone hurt?"

Great Bear offered him a smile, conciliatory, but reassuring. "Not too badly."

Truitt appeared beside him. His face was solemn.

"Where did you learn that?" he asked. His voice was like steel.

The cart hit a hard bump and lurched. Paine reached for his head again. "Learn what?"

"To control so many souls; to sever the mind control of the Wormwood. Five years ago, we almost killed Diarmuid doing the same thing."

Visions of the events flashed in his mind. He thought of the voice that once again guided him. And then of the souls of the dead. They had wanted blood. He immediately groped at his skin. All seemed whole.

*Had they not asked their price of him yet again?*

Paine shivered. "I thought I was going to die. What happened to the Hunter?"

Great Bear rode in closer. "She remembers almost nothing, except her name — Mira. She has been sleeping when she hasn't been sobbing. The Clan Mother gave her some tea to help her rest."

"She doesn't remember anything?"

Truitt shook his head. "It was the same with Diarmuid when he was freed. Her memory will return with time."

Great Bear cleared his throat. "You should get some more rest. We won't be stopping for some time yet. We are trying to keep ahead of the Hunters before they finish crossing the Mississippi. So far there has been no sign of the demons."

Paine noticed that he was naked under the blanket. He lay upon straw and it, as well as he, was covered in his own filth.

"How long have I been out?"

"Three days. Gregor called it a coma, and said you would wake when you were ready."

"What is that?"

Truitt shrugged. "We call it Walking the Forgotten Realm. You have to choose to come back to the world of the living, otherwise you waste away and remain there forever."

Fatigue settled on Paine in thick waves. "Did you see anyone else near me? There was a voice in my head, someone helping me." Great Bear looked pensive for a moment before answering. "There was no one. The Clan Mother stood beside you for a time, but the moment Alwhin fell, she ran to help her."

The two then left Paine to his rest.

He drifted off, not caring about how unclean he was. He woke from time to time, passing the day in a dreamless slumber. When he finally rose the sun sat on the edge of the horizon, casting an orange glow on the evening clouds. Fang wagged her tail as he sat up.

"Well, it is good to see you up." Little Doe stood beside the cart, her weathered face smiling. They were no longer moving. "Come, Little Badger. You'll get stiff if you remain there much longer."

She offered her hand as he stepped down from the cart. His legs trembled.

"How do you feel?"

His stomach growled. "Hungry."

"We are about to eat, so you are just in time."

She led him to a stream so that he could clean himself and offered him the clothing of her people, all made from animal hides. They were comfortable, but did not breathe well. He did not want to offend her, but decided at the first opportunity he would get into some pants and a shirt that were not made of something that once had hooved feet.

Once clean she took him to a large clearing where the entire congregation gathered. The sounds of music filled the air. It was the first time Paine heard anything musical or happy in what seemed a lifetime. Everyone busied themselves mending broken or worn items, cooking, practicing their aim, or wrestling. Fang wandered into the brush, and Puck took her place at his side.

"Paine ... all right?"

Paine put his arm around Puck's shoulder. "I'm fine. You?"

Puck nodded, a faint smile decorating his simple face. Yet his eyes hesitated.

The Clan Mother smiled at the two of them. "Puck has been avoiding Mira."

Puck blushed. "No trust ... Hunter. She bad."

If Puck was right, then Paine would see to it that she never abducted anyone again. He wondered if he should have killed her.

*Would anyone have noticed, or even cared?*

However, he wanted to learn of the deal she made with the Westwood and who had ordered his parents' death, so he felt it best he had let her live.

*At least for now.*

As they approached the gathering, a few members stopped what they were doing to look in Paine's direction. The rest continued about their business, oblivious to his presence. Those that gawked at him seemed more than worried. Paine clasped the Clan Mother's hand for support. He gripped harder when he saw a crest of blonde hair filing through the crowd, a head taller than most.

*The Witch Hunter.*

Her gaze was cast to the ground, low and humble, as she sped towards Paine. His feet felt glued to the ground. A mix of emotions coursed through him as the Hunter approached. His throat was dry as a summer's drought. Puck took two steps back, head lowered.

The Hunter stopped suddenly before Paine, but could not look into his eyes. Her gaze darted all over, avoiding his own.

"Thank you," she muttered. Sobs escaped her lips, and she fell to the ground before him. Paine winced as she stroked his boots. Something inside him tried to surface once more. It yearned to make her suffer.

He beat it down.

She repeatedly thanked him as she wept. She rocked back and forth, cradling herself.

Nissamin ran over to the Hunter and guided her away. Paine stood frozen. Here was the woman who had hunted him, fierce and determined in her quarry, sobbing at his feet. Yet now she was like Diarmuid; free where she was once subdued by the Wormwood. He had seen himself how it had bonded to her soul. Could he still fault her?

His fists clenched in anger and frustration. He knew not how to feel.

The Clan Mother squeezed his hand. "Are you all right, Little Badger?"

Puck had a nervous look set upon his face.

Paine hesitated, then nodded. "Puck?"

Despite his simple mind, Puck knew hatred. Paine sensed it, like a warm fire. The young man remained silent.

The Clan Mother stepped between the two of them, one arm in each. "Come. Let's get some food."

Heading towards the fire, Paine was greeted and patted on the back by many, but all held a brief flicker of hesitation in their eyes. The three strode towards Great Bear and Truitt, seated together on the ground. He sat with them, and they inquired about his health. He assured them he was fine as the Clan Mother brought him some food. She then left him in their care.

They sat around the fire listening to tales well into the evening before two Nymphs rose and took the attention of the crowd. The crackling of the fire echoed through the silence.

Nodding to each other, the shorter, dark-haired one hummed, a low vibrating pitch. The second joined her, her voice an octave higher, in harmony with the first. It was a haunting song and the hairs on Paine's neck bristled as he listened. He heard the words, and fingered the stone that hung about his neck. It sat still. Octave for octave, their voices rose, the two blending, slow and rhythmic.

Before long, three Haudenosaunee drummed with the song. The two women smiled, and sang with even more fervor. They climbed further, the melody and harmony crawling under Paine's skin. His heart raced, the song becoming a part of him. His eyes watered.

Paine held his breath, his ears afraid to drown out even one note, his heart fearing to beat. He was entranced. The song climaxed, and more drums joined in. Paine closed his eyes and let the music sweep him away. His mind's eye saw a land of great trees and unearthly beauty, filled with beings of light, and crystal waters. But the vision waned as the song slowed, the drums faded, and the voices hummed to silence.

Paine exhaled. "Wow."

Truitt leaned over. "That was sung in a language that is rarely spoken."

Paine thought of the tablet in Lindhome. Reaching into the pouch at his side, he pulled out the folded parchment. "Like this?"

Puck leaned over. "What ...that?"

Truitt pored over the parchment and held it away from Puck's curious eyes. "Where did you get this?"

"I think it is from my birth parents. It is in the same writing that was on the tablet in Lindhome."

Truitt leaned in close. His firmness dissolved into concern. "What tablet?"

Paine lowered his voice. "The one with the statues around it."

Truitt rose. His face still held a solemn look, but his eyes showed he was agitated. "Come with me."

Paine followed the man away from the fire as their shadows danced before them. They walked to edge of the camp, Truitt ushering him with a strong hand.

"How did you see the writing on the tablet? Only one woman was able to see it among the Rebellion, and she's dead."

Paine shrugged.

"And Alwhin said nothing of this?"

"She said that no one could read it." In the distance, he heard two other women singing, twins.

"You don't understand. It's not a matter of reading it. No one can even see the writing. It's only seen by the souls of those that are descended from its creators. And there are only ever three of them in existence at a time."

"So how can I?"

"I don't know, but no one among the Rebellion can. That is why we were never able to decipher the use of the Tablet. It is said it can track the dead and the use of necromancy, anywhere in the world. The Firstborn stole it from the Sidhe and used it for centuries to fight the armies of the Dark One, but then used it against the others to enslave them. Its theft from Valbain started the Rebellion, and it has remained hidden in Lindhome since its founding." His face raged. "Now the demons have taken it."

"Why didn't Alwhin say something to me?"

"I don't know." Truitt cast his glance warily about, studying the patch of box elder that lay east of them for a time. "I can think of only one thing," he said.

Paine stared at the man and his pointed ears, so much like Lya's.

"She didn't want anyone to know who you are."

"What do you mean?"

"Like I said, only Sephirah could see the writing, and the souls that can read it are almost always descended from the previous generation, but there can only ever be three in existence."

Paine blinked.

*Could it be true?*

"That means Sephirah was your mother."

"And what about Lya?"

"Was she able to see the writing?"

And Paine thought back to the events of that day and even to the parchment that Truitt passed back to him. She had only ever focused on the side with the spell.

*Could she read it?*

"I don't know."

## Chapter 18

Friar John trekked through the forest, working his way downstream to where the waters stagnated. A sliver of moon hung in the distant sky, close to the horizon. The skies would darken soon and John hurried his pace. It was not a place to be left without light. In this place would lay a fiend that could aid him; something that lived between the worlds of the living and the dead; one that would have the power to work with the souls of the deceased on his behalf. But it was also one that, if hungered enough, would take his life without question.

He walked a lightly treaded path. Others had come before him, beseeching the aid of the ghoul that resided in such a dismal place, but as he looked at the growth along the way, he knew that few had been fool enough to try. It was a risk, he knew, but one worth the taking.

Young maples and beech twisted and curved their way upward; fighting with each other to reach for what little light came through the canopy above. It was a dark place, filled with a stench that lingered and worsened with each step. Dead things lay here, those whose bones hadn't yet sunk to the bottom of the swamp. The muddy path before him led only in one direction, deeper into the wetness.

His hardened heart thought little of his journey to this point. He concentrated only on the task at hand and how he would find the Beast. And then, once found, commit the act he needed to. The question before him was twofold; how to find the Beast, and how to remain alive after killing him. The latter was where the ghoul came into play. He would ask its aid for escape. The former was another matter entirely, but with patience he would find a way. He always did.

John stopped.

Before him lay what he looked for — a bog. The dead trees rose from the still waters like crooked fingers. Nothing moved here and there was little to hear aside from his own breathing. He looked into the waters and found leeches near the bottom. This was the place.

John backed up a few steps, ensuring that he stood upon solid earth and grabbed a stick from the ground. He drew a circle about him. Within the circle, he drew the pentagram and then symbols of protection. He wasn't taking any chances with a creature that was capable of snatching his soul from his body. He double-checked his work. All was set.

Then he cited the incantation that would drag the ghoul from the depths of the bog. He waited and watched as the leeches stirred under him. Their movements were slow, but their widdershins pattern indicated they sensed what was coming. Then the waters before him bubbled as something rose from the bog. Its legs and feet were somehow secured to the bed of the bog, like a trunk made of entwined reeds. Long thin arms twisted out of its bent body and hung down to barely touch the surface of the waters. Its face and hair were obscured by the shawl of peat that cloaked it. Around its neck it wore the shrunken skulls of the others that had come before him. Some were still fresh.

The ghoul towered over John, looking down upon him. It spat bog water when it spoke and its voice was a wailing that made John's neck muscles tense.

"What price are you willing to pay, heretic?"

*Heretic?*

John wiped the moisture from his face. "I have this." He held up the urn within which was trapped the soul of the young woman. He placed it outside the circle, careful to keep his hands within the protective barrier.

The ghoul plucked it from the ground with its misshapen fingers. It opened the urn and inhaled the soul that was within. John could swear he heard the woman screaming.

"This soul is tainted."

He thought of the alleyway and the man that had lurked there. "Then I will deliver another afterwards."

"What you have given is not worth half the tithe. For what you ask, I want the soul you hunt. That will fulfill me for years."



John knew better than to ask how it knew what he wanted. He'd worked with these kinds of devils before. "That soul has another purpose."

The ghoulish gurgled. John could not tell if it was laughter or irritation.

"What you ask for will require much. The tithe is greater. I need something more substantial than the souls of whores."

"Then name your price."

The beast leaned down and crossed the barrier. John sucked in his breath. The thing should not have been able to enter the circle. His hands froze and he waited as it traced its fingers along his chest. It gestured some form of spell or hex over his heart and then pulled back into the waters.

"I want something more succulent. Unless you can find something more pure than this tasteless refuse, I think your own will do fine."

John paused. He wondered what he would find that was pure enough to satisfy the appetite of this thing. Meega was now lost, and he felt ashamed that she had come first to his mind. Then he thought of another, one who was naïve and almost as pure as the little girl. The regret of it was temporary and then John nodded.

"Done."

"Will you accept the assurance?" it asked and plucked a leech from the bowels of the marsh.

John rolled up his sleeve and held his arm forth. He remained within the circle to see if it would cross the barrier once more. It did and it chuckled as if reading his thoughts.

"You are not what you once were, heretic. You have grown weak."

With its slick fingers it seized his arm and placed the soul leech upon his skin. As the thing bit into him and latched unto his soul the ghoulish shuddered.

"You will do fine," it said. It released him and the waters from its hands anointed John's head.

It recoiled back into the bog once more.

John rolled down his sleeve. He would bandage it later.

"You will deliver what I need?"

The creature nodded. "You will have aid when you need it. You know what to do."

"How long after you fulfill the bargain will I be held accountable?"

The creature shrunk into the bog. "Sunset of the very day."

Less than a day after the deed to get Miguel's soul.

"That's not a lot of time," he said.

The ghoulish said nothing and slid back into the waters.

\*\*\*

Sunshine beamed through a window, stabbing Brahm's eyes. She rubbed at them. They were dried and caked. She struggled to rise, feeling unbelievably weak.

A young woman sat beside her in a chair of lumpy, brown cushions. Her face was easily distinguishable.

There was something else about her and Brahm's memory grappled to recall. The girl did not smile, just offered a blank stare. And then she remembered. She knew this girl.

"Lya."

The girl nodded. "How do you feel?"

Brahm groaned. "Rough. You?" She stared at the girl's features, and something niggled at her, as if she was supposed to remember something. She had a sudden feeling of unsurpassed love for this girl. Then it was gone like a puff of smoke. She paused, waiting for her second soul within her to scream inside her head, but there was nothing.

Lya then offered a timid smile. "Good." She cocked her head to the side. "You look troubled."

Brahm felt her face flush. She had been staring. "I'm sorry. You look like someone." There was no

further doubt in her mind.

It was her daughter; the woman whose soul was bound with her own.

But there was something different about that woman's presence. It seemed no longer invasive, but rather a part of her, and it scared Brahm even worse. As she looked at Lya, a part of her felt like this was her own daughter.

*I've got to get this thing out of me before I become her.*

Brahm looked around the room. Thin, yellow curtains framed a small window, allowing the morning sun entry into the otherwise dreary room. Her pack rested on a scratched and tilted table on the other side of the bed. The air in the room tasted stale and smelled of urine and shit.

"Where are the others?"

"Diarmuid is getting supplies with White Feather."

Brahm laid her head back down. "Where are we?"

"We're on the western shores of the Mississippi, in a town called Bridgeport."

Brahm put her hand to her throbbing head. "How long have I been out?"

"Four days. You were gone pretty deep." The girl bit her lip.

"What do you mean?"

"I can't explain it. You were not sleeping, and not unconscious. It was like your soul was lost."

"It sounds like a coma. Gregor used that word once when we nearly lost Farin to the wolfen." She peered about the room trying to fake her interest in other objects while taking note of Lya's hand. It was bandaged, but the blood that stained it was fresh. "How did you get me here?"

Lya leaned back, her chair creaking. "You can thank White Feather for that. He strapped you to himself and rode on Roan's back. He never left your side."

Brahm stirred, pulling back the thin blankets to rise. She was naked, but not soiled.

"I don't suppose I have any clean clothes."

Lya skirted the bed and retrieved the pack. "Your other clothes are ruined. This is all that was left."

Brahm rose and steadied herself on legs that wobbled, gripping the bedpost to find balance. She dressed slowly, her mind still drifting through haze. She stepped forward, but her legs shook. "Can you help me out of this room? I need to eat."

Lya took her arm with a firm grip. "White Feather has been feeding and cleaning you. He insisted you were not to get out of bed without him."

She groaned. "I'm not some child to be coddled."

"But White Feather said—"

Brahm cut her off with a quick look.

The grip tightened. "You know what's best."

They headed down a drafty corridor and a worn staircase to the common room of the inn. Brahm leaned on Lya's shoulder more than she would have liked. The girl did not flinch and seemed to take her weight with ease.

The common room was small, and Brahm sat at the first available table. The smell of bacon lingered on the air. The innkeeper muttered a hasty greeting and left her to gorge on stale bread and cold, greasy strips of fried pork. Brahm barely took time to breathe between mouthfuls.

Lya sipped at a glass of pale liquid that Brahm could smell over the bacon — moonshine.

"White Feather had to feed you mush and water," she said.

With her mouth still full Brahm nodded. "I am in his debt."

"He seems quite fond of you," she said and put the glass on the table.

Brahm snatched it and gulped the remainder of the liquid back, letting it burn its way down. She set it back on the table in front of her.

She changed the subject.

"How are you feeling? Did you know we were following you?"

Lya eyed the glass and then nodded. "I hadn't realized you had been following Talon."

“Without her, we would have had a hard time following you.” She paused, her mind still struggling for clarity. “Do you know why the Hunters are gathered?”

“They thought I was from Lindhome and wanted to know about their weaknesses. They kept asking how to use the Soulstone Tablet. Does that mean anything to you?”

Brahm hung her head.

*The Soulstone Tablet.*

She stared into the blueness of Lya's eyes, and there she found traces of the Firstborn-woman she knew was her mother.

“It is said to be a tablet of great power, one that can track souls and the use of witchcraft anywhere in the world. The Confederation tried to get their hands on it once, but failed.”

Lya bit her lip. “I’ve heard that. Then they would be able to find every witch and necromancer in the land.”

Brahm nodded. “But I heard from the Lastborn there is writing on it that only three souls—“ Her mouth suddenly clamped shut. Brahm couldn’t say why that was, something inside her was telling her to keep quiet. She followed its advice.

From the corner of her eye a squat, bearded man watched them. He sat behind a table some distance off and picked up his stein. Taking a long draught that dribbled down his unkempt beard, he turned from her gaze.

Lya was clutching at her chest briefly, her usually taciturn look now one of brief, but irritated occupation.

“I need fresh air,” Brahm said.

Lya did not object and they made their way out to the muddy road of the town.

Bridgeport had the appearance of most towns with the single exception of a massive, white-walled church that stood at the top of the hill at the end of the road. Its doors were flung wide open as if to welcome one and all.

The rest of the town appeared meek and humble in its presence. A few crabapple trees lined the street, their flowers long bloomed and lost to the winds. The dirt road was a thick carpet of mud that stretched across the town, the result of recent rains. The lingering moisture still sat on the air.

Lya pulled up the hood of her tunic and Brahm slid it back off her head.

“Do not cover up. You need to be careful, but don't make it appear as if you are hiding. It will gather more attention. Have you already worn your hood around the town?”

Lya shook her head. “After we arrived last night, Diarmuid told me to remain with you and not to leave the inn.”

Brahm nodded. “Then perhaps things in this town are not too friendly. We should go back.”

As the words fell from her lips, Diarmuid rounded the corner, with White Feather in tow. The Haudenosaunee ran to Brahm. His embrace almost knocked the air out of her.

“Orenda.” The name escaped his lips in a whisper.

For a brief moment she thought he might kiss her, so she returned his fierce hug before he had the chance.

He let her go, but did not step back. “It is good to see you up again. Are you all right?”

“Yes, thanks to you. I am in your debt.”

“You owe me nothing. I had a chance to have my arms around you for days. What more could I ask?” The ridiculous grin was planted on his face. Strangely, a similar one stretched across her own. She shook it off.

“Hi, my name is Diarmuid.” With a wink, the pepper-haired man extended his hand.

Brahm laughed and pulled him close. “It’s good to see you too.”

White Feather still stood close, one arm extended as if to steady her. His eyes sagged with concern.

“I’m fine,” she reassured him.

He took a small step back, but the look lingered. "What happened to you?"

"I pushed myself too hard. Soul Running takes a lot out of me. I would have passed out sooner had Night not done something to me." The confused look on their faces was enough for her to realize she should continue. "I'm not sure what he did, but he helped me to keep going. I feel rested now." The lie escaped her mouth so easily she thought she might laugh. "I just hope I won't have to do that again. I can't overindulge."

Lya eyes looked eager. "What talent is this?"

"I don't know what it is. I have never met anyone with this skill."

*Yet there was one, one who was watching.*

"I thought I felt you while I was amongst the Confederation army," she said.

Diarmuid looked down the road. "We should get Lya back inside."

As they made their way back, Brahm's legs failed her, buckling under a wave of fatigue. She felt as if she'd been suddenly shoved from behind and tripped forward. She fell into the mud, slicing her palm open on a sharp stone that protruded from the ground. Her knee twisted, the pain of it soaring up her leg. Brahm moaned.

"Orenda!" White Feather pulled her to her feet. Small trickles of blood stained the muddied ground.

Brahm checked her footing and hobbled on her good leg. White Feather ripped a piece of his shirt and bound her hand. Diarmuid then led them back to the inn.

White Feather offered to carry her up the stairs. Though she refused the offer, she was forced to accede to at least an arm around her waist. He then left her in Lya's care at the girl's insistence.

In her room, Lya washed Brahm's hand in the basin and put a salve on it that stopped the bleeding. She then held the hand to her lips and muttered some words over it. The wound warmed, to the point Brahm almost jerked her hand away. When she finished Brahm no longer felt the pain from it. Lya bandaged it and knelt at Brahm's feet. She rolled up the ripped pant leg and her pale, white hands ran over the surface of the knee. At first her hands were cold, like she was dead. Over time and mumbled chants they warmed. She whispered strange words over the leg and rocked. The knee continued to warm and then grew hot. Lya continued to rock, her head bobbing back and forth, her hands running over the knee. Searing heat filled Brahm's leg, penetrating to the bone and she bit back her scream. Then the pain receded and Lya sat still.

Brahm rose and tested her weight upon her leg. "There is almost no pain now. Where did you learn that?"

Lya shrugged. "I had a book growing up — a grimoire of spells."

"It is a rare talent. Thank you." Brahm took stock of her clothes, covered in mud. "I need to get out of these. Where is my pack?"

"What you are wearing is the last of the clothing you had. Everything else was lost or thrown away while on the run."

A nervous twinge struck her. "What about the kahbeth?"

A spider crawled across Lya's hand. She crushed it between her fingers. "Those were strapped to White Feather's back. They're over there, on the other side of the bed. I can sense the rage in them."

Brahm nodded at the glittering sight of them, relieved. She looked about the room, with its lumpy bed. "What am I going to wear?"

The girl clutched the bed and pulled herself up. "You should take a bath. I'll check with the inn keeper and bring some clothes."

Lya left her and Brahm descended the stairs to the musty bathing room. With kettles of hot water that warmed over a wood-burning stove, she filled the tub. She tossed in a few rose petals to take away the smell of the mud and grime. After a quick whiff of her body, she decided she had better add a few more.

The hot water soaked away her hurts, and Brahm rubbed her muscles. Days of little use and

already her legs and arms were feeling like mush. The water turned lukewarm and she climbed out of the tub, careful not to slip on the floor. Another whiff of her body and she exhaled.

*Too many rose petals.*

Now she smelled like an ugly whore.

Brahm dressed in a garment that Lya had left for her. It had taken her quite some time to arrive with it, but in the end all she managed to acquire was a thin violet dress that was something close to cheesecloth. Brahm muttered obscenities as she slipped it over her head. It hugged her body.

Brahm abhorred most things feminine. Yet as she stared at her reflection in the mirror, she was forced to admit she cleaned up fairly well.

She shuffled to the common room, gripping the wall for support, where she found the others waiting. Diarmuid and White Feather were nursing a large mug of ale each and Lya now sipped at a glass of a dark red liquid. Brahm asked for ale as well and laughed at the unpleasant look she received from the barmaid. She supposed she did not appear the ale-drinking type at the moment.

White Feather rose as she approached the table and she smiled inwardly at the look on his face.

*If his eyes open any wider, they'll fall out.*

He had never seen her in anything so form-fitting, and the dress accentuated every curve she had. She sat with her ale and the talk stopped.

"What? Never seen a dress before?"

Both men were speechless.

Brahm knew Diarmuid had no reason to stare. He was probably surprised at the sight of her. White Feather was another matter. His eyes shifted, as if not knowing where to put them.

"Well, I can see I am going to have to buy some new clothing, as this doesn't seem to be very popular."

Diarmuid laughed. "You look great. You've just never looked so ... feminine."

White Feather cleared his throat. "You look very nice." He choked on the rest of his words, grabbing his ale and taking a hard swallow.

His comment lacked the usual insinuation and Brahm smiled.

"Thank you."

An assortment of characters filled the establishment, a low hum of chatter filling the air. Brahm sipped her ale. The foursome talked of little as they sat, listening instead to bits of conversation that flitted about the room. After a time, Brahm felt a sickness at the talk. Two men in the corner talked of the Confederation attacking the monsters in the Westwood and that Haven was destroyed by something they had conjured in the night. There was also mention that none could cross the Mississippi at the moment, under Confederation orders. Any ship caught crossing without the Confederation's permission would be sunk without question.

Others muttered the same. Diarmuid and White Feather had a drawn look upon their faces that she knew was a match for her own. When the food arrived, she pushed her plate away, feeling she might retch. There was a powerful feeling in her gut.

She looked around. Outside the window stood ten horses, all bearing the emblem of the Confederation Guard. Then she remembered the little man she saw previously, and with the recognition of him came horror.

*Imp!*

"We have to leave. Now. Get up quietly."

She did not wait for the others to respond and rose from the table. Her legs wobbled and she clutched White Feather for support. The feeling in her stomach worsened. The others did not question and rose, but too late. Into the common room marched ten guards, armed with swords. At their lead was a tall, black-skinned man with eyes that matched Brahm's. The crest on his cloak showed him to be a captain of the Confederation Guard. She faced his hard stare.

Brahm heard a heavy thud beside her. Lya was collapsed on the ground. Behind the girl, upon a

chair, stood the stubby man she saw with the beer earlier. He gripped an iron pot in his fat little hand.

Brahm knelt to grab Lya, feeling for the back of her head. She was relieved to find it undamaged.

“Imp, I should have known it was you. The beard does not suit you.”

He took a clumsy bow. “It's been a long time, my lady.”

White Feather looked at Brahm and then back to the tall man at the door, a look of disbelief on his face.

The captain marched forward, staring down at her.

“Brahm. Not a joyous reunion, is it?” He looked at Lya. “Well, I see you have our runaway. God has smiled upon me this day.”

Diarmuid and White Feather held knife and dagger. Brahm's mouth was agape. In all her years, she never thought she would be faced with this.

*Mason.*

“Brahm,” Diarmuid said with a slow, cautious tone. “Is this who I think it is?”

She gulped down a knot in her throat. “Yes. It's my brother.”

## Chapter 19

Brahm came to, her head pounding. The sounds of rushing water inundated her ears, as did the steady creaking of wood. Above her, beams crisscrossed the ceiling, and she traced their path to the smooth curved walls of the ship in which she found herself imprisoned. Her head throbbed as she sat up, but it was no more painful than her rope-bound wrists and ankles. They itched and burned.

She rolled to her side. Both White Feather and Diarmuid lay close to the wall, unconscious. Lya was not in the room with them. Brahm listened to the groaning of the ship, and her mind sailed through the memories of what had happened.

Her brother had become much better with a sword than she had ever thought possible. After a short skirmish, he disarmed Diarmuid. And White Feather had been no match for nine Confederation Guards. She closed her eyes as the memory of it stung. She had been useless, barely able to stand, let alone fight. And in that fucking dress, without weapons, she might as well have knelt at her brother's feet. She still felt the pain from the blow he had dealt to her at the back of the head. She remembered the look in his eyes when he had struck her. It hurt him to capture her, but the pain that lingered in his eyes was from the wound she had inflicted when she left his side so long ago.

She looked at White Feather. As she stared at his long frame huddled on the floor she wanted to reach over and touch him.

He shuffled and rolled towards her.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He groaned, and nodded. "You?"

"I've seen better days."

His eyes hinted at anger. "He's your brother?"

"Yes."

"Your brother is Captain of the Confederation Guard?"

She sighed. This is where it would get painful. "Yes," she said, "but he wasn't always. He used to be second in command to me." She braced herself for a torrent of anger.

His eyes seethed for a moment before he spoke in a low hiss. "So the rumors were true. You used to be one of them."

She swallowed the knot in her throat. "Yes."

"And to think I ... to think ... did Gray Wolf know?"

Brahm nodded. "She took that secret to her grave."

