

A woman with long, wavy blonde hair is shown from the waist up, holding a large, thick brown snake. She is looking down at the snake's head, which is raised towards her. The background is a mottled green and brown, suggesting a natural, outdoor setting. The overall tone is dramatic and mysterious.

Serpent's
Quest

LYCAN BLOOD: VOLUME I

JANRAE FRANK

Serpent's Quest [Lycan Blood Vol. I]
by Janrae Frank

Renaissance E Books

www.renebooks.com

Copyright ©

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

This eBook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.



Distributed by Fictionwise.com

Serpent's Quest [Lycan Blood Vol. I]
by Janrae Frank

LYCAN BLOOD: VOL. I

SERPENT'S QUEST

By

JANRAE FRANK

ISBN 978-1-60089-074-1

All rights reserved

Copyright © 2007 Janrae Frank

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

For information contact:

PageTurnerEditions.com

PageTurner Editions/Futures-Past Fantasy

A Renaissance E Books publication

THE FIRST MOTHERS

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

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

Serpent's Quest [Lycan Blood Vol. I]
by Janrae Frank

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

THE EXILE'S CURSE

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

When fireborn law breathes hot upon the root
One born of fire shall perish for the truth
The exile's victory shall be his pardon
Those he claims will rule
The prince from shadows shall emerge
To sit a blood drenched throne
...Alistar Weems' dying words.

CHAPTER ONE

THE INFILTRATOR

On an unusually hot day for late spring, Malthus stood in the middle of the stout wooden bridge spanning the gorge cut through the sheer stone walls by the deep cataract known as the Eirlys River: the rushing roar of the Eirlys made fitting music for the entrance into the lands of one of Waejontor's most powerful lycan clans. On three sides the land descended into rugged canyons and twisted valleys that looked like an impossible giant had ripped his fingers through the soil. Most of the ruling sa'necari culture did not know this valley existed, except for the upper castes and their liegemyn who had used it as a waystation during the years that the late King Baaltrystan's lords still held their mountain fastnesses.

He clutched two small girls close to him in a protective embrace, and hesitated as the seven lycan guards in gigantic wolf form emerged from the thick stand of fragrant white pine and cedars three spear lengths beyond the bridge where a heavy barrier of brush and briars offered concealment for many things.

The newcomers looked ragged and worn: the girls' dresses were stained and soiled. The hem of the older girl's skirt had come partially loose and dragged in the dirt. Trail dust smudged their faces, forming muddied lines around their mouths and noses where it had mixed with their sweat.

Malthus wore a brace of long belt knives at his hips, an empty scabbard that had once held a sword at his shoulder, and a scruffy pack on his back. Several pouches hung from his belt. He gazed at the assembled lycans through eyes wide with fear and trepidation. "Please help us. I've been told sanctuary can be found here for the children."

"Come to our side," said a tall lycan in transitional form, stepping forward from among his wolf brothers and speaking with authority. He wore the runes of a lawgiver.

While considering the lycans, Malthus immediately wondered how someone as young as this mon could have become their lawgiver: he looked to be in no more than his late teens, and the last time Malthus heard, the lawgiver for this place was Nevin Scarface. Malthus began reassessing the situation in light of this.

Although they traveled swiftest as wolves, they were at their most dangerous in their hybrid shapes. All of the clans had a reputation for caution, especially this one: with their valleys laying in Sharani-occupied Waejontor, they were vigilant against both their old sa'necari overlords and their new ones, the Sharani. One wrong move and they would rip him apart before he could bring his magic to bear. The last thing he wished was for them to discover what he was. However, the lawgiver was young, and probably no challenge.

Malthus' arm tightened around the two girls, squeezing them together against his body while eyeing the lycans warily. He walked across, his worn boot heels clicking on the wood scarcely heard above the water far below.

"These are my nieces. Sa'necari born. Their parents were slain. We barely escaped with our lives."

The lawgiver nodded as if that was what he expected to hear but that it made no difference. "These are the rules. No lives are taken by appetite or rite on Clan Red Wolf lands: we are Willodarians. Those who have are unwelcome here. If you are sa'necari, state it now and return across the bridge or be spellcordinated." For emphasis he drew the bands and seals from the pouch hanging on his wide leather belt. "Someone will be sent to Read you for the taint, and if you have lied, we will execute you."

"I am not sa'necari," Malthus said. "My mother was human, unlike my brother's, so I did not inherit the tainted gene."

Nikko the lawgiver nodded again with his hand held up to forestall more words from Malthus, and continued in his speech. "From the Eirlys River," he pointed at the river, and then indicated the direction of the rest of the landmarks, "to the piled boulders and six pines, north to the caves and south to the broad meadows and place of fallen trees. All that belongs to Red Wolf. All must ask permission before feeding on blood; make certain that your nieces adhere to that."

"They carry the sa'necari gene, but they have not matured into their fangs yet."

"All the better," replied Nikko. "You are welcome here so long as you obey our rules, and you may make a place for yourself among the others who have come seeking sanctuary. The homes and farms on clan land you enter only if invited. You hunt game only if invited. If the Sharani should have

reason to pursue you to our borders we will kill you. We are law-abiding citizens of the occupied zone. These are the rules."

Occupied zone. The words framed in Malthus' thoughts with distaste. *These stupid wolves.* The young Queen Tomyrilen de Waejonan was beating the Sharani back at every turn and they still considered themselves citizens of the occupied zone. It did not matter to the sa'necari and other Waejontori gathering to her banner that she was the bastard daughter of the late Prince Shintar and a Sharani banewitch: what mattered was that, so far as any one knew, she was the last of the Waejonans. If these foolish wolves continued to obey the Sharani, then she would soon be torching their valleys. "We accept them. You have teachers for the children to bring them to the path of Light?" Malthus asked.

"Yes. A Willodarian priest. You look as if you haven't eaten."

"Not in three days. The children are hungry. I can work with my hands. I am strong. I can earn whatever bread you can provide." *I also have plenty of gold to spend, but you needn't know that yet.*

"The Sanctuary Refugee Camp can always use more hands. We are building shelters and houses for the refugees like yourselves. Come and let us see that you are fed. I am Nikko the Lawgiver."

"I am Malthus Estrobian. My nieces are Ros and Lyrri. I was kandoyarin, serving in Ocealay until I heard about the rebellion. Fearing for my family, I came home. We're all that's left."

At their names, the two girls smiled shyly at the lycan lawgiver.

Nikko smiled back at them. "Welcome to Wolffgard Village."

Malthus smirked as Nikko led them into the yard around the Chieftain Claw Redhand's home, which was the nearest building to the bridge, and sucked in a breath of relief. He was in. Soon he could begin to sniff around for what had happened to Troyes, his nieces' father. So far as he had been able to learn, this was the last place Troyes had been seen.

Tomyrilen Dovane de Waejonan had appeared suddenly out of nowhere, claiming to be the illegitimate daughter of the dead prince Shintar de Waejonan, and half-sister to the late King Baaltrystan. Nobles and commoners alike were rising to follow her standard. The rebellion had made reaching this valley difficult, but Malthus had made a deal with the young queen's first advisor, Lord Daemon. He had been allowed to slip through in exchange for becoming Daemon's agent here. The valley would fall and Malthus would be well paid in gold, land, and slaves.

Malthus was a bounty hunter with a reputation for subtlety and resourcefulness—and sa'necari by birth. His father had been nobly born, but Malthus came from the wrong side of the blankets. He would have inherited nothing, even had his father's estates not been burned by the Sharani. Five siblings on both sides of the blankets had been burned alive by the Sharani. Knowing the swift way that sa'necari fertility faded, his father had gotten as many children as he could in his youth. Yet, even so, only Malthus and these two little girls

were left. Unless Troyes was still alive somewhere. He would let this play out to his advantage; once he decided what that advantage was and who it lay with.

They followed Nikko past a large manor house with elaborate gardens surrounding the back and east side. A large barn and stables swept out to the west side of it. The simple practicality of water troughs and hitching posts in the courtyard contrasted sharply with elegance behind it. Blue veins shot through the chinked pale yellow stone of the manor house.

Nikko pointed at it. "That is the chieftain's house, Claw Redhand."

Malthus nodded, his trained eyes swept the grounds. The three-story structure wasn't as large as some sa'necari manors, but he estimated that it must have at least sixteen bedrooms in the main part and an equal number in the servants' wing. Lycans did not build their homes for defense. They counted on stopping invaders before they reached the houses and generally they were alerted by the packs of true wolves that freely ran their valleys, which were defensible areas in and of themselves. Those wild packs would need to be located and destroyed early.

"How far have you traveled?" Nikko asked.

"Too far," Malthus replied. "Two months ago I was in Ildyrsetts."

"I have never been there. It is down along the coast?"

"Yes. A little over two weeks ago, I was in Dragonton near Torment Lake." Malthus rubbed his pen quill thin mustache, pulling at the curving ends a moment. He had more facial hair

than most sa'necari because of his inheritance from his human mother, which required daily shaving with the elegant folding razor in his pocket to keep neat. Malthus used it to cut throats as well as to shave. He had picked it up in Timbren while working for one of the wealthiest bounty hunters in the business, Necrodez. There were rumors that Necrodez had finally met his match near Ildyrsetts last winter, but Malthus would have to see it to believe it.

Nikko nodded thoughtfully. "I hear there has been violence there."

"Not all of the old nobility wanted to accept the new queen. They met in Dragonton to discuss what actions to take. The queen swept down upon them..." Malthus let his voice trail away and made a cutting motion across his throat with his finger. "My family was among them."

Malthus studied Nikko. The mon seemed much too young for his position, no more than seventeen, or eighteen. Lawgivers were chosen by the location of the stars at their birth or other omens and reared for the job, serving the elder lawgiver. Malthus wondered what had happened to the old one, Nevin Scarface. Well it worked to his advantage to have such an inexperienced lawgiver to deal with. Now, if only he could be so lucky with the Willodarian priest.

They walked farther and entered the village proper. By that time Ros and Lyrri were stumbling with exhaustion. Malthus lifted Lyrri into his arms. Seeing the way Ros was faltering also, Nikko picked her up with a glance at Malthus who nodded his permission.

"I am sorry that it is so far," Nikko said. "We built the sanctuary in the protected area on the northeast side."

"I can understand that. It is a logical way to protect those less able to protect themselves." *And a good way to isolate people until you decide whether you can trust them. Canny wolves.*

The rustic village contained mostly the traditional longhouses of variegated stone, with newer frame houses sprinkled through, painted in the forest colors beloved of the lycans. A single main street traversed the village, which was almost large enough to be called a small town, with numerous residential side streets. They passed a large assortment of shops and establishments, including two eateries, a couple of taverns, a dry goods, a tanner's, and toward the end a blacksmith and a harness-maker. The majority of lycans were no more than semi-literate, hence the graphics on the signs over every place of business. Where human villages tended to be dirty, with streets of dead brown, packed down earth—the lycan main street was thick with trees of all kinds and grass growing in a wide swath down the middle. Trees shaded the fronts and sides of every building, with tree rounds and benches for sitting scattered through with comfortable abandon. The lycans were fond of sitting outside and gabbing with whoever happened by. People stopped to nod at them and acknowledge the lawgiver in a mix of politeness and curiosity as they sized up the newcomers.

Malthus gave them his most humble expression salted with suitable anxiety as if uncertain of his welcome. The two pretty little girls were his key to opening doors and hearts, and he

would see that they played it very well. He patted Lyrri's back, slid into her mind, and sent her to sleep. Over the course of their journey, he had placed coercions, sways, and triggers in their minds as deeply as possible. "She's exhausted. We all are. Is it much farther?"

"Only a little. Poor little thing," Nikko said. "We'll have you a place to sleep and food in no time."

The sanctuary proved to be mostly a cluster of woven cone-shaped sheelings that required dropping to your knees before crawling inside. Smoke rose from ventilation holes in the roofs of the sheelings. A long house built of stone stood at the center with a chimney in the middle of its roof. Several smaller buildings of wood stood half finished. A short distance away three more stone houses were being raised as permanent shelters; as well as others that were still being constructed by the refugees along with volunteers from among the lycans. Tree rounds and crude benches provided seats beneath the trees, as did the scattered small boulders.

Most of the volunteers were teenagers, yet they moved to their tasks capably and without hesitation. All lycans were reared to a trade as soon as they could walk.

A plump, middle-aged lycan wearing a shapeless, dark blue dress stood on the green in front of the long stone house. Nikko walked up to her. "Beth, I have more folks for you to care for. This is Malthus. The girls are Lyrri and Ros. They're sa'necari born, but their uncle isn't. Their family was wiped out in the rebellion."

Beth quirked an eyebrow at that. "We're getting a few of those. Come inside." She gestured at the longhouse.

Malthus said nothing when he saw her nostrils flare and she sniffed him in passing. Lycans did not consider it rude to check newcomers out with their noses. He knew that she was confirming his claim to be human. She would not find anything. Malthus used an embedded spell on the ring he wore to mask his nature, scent and sa'necari eyes. They could spellcord him, yet his eyes and scent would still be hidden. The ring had been a gift from Lord Daemon, who appeared to have an unusually substantial horde of early sa'necari artifacts.

The longhouse had a dirt floor and a deep fire pit in the center, around which several children lay sleeping. A room at either end was separated from the rest of the building by a half wall that had a curtained door and window built into the slat panels. Weathered gray wooden frames were built into the windows to the outside to hold the shutters that they closed on cooler nights.

Beth grabbed some bowls off a shelf and knelt by the pit. A huge kettle hung above the pit, suspended on two iron posts with a rod across them. She dipped up a hearty stew of lentils, lamb, and vegetables.

Malthus woke Lyrry as he knelt and set her on the ground. Nikko placed Ros by her sister near the fire pit.

"I'll return tomorrow and check on how you're doing," Nikko said. He left as Beth began handing bowls around to Malthus and his nieces.

Beth had a sweet, apple-cheeked face and a pleasant manner. She beamed at the girls as they ate hungrily. "Have they been blooded yet?"

Malthus gave her a startled grin. "That's some years off. Female sa'necari get their fangs with their menses, or so that side of my family told me."

Beth glanced at his wrists as if looking for spellcord, leaned in, and sniffed him again. "You're human."

"I'm afraid so."

Beth sniffed Ros and Lyrrri. "Sa'necari. How is it you're not?"

Malthus had expected to be interrogated. The lycans were cautious about outsiders. Odds were that Beth might prove to be a bit of a gossip and that could work to his favor. He gave her a straight look with just an edge of concern. "My mother was human. One of my father's numerous mistresses. I was born in Dragonton near Torment Lake."

Beth brightened. "I know the area. I have cousins up there. City wolves, but nice folk."

Mixing lies with his truths, Malthus described a bit of his youth growing up along the lake where their sa'necari overlords had once held most of their rites since the days of Waejonan. His last name was not Estrobian, but he had known the Estrobians well, having grown up with Volosarius Estrobian, the mon who introduced him to Necrodez, his last teacher.

Beth warmed to him steadily.

"I never met any of the Estrobians when I visited my cousins, but I heard of them," Beth said. "Fancy folk."

"Aren't all sa'necari in this land?"

Beth chuckled. "Not the ones working the sanctuary. We got them spellcorded, sealed, and doing chores."

Shivers ran through Malthus at the thought of being spellcorded. "You have adult sa'necari here?"

"Yup. Five women. Only way we'd let them accompany their children across the bridge."

Malthus swallowed back his reaction to that news and changed the subject. "Where will we sleep for the night? I would like to get the girls settled soon."

"Here for the moment. I'll get you some mats and blankets. Tomorrow one of the women should be moving into a new house with her children. It's there near enough finished. Then you can have their sheeling for the time being, until you can get a house up."

* * * *

Dynanna sat in the middle of her bed in Imralon, where she had remained after Isranon left early last spring. Normally she would have gone home to either her cottage in the garden that she shared with her brother, or her little house in the Badree Nym village of Summersnow near Blue Dog Pass. Nothing she did could distract her from moping over the black bottle Dynarien had given her for Isranon.

The bottle contained a euthanasia drug the Assassins Guild used. Isranon carried a divinator's curse inside his damaged body. Divinators used the bodies of their victims to turn the tides of wars, destroy kings, and deliver terrible curses. She had no way to know what would happen if the embedded spells killed Isranon.

Dynanna squeezed the bottle until her knuckles whitened. She shoved the bottle into her pocket with a heavy sigh, and

got up, wandering listlessly to her wall with the slingshots on it. Dynanna took each of them down, turning them around in her hands half-heartedly before replacing them with another sigh. No doubt existed in her mind but that a great and powerful curse would be unleashed upon someone with Isranon's death. The only ways to avert it were to either get the spells out before they could kill him or to change the manner of his death. Certain ways of dying would accommodate the spells, such as the dark rites or a violent death, especially if blades were involved. Contrariwise, if Isranon died quietly by his own hand...

Dynanna worried that if she gave him the bottle and explained about the curse lodged within him, he might decide to simply take the drug and die, rather than continuing his struggle to live and risk releasing the curse should the embedded spells finally claim him. Her hand went to the bulge in her pockets that was the bottle. "I wish you hadn't left this up to me, Dynarien," she muttered.

Then a thought struck her that sent a shivering sea of goose bumps over her body. What if Isranon's death was a curse directed at the destruction of the Sacred King? Without the Sacred King and at least one mage-paladin of Kalirion, matters could soon spiral out of hand what with the dark forces pounding along the eastern bank of the Hillora. Kalirion had his king, but not his mage-paladins; they were always pan-elementalists and lifemages. Usually an Abelard.

But there were none of them left. *Except ... except...*

Dynanna suddenly had an idea. She had to talk to Kalirion. Dynanna had been putting that conversation off because

Kalirion always tried to seduce her and he could be very persistent. She sucked in a fortifying breath and Jumped for the Gardens of the Sun.

It was night in the world below, but it was always daylight in the garden of Kalirion, which lived and blossomed in a wondrous eternal springtime. The garden was incredibly lovely. Trees bloomed and fruited all year round. Flowers in every shade of blue imaginable grew there.

Few signs remained to show that, up until a year ago, Kalirion's Jesmyrran angels had still been coaxing Dynanna's gophers from it. At Dynanna's insistence, they had released those gophers where they were now harassing the fields and gardens of a particularly nasty tribe of goblins. The garden now bloomed in its full beauty and luxuriant growth. Every shade of blue and yellow could be found in a lush riot of color; from blossoms to fruit; on bushes, vines, and trees. The grass grew deep and sweet in a soft carpet over every open space. The winding paths were paved in topaz and turquoise, the broad stones set in interesting patterns.

The Idyn tree at its center overflowed with large, iridescent, peacock blue fruit and flowers, showing every sign of recovering from Dynanna's long ago gopher curse. Looking closer, however, she could still detect a droop in its branches. She felt a flash of guilt at that. Dynanna sighed. One of these days, she would learn to keep her temper in check and not react without thinking. She had come here seeking answers to a prophecy and Kalirion, who was in love with her, had insisted she trade him a day and a night of sex for it. Dynanna had agreed to the deal and then cursed his garden

afterward. It had taken his angels years to catch and remove all of her gophers.

She settled on an elegant white bench to wait for him to appear. He always knew when she arrived these days.

Dynanna did not have long to wait. Kalirion emerged from his palace beyond the Idyn tree, wearing only a short white kilt. He was an immense man, six foot five inches, very muscular and clean limbed. Every time she saw him, Dynanna became wet between her thighs with longing; however, her perverse sexuality was such that every single time she had sex with a god, she got pregnant. What was worse was that she could get pregnant with another child every twenty-four hours for up to a week before it stopped. Multiple births were a commonplace for her. Gods were fun in bed, but she preferred mortals since she had not yet managed to get pregnant by one. Kalirion and Ishla both said they were looking into a solution to her problem, but neither of them had found it yet.

"Have you come for conversation or for a favor, beloved?" Kalirion asked, joining her on the bench.

She looked into his eyes of flame. "A favor."

A bright, eager smile spread over his fair face and he flicked back a blond curl from his forehead. "You know the price."

"Nope." Dynanna grinned cheekily. "I have something else you want just as much."

The Elder God arched an eyebrow at her. "What would that be?"

"A mage-paladin. An Abelard."

His lips thinned. "There aren't any."

Dynanna grinned. "Oh, yes, there is."

"Give me his name. If you're right, then I'll give you your favor."

"Lord Isranon Dawnreturning of the lineage of my brother Dawnhand." The words were scarcely out of her mouth when Dynanna could tell that she had Kalirion's full attention. "He's mine, but I'll trade him to you."

* * * *

The Great Hall of the Redhand Manorhouse was the largest room in the building. Two rows of stone support columns ran along the south and north sides of the room. Clusters of comfortable chairs, sofas, and low tables in dark-stained wood broke the Great Hall into false alcoves. The sections of a large trestle table stood stacked along the south wall to be assembled for rare formal dinners. At the east end stood the deep hearth and to the left of the hearth were three looms, a spinning wheel, and several baskets of wool and yarn.