"Is it also true you killed her and Two Moon's family?"

Brahm shook her head and her eyes welled up. "No. I could never have harmed her. She died trying to save Two Moon's family. I begged her not to go with them that day, but they left before I woke. I tracked them to find the wolfen over Gray Wolf. They fled as I approached. Two Moon came out of the woods later to find me kneeling over her dead body and those of his slain parents."

"How do I know you're not lying?" He turned his head away. "Does anyone else know?"

"Diarmuid, Gregor, your mother, and now the Hoyaneh."

His face reddened. "Were you planning on telling me?" His voice was low, disappointed.

The tears ran. "I thought the Hoyaneh would tell you before we left." She paused, trying to find his eyes, but he averted his gaze. "I'm sorry. I should have told you long ago."

He sat in silent disapproval for a time, and Diarmuid stirred. His face was cut and bruised. Mason had shown him little mercy.

The pepper-haired man groaned. "Ugh. I feel like hell. Are you two okay?"

Brahm nodded and dried the tears on the shreds of her dress.

White Feather remained silent.

"Where's Lya?"

The sound of footsteps approaching set them all to silence. Keys rattled outside the door. It

groaned as Mason opened it. A young man followed him with a small pail and rag in hand.

Mason looked them over. "Clean him up," he ordered, and the youth ran to wash the dried blood that was caked to Diarmuid's face. His eye was swollen and angry. When the young man finished, Mason ordered him out.

He walked the perimeter of the hold, his polished knee-high boots clacking on the wooden floor. "Traitors are tried before the High Court and hanged if found guilty. Brahm, your former service to the Confederation may gain you some sympathy, but treason is punishable by death. I am sorry I found you. I hoped we would never meet again. I have no desire to see you hang, but justice must be served." He struggled to keep his face without expression, but sorrow lingered in his eyes. He adjusted his jacket and flicked something off his shoulder.

She remembered being like that once. It was her whole life, everything she stood for. She was so principled and so regimented then.

*Until the night she met Sephirah.*

"Where's Lya?" she asked.

Mason continued stalking the perimeter. "She will bear witness to your trial so she can remember the price of rebelling against the Confederation, then we will make her one of our own. I've heard interesting things about her abilities. She'll make a good addition to our ranks. We hoped to take that brother of hers as well, but it was not him waiting in the bushes like Breland had hoped. He made a grave error in letting you out with those Hunters, but his actions have been redeemed."

Brahm was stunned. "You let her go as bait?"

Diarmuid's eyes raged. He fiddled with the bandage on his arm. "Paine would be of little use to you."

"It does not matter. The Senator has ordered him to be taken alive. His usefulness will be determined later." He paused for a moment. "What is interesting is how once you took their mother, I now have the daughter."

Brahm's brave look slipped into one of disappointment.

"Did you think I wouldn't know?" His eyes were unreadable. "You haven't told her, have you? You haven't told her how you killed her mother? How you led an ambush against a band of half-breed rebels and Haudenosaunee, and killed them for conspiring against the Confederation?"

Brahm hung her head as White Feather's eyes bored through her. The ship's creaking grew louder.

"Brahm, you shame me. I thought you had at least maintained your integrity. Did you lie your way into Haven?"

"No," she said. "Haven knows."

"And they still took you in —the Wendigo? And your Haudenosaunee friends; it would seem they didn't know."

White Feather turned his gaze from her.

"They know," she muttered.

"And what about the girl?"

Brahm's shame was a weight around her neck. "I have not told her."

Again the ship groaned and tilted to the left. Brahm adjusted her position to keep from sliding.

"You killed fifty of our people." White Feather's voice was coated in rage. "You killed them all. Our people. And the children you stole in the night."

Brahm nodded her head, her stomach reeling. She felt nauseous.

Mason rose. "I must leave you now."

Brahm left her head hanging on her chest as the sound of Mason's boots stepped out the door. She never felt so alone as she did in that moment. She hated herself for who she had been, for what she had done, and for those she had killed. And all the children she had taken who now had become the Hunters that terrorized them.

Diarmuid slid over to her. "Tell him everything."



How many times would she have to relive this? When would it be over?

She sighed. "When Mason and I were young, our parents owned a vineyard outside New Memphis. We were sent off to a Confederation school at a young age. We were taught how witchcraft destroyed us in the Witch Wars and how we should turn in all those that wielded it. They were a menace to be destroyed.

"In time, both Mason and I showed great physical prowess and one of the instructors decided we should be taken for training. Our parents were thrilled. So, most of our time was spent learning to become the best of the Confederation Guard. What we didn't realize was we were continually being fed Confederation propaganda. I can see it now, but couldn't see it to save my life back then. I suspect Mason still doesn't see it.

"Eventually I became head of the Guard, and Mason was my second in command. Our network of spies told us of a secret meeting that was to take place between Haven, the Haudenosaunee and the Lastborn. We suspected for some time they were planning on waging a war against the Confederation. It was rumored they brought with them a weapon of incredible power, but we never found it after they were vanquished. We came upon them in the night and killed many in their sleep before they had a chance to raise an alarm. I stood as their judge and executioner."

White Feather hung his head, his eyes moist with pain and anger.

"Among those present was a woman who stood to face me. She had Lya's eyes and dark hair — her mother. I drove my sword through her before she could summon anything to aid her." Brahm kept the rest to herself, remembering the feeling that seeped into her as the woman gripped her with hands of iron, smearing her own blood on Brahm's fingers and face. She could still taste her blood and the words she had whispered still haunted her.

*My soul to your soul. We are one, Soul Runner.*

If the woman was capable of forcing her own soul into Brahm's, what else was she capable of? *Could she eventually take over her body?*

"I cannot tell you how sorry I am," she said, pushing the thought from her mind. "I was another person then."

She looked to White Feather. "Gray Wolf forgave me and my past. Though I do not deserve it, I ask the same of you."

White Feather continued in his silent rebuke.

The ship groaned and Brahm's head sagged. Her shoulders heaved and guilt streamed down her face in tears that dripped into the dark violet of her torn dress. Strangely her second soul was not screaming. Instead Sephirah's soul held Brahm's in her own and they wept together.

## Chapter 20

Cherry clouds streaked the late evening sky, and a Confederation ship set sail from the docks. A Firstborn Lord, or what was left of him, watched as the seed of his love drifted south along the currents of the Mississippi. The wooden ship slipped through the waters, like his sanity through his fingers.

*Seventeen. Seventeen. Seventeen.*

He shook his head, and pulled his hood over his black, matted locks. In some dark recess of his mind, he remembered his former life. Dīor, heir to the throne of Valbain. He thought of the woman he had loved, of the woman he had sacrificed everything for. His throne, his power, his life. His heart was tainted with her loss.

He thought of the child she bore him, and he watched as the babe he once held in his arms sailed downriver.

*I will find her trail again.*

He had tracked them since he was freed of the Westwood's grasp; his daughter and the dark-skinned woman.

*The same woman that butchered my Sephirah.*

He thought back to Sephirah's death, and how he had failed to save her, how he had been powerless to stop it. His bitter heart twisted with agony.

*Seventeen. Seventeen. Seventeen.*

He shook his head again, and watched as the ship sailed on. He recalled his ill-fated journey through the Westwood after Sephirah's death, no longer fearing what the half-breeds and mutants of Lindhome might do to one of the Overlords of Valbain; no longer afraid for his life. For what was life without Sephirah? And in that despair, the Westwood had taken him, knowing him for who he was, and had probed him for endless years.

*Seventeen. Seventeen. Seventeen.*

Seventeen years the Westwood tormented him, reaching with its sinister claws into the depths of his soul. It had sifted little from him. He had refused to let Sephirah's death be in vain. He held out, with a resolve he never thought he had. And it was while trapped by the Westwood, lost in the agony of time that he had sensed his daughter's blood spilling on the ground, rekindling something within him. He recognized her power and for the first time in seventeen years hope dangled before him. Yet the Westwood had sensed that hope and mocked him. It would have her, it would take her, it would make her its own.

He also felt the boy, Lya's half-twin. And he perceived the Westwood's loathing and insatiable desire for him as well. Dīor shuddered. That was just before the Westwood devoured Lindhome. It had been his chance to escape and he took it, using the Westwood's own power to slip through its grasp. For days afterwards he wandered and when he had stitched up what was left of his unraveling sanity, the trail of his daughter was more than a week old.

Dīor sniffed at the air, the musty smell of his own hair tickling his nose. The trail had taken him far, north of Lindhome and then south once more. He followed through marshes and swamps where he cavorted with the undead and half-men that dwelt in their depths, he swept past towns and villages and through the remains of the Confederation camp where he heard rumor of the Westwood moving — a dark curtain of death and despair that prowled the land. Through it all his thoughts dwelt upon his daughter.

He thought perhaps the Westwood might come for him; it hadn't taken everything from him, but that thought was brief. He knew it hunted much bigger prey than he. The Firstborn Lord chuckled, wondering how the Lastborn would fare against the Westwood now that it was free.

*No matter.*

Dīor's attention turned as Confederation soldiers approached. He slipped into the shadows, becoming one with the darkness. The Hunters passed, failing to notice him, nor sense the darkness that

shrouded him.

*Kill. Kill. Kill.*

His fingers danced along the handle of the dagger that hung at his side. Yet he let the Hunters pass, and focused his attention once more on the sailing ship.

*Lya.*

He stirred from the shadows and slunk into the forest, following the Mississippi.

*I come for you, my child.*

\*\*\*

Brahm sat on the deck of The Lady Maiden, the wind stroking her bare scalp. Lya sat next to her, in lighter chains than the ones that shackled Brahm to the rigging. Mason must have assumed that she posed little threat to him.

Her brother stood behind them as guard, his gaze never meeting hers. His anger was still palpable. She faced back to the water, his rejection taking more of a bite from her than she thought possible. She felt his shame of her, but she held her head high.

*His shame is not mine.*

Lya was absent with her thoughts. Mason had informed the girl of Sephirah's death; something Brahm had wished he had left for her to do. He obviously felt it his duty. Regardless, Lya asked to join Brahm on the deck and for some reason Mason was inclined to oblige.

Lya had shown neither kindness nor cruelty, but Brahm accepted her company as a good sign. The guilt of it bore through her heart. She considered telling the girl the rest of the story; about whose soul resided with her own.

*Perhaps it would ease the guilt.*

She held her tongue.

White Feather was another matter. He distanced himself from Brahm, refusing to even look at her. Where the guilt and shame from Lya tore open her heart, White Feather's rejection ripped it to shreds.

Lya briefly clutched at her chest. The pain was not readable on her face, but her eyes hinted at something other than the calculated look she usually carried. Whether it was pain or not was another matter. That made Brahm think of Lya's brother.

She did not lean over, but looked from the corner of her eye. Mason was some distance away, now talking with Breland. She spoke through her teeth. "Your brother, would he be able to help us? You are twins, can you call to him?"

Lya shook her head, a slight movement. "Even if I could reach out to him, he is weak, useless."

Brahm tried not to wince at the cold words.

Mason's boots thumped the deck behind them. She overheard his words. "...we are a day's journey from New Memphis. We disembark to head northeast to join the rest of the army."

*New Memphis.*

There were two ports at which to cross the Mississippi easily, where it flowed its thinnest at fifty miles wide. The rest was treacherous. Brahm figured the army must have gone north to cross.

Strange, she thought. The northern crossings were ill used by the Confederation and how they were going to catch up to the army was something of a mystery. It would be a long walk, indeed.

Mason appeared briefly hurt as he stared towards the direction they sailed. Then he uttered something she never expected.

"Why did you leave?"

He shifted behind her, the sound of his boots clicking the deck.

Brahm answered, as if eager to tell him. It was cleansing.

"I was sent to investigate a rumor about a Missionary that was attacking the Hunters and leading witches to Haven. We knew about the Missionaries, but there was one who was better skilled than

most; one who seemed able to call the wild things of the forests for aid. It was thought Haven had a new weapon to fight the Hunters. So I went to find out for myself.”

A squawk and fluttering of feathers turned her attention. Brahm rolled her eyes.

*Stupid gull.*

Yet she recognized the opportunity, and opened her mind to its thoughts. The images and instincts spilled from its simple mind — flashes of a hooded darkness skirting the trees, something akin to the Westwood. She sensed the gull’s fear. She then gave it a message to relay to the Haudenosaunee, to alert them of her situation. The white bird squawked once more, and she remained open to its thoughts as she continued with her story.

“I headed for a small town south of New Boston and spent the better part of two weeks there, searching.”

Brahm focused the bird’s attention to Lya, to turn its thoughts towards her and spoke within her mind.

*-Lya. Can you hear me?-*

The girl’s gaze remained unwavering, towards the river.

*\*Yes. I hear you. What craft is this?\**

Brahm spoke aloud her story to Mason.

“I heard nothing from the locals, but did not trust them as they seemed to suspect I was from the Confederation.”

*-The Tongue is not a talent of the craft. We can communicate through the gull’s mind. Pay attention to its thoughts.-*

She paused for a moment, for Lya to sense the gull’s warning, and then continued speaking. “I had given up on my last night there and decided to entertain myself in one of the local bars. I noticed someone eyeing me, a wild-looking woman I was instantly attracted to. She was as tall, with tanned skin and dark eyes. She sauntered over to me with two beers in hand. I had no reason to suspect she might be anything more than a one night stand, so I accepted the beer and we talked through the night.”

*-Something tracks us. I have left a message with the gull to get help. We will discuss this later.-*

Brahm released her mind from the gull and it fluttered and rose upwards.

“Gulls are stupid birds,” she muttered aloud.

Mason nudged her. “Go on.”

“Well, needless to say we woke up in each other’s arms the following morning. I spent two more days there, hunting and drinking with her, and falling hard and fast for this strange woman. We talked a lot during those two days, about the Confederation and the Hunters. We discussed different views on witchcraft, and I listened to what she said. On the third day, I told her who I was, deciding not to hide from her. She then told me she was a Missionary with a gift to speak with animals. I then realized she was the one I was looking for.” The gull perched upon the mast of the ship, seeming to watch them.

*Fucking gull. Fly!*

Mason shifted.

“We argued that day, and fought; and nearly killed each other. Finally, she asked me a question: ‘Do you know who the man is that discovered how to control the Hunters? Do you know why it is kept a secret?’ I told her what I knew, that Senator Thurmond read an ancient text and found an herb to turn the tides, to prevent another Witch War from ever happening again. She told me the secret of that weapon was kept a secret so no one could learn to use this weapon against the Confederation.”

She listened for Mason. Silence sat behind her. The gull took flight.

“Gray Wolf also told me that Senator Thurmond was a former member of Haven. He was ex-communicated. Gregor ousted him because he wanted to use the herb to control the Confederation. Thurmond is a blood witch and the Hunters answer only to him.”

Lya sat quiet, biting her lip. Brahm heard nothing from her brother.

The gull flew towards the western shore of the Mississippi and Brahm nearly choked on her words

as the bird dropped from the sky. She scanned the trees, and let her soul slip into its dance. She sailed the wind currents in unison with the bobbing of the small wooden cruiser, its sails unfurled and taut. She floated along the water's edge, traveling towards shore. She searched for the remains of the gull, feeling for its broken body, and her soul gasped at what loomed over the dead bird. It was something dark, a blot on the fabric of life. The thoughts of the gull came back to her.

*Something from the Westwood.*

A chill swept through her soul as the shadow turned its attention towards her. She sensed some incoherent thought from it.

*\*Seventeen. Seventeen. Seventeen.\**

She reeled back from its touch, fleeing for the safety of the ship.

*What is that thing?*

She soared over the water, and sensed a presence watching her. Her face stung from a harsh slap.

Mason stood over her, shaking her. "No!"

She thought he would not like her revelations about Thurmond.

Her brother said nothing more as he pulled her to her feet and unshackled the chains from the ship's rigging. He dragged her below deck, marching her through the bowels of the ship. His boots pounded the wooden floor. He shoved her forward and Brahm realized it wasn't her tale of Thurmond that had upset him. It was that she had done something to defy him, right under his nose and bold as a peacock. She smiled, realizing her opportunity. The soul that had watched her was kindred.

She kept her pace through the stale wooden hull, and turned back to face him. "It was you. You sensed me in the Confederation camp. It was you just now. You are a Soul Runner. Did you see what was out there?"

He stopped in front of a closet and flung open the door. The kahbeth sat upon the floor, still and lifeless. Mason grabbed a silver collar and clamped it about her neck. "I should have thought of this before."

He slammed the door shut and yanked the chains to drag her once more along the hall.

"Mason, you have the same skill. It isn't witchcraft."

He opened the door. "Convince yourself of what you want, traitor. No witchcraft runs through these veins." Her brother pushed her in and locked the door.

His boots echoed down the hall.

White Feather looked at her with concern and then anger filled his eyes once more. He rolled over.

Diarmuid sat up. "What happened?"

"My fresh air was cut short. Mason sensed my abilities as a Soul Runner. He has the same skill."

"What? Is that why you wear the silver?"

She nodded. "He thinks it's witchcraft."

"Is it?"

"I don't think so, but then I've never been clamped in silver before."

Brahm released her soul from her body. It was heavier than usual, and could not travel more than a few feet in front of her. The familiar feeling of fatigue wafted through her. She slipped back into her skin and fisted her hands. "I cannot command its use more than a few feet from where I sit."

The second soul within her cackled.

## Chapter 21

Friar John sat with the urn on the outskirts of New Boston. He had reset the sigils upon it so that he could take Miguel's soul with it. He had asked of the Church within the city and learned that Miguel had taken up residence there. There were a few followers, not as many as the Church of the Ascension, but enough to warrant a humble structure within the port city. He did not contact the man; that would be done soon enough. Instead, he left the fat friar to his pious ways and headed for the forests to take care of the business at hand. He needed to find this gathering of evil and confine the soul of the Beast. He rubbed at the bandage on his arm and felt the leech wriggle beneath it.

John pulled out the Baron's mirror and spoke some words of incantation. With one of his newly sharpened tools he slit his own hand and smeared the blood along the edges of the mirror. This was a window to shadow if used properly, he knew, but he did not want to summon forth what lay within. He wanted only to listen. The trick was not to turn mad in the process.

John propped the mirror against a stone and sat before it, waiting.

He closed his mind to all else, and for twelve days and nights, eating only bread and honey, he waited for the dark whisperings, and temptation.

\*\*\*

Upon a damp, woolen blanket, Paine sat with Fang at his side, the warmth of her body seeping into his legs. Patches of cloud covered the evening sky, remnants of the days of rain that plagued the fugitives as they ran from the army of Hunters. It left in its wake a dusk of humid air, still and stagnant. Sweat slid down the back of his neck and he stroked the wolf behind the ears before shifting away from the heat of her body.

He pondered what Truitt told him of his birth-mother, of who she had been before she abdicated.

Through his parents he knew of the Church and the power it wielded across the sea.

*Had they known of her when they took the two of them in?*

In a clearing about twenty feet from where he sat, witch, Haudenosaunee and half-breed gathered by a blazing fire, and Paine's gaze settled on Little Doe. He declined her invitation to eat for the third night in a row, his appetite abandoned on the shores of the Mississippi. He noticed the look of concern in her eyes over the last few days — days of little food and sleep, but did not let on what kept his mind occupied. Questions plagued him about his birth-mother and his own heritage.

*Who was he? And for that matter, what was he? Why did his mother give them up?*

The last thought he had been prone to during his youth, usually when Gwen had sought to use the rod on him. He eyed Little Doe once more. She doted on the Hunter, like a mother. He smiled, if only briefly, for that was how she also treated him.

He turned his attention to the grimoire in his lap. He'd flipped through it plenty over the years. Some of the spells he knew by rote.

*Lya knew them all.*

He searched for the spell that Lya would have cast upon him. He was still angered with her for whatever it was she had done to him, but there was satisfaction in knowing that she was paying the price for it now, for when his heart ached so did hers.

Stains dappled the parchment; some fresh from Lya dripping blood on them. The others had been there when they found the book. The page in front of him was a spell to summon a soul that would create a plague on livestock. Towards the back of the book were the more complex spells that involved invoking multiple spirits into your body. He pulled the parchment from his pocket as he realized something.

The handwriting was identical to that of the grimoire. He thumbed through the pages until he reached the end.

A sheet was torn from the final page and he looked at the serrated edges of the parchment he had in his pocket. He held it up against that of the book. They matched, as did the script; not only the writing with the spell, but the other side as well. That meant the grimoire was from his birth-mother, written in her own hand.

The spell on the sheet was one that summoned five spirits, all powerful names: Agares, Morax, Balam, Tephros, and Vepar. Each one had different powers and were a deadly combination.

*Where did she learn such spells?*

Paine sighed and closed the book. He picked at the dirt, pulling small pebbles from the earth. He recalled the statue in Lindhome, how the sharpness of its features were familiar to him, so familiar he had missed it in his own sister.

He looked up when a shadow settled upon him.

Little Doe stood over him, blocking the light of the fire. Even in the failing light he saw the worry in her eyes.

"I am glad to see you smile, Little Badger. You have been distant since the night you freed Mira."

As if on cue, the Hunter stepped from behind the Clan Mother, her mouth set with an awkward curve.

"Hello."

It was the second day in a row that the Clan Mother had brought Mira with her. The former Hunter warranted little from him; certainly no longer fear, but the anger still smoldered. He was biding his time with her, deciding what he wanted. In the meantime, he wanted nothing to do with her and felt the unease of two strangers who had little to say to each other.

Paine tucked the grimoire away and spread out the woolen blanket on which he sat, the dampness leaching into his pants. The two women sat across from him. Fang opened an eye, seemingly to ensure they did not invade her space, and then returned to her nap.

The Clan Mother placed some flat bread wrapped around some spiced meat before him. "I thought perhaps you might eat something."

His tongue bathed in saliva at the smell. Though he wouldn't care to admit it, he was actually hungry.

"Thank you." He accepted the food, taking a bite immediately. Warm juices escaped his lips and he wiped his face with his sleeve.

The Clan Mother smiled. "It is good to see you eat."

More liquid dribbled down his chin.

The Clan Mother sighed and pursed her lips for a moment. "I suppose you wonder why I have brought Mira over to you again."

Paine stopped chewing.

"I hoped your presence might jar her memory. I tried to bring her to Puck, but he refused. Perhaps he cannot accept she is released, or perhaps he cannot forgive her. I do not know."

Paine swallowed and the food inched down his gullet like half-eaten sawdust. He put it down.

"Perhaps I will let Mira speak. Is that all right with you?"

Paine remembered that Diarmuid was once like this woman, controlled. He knew what he felt about Diarmuid, but his parents were dead. And this woman had had a hand in it, if even an unwilling one.

Mira shuffled closer to him. She still shook from the withdrawal, but the Clan Mother's tea helped her cope.

"I'm sorry," she stammered. "I remember little. I remember your face and the hunt. I remember the Westwood and I waited for you. I took your sister. I had to. I had orders. Please forgive me."

"Orders from who?" The words spat from his mouth.

She looked him in the eye. "I do not remember."

"Lies!" he spat.

The Clan Mother put her hand in Paine's. "Little Badger, would you mind telling us what you remember?"

The scent of the spiced meat and onions tickled his nose, yet it no longer tantalized him. He wanted to retch. He opened his mouth to speak, but was distracted by movement in the distance; Puck, staring at them with a look of anger etched into his thick eyebrows. The young man turned away after one last sulky look. Paine looked back at Mira.

"Perhaps another time."

Mira nodded her head, and regret swam in her eyes. The Clan Mother took his other hand.

"Something weighs heavily on your shoulders, Little Badger. I am a good listener if you need one."

The warmth of her smile was the exact opposite of Gwen's. It was less calculated, genuine.

"I do not know who I am," he said.

The Clan Mother stroked his face with her gnarled hands, a touch of soft leather.

"We are who we are meant to be. Before me, I see Little Badger, but if you must know more than that, perhaps the answer lies in the nature of your heritage. I know little of such things, but there are others here more knowledgeable in these matters." She cast her glance towards the gathering by the fire. Paine's eyes slid across the blur of half-breed, Haudenosaunee and witch to settle on someone who sat with Gregor, head lowered in a private conversation — Alwhin.

The Clan Mother patted Paine's knee and groaned as she rose, Mira helping the older woman up. As she did so, Paine noticed on her shoulder the marking of a goat.

"Just be wary, and come see me when you need to talk, Little Badger. My tent is always open."

Mira took one last look at Paine. "Thank you."

Paine nodded his head in return and the two women walked away as he ate what remained of his meal. Mira veered off to join an awaiting Great Bear, his wide face chiseled with the smile of the crescent moon. He had taken a keen interest in her recovery.

Fang nudged Paine with her nose, her tail thumping the ground. Dark now settled upon the land and the only light by which to see shone in the distance like a fading, orange beacon.

Paine scratched the wolf behind the ears.

"All right, let's go."

The she-wolf sauntered at his side as he walked towards the fire, the dying flames taking low, rhythmic breaths. The night air embraced him with an uncomfortable warmth, sapping the energy from his legs.

To the north of where he walked, three Lastborn stood guard in the shadows of the trees. Every day was the same, with guards posted at the four corners for signs of danger. It gave him some sense of safety, but he wondered if it would last.

He approached the fire.

Gregor smiled, and Alwhin seemed to search him, stripping him down to his soul.

"What can we do for you, child?"

Paine ran his fingers along the edge of the folded parchment in his pocket.

"I want to know about Sephirah, my mother."

Paine failed to read either of their eyes in the dim light of the fire. Alwhin rose and offered her hand to Gregor.

"Let us walk together."

The clouds lingered in the sky, dawdling over the surface of the nearly full moon. The smell of pine was faint on the air, masked by the lingering scent of burning wood. The singing and voices faded to a distant murmur as they walked through the trees. Finally, they stopped at a fallen log, and Paine sat across from the two.

Alwhin's face was unreadable. "I see you know more than when last we spoke."

"Did you know?"



She nodded.

“When we last spoke you said you knew nothing of my parents.”

Alwhin cast him a sidelong glance. “I said I could not tell you.”

His neck and face warmed. An angry fire stoked within him.

“I don’t understand. Why could you not tell us?”

The woman’s face was blank and unreadable in the dark. “Because of your sister. My Sight eludes me again, so I am unsure if it is wise to tell you this, but she is heir to the throne of Valbain.”

“What?”

“I knew from the moment I saw her. And there are those among the Lastborn who would delight in her slaughter, or who might use her to their own ends to get back at the Firstborn.”

“So Sephirah is our mother?”

She nodded.

“And our father?”

“I believe you have different fathers.”

“But we’re twins, that’s not possible.”

She laughed. “Breeding with only one male is an anomaly reserved for humans. The beings of the Fifth Day commonly breed with multiple partners. I myself had two fathers, both Revenant. Assuming Lya had more than one father, the most important one is the heir to Valbain, Dīor. He remained in Sephirah’s shadow when she came to us, always hooded. I caught a glimpse of him when they thought they were alone. There was no mistaking his face, for I was once slave to his family. I spoke with Sephirah about his presence in Lindhome. I knew the others would want him hanged, and she begged my silence on the matter. When I set eyes upon Lya, I knew she was the seed of Dīor.”

“What about me?”

“You are Sephirah’s son, but you are not Dīor’s offspring.”

“Then who is my father?”

She paused. “That I do not know.”

He shook his head. This was absurd. “How do I know you are telling the truth?”

Alwhin cast him a frigid glance. “I did not lie to you. I could not tell you at that time, and I’m not even sure I should be telling you this now.”

“You twisted the truth,” he said, his words spitting from his mouth. “How can I know you are not doing the same now?”

Gregor reached towards him, but his hand fell short as Paine glared at him.

“Alwhin tells you the truth.” The old man’s voice was calm as the night air. “The hope was to get you to Haven, so you could both decide your own path without pressure from the Rebellion. Do not blame Alwhin for trying to protect you.”

The old man’s voice soothed the tension in Paine’s neck, but just barely.

“I just want to know who I am and who ordered my parents’ deaths.”

Gregor’s head spun at the presence of someone at the edge of the clearing. Nissamin approached, holding a torch to guide her steps.

“Alwhin, Gregor, we just received word, the Westwood is moving.”

Gregor’s face blanched, and he clung to his staff as he rose.

“How do you know this?”

“Birds have arrived. The Westwood is on the move, and leaving nothing alive.”

Alwhin looked at the old man, and then to Nissamin. “We will be there in a moment.”

Nissamin departed, and Alwhin rose. “It would seem we have bigger problems than the Confederation. And Elenya’s Soul is lost.”

Paine jumped on the opportunity to ask. “What is that?”

Gregor pursed his lips. “There is great power in death. Much of the craft relies upon blood to feed it. And death is an even greater tool in the most powerful of spells. But there is a greater power when

one gives their life freely. Elenya was Lastborn, and she gave her life to trap the Westwood in the place where we created it.”

Paine remembered the horror of the Westwood and the strange boy-creature that would have killed them all.

“You created that thing?”

The man hung his head. “Your mother did.”

“My mother created that thing?”

He nodded, as did Alwhin.

“We thought we could create something against the Firstborn, an entity we called Dark Wind. Your mother gave birth to the two of you while casting the spell. She was alone with her wet nurse when she cast it. We hoped we could control it, but it grew too powerful and beyond our control. And after your birth, your mother was too weak to try again. Our folly cost us many lives, and the heart of my soul — my Elenya. We were unable to destroy Dark Wind, so she gave her life to stop it from wreaking havoc upon the land, and trapped it in the lair of its birth.”

“Dark Wind?”

“That is its true name. We renamed it the Westwood, trying to mask what we had done.”

A sickness settled in his stomach.

“With Elenya’s Soul, we used what spells we could to stunt its growth until we could find a way to destroy it completely. Your mother even attempted to use the Soulstone Tablet to try to destroy it.”

“The Soulstone Tablet?”

Alwhin looked to the night sky. “The tablet on which you saw the writing in Lindhome. Your mother and Dïor were the only ones who could read it. We lost track of Dïor after your mother’s death at the hands of the Confederation so we were never able to use it.”

“We hoped, in time, that Lya might be able to read what was on the Tablet and find a way to destroy your mother’s creation.”

Paine pulled the parchment from his pocket. “With the writing like this?”

He handed the note to Alwhin and Gregor. The woman tipped the parchment to read it in the faint light.

“I do not see any writing on this, other than the spell on the back. Are you telling me there is writing on this similar to the Soulstone Tablet?”

He nodded.

“Where did you get this?”

“It was left with the people who raised me. We found it when they died and figured it was from our birth-parents.”

Alwhin pored over it, muttering some guttural words. She tilted the parchment. “Your mother left you to be raised by her wet nurse. She left this with you?”

“Gwen was her wet nurse? She was there when we were born?”

Alwhin nodded.

It didn’t make sense.

*If Gwen had known about his mother, why had she treated him so cruelly?*

“She did not give you this note?”

“Her husband did when he died. Can you read it?”

“This is beyond my sight and knowledge.” She handed it to Gregor to examine.

Paine pondered the note, wondering. “Perhaps it is information on how to use the Tablet?”

Gregor shifted where he stood. “Even if it was, the Tablet is lost to us. There is little we can do now, but run.” His hands shook as he handed it back to Paine. It dropped to the forest floor.

Paine bent over to retrieve it.

He brushed it off and stared at the script.

“What if it is a message on who I am?”

But Gregor and Alwhin were already out of earshot, the urgency of Nissamin's news hastening their steps.

He looked for Fang. She stood some distance into the trees. The wolf gave him a protracted look and then left him as well.

And Paine stood there for a time, in the embrace of a night that was warm, but lonely.

## Chapter 22

A harsh pinch surged through Paine's leg, jarring him from his slumber. He jerked awake.

Fang leaned over him, her whiskered muzzle poking him as she growled. In the dim light, he barely made out her hackles, rising as she stared towards the edge of the camp.

Movement skirted the shadows and a dank smell fouled the night. Gleaming eyes of yellow shone, beacons filled with malice. Paine's eyes adjusted to the dark as towering demons crept from the night. The pit of his stomach hardened.

*Not again.*

He rose to wake the others, but cries at the north end of the camp indicated the slaughter had already begun. Over the screams, Great Bear and Truitt called for arms and order. Paine fumbled about, wondering where to run. Fang nipped at his ankle, and bounded to the side.

She barked and Paine followed, dodging others who ran towards the battle. He passed by Mira's blanket, ruffled and cast aside. Further along, Puck's bedding lay empty and untouched. He looked north, the screams piercing the night air. Again, Fang nipped at his ankle and he followed her east once more.

The wolf led him to Great Bear's horse, where she jumped up against the side of the Clydesdale. Whinnying in panic, the horse reared back against the rope that tethered it to an elm.

Paine reached for the horse, trying to calm it. "Easy, Booker."

Booker's eyes were wide and it yanked on the rope once more, nearly snapping the elm in two. Fang jumped again at the side pack, yipping and eyeing Paine.

"What is it?"

Wishing he had his sister's gift, he tried to decipher Fang's actions.

*Was it the horse?*

The wolf jumped up again, her teeth tearing at rope. Booker whinnied and bucked. Fang jumped twice more and Paine noticed a gnarled branch under the horse's feet. Fang barked in triumph, eyes agleam.

Leery of Booker's frantic steps, he groped for the branch. He fumbled about, dodging the horse's hooves. His fingers slid along its rough surface, and he pulled it out. Fang took it from his hands and dragged it away. He reached for it, but she growled at him.

Paine retracted his hand.

Then Fang dragged the wood into the dark of the trees and barked. Another wolf bounded after her; one that was slightly smaller but with the same coloring.

Paine watched as the demons flooded from the north.

*What I am I supposed to do?*

He pulled out the parchment from his sister and reviewed the words of the summoning, preparing himself.

\*\*\*

Fang dragged the oak branch into the trees, determined to have some privacy for what she needed to do. She risked exposing herself and her kind, but there was no choice. This boy needed protection, and not just from the demons that butchered the witches and the people of the longhouse.

She looked upwards and a winged creature flew past the moon. She caught the faint glimmer of its winged tips.

Time was running short.

She growled and the lone wolf that followed her approached.

*One of her own.*

Fang lowered her body and raised her tail, as if to play. The other wolf's ears pricked and she

bounded towards him. He leapt towards her, eager to participate. He hadn't played like this with his mother since he was a pup. She toyed with him awhile, nipping at his legs here, mounting him there. She hated this, yet continued with her coy game until he rolled onto his back and then she pounced, piercing his throat with her jaws. The wolf's eyes widened and he struggled to free himself. This was not part of the game. He yelped but his voice was muffled in his opened throat. She clamped her jaws harder and he thrashed about, scratching her open with his claws. She dropped her weight onto him and bit down further. The taste was tangy.

Fang let the blood soak into the earth and held her offspring until enough blood spilled, until he was nearly dead; almost, but not quite. She needed his soul. The wolf no longer resisted her and lay still, but his eyes were still aware. There was confusion there and it pained her to see it.

*One of her own.*

But that was the purpose of this spell.

*It had to be.*

Fang dragged the oak branch over and forced one end into the moist ground. She then drew from what little power was available to her and summoned a spirit that was born of the Earth itself. She reached deep within the wells of her ancient soul and brought forth everything she could muster — a spell to create a staff that would act as a buffer. She had witnessed its creation once before.

She leaned over the wolf, her own offspring. His breathing slowed and his eyes glazed over. As the last raspy breath escaped his gurgling throat, Fang inhaled his soul through her nose. She carried the offering towards the pool of blood and exhaled.

*One of her own.*

\*\*\*

Paine watched the slaughter play out before him. He paced in the darkness, close to the woods, waiting for Fang.

*What was he supposed to do?*

He eyed the note again in the faint light, muttering the words in his mind, cautious not to speak them aloud. Fang was in the brush; he could hear yipping and growling from the two wolves. There was silence for a time, the occasional padded movement and the sound of something being dragged across leafy ground whispering through the trees.

*What was going on?*

Facing northward he clenched his fists as Nissamin fell. The demons pounced on her and ripped open her chest as she wailed for help. It did not come and after a few moments, one of the demons raised her lifeless heart to the sky before devouring it. Paine turned away, unable to bear the sight and found Fang behind him. The branch was placed between them. One end was dark and moist. She nodded her head. Paine picked it up.

*What was he supposed to do with it?*

As he placed the butt of it to the earth, something surfaced within him, a multitude of thoughts and desires. All at once they were there, screaming in his head. They were the souls he had called upon before. They surfaced from a secret place within him, hidden from his knowledge. They had been living inside him. They called to him, begged for his command.

*\*We are yours.\**

Paine bit his lip, waiting for the cold and vomit to spew forth. Yet there was nothing, nothing but the taste of blood in his mouth. And the impatient waiting of the dead. They were eager to serve. He gripped the staff and called upon others. The land released hundreds more to his summons.

They, too, whispered to him.

*-We are yours.-*

Paine laughed, a mad howl he could not stifle.

*They are mine! I am in control.*

Fang nuzzled him in the leg.

He looked north. The demons flooded from the trees, spilling into the camp. He ran towards the fight, the screams summoning him. He followed their call, feeling the strength of twenty men and the courage of fifty.

*I am Little Badger.*

He jerked his head at movement in the shadows. Before him, with its hoofed feet and matted fur crawling up its legs, a horned demon towered over him. It smiled with stained teeth and nodded its head. Fang bounded from Paine's side into the thick of battle, leaving him to face the creature alone.

*I am in control.*

He laughed and fear flitted in the demon's eyes. It lasted for only a breath, and the creature lunged forward. Paine winced and stepped back as he held aloft the staff. He thought of a ring of fire and it was so. The demon hesitated as a circle of flames flared to life before it. It snarled and summoned a fire of its own, green flames that sat in its opened claws. It flung it at Paine. The fire struck him, and the searing pain soaked into his skin. He groaned.

*No!*

He clung to the staff and the fire winked out. His skin was untouched, yet the memory of the pain was still there. It smoldered. The creature slashed at him, its claws swiping inches from his face. Paine ducked. The demon crept around him, hissing. It slashed at Paine again and flung green fire once more.

*No!*

The ring of flames that surrounded Paine blazed and consumed it before the fire could reach him. He opened his palm and divined a fire of his own, crimson and smoldering. It caressed his fingers and he toyed with it, laughing.

*Was this how Lya felt? This powerful?*

He held up his hand, outstretching his palm and let the flames dance. He blew upon it and the ground around the demon flared to life with fire. It screamed as the flames engulfed it, dropping to the ground. Its hooves kicked as the fire consumed it. The smell of burnt hair and rotting flesh soured the air. Paine licked his lips and smiled.

*Die!*

He turned away as the demon lay still. Its knowledge and memories did not come to him. It had no soul. It was a mindless beast, knowing only to hunt and slaughter.

Another approached.

Like the last, this one had horns, but a goat's face. It cried out, a rumbling bellow. Paine summoned the fire from the earth once more. This demon dropped, thrashing on the ground. Another approached, and Paine dealt it the same fate.

*Two more.*

Euphoria welled inside him to match the power he wielded, taking demon after demon.

*Five.*

He closed his eyes and summoned forth locusts that swarmed the demons. He called upon the ground to swallow them. Fire fell from the heavens, striking them down.

He took the parchment from his pocket and read the spell.

It required blood.

The land was soaked in it.

He summoned the five souls listed there, no longer frightened.

*I am Little Badger.*

A chill wind swept through the trees. He heard their wailing in his ears, and their ancient souls touched his own. They were his to command and he sent them forth. The spell worked and demons were dropped and pulled into the forest where their screams were short and agonizing.

Paine continued on. The staff was cold in his sweaty grip. The demons lurched towards him, and

tumbled at his feet.

*Ten.*

He brimmed with ecstasy, slaughtering all before him. Some fell from a sickness that weakened their bones, their legs splintering into pieces; others crumpled over and were consumed by beetles and scarabs that flooded from their mouths.

From among the crowd, Puck ran directly towards Paine through the crowds. A demon was on his heels.

“Paine!”

Paine summoned scarlet fire once more and with a wisp of a thought he struck the creature down.

Puck gasped for air as he reached him and collapsed to the ground. “We m-m-must leave.”

“I can destroy them, Puck. You are safe.”

Two more demons approached, a wolfen at their side. Paine summoned the protective ring of fire once more. He pulled Puck up with one hand, and summoned hailing brimstone with the other. It pummeled the foul spawn before him, all three howling as they fell to the ground.

“This staff lets me control the spells and the dead.” He laughed. “They cannot stop me.”

The orb from Puck's dead mother glowed in the young man's hand, violet and dark. A feather crack ran along its surface.

“Puck, what is that?”

Puck slid his hand along the staff and took a step towards him. “Mine.”

His presence shifted. His fingers slipped along Paine's skin, and with a cold touch brushed his soul. The orb pulsed and Paine froze in place, unable to move. He tried to release the power he had summoned, but it was too late. It throbbed with the orb and Puck's presence slunk further into him. His chill touch snaked under Paine's skin.

Then Puck changed before him, appearing as Billy Chapman, then as the Reverend. Paine sucked in his breath. Puck's feet morphed to hooves and his hands to claws. He towered over Paine, his muzzle smiling with a tooth-filled maw, yet the eyes remained the same, green and chilling.

“You are mine,” he hissed.

Paine's legs trembled. He tried to control the souls, but as Puck's presence continued to creep into him, they slipped from his grasp.

The creature breathed in Paine's ear. “I have been forced to bide my time, playing simple around a sniveling little whelp. My patience has its limits and I will not wait any longer. I will have you now.”

Paine scanned the land for Fang, but could not find the wolf in the battle. He looked for Truitt and Great Bear. Both were mired in a sea of dark spirits and fire.

He gritted his teeth. “What do you want from me?”

Puck did not answer, but looked into the crowd. A short woman approached from the shadows — Farin. Her features changed and she stood as Puck, demon-like and towering.

“We deceived those fools in Haven and Lindhome.” Puck's face grinned. His breath was bitter.

“Do you know what I hold in my hand? It is Elenya's Soul. The same jewel that has held the Westwood in place all these years. Do you know its power? Can you feel it paralyzing you here? Long enough for me to take your body. I want your power. You're not worthy to wield it.”

Paine clenched his jaw as his soul was squeezed aside.

Puck laughed, a low guttural chuckle that made Paine's skin gooseflesh. The demon leaned in and faint words sighed from his rank mouth. “You were promised to me. And now you will be mine.”

*No!*

Farin grinned the same unctuous smile.

Gregor and Alwhin ran forward. The old man gasped. “Elenya's Soul.”

The demon flashed her teeth at him. “You won't be stopping Dark Wind now.”

He reached out with a frail hand. “You can't possibly think to control it.”

Puck waved him off. “It will do as we say.”

“But it’s cracked. It will not hold Dark Wind.”

“I won’t need it.”

Paine's anger and fear seethed and a legion of souls flew to his aid. Puck took control of them, used them, and sent them into the onlookers. Screams echoed as the crowd scrambled for safety. Little Doe ran, but stumbled and fell. She was dragged into the trees. Her gurgled screams deafened Paine's ears and blackened his soul. Then there was silence.

*No!*

Puck continued to seep into Paine's body. Paine felt an urge to surrender to the creature, a desire to yield to its wants. A madness stirred within him, a darkness that beckoned him into its lair, warm and inviting. It would be so easy. He wanted to yield, but a part of him resisted. Puck continued to shuffle closer. Paine’s will began to slip.

*-Hold on, child! Hold on to your will! Do not let it take away your spirit. It is your own to command. Fight it!-*

It was the voice.

He thought of the Clan Mother, slaughtered by the very spirits he had summoned. Anger brimmed and Paine fought, pushing back against the force that invaded his body. Puck’s presence hesitated and then pressed forward again, worming its way inside him.

*Little Doe.*

She had been more of a mother to him than Gwen. He would not let her death be in vain.

*-Fight!-*

The fire within Paine blazed with blind rage and he walled the demon from getting any further. The demon stopped.

*-Good!-*

Paine gripped the staff and sensed his body once more. He pushed against the foreign soul, forcing it out. Taking the staff with both hands he stood his ground and focused his power. Shock flitted in Puck's eyes. The black orb glowed again, throbbing and the demon held it up.

A flash scorched the night sky, and Paine closed his eyes to the blinding light. The staff seared his hands and shattered. He heard snarling and opened his eyes. Fang pounced on Farin. The wolf gripped the demon's throat in her jaws and blood spurted as Farin gurgled in agony and rage.

Puck lay on the ground. He rose and spat. “This is not over! You were promised to me. You will be mine!”

Someone fired an arrow, but it pierced only air as Puck vanished from sight.

\*\*\*

From atop bold, rocky cliffs, Gault peered down upon Lake Nanabijou, the largest of the great waterways. The land of the Sleeping Giant rose in the distance, in the form of a great spirit who once lay to sleep, waiting for his time to rise. Gault sniffed at the air and looked back to the small band of Obek, all nodding in silent unison.

He stepped closer to the ledge, fingering the small sack of Troll's bones at his hip. On his shoulder, Sri dug in her black talons and then leapt into the air to dive from the cliff. Her onyx wings spread wide in a graceful stretch. The sea eagle glided along the water, her feet lightly touching its course surface.

Gault watched through the giant bird's eyes as she soared across the waterways and approached the sleeping form of the great island.

*Does he slumber still?*

Shriveled trees dotted the island, and only dust blew along its surface. The eagle swooped over the giant's head and a draft forced her upwards, a warm and damp breath.

*He breathes. He will wake soon, as will the others.*

From the depths of his mind, Gault summoned Sri back to him and he turned from the cliff,



walking its edge. Sri joined them momentarily and the Obek marched south and east. A still hush sat thick on the trees as they strode through the forests of pine and cedar.

Calling them to a halt, Gault raised his mangled left hand, its smallest finger lost to the blades of the kahbeth. Before them, thick, black smoke rose from the trees like the Dark One's anger. The scent of burning flesh tickled his nose and the great Obek once more fingered the bones. He signaled for readiness and marched forward, stepping through the trees with feet of heavy silence.

The scent thickened as they walked and Gault slowed his breathing, focused, ready. The trees thinned and a palisade of thick wooden stakes, charred and smoldering, towered over them. Gault signaled for the others to walk the perimeter and search for survivors, and then bent to look at a painting on the wooden stakes. Blackened, but still noticeable, was a white pine tree with four roots that extended to the four corners of the Earth. At the top, with its wings spread wide, perched an eagle.

*The Tree of Peace.*

He heard the Haudenosaunee were expanding.

He continued around the circular wall, finding its entrance and fallen gates. Bodies of demons and Haudenosaunee littered the ground, broken, crumpled, and burnt. Bows and daggers were still clutched in their hands. Black smoke billowed from the blood-spattered longhouses.

Gault stepped around the bodies, his fingers twitching signs of blessings over each.

*May the gods keep them.*

Crows pecked at the bodies of the fallen Iroquois, but avoided the demon dead. He reached into his pack, pulled out a handful of dust, and threw it into the air. As the faint breeze carried it south, he muttered words of warding and the dust sparkled. The crows scattered, cawing as they fled.

He strode to the center of the village, side-stepping pools of blood and the bodies of four demons.

*Foul creatures.*

He scanned the village. The only movement was his own band stepping through the silent ruins, their faces showing no sign of emotion in the manner of the Obek warrior. Yet he knew their thoughts would be similar to his.

*This was a slaughter.*

A gurgling cough shattered the still air. A demon's legs moved at the side of one of the newly built longhouses, its hooves coated in mud. As the Obek rounded the corner, a sickness settled in his stomach at the sight. Before him, a monster clawed its way towards the gates. Its lower body was hooved and hairy, yet its torso was Haudenosaunee. Its eyes glowed green and it coughed up mucus and blood.

Gault unsheathed the kahbeth from across his back as he approached. "What happened here, Nightwalker?"

The half-demon gurgled. Its human face stretched in pain, yet its eyes cast hatred.

"You are too late."

Gault passed the blades of the kahbeth before the demon's face.

"I will end your suffering if you tell me what happened."

It smiled. "What does it look like?"

From the pack at his side, Gault withdrew a silver knife and a pouch of yellow dust. He sprinkled the dust on the knife and muttered a few words.

"I will cast the demon wraith from you."

The demon's eyes widened as the Obek jabbed the dagger into its leg. It howled with rage, scraping the ground with its nails. A few moments passed as the legs changed from demon to human, and back again. The demon hissed and green smoke sifted from its legs as it rolled out of the human body. It clawed the ground one more time before it lay still.

Gault knelt to cradle the frail human body in his arms. The Haudenosaunee tilted his head and opened his eyes.

"I am Two Moon. Please ask my people to forgive me."

Gault, with his knotted hands, brushed the flowing hair from Two Moon's face.

"It is not your fault, warrior," he whispered. "The wraith controlled your actions. They take us when we are most vulnerable. It is a powerful demon, hard to fight. Can you tell me what happened?"

Two Moon sputtered. "The demons launched an attack upon the village. They attack the others that flee for New Boston. I was supposed to send messages to the new villages for help, but that thing inside me would not let me. Instead I led the demons to destroy them."

"Do not lay blame upon your shoulders, great warrior. It is too great a yoke to bear when it is not yours."

He coughed again. "They will destroy my people."

"Where are your people now?"

"East of the Mississippi. You must warn them."

"Rest your mind, great warrior. I will take up your dagger in your place."

Two Moon's eyes fluttered for a moment. "Thank you, Wise One."

He closed his eyes, his head fell back, and he breathed no more.

Gault lay the man's body down as if he were an infant.

*We must bury them all and burn the demon flesh.*

He looked at Sri, perched upon the remains of the palisade. "You must send a message, my friend. Look for my nephew. Tell him the others of their kind are lost and that we make our way east to their aid. Go, my friend. I will catch up to you."

Sri screeched and then leapt into the air, her great wings taking her higher until she disappeared beyond the trees. Then Gault called the others over to him and prepared for the great burial.

## Chapter 23

The Lady Maiden bobbed in the waters of the Mississippi, a seesaw motion that mired the captives in a bog of weariness and boredom. For an hour it had been moored in New Memphis, and Brahm leaned back against the wooden walls of the cargo hold, awaiting her fate. The creaking of the ship grated on her nerves like a dull song droning in her ears. She pulled at the loose threads of the drab gray tunic and pants her brother had offered her.

*At least it was better than that fucking dress.*

Lya lay asleep on the floor, having now joined them. White Feather sat chained on the other side of the hold. On occasion he glanced in Brahm's direction, his eyes appearing thoughtful at times, confused at others. No longer did she feel the heat of his anger, yet she wondered what ruminated in his mind.

Diarmuid waited near the door, his ear turned to the crack.

"Someone is coming," he said.

His chains rattled as the pepper-haired man shifted away. An unsteady clapping echoed down the hall. She knew it was not her brother's deliberate stride. The being walked with an awkward cadence, and she knew him instantly.

*Imp.*

The door inched open and Breland stepped in, offering her a shallow, mocking bow.

"My lady."

His bulbous head held vacant eyes. "We are disembarking momentarily. New Memphis is a busy port. Should you try to escape, no effort will be wasted to re-capture you. You will be killed on the spot." His hollow gaze lingered on Brahm. "The sight of you will likely stir some heated emotions. I suggest you keep a low profile and try to look humble. It's hard to say what might happen should an uprising occur." His face twitched. "I am sorry it has come to this, my lady. The price for treason is high."

"You seem different since last we met, Breland. Are you unwell?"

The man shuffled over to where she sat on the wooden floor, his meaty fingers bedecked with lavish gold rings. "I'm as well as always, my lady. The Lord has been good to me."

"You still believe that drivel?"

His eyes hinted brief irritation. "Though it may not seem so, God has also smiled upon you this day. Senator Thurmond has surprised us with his presence. He is attending a Revival tonight."

"A Revival?"

"Some of the flock have strayed here," he said. "They need the chance to save their souls — as do you. I'm sure it has been a hard road since you left the flock."

*Strayed?*

Brahm's face pinched. "I think I'll pass."

His lips slithered into a smarmy grin. "You don't have a choice. You're going to be held up as an example of what happens when you drift from the presence of God. Your capture is a good omen."

The door opened again and Mason strode in. "Breland, what are you doing in here?"

The shorter man's eyes flitted anger before his face melted into humility.

"Encouraging your sister and her friends to find their way back to the flock. Perhaps tonight's Revival will save their souls."

Mason waved him off. "I think you should be worried less about their souls and more about their interrogation. Leave us, I must take them down to the docks."

"As you wish." Breland bowed low, and then hobbled out the door.

Brahm took the opportunity to prod her brother. "You were not expecting Thurmond."

"No." He closed the door. "The Senator wants you in his custody immediately. He will be personally escorting you back to Charleston."

*Charleston.*

She remembered the place well, and the stench of ink and oil as bibles were mass-printed on some ancient contraption from the Age of Marvels that Thurmond had supposedly discovered. Despite the fact that it was a forbidden item, it seemed the Confederation was willing to overlook such an abomination if it furthered their cause. They sent the neatly printed books throughout the land, even overseas, in their bid to proselytize the Good Word. And the Senator had become like a god to the people with his findings.

“Is the Imp coming with us?” she asked.

Mason lifted an eyebrow. “Did he tell you that?”

She shook her head. “Just a guess.”

Mason said nothing as he shackled each of the captives at the waist.

She prodded further. “Was he involved with Lya's capture?”

He re-examined the silver collar around Brahm's neck, ensuring the lock still held.

His breath caught at the question. “He ordered—.”

Mason paused, his eyes lost in thought, and then he scowled. “I no longer answer to you, Brahm. I see the seeds of doubt you are trying to sow. They will not take.” He said nothing more and led them out of the room.

They passed the locked closet where the kahbeth and the other weapons sat. Brahm thought of reaching out with her soul to see if they were still there, but as Mason pulled on the chain, she left the idea behind.

A heavy breeze carried with it the bustling sounds of the port city. It was tainted with the scent of raw fish. The docks were crowded with Confederation cruisers and barges, moored in precise order. Gulls soared through the air and alighted on the wooden docks, suffusing the port with a thick veneer of white slurry.

The four captives shuffled down the plank, careful not to step on each other. Their chains clanked, drawing unwanted attention. Gawks and hushed murmurs shadowed them as Mason and five Hunters escorted them into the city. The onlookers muttered and Brahm dodged an overripe tomato.

“Witch!” a voice called from the crowds.

Another tomato flew and struck Lya in the side of the face. Brahm caught the young woman's look as she turned and scanned the crowd. Her expression spoke nothing but loathing.

Another voice called out. “Fiend! Monster!”

Mason took stride next to Lya with his sword bared. He said nothing, yet his presence silenced any further calls.

They continued through the city, past horse-drawn carriages and teams of Hunters. The nobility of the city stared from under their frilled parasols, their faces puckered in disapproval. Brahm sensed their stares, and their looks of recognition. As a daughter of New Memphis, she was well known among the upper class. She supposed her parents would have been shamed.

As if on cue, they strode past the lofty crypts of the New Memphis Cemetery. A warm breeze wafted through the stone vaults and Brahm caught its silent voice.

*Mother. Father.*

A morning dove cooed from atop one of the granite mausoleums.

*What would they think of this?*

Sweat trickled down the back of Brahm's neck as she noted the neat rows of stone tombs that lined the cemetery streets. She caught a brief glimpse of her family's crypt with its weeping angel clinging to a cross. On each side of the stone door were carved two elongated swords.

*When a man's ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him.*

She remembered her father's wishes for that inscription, as he lay dying with her mother on the floor of the Confederation Courthouse, an assassination attempt on one of the senators gone awry. The same inscription was etched into the tiled ceiling of the judicial building, just under a stained-glass

window. Brahm remembered well the image in that window, with the angel kneeling before God, sword in hand. It was the last thing he saw. That angel still haunted her dreams, for it was under the image of that angel, clutching the frail, dying hands of her parents, that she rebuked everything to do with the Church of the Ascension. Mason never understood.

Her brother led the captives east towards a towering, stone church that stood upon a hill. Its soaring steeple and cross caught the light of the setting sun, reflecting a blinding light that hurt her eyes. It had always fascinated Brahm as a young girl.

*No more.*

They strode close enough to its entrance to see what was etched into its keystone.

*The Church of the Ascension.*

Instead of walking through the arch, Mason led them around the side through tall hedges to the back of a building that was being encroached upon by tendrils of ivy. Brahm paused. A large crowd gathered upon the hill behind the church. Hundreds milled about a grand, covered stage while others sat upon blankets, fanning themselves from the early evening heat. Mason ushered the captives through a narrow, black door into the Church. Its creaking sent two mice scampering across the strip floor.

They entered a dank, but sizeable storage room, piled neatly with wooden boxes. The lighting was poor. Mason ordered the Hunters to stand guard while he waited inside with the captives. He closed the door and only slight cracks in the boarded window allowed the sun's failing light to filter through.

Mason paced, slow and deliberate strides that thudded on the floor. His leaden footsteps paused at a knock at the door.

Mason jerked it open and torchlight from the fields flooded in.

Breland stood in the doorway. "Captain, I must take the girl to the stage for all to see. Senator Thurmond wants to use her in his Revival."