Claw sat in his big over-stuffed chair. Like most of the lycan clans, he maintained an informal household, rather than the elaborate courts of the sa'necari and the humans of Shaurone to the south and Creeya to the Northeast. On the side table sat his pipe rack with a jar of tobacco in the center and four pipes in cradles around it. He filled his pipe, struck a lucifer and lit the herb. Claw took several puffs, then slid his gaze across the four guardsmyn seated around him: stout Belgair, the Captain of Claw's Household Guards for the past two decades, reputed to be a bully although Claw had yet to

witness it himself; blond Kynyr Maguire, the youngest of the guardsmyn at twenty and so handsome that some said it was downright sinful; tow-headed Finn MacIver, who had missed being youngest by two months; and Ramsey Fitzgerald with hair as red as a whore's petticoats and a temperament so mellow and staid that it proved you could not judge a mon's nature by the color of his hair.

A slender nibari slave entered with a tray and handed out tankards of mead. "Will that be all, Master Claw?"

"Yes, Kissie."

His gaze rested longest on a handsome young male named Kynyr Maguire. Kynyr looked so much like Claw's long dead son, Tarrant, that it often caused a poignant flutter in the otherwise crusty, obdurate old chieftain. "I hear they've a new one at the Camp."

Kynyr glanced at the Captain of the Guard, Belgair, before answering. He drew a glare followed by a shrug from Belgair. "A male with two little girls."

"I don't like it. Males don't stop here."

The Sanctuary Refugee Camp existed only because Claw permitted it, and he liked to keep a close watch on it.

"They do if they've children along." Belgair pointed out, and took a long draw from his tankard.

"Yaw. And how many times has that happened in the last four years? They stay just long enough to dump the cubs and run."

Kynyr shook his head at Claw, drawing another glare from Belgair. "Nikko says this one is insisting he's here for the long haul ... that he won't desert his nieces."

"Sa'necari?"

"Only the girls. He's human."

"Or so he says. Go ask around, Kynyr. Ramsey, you and Finn go with him."

Kynyr finished his mead and they left.

Belgair out-stayed the others, leaning in toward Claw.

"Just because he's got a pretty face..."

"Shut up, Belgair." Belgair had never known Claw's twin sons, Logan and Tarrant. They had died ten years before Belgair's birth. Belgair had no idea what they looked like because Claw had ordered all their portraits removed from the walls of the manor after their deaths: looking at them made his wife Aisha cry. Let Belgair think what he would; Claw had no intention of opening himself up for accusations of sentimentality by telling Belgair what it was that drew him to Kynyr.

"I wouldn't put so much trust in Kynyr ... if I were you."

"I'll be the judge, Belgair. You've made your points, now get out."

Belgair frowned and removed himself.

Claw sat a long time alone, smoking and drinking, ringing the bell for Kissie repeatedly to refill his tankard. He kept hoping that Kynyr would draw the eye of his daughter Merissa, but she seemed determined never to fall in love again; and like the rest of the Redhand family, stubbornness was proving a curse. So far all that Claw had was the bastard child Merissa had borne her sa'necari lover—a child that could not inherit the realm because he had not been born lycan. If Merissa did not find a husband in the next year, Claw

Serpent's Quest [Lycan Blood Vol. I]
by Janrae Frank

intended to exercise his rights and arrange a marriage for her whether she wished it or not.

CHAPTER TWO

RIPE FOR THE TAKING

The evening breeze had come up early and blew strongly into the night, carrying a heavy scent of pine and evergreens. It swirled Malthus' waist-length black hair, which he had loosed from the confining leather thong. If he did not keep his hair trimmed, it easily grew to his ankles, like most Waejontori males.

Malthus stared at the stars and thought.

Because of his reputation, Lord Daemon had given him his choice of assignments. He had turned down an offer to send him to Rowanhart and murder the twin sons of Mephistis de Waejonan. His old rival Corradeo had taken that one. Queen Tomyrilen's claim to the throne was tenuous at best, being both a bastard and a female. In four thousand years, Waejontor had had only two queens and both had ultimately brought destruction upon the realm. However, once the boys were dead—Malthus supposed they must be around five years old by now—all the holdouts among the surviving sa'necari nobility would have no choice but to follow her.

For once, his personal issues had proved more important to him than business. He felt more driven to find out what had happened to his brother Troyes than he did getting paid for an easy kill.

"What happened to you here, Troyes?"

He heard the back door to the longhouse open, and from the solid sound of the steps, knew it had to be Beth emerging.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Please do." Malthus turned toward her.

Beth had changed into a pale pink shift that buttoned down the front as far as her navel. The hem brushed her ankles with a soft swish. "What are you thinking of? Your family?"

Malthus lowered his eyes. "What else would I think of? This is the first time we've been able to stop running in four weeks."

"You'll be fine here." Beth came to him, swaying her large hips in a manner that suggested she found him attractive. Her raw-umber hair had been freed from its earlier bonds and hung past her waist. Dark hair was rare among the lycans, and usually indicated mixed blood somewhere in their ancestry.

"Yes, I think so. We will need all the help we can get. I will work hard in exchange for it. I just worry about my nieces."

Beth stopped very close to him. "We will do all that we can. You seem like a good mon to care so much."

"I try." Malthus, guessing that a woman of her age and build did not get much male attention, gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "I appreciate everything you're doing for us, Beth."

She flushed and started to draw away from him, fluttering her hands. Her size made the girlish movement seem grotesque.

Malthus gambled. Most lycans had strong minds that resisted sa'necari intrusions, and unless they were caught off guard it required a prolonged, systematic hammering to break them open. Malthus had always had a fetish for lycans. Two of his last doxies had been lycan. Malthus had frequented their taverns and brothels, partied, hunted, and gamed with them since early adulthood. Dozens had died on his altars, and hundreds had perished in his dungeons in his experiments with poisons and various other toxins, as well as in his detailed examinations of lycan anatomy. He had even vivisected several. There was very little he did not know about lycans. He had never completely understood the attraction, yet he had never denied it.

He sized Beth up as someone who used charity work to fill up the empty hole where a husband and children of her own should have been. The extremity of her neediness made her vulnerable.

"You're too kind," he murmured, and when he sensed her deeper flush of pleasure, he lunged into her mind with a needle thin blade of power.

Beth looked confused, one hand went trembling to her face. "I want to be ... kind. You don't need to be ... to be so..." Her voice trailed off as Malthus captured her fingers and kissed them.

He twisted the invisible blade of his gifts deeper into her psyche. "You like pleasing me."

"Yes, I do. I—" Beth shivered.

Malthus flicked his fingers across her nipples, and Beth shuddered. "You want me, Beth. You want me as a woman

wants a man." Each time he said her name, he gave the blade another thrust into her mind, cutting through the cords of her resistance.

"Yes, I do. More than anything."

"Good, Beth. You know what I am now, but you're not going to tell anyone, are you, Beth?"

The light faded from Beth's eyes as he extinguished her will with each repetition of her name. Her lips parted as if to speak, but nothing came out. Her arms settled at her sides in a lifeless manner.

Malthus kissed her again. "Come into the trees with me, Beth. I'm hungry."

"Yes."

The subtle coercions he wished to place in her mind would take time to achieve. If he accidentally tore her, Beth's behaviors would change too abruptly and someone would notice it. For the nonce a feeding trigger would do nicely, set just deeply enough for her to open her veins and legs to him.

As Malthus led Beth into sheltered copse, he asked her, "When was the last time that a sa'necari guested with your chieftain? This used to be a royal waystation."

Beth licked her lips with a little *hhmmmmn*. "Must have been just over three years ago. Two of them. Troyes and Isranon."

Malthus settled on the ground with Beth and began unfastening her dress. She stared past him as if unaware of what was happening. Her body proved to be fat, but not shapeless, and after a fashion appealing. "And where did they go when they left, Beth?"

"Don't know. They just left. Only Claw's household knows. He don't like folks talking about it, cause one of those two storked his daughter. The child's sa'necari."

He fondled Beth's huge breast, eyeing the conspicuous vein along the top. "Which one do you think did it?"

"Troyes. I was running with the wolves one night and stumbled on them going at it. We should have stoned her, but the lawgiver wouldn't let us."

Malthus let his fangs down completely and breathed along her breast, as he penetrated the innermost places of her being, binding her to his suggestions. "Nikko?"

"No. Nevin. Nikko's his cousin ... was his apprentice then." Beth trembled when Malthus removed her clothing and ran his hands up and down her body.

"What is this princess of farmers' name?"

"Merissa."

"You'll help me find a way to meet her?" Malthus began removing his own clothing.

Beth watched him disrobe with a glazed expression. "Yes."

"Good. Are you still a virgin, Beth? An old maid?"

"Yes. No one's ever wanted me."

"Be good and I'll take care of that tonight." Malthus laid Beth on her back. He felt her psyche squirming as he showed her his fangs that were fully extended from their sheaths. He rotated his power through every vulnerable spot within her like a knife in a wound. "Beth, Beth, Beth. You're in love with me."

Malthus threw himself on top of her, enjoying the way she moaned as his fangs pierced her breast and he began to suck

her rich lycan blood. If anyone heard them, they would assume that someone was making love in the copse. And, once he finished his meal, they would be.

* * * *

One the far side of the Great Hall, close to the hearth, Claw's aging sisters, Searlait and Fianait, sat at their looms weaving. Off to their left the spinning wheel whirred as Aisha Redhand, Claw's wife, spun strands of wool into yarn to be taken to the local dyers.

Kynyr had house duty that day. The other guardsmyn called it bitch watching and were only too glad to trade off with Kynyr to avoid it. Since all the troubles began, Claw wanted at least one male at large in the family sections of the manor, watching over his sisters. Frequently there was more than one, depending upon Claw's mood, and the gardens and grounds were patrolled constantly.

Having grown up as an only boy with six sisters, Kynyr enjoyed it; and his spiritbrother Finn—who had been raised in similar circumstances, but with eight rather than six—had begun to also. That often led to the two of them getting paired for the duty as they were that day.

Kynyr sat next to Fianait with just enough distance between them that he did not get in her way as she wove the delicate kazamerie wool on her big loom. Fianait responded well to his questions about the history of her family and his favorite stories involved Tarrant Redhand, the older of Claw's twin sons, who had been executed by the sa'necari.

Fianait took out her scissors and clipped a strand of brown wool before tying on a green strand for the next row. Kynyr noticed that the ends of the scissors were blunt and rounded like children's scissors. On impulse he glanced at her waist and saw that she carried pouches on her belt, but no knife. Bitches usually carried a small utility knife, and some of them—those that had to travel alone for any amount of time—carried a single fighting knife. The absence of a blade and the blunted scissors increased the air of fragility that clung to the elderly bitch in a way that Kynyr found difficult to define.

Finn sat near the door watching them.

Fianait tucked a strand of thinning, white hair back into the bun at the base of her neck. Fair-skinned to begin with, she had become translucently pale with age, the veins showing violet beneath her skin. Her knuckles, like knobs on her long, slender fingers, bore the signs of arthritis; however, she rarely allowed it to slow her down. She smiled at Kynyr as she started again at her loom.

"You remind me of Tarrant."

Kynyr smiled back at her. The entire family had remarked on that more than once—in fact, it was repeated almost daily by at least one of them—and Kynyr enjoyed hearing it, except when they tried to carry it a bit further. They knew his father was a bastard and his grandmother had ridden with Tarrant's army as a healer during the tragic Lycan Rebellion of eighty years ago. Kynyr had never made an effort to conceal it, because gossip was a popular lycan mode of communication and what happened on the East side of the valley was usually

known all over the west side within a season. But he always assured them that he was no kin of theirs and usually they let it drop.

"I'm complimented."

Fianait's smile broadened. "Is your father still teaching school?"

"Last I heard he was."

Community supported schools were still somewhat of a novelty in Red Wolf Valley, teaching reading, writing, basic math, and a little history. Although Kynyr's father said that it still felt like pulling teeth, literacy had begun to spread among the lycans.

"Does he enjoy it?"

Kynyr chuckled. He had had this conversation many times before with Fianait. Either her memory had begun to go with age, or she just liked hearing it all again. Kynyr was never certain which it was. "Cubs would rather go fishing than crack books."

"Frustrates him?"

"A bit."

"I'd've snuck off more often if it hadn't been for the Dreaded Horde," Finn complained.

Aisha favored them with a prim frown. "Must you always call your sisters the Dreaded Horde?"

Finn scratched at his scruffy yellow hair. "Don't know what else to call them. My sisters and Kynyr's used to gang up on the two of us. Fourteen harpies armed with hairbrushes ... descending on us like Hell's Army. We've been away from

home for four years and I swear I've still got some parting lumps and bruises."

Searlait laughed and that set off the rest of them.

"Changing of the Guard," called a gruff male voice from the doorway.

Kynyr glanced and saw Captain Belgair Doherty standing near the entrance to the Great Hall flanked by grizzled Morcar and the oafish Gorgarty. Then he caught a glimpse of Ramsey's bright red hair in the hallway just beyond the door as his friend thumbed at the foyer, indicating that Kynyr and Finn had friends waiting for them in the courtyard: apparently a trip to the Difficult Horse for a tankard was planned.

"Excuse us." Kynyr rose to his feet with a polite bow to the bitches.

Aisha stopped him with a gesture. "If you're going to Hereward's ask if he's gotten more of the whiskey in that Claw likes. Otherwise we'll have to send someone to Hell's Widow for it."

"I'll do that."

* * * *

Malthus slipped out of Beth's bed before first light, lest one of the children catch him there. He had ridden her several times in the night, sa'necari having a greater sex drive than most other races. The children had been forbidden to enter what passed for a bedroom in the longhouse, but that did not mean they would obey—children were known for disobedience. Beth had told him the truth—it was nearly impossible for anyone to lie with the blade of a sa'necari's

power lodged in her brain—she had been virgin. He had thoroughly deflowered her to both their satisfactions. Malthus tied his pants closed, pulled on his tunic, and belted his blades and pouch on.

Within a few days, he would have a perfectly cooperative tool in Beth. He stepped silently around the children sleeping on the floor like a pile of puppies, and emerged from the longhouse to the sounds of trees crashing to earth. Malthus glanced toward the sounds and saw lycans in their hybrid forms, wearing only pants, trimming away the branches of the felled trees with axes.

He nodded at that and went to the water barrels lining the west side of the longhouse, took down a dipper from a wooden frame above them, and took a long drink before splashing himself with the leftovers. If he wanted a bath, he would have to go down to the stream.

"So you're new?"

Malthus straightened and turned at the sound. A tall, long-limbed mon stood there, wearing the umber robe and forest green cloak of a priest to Willodarus. He had a heavy nose in a long face that reminded Malthus of a hound dog he had once owned. A leonine wealth of nut-brown hair topped his head, and he had heavy-lidded steel blue eyes, framed in wrinkles beneath a strong brow ridge. The priest carried a tall staff and a belt-knife so small it could not be considered a weapon. At first glance there was nothing to give Malthus pause to consider the mon a threat, yet his instincts said there had to be. Malthus gave him a polite bow. "I'm Malthus

Estrobian. My nieces and I arrived yesterday. The girls are still sleeping, but I needed some air."

"We all need air. What god do you serve?"

"I haven't pledged to any, but I make offerings to all as the need comes to me."

The priest's eyes went to Malthus' wrists. "Human?"

Malthus nodded. His eyes slewed to the side and he saw the lawgiver, Nikko, leaning against an elm tree with his arms crossed. Malthus wondered what part Nikko had played in bringing the priest to investigate him.

Nikko noticed Malthus looking at him, and nodded with a pleasant smile.

The priest's gaze seemed to deepen and extend into him. Malthus found himself reaching out to the ring to strengthen his shields. "Waejontori human?"

"Yes. But I've been away for fifteen years."

"Take your tunic off and show me your neck."

Malthus unbuckled his belt, dropped it to the ground, and then he pulled off his tunic. His stomach tightened and he forced it to relax. He had not had the ring of concealment tested this severely: the priest intended to Read him. "Do you wish me to sit for this?"

"A good point. Bring your things to that boulder, and sit there." The priest pointed to a huge rock in the middle of the yard near a wooden bench.

Malthus obeyed, and the priest followed him. Once settled, the examination began. The priest ran his fingers along both sides of Malthus' neck, Reading for signs of his having been bitten, which could have placed him under the control of

Lemyari and other hemovores. The priest checked his arms, his chest, his sides, and stomach. Then he grasped Malthus' wrist and Read him deeply. Malthus analyzed the nature of the priest's powers as they moved through him: the mon was human, not lycan. Interesting.

Without releasing Malthus' wrist, the old priest remarked, "I'm astonished that one who has lived so intimately with the sa'necari as you have, is not marked in some way."

Malthus shrugged. "I was a noble's bastard. I left young. There's no place for my kind at court, except to bend over and offer my neck."

"I'm surprised they let you go."

The priest's tone irritated Malthus. "I'm human. Not nibari. My father was not so low as to eat his own children."

"Are we getting a little angry?" The lines of the priest's eyes crinkled as he grinned good-naturedly and let go of Malthus' wrist. "I apologize for pushing you. It is my job to assess the newcomers, just as it is for the lawgiver. Nikko is young, so he likes for me to examine them also." The mon extended his hand. "I am Tempest Anstey."

Malthus grasped it. "It is good to meet you."

"I hope you find it so. We'll be keeping an eye on you. We do all of the males at first. You see, not many have shown up here seeking refuge. Most flee over the borders into Creeya. It is the women and children who can't run as far or as well who come to us."

"I am here because of my nieces. I feared they would not survive that kind of a journey."

"Understandable. I will leave you alone now. However, I will drop in again."

"I will welcome you."

Malthus turned his attention elsewhere as Tempest departed with Nikko. Three lycans, bare to the waist, in their transitional forms, dragged a tree into the compound, and set to it with hammers and wedges once they had ascertained which way the grain lay. They split it into planks with swift efficiency. Several young myn moved the planks to the houses that were being raised.

He drifted over to them and spied a young lycan who appeared to be in charge. "Is there something I can do to help?"

Shalto straightened from running his hand along one of the planks and nodded. "You're the new one." He extended his hand and shook with Malthus.

"I'm Malthus."

"Shalto. Well, there'll be plenty of work for you soon. You don't need to start immediately."

"You're rather young to be in charge, aren't?"

Shalto scowled. "I'm sixteen. I've been of age for two years."

"I meant no offense."

"Then none taken."

"Perhaps you'd allow me to buy you a tankard at the tavern in exchange for telling me how best to fit in? I know very little about your customs, and I don't wish to offend anyone."

Shalto grinned. "Can my cousin, Oswyl, come?" He thumbed at another young man with rust-colored hair.

Malthus smiled broadly. "Certainly."

"We'll take a tavern break in the afternoon when the sun gets hottest. Come back then."

Malthus wandered the camp, observing the people. Naked children crawled out of the low openings to the woven bark sheelings and ran laughing across the yard, pursued by older siblings trying to pull clothes over them. The smoke of cook fires spiraled out of the exit holes in the sheeling roofs as the women began to cook their allotments of meal. Others emerged with their bedding and hung them out to air on lines stretched between trees. Several women filled pitchers at the water barrels and carried them back to their houses and sheelings. Malthus could easily identify the sa'necari among them by the spellcords on their wrists with the deadly seals attached—if they tried to remove the cords, the seal would release a fatal spell upon them. He had only been corded a few times in his thirty-six years. The first time had been by his mother who wished for him to understand the effect and she had released him a day later. Still, looking at the cords made him shudder.

The refugees were mostly young women with children. He ran his tongue across his gums, feeling the sheaths of his fangs. There were several there that Malthus would have enjoyed getting his teeth into, but caution was a watchword with him. He would make do with Beth for the nonce. Greed would betray him to the lycans faster than anything else. He

had to also make certain that Ros remained in firm control, since she was precocious and had been born with her fangs.

He sauntered around behind the dwellings to the barns and watched four of the homeliest nibari he had ever seen milking goats while the tethered beasts nibbled at the low hanging leaves of a leaning oak tree. Once Malthus had walked the entire length of the camp and found each of the red sticks that had been placed around it to mark its perimeters, he decided on an isolated corner sheltered by many trees as the spot where he wanted to place his house. He would inform Beth of his choice and she would tell the others.

Shalto and Oswyl were sitting on tree rounds, waiting for Malthus when he made his way back.

"Are you ready?" asked Shalto.

"I certainly am," replied Malthus, reaching into a pouch to flash several pieces of gold and silver at the youths.

Oswyl nudged Shalto. "Let's go. I'm thirsty."

"The Difficult Horse is the best," Shalto said as they began walking toward the village. "Old Hereward makes his own mead from honey the farmers sell him, and it's very nice."

"I imagine so. Lycans are famous for their mead."

"So we are," Oswyl acknowledged Malthus' comment.

The Difficult Horse, called that because of its sign that featured a horse sitting on its rump while a man tugged the reins before it, stood on Main Street across from the village common. The interior, cool, dark, and pleasant compared to the heat and glaring sunlight outside, provided a welcome relief. Barrels with spigots jutting from them lined the rear wall behind a polished bar of walnut heartwood. Sturdy chairs

circled the round tables placed throughout. Shalto led the way to their favorite table near the right hand wall, and the young lycan indicated that Malthus should sit first. Malthus chose the chair that put his back to the wall where he could see everyone around him, an old custom that had saved his life in the past and played to the caution in his nature.