Brahm thought of something there. A suspicion about what lurked inside the small man. Her soul leapt from her body and she fought the silver with all her might. She captured her brother's attention as she soared past him. For a mere second she sensed his anger as she touched his soul and then thrust him towards Breland. She felt her brother's shock at what he discovered. It was as she suspected.

*Demon.*

Mason hesitated.

Breland questioned his lack of response. "Is something the matter? I need to take the girl. Unchain her and give her to me."

Brahm reeled back into her body. Mason looked down upon Breland. He straightened. "I will take her myself. I want to ensure nothing happens to her."

Breland's lips pouted, making his face look piggish. "Senator Thurmond's orders, my liege. You are to remain here to make sure nothing happens to these three."

Mason's face flushed and his gaze paused for a brief moment on Brahm, as if in confusion. The chains rattled as he unchained Lya. It took him some time to get her ankles loose, his movements deliberate and measured. Lya did not look at either Diarmuid or Brahm.

Breland's thick hands clasped the chains and led Lya out into the torchlight. The rings on his fingers glittered. The door slammed closed and a lock slid into place. Breland walked away, his feet shuffling in a clumsy gait. Mason's fists clenched and opened repeatedly as he stared at the closed door.

Brahm marked time with the steady footsteps of the Hunters outside the door. She lost count after twenty paces, her mind and body aching with fatigue. Over the silence, voices passed, commenting on the size of the Revival. It wasn't long before the low hum faded into the distance.

A serpent-like voice oozed through the cracks in the door, dripping in a thick coat of southern drawl. "Greetings, brothers and sisters! Greetings, children of the Almighty God!"

The crowd cheered.

"I thank the Lord you have made it here on this fine evening. Praise be to the Lord for this glorious day!"

Voices cried out in unison. "Praise be!"

Brahm rolled her eyes, remembering how she once enjoyed his sermons.

"Praise be to the Lord that we are able to gather in safety in these dark times!"

"Praise be!"

"Dark times are upon us, but here, where we follow the Word of the Lord, let the Light shine! We have spread the Light, my friends, spread the Light into the dark lands that try to consume us. For the bloodcraft and the sorcery of the Outlands is being banished as we speak. The followers of the Horned One and their heathen practices shall be destroyed."

The crowd applauded and cheered.

"For it is written in the Good Book: Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

Again, praise and shouts of approval.

Thurmond's speech droned in her ears and she focused once more on the pace of the Hunters outside the door. Above the heavy steps, the twang slunk through the cracks in the wood, yet she ignored it. Her head drooped, as if to fall asleep, and she felt a presence. A cold chill entered the room, as if the door had opened upon the lands of the North Moors.

A shadow skulked past her. She could not see it moving, nor hear its steps, but knew it watched her from the dark, its eyes peeling her down to the soul.

"Something is in the room with us," she said.

Her soul lifted once again from her body, and found what lurked in the room.

*The being from the Westwood.*

It leeches onto her and battered at her soul. She felt its anger. Its hatred of her was icefire, its cold touch burning her very essence.

She forced it back, its dark touch freezing her.

*I need help!*

She sensed Mason over her body, his fingers around her neck. They fumbled with the lock of the silver collar.

She reached towards him. *Mason, I need you!*

As the collar tumbled to the ground, she recognized her brother's intent. The weariness withered and died. It was the silver that caused the fatigue. Her dependence on the kahbeth had hindered her all along. Her spirit now thrummed, strong and vibrant.

The being withdrew, trying to merge with the shadows. She sensed its fear and grabbed hold, the bitter bite of its frozen touch worsening. She persisted as it melded with the dark. Her soul coiled around it, preventing its escape, congealing it.

A knife from the shadows flew towards her body. Brahm braced for the pain as the blade coursed through the air. Mason stepped in front, deflecting it with his arm. He groaned. The dark spirit emanated fury and hatred and then its physical presence stood before her, having solidified from the shadows. Her second soul recognized his features.

*-My love!-*

It was Lya's father. Startled, Brahm whipped back into her own body as Mason thrust himself towards the Firstborn Lord.

Brahm seized her brother's arm. "No, Mason! It's Lya's father!" Her chains clattered as she stepped forward. She strained to see the man in the shadows. "You're alive! I knew someone escaped us when we ambushed the others. It was you."

His voice seethed. "You killed my Sephirah. I will not let you take my daughter as well."

"Sephirah's soul is twinned with mine," she said. "And your daughter is held captive by the Confederation, as am I."

His voice hissed. "I do not care."

White Feather rose from the wooden box. "She has turned from the Confederation and will do anything in her power to see your daughter safe." He nodded in her direction. "She is one of my people,

and they have forgiven her.”

The Firstborn spoke low. “Forgiveness is beyond me. There is little left of what I once was. I have only thoughts of my daughter. She is all that matters now.”

Brahm stood to face him. “Then help me free her. A demon walked out with her.” She was close enough to smell the decay on his breath. “What is your name?”

He wheezed. “Dïor, I was once called.”

She held out her hand. “Then, Dïor, help me rescue your daughter.”

He hesitated before his hand clutched hers, cold and hard. “My fight with you is not over. I consider this a truce. You must still pay the toll for Sephirah's life.” His voice was stone.

She gulped down the fear in her throat. “It is a truce then.” She turned to Mason. “So, my brother, what is it going to be? Have you seen enough? Do you see the truth now?”

He stood silent as Thurmond's voice drifted through the cracks once more.

Mason looked towards the door. “I see only that the Imp must be stopped. He is demonkind.” His face twisted. “I am with you ... for now.”

## Chapter 24

Brahm bandaged the angry gash in her brother's arm with a shred of cloth she ripped from her tunic. He winced as she pulled it, but took the pain of it with silent acquiescence. White Feather and Diarmuid rummaged through the wooden boxes in the storage room only to discover a rusting pick-axe and the handle from a shovel. Dïor waited by the entrance, listening as he flicked at the blade of his dagger.

Through the cracks in the door, Senator Thurmond's voice spewed vitriol like rattler's venom. The crowd fell victim to his poison, silent and attentive except for the occasional agreement.

"Hallelujah! Amen!"

Brahm finished with the binding on Mason's arm. "We need to figure out how we're going to help Lya. I'm going to see how many Hunters are out there."

Her soul soared through the door, and east up the hill towards the stage. She sensed the sharp fear of the masses, honed by years of misinformation and ignorance. A quick search of the perimeter revealed a few Hunters on the outskirts, out of the crowd's sight. Thurmond stood at the podium, his jowls and fists shaking. Brahm decided to take a closer look. Mason's soul was beside her as she sailed in the direction of the Senator.

His words floated over the crowd and with it a spell of influence. "There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch."

Mason arrived at the podium first and reached into the Senator's body. She sensed her brother's revulsion and followed his lead, only to find the same loathing in herself as she brushed Thurmond's presence.

*Something like a demon, but stronger.*

Thurmond's speech broke for a moment as he paused to swallow water. He cast a hasty glance around him before continuing.

Brahm backed away and skirted past Lya who stood behind the stage, surrounded by Hunters. The girl clutched at her chest.

Brahm's soul sailed the still night air, back to the secluded storage room. As she glided back, a presence watched her. Dïor stood at the door, his fingers playing with the dagger. He muttered to himself. "Seventeen. Seventeen. Seventeen."

*Was it him?*

"There are twenty Hunters out there," she said, "all armed. I'm not sure, but I thought I sensed something watching me."

Dïor repeatedly sheathed and unsheathed his dagger. His gaze remained focused on the door.

Brahm turned to her brother. "Did you sense what I did about Thurmond?"

His eyes lowered. "Demon."

"Not just demon, something more."

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. What matters now is getting out of here. Lya should not be left in their hands."

*And in whose hands should she be?*

Dïor shifted. "Leave the Hunters to me." His face blackened as he stepped into the shadows and was gone. Two thumps were heard outside the room and a trickle of blood seeped under the door. The rasping sound of dragging bodies followed.

Mason averted Brahm's gaze and slipped through the door. The others inched out behind him, mindful of the crowd's attention.

Brahm bent to retrieve a dagger from one of the Hunters. She hesitated, the cold of the dagger heavy in her hands.

White Feather was beside her. "Orenda, we must go. Lya needs us."



Brahm took it and followed White Feather into the dogwood shrubs that grew in neat rows behind the church.

A small blue bird chirped and danced along the ground. It hopped twice towards a dark part of the woods. Brahm paused. Then she noticed there was nothing to be heard. Senator Thurmond's voice was silenced, as was that of the crowd. There were no creatures of the night, no crowd gasping or praising the Senator's poison words. She looked up. The few clouds that were in the night air were still.

*Thank the Great Mother. Help at last.*

Brahm thought of the Peace Maker and strode forward. Perhaps she could beseech his aid. It took only a few steps before she found herself in a clearing and here she paused. It was dark and moist here, and stunk of sweat. Something was stuck in Brahm's throat as she stepped forward. It took great effort to swallow it down.

She walked the perimeter of the clearing, searching. There was no stump on which to sit, only a swath of moss in its midst. When she had made one complete circle she strode to the center.

*Where was the Peace Maker?*

Then she saw someone standing on the other side, in the shadows. Whoever it was, they were taller than the Peace Maker.

"Greetings," she said, unsure of what else to say.

"Merrily met," said a low voice. It was like buttermilk to her ears. The bearer of the voice came into the poorly lit clearing. Brahm sucked in her breath at the sight of him. He had cloven feet and goat-like legs that stretched up towards a body that was carpeted in matted hair. He stood tall as the Peace Maker, but the horns on his head made him somehow more majestic. They were covered in a soft, mossy-like substance. He was naked and his phallus was erect and thick.

Brahm refused to turn her gaze from him, and found she could not help but stare at the appendage between his legs.

She squeezed out the only words she could manage. "We need help."

"And I need a bride," he said.

The voice of her second soul was with her. It held her.

*-We are one, Soul Runner. We are in this together.-*

Brahm raised the silver dagger to defend herself, but the blade was gone.

"Fighting spirits," whispered the voice. It emanated from the whole clearing. "Attractive."

Other creatures appeared at the edge of the clearing — some that were human-like in appearance, others that were not. Most were half-human and half something else. All were naked.

Two of the half-men played forked flutes and the others began to frolic. The female creatures danced around Brahm, slow and sultry. They smelled of ripe berries and sweet flowers. Brahm stood her ground, refusing to move. One of the human-like creatures brushed her, her firm breast pressing against Brahm. The nipple ran down the length of her arm and paused at Brahm's hand as if wanting something from her fingers. It lingered there and then was gone.

Another did the same, running her breast along Brahm's leg, pushing harder against her to penetrate her pants. Brahm held in place. The man with the horns was behind her and his voice whispered in her ears.

"Why do you resist. My bride must be willing."

"Who are you?" Brahm managed to ask.

She waited for his manhood to press against her thigh, but there was only his quiet, firm voice. He walked around her.

Her eyes were drawn downward once more. She swallowed.

"My name should mean little to you."

Sephirah's soul knew him.

*-The Horned One.-*

His hand took her own, dwarfing it. It was strong and gentle.

"It won't hurt," he said.

She did not pull back her hand, yet she held her ground. "We need help," she tried to mutter, but the words only dribbled from her lips.

"I like this play," he said and was gone once more.

Again the female creatures were there. They danced, touching each other. There was tenderness, but it was underlied by yearning. They kissed. They drew in towards Brahm, caressing her arms once more. Their skin was soft, and the smell of berries filled her nose.

Brahm's head swam.

The female beings laid upon the bed of moss. Flower petals dropped from the trees, alighting on their outstretched bodies. With red berries they traced a slow path along each other's limbs.

Brahm could taste them as they bit into them, staining their lips. There was wetness upon her tongue.

They lay with each other, bodies pressing gently together at times, a slow rhythmic rubbing that Brahm had to bite her own lips to watch. Some of the male creatures joined in, mouths enjoying the taste of crimson berries and ruby lips. They were eager, hungry, yet restrained. Their movements were slow, deliberate, pleasing. With thick fingers they toyed with the women, dancing in places that desired tenderness and were forceful in places that hungered for something more.

Brahm moaned.

The Horned One was with her again, behind her. He smelled stronger of man-sweat and berries. This time he brushed against her thigh. Brahm closed her eyes. He said nothing, but his breath was on her neck, moist and warm. She felt him circle her. Again he pressed against her. His breath was in her face, steady, unrushed. It smelled of fornication.

Brahm licked her lips, waiting for his own to touch hers, wanting it.

She tried to resist. "Will you help us?"

He whispered. "Will you take me?"

She breathed her response in a sigh. "Yes." She wanted nothing more, she cared for nothing else.

Her body then shuddered with pleasure as she lay upon the ground. Convulsions of delight took her and she tipped her head back, her neck stiffening. Her back arched, her toes curled and she moaned her ecstasy. She was naked and every flower petal that touched her was a moment of unique pleasure.

He was over her, tickling her ear with his gentle voice. "Will you accept my mark?"

She pulled him to her. "Yes."

-Yes.-

His body was against hers, heavy and powerful.

She felt pain on her shoulder. And with its burning she moaned as did the second soul within her. And then Orenda, the twin-souled woman, spiraled into rapture for what seemed days without end.

\*\*\*

Friar John rose from the forest floor and cleaned the mirror of blood within a nearby stream. It was night, so it was difficult to tell if all the blood had come off. He did not want to leave it lying about for someone to inadvertently use it. The spell cast upon it would allow any sort of evil to tempt its bearer. It was an open window now that it had been used for such a purpose. He imagined what sorts of people could be fooled into believing the whispering lies.

*Almost anyone.*

He lay it out in a clearing so that the moon could cast its rays upon the mirror and cleanse it of darkness. As the rays of the gibbous object struck the mirror, it took only minutes before it smoldered and cracked.

John strode from the clearing, carrying his pack and followed the path of the setting sun. The Beast would be closer than he thought. Dark things were being called to a place west of where he

stood.

As he walked, he took his fond memories and kindnesses and buried them deep within his being. He brought forth his anger and his jealousies, his hatreds and his scorns. They rose within him, and he immersed his heart in their pain; for he knew his heart would be examined by those among the darkness. There were beings that could search for his purpose and the reasons for his allegiance to the shadow.

*With pristine wings.*

John had shed his Friar's robes and dressed now in black cloth. He let his thoughts wander into darkness and of things that he had once regretted. He took pleasure in his past wrongs, and he did not castigate himself for his impure and wicked thoughts. He hated himself and the others that had caused him pain. And with all of this, he marched forward.

He cast a spell to hide his own mission, even from himself; a spell that would raise his consciousness and the righteousness in his heart when the truth was revealed. When the time was right, his true purpose would come forward and he would smite that which would bring evil to the world; the Hand of God.

He constructed a new truth, one which he would use to fool himself; he immersed himself in the whisperings of the mirror and let his heart be tainted by their promises. He let himself be led into their temptations. He delivered himself unto evil. He became what he once was, so long ago.

*Assassin.*

Then, as the last of the spell was cast the man that was once Friar John marched forward. In his hand he held a wick. He smiled his pleasure at it and then sucked upon the leaf of the Wormwood.

## Chapter 25

Brahm stood, clothed and cold, in a place where time moved and the scent of blood soured the air. Here there were no petals that delighted the skin as they dropped, or the loving caresses of half-women that danced naked under the moonlit sky, and neither was there a man who knew how to pleasure her in ways no being ever had.

*Or might never again.*

She found three dead Hunters at her feet. Their bodies were hidden in shadow. She was back in the place from which she had departed this world. Brahm looked to the sky to find the clouds shifting across the firmament once more.

She peeled back her shirt to examine the brand that lay beneath. It was no longer a fresh wound and her fingers were cool as they brushed it. There was no pain.

She vaguely remembered the making of it. It was different than Greta's. Where the thin woman's was a dancing goat, this was a mark of a goat's head with horns like that of the Horned One.

Senator Thurmond's voice echoed upon the still air like grating metal. "And he caused his children to pass through the fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom: also he observed times, and used enchantments, and used witchcraft, and dealt with a familiar spirit, and with wizards: he wrought much evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke him to anger."

Brahm reached to her belt. The silver dagger had returned.

White Feather and Diarmuid motioned her to the back of the stage. They had no idea that she had been gone for what seemed like days.

Brahm's face pinched, in fury and in pain. She had been taken to a place of such pleasure, only to return to a world filled with suffering and hate. It was as if she had been teased with a taste of heaven and she would likely long for it for the rest of her days.

Brahm spat.

*What cruel joke was this?*

She approached the stage. Two more dead Hunters lie on the ground, their bodies one with the dark mist that enveloped them. Dïor stood over them, his white hands clutching a dripping, red dagger. Brahm kicked them.

Thurmond's voice thundered. "And I say to those that support the witches: Let now the astrologers, the stargazers, the monthly prognosticators, stand up, and save thee from these things that shall come upon thee. Behold, they shall be as stubble; the fire shall burn them; they shall not deliver themselves from the power of the flame: there shall not be a coal to warm at, nor fire to sit before it."

Brahm searched for her brother. "Where is Mason?" she snapped.

White Feather's face was grim. "He said to tell you he is looking for the Imp."

"Which way did he go?"

The Haudenosaunee pointed towards the far side of the stage. "Orenda, he asked that you not follow him. You are needed here." His hand brushed hers. "I think he left us to allow us to escape. Take the opportunity. Leave him to his Confederation."

*Mason?* She wondered if that were true. *Hasn't he seen enough?*

"Fine, let's get this over with."

Diarmuid gripped the rusty pick-axe. "Any thoughts on where to go once we get her out?"

Dïor pillaged a dagger from one of the Hunters and handed it to White Feather. The hilt was emblazoned with a white cross. "The docks."

Brahm nodded, but she could not believe she had been swept back to this reality. She wanted to return to the grove.

Dïor murmured again. "Seventeen. Seventeen. Seventeen."

Brahm stepped in front of the Firstborn Lord, his face in shadow under the hood of his cloak. "Are you all right?"

His eyes stared out through the hood, cobalt flames at the end of a dark tunnel. "I was trapped by the Westwood all this time. Seventeen years my soul endured torture; seventeen years of my daughter's life I lost; and seventeen years I have mourned my Sephirah. I will never be 'all right'." His dagger flashed before her eyes and he melded with the shadows. "It is time."

White Feather's hand squeezed her shoulder, unknowingly pressing against the brand. "Orenda, be careful with him. He kills with darkness and shadow. His pain and hate run deep. I do not like how he looks at you."

The concern in his eye eased her mind and gave her a sense that she did, somewhat, belong to this world. His slight smile secured her in this place. And in that moment, she knew what she felt for the man who stood before her.

She could not love him; not after what she had just experienced. It wasn't possible.

Diarmuid interrupted her thoughts and the regret that sat in her heart.

"Brahm, let's go."

She followed him to the side of the stage where she found another three Hunters in the darkness, their gaping throats screaming out the identity of their assailant. From her belt, Brahm pulled the silver dagger and watched Thurmond at the podium. Lya stood back in the shadow of the stage, surrounded by Hunters. She was unchained.

Brahm's soul took wing and the silver dagger tugged at her as she skirted the shadows searching for Lya's father. Within moments she found him, his presence not yet physical. She sensed him as he made his way towards his daughter. When he leaned in to whisper in Lya's ear the girl turned suddenly to look in Brahm's direction.

Thurmond's voice pierced the air. "And I will cut off witchcrafts out of thine hand; and thou shalt have no more soothsayers: Thy graven images also will I cut off, and thy standing images out of the midst of thee; and thou shalt no more worship the work of thine hands. And I will pluck up thy groves out of the midst of thee: so will I destroy thy cities. And I will execute vengeance in anger and fury upon the heathen, such as they have not heard."

Lya suddenly stepped from the dark and raised her hands to summon the souls of the dead to her aid. The Hunters stood where they were, as if unaware of her presence. The crowd sat like lead weights in their seats, unflinching, as if awed by a part of the Revival. She strode towards the Senator with deliberate strides and the man's hands lit up with green flame.

The crowd finally responded, the cold reality of the situation settling on them like a sudden frost.

A voice cried out. "The Senator is a witch!" Screams filled the night air as people tumbled over each other to flee the hill.

Thurmond summoned brimstone and aimed it at the place where Dïor had materialized. He waved it off, sending into the crowds where it struck the onlookers dead.

From the north end of the stage, green flames flew towards Brahm. It missed and Breland hobbled across the stage, his face swelling like an overripe melon. His fingers still alight with green fire.

"Master, we must leave now."

Thurmond cleared his throat and nodded.

From the field, Mason leapt onto the stage.

Thurmond gritted his teeth. "So you have betrayed me, too, Mason. No matter, you cannot stop us."

Mason swung at the Imp and caught him unaware. His sword slid across the Imp's midsection, gutting him. The wound was deep and his insides seeped from the wound. He hobbled towards the Senator, one hand reaching for the man, the other trying to hold his innards together.

Thurmond called upon the elements and the dead. Then he was gone.

And with him he had taken Lya and the Imp.

"No!" Her brother stared agape at the place where the Imp once stood.

Dïor's rage was palpable. The death cloud solidified and he stood among them, clinging to a

blackened knife.

Diarmuid left White Feather to fend off three Hunters that scrambled onto the stage. He unwrapped the bandage from his arm. Brahm would have advised him against it, but there was no other choice. It was off in moments and he yanked the leech from his arm.

Darkness spread from its mouth and the leech wriggled upon the stage.

Diarmuid closed his eyes as the image of the ghoul he had summoned formed before him. It was hooded and stooped, with dripping, crooked fingers.

Diarmuid faced the wraith-like figure. "Take us to Senator Thurmond."

"The deal is set," said an iron voice.

Brahm felt a tug. She was pulled through a black emptiness. But the cold void was temporary and soft torchlight filled the clear night. Crickets chirped. She lay upon the ground, staring into a clear night sky.

*Where are we?*

They were no longer on the stage, but surrounded by an encampment of Hunters, all looking like stunned rabbits. The ghoul had swept them across the land with its spell, right into the heart of the Confederation army.

Something yanked the knife from Brahm's hand and a voice hissed in her ears. She was pinned to the ground by an unseen force.

*-I will not kill you, Soul Runner. My Sephirah lives within you now. But you must still pay the price.-*

Darkness shrouded her. She coughed, and swooned.

"No! Please!"

*\*Seventeen!\**

Brahm screamed as agony pierced her wrist, and the silver edge of the knife sawed off her hand.

\*\*\*

Fang had run, for days and nights, calling to her brothers, sisters, and her children. She pushed her body almost as far as it would go. Yet she was successful in her venture; some had responded to the summons and they waited in the woods on the borders of the Plains. The urgent cry was carried across the lands. The wolves were needed.

She waited in a grove, unable to run further.

*The clan leaders will come. They will all come.*

A thick scent on the air caught her nose and she turned her attention. A black wolf approached. He was followed by another, whose wiry, tawny body stood shorter than the other.

The first one greeted her. *\*It has been some time, old friend.\**

She sniffed the air. *-Night. Bane. Are you ready?-*

Bane stepped in front of the darker wolf. *\*Where is this boy?\**

Night growled at him. *\*In time.\**

He looked back to Fang. *\*Are you sure about this? We will have only one chance.\**

She nodded. *-Yes.-*

\*\*\*

Friar John skirted a land that was filled with dying grass and insipid air. The Witch Plains, this place was called. He smiled at the name. Somehow it was fitting.

He had had to take a wide berth around a group of people that were native to this land, mixed with Lastborn and some other humans that smelled of necromancy and weak summoning. He was unsure of their intent, or why they were amassing here, but he knew this was not the gathering for which he

searched. There was another, and it lay further west.

He continued on, well past the congregation of exhausted-looking vagrants. He moved as if something drew him towards it. He felt something old and familiar pulling him, guiding his steps. This path was his to take.

The sun beat upon him and the sweat of his head slid along his temples and down his unshaven cheeks. He took out a blade and shored off his hair in clumps as he marched forward. There was relief from the faint breeze that tickled the back of his neck.

John paused. Before him an army waited. Among them were the Witch Hunters he'd heard so much about; mindless drones to something much greater than themselves. None of them approached, only a small creature that John knew to be a goblin. It was shorter than even the shortest of men. The little beasts were known for killing for sport when left to run amok. This one showed some constraint as it waddled towards him.

It tilted its head, studying John. "This place is unsafe for travelers," it said. Its voice rasped.

The goblin was repugnant to him and John wanted nothing more than to kick the little beast and beat its crooked face into the earth. He loathed them.

John looked down upon the thing. "I have been called."

"You must submit to the testing."

"Bring forth whatever you would, goblin."

The creature looked to the west. There were bodies hanging from tree limbs, some torn, some whole.

The little beast grinned. "Those that have failed."

A being came forth and John saw its wings trailing behind its long strides. They were black and shining. Its face was terrible, yet beautiful—a face that instilled fear and awe. In its hand, it carried a sword of flame. John knew him at once.

"Uriel," he said.

The archangel studied him and then spoke. His voice was low and cruel. "Who are you that you know my name?"

"An assassin of the former Pope."

The angel's face was unflinching. "I did not command Aloysius to send help."

John paused.

Uriel did not hesitate, sensing the dilemma. "You were not sent by Aloysius."

John could not lie. "No. The Pope sent me forth, but I was tempted by the summons in the mirror."

Uriel nodded. "That which calls has great power."

"And I have come."

"An assassin is useful, although your talents could be better used elsewhere."

"I am yours to command. You may search my heart."

The angel held the sword to him. The fire upon it was searing. "Before you even came up the hill, I knew what lay in your heart. The grief and pain is great, as is the curse your spirit bears. I smell the soul leech upon your arm and the dead whore you killed as payment."

John rubbed at his arm. The soul leech that lay beneath wriggled under his fingers. He vaguely remembered the encounter with the ghoul. He remembered only that if he needed help, it would be there when asked. The leech was assurance of that.

"For a man of your abilities, you bargain with some unsavory characters."

John swallowed. "I will use whatever means are at my disposal."

Uriel said nothing. He drew back the sword and John felt the angel probing his heart. His wings fluttered behind him.

*This being's power is great.*

He felt fear in the pit of his stomach. It seemed to remind him of something, but he could not remember what.

He lowered his head. "I am your humble servant."

"You show humility when required. What are you called?"

"John."

Uriel smiled. It was terrible. "Then you shall be the herald. You will prepare the way."

John nodded.

"Follow me, heretic. I have need of you."

And the man called John, awed and jealous of the magnificence of the winged being, followed in the wake of the archangel.

\*\*\*

Brahm rolled to her side and moaned. The pain of her severed hand ripped up her arm. Her iron chains rattled as she gripped at the red-stained swathe of rags that wrapped about her stump. She fisted and flexed the ghost-hand as if it were still a part of her.

The captives sat in a circle, each chained to a pole with a Hunter standing guard. The one looming over her pressed the flat of his sword to her shoulder.

"Move back."

Brahm shuffled back as Senator Thurmond approached.

He poked her with his boot. His white robes brushed her stump. "I want to know about your power."

Brahm cradled her wounded arm. Breland sat off to the side, his sinister eyes smiling. The sword wound to his midsection was sloppily stitched. He wore the hideous scar exposed, and with pride. Flies hovered over it.

*He should be dead.*

Mason sat up. "Leave her. She knows nothing."

Thurmond rounded on his former Captain. "Fool! It is you who know nothing."

A painful look crossed the Senator's face as he gritted his teeth. His face and body began to split. A second set of arms and legs emerged from his body, led by a second head. When the creature had finished crawling from the Senator's form, its face smoothed out and took on a youthful, blank visage, the features melding into androgyny. Two now stood where one once did and the second took the shape of a young man. His phallus was erect and he played with it.

Diarmuid sucked in his breath. "Puck! What have you done to Paine?"

Puck grinned back. "I-I-I," he said mockingly, "will have that pathetic brat soon enough and then you will see." He strode away, still playing with himself.

Senator Thurmond cleared his throat and an unctuous grin slid across his face. "You see, brothers and sisters," he said, his preaching voice dipped once again into viscous drawl. "We are fishers of men. And you are bait."

Brahm's eyes challenged him. "What do you mean?"

"We want the boy. His mother whelped two children — twins; both of whom command great power. But one of them has the ability to command the Westwood. Their afterbirth helped create it and so they are a part of it. We want that power."

He then marched away from them and the Imp scuffled along behind him.

Diarmuid called after him. "Where is Lya?"

"Safe," said a voice that was low and harsh. It came from behind them. Brahm craned her neck and sucked in her breath at the sight. A tall man in black robes approached. He had shorn hair and a hard look in his eye. Behind him strode a magnificent being of darkness and light. It had black wings, yet they shone in the sunlight. Its face was terrible and beautiful. It reminded her of the statue that she had seen upon her parents' death. In his hand he brandished a sword of fire.