Six freerangers in forest green leathers sat at a table near the door. Their presence irritated Malthus. Those sword-wielding tree-huggers had begun to increase their numbers in the area, adding their own patrols between the valley and Hell's Widow to compensate for the decrease in Sharani patrols as the Saer'ajan of Shaurone turned her attention toward the Waejontori Rebellion. They could easily endanger Malthus' lines of communication with his operatives in Hell's Widow and disrupt his still tenuous supply lines.

A servingmon came to take their order and Malthus noticed the metal ownership collar around her neck: she was nibari, a reminder that before Claw closed their borders to his kind two years ago, this had been a waystation for sa'necari passing through the occupied zone. The mon had been expected to open her veins and legs to sa'necari passing through as well as to serve other customers in the past. It irritated him and Malthus' thoughts went back to the women of his kind shackled by sealed spellcords on each wrist. Spellcord on a single wrist was not enough to completely stifle the flow of power through a mage's shaukras and the mage-nets in their body, each wrist had to be corded separately. His human mother had taught him that by making

him wear them both ways for a day. He wondered how his mother fared with her new employer, Lord Daemon.

"So, what did you do before you wound up here?" asked Shalto, shifting back in his seat as the tankards arrived and Malthus dropped some coins onto the server's tray.

"I spent fifteen years as a kandoyarin."

"Mercenary. Hsaaah!" Shalto grinned, appreciation glinting in his pecan shell brown eyes.

Well at least they know the term. That's worth something.
"I've been from one end of the Blood Coast to the other."

From the corner of Malthus' eye, he caught a glimpse of Nikko covertly watching them. *Is he following me around? Or was he already here?*

"Why'd you come back?" Oswyl asked.

A tall blond in the chocolate and claret uniform of the Red Wolf guardsmyn took a seat at Nikko's table. The young lawgiver had a ready smile for him. "Hello, Kynyr."

Malthus licked his lips, momentarily distracted by Kynyr's appearance. It had been years since Malthus saw a male lycan that so strongly provoked his appetites—yet Kynyr did.

The young guardsmon's golden ginger hair, so thick it bloused around his face no matter how tightly he tied it back, hung at his shoulders in a clubbed knot. A narrow fringe of close-cropped golden beard framed his face from sideburns to an inch from his chin. His lantern jaw, pronounced cheekbones with dramatic hollows beneath them, and cleft chin made him the visual epitome of lycan masculinity.

Looking at him made Malthus hungry.

"Malthus?" Oswyl prodded.

Malthus' attention snapped back to the young wolves at his table. "Sorry. I was distracted. Who's the young guardsmon?"

"Kynyr Maguire from Longbranch. No one special. Thinks he's a looker, but he ain't," said Shalto, and then repeated Oswyl's question. "Why'd you come back?"

"The rebellion. I had family in Waejontor." Malthus pressed his hands around his tankard and stared into the contents before continuing. "I became worried about them."

Shalto and Oswyl shared a glance as if deciding who would ask the obvious question. As usual, it was Shalto who did. "Had?"

"They're all dead ... except my nieces. I didn't get back in time."

"We're really sorry to hear about that, aren't we, Shalto?"

"Yeah. Look, if there's anything we can do to help you, Malthus. You just let us know."

"Thank you, I will."

Malthus bought them a second and a third round. By that time the two youths were treating him like a long lost brother, including telling him about their problems with females: they couldn't get any. They had problems with some of the other young wolves, feeling that they deserved more respect than they were getting. Their jobs at the camp didn't pay well, since they came from donations to the shrine, but jobs were scarce. Malthus took their measures, probed their vulnerabilities, and explored their dreams. He purchased a fourth round and when they finished, the young pair staggered happily back to the compound with him.

* * * *

Kynyr watched Malthus and his drinking buddies leave. Nikko started to rise and follow them, but Kynyr touched his arm and nodded at the chair. "I'll buy the next round, Nikko. I need to ask you some questions."

"About what?"

"Was that the new mon at the camp?"

Nikko settled back in his chair as Kynyr gestured at Hereward to refill their tankards. "Yes."

"He seems to have cozied right up to your workers. Does that bother you?"

Hereward arrived with fresh tankards, set them smoothly in front of the two young wolves, and withdrew, taking the empties with him.

Nikko stared into his drink with a sigh. "Yes, it does. I'm not certain about him."

"In what way?"

"Gut instinct, I guess."

"I never ignore one of those. Has Tempest had a look at him yet?"

Nikko nodded, his lips so tight they nearly disappeared. "Tempest says he's human."

"But you don't believe that?"

"There's no reason not to believe it. And yet?" Nikko made a palms up gesture of hopelessness.

"Gut instinct?"

"Yes."

Kynyr scratched at the yellow whiskers trimmed into a close-cropped thin line around his features. "You ought to get yourself some apprentices."

"I don't feel ready."

"Some assistants then. Hire some assistants."

Nikko sighed. "I guess I could think about it."

"Until you decide, Claw says to tell you that Finn, Ramsey and myself are available at all hours."

Nikko ran his hand across his neck, shifting in his chair with growing impatience. "I will. Now I need to go. Really, I do."

"Don't bite off more than you can chew, Nikko. Remember you don't have to do anything alone."

"I'll remember." Nikko rose and left.

Kynyr dragged Nikko's tankard over and saw that the lawgiver had taken no more than a couple of swallows from it. Whatever gut instinct was riding Nikko; it was riding him hard.

* * * *

Malthus crawled into the sheeling and dropped his pack well away from the firepit. He withdrew a necklace of little crystal globes that looked like simple pretties. Holding them one at a time in the palm of his hand, Malthus decided which one he wanted. He laid the necklace on the dirt floor, and tapped it with a word of command. Two covered quivers and a long bow came out. He tapped another, which brought forth a bowl and several bottles of a silvery liquid. Then he began to dip the points in and stack the arrows against the side of

the sheeling to dry. The poison worked best when it was fresh.

The mountain air of the high elevation valley always became dramatically cooler in the evenings. A small fire burned in the pit. Two reed beds lay along the sides with a quilt to contain them and a light coverlet over that. Ros and Lyrri crept in behind him. Ros appeared a bit peaked, and he knew she must be feeling the effects of not having had blood to drink in several days.

At his gesture the girls settled together on their bed. He stroked Ros' dark hair. "One more day, Ros. Then I'll have blood for you."

"Thank you, Uncle. I'm so hungry I hurt."

"I know how that is. I've had to go without a few myself."

Malthus put a finger to each of their foreheads and sent them to sleep. He studied them both with a deep fondness while he waited for Beth to arrive. Had he not needed them for this gambit, he would have sent them to his mother when he took them from their maternal relatives, who in his estimation had been not rearing them properly—timid sa'necari equally fearing both the queen and the Sharani, trying to pass for human, and running a dry goods store as a front for their existence. That was no fit life for his brother's children. Especially Ros, who was a prodigy among sa'necari and would be very powerful when she came into her own.

Beth scrambled through the opening, glanced back out to make certain she had not been seen, and sat on his bed. Nothing they did would wake the girls, only his command, or the sun in their eyes. She undressed without being told.

Malthus smiled at that. Beth had proved very susceptible. Just one night and he had her trained this much. Tonight he would train her further. He needed Beth to feed both himself and Ros until other arrangements could be made.

"I love you, Malthus," she said, her voice filled with eagerness for him. "I didn't let anyone see me. I've been good, Malthus."

"I know, Beth." He looked at the healing bruise he had left on her breast last night. Lycans healed more quickly than humans and it would be gone by tomorrow. It would already be gone, if he hadn't torn her more than he originally meant to.

Malthus kissed her cheek and slid into her mind again, turning and knotting the trigger tighter. He began the first layer of commands that would become a coercion. "You want to protect me, Beth."

Once more he used repetitions of her name to strengthen his hold upon her.

"More than anything." Her earnest expression pleased him.

"Good girl, Beth." He gazed at her throat. Bellocar's Hells, how he wanted to put his fangs in her neck—but that would show—it was all that he could do to hold himself back. "You don't want anyone to hurt me."

She raised concerned eyes to his face. "I don't want them to do that."

"They would kill me, Beth."

Her eyes widened like a small creature trapped in the sudden glare of a lamp. "No. I can't let them do that."

"You know what you need to do then, Beth," Malthus murmured into her ear, kissing her head.

"I need to protect you."

"More than that. I need the freedom to come and go from this place. You will cover for me, lie for me..." Malthus knotted the edge of the coercion. "Kill for me."

Tears abruptly appeared in Beth's eyes and spread a river across her cheeks. Malthus knew that she had finally realized what he had done to her, but he was in too deeply for her to break free. Her psyche squirmed. She needed to be disciplined.

He touched a single finger to her chest, with a tiny spell of muscular disruption, which sent a fiery lance of pain through her. She gasped sharply and grabbed at his finger. He brushed her stomach with his other hand, repeating the spell, and Beth doubled over with a cry.

He licked her tears away and kissed her breasts, dressing his threats in a lover's soft tones. "Don't fight me, Beth. Don't make me hurt you."

"I won't," she sobbed.

"That's a good girl." He put another knot in the coercion. The more firmly he placed his controls, the more aware of them he could safely allow her to be, enabling him to enjoy the taste of her fear. "Do I frighten you, Beth?"

She trembled. "Yes."

"Good. Lie back and spread your legs. Which vein shall I open tonight?"

"Any you wish."

* * * *

The two young boys, eight and nine years old, stole up to Malthus' sheeling in the dark, and squatted down listening to the grunting and moaning. There had been some words earlier, but they had not heard them clearly.

"See, I told you Beth is finally getting some," Rory said.

"I never thought fat, old Beth would ever get any," Hamish replied.

"I doubt she's more'n a waystation to him. He'll drop her when he gets a prettier sheath for his sword."

"What are you two doing out here this late?" Nikko asked, emerging from the darkness beneath the trees. He had been on his way home from counseling one of the human women in the compound.

Hamish started to run, but Nikko was quicker and had him by the collar. Rory escaped, running for all that he was worth. Nikko sighed, wishing he had been faster and gotten them both. The two Scott boys were not troublemakers; just underfoot more than Nikko thought they should be. He would have to talk to their parents tomorrow. That was part of his job as the lawgiver.

Nikko lifted Hamish onto the tips of his toes. "What are you doing?" he repeated.

"Listenin' to it."

"What?" Then Nikko's sharp lycan ears were drawn to the sounds of two people coupling in the sheeling. For a second he wondered if Malthus was molesting his nieces.

"Beth," Hamish hissed. "It's old Beth. We were goin' home from playing with those Hansley kids and saw her go crawling into there. Then the sounds start up. Oh, they been loud."

"Listening to it is rude. You go home right now," Nikko admonished him, reconsidering his initial decision to speak to their parents, and deciding to wait and see if he caught them here again. "If I catch you again, I'll be forced to inform your parents."

"Yes'm, Master Nikko."

"And you tell Rory that I said it."

"Yes'm."

Nikko released Hamish, and the boy raced off in the direction of his home in the middle of the village. *Well, maybe the admonition will be enough.*

The sounds coming from the sheeling sent an odd shiver over Nikko, like the skeletal hand of presentiment. Something wasn't right, but he was almost afraid to touch it. Nevin would have known what to do. Nikko stared at the sheeling for a moment. He shook himself. If it was not all right for the boys to listen, then it was not all right for him either. So he walked home, wishing Nevin were there to counsel him. More and more he went to Tempest with his doubts and uncertainties, but Tempest was not lycan and failed to understand all of their ways.

He thought of Kynyr Maguire's offer and then shook his head at it. With no proofs to offer, all Nikko had was possibly groundless suspicions. He was supposed to be the lawgiver, not some uncertain, paranoid, wet-tailed cub. It was easier to admit that he might be wrong to someone older than he was,

Serpent's Quest [Lycan Blood Vol. I]
by Janrae Frank

than to someone his own age ... he could not do it.

CHAPTER THREE

CULLEN

Cullen perched on the tall sorrel mare like a stocky pit dog in dusty brown leathers and a nondescript chambray shirt, his stirrups drawn up almost to the saddle skirts to allow for his short legs. The leather patch over his dead left eye and a day's growth of stubble on his weathered face lent him an unsavoriness matched only by his dour expression as he reined Larkspur to a walk entering the courtyard of the manor.

Larkspur recognized that they were home at last and whickered softly.

Cullen patted her neck. Seventeen hands at the shoulder, lean and leggy with a deep chest, Larkspur could outrun nearly anything on four legs: she was Cullen's prize possession; a gift from Claw Redhand whose herd of fine racers were the envy of all the clans.

"Yo, hostler! Get yourself out here!"

Cullen adjusted the strap of his nondescript black satchel—common to many trades—that crossed his compact, muscular chest, swung his leg over the saddle, and dropped to the ground.

The hostler, Georgie Rogan, emerged from the barns at Cullen's left and hurried toward him, grinning at the manner in which the short wolf had disengaged from his large mount.

A harsh glance from Cullen's cobalt eye banished the smile from Georgie's face. Although Georgie had several inches in height and forty pounds over the mon, something in Cullen's face and manner discouraged trifling with him.

"Brush her down good," Cullen barked at Georgie. "Give her some oats. Mind my words. I'll check later. If you ain't done it right, I'll have the skin off your back."

Georgie swallowed, making his Adam's apple bob like a cork in a stream. "Yessir."

Cullen strode to the front door and pounded on it, speculating on which of the servants would answer. He could have just walked in, but he liked making his presence known whenever he returned from a long trip with a packet of letters for the household.

Kissie answered the door and stared at him with reddening cheeks.

Cullen's eyes went straight to Kissie's ample bosom, their shape revealed by the hang of her drawstring-necked blouse that she wore tucked into her skirt. His hand shot out and he gave her his usual greeting: he pinched her nipple. He walked past her brusquely as if he had done nothing untoward. After all, Kissie was a nibari, a slave, although the Redhands like to call them servants. "Where's Claw?"

"The Great hall." Kissie trailed him, drying her hands on her apron. "Is there something I can get you?"

"You. Naked. My bed." Cullen patted his crotch. "I ain't had any since yesterday."

Kissie's flush deepened. "I'm in season."

"Pity that. Ya liked it last time, didn't ya?"

Kissie's voice dwindled to a murmur and she ducked her head. "Yes, Master Cullen."

Cullen scratched at the stubble on his chin, uncertain whether she meant it or was just being polite. That dinged his ego and he did not say anything else until they reached the Great Hall. There were three things he considered himself a master at: riding, fighting, and fucking ... especially fucking.

Claw glanced up from his whittling as Cullen and Kissie entered the Great Hall, noted the color in Kissie's face, and growled. "Cullen, keep your paws off Kissie."

The courier settled into a chair opposite the chieftain. The dour look he had given Georgie returned to his face. "As you wish."

"I damn well do wish. Kissie, is Tulah out of season?"

"Yes, Master Claw."

"Good. Tell her she's got Cullen duty."

"That what you're calling it now? Cullen duty?" Cullen removed his pouch and slid it across the intervening table to Claw.

"You're a slut. My servants aren't your harem." Claw laid his whittling aside, filled his pipe, and lit it, showing no sign of having noticed the pouch. He puffed for a minute. "If you weren't the best ... I'd've dismissed you forty years ago."

"There's that." Cullen took his own pipe out and leaned back in the chair, smoking. "It's getting tough to get through. Lord Daemon routed the Sharani at Torment Lake. I had to slip past their pickets and they almost caught me."

"Sharani?"

"Waejontori."

"I'll go through the dispatches and then you can brief me tomorrow."

"Will do."

They smoked for a time in silence.

Claw gestured at Cullen with the stem of his pipe. "You've done well for me, Cullen. I've been thinking of rewarding you."

Cullen's interest perked up. "How?"

"Isn't Larkspur coming into season soon?"

"Yah. That's why I didn't stop along the way. Don't want some two-bit, mongrel stud covering her."

Claw nodded. He suspected that Larkspur was the only female Cullen had ever loved with his whole heart. "I'd like to breed her to Stormsong."

"Woof!" Cullen's eyes sauced at the thought of Claw's current top stud. "But, what will I ride when she gets too far along? My route is a tough run."

"I'll loan you Shadow Orchard."

"He's risling, ain't he?"

Claw nodded again. "He didn't sire the kind of foals I expected."

"Ahh. Now about Stormsong. He won't hurt her, will he?"

"Not at all. Tell you what, Cullen. You can come and watch and see that Stormsong doesn't get rough with Larkspur."

Cullen beamed. "I'd like that."

* * * *

Cullen considered going into Wolffgard and spending a few hours relaxing at the Difficult Horse with a tankard of mead

and some of Claw's guardsmyn as companions. He decided instead on a hot bath in his rooms and a hot nibari with her legs open. It had irked Cullen when Claw called him a slut, even though the courier had never denied it. Cullen scratched at his head, and continued along his line of thought as if Claw were there and they were arguing, muttering to himself the things he did not dare to say to his chieftain.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'll settle down ... right. And get stuck with a single bitch for the rest of my bloody existence. Horde of cubs whining at me. Yeah. And be bored as hell. I got too much to offer not to spread it around a bit."

He did not have the social status to rate a harem like some of the clan chieftains and richer merchants maintained. On the other hand, Cullen had been socking away the gold he won racing Larkspur at various country shindigs to purchase half a dozen nibari when he retired. With his reputation, no self-respecting lycan wanted him anywhere near their daughters, so that was out. However, there was a sweet little lycan whore at the Crimson Lady whom Cullen had become fond of. He could always marry Ellie and thumb his nose at lycan society. Being a whore, Ellie probably would not rub his nose in it if she caught him in a few indiscretions—so long as he did not catch her in one all would be well.

A big tub sat in the middle of his outer room with water steaming in it. Cullen felt grateful that his status in the household was such that he didn't have to use the Barrack's bathhouse to soak the road dirt off him. He dumped his clothes on the floor and slipped into the water with a loud "Ahh."

His large cock bobbed for a moment and he winked at it grinning. "I know what you want."

Cullen's genital endowments were impressive and he took great pride in them. He was still grinning at himself when Tulah came in and laid towels on a chair near the tub.

"Hey, Tulah! Whatcha think a that?" He pointed at his cock.

The nibari came closer and looked.

A naughty boy grin spread over his face and he dragged her into the tub. Water sloshed onto the floor and Tulah gave a startled shriek, squirming around in the hot water. Cullen got her skirt up, shoved his hand into her slit, and winked at her.

Tulah settled against him. Nibari, the genetically-altered humans created by the vampires and sa'necari as slave cattle, bred for thousands of years for complete docility, were the soul of compliance—unless directed otherwise by their masters.

She giggled as he shifted her around until she sat on his lap, facing him with her legs around him.

Cullen thought back to Kissie and the hint of doubt she had caused him. "I do it good, don't I, Tulah?"

"Yes, Master Cullen." Tulah shrugged out of her wet blouse and dropped it on the floor beside the tub.

* * * *

Malthus concluded a deal with Shalto's father to buy two horses, a good riding animal, and a packhorse. Then the next day he rode into Hell's Widow to meet with Heironim.

The town of Hell's Widow had prospered under the rule of the Sharani occupiers. Without the constant drain on their resources by their former masters who had ruled through blood, terror, and cannibalism, the town had expanded to twice its borders in twenty years. Malthus rode into Hell's Widow, and through the town, noting the presence of the Sharani women walking tall and proud down the streets. Waejontori peasant women wore shapeless black dresses and head scarves. The only sa'necaris dwelling in Hell's Widow lived in the shadows, hidden from the conquerors. They maintained the secret waystations.

He turned into the yard of an inn called the *Devil's Dance*, which was a waystation to those who knew what to look for. Their rooms on the third floor catered to obscene appetites concealed from the Sharani. Malthus intended to spend the night here while he concluded his business, and start home to Wolffgard Village tomorrow.

He dismounted as an ostler came out.

Malthus tossed the ostler a handful of coppers. "I'll be staying the night."

Inside the inn, Malthus found the common room filled to capacity with locals and he spied Heironim sitting in the far right corner dicing. He strode up to the table and gazed at Heironim. "You have some goods for me."

"Yes, I have." Heironim picked up his winnings. "You'll excuse me, but I have business to take care of."

His companions grumbled, but Heironim shrugged them off.

Malthus started toward the door to the back without waiting for him, and Heironim fell into step beside him.

They reached the third floor where Heironim had his rooms and walked down the hallway. A nibari emerged from a room and greeted them. Her face had the kind of flush that came from being sucked after having gone too long without fangs in her flesh.

Malthus raised his hand to halt her. "Do you have more that are over ripe?"

She curtsied. "Yes, master. Two that are getting the blood-bloat bad. We haven't had many masters come through recently."

"Light meat or dark?"

"Both light meat, sir."

Malthus extended his fangs and tongued them with a smile. "I'll take your best room, and both nibari." He reached in his pouch and produced two silver coins, which he placed in her hands. "Have them wait for me in my room. Send up a nice dinner also." He turned to Heironim. "Now let's have a look at my supplies."