*An angel?*



The second soul within her shrieked, as if Sephirah was being burned by it.

*-No!-*

Brahm could barely peel her eyes away from the angel as it swept around to face them.

The man in the black robes remained behind the angel, muttering the words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is nigh."

The sword swept low and close to Brahm's missing hand. "You are insignificant in the eyes of the Almighty," he said, "a maggot among worms. Tell me, Soul Runner, which of the others has touched you?"

Brahm shook her head. "I don't understand." She wiggled her ghost fingers.

The angel cocked its head. "One of the gods has lain upon you. I can smell the beast all over you. You reek of sweat and fornication."

White Feather looked at her, but Brahm kept her gaze focused on the angel.

Brahm heard Sephirah's voice within her.

*-Don't lie to him! He will know.-*

Brahm thought for a moment.

*Don't lie to him.*

She spoke. "He did not give me his name."

The angel looked to the man in black robes. "What say you, messenger?"

The messenger adjusted a pack upon his back and then nodded his head.

The angel leaned in and shoved his hand against Brahm's stomach. She moaned with the roughness of his touch.

The angel said nothing and then strode off, his wings trailing him. The messenger followed, but paused for one last look at Brahm. As he did so, Sephirah forced Brahm's soul to sail forth and lunge at the man, delving within him. Then her soul reeled back as Brahm tried to understand what she had done.

*-Soon we shall be free.-*

The messenger remained motionless for a moment. Then he adjusted the pack on his back once more and walked in a different direction than the angel.

## Chapter 26

The late summer air moaned silence across the Witch Plains, its humid breath seeping into Paine's undergarments. He thought of Little Doe. Her loss was a wound to his heart, piercing and sharp. And what made it fester was that she had died by his hand. They had found her body the morning after, shredded and sliced. Her mouth and eyes had been open in suffering.

Paine's nose twitched as he remembered the scent of the burning flesh from the funeral pyre. He had been the last to mount, remaining by the fire as the others departed. He had remained until her body had fallen into the branches and disappeared from sight. The thoughts of raising her soul and speaking with her had been tempting. He had wanted to apologize for his careless actions, but in the end he rode away, leaving her soul to rest in peace. The regret had been heavy on him for the last five days as they fled from an army that had caught them too swiftly.

Mira and Great Bear stood to his left, Truitt to his right, their gaze cast two hundred yards away, to the Hunters lined in the middle of the Plains.

He thought also of the souls of the dead that now resided in him. After the staff had been broken, the souls had wanted their price and he knew they waited within him, reveling in the blood that ran through his veins. He could not sense their presence, nor their voices, but it still made his skin itch. And others had witnessed that the dead had advanced upon him and dwelt within him. Almost everyone avoided him now, as if they were expecting him to explode and that hundreds of hungry dead would come looking for their toll elsewhere.

Gregor stood a few feet over, his gnarled hands fingering Elenya's Soul. His eyes appeared lost, looking toward some distant thought. Alwhin and Brown Bear stood at the old man's side, both looking drawn and grim.

The army of Hunters assembled in pristine order, their swords still sheathed across their backs at a forty-five degree angle. Row upon row they waited, their faces expressionless and hard. The pearly-white crosses of their leather vests gleamed in the light of the rising sun, but paled next to the bleached white robes of the man who rode in front of them. Gregor named him; Thurmond, the man who created the Witch Hunters. Paine thought back to what Puck had told him.

*Is he with them?*

He looked at the meager army of refugees. Mounted Haudenosaunee flanked the right side, the remainder of Lindhome with the Lastborn lined the front, bows lowered, but arrows nocked. The witches of Haven, with daggers unsheathed, were prepared to draw their own blood. They flanked the left with the brightly-garbed ranks of the New Boston Guard. The mayor had sent them to help protect the city.

Man, woman; half-breed, human; they stood together, faces haggard, but eyes determined. Paine looked again to the Hunters that outnumbered the refugees by four to one.

*It's hopeless.*

A shifting in the trees to the north turned the heads of both hosts. Twelve mighty beings marched from the woods, their gray bark-like skin covered in tanned hides. They each stood a head taller than Great Bear.

As if on cue, the Haudenosaunee prodded him and whispered.

“Obek.”

\*\*\*

*Seventeen. Seventeen. Seventeen.*

Dior, once master of the Overlords, heir to the throne of Valbain, and High Magus of the Empire, wriggled through the congregation of Lastborn like a deathworm. Their mere existence twisted his insides with revulsion. His presence skimmed past them, squeezing between their tired bodies to avoid

their touch. He brushed the wretched boy and reeled from him.

*I should kill him.*

He continued on, one thought in his mind.

*Lya.*

His presence slunk through the crowds, avoiding the old Obek as he spoke of demons. He felt the Troll's double gaze trail Dïor as he slid along the shadows to materialize in front of Gregor and the Lastborn witch with the Sight.

*Sorceress.*

Both stepped back and Dïor's lips curled in a shallow grin. He pulled back his hood, feeling the pain of the sun on his pale skin.

Alwhin gasped. "Dïor, you live."

*Seventeen.*

"Indeed." He sensed the gaze of the rebel eyes upon him. Ten Lastborn aimed their bows at him. The Revenants cowered.

He laughed. "Put down your weapons, fools. I no longer have any quarrel with you."

Alwhin motioned them to lower their arms. "What has happened to you? Your presence has darkened."

"There is no time. Dark Wind is upon you and my daughter is among them." He pointed to the army of Hunters.

"They have Lya?" asked one of the Lastborn men, his goateed face contorted. Dïor sensed the waves of diluted adoration that radiated from him. It was a tainted love.

*You could never love her like I did my Sephirah.*

"So you know she is my daughter? I'm surprised you did not take her captive."

Alwhin shook her head. "I did not want to endanger her life by revealing her identity. You have now done that, to her peril."

*Seventeen.*

He spat black mucus to the ground. "She will be far greater than any of you can imagine. She should know who she is and take her rightful place."

A young human pushed his way to stand in front of him. Dïor saw the questions in his eyes and smelled fear wafting from him. He remembered the boy's name, Sephirah's idea, for the suffering he brought upon her, in his conception, his birth, his life.

*Paine.*

"What do you want, whelp?"

"You are Lya's father?"

"And not yours," he snapped. "I want nothing to do with you, boy. I would have slit your throat when you were born, but Sephirah wanted you to live. She even wrote some note as to why she had done such a thing. Now get out of my sight."

The boy swallowed, but his eyes were hard. "This?" He held up a ripped piece of parchment. On it was the writing that Dïor knew to be Sephirah's hand. And on it was the script that he knew only he could see.

"You can read this?" he asked.

The boy nodded. "It's the same as the script on the Tablet."

*Seventeen. Seventeen. Seventeen.* "This cannot be! Only three souls can read this. Mine, Sephirah's and our child's."

And then Dïor read the note left by his love. His insides twisted with anger and revulsion. The pain of it made his legs wobble where he stood.

"What does it say?" the boy asked.

Dïor looked to him and still hated him.

He swallowed back his pain, but his pride remained caught in his throat. He choked as he pointed

back towards the Hunters. "For your mother's sake, I will give you one piece of advice. Get on a boat with the half-breeds, boy. Flee this place. Dark Wind wants you and your sister. As does that monster over there. I am going to see it does not get its hands on you. Now, get out of my sight."

Dïor turned his anger towards Gregor. "So, ancient one, what do you plan on doing to fix the mess you helped create? I should stab you for your part in it, but my Sephirah agreed to it. Now I need you to help me stop it."

The old man looked worn, like his life was nothing more than yarn stretched too tight and ready to snap. He pulled from his tunic a black orb. Dïor recognized it instantly. "You will need more than one of these. Dark Wind's power has grown."

Gregor looked into the distance and nodded. "How much time do we have?"

Dïor closed his eyes, feeling for shadow and gloom.

*Seventeen.*

He opened his eyes. "It will be upon us before the day is out."

"Do the demons control it?"

Dïor cackled. "Nothing controls Dark Wind, and it will devour them as easily as the rest of you."

"It made an alliance with them."

"Listen to me, old man. I was a part of the Westwood when that happened and I know what it intends. It will not honor that alliance. Its purposes have been served and now that it is free, it will do what it pleases. All of you should get on boats because if you cannot stop it, none of you will survive."

Gregor sighed. "We have an army to fight. When Dark Wind arrives, find me. I will need your help."

The double gaze of the old Obek slid along Dïor's skin. He spoke.

"I sense Brahm's presence among them."

*I should cut out his Sighted eyes.*

Dïor nodded. "There are others with her. A kin of hers, a severed necromancer, and one of theirs." His pointed finger targeted one of the Haudenosaunee. The sun burned his bleached skin and he remembered the days when he used to relish its warm caress on his face. He lowered his hand and pulled up the hood of his battered cloak.

*Seventeen. Seventeen. Seventeen.*

"I will come for you, ancient one." He caught the boy's eye. "I suggest you avoid any unlikely shadows on the battle field. You might meet your end in it."

The Firstborn Lord then flourished his cloak and melded into his phantom form.

\*\*\*

Friar John walked among the fringe of the Hunters. In his hand he bore the Spear of Destiny. The battle was at hand and he needed to be prepared. So here he hid from Uriel while the archangel conferred on what to do with the woman, the one who bore Sephirah's soul. Somehow her presence had set loose the spell within him, releasing his true intent from his own prison.

*Too early.*

The bewilderment had been brief and he felt a little annoyed that he hadn't yet seen the Beast. And now that Uriel was around it would be difficult to get even near enough to see to the duty that had been bestowed upon him. If the angel sensed his true purpose it would be the end of his mission.

A grim thought made his lips twitch. He supposed he could let Uriel kill him and then the archangel would be damned forever, but that thought was fleeting. With the bargain he had made, his own soul would belong to the ghoul. And that was a place John had no desire to spend eternity. Slowly being devoured over time by a creature that he was certain would take pleasure in tormenting him for perpetuity was not how he imagined the afterlife.

No, he would need to avoid meeting an untimely end before he had met the terms of the bargain.

He rubbed at the bandage on his arm. The soul leech hurt.

One of the goblins bumped his leg where he stood. With his dark self still shrouding him, his irritation and anger came forth and John kicked the little beast. It turned to stab him and John's retribution was swift. The repulsive creature found the other end of the Spear jabbed through his chest instead. Its eyes bulged and it dropped the knife from its grubby hands. The Hunters that heard the struggles of the goblin as it tried to wriggle free paid it no heed. They simply turned back to their own preparations. The goblin meant nothing to them.

When the thing finally rasped its last breath and slumped upon the blade onto which it was skewered, John flicked it off the end of the blade like an unwanted piece of gristle. He left its body on the ground and circled the encampment. He tried to remain as far from view as he could from Uriel. He kept his heart darkened and his purpose concealed as he searched through the crowds. The angel conferred with the man in white robes, apparently a Senator in this foul-smelling land.

He also heard through the Hunters that a girl had been taken captive; Firstborn from the description. What one of their kind was doing so far from their own lands was intriguing, but John did not have time for such curiosities.

The task at hand called for his undivided attention. He flicked the end of the blade. It was an unconscious move and he noticed the goblin's blood on his fingers. He smelled it. It stunk, but he put it to his tongue anyway. It even tasted of rot.

John thought hard and quick, trying to sort out how he was going to find his prey in this confusion. He hated rushed, panicked thinking and with a battle about to begin, it was going to get more difficult. Then he heard a horn on the air and prayed that his wretched luck had turned.

\*\*\*

Paine's skin crawled as the Firstborn Lord faded before his eyes.

Mira offered him a crooked smile. "Do not let his words eat at you. He is a dark being. Focus on your sister."

*Lya.*

He fingered the bone dagger in his belt as well as one of the shards from the staff. It was useless now, but it offered him some reassurance. He watched as the Obek approached, lumbering across the Plains. Their strides were slow and deliberate, their expressions like stone. They were greeted by Gregor and Brown Bear and then took places in the crowd. Their leader, Gault, studied Paine briefly. He fingered a sack at his waist and blinked his eyes. Paine sucked in his breath at the two sets of eyelids. The old Obek nodded at him and Paine returned it. He then joined the rest of his tribe.

The man called Thurmond stood ready, his arms raised and then from among the neat rows of Hunters marched a tall being of brilliance and splendor. Its wings shone in the sunlight. There was muttering among the Lastborn and Paine noticed the uncomfortable look that Alwhin gave Gregor. He saw her mouth the words he knew this creature to be.

*Angel.*

It stood next to Senator Thurmond, a sword of fire in its massive hand. Its face was terrible to look upon.

The wind breezed along the Plains and Paine caught a whisper.

"Seventeen."

Gray clouds gathered above them and flashes of lightning rippled through the clouds. Thunder followed soon after, rolling across the heavens. Pellets of rain pounded the Witch Plains.

Paine pulled the dagger out and gripped it as Thurmond lowered his arms and pointed his hand towards the refugees. He yelled out orders and the Hunters unsheathed their swords.

The army moved forward, a juggernaut of expressionless eyes and silver-plated swords. They marched towards them, pure in their mindless determination. Mira donned her Hunter's helmet as the

members of Lindhome and the Haudenosaunee raised their bows. Paine held his breath and waited.

Truitt held his sword aloft, and dropped it. Arrows streaked through the pelting rain and wind. Some landed close to the approaching Hunters, but most fell short. The Hunters pressed forward.

*Twenty yards.*

Another volley of arrows sped through the sky. Two Hunters fell.

*Ten yards.*

One last volley rushed through the air, these with tips of silver. Twelve Hunters collapsed and where each one fell, another took their place.

The rain poured and lightning split the sky. Paine gripped the dagger. The Hunters swarmed, their swords raised. The rebels lunged, and swords clashed. Metal sang and the angel with the sword of fire swept forward. His sites were set on the Obek.

A surge of fear coursed through Paine and he caught a horn on the air; a low, heavy wail.

\*\*\*

Brahm lifted her wet head to the call of a horn on the air.

*What is that?*

Thunder beat the rain-slicked ground. It was not the storm, but horses.

*Hundreds of them.*

She craned her neck to see the impending wave of riders brandishing swords and the emblem of the Horned One. It matched the tattoo on her arm. There was little silver to their armament, but their numbers were impressive. They brought with them their necromancy and divined elements. Their berry-red lips muttered words of enchantment and they called upon the souls of the dead.

Brahm felt a changing tide. Selling herself had worked. He had sent help after all.

*-Whore.-*

She still longed for his touch.

Cresting the group was Yellow Hawk, Mumford Banyon, and Paul Cathman. The Hunters halted their progression forward and turned back to face the oncoming tide of witches and their righteous anger. Brahm struggled with her chains, pulling helplessly against their implacable hold. She looked at her useless free arm with its stump and waved to the riders, hoping they might see her.

"Help!"

The horse riders failed to notice the captives as they bore down upon the army. Metal clanged as the last two rows of the army fell under the silver-edged shoes of the mounts. The cries of the Hunters roared over the cracks of thunder.

The riders pulled back, rounding to gather for a second assault. The Hunters mustered together, raising their swords in readiness. Brahm's soul lifted from her body. Row upon row, the hundreds of Hunters were a festering swamp of hatred and fear.

The rebels barely held the Confederation army at bay. The Obek backed them, but they were entangled with the angel, and it took all twelve of the mighty beings to keep the winged creature at bay. A few Hunters tried to engage them, but their kahbeth sliced through the humans like hot pokers through fresh snow. She saw Gault, and dove into his being, sensing his soul. It exuded a soft hue of jade, its sound like the cry of the caribou. He held her there, as if in comfort. The Obek let her go and she slipped past him to see Lya's brother, dagger in hand. He waited for the Hunters to get past Great Bear and a tall blonde woman with a Hunter's helmet.

Brahm soared over the battle as the rebels fell back, the Hunters gathering to strike once more. From the south, howls pierced the air. Brahm flanked in their direction, sailing over the bloodied, wet ground. She dodged a shadow that enveloped a Hunter and sensed its madness.

*Dior.*

Brahm she swept towards the edge of the Witch Plains and, from among the forest of great silver

maples that bordered the land, wolves dashed forward with their fangs bared. Nine of them dwarfed the others and she recognized the two that led.

*Fang. Night.*

Two hundred wolves rushed from the trees, their fur sopping with the heavy rains. They leapt among the Hunters, pulling the southern ranks into the blood-stained mud. Brahm approached Night and as the wolf leapt at one of the Hunters; he nodded as if to acknowledge her. She attempted to reach into his being, but found herself blocked.

Fatigue flooded over her and she reeled back into her own body.

Mason's soul returned as well. "Bad news," he said. "Demons are coming from the north and the Westwood is nearly here."

Wailing and piercing howls filled the air and Brahm lifted up once more to search north.

*One last look.*

Demons and fiends of the deepest forests rushed from the trees and launched at the Haudenosaunee and Lastborn. Exhaustion settled on her as she sailed on westward and nearly slammed into a dark haze that hung on the air.

*The Westwood.*

She sensed its lust for all living things. Brahm sped away, back to her body to hear Sephirah screaming at her.

*-He is coming!-*

## Chapter 27

Friar John searched through the chaos. He killed what beasts he could, trying to avoid killing the Hunters. He'd had enough of taking human lives for now. But the goblins, he could take them over and over. Something in him delighted in their grunts of pain as they fell under his blade, something that had lain dormant for years.

Demons and creatures of savage darkness poured from the north and John took them as well. It was too late for anything close to an orderly approach to carrying out his plans. He continued to avoid Uriel, hoping the angel would not sense him. Fortunately, the winged being was occupied with a host of Obek; too busy attempting to kill them to be worried about a single man. He had taken three of the mighty beings already, but was hard pressed to take more.

John turned his back on the angel, scouring the landscape for whom he searched. The Beast had not revealed himself. Then John spotted the dark-skinned woman, the one who bore Sephirah's soul. And as if reliving a strange dream he cut a path through the demons and Hunters towards the woman he had once been in service to.

\*\*\*

The rain pounded and Brahm woke to its cold prickling upon her face. She was leaning against White Feather's rising chest. He said nothing, smiled, and squeezed her good hand as she sat up. Her ghost hand still hurt and the stump throbbed. She closed her eyes once more, her body requiring sleep, but re-opened them at a persistent wet nudge upon her leg. She blinked through hazy vision to see a black form step towards her. It leaned over her.

Her breathing labored in the musty air. The scent of the Westwood was heavy. Birds flew east from its path and small rodents scurried in the same direction, fleeing the oncoming cloud of death that she knew would follow.

A bloodied hand held out keys in front of her. It was the man dressed in black robes. In his other hand he gripped a long dagger.

"You will need these," he said, unlocking the chains that bound her.

Sephirah's soul screamed inside her head. It was the anguish again.

"I know who you are," he said. "I see Sephirah's soul bound with your own."

"You know?"

His face sagged. Sorrow lay in those eyes. "I did not tell Uriel who you are."

He released each of the captives and paused at Mason, noticing the emblem upon his uniform and the gleaming white cross.

"Whose side are you on?"

Mason looked at his sister. "Yours. I want nothing to do with the Confederation. I have had enough."

The messenger glanced at Brahm.

"He is with us," she said as she tried to massage her missing hand against her body. It itched.

He released her brother and threw the keys away.

Mason stared into the thick of battle, to where the Hunter and demon army advanced upon the refugees and horse riders. He took one of the swords from the dead Hunters. "We must get Lya and run for the ships."

Diarmuid grabbed another sword, wrenching it from the body of a slain Hunter. "I am going after Paine. I will meet you there."

"What about the ghoul? What was your price?"

"Not one you need to worry about," he said.

Her gut wrung as he left them to run towards the fighting.



*Diarmuid.*

Brahm looked at the messenger. "Why are you helping us?"

"To right a wrong," he said. "The second soul within you knows."

He looked about the field. "I am looking for the child of Sephirah. Where is he?"

Sephirah's soul wept uncontrollably.

"I do not know," Brahm said. "We are trying to save him."

"I'm trying to save us all," said the man.

*-Don't tell him.-*

But White Feather spoke. "Follow the one who just left. You can help him. He went after Paine."

The messenger nodded his head and ran after Diarmuid.

"Wait!" Brahm called, wondering to what Sephirah had been referring, but the man in black robes did not turn back.

Sephirah pleaded.

*-Go after my children! They are in peril!-*

White Feather retrieved two daggers from the Hunters. "We must go now. Already it is harder to breathe." He handed one of the daggers to Brahm. It was silver.

She waved him off with her stump.

"We need to go after that man. I think he may harm Paine."

He nodded. "Then I will watch over you."

Brahm's soul leapt from her body, sailing through the battle. Beside her, Mason's presence skimmed across the land. Brahm surged forward, through the Hunters and demons that fought side by side. She thought of the young Firstborn girl and the second soul within her guided her steps, the same feel that for years had guided Brahm's gut.

They ran, and there, in the midst of the Hunters, the girl stood, unchained, unhindered, and summoning aid. Her hands were raised to the sky.

Further ahead, Brahm noticed Paine. His features suddenly dissolved into red anger and Sephirah's soul screamed.

*-Down!-*

Sudden cold emanated from the boy and Brahm reeled back towards her body. She grabbed her brother. Her ghost-hand grasped air as she reached for White Feather.

"Get down!"

The rain stopped and a wave of black fire flooded towards them. They all dove to the ground.

\*\*\*

Friar John ran after the pepper-haired man, darting past more demons and Hunters. The man in front was swift in his movements, yet he shifted directions with his search. He searched the borders of the battle where those that had fallen or were maimed lay waiting to be eaten by the demons. Then he would lunge into the thick of the fighting where he moved a little too close to the archangel. Demons fought at its side and John thought of their common master.

*Who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire.*

They were nothing more than an elevated form of demon.

There were three less Obek now and the fighting was not looking good for the towering beings. Uriel's flaming sword and strength was too much for them. It wouldn't be long before all of them fell. John tried to give as much distance as possible from the angel and continued after the man who searched for Sephirah's son.

The man ran back towards the perimeter and John realized what was going on. The man's movements were erratic, and undisciplined. He was desperate. And looking closer at the man showed John the mark upon his arm; one that was very similar to his own with the exception that the soul leech

was still attached to his own arm.

He left the man to his frantic hunt and then felt a wave of cold and the souls of the dead move to the west of where he stood. He felt his own desperation fill him, the sense that if he did not ask for help he would miss the chance to kill the Beast. He had enough of pissing around; too much had gone awry and not the way that things used to for him. His plans had always been smooth and flawless. Not now.

*Why?*

John had no choice. He unwrapped the bandage around his own arm and yanked the leech from him. Then he summoned the ghoul and asked for help finding Sephirah's son.

\*\*\*

Paine stood behind Great Bear and Mira, who beat back the Hunters and twisted creatures that flooded from the north. The Obek stood beside them, but they were engaged by the angel and his swift sword. He searched the fields for Fang. Hundreds of wolves poured from the woods to the south, yet he failed to find the she-wolf.

He looked between the Obek at the wiry demons. He thought of Puck and anger boiled inside him.

*Is he here?*

He searched through the army of Hunters, wondering if the former simple-minded fool was among them. Great Bear and Mira lunged to the right, giving Paine a clear view. He spotted black hair, like midnight's cloak framing a pale face and eyes like the brightest sky. Her arms were raised to the sky and he sensed her summoning. Beside her stood Puck. He was whispering in her ear. Paine closed his eyes, feeling for the connection between his heart and hers. At first there was nothing and he searched deeper, pushing the sounds of battle from his ears. He delved further and there he found it, an insipid presence that connected his heart not only to hers. He felt the sticky strand that had been placed there securing his sister to him and he noticed something else. He was secured to Puck as well.

He yanked both from his heart and the two turned to him when it was done.

"Lya!" he called.

Puck looked at Paine. He morphed to demon form.

Paine fisted his hands. "No!"

Anger surged from him, pure and unfettered. A field of dead souls rushed to his aid. And those within his blood, those that he carried with him, arose. They took the form of black fire. Paine shoved past those that protected him, but some of them burned as he brushed them, Mira among them. She recoiled and screamed at his touch. He stumbled forward, the black fire searing the ground on which he walked and he sent it forward in a cresting wave of blazing pain. The Hunters before him fell to the ground.

Paine marched towards Puck and commanded the fire to burn the wraith, the fucking creature that had played him for a fool. The demon flew back from Lya, scoring the ground with his claws. He rose, commanding a powerful wind to suppress the dark flame that encircled him.

Paine advanced.

Puck pointed towards him with a thin, bent claw. "Get him!"

The demons from the battle turned towards Paine and launched at him. They withered as they leapt into the dark aura that surrounded him — sagging, writhing shells of their former selves. He trampled over wild flowers and wet, red earth. He slogged through mud, his legs like weighted chains.

Demons and Hunters ran towards him. They dropped, seared to the bone before they could get within yards of him.

He pressed on.

The dead from miles around flooded to Paine's silent call. They hovered over him. He pointed with a single finger.

"Kill him."

The host of souls sailed forth.

Puck screamed as he was flung to the ground. The demon writhed in agony, leprous spots dappling his body. His fur lit up with flame, white and hot. He tried to rise and call forth souls to aid him, but his lips were suddenly stitched together. Puck thrashed about, morphing from wraith to human, in the various forms he had taken over his years. They were many, and each had a tortured expression. Among them were Billy Chapman, Farin, and then the Reverend Chapman. Paine stood, watching as the wraith mumbled his screams and kicked at the earth.

Paine smiled. It was filled with vengeance.

*Good.*

Then the fire finally took the demon and he lay still, burning. And this time, unlike the other demons, the wraith had a soul. And with it Paine opened his arms, waiting. He welcomed the memories and the knowledge that accompanied it. He was ready for it, embracing it. He would know what this being knew.

But the memories did not come. The soul he expected slid away from him, towards the man known as Senator Thurmond. Paine turned on him, but a tall man in black robes stepped in front. Upon his arm was a terrible wound, dripping and bloodied, and in his hand was a blackened spear.

\*\*\*

Brahm got up from the ground, grunting with the pain of her missing hand. Sephirah was driving her forward.

*-Get them!-*

She pulled White Feather with her one good hand. "Get up!"

The Haudenosaunee rose, but his face was slightly seared. Red blisters were beginning to form.

Brahm's heart wrenched at the sight.

Her brother was beside her quickly. He was undamaged.

She began to run towards Lya, but her instincts told her different. She made a sudden change and instead ran after the boy.

Demons and Hunters blocked their path. White Feather and Mason ran just ahead of her, taking each one down that dared to get in their way. Brahm felt useless and even her soul tired of running. She ran blindly behind the others, and then Sephirah spoke to her, quietly, revealing all.

She told of a dark conception, a spell of great power, of the birth of Dark Wind, and of how one of her children might be able to command it. And then she gave Brahm the words of a spell she had once recited; one that she had hoped might bring to ruin a plan that had been laid with her own forced pregnancy.

And in that moment, Brahm's soul held Sephirah's; comforted her from her pain; and vowed that she would help make everything right.

She pushed ahead of the others, her legs moving in great stag-like strides. She ran ahead and heard White Feather and her brother calling after her.

*-I must speak.-*

And Brahm let Sephirah's soul come forth as she arrived, just as the man in black robes did. And they both faced Sephirah's child.

\*\*\*

Friar John stood facing the boy to whom the ghoul had guided him. He felt his face flush and his heart pounded, for he knew who stood before him, as sure as the truth that had plagued him for years. He had found his quarry; but not the one the Pope had sent him to find. Although it was by his hand that Sephirah had been drugged into the abominable act, and also by his own body that she had been

impregnated, this was not whom the Pope had sent him to find. Yes, this boy before him had been conceived by John's unwilling relations with the former Pope; and the one Sephirah had borne to the world — a Son of Man. But things were not as he expected.

He twitched his fingers as he smelled the truth of this boy. He was not possessed of the dark Spirit that should inhabit his body. John's work was not complete.

*I have found my bastard child, but this is not the Beast.*

Behind him a voice spoke, its cold hatred forced him to turn. It was the man in white robes he had recognized from a distance; the Senator.

There was anger in the Senator's face. "Heretic, what are you doing here?"

John sucked in his breath.

*Heretic?*

The man's face reddened as he looked at the Spear in John's hands. "Is this what the Pope sent you to do? Fool! This one is mine. He has been promised to me."

"No!" said another voice. It was a woman, tall and black. She was missing a hand. John recognized her. And the voice that spoke was not her own; it was that of Sephirah.

"You will not have my son, Aloysius," she said.

*Aloysius?*

The Senator's eyes widened.

"I know that voice," he hissed. "How do you know me?"