Heironim's suite had a modest sitting room with four chairs around a square table, a divan, and two chests of drawers. A door to the right opened on a bedroom. The only guests who lodged on this floor were those who could not bear close scrutiny. Heironim seated himself at the small table and lifted a chest from the floor onto it. He shoved the chest into the middle, and Malthus pulled it the rest of the way across. "Here's what your mother sent."

Malthus opened the chest and smiled. Six bottles of exotic wines to tempt Claw's palate once the curses were laid upon them and Malthus had wormed his way into their household. Tucked into the other side of the chest were jars of powers and bottles of liquids in strange colors. His mother, Sidera Tyrins, had sent him a fresh supply of the various toxins Malthus enjoyed working with and three of her newest creations. Sidera currently served as Lord Daemon's toxicologist and bio-chemist, creating deadly surprises for his enemies. Poisons and venoms, both arcane and natural, had been the family business for generations. Malthus had informed everyone in Red Wolff Valley, especially the people of Wolfgard Village, that he was the illegitimate son of the late Lord Estrobian, when actually he was the son of Sidera Tyrins and Lord Feodras who had gone missing after the destruction of the late King Baaltrystan's mountain stronghold.

A large number of sa'necari nobles had gone missing after the palace collapsed, and only Malthus and his mother knew what happened to them. Sidera had betrayed them into his hands as they fled and he had rited them all, including his father. Each of his victims had carried mortgiefan legacies, increasingly powerful collections of soul fragments and stolen magic, that passed from parent to child when the child rited an aged or dying parent. As a result, his powers now rivaled that of the late Prince Mephistis, the most powerful sa'necari of all time, who had been slain by the Sacred King of Rowanhart.

Malthus took a bottle of wine from the chest, sketched the spell onto the green glass side, and then added two more runes to triple the strength of the curse.

"That's an interesting spell," Heironim said, watching Malthus finish with the first three bottles. "It's a bit too subtle for my taste, but still interesting. Who's the wine for?"

"A gift for the chieftain."

"Ahhh, the chieftain. I can see why you'd want to be subtle."

"I'm going to the heart of the matter." Malthus paused to chuckle at his joke. "His heart."

A knock came at the door as Malthus finished with the final bottle. He closed the lid and looked up as Heironim answered.

"Tell the other master that his rooms are ready and his meals are waiting," said the nibari on the other side of the door.

Heironim nodded, closed the door, and returned to Malthus, looking at the number hanging from the room key. "Best room in the house. How do you rate that?"

Malthus shrugged with a tiny smile that spoke of secrets. "I've known the innkeeper for twenty years. He was having a bit of trouble when I first met him. So I went out and rited his trouble."

Heironim laughed.

Malthus pulled three small sheets of paper from his pocket and passed it across the table to Heironim. "Have your people purchase all these things for me. My cover is that I'm running errands."

"I'll do that."

"Your first order of business, once I'm gone, is to buy up some of the whorehouses. Especially the ones the lycans frequent." Malthus pulled a pouch of gold from his belt and sat it on the table in front of Heironim. "Some warehouses also. Preferably in a section of town that the Sharani do not frequent."

Heironim nodded. "And what am I doing with it?"

"Watching for couriers."

"I don't have that many myn yet."

"Not on the road, Heironim. In town. They'll have to come through here. If they're using windfolk, then it's my problem. If they're using riders, then it's yours."

"I'll make a start at it."

"Good. For now, come to my rooms and have dinner with me."

"You sure?"

"Of course, why else would I order two blood-bloaters?"

Malthus' rooms were plush, from the carpets to the heavy drapes, from the overstuffed chairs and sofas to the claw-footed, elegantly carved tables.

The two nibari, both female, waited on opposite sofas as Malthus and Heironim walked in. The nibari were in the late and most dangerous stages of blood-bloat, something that could kill them if the pressure and other symptoms were not relieved by being bled. The innkeeper, Dymier, could have bled them using leeches or have sliced their wrists and drained a bit off into bottles, but he generally let at least two or three of them go almost to the point of death because some sa'necari and vampires would pay high prices to drink

from a bloater. The bloaters always released a pleasant rush of tasty endorphins when a master's fangs entered them.

Malthus picked one and sat down beside her, savoring the symptoms of the bloat. Their normally light skinned faces were ruddy, their bodies bloated, and their skin clammy with sweat. She shivered as Malthus opened her bodice and pushed it back over her shoulders.

"I'm Lona, what position do you wish, master?"

Malthus played with her breasts. A long moan caused him to glance from the corner of his eyes, and he saw that Heironim already had his nibari on the floor in third position. "Position six."

Lona laid down on the sofa, draping one leg over the back, and placing her other foot firmly on the floor. She pulled her skirts up, exposing her slit.

"Very good, Lona. Very good." Malthus opened his pants and mounted her.

She turned her head to the side, offering the best angle for entering her long neck.

Malthus nuzzled her neck and then slid his fangs into her as he began to thrust.

CHAPTER FOUR

MERISSA

As Beth had told him he would, Malthus found the young female sitting upon an ornate bench in the gardens behind the chieftain's house with a child playing in the grass near her feet. A basket of crocheting sat on the bench beside her. Three suede pouches and a small utilitarian knife hung from her jewel studded belt, all of them—pouches, sheath, and belt—dyed a delicate rose to match her dress.

She reminded Malthus of Dyllys, his last lycan paramour—only she was far lovelier than Dyllys had been. He had thought Dyllys the most beautiful of all. She betrayed him and he rited her for it. This mon had heavy ginger hair and fair skin, a delicate mouth and nose, large blue eyes. He imagined she must make a striking wolf, since the color of their hair reflected the color of her coat in wolf-form. The child was black-haired and dark-skinned; yet his eyes like polished turquoise marked him as hers. This jewel among wolves had to be Merissa.

The garden was a simple affair of low hedges, rose bushes, and several rows of herbs. A psychic nudge through the links he had placed in his nieces' minds sent them running far ahead of him. They rushed laughing into the garden. Malthus trailed them with a doting expression. The girls rounded the hedgerow nearest Merissa and her son, and stopped with a squeal of fright. Malthus blinked, wondering what they had

seen. Then, as he came into view, Malthus hesitated. A half-grown maned hunting cat, a mountain chekaya, rose from behind the bench. He had not seen it until then. Malthus grabbed his nieces and pulled them close to him.

Merissa sucked in a surprised breath, saw his reaction, and caught the cat by the scruff of the neck. "Don't be afraid of Kenly. My son is wilderkin." She indicated the toddler. "One day the mother cat appeared and gave him the kitten." Merissa gave Kenly a pat and the cat settled again by her son.

Malthus wondered how dangerous that might make the child, whether the boy might be a simple wilderkin, or the more rare and deadly predator wilderkin. *Caution, caution, caution. Take this one step at a time.* "Have I permission to sit with you? I'm still learning the ways of this place."

Merissa smiled pleasantly up at him. "Of course. Are these your daughters?"

Malthus lowered his head as he shook it, allowing Merissa a brief, fleeting glimpse of his inner sorrow at the loss of his family. "Nieces. Their parents are dead."

Always the more daring of the two, Ros crept up to Kenly and touched him tentatively, just brushing her fingers across his forehead. "He's soft. Come on, Lyrri. He won't bite. Will you, Kenly?"

Lyrri hesitated and Ros went back, bringing her forward. Soon both of them sat petting the huge hunting cat.

Kenly started to purr and then gave an odd cough.

Merissa directed a startled glance at Kenly before frowning at Malthus. "She's sa'necari. Are you?" She looked at his wrists, which wore no spellcords.

"Me? No, of course not. I thought you were not allowing any adult sa'necari into the valley now."

"We have a few. They are all spellcorded, sealed, and watched. It is the only way we would allow them to seek refuge here. They must repudiate the old ways."

The thought of spellcord made Malthus' stomach clench, but he forced himself to relax. He would rather die than allow himself to be corded and cut off from his powers. It had happened once, but only once and he would never forget the burn as the cords were twisted into his flesh, and the empty sickness of being blocked from his dark inner core. What could possibly have driven his people to allow themselves to be bound? But the other sa'necari here, besides the children, were all women, and women were all soft in the head when it came to their children.

What fools these lycans! No one who has tasted the rites ever truly repudiates the old ways. Malthus decided not to point that out to her and thus endanger his own kind. Instead, he inclined his head to acknowledge the soundness of her statement. "Which is exactly as you should."

Merissa smiled again. She bent forward and lifted her boy to her lap. "This is my son, Darmyk. He's two and a half. He'll be three at mid-winter."

"A handsome boy. Is he sa'necari born? Is that why you brought him here?"

Merissa hesitated before answering. "Sa'necari, yes. However, Claw is my father."

"Then you are the Princess Merissa!"

Merissa blushed. "We're not that formal here."

"May I call you, Merissa?"

"Yes."

"I am Malthus." He extended his hand and she placed hers into it. Malthus gave a short bow and kissed her fingers. He lingered over her hand a moment too long and she pulled away from him. "My half-brother was sa'necari as was his wife. I was not born with that stigma. Ros is seven and Lyrri is six. I thought we'd never reach here safely."

After watching Darmyk rolling over the huge kitten, the two girls joined him, petting and laughing.

Merissa sighed, her lips tightening a fraction. "It's hard. Especially with this rebellion against the Sharani claiming so many lives."

"I hope your husband has chosen to remain here in the valley."

"I'm not married."

"Widowed?"

"My son was born on the wrong side of the blankets. Not that it's any of your business..." Merissa said, lifting her head to a proud angle, and her eyes flashing with anger as if daring him to say something.

Malthus nodded. Considering the age of the boy, Beth was right. He wondered whether it had been Troyes or Isranon who had gotten her pregnant. They had stayed at this farm together. Troyes' orders had been to ride on after leaving

Mephistis' young catamite here, but if he had, no one knew it: Troyes had never been seen again. "I meant nothing. I too was born on the *wrong side of the blankets*. My father was married to someone else."

Merissa sighed more deeply. "I apologize for reading more into your question than you intended, I'm sure. It's just that so many people look askance at me. I just assume everyone I meet already knows. My lover rode off to follow his prince and left me. At least he was honest. He told me from the beginning he didn't love me."

"I am sorry." Malthus almost laughed. Isranon, for certain, had rejoined Prince Mephistis after the fall of the Lord Hoon's City of the Dead three years ago. Could Troyes have done so as well? Which one fathered this little boy? He suspected Troyes. The half-a-mon had never seemed masculine enough to attract a woman like Merissa, nor possessed of the boldness to force one. Troyes had been both.

"At least he wishes to know his son and has promised to come when he can."

"I cannot understand how a man could not love a woman as beautiful as you."

Merissa shifted uncomfortably and stood up with Darmyk. "You are kind, but I think I should go in now."

"Will you be out here tomorrow? Maybe the children could play together. My nieces haven't made any friends yet."

Merissa smiled again, relaxing. "Of course they can play together. Darmyk will like that."

Malthus watched her go. She was exactly his brother's type. Troyes would have certainly tried to bed her. When

Troyes chose a woman, he always got her. Then Malthus thought of a third possibility. Could the lycans have killed his brother and hid his body if he had managed to bed her and get this child? Lycans generally abhorred having a sa'necari child born to one of their own. Beth's words came back to him: *we should have stoned her.*

What a waste that would have been. Merissa was the loveliest piece of flesh he had ever encountered.

Had Merissa been anyone except the clan chieftain's daughter, no doubt she would have been forced to abort the child rather than bear it. Malthus needed to discover the name of the child's sire.

Malthus continued to consider it as he returned to the sanctuary with his nieces. Two sa'necari with their wrists spellcorded and sealed carried buckets of water hanging from a pole across their shoulders. They looked tired and worn out. A tickle of anger started in his middle. Sa'necari women should not look like that, nor work like that. The sanctuary owned only a dozen nibari, all cast-offs donated from other lycan households. So feedings for those women were scattered and few. *Fools. Fools all.*

"Go play with the other children," he told his nieces and went into the longhouse. Beth stood at a tub, rising off the dishes from dinner. She set the last one aside and went to Malthus, throwing her arms around him in a hug. He stiffened, but Beth failed to notice it.

"I'm so glad you're back," she said.

"I will be glad of some time alone with you, Beth."

"Do you like my dress?" Beth asked.

Malthus finally stopped thinking about Merissa for a moment and stared. The neck of Beth's dress was unbuttoned almost to her nipples. His hand tightened on her wrist. "Come, Beth. Let's find a place to be alone together." *I need to adjust your triggers otherwise everyone will know I'm plowing your field. When the time comes, you'll scream nicely on my altar. It's Merissa I want.*

He took Beth to his sheeling and they crawled inside through the low entryway. The girls would not be back until dark. They tended to stay away as much as possible, leaving him to his business once he dismissed them. The lycans had no nudity taboos, yet being unclad always made a female feel more vulnerable before a dominant male. So he started each of his sessions with Beth by having her undress for him.

She sat on his bed, her plump breasts resting on the firm roundness of her belly, and her heavy thighs opened. The overhang of her belly partially concealed the tuft between her loins. Malthus liked them slender, but his friend Egidius liked them fat. He would introduce Beth to Egidius when he arrived.

"I love you, Malthus."

"Yes, I know, Beth." He wondered if he had chosen the wrong first command by making her fall in love with him. There were other approaches he could have used that might have worked as well. Putting his hands on her breasts made her tremble. Initiating rapport, Malthus wrapped himself through her awareness, tied another knot into the compulsions regarding her devotion to him. "You must not be

so forward in showing off your body in public like this. People will get the wrong idea."

"What idea is that?" Worry furrowed her corpulent face.

"They will think I love you. I don't love you, Beth. I own you." He gave her left nipple a savage pinch.

Her eyes teared up. "Yes, Malthus. I know that."

"I want to move my sheeling to a more private corner of your holdings. That is where I want to build my house."

Beth swallowed and nodded. "Whatever you wish."

"Good. I have some friends coming. You will obey them as you do me. Without question."

"Friends?"

"You know what I mean." Malthus could feel her trying to resist him and squeezed her thoughts into a painful bundle, dragging up the worst memories in her mind to hurt her with.

Beth cried out and clutched her head.

Malthus lunged deeper into her psyche and drove a nail of force through it.

"I'll obey," she gasped.

"You will lie for me. You will kill, if I ask."

Beth cringed. "I will. I will."

"My lieutenant, Egidius, is bringing an army into your valley from the north. I'm going to butcher your males and enslave your females." He spoke sharply, provoking her reactions in order to pierce her defenses. Malthus continued to stick, stitch, tie, and knot.

Beth's eyes glazed over and she slumped forward. Malthus shoved her onto her back. Her flesh jiggled distastefully.

Malthus could not understand why Egidius preferred females like Beth.

"You will betray your people to me, Beth. Repeat that."

Her mouth twisted and she broke out in a cold sweat as she struggled to resist him. Sensing that Beth might scream, Malthus touched one finger to the hollow of her throat to stifle her noises. Beth clutched at her neck, eyes saucerling.

"No," she croaked, unable to raise her voice any louder.

Malthus rotated the arcane blade of his power in her mind.

Beth tried to shriek as she folded over her hands, trembling, her face gone white from the agony of his intrusion.

"Say it, Beth."

"I will ... betray my ... people."

"I want Merissa. You will not interfere with that."

Beth shuddered. "I will not interfere."

Malthus climbed onto Beth and bit her. He had barely begun to use Beth, when Ros arrived. She stood for a moment, watching them, licking her fangs, and then joined them on the bed, biting deeply into Beth's leg.

* * * *

Near the rear of the gardens, in the southeastern corner of the manor grounds lay the Redhand family graveyard. Short hedgerows lined the sides and back. A rose arbor marked the entrance down a path lined with oaks. Rather than the open spaces that most humans preferred as a place of burial, lycans, especially the upper classes, preferred to clutter them up with trees, bushes, hedges, and flower beds, arranging

their graves in sheltered rows. Until three generations ago, the Redhands had burned their dead, burying the ashes in small urns and planting a shrub over it.

Kynyr sat cross-legged beside the grave of Tarrant Redhand. He laid the flowers he had picked upon the grave. "Cahira Maguire sends her love, Tarrant. She's never forgotten you."

He had been coming here roughly every seven days on the first day that the moon changed for the four years that he had worked for the Redhands. Kynyr picked times when no one would see him steal into the cemetery lest they ask questions he dared not answer.

There were only four graves: that of Suleahan and Sorcha—Claw's parents—and those of Claw's twin sons, Tarrant and Logan. He knew the story of Tarrant and Logan well. Most of it he had heard from his grandmother, Cahira. Others had supplied more pieces and the image of Tarrant Redhand grew to heroic proportions with every telling.

The Lycan Rebellion had taken place nearly eighty years ago. For three long years the lycans held against the forces of the sa'necari while trying to persuade both Creeya and Shaurone to come to their aid. Claw's sons had ridden with soldiers to the support of Clan Silverpaw. A series of sa'necari ambushes resulted in the capture of his sons and his wife, Aisha, within two weeks of each other.

Logan and Tarrant were rited for treason, and Claw had been forced to watch their executions with Aisha held hostage to his cooperation. His sons' mutilated bodies were dumped in front of him after the sa'necari finished with them. He and

Aisha were allowed to take their remains home and bury them in the family cemetery. Most folks agreed that Claw had never been the same afterward.

Kynyr said a prayer for the dead and rose, beating at his pants to get the dirt off them. "I'm keeping my promise, Gram."

He headed back into the gardens and spied Malthus talking to Merissa. It sent a shiver along his spine for reasons he could not identify. Kynyr faded into the shadows of a clump of trees and waited for Malthus to leave before emerging into the open.

Kynyr found Merissa sitting in the Great Hall at the spinning wheel while Darmyk played at her feet with a set of toy soldiers carved from an assortment of wood.

He paused to ruffle Darmyk's head and then walked around behind the spinning wheel rather than have it standing like a rampart between himself and Merissa. "Who were you talking to?"

"Malthus Estrobian. He's new here."

"Yes, I know he's new. What was he doing in the garden?"

Merissa glared at him. "None of your business."

Kynyr sucked in a breath and held his temper. Claw had allowed him a great many privileges over the past two years and Kynyr had no intentions of spoiling it. "He's only been here two weeks and he's already sitting in the garden with you?"

"The children were there. No liberties were taken. What harm could there be?"

"These are dangerous times. Your father doesn't want you seeing strange males."

"My father or you?"

"Both."

"Jealous?"

"Cautious."

"You're not my husband, Kynyr. Mind your own business."

"My business is seeing that you're safe."

"I was perfectly safe. Kenly was with us." She reached down and stroked the cat's head. Kenly rumbled contentedly and rolled over on his back, batting at Merissa's hand.

"We know almost nothing about this Malthus. Caution is justified."

"Stop being so possessive, Kynyr. You don't own me yet."

An explosive sigh burst from Kynyr's lungs. "I'm not courting you. I don't intend to court you."

"You wouldn't know that to listen to my father." Merissa turned away from him with a flounce that made her long ginger hair bounce around her shoulders.

Kynyr found that he could not argue with that. He had been unable to avoid noticing the way Claw had seemed to shove them at each other ever since the news had come that Merissa's lover, Isranon, had been taken as a bloodslave by Anksha the Beast two years ago. Lycans were taught from the cradle to fear the Beast. "That's enough, Merissa."

"I fully agree." She stood, lifted Darmyk to her hip, and walked out, leaving him standing there alone.

Kynyr scratched at his whiskers, muttering under his breath. "I thought I knew bitches, but I guess I don't."

* * * *

Shalto and Oswyl helped Malthus move his sheeling to the secluded spot he had chosen for his home. Afterward, with two young myn in tow, Malthus went to see the blacksmith to replace his sword. A wide variety of fine blades and tools hung upon pegs on the far wall.

"What do you want?" the smith's assistance asked, emerging from a sheltered corner of the smithy. He eyed Malthus, measuring him in a suspicious manner. Not all of the lycans felt comfortable with the influx of non-lycan newcomers.

"Loosen up, Torquil," said Shalto. "He lost his fighting to reach here."

"What do you know about swords, human?"

"I was kandoyarin," Malthus replied, walking to the wall and examining their wares. He unfastened his sheath from his shoulder and turned, extending it to Torquil. "Something that fits this?"

Torquil looked at the battered leather and nodded. "Broadsword. Interesting choice."

"Popular on the coast."

"And in Shaurone."

Malthus raised an eyebrow at Torquil's suspicious tone. "Have you been beyond the borders of this valley?"

"No. But the battle-clans—"

Malthus cut him off. "Then don't question my choices."

Torquil shrugged. "We might have something. You have gold?"

Malthus brought several coins from his pouch and extended them to Torquil.

Torquil tucked the sheath under his arm and took the coins. "Sharani ten-dolu pieces. You've gotten around a bit."

"I told you, I was kandoyarin until a few weeks ago when I came home."

Torquil took a blade down from the wall and handed it to Malthus to inspect. The steel was very well made, supple, and yet strong. It would not break easy.

Malthus slid it into the sheath and noted the fit. He paid for it. "You should have a drink with us sometime, Torquil," he told him. "Shouldn't he, Shalto?"

Shalto grinned. "Yeah. Malthus here likes to buy and he tells great stories. I think I'd like to be a kandoyarin someday."

"I've met many lycans working for them, but you need to be able to handle a blade," Malthus said.

"Would you teach me?" Shalto asked.

"Certainly. I'd be glad to."

Torquil laughed, with a trace of skepticism. "I'll have to stop by with a pair of practice blades, human, and see what you can do."

"By all means ... do so."

As Malthus and his companions emerged, they saw Nikko and Tempest watching them from across the street. A small, fuzzy dog frolicked around them, returning again and again with a stick in his mouth, begging for Tempest or Nikko to toss it. Malthus snarled inwardly. Sooner or later they would misstep and he would eat them.

Serpent's Quest [Lycan Blood Vol. I]
by Janrae Frank

* * * *

Nikko knelt and patted Moss, took the stick from his mouth and tossed it toward some trees on the Common. Moss darted after the stick, barking with simple joy. Nikko glanced up at Tempest and straightened, brushing his dark brown robes off. "He knows we're watching him."

"It'll keep him on his best behavior."

"You know he's sleeping with Beth?"

The lines deepened to crevices across Tempest's face as he frowned. "I hadn't known. How long has he been here?"

"Two weeks."

"And he's already..." Tempest made a distasteful face, clearly looking for a polite euphemism. "Beth is a gentle, impressionable bitch."

Nikko nodded and bent down again as Moss pranced up with the stick in his hairy mouth. The lawgiver tossed the stick farther this time. "She's lonely. You've said it yourself enough times."

"Better alone than with the wrong mon." Tempest sighed and ran a hand through his gray mane, working his fingers through the tangles. "How long has it been going on?"

"According to Rory Scott, since his first night here. Rory and Hamish have been spying on them. So have the Hansley cubs."

"Have you spoken to their parents?"

"I threatened to. They haven't come round the Camp since then."

"Lawgiver. Your holiness." Kynyr Maguire sauntered up, followed by Finn and Ramsey.

Finn grinned at them, his thumbs hooked into his belt. "Did I hear you say someone was slipping the bone into Old Beth?"

Ramsey struggled to repress a snicker, and it escaped as a snort.

Tempest scowled as Cullen sauntered up to them with his hands resting on his fighting knives. "If I'd known old Beth wanted some, I'd've already been to see her."

"You are a slut, Cullen Blackwood." Tempest's lips tightened with disapproval. "You should be dipped in tar and feathered."

Cullen shrugged. "It's been tried, priest."

Nikko gave Moss a hand signal to sit next to them. "That newcomer, Malthus Estrobian."

Kynyr's expression hardened. "Every day for the past three, he's shown up at the manor gardens to walk with Merissa."

"I'll talk to him," said Tempest.

"If you don't, I will. And I promise it won't be pretty." Kynyr's hands settled on the long fighting knives that rode at his hips.

"Who made you the defender of bitches' virtue?" Cullen muscled in between Ramsey and Finn.

Kynyr gave Cullen a quiet glance that still managed to tell him he was trying to piss on the wrong tree.

"You better be as good as you think you are, boy."

"I am."

CHAPTER FIVE

SLUT

Kynyr Maguire sat on his bed in the barracks, oiling his long knives. His broadsword rested on a weapons rack built onto the wall beside the bed. A nightstand sat to the opposite side and a large chest at the foot. Forty beds identical to Kynyr's, each with their own nightstand and weapons racks, filled the room. Five rooms like this one fanned out along the barracks wing of the manor. Claw had two hundred guardsmyn, not counting the officers who had private quarters on the second floor. Kynyr had turned down Claw's offers of a private suite for over a year, because he did not have the rank to justify it in the eyes of the rank and file, many of whom were already referring to him as "Old Claw's pretty boy."

Kynyr found his good looks to be more often a source of discomfort and complications, than the asset the others seemed to think they were. Every time one of the dogs caught him talking to a young bitch, the innuendos started. If he'd gotten his cock into every female the rumors claimed he had, Kynyr would have had more bedmates than he had years of age. The talk, which had been amusing at one point, had become an aggravation, and for the past year he had not touched a bitch because he did not want to deal with the barracks repercussions. Before that he had ridden into Hell's Widow from time to time for a night with the whores—until he

encountered Belgair and some others among the older wolves of the guard doing the same and they had made him squirm for months over it.

Chieftain Claw Redhand's guardsmyn did more than soldiering. In a culture where farming predominated, they also rode herd on the manor's horses, cattle, sheep, and goats; fixed fences and repaired walls; patrolled the roads around Wolffgard Village; guarded the bridge over the Eirlys Cataract that formed the western border of Clan Red Wolf Valley; and guarded the manor itself and its inhabitants.

The guardsmyn's training was crude but effective, just a matter of filing the rough edges off whatever they had been taught growing up by their fathers and older brothers. When Kynyr signed up with the guards, his only problem had been concealing how good he was with any weapon they put in his hands. The last thing he had wanted to do was to attract unwanted attention and awkward questions.

Finn MacIver dropped onto Kynyr's bed with a cheeky grin, folded his hands behind his head, and reclined. "We get a day off and you spend it with your blades! If you don't come along now, Ramsey and I are for leaving without you."

Kynyr shammed ignoring his friend, gave his blades one more wipe and sheathed them. He stood and walked off.

"Hey, I'm talking to you." Finn fell into step beside him, caught the glint of mischief in Kynyr's eyes, and backed away. "I'm going to the Difficult Horse with Ramsey and Eideard. You coming?"

The left corner of Kynyr's mouth quirked. "Yeah. So I can dunk you in the horse trough for nagging at me all day."

Finn's lips twitched into an uncertain grin. "It's cold, Kynyr. If you're going to dunk me, can't it wait until summer?"

Kynyr snickered. "If it's not hot enough for you yet, I don't know what is."

They had grown up together, two only sons with an overabundance of sisters, living on neighboring farms with a small creek between them. Finn had been allowed to train with Kynyr's armsmaster so that the cub would have someone his own age to practice with, and it was only much later that Finn began to wonder how the son of an herb farmer, who taught school half a day on the side to make ends meet, and a small-time country healer could afford to pay a battle-clan veteran like Todd Sinclair to teach their son. Many things about Kynyr Maguire did not add up once Finn began to seriously think about them, but Finn kept his mouth shut about it both to Kynyr and the outside world. Kynyr's business was Kynyr's only, and Finn prided himself on not being a gossip. They had been friends, loving each other like brothers, since their earliest memories, united against the dreaded female hordes that assailed them at every opportunity—otherwise known as Kynyr's six sisters and Finn's eight.

Kynyr signed up with the Redhands first and Finn showed up a month later to do the same.

He headed for the door into the yard with Finn at his heels. It had been four days since he had gone into the village. The last time he saw Tempest, the priest had persuaded a promise out of Kynyr to let him speak to Malthus first. So, rather than be tempted, Kynyr had kept to the manor. Not

that opportunities had not presented themselves here. Every afternoon, Malthus showed up with his nieces and visited with Merissa while the children played together. The presence of the children kept Kynyr in line around Malthus: he did not trust himself not to grab Malthus by the throat and shake him, so Kynyr cut a wide berth around him.

Kynyr ran all of that through his thoughts again as he strode around to the front courtyard where Ramsey and Eideard waited for them. Malthus was in Wolffgard on Claw's forbearance and Kynyr did not intend to see that generosity abused by a lecher who had apparently developed an appetite for Merissa. Nor did Kynyr wish to see Merissa hurt again. Kynyr had thought Isranon to be a good mon, as sa'necari went, until he abandoned Merissa shortly after getting her with child. Kynyr had had to fight down an urge to go after Isranon and beat his head into pulp every time he looked at Merissa's swollen belly. An undercurrent of sorrow had clung to Merissa since Isranon left; and it disturbed Kynyr to see it.

If Malthus touches you, I'm going to bust his head.

"Want some company?" Cullen trotted up to them.

Kynyr glanced at his friends and got a round of shrugs from them. "Sure."

As they entered the Difficult Horse, Hereward spotted Cullen and came stomping toward them, shaking his thick finger at the courier. "You keep your bloody paws off my bitches. You hear me?"

"I only come for a drink." Cullen glared at Hereward.

The tavern master turned to Kynyr. "You keep him in line, Kynyr. Or I'll toss you all out."

"Sure." As soon as Hereward headed for the bar, Kynyr turned to Cullen, his lips pursed in bemusement, guessing why the short lycan wanted their company. "Which one did he catch you with?"

"His daughter."

"Which one? He's got four." Kynyr headed for a table and settled in.

"Kady."

Ramsey looked astounded at Cullen's audacity. "You put the bone to Kady?"

"Nah. I didn't get that far. We was in the alley out back, kissing. I'd just got her skirt up when..." Cullen glared at Hereward's back and took a seat next to Kynyr. "He caught us."

"You get your bone into Kady and he'll kill you." Finn took the other seat next to Kynyr.

Cullen shrugged. "He'd've tried."

"You gotta be mad, Cullen Blackwood." Ramsey gestured at a servingmon. "Everyone knows you don't mess with Hereward's daughters."

Cullen's expression turned dour, and his brogue thickened in a betraying manner. "Not if ya want ta drink here, ya don't."

Kynyr ordered a bottle of good whiskey, as he always did; his companions went for tankards of mead. His grandmother sent him a modest stipend that rounded out his meager wages as a guardsmon. Hereward got his supplies of whiskey and other expensive liquors from a dealer in Hell's Widow, a situation that was gradually becoming chancier as the

Rebellion moved closer to Clan Lands. Publicly they were taking a neutral stance, trying not to antagonize either the Sharani or the sa'necari. Claw had not yet made his private views on the matter known, and Kynyr hoped that he would at least tell his guardsmyn something; however Claw was playing it close to the vest and Kynyr had to respect that.

They had barely begun to enjoy their drinks when Malthus entered with three young wolves, only one of whom was known to Kynyr: Torquil, Smith Ranoul's apprentice. Torquil was large as lycans went; standing at least two inches above Kynyr's five foot eleven, big boned and thick muscled.

Malthus laughed and then noticed that Kynyr was watching them. His gaze locked on Kynyr's, sending the lycan's hackles rising as one predator recognized another. Malthus crooked a finger at Kynyr, biding him join them.

Kynyr pushed back from the table.

Finn grabbed at Kynyr and his friend shrugged him off. "What are you doing, Kynyr?"

"Don't get yourself killed." Cullen took a pull from his tankard. "I hear that bastard's good."

Kynyr ignored Cullen and headed for Malthus.

His companions stared at Malthus and the mon's companions. Finn pushed back from the table and their friends did also.

Malthus lowered his gaze, licking his lips, and framed a tiny smile. "You've been watching us."

"I'm a friend of Merissa's."

Cullen moved to stand behind Kynyr with his hands on his blades before anyone could stop him.

Malthus spared Cullen a glance before focusing on Kynyr.
"She's very lovely."

"Yes, I know."

"Are you going to tell me to leave her alone?"

"I might be." Kynyr's hands dropped to his blades.

"I'm kandoyarin. You're just a backwater guardsmon."

Kynyr regarded Malthus evenly. "I'm not impressed."

"Call me out and you will be."

Shalto and Torquil laughed.

"If the boy can't beat ya ... I can." Cullen's lips tightened into a grim promise.

"It can talk!" Torquil snickered.

Finn and Ramsey seized Kynyr's arms, and maneuvered him back to their table. Cullen trailed after them.

"Loosen up, Kynyr," Ramsey growled.

Kynyr shrugged and poked Finn in the shoulder. "You remember telling me the Dreaded Horde sent you to keep me out of trouble?"

Finn grinned over the edge of his tankard. "Yeah."

"Well ... you're not doing a good job of it."

Finn choked on a mouthful of mead, causing the other four to laugh at him. As soon as he stopped coughing, he gave Kynyr an affronted look. "You're hard to ride herd on, Kynyr."

* * * *

Malthus returned to camp feeling edgy. If that guardsmon, Kynyr Maguire's friends had not intervened, it was clear that he intended to call Malthus out. He had studied all the human

and lycan arts of war as well as those of the sa'necari. It was what made Malthus so versatile.

However, Kynyr was an unknown quantity that would bear investigating. Malthus had gotten the impression that there was far more to Kynyr Maguire than met the eye. Thinking of Kynyr logically led Malthus to contemplate the little, one-eyed bastard who had had to toss his own two coppers into the situation in the tavern. A few questions directed at a servingmon had produced his name and occupation: Cullen Blackwood, courier.

For the first week, he had avoided the five sa'necari females living at the camp out of fear of discovery: no one detected sa'necari as easily as their own kind. With the number of potential threats growing, Malthus decided that it was time to take one of them out—the easiest one.

Malthus noticed one of them standing before her house, which was the closest one to Beth's, not counting the sheelings. He tried to remember what her name was. She seemed to be watching him with a speculative expression, holding a three-year-old on her hip. Her son, as he recalled, was lycan. No wonder she had fled. Their kind were less tolerant of a female hooking up with a lycan, than they were of males doing so.

The longer he waited to deal with his people here, the more he placed himself at risk of being revealed. Malthus went to Beth's house and let himself in. He found Beth sitting at her loom, weaving. She rose to greet him, smiling, and threw her arms around him. Malthus shoved her away. Beth looked hurt by his action, but said nothing.

"How many sa'necari are in this camp?"

"Five women," Beth said.

"Who's that one with the lycan child?"

Beth frowned. "Kandaishee."

"Fetch her."

"Why?"

"Just do it."

Beth returned a few minutes later with Kandaishee. The child had been left with one of the other women.

"What is this about, Beth?" she asked. Kandaishee's eyes went to Malthus, and she folded her arms across her middle, shifting uneasily from foot to foot. Recognition glimmered in her eyes, telling Malthus that he had been right: she had figured him out.

"I wanted to speak with you," Malthus said. He stepped close and touched the hollow of Kandaishee's throat to mute her voice.

She clutched at her throat, turning to flee. Malthus grabbed her arm, jerking her against him. Kandaishee clawed for his eyes. He caught that wrist and forced both arms behind her, bringing her body hard against his. Her fangs came down and she tried to bite his face. Malthus bumped her chin with his shoulder and banged her face with his forehead.

"Hold her, Beth."

Beth seized Kandaishee's arms, pinning them.

"No, please," Kandaishee begged.

"You know that begging does no good, Kandaishee," Malthus said. "I can see it in your eyes. You've practiced the rites."

Kandaishee pulled at her arms, but could not get free from Beth's grip as the lycan changed to her hybrid form. "I've renounced them."

"A shame." Malthus stroked her face, Reading her. Her magic was underdeveloped, suggesting that she had participated in only a few rites, just enough to alter her eyes, and not enough to give her the substantial sa'necari strength.

She tried to close her mind to him, twisting and turning her thoughts about to prevent Malthus from getting hold of her. Spellcorded, Kandaishee's mind lacked shields and would be unable to fight him off if he pressed it. However, he did not wish to leave her wrecked. That would be noticed.

"Don't make me rip you open," Malthus hissed. "No one cares enough to notice a change in you."

She twisted her head back, trying to look at the lycan behind her. "Beth, please let me go. He's going to hurt me."

Beth said nothing, only tightening her hold, her strong fingers digging into Kandaishee's flesh.

Malthus ran his finger down Kandaishee's nose and across her cheek, amusement turning the corners of his mouth.

"Beth is mine. I claimed her my first night here."

Kandaishee eyes softened into pools of despair, her mouth drooped. She stopped straining against Beth's hands. "Gods, have mercy."

"You're praying to the wrong gods," Malthus said. "Be still and it won't hurt as much."

"I know." Resignation crept into Kandaishee's voice. "I've done it myself ... many times."

"Then why resist? You know you can't. Open and let me in. It will be over quickly."

Kandaishee's head lowered and her shoulders drooped. Malthus sensed her surrender, felt her mind go still and yielding. He lunged in, working swiftly, laying in all the coercions, compulsions, sways, and triggers at once. The speed of his efforts caused Kandaishee more pain than going slowly would have. She closed her eyes, turned her head to the side, and whimpered like a battered puppy. To test his results, he raped her.

"Bring me another sa'necari," Malthus ordered Beth, as Kandaishee crawled into a corner and huddled sobbing.

By the end of the day, Malthus no longer had to worry that one of his people would recognize his true nature and reveal him to the lycans. What he had said to Kandaishee was true: neither the lycans nor the humans that lived and worked about the camp cared enough about sa'necari to notice a change in them.

CHAPTER SIX

HELL'S WIDOW

Heat stole over the streets of Hell's Widow. Spring had faded before the arrival of summer. Days were hot, but the mountain breezes cooled the valley off in the evenings. Heironim pulled at the edges of his coarse russet shirt and light wool tunic. He abhorred the crude cloth of the lower classes, but he dealt with it. A pair of the long slender dirks carried by the Waejontori commoners rode at his hips, not as broad and heavy as those worn by the lycans; stabbing weapons rather than the slash and thrust preferred by the lycan yeomony.

Heironim walked along Main Street in Hell's widow, avoiding eye contact with everyone he passed. The right clothing and body language contributed to keeping his true nature hidden. Sidera Tyrins had schooled him well. The art of concealment had become second nature to Heironim and the young sa'necari he had brought to Hell's Widow with him. He had been only five years old when the Sharani crossed the borders and tore his life apart. Heironim could not remember a time when he had not needed to hide what he was whenever he left the Tyrins estate growing up. His myn had grown up in the occupied zone, living from birth in terror of discovery by the Sharani. They were a different breed of sa'necari from those who had managed to escape into the mountain fastnesses where the Sharani dared not go.

The Sharani guardsmyn, strolling Main Street in pairs, paid him no heed. One of the first things he had done on reaching Hell's Widow was to learn their patterns. They patrolled heavily in certain sections and rarely in others; staying away from the lycan ghetto on the southwest unless summoned, and the Red Lantern district that adjoined it. The human shopkeepers and the upper classes enjoyed more protection than the poor.

He neared the Town Square, caught the lingering odor of burnt flesh, and fought his stomach for a moment. A week ago, the Sharani had caught a young sa'necari, his wife, and three children, who were trying for the borders to escape the violence in the northwest. The grisly remains of them were still chained to the posts in the Square where the Sharani had burned them all alive.

Heironim turned south on Corbie way and breathed a sigh of relief that he had gotten past the square without attracting attention. He disliked traveling at midday when the patrols were heaviest. However, the patrols rarely ventured down Corbie Way. Taverns, brothels, gambling house overshadowed the homes and less shops along the muddy street. There were certain colors and device best not worn here, especially the crimson and emerald of Danae, the neighboring Sharani province that owned this section of Waejontor; and the claret and chocolate of the Red Wolf guardsmyn. When myn of either group ventured here, they did so in civilian garb.

Heironim had been in Hell's Widow for six weeks, quietly buying up various businesses as fronts for his operations,

under the shelter of a proxy trading company set up by Malthus' mother, Sidera Tyrins.

The largest of the two brothels the lycans favored was the Crimson lady which had thirty whores in residence. A man had to go as far south as Skeleton Creek or west as far as Dragonton and Torment Lake to find a larger whorehouse. Although most people cautiously avoided discussing it, the Crimson Lady was the largest employer in Hell's Widow. Madam Silkie Faggini who ran the Crimson Lady employed her own guards, and was rumored to have put the Sharani patrols and inspectors on a secret payroll to leave her establishment alone.

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

Erotic tapestries and paintings dominated the walls of the foyer to the Crimson Lady. A huge desk of polished dark wood stood guard at the far end with a matchstick of a clerk sitting there with an appointment book open in front of him. A stack of other books rose like multicolored soldiers in a long, low wooden box to his left hand.

Heironim nodded at the clerk. "I have an appointment with Silkie."

The clerk frowned, selected a book from the box, and opened it. "Your name?"

"Heironim Traxton."

"I don't see you down. Madam has marked the next three hours 'do not disturb.' Can I set you up for another time?"

Heironim leaned over the desk, laid a Sharani double-gryphon down, and slid it over to the clerk with his fingertip still touching it. The clerk smiled and put his hand over the coin. Heironim shifted his finger, popping it atop the clerk's, and extended his gifts through the physical contact. The clerk's mouth went slack and his eyes vacant.

Pleased by the simplicity of the clerk's mind, which yielded to him like water, Heironim murmured. "Shouldn't you show me up now?"

The clerk looked startled, as if shaken from a dream. "Oh yes." He gestured at one of the savants sitting on a bench along the wall as a runner. "Lees, take the desk a moment. I'll be right back."

The clerk led Heironim into the Great Hall and up a broad swept staircase to the second floor. "Right this way."

"What's your name?"

"Mine, sir?"

"Yours."

"Flavio Ricci."

"We're going to be friends, Flavio." Heironim used repetitions of Flavio's name to deepen the link he had insinuated into the man at desk; a technique he had learned from Malthus when they were boys together. "You'll have a drink with me tonight, Flavio?"

The clerk brightened. "Oh, of course, sir. Where?"

"My home, Flavio. I'm living above the Green Sheaves Warehouse. North door takes you to the stairs."

"I'll come straight there after work."

Heironim smiled, remembering Malthus' admonition that it was best to always have more than one pawn in play at a time, more than one avenue of attack and retreat, and a series of overlapping ploys.