"You know me, well, fool. Now, leave this place."

He smiled with recognition. "Sephirah. So you have managed to find a way to cheat death by taking residence in this body. Well, you are too late. The boy is mine!"

He reached to grab the boy, but missed.

John looked to where Uriel battled with the Obek. They were down three more. The archangel turned, and with a sudden knowing in his squinted eyes, he gritted his teeth and began to fight his way towards them.

John gripped the black Spear. The angel lacked a soul to take, but the weapon might still do some damage.

The boy finally spoke and spat out his words in anger. "Who sent you? Why do you want me and my sister?" A legion of dead hovered over him, waiting for his command.

"Your sister?" The Senator laughed. "It was your sister who promised you to me. When the three of us had relations in the woods, it was she that tethered you to us, so that either one of us could find you when there was need; it was she who made the deal with the Westwood; it is she who has been calling the others to her in the darkness; it was she who had Farin send Diarmuid to you — the one human that could get you into Lindhome. It was she who had me chase and guide you to where she could examine the Soulstone Tablet for herself and once she learned that you could read it, she had to wait to use you to command Dark Wind. It was your sister who so willingly sacrificed her brother for her own purposes. And it was your sister who commanded the death of those that had raised you. The Bringer of Light calls her his own, and you — though you have abilities she does not, you are nothing! You are not worthy to inherit your birthright. When she was done with you, you were to be mine in trade for my army of Hunters. But my patience grows thin, whelp. I will have you now!"

He moved to step forward and John tried to sort out in his head what was happening.

*The boy was of his seed, but not the Beast?*

The prophecy called for a male.

*And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne.*

He looked to the woman that carried Sephirah's soul with a look of confusion.

There was a gleam in her eye and she mouthed the words, "I switched their souls."

\*\*\*

Paine felt as if a stone had struck his chest.

*His own sister had been responsible?*

It wasn't possible. He looked to her and there was a look of seething in her eyes; hatred in a form so pure it was like she was darkness incarnate. She stood there, sliced hand dripping with red, owning her betrayal of him on her stone face.

She had already called forth the beings from the parchment, the same ones she had summoned in the ancient ruins. It seemed a lifetime ago. She beckoned them closer with a pale, white finger. Paine could see them — four twisted beast-men and one woman, rulers of the netherworld. Lya's head moved only slightly as Paine walked towards her. He felt their constant hunger.

Her face remained impassive, cold. "So now you know. I will not extend an invitation to join me. Your soul is weak." She spat at his feet. "You have not altered my plans much; I still have the Soulstone Tablet. And Dark Wind may not be at my call now, but it will be. Once it has had enough of this land and eaten its fill, I will come back for it."

"Who are you? You're not my sister."

Lya laughed. "Fool! Who do you think was tempting you in the mirror so long ago. My plan has been long in the making. I almost had you where I needed you. And I used Billy Chapman to get at you. And I would have had you were it not for that fucking wolf."

"Fang?"

"She did something to you; gave you the ability to fend off my influence, but I will see to her kind soon enough. And as for you, my brother, I cannot let you live. I am not sorry for your demise. You're pathetic. And to think a boy was supposed to be chosen."

She grinned, and it was sickening. Lya pointed and the five sovereigns of Hell came at Paine in a rush.

They bit him and slashed at his skin. He burned in places unmentionable and his legs grew festering sores. Paine screamed. Then he bit back the anguish and sent his own legion of dead forward. He reached out to the five demons that dared to assail him, his will strong.

*I am Little Badger. Serve me.*

He fought with his sister's control over them; the blood that ran in his veins was potent; more so than what dripped from his sister's hand. Their hunger for blood and the souls of the living was palpable, frantic. They came to him with little resistance.

While he pulled them towards him and offered them his blood; the man in black robes went after Puck; his long black spear taking swift jabs and swipes at the demon. The man moved well as the demon struck back with green fire and curses of his own.

The woman that spoke with his mother's voice had tears in her eyes. Before her appeared Dïor, cloaked in shadow and darkness. She pleaded with him, but about what Paine did not hear over the screams of the demons and the thunder that rolled across the heavens. Dïor shook his head, took her face in his hands, and kissed her on the forehead.

Agares, Morax, Balam, Tephros, and Vepar having accepted his offer, waited for his command. They resided within him. Paine held them back. He could not attack his own sister. Yet the rage in him wanted retribution. Her betrayal soured his stomach and pierced his heart. And the shame that she had fooled him for so long was maddening. He held the demons back by a thread.

Lya grabbed a Hunter by the hair and stuck his throat with her blackened blade. She summoned others — Byleth, Ariel, and Malphas; fiends from the depths of the underworld. They were accompanied by others — legions of their twisted underlings.

All were easily swayed with the offer of Paine's blood. They came to him and Lya screamed her rage. They slid under his skin, an accumulation of malice and anguish. It was vile, yet savory. He closed his eyes, enticed by their depravities. The legions were wanton and reckless, but their masters

were deliberate. Their power was decadence.

Lya threw her dagger at Paine. He ducked and it grazed his arm; the place where his heart would have been. She unsheathed a knife and shoved through the demons and Hunters, towards the angel, slicing down those that stood in her way.

Paine reached out to the angel, like he did to the others; and the offer of his tainted blood made the being pause. He felt it probe him; search his heart. He felt its power; like the foundations of the earth. And this time, he didn't beseech the angel with just his own blood. He craved this being's might, so he offered the blood of others as well. There was a field of it, spilled about his feet. He would take the rest of the Hunter army if this one would serve him.

The angel's face was stolid, unreadable. Then the being leapt into the air, and with a few quick flaps of his wings he snatched Lya from the crowds. His black wings carried them skywards and Paine stepped towards them.

His feet were immobilized and he looked back.

Puck offered a sickening grin. "You are still mine."

The full force of what lay within Paine's veins, the spirits of Hades and the countless dead, surged forth with his full displeasure. They lunged at Puck, and Paine did not stop them. He allowed them their indulgences of malice and it struck Paine as odd that these creatures would be so eager and willing to mutilate one of their own. The demon did not last long. His cries of anguish and aggravation echoed as his limbs were ripped and torn from him.

"It is not over!" he cried and then his voice was muffled as his tongue was taken from him. His body flailed and wriggled until even it was torn. Then he ceased to move.

Paine opened himself, waiting for Puck's soul, eager to take it and learn. He would have his knowledge and memories. And the knowledge would be succulent.

But, again, Puck's soul did not come to him. It slipped across the plains and there was a sickening sensation that it was grinning as it slid towards the sea.

"Triune," muttered the man in black robes. "And I know where its third form resides." The man coughed. The air was getting thick, putrefying; like the scent of death was leeching into everything around them.

*Triune?*

Paine wanted to scream his rage at losing him once again, but one of the Sovereigns whispered to him. It was Vepar, the female one.

*\*A triune has three forms; three as one.\**

*I want his cursed soul!*

*\*Then have this one lead you to him.\**

*And I want my sister. She will pay for this.*

*\*Your sister has been plotting for years. Patience is useful to those that wish revenge. Take your time. Prepare yourself for her.\**

Paine not only recognized the wisdom of her thinking, but felt it as well. The others weighed in with equal support of the notion.

*So be it. Her time will come.*

"You will take me to him," he said to the man in black robes.

The man looked to the sky, to where the sun hid behind the roiling clouds. The day was getting late. He gripped a bloodied wound upon his arm.

"There are Portuguese galleons moored in New Boston. I will meet you there. There is some business I need to take care of." Then he gripped the black spear and ran, skewering a goblin-like beast along the way.

Paine marched over to the woman that spoke with his mother's voice. Dïor had left her.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am the soul of your mother."

The air thickened and he knew there was little time. He could sense Dark Wind's presence. Its wicked laughter was faint, but Paine recognized it from the Westwood.

"What am I?"

"That man that left is your human father. Possessed by the Spirit of the one who would see his return to power fulfilled, he planted the seed in me against my will."

A Haudenosaunee man stood next to the woman and gripped her arm. On her other side stood a black-skinned man who closely resembled the woman.

"You were supposed to be a Son of Man," she continued, "the Beast, but during your birth I switched your souls. Your spirit was supposed to be born as my daughter — the heir to the throne of Valbain."

"So now I am neither the heir, nor a Son of Man."

"Correct. And your sister is both. But some of your birthright is still yours. In your veins runs the blood of twelve score lives that were slaughtered for your inception — blood that I was forced to drink. Your blood holds that power and you hold power over even the dead now. They will heed your call."

She coughed. Dark Wind's presence was nearly on top of them.

"And what about that thing?" he asked, pointing to the cloud of death from which birds fled in flocks.

"Created to gain power, by Gregor and I and the Lastborn. Your afterbirth was used in the spell with the Soulstone Tablet to entice one of the seraph, the highest of angels. But your blood tainted it and made its fall from glory so great that even its own master would likely fear it."

"Can I control it?"

"Its power has grown since its birth. I don't know that you can any longer."

Paine pulled from his pocket the parchment. "This is your writing, isn't it?"

She nodded.

The Haudenosaunee pulled on her arm. "We must leave."

Sephirah's voice spoke quickly. "It is the spell that I used to switch your souls. I hoped that Gwen would give it to you. It was meant for you and not your sister, in case she grew up as she did. I had hoped we could reach her and help her to mature without her heritage, but she found it anyway."

"Did Gwen know who we were?"

"She knew that something dark had been involved in your conception, but I never told her I switched your souls. She knew only that you were a bastard child. I told her to raise you in a quiet place where you would not find your way to an evil path."

Paine nodded. It made sense now.

"How can I read this writing?" he asked. "I can see it, but I don't understand it."

"I am no longer living, and the woman to whom I am twinned does not possess a power that I can use to give you the answer. Dīor still lives, even if it is as a shadow of what he once was. I asked him to give you that knowledge, but he refused."

A black cloud rolled across the Witch Plains, making for them. Its speed was fierce and its scent was putrid. Paine now heard its wicked laughter clearly. He reached forward with the dead as his hands. He latched onto Dark Wind, holding it as it loomed over his mother. He cried out to her, around a great lump in his throat.

"Go, get on the ships!"

With her good hand she reached towards him. She touched his face with a finger that was soft and smooth.

"No! You must go!"

He took one last glance at the woman who bore his mother's soul before he ran towards Dark Wind's waiting embrace. Perhaps there was a chance he could stop this.

Laughter echoed across the sky and the air thickened. Paine's lungs heaved. He ran and Dark Wind's presence surrounded him, cradling him. The laughter whispered in his ears and tremors shook

the land. His power summoned forth legions of souls to his aid. The sovereign rushed forth. He ran towards the heart of the entity, and it suckled on him like a leech. He fell to his knees, gripped the earth, and invited the evil unto him.

“Come to me.”



## Chapter 28

Brahm watched Paine run into the Westwood. She knew that look — a final desperate act.

White Feather was beside her. “You heard him. We must go!”

Mason grabbed Brahm’s other arm. “Let him do what he must. We must make for the port. Now!”

The two pulled Brahm towards New Boston, fleeing behind the rest. The demons, their numbers decimated, fled north into the forests and the Haudenosaunee, Obek and wolves chased after them.

Brahm looked to White Feather as they ran. “Your people are not getting on the ships. They head north.”

Though he ran at her side, his eyes delved deep into hers. “My place is with you, Orenda.”

She held out her hand to him, only to find it missing. The second soul within her cradled her with both its arms. Brahm let herself melt into the other woman’s presence.

*We are one.*

*-We are Orenda.-*

\*\*\*

Paine knelt in the mud where blackness slithered into him. It was not slow and subtle. Instead it was swift and abrupt, invading every orifice. It thrust its way along his spine, through his veins, and straight to his soul. He moaned with its impact.

He struggled to fight, but it siphoned his will. He thought of Dīor’s heated words and they burned through him. He thought of the Clan Mother, of his parents, all slaughtered because of his sister. His anger was righteous.

Paine looked up at soft footsteps that padded the ground ahead of him. A being of great magnificence stood within the darkness. It had six wings; two which covered its face, two which covered its feet, and two with which it could fly. Then it changed and morphed into the boy of the Westwood.

*You should be dead.*

The boy opened his cherry lips to speak, but the words were uttered in Paine’s head.

*\*Let me help thee.\**

He offered Paine his little hand.

Paine called forth everything he could summon and drove it at the boy.

*Who are you?*

The boy smiled.

*\*Once I was called Nahash.\**

The boy flicked his wrist and the souls turned on Paine, funneling back towards him.

*\*I can give ye power.\**

Paine gripped the earth. He sent the dead forward again, screaming.

The boy stood in front of him. His smile was pure and white.

*\*I can give ye all that thou desires.\**

He turned his head away from Paine for a brief moment. A light emanated from behind him. Paine followed the boy’s gaze to see a white aura and five beings walking towards him, a wolf at their lead. The boy squinted and the ground shuddered.

*\*I will spare thy companions.\**

The terrible weight of the darkness forced itself upon Paine. He crawled out of their sight. He could not let them share his fate.

*Not like Little Doe.*

The boy extended his hand once more.

*\*I can end thy guilt. I can promise ye control.\**

Paine paused.

The boy's black eyes blinked.

*\*I can give ye knowledge. Eat of the tree. Your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.\**

Paine reached up, hesitant. His hand trembled.

*\*I can help thee against thy sister.\**

Paine clasped his strong, tiny hand. And with the cold tightening of the boy's fingers, Paine felt a similar grip on his soul and heart. He closed his eyes, embracing it. There was always a price.

*What do you want?*

*\*I need a new body. This one hungers greatly and I wish to leave this land.\**

He invited the boy and his darkness into him.

*Come unto me.*

The boy's form dissipated into a black cloud, leaving behind the great darkness that hungered for living things. Paine inhaled his presence. His nose bled as the entity once known as Nahash swept into him and encased his soul. Its presence was not what he expected, barely noticeable. And with its insipid invasion came knowledge, old and deep. Paine nodded his head, understanding Dark Wind's intent.

And he smiled. *All was clear now.*

A sudden shadow enveloped him, something foreign to Dark Wind's shadow. It slunk over Paine. He knew it instantly, a being that had been trapped for seventeen years. And Paine knew what Nahash had done to the man.

Paine got to his knees and Dïor's voice spoke to him.

"You saved my daughter, whelp as well as the woman who holds my Sephirah's soul. For that I will honor her request to give you what you need."

Paine buried his own thoughts, masking them from the Firstborn's probing.

*This was easier than I thought.*

Dïor cast a spell that unlocked something in Paine, and with it there was the knowledge he required.

The man departed, leaving him there.

From the corner of his eye, he sensed someone reaching towards him. He knew that hand before he could even see it. Nahash had given him gifts beyond comprehension, things that the voices and the images in the mirror had promised years ago. And now those gifts were palpable, and they were his.

He faked a clumsy rising and waited for Diarmuid to reach him. There was a hole in the man's arm, similar to the black-robed man.

Gregor stood with him. The old man smiled, Elenya's Soul in his hand. Paine sucked in his breath. He knew that thing and its blasted intent. He masked his fear behind doe-like eyes.

"What are you going to do with that?"

"I will take care of this mess I helped create and stop Dark Wind before it gets any further. Your mother would be proud of you."

Paine offered a shy smile.

*Perhaps I will ask her.*

Dïor materialized beside Gregor. The two gave Paine one last look before striding further into what remained of Dark Wind's shadow. It still clouded the land, siphoning off all living things.

Paine rose from the ground and Nahash stroked his soul with its tentacles. Its evil laughed within him and shared a thought. Paine acknowledged its wicked intent.

*Someone needed to be sacrificed. Something needs to take residence in Dark Wind's body.*

And with the souls of the dead floating about him, Paine saw his opportunity to be rid of the former High Magus of the Valbain. He no longer needed the man.

As the others drew near, Paine rose and commanded the dead. He lifted his hands to the air as if commanding a final act of great summoning. The dead were eager, whispering in his ear.

*-Use us.-*

He sent them to precede Dïor and Gregor, spiraling towards the location where the heart of Dark Wind once resided and they took the form of a little boy. Its appearance flickered and pointed. It was a good replica and enough of a ruse to fool them.

Diarmuid, Great Bear, and Mira ran up to him.

*I should have killed her.*

At their feet loped a large wolf, its white fur almost glowing in the aura.

"Fang," he said, feigning a choking voice.

The wolf's eyes shone. A voice, calm and soothing, echoed in Paine's mind, a voice he recognized.

*-It is time. The ships await.-*

Once again Paine buried his thoughts, this time from the wolf, for he knew her true nature now. He needed to shield his mind from her.

He struggled to speak, the words gurgled. He almost laughed at this coy little game.

"You're the voice," he said to the wolf.

The she-wolf did not flinch.

Diarmuid pulled him towards him, his tugging on Paine's arm a little too urgent for that of a mere friend. The man held him. "You're safe now, Paine."

The air lightened, Paine coughed as if his lungs were trying to purge the soot that saturated them. He rasped a single word, as if Dark Wind had taken his voice from him.

"Diarmuid," he said. He offered a soft smile, one of innocence and relief. What lay under it was filled with lustful notions. He licked his lips.

Paine turned his thoughts from what he would do with this man. He would have him later, for now he knew the secret to whispering an enchantment in a man's ear and to get what you wanted from him. Something Lya had learned to perform in what seemed another lifetime.

Paine paused to watch Gregor and Dïor as they entered the depths of Dark Wind. They disappeared from sight and he bit back his glee, thinking of the trap that awaited them. He turned as Fang now led them over the Witch Plains. The small troupe ran to escape the cloud of death, the ground rumbling behind them. As they slipped through the edge of the shadows, he caught a whisper.

"Seventeen. Seventeen. Seventeen."

Mira's legs buckled under her. Dark Wind was proving too much for her. She fell to the ground and Great Bear scooped her up in his arms. They continued on, Dark Wind's shadow looming over them, chasing them towards New Boston.

The muddied ground was littered with the bodies of the dead and pools of red. So much could be done with this much blood. It was glorious.

Fang ran far ahead of them, leading them towards the city. Paine dodged body after body, his breath labored. Diarmuid put his arm around him and Paine smiled. He almost laughed at the ease of this.

Having him would be almost too simple.

Dark Wind trailed them, licking at their heels as they ran.

Paine smelled its musty odor nearly tumbling over them. Then it stopped and he knew his trap had been sprung.

*Excellent.*

A tortured voice echoed across the land.

"Seventeen!"

\*\*\*

Dïor strode with Gregor into the heart of the thing that had trapped him for years.

*Seventeen. Seventeen. Seventeen.*

He grabbed Gregor by the arm and cloaked him in the darkness of his own being. It would hide them within Dark Wind's shadow.

Gregor's presence gave off a scent of calm and longing, of finality and love.

The Firstborn Lord surfed the waves of shadow that tried to consume him, knowing that the heart of Dark Wind lay close.

*I can smell it.*

It flung demon shadows in his direction, but failed to find him as he slunk through its own darkness. Gregor gripped the Soul Orb in one hand and a bone dagger in the other.

A dark pulse throbbed around them and Dïor knew they finally stood in the heart of Dark Wind. Yet something seemed amiss.

"Are you ready, ancient one?" he asked.

Gregor ripped open his tunic to bare his white, spotted flesh and muttered the words of the spell that would trap his own soul. He was going to heal the Soul Orb and trap Dark Wind once more.

Dïor thought of his daughter and the Empress she could have become. For the first time in seventeen years, the Firstborn Lord smiled.

Gregor finished the spell and thrust the dagger into his own chest, spilling his blood and trapping his soul in the black orb with the woman who had once done the same.

"Elenya," the old man muttered and then his body crumpled.

Dïor materialized, snatching the Soul Orb from Gregor's dead hand as he fell. He held it aloft, eager to call upon its power.

*Sephirah must be saved.*

The Soul Orb thrummed in his ears and throbbed in his hand. He felt it work its power and then sensed a trap. Dark Wind's heart was no longer there. The Soul Orb worked its magic, but upon Dïor instead, paralyzing him within Dark Wind's ethereal body. The shadow of the creature that had once tortured him threw itself at Dïor, invading his body and he screamed his rage and fury. He would be trapped there, within Dark Wind's body, forever.

"Seventeen!"

\*\*\*

Friar John ran, cutting his way through the demons once more as they fled. The wolves had been the turning point in the battle, tipping the odds even greater than John would have thought possible. From where they had come he did not know, but their numbers were impressive.

The sun was nearing the horizon as John reached the outskirts of New Boston. Others fled before him, making for galleons that were to sail them across the ocean. John ducked through alleyways and side streets, yet still made an easterly direction. He had little time to lose and the people that fled from Dark Wind were increasing in number. They were getting in his way and he felt his impatience rising.

The shawl of his dark self he still wore about him. He needed to once again deliver himself to wickedness if he was to save his own skin. The sun now perched upon the western rise casting his shadow before him as he ran. He knew the location of the church. His only hope before the ghoul came for its toll was to find Miguel.

He dashed through the entrance, past the statue of the virgin. The pews reeked of fresh pine oil and his darkened self had to keep from retching with the smell. He pulled off his pack to pull out the sigil-covered urn. The Spear of Destiny was already in his hand. He scanned the mostly empty wooden rows. A few heads were knelt in prayer – mostly the old and the particularly devout. A man and woman knelt together as they lit some candles. Their packs were large upon their backs; likely travelers that had found a sanctuary of peace.

Near the front he found a tonsured man that had Miguel's roundness. He knelt before the cross, fingering beads with fat fingers. John had no time to waste. None would try to stop him here and he

would be gone before the City Guard would have time to react. They had their hands full attempting to stem the fear and panic that was now flooding into the city.

He marched forward, letting the floorboards groan beneath his quickened steps. The man did not look back to see who hastened through the rows. John gripped the Spear and hoped beyond hope that this was Miguel. If not, it would be too late. John rounded the last row and walked up to the man, grabbing him by his brown friar's robes and spun him round.

He nearly gasped at what he faced. The man before him was, in fact, Miguel and John would have driven the Spear through him right there, but next to him, knelt low and humble, beads in her tiny hands and garbed in a white dress of fanciful lace, was a shock of red hair.

"Little One," he whispered. John dropped to his knees.

She giggled and his heart soared. The shroud of darkness lifted from his heart, and tears choked him. He felt locked in place, like he could not move.

The sun dropped beneath the edge of the western window and he knew his choice would lead to ruin, no matter what.

Miguel spoke, his face alight with a look of happiness. "Praise be, brother. You were lost and now are found."

John swallowed back the tears and his words.

"I found her washed up on shore and she has recovered. She was baptized this morning and will take residence at the convent just north of the city."

Meega held up the rosary. "Beads," she said.

John's disgust and anger ran deep. And he chose, there, not to take the innocence of one, but two. The blade he shoved deep into the chest of Miguel, spilling his blood to the tiled floor. It ran fast and red towards the feet of the Christ that hung upon the cross. He muttered the spell to take Miguel's soul as the man collapsed to his knees.

The look of shock and betrayal was almost too much to bear, but John kept his eyes locked on those of Miguel, if only to say he had looked into the man's eyes when he took his life. And with the soul of Miguel went the innocence of a little girl whose beautiful blue eyes were filled with tears. Her mouth was wide with shock and John scooped her up with bloodied hands and carried her out of the church.

Meega wept with her head nestled in the crook of his neck. John found a place to stop where the ghoul would come to him. He pulled her face into his black robes and summoned the creature.

"Do not look, Little One. This will be over soon."

The ghoul's apparition came to him swift and sudden, its face covered by its cloak.

"I have your toll," he said. "The life of an innocent."

It sniffed at the urn and looked at the girl. Then it inhaled the soul of Miguel and John could swear he heard the fat man's anguish.

"There is more in here than just the life of an innocent."

John nodded. Meega's innocence and his guilt occupied it as well.

"You bargain well. It is now complete." It reached towards his arm and passed its chill fingers over the wound. The hole sealed itself leaving a scar that looked like the mouth of the leech.

Then it was gone.

John pulled Meega's face from hiding. She still clutched the beads in her little hand. In her other hand was the little straw doll that she had carried from over the sea. He cast the rosary to the ground and scooped her up once more and ran for the ships, abandoning his chances of redemption to a land that stank of refuse and remorse.

\*\*\*

Approaching the docks, Paine saw that the ships were already leaving the port. Dismayed, the

runners screamed for them to wait. Fang stood at the stern of one of the ships, barking at them as it departed. Paine waved.

“Wait!” he called. He looked about, wondering how he would actually get on the ship. The knowledge of things he now possessed was not enough.

The others screamed frantic calls, trying to get the attention of the Portuguese sailors.

Paine heard a voice behind him.

“Too bad. Since Thurmond gave up on you, now you are mine.”

They all turned and found a short, lumpy man with a gaping wound and nasty stitches across his midsection. His hair was mussed and his face charred. There were gaudy rings on his fat fingers. Paine knew what the little man was and what lay inside him.

Mira wavered where she stood. “Breland!”

The demon thrust green fire towards her. It struck her and she fell screaming under flames that consumed her flesh. Paine almost stopped it. He had wanted her demise reserved for himself, but he delighted in her wriggling and howling.

*Good.*

Great Bear charged with his war club, his anger as mighty as the mountains, but the little man jumped upon him with a blade and jabbed his neck. The sun disappeared beyond the horizon as the large man fell.

Diarmuid pulled out a silver sword and pushed Paine behind him. The demon cast lightning from the skies, but the pepper-haired man dodged it before it struck. Green fire sped along the docks towards Paine and coiled about him like a snake. Paine whispered a spell of protection. The green flames did not harm him.

The little man stepped forward. “You are mine.”

Diarmuid looked at Paine, but he said nothing. He knelt upon the docks, his head lowered. A cloaked creature appeared before him, partly visible. It had no legs, instead at the base of its cloak appeared a thick trunk of entwined branches and reeds. It wore a necklace of bones and skulls about its neck.

Something in Paine, as much as it wanted to simply use Diarmuid as a thing of pleasure, felt something other than a passing fancy for the man. He did not like what was transpiring. He reached out.

Nahash spoke to him, recognizing it for what it was.

*-Ghoul.-*

*What will it do?*

*-Steal the soul from his body if he has not paid its price.-*

Paine stepped forward. A briny wind ruffled his hair.

*Then I must stop it.*

*-You cannot. The deal is set. Once a deal has been sealed in blood, it is almost impossible to break.-*

With twisted fingers the ghoul touched Diarmuid’s face and then seized him by the hair. Diarmuid winced.

Paine retrieved the parchment and spoke the words that had been hidden from him for what seemed an eternity — his mother’s spell. He reached deep within him for help. He called upon those that resided in his blood. Nahash and the Sovereigns spoke the words with him, reciting the ancient enchantment.

As the little man known as Breland stepped forward to claim his quarry, Paine decided to use him as the target with which to trade. The switch was swift and unseen by the ghoul as it pressed its hooded face towards Diarmuid’s and drank of the soul that resided within. Diarmuid’s body shuddered, his fingers scratching at the wooden planks beneath him. Paine heard two souls screaming; the demon that had taken Breland’s body and the soul of Breland himself.

*An innocent?*

Diarmuid's body slumped to the ground and the ghoul faded away.

Paine then called upon the incantation again, to send Diarmuid's soul back, but as he reached within him and called upon the others for help, he realized there was no soul left within Breland's poorly stitched, festering carcass. Without the demon, the body was incapable of surviving and Diarmuid was now gone.

*No!*

He heard Nahash and the Sovereigns chuckling.

He opened his heart and arms in the hopes that Diarmuid's soul would come to him, but there was nothing. He had not taken the man's life, so his memories were not Paine's to witness. And he stood there, arms open, tears in his eyes.

*No. I will call him back, resurrect him.*

*-You cannot.-*

*But another did once before.*

*-Parlor tricks. Once a soul has moved on, there is no bringing it back.-*

Paine fisted his hands. He looked back to Fang on the ship that was sailing away.

He reached out to her, wondering what she was capable of.

*Could she do something?*

He was being left behind.

*No. I will go to her.*

He called upon everything within him, and stepped out onto the surface of the water. He would walk. He commanded Nahash and the Sovereigns to aid him.

Their laughter came again as he sank beneath surface. It was deep, and Paine, unable to swim, sank. The water and the waves tossed him about, turning him over. He struggled to get his head above the surface. He took in one breath and saw the ship sailing.

*Save me, he demanded.*

*-Save yourself.-*

They laughed again and he felt their presence drift. They were abandoning him.

*-You are weak.-*

*No!*

He convulsed, not something feigned, but for real. He felt an outpouring of power as the Sovereigns departed. They took with them the darkness that wrapped about his heart and soul. The tentacled arms of Nahash struggled to remain, but the strength with which he had held the being to him was leaving with them.