Silkie Faggini sat at the desk in her office going over the ledgers when Heironim entered. The aristocratic angles of her face had held up to the years well and despite the lines around her eyes and mouth, Silkie remained an attractive woman. The edges of her slanted, faintly sylvan eyes narrowed, their cerulean depths flashing like blue fire. "What do you want?"

Heironim stood at the edge of the desk, smiling. "To make you an offer."

"You're the one who's been buying up warehouses."

That startled Heironim, who thought he had been discreet. "I want the Crimson Lady."

Silkie's expression hardened. "She's not for sale."

"My dear lady..." Heironim leaned across the desk, lifted her hand from the ledger, and kissed her fingers. He used the physical contact to make a gentle, questing probe and discovered her mind would not open to him. Wards.

Silkie jerked her hand away and slapped him across the face. "Get out. Next time you wish to talk, make an appointment."

Heironim straightened with an exaggerated sigh. "I'll do that."

He retreated from the room with a bow to Silkie at the door before slipping into the hallway. Getting to Silkie would acquire time and planning; and Flavio would prove a decent start once Heironim got his fangs and coercions into him deep enough.

* * * *

Kynyr changed into a simple cambric shirt and canvas pants, both black, and pulled on his boots—all either loose or with enough give to the fabric that he could shift easily without tearing anything or having to tightly control the level of transition. Nothing remained about him to scream 'guardsmon' to passersby. He buckled on his blades and retrieved Aisha's shopping list from the nightstand, stuffing it into his pocket.

Claw had grown increasingly reluctant to let his family leave the valley, and so Aisha had begun sending Kynyr to Hell's Widow with her lists, enough coin to cover everything and a little extra for him and his friends to spend as a 'thank you' in advance. She did not need to have done that, but Aisha liked people to know they were appreciated, and the result was that she generally got the best effort out of people.

He headed into the hallway and took the side door into the courtyard. Ramsey, Eideard, and Finn had already headed out to get the wagon hitched and their horses saddled.

Cullen strolled across the yard and saw Kynyr coming out. "Where ya goin'?"

"Hell's Widow. Aisha wants some supplies picked up."

"Want some company?"

"Sure, but I don't have time to wait for you. We need to head out so we can get there while the lights still good." Kynyr kept walking with Cullen trotting to keep up with him.

"No problem." Cullen gave him a wink and ran into the barn. "See ya in Hell's Widow."

Kynyr chuckled and scratched at his sideburns. His friends were waiting with the wagon when he got there. Bucky, Kynyr's saddle horse, was tied to the back. They sat their horses, gazing in the direction that Cullen had gone.

"What's with him?" Ramsey asked.

Kynyr shrugged. "Says he'll meet us in Hell's Widow."

Eideard groaned. "All he talks about is horses and whores."

Finn laughed at Eideard's reaction, ran a hand through his hair, and his lips framed a mischievous smile. "I think he likes Kynyr."

"Oooh, the old lech likes Pretty Boy Kynyr." Ramsey chortled and made a mock duck in his saddle as if Kynyr had thrown something at him.

Kynyr paused reaching for the wagon break, glancing up with just his eyes. "Maybe he's lonesome, Ramsey. Most folks don't like him."

"And you do?"

"Maybe. I certainly have no objection to him. My sister, Tamra, always says that most folks like Cullen are just misunderstood. And she's usually right."

"The High Priestess of the Dreaded Horde," Finn muttered. "Well, she don't know Cullen. The Horde would beat the shit out of him first time he opened his mouth."

"Speaking from experience, Finn?" Eideard grinned.

Finn flushed to the roots of his hair and refused to answer.

Kynyr slapped the reins across the horses and they leaned into their traces. The wagon pulled out of the courtyard, with Finn, Ramsey, and Eideard riding guard on it.

An hour down the road, the sound of a horse galloping up behind them, made Eideard turn to look. He groaned. "We got company."

"Who?" Kynyr asked.

"Cullen."

Larkspur whickered at Bucky and the stallion shook his head up and down, calling back to her as she passed him. For Ramsey and Eideard it was their first good look at Larkspur, and Ramsey whistled. "That's some horse."

Cullen beamed with pride and patted her neck. "Ain't she though? Larkspur's my darling girl, ain't ya, sweetheart?"

"The Dreaded Horde would love a horse like that."

They rode into Hell's Widow and took rooms for the night at the Three Candles Inn. A city wolf named Amos Raggat ran the Inn with help from his four daughters. Cullen valued Amos' good will enough to keep his paws off them, although he had been sorely tempted over the years.

Kynyr put them all, including Cullen, to carrying supplies to the wagon as they made their rounds of the businesses in town while he made the purchases on Aisha's list. By the time they finished, the sun had gone down. They took everything

back to the inn, and Cullen insisted upon all of them accompanying him to the Crimson Lady where he promised them the time of their lives.

They had gone barely two blocks down Corbie Way when three myn stepped into the light of the street lamps and barred their way with aggressive gestures. Kynyr gestured for his friends to halt and sauntered forward to stand at their head.

"What do you want?"

One mon stepped forward, speaking with a soft northern accent. "That Cullen Blackwood with you?"

"So what if it is?"

Myn lunged out of the shadows, surrounding them with swords and knives drawn. They were outnumbered two to one. The lycans shifted smoothly in hybrid form. If their attackers were human, that would even the odds by increasing their strength and speed.

"We just want Blackwood. The rest of you can go."

Cullen frowned and started to speak, only to be hushed by a gesture from Kynyr. The young guardsmon eyed the mon with quiet confidence. "No."

"Your funeral, lycan." He lunged across the distance at Kynyr, sword flashing in the lamplight.

Kynyr went still and cold inside as he let him come before moving. A sliding step to the left and a calculated twist took Kynyr out of the way of the initial thrust. A backhand slash opened the mon from shoulder to elbow. Kynyr's foot connected with his opponent's hip and sent him staggering. Todd had taught him that knife fights were decided in

seconds, unlike swords. Kynyr came at the mon fast before he could recover, slamming one blade into his side and the other up under his sternum. He heard movement behind him as his opponent collapsed. Kynyr leaped forward, spinning to the side as another mon charged him. He brought his left blade to guard in time to lock hilts with his attacker's dirk. A sliding cross-step took him out of the way of a jab at his stomach, and he slashed the mon across the face as he disengaged his left blade. The mon made a couple of blind thrusts, but then Kynyr was on top of him, driving both blades into his opponent's ribs.

A cry of pain from Eideard made Kynyr turn about. His friend was on his knees, clutching a long gash in his side as his attacker lunged in for the kill.

* * * *

Cullen's hands dropped to his blades as he watched the myn surround them. Despite the darkness and the limited light thrown by the lamppost on the street corner, Cullen knew he had never seen any of them before. To Cullen's mind, he had done nothing to cause trouble in Hell's Widow, and his initial guess was thieves—until the leader stepped forward, and said, "We just want Blackwood. The rest of you can go."

The courier's eyes darted across the solemn faces of his young companions. They stood with their hands on the hilts of their blades, ready to draw and fight, making a calm assessment of their opponents. Ramsey, the oldest of them was only twenty-three; while Kynyr and Finn were barely

turned twenty. At sixty-three, verging on a middle-age that Cullen did not want to acknowledge, he felt an unexpected rush of responsibility toward them. He did not want to see any of them hurt, or possibly killed, on his account.

"Let them go. I'll stay—"

A sharp chopping gesture from Kynyr silenced Cullen. If ever a young wolf had been born to command, it was Kynyr. Cullen could see it then.

The young guardsmon eyed the mon with quiet confidence. "No."

"We don't abandon our own," growled Finn.

Cullen shifted into his hybrid form and darted toward a hitching post. He leaped over it, spun about, and drew his knives, shifting his grip from hilt to blade with a flick of his wrists. The mon charging him had no time to register the switch before Cullen popped one into his chest. His opponent's eyes saucered in shock, the blades fell from his hands, and he crumpled to the ground, groaning. Cullen scooped up the fallen blades, tucked them into his belt, and yanked his knife out of the mon's chest just in time to throw himself into a roll to the side, evading a thrust at his chest from a second mon.

Cullen tucked his feet beneath him as the mon reached him, shoved a blade into his assailant's groin, and scrambled to the side again. He sprang up, glancing around for thirds and spied Ramsey hard pressed from two sides. Cullen darted forward for a clear throw and hit both of Ramsey's adversaries in the back.

A cry of pain from a familiar voice brought Cullen spinning to his right in time to see Eideard fall and a mon move in for the kill.

"Goat-fucking ... sons a' sluts." Cullen yanked the two appropriated blades from his belt and sprang across the intervening distance.

Eideard swayed on his knees, forced back into human form by the shock of his wound. He grasped his attacker's arm, trying to stop the inexorably descending blade from reaching his chest.

"Bastard!" Cullen plunged one blade in the mon's back and the other into his kidneys.

* * * *

Finn walked up to Kynyr, wiping his blades on a handkerchief. "Gods, Kynyr ... Cullen got four of them."

Ramsey knelt by Eideard, examining his wound. "Looks worse than it is. He should be okay."

Eideard nodded, tight-lipped as Ramsey shouldered his weight and got him to his feet.

Cullen slashed a mon's pouches off and dropped them down the front of his shirt, moved to another and did the same.

"What the hell you doing?" Finn demanded.

"Making it look like a robbery. Send the guard looking for people from the wrong end of town." Cullen went for a third pouch.

Kynyr glanced at Finn. "He's got a point. Ramsey, get Eideard to the inn. We'll be along in a bit."

Cullen headed off as soon as he collected a fourth. Kynyr and Finn gathered the rest and followed.

"What do you make of him now, Finn? Still think he's *kizmeigo*?"

Finn shook his head slowly. "No."

When they reached the inn, they found that Amos' oldest daughter had gotten Eideard cleaned and bandaged. He was sitting up in bed talking to Cullen and Ramsey. As soon as Kynyr and Finn walked in and dropped their booty on the table, Cullen turned to them. "Did either of you check their eyes?"

Kynyr glanced at Finn and both of them shook their heads 'no.'

"Damn!" Cullen's face darkened into a frown. "Humans, you think? Why the hell would they be after me?"

"Cullen, you're rather free with the bone. Could have been some woman's kin." Kynyr dragged a chair over and straddled it.

"No." Cullen shook his head. "I stick to the whores when I'm on the road. Ask Amos if you don't believe me. I never made no moves on his daughters. Nor anyone else's. Too risky."

"How many know you're a courier?"

"Out here?"

Kynyr nodded.

"Not many. Amos does. And Silkie. Captain of the garrison. It's not like Wolffgard."

"Well, someone's after you. Question is: why?"

"I dawn't know." Cullen's brogue thickened. He scratched his head and looked away. "Kynyr. If ... if something happens to me ... I'd like you to have Larkspur."

"Feeling mortal, Cullen?" Finn asked.

"Maybe."

* * * *

Flavio moaned like a bitch in heat, his eyelids fluttering, and mouth slack. He reclined on the velvet sofa in Heironim's parlor, his shoulders cradled against the sa'necari's bare chest while Heironim sucked his neck. Heironim triggered Flavio's endorphins, slithered through his pleasure centers, and sent the clerk over the edge into bliss. Flavio came all over himself, geysering his milky white treasures across the black velvet sofa.

Heironim disengaged from Flavio's neck, licked the wound closed, and gazed into the clerk's dark eyes glazed with satiation.

"I love you." Flavio's fingers trailed along Heironim's cheek.

"Enough to die for me?"

"Yes."

Heironim chuckled. "Tell me then. Do you know Cullen Blackwood?"

"Everyone knows Cullen. He's a regular at the Crimson Lady."

"Is there a whore he favors?"

"Ellie. He used to come for Silkie. The past three years, it's only been Ellie. Always Ellie.."

Serpent's Quest [Lycan Blood Vol. I]
by Janrae Frank

Heironim stroked Flavio's smooth, soft chest. "Book Ellie for me. Tomorrow night, from dusk until dawn."

CHAPTER SEVEN

TEMPEST

One thing at a time. One day at a time. Malthus did not push things fast, but steadily. He had now been moving about the village for four weeks, making himself indispensable around the refugee camp, and using the cachet of his kandoyarin tales to ingratiate himself with the younger wolves. He had a good following forming up behind him. Malthus waited a week after buying his sword, and then took his core band to speak to Nikko. They included Beth, Shalto, Oswyl, and Torquil. He wanted to speak to the lawgiver to get permission to hunt on clan lands. Hunting would give him a good explanation for wandering far from Wolffgard Village.

Nikko lived with his widowed mother, Granta, on one of the better streets in a two-story house with a basement. They shared one of the nicer houses in the village. His late father, who had been architect trained in Creeya, had returned to Red Wolf Valley to settle down, marry, and practice his trade. All of Nikko's siblings had moved to homes of their own when they married. Nikko had remained at home to care for his mother.

Malthus knocked at the door and heard Granta's pleasant voice tell them she was coming.

Beth smiled uncertainly at Malthus and patted her dress to neaten it. "We'll get this approved, Malthus. It's for the children, after all."

"I hope so, Beth," Malthus replied. "But I'm not lycan."

"I don't see how Nikko can turn you down," Shalto said. "It isn't like you were wanting to hunt for sport."

Granta opened the door, and an expression of surprise at seeing so many lit the pale eyes in her heavily lined face. Her ears looked a bit too large, as did her eyes, but that was only because age had withered away the tissues beneath her once delicate features. She wore her white hair in a knot at the nape of her neck with a pin stuck through it. "Have you come to see Nikko?"

Nikko was the youngest of the aged bitch's five cubs, and she had ten grand cubs from his siblings.

"We have," Beth said.

"Come in." Granta led them to a comfortable living room filled with soft cushioned sofas and chairs. "Make yourselves comfortable and I'll fetch Nikko."

Malthus took a chair near the end of a long, low table, but allowed Beth to take the head as if she led instead of him. Nikko appeared, tying a loose robe over him as he walked, and eyed all of them, clearly wondering why a deputation would come to speak with him. He let his gaze rest the longest upon Malthus.

The sa'necari gave Nikko a polite smile and inclined his head in acknowledgement. He knew that Nikko was only bothering to dress because a *human* was present.

"What is it you want?" Nikko asked.

"There isn't enough meat for the children," Beth said. "One of us needs to hunt."

"So? Why does this require so many?"

"I want you to give Malthus permission to hunt on clan lands to provide for the children," Beth said.

"The rest of us are too busy building and working at other things," Shalto put in.

Nikko's gaze fixed upon Shalto and lingered there. "What is the point you're trying to make?"

"That Malthus should do the hunting for the compound," Beth said. "He needs your permission, since he's not lycan."

"Malthus? Since when did a human hunt better than a lycan? You have several lycans working for the camp," Nikko pointed out.

Beth shook her head. "We need Shalto and Oswyl for the building. They're stronger than a human. Malthus has the skills for hunting."

Malthus met Nikko's skeptical gaze for a long moment. "I've had to live off the land many times as a kandoyarin. I was hunter for my units in Ocealay. I am capable of providing for the camp."

"Look, Nikko," Shalto interposed. "We're good at building things. Better than Malthus will ever be. We can spare him, but not us."

Nikko frowned. "It sounds like you've already decided this amongst you before coming to me."

"We have," said Beth. "We can spare Malthus, but not Shalto and Oswyl."

Nikko swept his gaze around the deputation. "So what are you expecting me to do?"

"Give him permission to hunt on clan lands, permission to travel," said Torquil, speaking up for the first time. "So long

as everyone eats at the camp, what objection can you possibly have?"

Nikko shrugged. "None I guess. I'll notify Claw of my decision. But if I hear that the meat is not being shared..."

Beth growled at him, deep in her throat. "That's my decision to make. I trust Malthus to take care of us. That's more than you've been doing."

"Beth, I have an entire village to attend to, not just your small camp, as important as it may seem to you."

"Exactly," Beth snapped at him.

"So be it, I grant my permission, but I'll check in on this from time to time."

"That's understood."

Is it? Malthus wondered. *I think you gave in a bit too easily.*

* * * *

Kynyr stepped into the schoolroom and leaned against the wall with his thumbs tucked into his swordbelt. Ever since that day when Malthus had practically tossed the gauntlet in his face at the Difficult Horse, Kynyr had begun carrying his sword whenever he left the manor. When lycans fought amongst themselves it generally came down to knives or fisticuffs. The ancient customs held that they did not fight each other as wolves because it was an affront to the First Mother of their race. It did happen; usually in the heat of impassioned emotions. There were also forms of ritual combat carried out in wolf shape, such as the choosing of a new chieftain for a Battle-clan. Carrying a sword on Clan Lands

generally marked a wolf as being either a guardsmon or a Battle-clansmon.

Tempest dismissed the children, took his staff up, which lay propped against the podium, and walked over to Kynyr. "You need something, Kynyr?"

The guardsmon noted that Tempest seemed to be moving more slowly of late. *Age is catching up to him.* "Same old. I can't put off talking to Malthus much longer. Claw's noticed him with Merissa in the gardens."

"That's difficult." Tempest scratched his shaggy mane and stepped through the door into the hallway, heading for his apartments. Kynyr followed north along the narrow hallway. A right turn at the end carried them past the door to the gardens, beyond which lay the little graveyard for the camp that Tempest had sanctified on New Years. Another right, and they approached Tempest's quarters.

Tempest unlocked the door and let them inside. Most of the villagers and the refugees never bothered to lock their doors. Tempest had begun doing so after half a dozen rowdy cubs had gotten into his rooms and tried their hands at redecorating the place using crayons, paper, glue, paint and dried flowers. It had taken a month of scrubbing to put it to rights again.

"Is he still putting it to Beth?"

The priest indicated that Kynyr should set on the sofa and went to the cabinet for glasses and a bottle of whiskey. "Yes. I've tried talking to Beth, but she refuses to listen to me."

"Is that why you wanted me to wait?"

Tempest put the bottle and glasses on the low table before the sofa and settled into a chair. "Yes. Now she's avoiding me. Beth didn't come to services this week."

"Sorry to hear that." Kynyr knocked down the whiskey, turned the bottle around to look at the label, and a quick smile passed across his lips: it was the bottle he had left in the offering basket at services three days ago. Some left money, others food, a few left drink; people offered what they had to spare. "Claw's given me until the end of the week, Tempest. If you can't talk sense to him, then I'll warn him off."

"I'd rather not have violence on the Sanctuary grounds."

Kynyr shrugged and poured himself another drink. "That's up to him. Finn and I are going to Hell's Widow day after tomorrow. Is there anything you'd like?"

"Rum?"

"It's hard to come by with the Rebellion stifling trade, but I'll see what I can find."

"Be careful around Malthus. He's kandoyarin."

Kynyr gave another shrug. "So he says. I think he's just being *kizmeigo*." Kynyr's lips twisted into a sneer around the Creeyan insult for a braggart who always had to go folks one better.

Tempest shook his head, sipping his whiskey. "He isn't. I've seen him practicing. He's teaching some of the young wolves who work here."

The guardsmon's eyebrow lifted. "When did this start?"

"The day after he replaced his sword. He's good, Kynyr. He's fast."

"So am I."

"Battle-clan trained?"

Kynyr tensed for an instant. Neither he, nor Finn, had let that part out concerning their training. It paid to let people underestimate them. Kynyr sucked in a breath and decided to tell Tempest all of it as a means of reassuring the old mon. "Todd Sinclair. Guild and Battle-clan training. Don't go telling anyone that?"

"I won't."

* * * *

Kynyr had not troubled Malthus in over a week, although they continued to encounter each other at the Difficult Horse. The guardsmon usually had Cullen in tow, and Malthus had begun asking around about both of them. What little he could pick up concerning Kynyr had assured him the young wolf was no match for him. Cullen, on the other hand, had both an astonishing reputation with his blades and as Claw's toughest and most resourceful courier. The only thing that hampered the one-eyed lycan was his obsession with the whores. However, that played nicely into Malthus' hands, and he felt certain that the next time Claw sent Cullen out, Heironim would make certain the obnoxious lycan did not return.

Malthus thought he had every thing resolved, and nothing more to worry about as he rode back to his sheeling to work on his new house some more before dark, only to find Tempest waiting for him. The priest was seated on a tree round in the yard with his staff across his knees. Tempest

stood when Malthus arrived, and approached him with a stern look.

Dismounting, Malthus tied the horses to a tree and faced the priest, wondering what this was about. "What can I do for you? Is this about my nieces? Are they misbehaving?"

"Not at all. They are good students. This is about Beth."

Malthus rocked back on his heels and nodded. "Beth? What about Beth? Is she okay?"

"That's a good question. Beth is a good mon. But she is a homely woman. And she knows it."

"I don't know where this is going."

"Perhaps nowhere, perhaps everywhere. Rumor has it that you are sleeping with Beth."

The calm tone of Tempest's voice irritated Malthus, who felt as if the priest was playing games with him. "And you want to know if I am? I don't think that is any of your business."

"Beth is a very vulnerable woman. She is a member of my congregation, and a great benefactor of it. Both of her time and of the land for us to build on."

Malthus glanced around for Nikko. The lawgiver did not appear to be there. "And that makes it your business?"

"Yes, it does. I want to see her treated fairly."

"I haven't promised her anything. You are familiar with the lycan term, 'like the wild cousins' and all that it implies?"

Tempest sighed and lowered his head. "So you *are* sleeping together."

Malthus' lips curled back in a sneer. "Would you rather I had said that I was jacking her, priest?"

"That's a harsh way to put it."

"Yes, it is. But that's what you came to hear, wasn't it? And that's what I am doing." Malthus grew irritated, his contempt for this flower-kissing, tree-hugger priest showed on his face and in the angle of his stance.

Tempest frowned at him. "It is very evident that she's in love with you. I can't see why."

"She knows I don't love her. It is strictly like the wild cousins."

"What if you get her pregnant? Has that crossed your mind?"

Malthus shrugged. "It's unlikely. Lycans aren't as fertile with humans as they are with each other."

"You seem to know a lot about lycans."

"I grew up around them. There is a large lycan community in Dragonton."

"You've been seen walking with Merissa."

"So now we get down to it," Malthus snarled. "I won't stop seeing Merissa."

"How does Beth feel about this?"

"It doesn't matter how Beth feels about it. I've told her I don't love her."

"And Merissa? Does she know about Beth?"

Malthus straightened, his voice going chill. "Are you threatening to tell her?"

"I am. Merissa's already had her heart broken once by a lover who left her."

Slewing his eyes around to check the area, Malthus ascertained that Tempest was, indeed, alone. "I don't think you'll be telling anyone, priest."

"What?"

Malthus' hand shot out and pressed over Tempest's heart as he grabbed the priest by the shoulder to hold him steady for the kill. Black energy slammed into Tempest's chest. A loud groan of agony climbed up Tempest's throat, and escaped his parted lips. The priest's eyes bulged in shock, and he gasped for breath. His heart pounded as if ready to rip through his rib cage.

"Willodarus!" Tempest invoked his god, struck Malthus with his staff, and staggered free. He faced off, with his chest heaving and his staff raised.

Malthus cursed. The priest was stronger than he had expected: that first charge should have stopped his heart. Tempest jabbed at Malthus' stomach. Malthus sprang to the side, caught hold of the staff, and jerked it above his head, bringing Tempest stumbling toward him. He spun the staff, forced it from the priest's grasp, and tossed it into the trees near the horses, which caused the animals to shift uneasily. Malthus' hand shot out and touched the hollow of Tempest's throat before the priest could draw away from him. A spell plunged through the aged flesh.

Tempest's lips formed the word "sa'necari," but no sound came out. His hand went to his throat as a look of horror came over his face. He mouthed the word "no," and backed up two steps, turning to flee.

Malthus kicked Tempest's knee, shattering it. The leg gave and the priest fell into the dirt. Snarling, Malthus kicked Tempest in the chest, sending the older man onto his back, and he pinned him there with his boot heel grinding into the hollow beneath Tempest's breastbone. "Time to die, old fool."

He dropped all of his weight into the pit of the priest's stomach and straddled him. The breath whooshed from Tempest's lungs, leaving him stunned and sobbing for air.

Malthus snagged Tempest's mane and twisted his head to the side as he slammed his palm to the left side of the priest's chest. The loose wool robe shifted under Malthus' hand, bunching up. He shoved his hand inside Tempest's robe, feeling the slick aged skin beneath his palm. Dark power constricted around the priest's heart.

"Don't fight me, Tempest," Malthus said with venomous compassion. "It won't hurt as much ... or as long."

Sobbing and gasping as the unrelenting torment increased, Tempest grabbed Malthus' hand, trying vainly to force it away. Flashes of pain shot along Tempest's left arm as the pressure built in his chest. Dizziness enveloped him, and the priest felt like fainting; yet Tempest knew that to lose consciousness was to die. He blanched, breaking into a cold, clammy sweat.

With the strength from a thousand rites, Malthus held steady, shrugging off Tempest's efforts to free himself, continuing to flood Tempest's chest with the deadly magic that was slowly and steadily rupturing the organ. Tempest's hold weakened. Malthus drank in his terror and anguish, savored his pain, and fed deeply upon it, pleased at how hard

the priest was dying. Tempest had turned out to be a better psychic meal than Malthus had anticipated.

Malthus' cock hardened—a frequent sa'necari reaction to killing someone, due to their necromantic natures enhanced by the rites. He increased the flow of energy. Tempest's eye lids fluttered, his lips parted with drool coming from the corners, his fingers slid away from Malthus' wrist. The necromancer timed the struggling irregular beat of Tempest's heart.

"Your suffering is nearly over."

"My god ... have mercy..." Tiny convulsions rippled through Tempest, his body jerked and twitched briefly, and then stilled. His pupils became fixed and staring. Within moments, Tempest looked several hours dead, with a deep purple lividity along the back of his neck, his mouth locked into a grimace.

Malthus released his grip on Tempest's hair and sat back, licking his fangs, wishing he dared to sink them into the priest's body. "It's over old, mon. You died deliciously."

He extended his necromantic senses into the dead flesh, checking it closely to see if anyone would be able to tell that it had not been a heart attack that killed the priest. Once he had satisfied himself that it would pass a Reader's examination, Malthus carried Tempest's body to his packhorse and tied it down, covering it with a blanket. He retrieved the priest's staff and shoved it under the saddle flap. It was best to get this over with before evening when the lycans would be returning home from their fields and shops. He would leave the body in the forest well away from his home.

Now there was only Nikko to be dealt with. And possibly Kynyr. It would not do to forget about Kynyr.

* * * *

The camp's children sat in the little schoolroom on benches behind long tables. Nikko sat at the front in his chair beside the slate board. They were waiting for Tempest, who taught the second half, religious studies. They had arrived back from their break with bright, expectant faces, for everyone loved Tempest's lessons, which were filled with tales of gods, monsters, and heroes.

Morning turned into early afternoon and still Tempest had not arrived. Nikko began to worry. He watched the children start to fidget, crossing and uncrossing their legs, drawing on the tables with their fingers, shifting on the benches. The little boys began to pick at and poke the little girls. He wanted to reprimand them for it, but he felt restless himself and remembered too well how it had been when he was their age. *Why is Tempest making them wait so long?*

"Go outside and play, but don't go far. I'll find Tempest and see what's keeping him."

The children rushed from their seats without a backward glance, and Nikko went to the rear door of the schoolroom that he had helped to build with such loving care. The rear door led into a U shaped hallway. The door to his right led into the shrine itself. He turned left and then right, passed the door into the outside, right again brought him to the door to Tempest's apartments first on his left and another door into the shrine on the right beyond it.

He knocked at Tempest's door and received no answer, beyond the frantic barking of Tempest's fuzzy, little dog, named Moss. Nikko's brow furrowed. In the four years that Tempest had been here, the priest had never failed to notify Nikko when he would be away and where he could be reached in an emergency. The two of them worked hand in hand together.

Nikko let himself in. Moss leaped on him, whining frantically. Like many lycans, Nikko had a strong affinity for natural canines. He disrobed, changed into a wolf, and settled on the floor to ask Moss when was the last time it had seen its master. What the dog communicated to Nikko disturbed him. Moss had been locked up here since early yesterday, without food or water. That was not like Tempest. He would never have left Moss uncared for. Usually, when he was going away, he brought Moss to Nikko's mother to watch. Tempest was a kind soul.

Nikko changed back and dressed. Moss watched him, periodically giving his plumed tail an uncertain *tock tock* back and forth. Nikko went into the kitchen and returned with a bowl and Moss' leash, buckled it on, and took him outside. He tied Moss to a tree and dipped him some water from a barrel. While Moss lapped water, Nikko walked to the center of the main yard.

"Has anyone seen Tempest?" Nikko shouted. "Anyone at all? He didn't show up to teach the children."

"Maybe he's gone to the next village," Beth said. "He does that sometimes."

Nikko shook his head vigorously. "Not without informing me so that I could arrange a substitute for him."

People began gathering down wind of him, watching him in a manner that made Nikko uneasy. None of them came close enough for him to get a good sniff of their emotional scents, not that he normally intruded in that manner. The young lycans who worked at the camp came closer than the rest, hands on their hips, regarding him with what? Hostility? Contempt? Nikko wished they would come nearer so that he could get a whiff of them. The lycans among them would be shielding their emotions, of course, so that their scent did not broadcast as strongly. But the others...

Malthus strode up to him. "Have you checked his home?"

Why had Malthus come forward? The way that the others hung back and regarded Malthus—it was almost like he was their leader. His nostrils flared and he tried for a scent clue from Malthus. Malthus was one of the mostly tightly shielded humans that Nikko had ever encountered. "Yes. Moss hasn't had care for two days."

"Check the taverns and infirmary, before you start worrying people," suggested Shalto in a disparaging tone.

"You worry too much, Nikko."

Nikko scanned the crowd but no one seemed ready to join or support him. No one offered to help. "I suppose." Nikko walked off with his shoulders slumped. "But this isn't like him."

"When you've checked every place else, then come back here and we'll get a search going," Shalto said, following his words with a derisive noise.

Nikko scowled, his insides quivering. He saw no respect in any of the faces before him, nor concern for Tempest. When had that changed? And how? "I'll be back."

He retrieved Moss and headed for his home to entrust the little dog to his mother. Moss pulled at the leash frantically, looking in all directions for Tempest as they traveled. Nikko could smell the dog's worry. At a watering trough for horses, Nikko lifted Moss up so that he could get another drink. People came over to him as usual to speak and to pat Moss, and Nikko told them all that he had discovered concerning Tempest. He found that they gave him the normal amount of respect due to a lawgiver, unlike what was happening at the camp, which made him wonder why.

On arriving at his home, Nikko saw his mother Granta sitting on a bench under a shade tree chatting with a neighbor. Moss immediately jumped onto Granta's lap, whining.

"Is Tempest going someplace?" she asked, rubbing Moss' head.

"Tempest is missing. Moss had had no water or food since yesterday."

"Oh, poor little thing!" Granta made some noises deep in her throat and Moss perked his ears listening. "Give me the leash. I'll take care of him, Nikko."

"Tempest is old. And, he's human," the neighbor said. "Something could have happened to him."

"I know. I'm getting a search going. People have already agreed to meet me on the Common in an hour."

* * * *

Malthus finished chopping the extraneous branches off another tree with Shalto and his cousin Oswyl as evening arrived. He wiped his sweating, dirty streaked face on his shirtsleeve, and grinned at them. "If we're done for the night, I have a cask of passable mead at home."

Shalto's eyes gleamed and he nodded with a quick smile of appreciation. "I could do with some of that."

"Then why don't both of you come home with me?"

They dragged the tree from the forested edge of the camp to the center of the yard, put away their tools, and then set off for Malthus' place. They sat drinking mead on tree rounds in front of the house they had just finished laying the foundation for yesterday and eventually the talk of women came round, as Malthus knew it would.

"I must admit to liking your custom of doing it like the wild cousins," Malthus told them, with a knowing grin. He dropped his hand to his crotch and made a humping gesture.

Shalto's eyes lit. "Yah, I've been hearing rumors of you and Beth." He mimicked Malthus' gesture. "Wish I could get me some."

Malthus almost laughed at how easy it had become to draw the two sixteen-year-olds onto the path he wished them to walk. "Ah, yes, Beth. She surprised me. I never expected her to be so experienced."

"Beth?" Oswyl sounded incredulous.

Malthus ran his tongue over his lips and cocked his head, with a glance to the side. "Well, yes. She's as talented and experienced as any doxie I've encountered and I've had

women from as far south as Ocealay to as far north as Havensword in Creeya."

"Hsaaa! And here we have always thought no one'd ever touched her. I mean—" Shalto looked nonplussed.

"Then she's been more discreet than most here," Malthus said. "If that's the case, I'm sorry I mentioned it."

"No, don't be," Oswyl said. "I mean, for the common folks like us, doing it like the wild cousins is no bad thing."

"Then, maybe you should try her," Malthus suggested. "Would you like another round?" He gathered up the tankards.

"Sure thing," Shalto said.

Malthus refilled the tankards from a barrel he had propped on a makeshift rack beside his sheeling. The walls on his house would start going up tomorrow.

"Look, if you don't have anything planned with Beth for tonight, maybe we'll stop by and see if she's willing to accommodate us," Shalto said.

"You'll find her more than willing, Shalto," said Malthus. "She's been telling me she had her eye on you."

Shalto grinned and Oswyl nudged him.

Malthus' grin turned evil. "And she likes it up the ass."

The two young lycans looked at each other.

Malthus laughed. "You're not very experienced, are you? I mean, you do know that the ass is tighter than a well used cunt, don't you?"

"I'd never thought of it," Shalto replied.

"Much tighter. Try it, you might like it. A snug sheath for your sword."

Malthus went on to describe the sexual practices of dozens of cultures, finding the two inexperienced young lycans a rapt audience. He trusted that, like all young males, they would brag to their peers once they had been with his slut. Then, should Merissa learn of his liaison with Beth, the lycan's reputation would be so completely soiled that Merissa would think nothing of his actions.

* * * *

Beth opened the door. Shalto leered at her with a knowing smile and Oswyl grinned over his shoulder. Her heart skipped a beat. The last group of children that had been living with her had been fostered out to other women living on the compound and she finally had the longhouse to herself again. Two nights ago, Malthus had told her he intended to start sending males to use her and that she was not to refuse them, no matter what they wished her to do.

She felt ill, but regardless of how hard her will struggled in its bindings, she could not get free. "Come in."

Shalto drifted to the curtains of the half wall leading into her sleeping area.

"Can I get you anything?" Beth asked.

Oswyl nudged Shalto.

"You," Shalto said. "We hear you want it like the wild cousins."

Beth's head settled on her shoulder as she started unlacing her dress. She wished she were free to cry, but Malthus had forbidden her to do that in front of others.

Oswyl nudged Shalto again.

"One at a time?" Shalto asked, and then paused thinking.
"Or two up?"

Beth felt her heart break. She had assisted to whelp these two sixteen-year-olds, watched them grow up with a longing fondness in her heart, wishing they might have been her own. Now it was all being destroyed. "Any way you want it."

Her shift settled around her waist, exposing her breasts. The eagerness in their eyes made her cringe. Shalto fondled her breast, and she forced a smile.

Shalto looked at Oswyl. "Two up?"

"I've never done that before," Oswyl said. "But sure."

Shalto let out a series of enthusiastic hoots. "Get naked, Beth! Oswyl, we're finally gonna get some." He grabbed her shift and pulled it past her hips. "Oh yeah, gonna get some."

* * * *

On the third day of searching for Tempest, Nikko had grown disheartened and certain that they would not find his friend alive, yet frantic to have closure and see the priest's remain laid to rest. Braided through his shifting emotions, lay a desperate need to be wrong, to find Tempest alive. Driven by his inner demons, Nikko continued to search long after the others had given up and gone home for the night. He thought of poor little Moss. The dog was mourning, and Granta was spoiling him as a result. His mother had already promised to make a place for Moss in their home.

The sun rose, and dawn illumined the landscape in shades of pinks and oranges. Dozens of black circling shapes lifted from the trees, becoming a spiraling blemish against the soft

hues of sunrise, their raucous noises drowning out the morning bird songs: ravens.

Nikko hastened toward them with his stomach clenching. His nostrils flared and he smelled death before he saw it. The crows and ravens blanketed a carcass, tearing at it fiercely, pecking at each other in a dominance dance for the macabre feast. Flies buzzed angrily. Nikko plunged in, driving the crows and ravens from their banquet with broad waves of his hands. The frustrated birds took refuge in the trees and watched him.

A figure clad in scavenger-savaged umber and brown robes rested beneath a tree, with a staff still laying in the bony remnants of its fingers. The eyes were gone and portions of the face. Maggots moved around the opened mouth.

Nikko's throat tightened and his stomach rebelled. "Tempest."

He sank to his knees, as shock sent him into his hybrid form, and he howled his grief to the heavens.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SUSPICIONS

Malthus' house had gone up swiftly. So far he had a single room partitioned off, with full walls and a door, instead of the usual half walls of the lycan longhouses: his bedroom. His nieces slept in the living area for the nonce. He intended to add on a study and a bedroom for them also. Shalto and Oswyl had already laid the foundations. Eventually he would have a very cozy human style cottage. There had been a bit of complaining among some of the myn who had been here longer, however, once he got inside their minds, it stopped. The growing insularity of the camp meant that the general lycan community did not poke their noses in enough to notice the changes: the camp had become Malthus' little fiefdom.

Beth sat weeping on Malthus' big reed bed. "They use me like a whore, Malthus. Shalto, Oswyl, Torquil, and a dozen others. You have no idea what terrible things they do to me."

Malthus leaned against the wall with his arms crossed and a chill expression on his face. "I suggested most of it to them."

Beth shot him a disillusioned look. "My own people are doing this. How many more are you going to send to use me?"

"As many as I like. You are developing quite a reputation among the young males as a slut. I don't see why you're

complaining. You're getting more than you ever did in your life."

She twisted her hands in her skirt, looking more forlorn by the moment. Malthus had her wearing better dresses, brighter colors, and belts to show that—although plump—she had a waistline. "I—I don't like it. Not this way. Not so many."

"Are you going to refuse them anything?" His voice oozed with contempt.

Beth squirmed. "I know better than to do that."

"I'm sure you do."

Beth dropped her head. "They found Tempest."

"Oh?"

"He's dead. They're saying it was a heart attack. But—but I don't think so. I think you killed him."

Malthus laughed derisively. "Of course I killed him. He was going to Merissa about my relationship with you."

"That's what this is all about, isn't it? Merissa? You want that sa'necari loving slut princess?"

Malthus came around and gripped Beth's face, forcing her to look at him. "You're forgetting something, Beth. *You* are a sa'necari loving slut."

"Oh, gods, I love you, Malthus."

"Stop saying that," Malthus grumbled irritably. "Take your clothes off. Since you've been so busy for the past few days," he drew the words out with a sneer, "I've been doing Kandaishee. I haven't had a taste of lycan in far too long."

Beth obeyed and sat waiting for him.

Malthus covered her temples with his palms and tore her mind open. "Once Tempest revealed how far the rumors had

spread, I had to soil your reputation before Merissa could learn of it."

Beth whimpered as he worked on her, shoving more arcane needles into her most private corners. Tears ran down her face.

"Shall I tell you how I killed him, Beth?" Malthus asked, his voice low and sinister.

"No. Please. I don't want to hear it."

"You know how I hurt you with a single finger?"

"Stop, please."

"I put my hand on his chest, and I squeezed his heart until ruptured it. A very painful way to die. Do you wish to die that way?"

Beth swallowed and her whimpering worsened. "No," she said in a small voice.

"I didn't think so. Be good, and it won't happen that way. Lie down and open your legs, Beth," he said. "You're going to have a busy night. I have guests coming and I told them how insatiable you are. But I want to be first."

* * * *

Kynyr stood in the shadows of the trees along the edge of the graveyard in Sanctuary as Tempest's remains were lowered into the ground. Baroucha, the village healer and midwife, said Tempest died of heart failure. Kynyr's gut instinct insisted it was murder. He wished he could have sent for his grandmother to examine Tempest's remains, but she had vowed never to come to Wolffgard again as long as she lived. It had been eighty years since she last came here. The

lycan lifespan being between one hundred twenty and one hundred fifty; Cahira Maguire remained hale, hearty, relatively youthful, and the stubbornest person Kynyr had ever known.

Tempest's death had stolen the joy from Kynyr's face and the cockiness from his stride. His shoulders slumped, and his mouth set in a tight line, the corners of his narrowed eyes crinkled. The cacophony of mourning filled his ears and dragged at his heart. Dogs, bitches, and cubs—they all keened as they passed the grave, tossing handfuls of soil over the coffin, putting flowers and offerings around the edges. Few humans ever became as beloved by the lycan community they dwelled in as Tempest had. Even the Redhands had come to say a final farewell to the old priest; and Claw had paid for the headstone himself.

Kynyr spotted Malthus standing off to the side with a group of the females from the Camp, apparently offering comfort to them. It irritated Kynyr that Malthus had managed to insinuate himself into the front of the line of mourners from the Camp—close enough to the Redhands to hug Merissa briefly before moving on with the others.

The young guardsman sucked in a deep breath and blew it out through his nostrils with an aggravated noise.

I don't know how you did it, but you murdered him, you bastard.

As Claw, his wife Aisha, his two sisters, Fianait and Searlait, filed past Kynyr with their compliment of guardsman, Kynyr noticed that Merissa was not with them. He glanced around for her and spied her moving toward Malthus. Kynyr

cut through the crowds and fell into step behind her and realized that she was headed straight for Malthus.

Kynyr darted forward and grasped her wrist. "We need to go. Your family's leaving."

Merissa jerked free and kept walking. "Go away, Kynyr."

Malthus saw them and approached, giving Kynyr an appraising look.

Kynyr leaned in and whispered to Merissa. "You don't want him. He's sticking his cock in Beth."

Merissa stiffened, a hurt expression came over her face, and her hand went to her lips. She spun about and fled.