Paine longed for them to return, their knowledge was slipping from him. He begged.

*Please.*

But they did not respond.

The sea tossed him about and as a last desperate act Paine delved into the heart of the entity that had offered to aid him. What he found was dark and terrible, the knowledge that lay in there; for within the soul of Nahash lay the years of questioning Dïor. The Firstborn Lord had rescued Sephirah from the depths of the Earth, and had lain with her. Next to the existing child in her womb he had placed his own seed. And the first of the twins was a boy, a bastard child fathered by a man possessed by one of the oldest spirits to walk the Earth.

Paine then learned of his mother's labor. It had been difficult. She had nearly died while delivering the boy-child. And then Paine knew the birth of the insatiable creature that had dwelt within him. Once seraph, one of the burning ones, highest of the order of angelic beings, tempted like the lowest of demons towards the blood that had been spilt during Paine's birth. Sephirah had summoned it. Her plans had fallen asunder when it desired the world that had been beneath its feet for countless years and with all-consuming hunger it craved to devour it. She had had no choice but to trap it where it had been

birthed and one of her handmaidens, a virgin, had willingly given her life to do so.

And then he learned of the deal his sister and the triune known as Puck had made with the creature. They would release it and allow it to feed if it would only serve her as required. Nahash had made a false pact with his sister. Nothing could stop its hunger.

Paine accepted his heritage there, without tears and without pain. He was what he was.

*I am.*

The cherub-faced little boy, Nahash, reached out to him. He did not have a pleading look in his eye. He opened his mouth in a silent scream.

*\*Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.\**

He dissolved into a swarm of fish.

Paine accepted that this would be the end for him. He opened his own mouth to breathe and waited for salt water to fill his lungs, but there was air instead. He felt himself being lifted.

He was being lugged onto a rowboat. He coughed and sputtered as he sucked in life-giving air. His consciousness drifted as he was lifted onto one of the ships.

As Paine fell upon the deck, Fang jumped on him, licked him on the face, and then backed away. He caught the sight of other wolves on the ship, eight of them. They closed around him, sniffing the air.

He feigned a smile. "Fang."

His attention then turned to a little girl with porcelain features and red hair. She gripped a limp, straw doll in her hands. The girl ran up to Paine to wrap her tiny arms around him. He knelt to let her hug him and she laughed, a shrill sound that lifted his heart. For a brief moment she held his face in her tiny hands and there was a simple joy there.

He put his arms around the girl to return her embrace, nearly falling over with fatigue.

"What is your name, little one?" he croaked.

She laughed again. "Meega."

The man in the black robes, the one that Paine had learned was his unwilling birth father, came over to him. The man held an urn in his arm. It was marked with strange symbols making the pattern of a pentagram.

He offered a hand. "My name is John."

Paine retched, spitting up water. "Paine."

"Is that your name, or how you feel?" The man smiled and there was something about it that seemed charming. He even had gray flecks in his hair.

Paine thought it odd, yet intriguing. He licked his lips.

"Funny," he said. He'd heard that joke before.

He took John's callused hand and looked out to the sea wondering what had happened to his sister.

He could no longer feel her presence, nor the pain of her absence. And he smiled.

*Good.* She wouldn't know he was coming for her.

Though he was unsure of how he would track her, he had taken from Nahash what he needed; a few summons that would aid him, the art of enchantment, a desire for much more, and the knowledge of his origin.

He would find his sister.

*And she will die.*



**About the author:**

David H. Burton was born in Windsor, Ontario to an agnostic mother that instilled in him the love of the written word and a father that taught him to question everything around him, including his own religious indoctrination.

Fantasy and Science Fiction novels have always been David's greatest vice and he has indulged in the likes of Terry Brooks, Robert Jordan, Margaret Weis, Mark Anthony, J.R.R. Tolkien, George R.R. Martin, Robert J. Sawyer, Isaac Asimov, Melanie Rawn, Marion Zimmer Bradley, J.K. Rowling and for interest, some Margaret Atwood and Jose Saramago.

David graduated from the University of Toronto with a major in Biology and a minor in Classical Civilization. He also dabbled in Computer Science, to which he owes his current occupation in the Telecommunications world at one of the large banks in Canada.

When David isn't writing he enjoys spending time with his partner and three boys: hiking, swimming, kayaking, biking, and reading. David has a great fondness for Portuguese cuisine, good wine, and all things left of centre.

**Feel free to connect with David online at:**

**Blog:** <http://davidhburton.com>

**Twitter:** <http://twitter.com/davidhburton>

**Facebook:** <http://facebook.com/davidhburton>

**Myspace:** <http://myspace.com/davidhburton>

**Livejournal:** <http://davidhburton.livejournal.com>

**Live Spaces:** <http://davidhburton.spaces.live.com/>

If you enjoyed *The Second Coming*,  
please read further for great books by other indie authors.

**33 A.D.**

**By David McAfee**

Jerusalem, 33 A.D. The vampires of the era have long sought to gain a foothold into Israel, but the faith of the local Jewish population has held them in check for centuries.

When one of their own betrays them to follow a strange young rabbi from Galilee, the elders of the vampire race dispatch Theron, a nine hundred year old assassin, to kill them both.

The rabbi's name is Jesus. Killing him should be easy.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

*Jerusalem, 33A.D.*

Ephraim darted around his modest wood-and-mortar home in the Upper City, grabbing as many of his possessions as he could carry – mostly clothing and a few personal items – and shoving them into a large burlap pack. Every now and then his brown eyes shifted to the door, waiting for a knock. Or worse, no sound whatsoever. The latter worried him the most because it would mean the servants of the Council had found him. A Psalm of Silence only carried for about twenty paces, so if the world around him went suddenly quiet, he would know those who hunted him were very, very close.

As an Enforcer, or at least a former Enforcer, Ephraim knew the inevitable result of breaking the laws of his people, a race not known for mercy. Now, as he packed, he couldn't help but wonder why he'd felt the need to tell the Council about his indiscretions. Bad enough he'd defied them, but he also gave them all the information they needed to punish him. And for what? A strange feeling in his heart? A pang of conscience? Was he mad? In retrospect, it seemed possible, but he couldn't do anything about it now. His elders wanted him dead, and unless he hurried they would get their way.

A worn, woolen tunic hung halfway off his bed. *I'll need that*, he thought as he reached for it. He couldn't afford to leave a single piece of clothing behind. He stuffed the tunic into his bag and turned to regard a large chest on the wall opposite the bed. He reached down and flung the lid open, breaking one of the hinges in the process, and started grabbing more clothes. *I'll need that. And that.*

Then his fingers closed on something small and hard. He didn't have to look at it to know it was his ceramic wolf's head figurine, a symbol of his former rank. *I won't need that.* Ephraim tossed it over his shoulder, where it shattered on the hard floor. He didn't pay it any attention as he picked up a short, fat bladed knife. *I'll need that, too.* It joined the many tunics in his bag. Just as he picked up a pair of worn breeches, a noise outside his door caught his attention.

*What was that?* Ephraim froze, craning his ears and trying desperately to catch the elusive sound. He stood silent and still for sixty long seconds, muscles tense and booted feet nailed to the floor. The breeches hung from his fingers like a mouse in a raptor's claw. He eyed the sickle-shaped sword on the opposite wall, ready to spring over and grab it if necessary. Although the sword was very old, he kept it sharp and in perfect balance, not easy to do with a *khopesh*.

When the noise didn't return, he shook his head. *The wind*, he told himself, and returned to the task at hand. He had to hurry. They were coming.

He couldn't allow himself to be captured by the Council's minions. They would make him talk, and that would be bad. Not just for himself, but for his newfound friends, as well. The elders of the *Bachiyr* race had many methods by which to extract information, even from one of their own. All of them brutally effective. If they caught him, they would find a way to make him talk. Sooner or later Ephraim would tell them anything they wanted to know, the only real question was how long would it take to break him.

As he packed, his hand brushed against a small figurine of a lamb from the shelf above his bed,

knocking it off and sending it toppling through the air. “Damn!” He reached out to catch it and missed, but his fingertips brushed the delicate figurine just enough to alter its course so that, instead of following the wolf’s head to the hard floor, the lamb plopped down amidst the soft linens on the bed. Ephraim breathed a sigh of relief when the delicate figure didn’t break, and reached down gently to pick it up. He didn’t miss the irony that he, the predator, had thrown away the wolf figurine and kept the lamb.

*Former predator*, he amended, shaking his head. *I am not like that anymore*. He stared at the lamb for several precious seconds, remembering what it symbolized and making sure, in his heart, he’d made the right decision. Satisfied, he placed the tiny item into a small velvet bag and tied it shut, then placed the bag into his pack, stuffing it between the folds of a coarse brown tunic. He tied the pack closed and set it on the floor in front of him.

Ephraim then stepped over to the far wall and eyed his ancient *khopesh*, which he had wielded for over a thousand years, though the style of blade had largely gone out of use eight centuries ago. He reached a tentative hand up to the sword, but his fingers froze before they touched the handle. Ashamed, he pictured the faces of his many victims, heard again their anguished screams, and saw their mouths stretched wide in agony. The smell of their blood returned to him, sending an unwelcome rumble through his belly. Far from the pleasure these memories once brought, Ephraim now felt only shame. *How many?* He wondered. *How many have I killed with this very blade?* He had no idea, but the number must surely be huge.

“So great is my sin,” he whispered. He could not shed tears, none of his race could, but his face felt hot and flushed, nonetheless. He drew his hand back, unwilling to touch the ancient sword, his most trusted companion for centuries, now too poignant a reminder of who he used to be. With a sigh, he turned from the wall and walked over to the bed, determined to leave his past at his back.

Now ready to go, he just had to wait for his friend to come and help sneak him out of the city. Ephraim sat on the edge of his bed, waiting for Malachi’s knock. He hoped it would not take long.

*Please hurry, Malachi*, he thought. *Time is running out. They are coming.*

\*\*\*

Above Ephraim, crouched amidst the pressed oak beams that supported the structure’s ceiling, a single pair of eyes looked down at the one-time Enforcer. The Council’s agents were not *coming*, as Ephraim feared. They – or rather, *he* – had already arrived. If he had looked up, he might have seen the dark shadow hiding among the lighter ones in his ceiling, but he never so much as glanced upward. His visitor thought lack of sustenance to be the cause of Ephraim’s inattentiveness, and he shook his head in disbelief. From his dark vantage point, he watched the scene unfold, memorizing the layout of the room for future reference.

Earlier that evening, before he had left the Halls, the Council told him what to expect. Even so, he hadn’t wanted to believe that one of their own, particularly one with as glorious and faithful a history as Ephraim, could be capable of such treachery. Until he witnessed Ephraim’s hurried packing and the incident with the wolf’s head – an article of rank sacred to the *Bachiyir* – he’d hoped to discover his superiors mistaken. The longer he waited on high, however, the more he came to realize they were right, and the angrier he became.

*They are always right*, he thought to himself. *I should have known better than to doubt. Just because he’s a friend*— he stopped himself there, not wanting to diminish his readiness. He couldn’t waste time thinking of past friendships and obligations. He had a job to do, and reminiscing would only make it harder and might even cloud his judgment, which could not be allowed. He had to be clearheaded and alert for the next few minutes.

Long enough to kill Ephraim.

First, however, he had to wait and observe a short while longer. The treacherous dog would die,

certainly, but not before his visitor discovered who he'd betrayed them to. Ephraim's message to the Council had been vague in that regard; most likely a deliberate omission. To that end the watcher held himself in check through his growing anger while his thick, sharp nails dug furrows into the wooden beams. He held still, relishing the tantalizing scent of fear that emanated from his former friend, and waited for the knock that would signal Ephraim's allies had come to save him. On that, the Council's orders were very clear. *We must know who the traitor is in league with. That is of utmost importance, Theron.*

Theron had never failed the Council before, not once in over nine hundred years, and he didn't intend to start now. As much as he wanted to drop from the shadows like an evil beast from a child's tale, he waited. *Patience*, he counseled himself. *Not yet.* Waiting was the essence of his craft. He was a professional. If you wanted to put a fine point on it, he was *the* professional. The Lead Enforcer for the Council of Thirteen, albeit newly appointed. These days, that mostly meant he acted as their primary assassin, although every now and then the Council sent him for capture rather than elimination. But those occasions were few.

And this wasn't one of them.

So until Ephraim received his visitor, Theron would sit, out of sight, and wait for the sound of knuckles on the door. However long it took. But once he had his information, then... well, *then* the fun would begin.

He didn't have to wait long. About five minutes after Ephraim finished packing a loud knock thundered through the house, violating the silence with a hollow boom. Ephraim jumped at the sudden sound, but Theron had heard the visitor's boots crunch on Ephraim's gravel walkway and was expecting it. He smiled as he watched his intended victim's face go from terror to joy.

"At last!" Ephraim said. "You certainly took enough time to get here." He walked over to the door and grasped the handle. Then, just as he was about to raise the wooden latch, the relief fled his face, replaced by a look of wariness and renewed fear. "Who's there?"

"Ephraim, you dog. Open the blasted door. We don't have time for this."

"Malachi! Thank the Father you've come." He released the latch on the door and swung it inward.

*Malachi the butcher? A human?* Theron had expected another *Bachiyir* to be behind Ephraim's treachery. But a human? What in the Father's Name was going on?

Malachi stepped in, ducking his head and twisting a bit to the side in order to maneuver his broad shoulders through the doorway. He wore his shoulder-length brown hair tied back with a leather thong, leaving his craggy, olive-skinned face exposed from forehead to chin, and he didn't look pleased. He fixed his stern features squarely on the much smaller Ephraim. "Thank 'the Father,' Ephraim? Why would you offer thanks to a demon? Have you learned nothing these last few weeks?"

"My apologies, my friend. Old habits can be difficult to break."

"Indeed, they can," Malachi said. "That you are trying at all says much about your progress." The butcher's face relaxed. He reached his hand out and clasped Ephraim's. "So what is the news?" Malachi looked around the room at the mess of Ephraim's frantic packing. "Are they coming?"

"Yes." Ephraim sprang into motion, grabbing his pack off the bed and hoisting it over his shoulder. "I'm sure of it. We have to leave."

"How did they find out?"

"You want to waste time on explanations? Didn't you hear? They are coming. Let's go and I'll explain on the way." He started to go around the larger man, and Theron tensed. He could not allow the pair to leave, which meant he would have to kill the human first and deal with Ephraim, by far the more dangerous of the two, afterward. He readied himself to spring as Ephraim tried to squirm his way around the huge man.

But Malachi would have none of it. He reached down and grabbed hold of Ephraim's shoulder. The thick, corded muscles on his arm twitched as he casually tossed the smaller man back into the room. He then placed his bulky frame between Ephraim and the door, folding his thick arms across his

chest.

“How did they know, Ephraim?” Malachi asked again.

Ephraim glared at the human and chewed his lip, as though trying to decide how much to tell. It surprised Theron that the man handled Ephraim with so little trouble. Either Ephraim’s lack of feeding weakened him more than Theron had expected or the butcher was extremely strong. Probably a bit of both. He made a mental note of Malachi’s strength; he’d need to be wary of it soon enough.

After a moment or two spent in tense silence, Malachi spoke. “If you don’t trust us by now, Ephraim, I can’t help you.” With that, the giant turned his back to Ephraim and started to walk out of the house.

“I told them!” Ephraim cried. “I’m sorry. I told them. I thought they would be pleased, I... I thought they would see as I have seen. I wanted them to know the truth.”

Malachi turned to face him, his face a mask of rage and disbelief. “You *told* them, Ephraim? Dear God, what were you thinking?”

“I didn’t tell them everything. Just that I couldn’t serve them any more. I thought they would understand.” Ephraim’s voice cracked on the last syllable. “I thought I could *make* them understand.”

Malachi closed his eyes. His massive chest swelled as he took a deep breath. The look of anger washed away from his face, replaced by one of sorrow. When he opened his eyes Theron noted a hint of moisture around the edges. “They do understand, my friend. They understand all too well. That’s why they will kill you now, and him too.”

“No,” Ephraim shook his head, his eyes wide. “No, Malachi. Me, certainly. But him? Why? He’s done nothing to them.”

“Do you truly think they will care?”

Ephraim didn’t answer, but he didn’t need to. In the shadows above, Theron could have answered the question for him. Of course the Council wouldn’t care. The Council *never* cared. One of their own had betrayed them, and thus he must die. Ephraim would be executed, along with any co-conspirators, be they human or otherwise. Theron’s very existence proved that. After all, why would a forgiving Council need Enforcers?

Malachi sighed, his face troubled but resolute. “We must get you out of here, Ephraim. There’s a merchant caravan going out with the first light. We can put you in a strong box so the sun will not touch you. The driver’s name is Paul. They are heading west to Lydda. There you will find shelter and solace, as much as can be given one of your kind.”

Ephraim stood, his face brightening with renewed hope. “Thank you, Malachi. I can never repay you.”

Theron had heard enough. “I can,” he said as he dropped from the rafters. He positioned himself between the entrance and the room’s two surprised occupants. In one fluid motion, he kicked the door shut behind him and pulled his sword from his sheath. Not a *khopesh* like Ephraim’s, Theron’s sword was of a more modern, almost Roman design. The straight, thick blade, relatively short for a sword, was designed more for piercing than cutting, though it was certainly capable of both. He hadn’t planned on using it when he left the Halls earlier, but Malachi’s strength and size presented a very real threat. Since he would need to face Ephraim, as well, speed was a primary concern. That meant using the blade. Theron hadn’t become Lead Enforcer by taking chances. The human would die first, then he would deal with the traitor.

Malachi reached for the hammer at his belt, but although large and strong, he was not fast. By the time he got his fingers around the handle, Theron had already spun a circle in front of him, blade first, and cut open his throat in a precise line from one side of his jaw to the other. Malachi sputtered and tried to speak, but his severed vocal chords failed him. The fingers on his right hand started to twitch, and the hammer fell from them and hit the floor with a dull thump. He brought his left hand up to his neck in a futile attempt to stem the flow of his life’s blood, then he followed his weapon to the floor. The big human didn’t seem angry or bewildered, as Theron might have expected, but content. His face

softened into a peaceful expression the Enforcer found somewhat odd. Before he could puzzle it out, however, he would have to deal with Ephraim.

Theron whirled to face him, fully expecting to be bowled over in a mass of teeth and claws. But Ephraim stood in the same spot as before. He hadn't moved at all during Malachi's death, and had not plucked his infamous *khopesh* from the wall. Theron thought he knew the reason. *He knows it won't help. He already knows how this must end.* He stepped closer. Malachi's blood dripped from his blade, leaving a thin trail of small red puddles on the floorboards.

"Theron," Ephraim said. "They sent you?"

"I'm the best. Of course they sent me." Theron gave a mocking bow.

"Are you the Lead Enforcer now, my old friend?"

"Someone had to take your place. Who better than me? But you are no friend of mine, traitor." He spat at the other's feet, barely missing Ephraim's dusty leather boot.

"Don't be so quick to choose, Theron. You should hear what he has to say."

"I don't need to hear what he has to say. I still serve our people. The rambling words of a deranged rabbi will not show me my path. The Council's laws have protected our people for over four thousand years. You," he pointed an accusing finger, "have violated them."

"His words would save you, my friend," Ephraim said, so softly Theron almost didn't hear him.

Theron laughed. "Save me? As they saved you? You are a handful of seconds away from Hell, and you would presume to save *me*?" In that instant, Theron determined he would make Ephraim's death as unpleasant as he could manage. He threw his sword to the floor and willed his claws to grow. In a few moments his fingernails grew long and thick. The brief but intense pain in his fingertips was worth it. He would rip the traitor's head from his shoulders. "You should worry about saving yourself, *old friend*."

"I did," Ephraim replied, just before Theron leapt at him.

It was over quickly; Ephraim didn't fight back. When Theron grabbed Ephraim's head between his clawed hands, the traitor only stared at him with a sad, wistful expression on his face. He didn't speak, not even to beg for his life, which was a bit disappointing. Ephraim didn't flinch at Theron's touch, and he didn't scream, not even when Theron drove his clawed fingers through the flesh of his throat and began to twist, rending tendons, tearing muscle, and sending a spray of blood all over the wall. Once the head rolled off onto the floor, it was over. Theron felt let down. It was too easy.

A quick search of Ephraim's body turned up a rolled piece of parchment. Theron noted the red wax seal, which matched the *E* on Ephraim's ring, and snapped it in two. He unrolled the letter and read every word, but it didn't tell him anything he hadn't already surmised. It was only a letter to Malachi. Apparently Ephraim had wanted the butcher to be prepared in the event of his death, but in the end it proved too little, too late. Now both lay dead, and Theron had his answers. He dropped the paper onto Ephraim's headless torso and went to the back of the house to find a shovel. He would need to bury the bodies so they would not be found, at least not before he completed his business in Jerusalem.

\*\*\*

It took a long time to bury Ephraim and Malachi. The hole had to be deep enough to keep any stray dogs from smelling the bodies and digging them up. Due to Malachi's tremendous girth, it also had to be wide and tall. Theron spent the better part of four hours digging the hole, rolling the bodies into it, and covering them up. He also tossed in Ephraim's last letter to Malachi. He wouldn't need it to convince the Council; he had proof enough already.

Afterward, he carefully replaced the layer of grass and sod to better hide the corpses, though the telltale bulge of the earth would be a dead giveaway if anyone came looking. By the time Theron finished the arduous task, dawn loomed a mere two hours away. That didn't leave much time to make his way through the city, but he thought he could manage it.

He walked away from the house, carrying his macabre prize in Ephraim's burlap sack, which he carried slung over his shoulder. Ephraim's head, which bounced and jostled along inside the bag, wore neither fear nor malice on its lifeless features, instead the dead vampire's expression seemed... peaceful. Theron didn't care. The job was done; the Council would be pleased. What's more, he had the information they sought, for Theron now knew the identity of the person to whom Ephraim had betrayed his people. It could only be one man, the same man who'd acquired followers from all across Israel over the last few years. The very man Malachi swore his life to protect only a month ago.

Jesus, they called him. Jesus of Nazareth.

**Visit David McAfee on the web at <http://mcafeeland.wordpress.com>**

---



## **DRUMMER BOY**

**By Scott Nicholson**

On an Appalachian Mountain ridge, three boys hear the rattling of a snare drum deep inside a cave known as “The Jangling Hole,” and the wind carries a whispered name.

On the eve of a Civil War reenactment, the town of Titusville prepares to host a staged battle. The weekend warriors who don their replica uniforms and clean their black-powder rifles aren’t aware they will soon engage in mortal combat. This is a war between the living and the dead, because a troop of Civil War deserters, trapped in the Hole by a long-ago avalanche, are rising from their long slumber, and their mission is far from over.

And only one misfit kid stands between the town and the cold mouth of hell...

### **CHAPTER ONE**

The Jangling Hole glared back at Bobby Eldreth like the cold eye of the mountain, sleepy and wary and stone silent in the October smoke.

“Th’ow it.”

Bobby ignored Dex’s taunt as he squeezed the rock and peered into the darkness, imagining the throbbing heartbeat that had drummed its slow rumble across the ages. The air that oozed from the Blue Ridge Mountain cave smelled like mushrooms and salamanders. He could have sworn he heard something back there in the slimy, hidden belly of the world, maybe a whisper or a tinkle or the scraping of claws on granite.

“Th’ow it, doof.”

Bobby glanced back at his heckler, who sat on a sodden stump among the dark green ferns. Dex McCallister had a speech impediment that occasionally cut the “r” out of his words. Dex was so intent on pestering Bobby that he failed to note the defect. Good thing. When Dex made a mistake, everybody paid.

“I hear something,” Bobby said.

“Probably one of them dead Rebels zipping down his pants to take a leak,” Dex shouted. “Do it.”

Vernon Ray Davis, who stood in the hardwood trees behind Dex, said, “They didn’t have zippers back then. Nothing but bone buttons.”

Dex sneered at the skinny kid in the X-Men T-shirt and too-tight, thrift-store jeans that revealed his pale ankles. “What book did you get that out of, V-Ray? You’re starting to sound like Cornwad,” Dex said, using the class nickname for Mr. Corningwald, their eighth-grade history teacher at Titusville Middle School.

Bobby hefted the rock in his hand. Though it was the size of a lopsided baseball, it weighed as much as the planet Krypton. Probably even Superman couldn’t lift it, but Superman wouldn’t be dumb enough to stand in front of a haunted hole in the ground, not while he could be boning Lois Lane or beating up Lex Luthor.

Dex and Vernon Ray were thirty yards down the slope from Bobby, in a clearing safely away from the mouth of the cave. Not that any distance was safe, if what they said was true. The late-afternoon sun coated the canopy of red oak and maple with soft, golden light, yet Bobby shivered, due as much to the chill emanating from the cave as from his fear.

“I’ve been to the camps,” Vernon Ray said. “My daddy’s got all that stuff.”

“That’s just a bunch of guys playing dress-up,” Dex said.

“It’s authentic. 26th North Carolina Troops. Wool pants, breech loaders, wooden canteens—”

“Okay, Cornwad,” Dex said. “So they didn’t have no goddamn zippers.”

“Daddy said—”

“Your daddy goes to those re-enactments to get away from you and your mom,” Dex said. “My old man drags me along, but you always get left behind with the girls. What ya think of that, Cornwad?”

During Dex’s bully act, Bobby took the opportunity to ease a couple of steps away from the mouth of the cave. The noise inside it was steady and persistent, like a prisoner’s desolate scratching of a spoon against a concrete wall. The Hole seemed to be daring him to come closer. Bobby considered dropping the stone and pretending he had thrown it while Dex wasn’t looking. But Dex had a way of knowing things.

“Bobby’s chicken crap,” Vernon Ray said, changing the subject away from his dad and deflecting Dex’s attention. “He won’t throw it.”

*Good one, V-Ray. I thought we were on the same side here.*

Dex tapped a cigarette from a fresh pack, then pushed it between his lips and let it dangle. “Ah, hell with it,” he said. “You can believe the stories if you want. I got better things to worry about.”

Relieved, Bobby took a step downhill but froze when he heard the whisper.

*“Uhr-lee.”*

It was the wind. Had to be. The same wind that tumbled a gray pillar of smoke from the end of Dex’s cigarette, that quivered the bony trees, that pushed dead autumn leaves against his sneakers.

Still, his throat felt as if he’d swallowed the rock in his hand. Because the whisper came again, low, personal, and husked with menace.

*“Uhrrrrr-leeeee.”*

A resonant echo freighted the name. If Bobby had to imagine the mouth from which the word had issued—and at the moment Bobby was plenty busy *not* imagining—it would belong to a dirty-faced, gaunt old geezer two hundred years dead. But like Dex said, you could believe the stories if you wanted, which implied a choice. *When in doubt, go with the safe bet. Put your money on ignorance.*

“To hell with it,” Bobby said, throwing extra air behind the words to hide any potential cracks. “I want me one of those smokes.”

He flung the rock—*away* from the cave, lest he wake any more of those skeletal men inside—and hurried down the slope, nearly slipping as he hustled while feigning nonchalance. One more whisper might have wended from the inky depths, but Bobby’s feet scuffed leaves and Dex laughed and Vernon Ray hacked from a too-deep draw and the music of the forest swarmed in: whistling birds, creaking branches, tinkling creek water, and the brittle cawing of a lonely crow.

Bobby joined his friends and sat on a flat slab of granite beside the stump. From there, the Hole looked less menacing, a gouge in the dirt. Gray boulders, pocked with lichen and worn smooth by the centuries, framed the opening, and stunted, deformed jack pines clung to the dark soil above the cave. A couple of dented beer cans lay half-buried in a patch of purple monkshood, and a rubber dangled like a stubby rattlesnake skin from a nearby laurel branch. Mulatto Mountain rose another hundred feet in altitude above the cave, where it topped off with sycamore and buckeye trees that had been sheared trim by the winter winds.

He took a cancer stick from Dex and fired it up, inhaling hard enough to send an inch of glowing orange along its tip. The smoke bit his lungs but he choked it down and then wheezed it out in small tufts. The first buzz of nicotine numbed his fingers and floated him from his body. Relishing the punishment, he went back to mouth-smoking the way he usually did, rolling the smoke with his tongue instead of huffing it down. His head reeled but he grinned toward the sky in case Dex or Vernon Ray was looking.

“We ought to camp here sometime,” Dex said, smoking with the ease of the addicted. He played dress-up as much as the Civil War re-enactors did, though his uniform of choice was upscale hoodlum—white T-shirt and a windbreaker that had “McCallister Alley” stitched over the left breast pocket.

Three leaning bowling pins, punctured by a yellow starburst indicating a clean strike, were sewn beneath the label. Dex's old man owned the only alley within 80 miles of Titusville, and about once a month Mac McCallister was lubed enough from Scotch to let the boys roll a few free games.

"It'll be too cold to camp soon," Vernon Ray said, constantly flicking ash from his cigarette like a sissy. Bobby was almost embarrassed for him, but at the moment he had other concerns besides his best friend maybe being queer.

Concerns like the Jangling Hole, and whoever—or whatever—had spoken to him. *The wind, nothing but the wind.*

"Best time of year for camping," Dex said. "I can get my old man's tent, swipe a couple six-packs, bring some fishing poles. Maybe tote my .410 and bag us a couple squirrels for dinner."

"There's a level place down by the creek," Bobby said.

"Right here's fine," Dex said, sweeping one arm out in the expansive gesture of someone giving away something that wasn't his. "Put the tent between the roots of that oak yonder. Already got a fireplace." He booted one of the rocks that ringed a hump of charred wood.

"I don't know if my folks will let me," Vernon Ray said.

"Your dad's doing Stoneman's, ain't he?" Dex dangled his cigarette from his lower lip. "Since he's the big captain and all."

Stoneman's Raid was an annual Civil War re-enactment that commemorated the Yankee incursion suffered by Titusville in 1864. The modern weekend warriors marked it by sleeping on the ground, drinking whiskey from dented canteens, and logging time in the saddle on rumps grown soft from too many hours in the armchair.

If they were like Bobby's dad, they spent their free time thumbing the remote between "Dancing With The Stars" and "The History Channel," unless it was football season when the Carolina Panthers jerseys came out of the bottom drawer.

"Sure," Vernon Ray said, voice hoarse from the cigarette. He flicked his smoke twice, but no ash fell. "Mom will probably go to Myrtle Beach like usual."

"The beach," Dex said. "Wouldn't mind eyeing some bikini babes myself."

There was a test in Dex's tone, maybe a taunt. Perhaps Dex, like Bobby, had been wondering about Vernon Ray. "What ya think, Bobby? A little sand in the honey sounds a lot better than watching a bunch of old farts in uniform, don't it?"

Bobby's gaze had wandered to the Hole again and he scanned the crisp line where the dappled sunlight met the black wall of hidden space that burrowed deep into Mulatto Mountain. As Dex called his name, Bobby blinked and took a deep, stinging puff. He spoke around the exhaled smoke, borrowing a line from his dad's secret stash of magazines in the tool shed. "Yeah, wouldn't mind some sweet tang myself."

Dex reached out and gave Vernon Ray a chummy slap on the back that was loud enough to echo off the rocks. "Beats pounding the old pud, huh?"

Vernon Ray nodded and took a quick hit. He even held his cigarette like a sissy, his pinky lifted in the air as if communicating in some sort of delicate sign language. Vernon Ray, unlike most of the kids at Titusville Middle School, already had a hair style, a soft, wavy curl flopping over his forehead. Bobby wished he could protect his best friend, change him, rip that precious blonde curl out by the roots and turn him into a regular guy before Dex launched into asshole mode. When Dex got rolling, things went mean quick, and Vernon Ray's eyes already welled with water, either from the smoke or the teasing.

"I heard something at the Hole," Bobby said, not realizing he was speaking until the sentence escaped.

"Do what?" Dex leaned forward, flicking his butt into the cold, dead embers of the campfire.

"Somebody's in there."

Dex twisted off a laugh that sounded like the wheeze of an emphysema sufferer. "Something

jangly, maybe? Bobby, you're so full of shit it's leaking out your ears."

Vernon Ray looked at him with gratitude. *Bambi eyes*, Bobby thought. *Pathetic*.

Bobby put a little drama in the sales pitch to grab Dex's full attention. "It went 'Urrrrr.'"

Dex snorted again. "Maybe somebody's barfing."

"Could have been a bum," Bobby said. "Ever since they shut down the homeless shelter, I've seen them sleeping under the bridge and behind the Dumpster at KFC. They've got to go somewhere. They don't just disappear."

"Maybe they do," Dex said. "I reckon those wino bastards better stay out of sight or they'll run 'em plumb out of the county."

The shelter had been shut down through the insidious self-righteousness of civic pride. Merchants had complained about panhandling outside their stores and the Titusville Town Council had drafted an ordinance against loitering. However, the town attorney, a misplaced Massachusetts native who had married into the fifth-generation law firm that had ruled the town behind the scenes since Reconstruction, dug up some court rulings suggesting that such an ordinance would interfere with the panhandlers' First Amendment rights.

Since the town leaders couldn't use the law as a whip and chair, they instead cut off local-government funding and drove the shelter into bankruptcy. Vernon Ray had explained all this to Bobby, but Bobby didn't think it was that complicated. People who didn't take the safe bet lost the game, simple as that.

"Even a bum's not stupid enough to sleep in the Hole," Vernon Ray said. "Cold as a witch's diddy in there."

Dex grinned with approval. "That why you didn't th'ow the rock, Bobby Boy? Afraid a creepy old crackhead might th'ow it back?"

"Probably just the wind," Bobby said. "Probably there's a bunch of other caves and the air went through just right."

"Sure it wasn't the Boys in Blue and Gray?" Dex said, thumbing another smoke from the pack. "Kirk's See-Through Raiders?"

"Like you said, you can believe the stories if you want." Contradicting his bravado, Bobby's gaze kept traveling to the dank orifice in the black Appalachian soil.

They should have stuck to the creek trail and not followed the animal path into the woods. The trail was the shortest distance from the trailer park where he lived and the Kangaroo Hop'n'Shop, a convenience store run by a family that Dex called "The Dot Heads." Bobby wasn't sure whether the family was Indian, Pakistani, or Arabian, though one of the daughters was in his English class and had a lot of vowels in her name. Dot Heads or not, it was the closest place to buy candy bars and football cards, not to mention sneak a peek at the oily, swollen breasts flashing from the magazine covers.

Half an hour before, the boys had made their ritual Saturday visit, flush with pocket change collected over the course of the week. While tobacco had become a controlled substance on the order of liquor and Sudafed, even in the tobacco-raising state of North Carolina, not all packs were kept on shelves behind the cash register.

A promotional two-pack of Camels, shrink-wrapped with a lighter, was perched on the edge of the counter by the ice cream freezer, and as Bobby had paid for a Dr. Pepper, Dex swept the package into the pocket of his windbreaker. Bobby caught the crime out of the corner of his eye, but the middle-aged woman at the register, who had a slight mustache riding her dark, pursed lips, was focused on counting pennies.

"Let's smoke 'em at the Hole," Dex had said, once they were out of sight of the store. Neither Bobby nor Vernon Ray had the guts to protest.

The Jangling Hole was half a mile's hike up rocky and wooded Blue Ridge terrain. Bobby had been there before with his two pals—after all, who could resist the most notorious haunted spot in the county, especially during Halloween season?—but they usually just eased around it and went to the

headwaters of the creek where you could hook rainbow trout all year round, because no wildlife officers ever hoofed it that far back into the hills. That was back before Budget Bill Willard, the famous local photographer and artist, had bought the property and posted “No Trespassing” signs all over it.

Dex had knocked down the first such sign he’d seen, unzipped his trousers, and urinated on it. Then he’d cajoled his reluctant merry band of pranksters to the Hole. After Dex had dared him to “th’ow” the rock, Bobby had no choice but to march up to the crevice, which was as wide as a pick-up truck. Nobody in his right mind would go near the cave that harbored the spirits of—

“Bobby?”

At first he thought the voice had come from the cave, in that same reverberating whisper that reached into his ears and tickled the bottom of his nasal cavity. But it was Dex, arms folded, chin out, squatting on the deadfall like a gargoyle clinging to the edge of some old French cathedral.

“You going to pretend it was them Civil War ghosts?” Dex said, letting one eyelid go lazy as if suggesting they could play a good one on Vernon Ray.

“I’m bored.” Bobby’s mouth was an ashtray, tongue dry as a spider web, nicotine ramping up his pulse. He’d wished he’d saved some of the Dr. Pepper, but Dex had knocked it from his hands as they’d crossed the creek.

“What you guys doing tonight?” Vernon Ray said.

“Your momma,” Dex snapped back.

“I claim sloppy seconds,” Bobby said, though his heart wasn’t in it.

“For real,” Vernon Ray said. “Think you can get out for a movie?”

“What’s playing?” Dex said, faking a yawn and showing his missing molar.

“Tarentino’s got a new one.”

“We can’t sneak into that, dumbass,” Dex said. “It’s rated ‘R’ for racks and red blood.”

Bobby was about to suggest a round of X-Box, anything to get away from the cave, when Vernon Ray held up his hand.

“Shhh,” the curly-haired boy said. “I hear something.”

Bobby couldn’t help sneaking a glance at the Hole, wondering if Vernon Ray had heard the whisper. Dex groaned. “Jesus, not you, too, V-Boy.”

“Serious.”

“That’s the roaring of your own fat skull.” Dex stood and looked down the slope into the woods, where the animal path widened. He blinked and flung his cigarette away as he turned and bolted.

“Over here!” came a shout. The rhododendrons shook along the edge of the clearing and a man in a brown uniform burst out, breaking into a run. Bobby caught the gleam of metal on the man’s belt.

*Cop. Crap.*

His heart jumped against his ribs and fluttered like a bird in a cat’s mouth. His dad would bust his ass good if he got in trouble with the law again. Dex headed for the back side of the mountain, where the steep slope bristled with brambles and scraggly locust trees, cover fit for a rabbit but little else.

The overweight cop was after him, wheezing, shouting at him to stop. Vernon Ray, who had fled down the path toward the creek trail, froze in his tracks at the command. While Bobby was still deciding which way to run, a second cop emerged, the brown-skinned store owner beside him.

“Is them,” the store owner said. The cop, a young guy whose cheeks were blued with stubble, put his hand on his holster, no doubt weighing the wisdom of drawing on a couple of kids.

As the second cop hesitated, Vernon Ray cut to the right, through a shaded thicket of hardwoods and jack pine. He was soon out of sight, though his route was discernable by snapping branches and rattling leaves. The cop took three steps in pursuit, and then apparently realized Bobby would be easier prey.

Bobby took a backwards step. As a Little League All-Star, he could dash ninety feet between bases with no problem, and the safety of the woods was only half that distance. Dex would get away clean, he was as slick as a snake in a car wash, but the swarthy cop would probably net Vernon Ray if Bobby

fled. And Vernon Ray was Honor Roll, the pride of the trailer park and Bobby's best friend.

"Hold it right there, son," the cop said, though he was barely a decade older than Bobby. The stem of his sunglasses was tucked in one pocket, the lenses like a second pair of accusing eyes. Sweat splotted the cop's underarms, and the badge caught a stray bit of sunlight as if God had signaled a secret moral message.

Bobby wanted to tell the cop he was innocent, to sell Dex down the river and take a plea, to beg the hairy-eared store owner's forgiveness. But no words came, his feet had grown roots like the trees around him, and his senses were as heightened as they'd been during the first rush of nicotine. *Had there been so many birds before?*

The cop smiled in condescension and triumph, and Bobby blushed with anger. Titusville was full of meth addicts, lock bumpers, and check kilters, and Bobby was pretty sure Louise Templeton was running a trailer-park whorehouse three doors down from his home, yet the local peace officers had nothing better to do than hassle kids.

Of course, his jacket already had three lines in it, and though as a juvenile he'd had it all written off because the courts called him an "at-risk youth," bad habits had a way of coming back to bite you on the ass.

"Don't worry," the cop said, reading the anxiety in Bobby's eyes. "We just want to talk."

"I make charges," the store owner said in his high-pitched, thickly accented voice. "I run fair trade."

The cop waved him back. "I'll handle this. It's only a misdemeanor, not a hanging offense."

It was the same smug crap the probation officer, the school counselor, and the principal all dished out. They'd poke around for some reason to explain the delinquent behavior, and though Bobby had only a passing knowledge of Freud, he'd picked up enough to feed the crap right back. Unhappy home, poverty, what they liked to call "an adjustment disorder," and the likelihood of substance abuse became not reasons to whip his ass into shape, but excuses for screwing up. Not only was his troubled streak explainable, it was practically expected. And who was *he* to disappoint so many others who had such a deep interest in his future?

The cop was close enough that Bobby could smell his aftershave, Old Spice or some other five-dollar-a-pint pisswater they sold at Walmart. The store owner's pudgy fists were clenched, his dark face flushed with the anger of small-change violation. Hell, Dex could have paid for the smokes, that was no prob, Dex not only had a generous allowance but he was the biggest weed dealer at Titusville Middle School. He always had some spare jack in his pocket. But what the Dot Heads and the cops and the do-gooders didn't understand was that stealing was just more *fun*.

And Bobby had nothing better to do on a Saturday afternoon than sit through a booking and a lecture and then Dad's trip to bail his ass out of trouble again. Beat the hell out of X-box any day. And, he had to admit, an arrest would get him away from The Jangling Hole and the cold whispers and—

*"Aieeeeeee."*

A scream ripped from the other side of the ridge, where the cop had chased Dex. It was followed almost immediately by a gunshot, the sharp report silencing the birds and riding up above the wind.

The young cop's face erupted in what might have been shock, but Bobby saw just a little pleasure in it. The cop was as bored as Bobby, and "Shots fired" was almost as good as "Officer down" when it came to law-enforcement hard-ons.

The cop grappled with his holster and had his mean-looking piece in his hand by the time he brushed past Bobby and headed around the Hole. Bobby and the store owner were left looking at each other, neither knowing what to do.

Bobby shrugged. "It was just some smokes, man."

The store owner stamped his foot and started jabbering a mile a minute in some exotic language, but he shut up quick when the second shot rang out.

**Visit Scott Nicholson on the web at <http://hauntedcomputerbooks.blogspot.com>**

---

**PARALLAX**  
**by Jon F. Merz**

What happens when two professional assassins - one a Mafia hitman and the other a former German terrorist - kill at exactly the same moment in time? For Ernst Stahl and Frank Jolino the result is a psychic bond that slowly blossoms in each man's mind, enabling them to see into the other's world. Frank Jolino doesn't like what he sees, especially when he realizes that Stahl is headed to his home turf of Boston to kill a scientist who may hold the key to solving the world's deadliest diseases. But for Stahl, there's no other option. Virtually bankrupt and with his son in desperate need of a bone marrow transplant, he's got little choice but to take the assignment. Jolino has other ideas. On the run from his crime syndicate for refusing to kill his ex-girlfriend-turned-government-informant, Jolino sets a plan in motion that will bring the two men face-to-face and gun-to-gun...with no guarantees either will survive.

**CHAPTER ONE**

Revere, Massachusetts – 6:55PM

The first thing Gia ever said to him was, “You’re Patrisi’s hitter.”

She’d already known. And Frank, still marveling at her blue eyes, brunette hair, and full lips, found himself struck dumb for the first time in his life.

Eventually, he’d found his voice. And things got better from there.

For a time.

The last thing Gia ever said to him was, “It was fun. Sort of.”

Then she was gone.

Movement to his left drew his attention back to the present. The kid sitting next to him had decided he needed a cigarette. Frank’s voice cut through the darkness.

“You don’t smoke when you’re getting ready to kill a man.”

Bobby froze. The cigarette floated in the space halfway to his mouth. “I heard you had to give ‘em up. You turned preacher now?”

Frank watched the red brick-faced bar through the January downpour and frowned. Nasty weather to kill in, he decided. “Health’s got nothing to do with it. A lit butt looks like a flare in the night.”

“So?”

Frank sighed. Don Patrisi asked him to do this favor. But babysitting the transplant from Philadelphia and his cavalier attitude grated on Frank’s nerves. “So, our boy sees a red cinder in a dark idling car across the street, who the hell’s he gonna suppose is out there waiting for him? Not the Publishers Clearinghouse people.”

The cigarette vanished. “You really the best, Frankie?”

“How old are you, kid?”

He could sense Bobby shift in his seat, drawing himself up. Frank never stopped watching the bar.

“I’m twenty-four.”

Barely out of diapers, thought Frank with a smirk. “First off, don’t ever call me Frankie. To you, my name is Frank. Or Mr. Jolino. Never Frankie. We clear on that?”

“Yeah.”

Frank let the silence hang for a few seconds. “Do yourself a favor, don’t ever go through life thinking you’re the best at anything. You know why?”

“Why?”

“Because there’s always someone out there been doing it longer and better than you have. Start thinking you’re the best, someone’ll show up and prove you wrong.”



“Okay.”

“Do your business the best you know how. Learn from those you can learn from. Maybe pass on a bit of that knowledge to the next generation. Live humble, kid. The world’s already got enough prima donnas.”

Bobby’s head bounced like an eager puppy. “Yeah, but are you really the best?”

Frank glanced at him, sighed again, and then went back to watching the bar. Another spate of rain sloshed down on the windshield, turning the neon sign across the street into a melting swirl of pink and purple.

He pressed his spine into the seat cushion. Truth was, he wanted a cigarette, too. But he’d dropped them a year ago. Right after the quacks told him to either quit or die within six months from a series of massive heart attacks.

Frank hated kicking the butts to the curb. All his heroes smoked. Mike Hammer, Sam Spade, Nick Ransom, all of them – they all smoked. Of course, in the pages of pulp fiction there weren’t such things as heart attacks and lung cancer. At least not for those guys.

But for Frank? Mr. Myocardial Infarction lived right around the corner. Lung Cancer hung out on the front stoop. And Emphysema had his phone number on speed-dial.

So Frank ditched the tobacco.

In the distance, bloated clouds hugged the Boston skyline pissing down raw January misery. Cold. But not cold enough for snow, thought Frank with a sigh. He liked snow. Its virgin white made him think some things in nature couldn’t be corrupted.

Human nature, though, that was something else entirely.

“Turn the heater on.”

Bobby flipped the switch. As a rule, Frank didn’t keep the engine going. Idling cars ranked just above lit cigarettes on the Stupid Moves Scale. But he made an exception tonight. If they didn’t keep the engine hot, they’d be stepping out every ten minutes to relieve their cold-constricted bladders.

A rush of heat poured from the vents. Frank directed them down at the floor and cracked his window to defog the windshield.

He glanced at the dash clock. Just after seven. Next to him, Bobby tried stretching his legs.

“Stay loose, kid. He won’t be much longer.”

Bobby nodded once. Curt. Sullen.

Kid hates my guts, thought Frank. He grinned. So what? He wasn’t here to make friends. Fear and hatred were the foundation you built respect on – at least in the Family.

Frank waited. Plugging Vito Vespucio wasn’t what he’d wanted to do on a freezing drizzly night like this. Curling up with the old Raymond Chandler first edition he’d bought from an antiques dealer on Beacon Hill sounded a lot better.

But a job was a job.

And to Frank, the job was everything.

Almost.

\*\*\*

Munich, Germany – The Same Time – 1:55AM

“It’s leukemia.”

Stahl felt the office lurch; its walls billowed like sails and then shrank in toward him, a fist crushing his world. Cancer? Impossible. But he seemed so healthy. He looked so healthy, even.

“What are the options?”

“Treatment, of course. A bone marrow transplant is the best method we have available. But it’s costly. You do have insurance?”

Stahl glanced up, biting back the surge of emotion. "You're callous enough to ask about money at a time like this?"

"No, no." The doctor leaned back, hands coming up. "It's just that if you aren't able to afford it, there are certain alternatives we could discuss. I wasn't implying--"

Was it that visible? Could everyone see just how broke Stahl truly was? That his bank account had a grand total of seventy euros in it? That he had electricity and gas bills months overdue? He'd stretched what he had as best he could, but it wasn't enough. The stress of trying to keep his head above water, of providing a life for his son, it was breaking him.

No.

He didn't have insurance.

He didn't have much of anything. Except a broken past. And a handsome son who'd taught him more about love than any woman ever had.

Now this.

Leukemia.

Stahl felt dizzy. He closed his eyes and opened them again, settling his gaze on the doctor.

"Schedule the transplant. No matter what it costs."

"Are you sure?"

Stahl took a breath, steadier now. "My son gets the very best care. He's all that I have left."

*"Herr Stahl!"*

The doctor's office vanished; its white walls replaced by a frigid darkness that enveloped him.

"What?"

Next to him, a thin rickety man shivered behind the steering wheel. "Herr Stahl...p-p-please, could we turn the heater on?"

Stahl checked the slide on his Beretta. Again. In the darkness, the gun looked longer thanks to the homemade suppressor he'd fashioned earlier. Good for six shots. Plenty more than he'd need.

"No. You don't want our prize seeing us out here, do you? You don't want him to get away again, do you?"

"Of course, not. I only thought--"

"I know. It's cold. It's freezing, in fact. We might even see some snow." He nodded outside. "But this man has not eluded capture by being stupid. He will hear us. Maybe he will even smell the car engine. And then he will know. He will know we wait for him."

"Forgive me, this is...unusual for me."

Stahl smiled. "Not used to dealing with criminals, are you?"

"Certainly not. Nor am I used to dealing with men like you, Herr Stahl." He coughed once. "I don't even know if that is your real name."

"Does it matter?"

The answer came quick. "No, no. I'd rather not know."

"Let your anger be your warmth," said Stahl. He peered at the red brick tenements bordering the alley, towering over the car they sat in. At this time of night, darkness bled from all the windows.

The thin man's teeth chattered. "This man must not be allowed to live another day."

"How many?" asked Stahl.

The man frowned. "According to what the Polizei told me, twenty. Most of them between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two."

"No evidence?"

"None. He is meticulous in his task. The Polizei believe he uses drugs to subdue his victims first," the older man shuddered and coughed again. "Before he begins."

"He's compulsive," said Stahl. "Addicted to his work -- it's his passion."

"There is nothing passionate about raping a young woman, Herr Stahl."

"Of course not. I'm not implying what happened to your daughter was anything but the most

heinous of crimes.”

“Thank you.”

“Still, to capture prey, you must first understand them. You must be able to see the world through their eyes. Only when you see their world will you know how to catch them.” He nodded. “And kill them.”

The man pointed at the pistol Stahl held. “You’re sure it will not be heard?”

“If the tubing is fashioned correctly, the washers inside will break up the gases and the wadding will dissipate the noise. This small a caliber doesn’t sound like much more than a firecracker anyway. The tubing will cut the noise down to a vague muffled pop.”

“We must leave as soon as it is done. You understand that?”

Stahl’s eyes narrowed. “I have no intention of staying around.”

\*\*\*

Frank grunted.

Across the street, the maroon door opened. “Heads up.”

Bobby straightened, alert now. “He’s early tonight, huh?”

“He’s early every night,” said Frank. “He stops by the bar, has a drink, takes that dame up to the Tailwind Hotel on Route One for an hour, bangs her brains out – or as best he can manage – and then heads home to tuck his kids in bed by nine. Real family man, this guy.”

“Not after tonight,” said Bobby with a grin.

Frank watched Vespucio walk through the slush. The blonde ornament clung to his arm like a wet newspaper.

He fixed Bobby with a hard stare. “Wait until I cross the street. When I get behind him, you drive around. Let him hear the engine. See the car. Long as he sees you, he won’t see me. Not ‘til it’s too late.”

Bobby nodded.

Frank stared at him for another second mentally willing the young gun not to screw things up. Then got out of the car. His shoes slid into the muddy slush, sinking two inches into the grime. He ignored the sudden cold biting through his cotton black socks and stinging his feet. He’d learned to shut off discomfort a long time ago. He checked for oncoming traffic and hurried across the street.

Vespucio walked leaning into the blonde. She must have hydraulic jacks for arms, thought Frank, being able to support that much flab.

The parking lot sat twenty yards away, surrounded by a rusty chain link fence that bowed out in certain sections.

Frank closed the distance. Readyng his mind.

Vespucio wasn’t a big fish. He was a small-time bookie working for the Patrisi family. But Vespucio thought that since he flew under radar the Don wouldn’t care if he skimmed a few grand from the books.

Vespucio thought wrong.

\*\*\*

“There. That is he.”

Stahl nodded. He looked just like his photograph. Perhaps forty years of age, thin, balding on top with thick glasses. He didn’t look strong but Stahl knew that appearances deceived. A weak man could explode in strength if the situation called for it. Stahl himself had adopted the guise of a weak nobody many times in the past. And each time such instances had ended terminally for those who had underestimated him.

“This won’t take long,” said Stahl. “Crack your window. As soon as you hear the first shot, start the motor.”

“I thought you said I wouldn’t be able to hear the shots.”

“You’ll hear something, for God’s sake. Not much, but something. Now do as I said.”

Stahl pulled the door handle and slid out of the car.

The cold night air embraced him.

\*\*\*

Ten yards.

In the zone now, Frank fell into step behind them.

His hand - still in his overcoat pocket - gripped the pistol.

Sights and sounds registered like simple check marks in a type of staccato log.

Bobby’s car engine slid into drive.

Headlights bounced over him.

The engine gunned as Bobby stomped the accelerator.

A loud bump as the car jumped the divider and came down with a scrape.

Ahead of Frank, Vespucio turned.

The headlights drew parallel with the sidewalk.

Frank walked faster.

Vespucio looked at the car.

Frowned.

He knows, thought Frank. He knows it’s on.

Vespucio turned.

And saw Frank.

Frank drew his hand from his pocket, already thumbing the safety off and leveling it on Vespucio’s head.

Vespucio’s eyes went white.

Blood sank out of his face.

The blonde screamed when she saw the gun.

But Frank didn’t care about her. He only cared about Vespucio.

He took a deep breath and exhaled it slow, starting to squeeze the trigger.

\*\*\*

Stahl covered the distance quickly. He bounced into the side of the alley, stumbling as he walked. He giggled.

The man looked up, suddenly hurrying to open his door. He fumbled with his keys.

“Excuse me,” said Stahl. “Is there a pub around here that’s open at this ungodly hour? I need a drink in the very worst way.”

The man looked up. Stahl could see the tension in his face.

But Stahl kept smiling. Always smiling. He was just an innocent drunk after all. Just a foolish man who’d had a few too many and wanted a few more before calling it a night.

The man hesitated but then grinned. “I think there’s a place around the corner.”

Stahl put his hand out to the man’s shoulder. “I cannot thank you enough, my friend.”

And then he shoved him back against the doorjamb, twisting the man’s body as he did so. His keys skittered to the ground.

Stahl’s hand came up aiming the Beretta between the man’s eyes.

\*\*\*

Frank squeezed the trigger.

Stahl squeezed the trigger.

Again.

Again.

Even as their bullets found the heads of their respective targets – something rocked both Frank and Stahl. An explosion of pain surged through their skulls; a roar like standing next to a jet engine filled their ears; their vision blurred and then blackened.

Then the roar faded.

Frank opened his eyes. A dead bald guy with two entry wounds in his skull looked up at him with vacant eyes. Blood and bits of brain splattered the nearby doorjamb.

*Where the hell am I?*

Stahl opened his eyes. He saw the fat man dead at his feet, blood already mixing with the cold rain that coursed along the gutter. Next to the body, a scantily dressed blonde screamed.

*In...English?*

Stahl frowned.

He was in Germany – wasn't he?

Another explosion roared in their heads; another wave of pain crashed down.

Frank's eyesight clouded.

Stahl grabbed his head.

\*\*\*

It cleared then. Frank saw the terrified tart on the sidewalk before him.

He saw Vespuccio.

Dead.

Two tiny holes punctured his forehead.

Frank took a shaky breath and trained his .22 on the blonde. "You know me?"

She shook her head like a rattle. "N-n-no."

"If you ever do, I'll find you." He stared at her once more for effect.

He pocketed the gun and slid into the car.

Next to him, Bobby whooped and jumped on the gas pedal. "Wow!"

The car shot away from the curb. Frank took a breath. "Slow down. I don't want any cops pulling us over for speeding for crying out loud."

The pain in his head lingered, but diminished quickly.

In the rearview mirror, he could still see the blonde screaming for help. Vespuccio's body filled a large portion of the mirror, but it kept getting smaller. Like the pain.

Bobby took a corner and the image vanished.

*What the hell happened to me back there?*

\*\*\*

Stahl's vision cleared. He was back in the alley. The rapist lay dead at his feet, a long trail of red blood scarred the white entryway. The bullets had exited the rear of the man's skull, jetting bits of gray matter about. Odd that the .22 rounds had exited the skull. They usually stayed inside and danced around the cavity. No matter, the rapist was dead.

He heard the car come up.

Stahl turned and slid into the front seat. The pain in his head subsided. He nodded at the older man. "Let's go."

"He's dead?"

"He won't be raping any more children in this lifetime," said Stahl.

He glanced at the doorway one last time.

That pain. Those images. That roar.

What had just happened to him?

**Visit Jon F. Merz on the web at <http://www.jonfmerz.net>**