Kynyr stifled a sigh, certain that he should have found a more delicate way of putting that and regretted his angry phrasing.

Malthus stopped Kynyr from going after her with a curt gesture. "What did you say to her?"

"The truth."

"Which is?"

"You're fucking Beth."

Kynyr turned on his heel, and stalked off before Malthus could reply to that.

"Hey! Hey, Kynyr!" Cullen trotted up to him. "That bastard don't know how to take a hint, does he?"

"Oh, he knows, Cullen. He just doesn't want to give the right answers."

"I thought maybe you'd have a drink with me. My last night here. I'm leaving for Shaurone tomorrow."

Kynyr stopped and turned to Cullen. "Claw's sending you?"

"Yeah. I'm going to get us a new priest."

"Sure. Let's go."

"I'll only be gone three weeks. Four at the outside. You leave a piece of that asshole for me to have a shot at, Kynyr."

Kynyr grinned and slapped Cullen on the back. "Sure thing."

* * * *

Nikko sat at the little table in his mother's kitchen four days after the lycans buried Tempest beside his shrine. He pressed the whitening knuckles of his fists together. "If I'd only known he was going away, I could have been with him. I *should* have been with him."

Another fit of weeping took him. Moss whined and climbed into Nikko's lap. He scratched behind Moss' ears distractedly. His mother put a cup of chamomile tea in front of him. She drew a chair close and put her arm around him. "I'm sorry, Nikko. But you couldn't have known his heart would give out."

"Tempest ... was like a second father to me."

"I know." She patted his hand. "We all miss him."

"I don't believe it was a heart attack. He never had anything wrong with heart before, mother."

"Nikko—"

"Mother, listen to me. But don't tell anyone what I say."

"I won't, but be reasonable."

"I am. There's one of the newcomers. Tempest and I ... we never trusted him. Sa'necari can make a death spell that appears to be natural, except to a mage-gifted Reader. We have none of those in the valley."

"All the adult sa'necari are spellcorded."

"I've caught glimpses of strange things in the forest. Things I've never seen before. None of them showed up before this mon arrived. I think Tempest was murdered. I think this mon had something to do with it. Tempest had said he intended to talk to him about something the day he died."

"Nikko, be careful what you're saying. You're the lawgiver. You can't accuse without evidence."

"I'll get evidence. And then there's Beth."

"Hsaaa. Beth is a slut. Now that I think on it, she probably always was and we never noticed."

Nikko sucked in a sharp breath, put Moss on the floor, and stood up, seeing that he was getting nowhere with his mother. "I'm going for a walk."

He drifted through the village, acknowledging people with small nods, while not paying them any real attention. When he reached the common, Nikko spied Malthus going into the Difficult Horse with Shalto, Oswyl, and Torquil. It seemed like every time that Nikko saw Malthus in the village Shalto and Oswyl were with him, and sometimes Torquil. He was certain that Malthus had killed Tempest, but he could not think of any way to prove it. Nor could he offer any possible motives for Malthus having done it. Only that it was a lingering gut feeling and Nevin had always told him to listen to his gut on such matters. So how did he start to investigate Malthus without the mon knowing it? Most of the young village males had befriended Malthus, and that did not make any sense either.

CHAPTER NINE

CAPTURED

Cullen rode into Hell's Widow and took a room for the night at the Three Candles Inn. He rarely traveled after dark unless the moon was full, partly out of superstition that Tala watched over her people best when the light was strongest in the heavens, and partly out of commonsense because the night had its dangers, especially ambushes. He had thought long and hard about the last time he came here, about the attack on Corbie Street.

Old habits were hard to break, and Cullen was too stubborn to forego a visit with his favorite whore, Ellie Remus, at the Crimson Lady. He took a different route than usual and traveled with his full attention focused upon his surroundings, determined not to be caught with his guard down. As result, he arrived at the Crimson Lady without a single incident.

When he entered the foyer, Flavio grinned at him. "Cullen! It's good to see you again. Ellie will be delighted."

Cullen patted his crotch. "I know she will."

"Go on up, Ellie's free tonight. You're lucky, considering how popular she's become."

Cullen nodded. "Not surprising."

He went upstairs and down the hallway to Ellie's room, knocked and let himself in.

Ellie sat at her dressing table, combing her waist length yellow hair. "I'm not ready yet, Heiron..." She blinked and came off her stool in a rush. "Cullen!"

"You're sure pretty tonight, Ellie." Cullen's cock filled to bursting as she embraced him, rubbing her body up and down his.

"You always say that." She released him and began unfastening her dress.

He let out a low whistle at the high quality furnishings, sauntered over to the huge bed with the heavy olive velvet curtains and peered inside. "You've come up in world."

"I'm popular, Cullen." Ellie pulled the bows on her lacings and her bodice came open.

Cullen licked his lips as her breasts emerged from the bodice. He noticed the rings on her fingers, lifted them and was astonished at the size of a piece of jade in an intricate gold setting that looked like a temple. "I'll say."

Ellie withdrew her hand, shimmied free of her skirt, and stretched out on the bed with her legs wide, playing with the lips of her vagina. "Well, are you going to stare or are you getting undressed?"

"I'm ready for you."

Cullen tossed his clothes in the corner, grasped his erection, and wagged it at her.

Ellie giggled. "I'm waiting."

"I guess you are."

Cullen climbed on top of her and thrust into the moist, welcoming hole.

Ellie's vagina tightened around him, sucking as she contracted her muscles.

He could see why she was popular. A long moan escaped him as he thrust.

She clutched his arm and a sharp pain seared through Cullen's bicep. A needle had emerged from the ring and was plunged into him. Cullen shoved away from her.

"What've you done?" He felt dizzy and disoriented.
"Poison?"

"They want you alive." She jabbed him again, a nervous light in her eyes.

Cullen hit her in the face, yanked his arm free, and rolled off the bed.

Ellie cried out and scrambled to the far side of the bed.

Cullen swayed on his feet. "Bloody whore ... filthy bloody ... whore."

He staggered halfway to the door before collapsing on the carpets. Ellie slipped from the bed and knelt beside him. His eyes were open and his lips moved, but nothing came out. Ellie took his hands, stripped the rings from his fingers, carried them to the nightstand, and dropped them into her jewelry box.

* * * *

Cullen sat in a crude chair. His shoulders, hips, wrists, and ankles had been nailed to the wood with long silver spikes. All of the hair had been shaved from his body except for the thatch atop his head. They had broken his arms and legs in several places, and fragments of bone jutted through his right

arm, and both of his calves. His fingers and toes had been crushed and mangled; his nose had been shattered. Bruises covered him. Spellcord on his wrists prevented him from changing shape.

The room was large and nearly empty with no windows. Mirrors covered the ceiling and the walls, and a highly polished mirrored tile covered the floor. A square table occupied the northeast corner, four chairs surrounded it, a bottle of whiskey, and several glasses sat in the middle of it.

Two rough mattresses were dragged in and thrown in the northwest corner along with a pair of ratty quilts.

Cullen had soon discovered that he had fallen into the hands of the Butchering Serpent. For sixteen years both the lycan clans and the Assassins' guild had hunted the genocidal mastermind behind a hidden laboratory in the far northern mountains where hundreds of lycans had perished in nightmarish experiments that had included toxins and vivisections.

His captors knew their business well; they knew how to cause the most pain with the least damage, postponing his inevitable death while making him crave its arrival. They wanted names, places, sources, and ways and means.

Cullen's initial despair had settled into tight lipped defiance, knowing that anything he said would sign the death warrants of others. They tried to crack his mind open with their arcane arts and there they failed also.

He had grimly refused to name names and thus condemn his fellows to death; but Cullen was beginning to wonder how much longer he could hold out.

Heironim paced back and forth before him, wearing a cloth mask. All of the myn who had tortured him had been masked. "One last time, Cullen. Who are the other couriers? How does the clan get messages out?"

"Go to hell." Cullen's voice was hoarse and rasping from days of screaming his lungs out as they hurt him. "I'm *cadhbair imhaig*."

"Dead mon walking?" Heironim made a guess at the meaning of the lycan phrase, but received no confirmation from Cullen. "I assume that's your final answer?"

"Bastard."

Heironim gestured and two myn set out a table near Cullen, placing an array of blades—many of them silver—on it.

"Our guests have arrived," a mon said to Heironim.

"Good, bring them here and get them seated. Bring a bottle of Dragonsbreath also. They'll need it."

The mon departed and Heironim returned to Cullen. He gestured at someone standing behind the injured wolf. Rolls of hard leather were shoved to Cullen's lower back, forcing his chest up and out.

Heironim stroked Cullen's chest, his Reader's gift roving the wolf's organs and insides. "A fine angle. But perhaps a bit more?"

Two more rolls were shoved behind Cullen and the pressure on his spine became intense. He groaned.

The door opened and one of the myn ushered in Ellie and Madam Silkie. Ellie went pale when she saw what they had done to Cullen, and a strangled sob escaped her and she

muttered under her breath. "Forgive me. Forgive me. I had to do it."

Silkie remained hard eyed, her sour mouth set in a tight line. "Shut up, Ellie."

"Good advice." Heironim indicated the table and chairs. "Sit. Enjoy the whiskey. You'll need it."

Silkie bustled over to the table and took the chair that directly faced Cullen. "What are we here for?"

"To learn." He walked to the work table and stood testing the edge and balance of each blade. "We caught another courier. He's been very responsive to persuasion. Cullen's of no use to us."

Cullen tensed, forming a silent prayer that his death would be quick.

Heironim carried a blade from the table and placed his fingers on Cullen's taut abdomen, searching with his arcane senses for the best spot to insert it.

Cullen's blood seemed to chill in his veins. *Belly wound*. The bastard was going to make it as slow and excruciating as possible. "Just do it ... filthy gutterscrew."

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

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

Cullen jerked and gasped.

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

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

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

Cullen sagged forward as much as the spikes would allow, breathing hard, making animal noises in his throat. An inadvertant glance grazed the mirrors and he saw the silvery hilt glinting against his flesh. Dying like this ... seemed an ironic travesty. He had always expected to get it on a street corner, or in a dark alley, or in the forest making his ride; maybe an arrow or a blade in the back.

Silkie poured whiskey for herself and Ellie. She put Ellie's hands on the glass. "Drink it, Ellie."

Heironim sauntered to the table. "While you watch him die, think on this. You could be next."

He gestured. The blades and the table they sat on were removed, and they locked Ellie and Silkie in with Cullen.

Ellie went to him and knelt. "Forgive me, Cullen. Please forgive me. I didn't know they'd ... do this." She gestured helplessly at his broken body.

He started to say 'never' and swallowed it back. "Squeamish bitch."

"I'm sorry."

Cullen did not answer for a long time, struggling to ride the pain and get past it. Silkie put a glass of whiskey to his

lips and he drank it. "You're in ... too deep ... both a ya ... like the ... blade in my gut."

"I'm afraid of them." Ellie's voice trembled.

Silkie wiped the driblets from his chin with a corner of her sleeve.

Cullen's eye focused on Ellie, grateful that she blocked the mirrors. "I'd've ... gotten ya out, Ellie ... if ya'd told me ... if ya'd bloody told me."

"No one helps a whore." Ellie's voice held a tone of angry bitterness.

"I did ... have." Cullen tensed with a groan as a hard wave of pain swept him.

"You always were an odd wolf, Cullen Blackwood. One of a kind." Silkie stroked Cullen's face, a sad edge in her voice. "If I'd only known..."

Ellie reached for the hilt of the blade in Cullen's body and Silkie grabbed her. "Don't touch it."

Cullen roused at the sound of Silkie's voice. "Listen to her, Ellie."

She glanced from face to face. "Why?"

Cullen struggled to speak, having to pause every few words, fighting the pain, fighting for breath. "Trapped."

Silkie nodded, shifting her grip of Ellie from her arms to her shoulders. "They wouldn't leave a blade where we could reach it, unless it were trapped or cursed in some way."

"But..."

"It's how ... they ... do things." Cullen shuddered, his lips drawn back from his teeth in a grimace.

"Cullen..."

"No ... what would ... ya do ... wi' it? Fight? Don't be a ... stupid fool of a bitch."

"He's right, Ellie. There's too many of them. They'd rite us both for trying."

Ellie pulled away from Silkie, ran across the room, and huddled in a corner of the mattress.

"Gahds ... I wish ya ... dint have ta watch me ... die ... Silkie." Cullen writhed in a fresh wave of pain. "Keep her alive, Silkie. Yar a ... tough old bitch. She ain't."

"I'll try."

"Oh, gods ... Larkspur ... I—I never loved a bitch ... like I ... loved that horse." He fell silent for a moment, pain grinding through him, his head wobbling on his neck like the stem of a broken flower. "Pity that."

"Where is she?"

"Amos Raggat."

"The old fool is probably dithering over what to do with her by now."

"Yah. Horse don't deserve ... ta suffer for ... mah sins." Cullen's brogue deepened with his anguish. He breathed in gasps and pants, sweat breaking out across his brow.

"I'll fetch her."

"Ya must know ... all tha lycans in ... town."

Silkie shrugged. "The dogs. Only time the bitches speak to me is when they drag their menfolk out of the Crimson Lady."

"Pity that."

Silkie tilted her head to the side, her face filling with sorrow, cracks appearing in her tough façade. "You

remember..." She swallowed, took a deep breath. "Cooley? My lycan son?"

Cullen's head listed to the side, his eyelids drooping. "I ... taught him ... ta ride. Was gonna teach him ... ta fight. Good cub..."

"He ought to be." Silkie took another deep breath. "You fathered him ... on me."

A fit of coughing took hold of Cullen. Blood ran from the corners of his mouth. Silkie used the sleeve of her dress to wipe the blood away when the fit passed.

"Why'n't ... you say?"

"Didn't want to burden you." Tears started in Silkie's eyes. "You weren't the marrying kind."

"Nah, gurl. Dawn't let'em ... see ya cry." Cullen coughed up more blood. "They wanna see ya ... cry."

Silkie wiped her eyes and mastered herself. "I know it."

"Thas muh gud bitch." It grew harder for Cullen to keep talking. "Use them ... whore's arts a yers ... stay alive."

"Whatever it takes ... I promise."

* * * *

Food, water, and more whiskey arrived twice each day. Silkie ate everything on her plate with an iron determination to survive; while Ellie could barely eat and most of it came back up when she did manage to swallow it. By the third day, Cullen had begun to slide in and out of fevered delirium. Silkie ripped the bottom of her dress off, moistened it from the ewer of water Heironim had left them, and took turns with

Ellie, wiping Cullen's face in a vain effort to give him some small relief.

Silence reigned for a long time and then Cullen spoke in a rasping whisper. "Bassids ... tokmahbrings."

Ellie bent close to him in an effort to hear. As the days and hours passed, Cullen's speech had become more and more slurred; harder to understand without great effort—effort from Cullen to shape the words and effort from them to discern them. "Silkie? What's he saying?"

Silkie knelt beside Cullen and cupped his chin, lifting his head. "Say it again. Slow."

"Bastards ... tak muh ... rings."

Ellie swallowed. "I took your rings ... I was going to sell them ... money to escape on."

"Smart bitch."

Cullen tried to remember which of the wolves he trusted frequented the Crimson Lady, but in his failing condition only one name would come to him. "Kynyr Mah—Mah—guire. Get tha ring ta Kynyr."

"Which one?"

"Sna—ake ring."

The door opened and a tall mon in a serpent mask entered with Heironim beside him and four more myn along. The work table was returned to the room and the blades arrayed for the Serpent's selection. He studied the blades and picked one.

"Doing Cullen pleases me, Heironim. Doing Kynyr will please me far more. He's a thorn in my side."

Cullen stirred, his eyes glazed with suffering. A rush of anger cleared some of the slurring from his voice. "Kynyr'll gut ya."

Silkie moved close to the Serpent, her lips twisting into a sensual smile. "Can I fondle your hard bit while you stick him?"

All eyes fixed upon the Madam. The Serpent broke the tableau. "You know about that ... little ... predilection?"

"Most of my family are sa'necari."

The Serpent chuckled and pushed her hand inside his pants. "Enjoy yourself."

Cullen snarled. "Do it, damn ya."

"Patience." The serpent grasped Cullen's shoulder and placed the tip just beneath the courier's sternum. "I like the way you have his chest presented, Heironim. I wish I'd thought of this trick."

"I have drawn up some designs that will be even better. Remind me to show you the workshop."

Although more than half dead, Cullen anticipated the blade in his chest with a mix of dread and relief. "Gah ahn ... do it ... pissing piece a shit."

The Serpent smiled behind his mask. "He's so eager. Tell me, Silkie. Are you still fertile?"

"Yes."

"Contraceptives?" The Serpent pushed the tip of the blade into Cullen.

"No." Silkie glanced at the blade entering Cullen's chest, and clamped down hard upon her reactions to hide her feelings.

"I'm going to swell your belly." The Serpent jabbed the blade deeper, angling it up into the left side of Cullen's chest.

Cullen groaned and Silkie nearly lost it. "When?"

"As soon as he's dead." Malthus pulled and jabbed several times in quick succession.

Cullen made an odd hiccupping sound, his chest jerking. His mouth went slack, his eyes staring and he sagged. The breath rattled from his lungs.

Silkie withdrew her hand from Malthus' pants, and took Cullen's dead face in her hands. She kissed his forehead, cheeks and lips in the farewell to the dead. "You were a good wolf."

Ellie mastered herself and did the same.

Silkie pulled her skirts up and laid down on the floor. "Stick me with a friendly weapon, Master Serpent."

Malthus did so.

* * * *

Four lycan corpses hung from the wooden frames, their heads tied back, throats slit to allow their blood to drain into basins: Cullen and three who had dared to venture into the wrong neighborhood at night. Myn worked on the corpses with skinning knives. The Black Market in lycan hides had grown lucrative of late.

As soon as the skin had been removed from the corpse, and placed in a vat of tanning solution, they opened Cullen up and removed his organs. Heart, liver, and kidneys were considered a delicacy and would be cured and salted. The entrails would be cleaned and used as sausage casings.

However, the most expensive part was the testicles as there was currently a vogue among the bio-alchemists to use lycan testes as the primary ingredient in a purported cure for sa'necari infertility. The catch was that they could not come from a rited corpse and the Readers would know the difference.

* * * *

Silkie lay on her bed at the Crimson Lady with the curtains closed. Her breathing was hard. She felt weak and dizzy. She fought down an urge to touch the place on her neck where Heironim had given her a final lesson in obedience. He didn't need to have. She did not know who she feared more: The Sharani or the sa'necari. If either of them learned her true name—they would kill her.

"Long ago and faraway." She murmured. When she had been young and beautiful, Silkie had had a powerful mage who loved her. He had given her a clever gift, embedding a crystal in her body where it would not be noticed. Her mind would always be her own. If anyone tried to put coercions, sways, and triggers in her, they would appear to be there but exist only as surface shadows. Over the years many sa'necari and others had tried to take her and failed.

When her looks began to fade, she came to Hell's widow and established the Crimson Lady, rightly knowing both lycan tastes in whores and that brothels were illegal in Red Wolf.

Despite all his flaws, Silkie had loved Cullen more than anyone else she had ever known. Which was why when she

found herself pregnant by him, she had chosen not to abort the child. "I'll get them, Cullen. I'll get them."

Silkie folded her arms across her stomach, hating what she knew grew inside her. According to the midwife that Silkie had sent for the first day after they let her go, the Serpent had filled her belly the same day he killed Cullen. The legends about his potency were true. Heironim had told her that if she aborted it, he would kill her and give the brothel to Ellie.

For the first time in her life, Silkie considered deserting her girls when they were all in danger. If she could escape before she had gone very far into the pregnancy the child could be aborted. She shuddered every time she thought about the abomination in her womb.

So Silkie began to consider her options and plot.

CHAPTER TEN

STALKING

Well, I offered to work for my bread, Malthus thought, wiping his sweating forehead on his sleeve. The lycans had put him to chopping wood that morning as his contribution to the upkeep of the sanctuary. He had been at it for hours, but now had the woodbins filled. This was the last of it. He laid the ax aside and pulled his shirt over his head, tossing it onto a bush. The cool spring breeze sighed over his well-proportioned chest and arms, chilling the moisture clinging to his limbs.

He had not yet deepened the compulsions he had set in the five adult sa'necari enough to turn them into a harem, but was considering it—although he had stolen a night here and there with Kandaishee. However, he did not dare to risk acquiring the very reputation he had so carefully cultivated for Beth.

The sa'necari helped with the children, the building, and other chores necessary to keep the sanctuary going. There was always at least one watchful lycan with them, and more often several. The lycans provided the sanctuary with nibari for the sa'necari adults and children to feed upon and all such meals were carefully supervised. Malthus' deception denied him access to the nibari, but he had always liked the taste of lycan best.

Lord Daemon's contacts had provided him with more preserving bottles of blood, but it was not the same—there was no taste of fear along with the blood—so he contented himself with Beth and fed Ros from the bottles. Even the best trained and most trusting of nibari held some small measure of fear before a master's fangs entered her. A rite would be better. That would completely satiate him for a time.

"I thought you might be hungry," Merissa said, walking up to him with a basket of bread and cheese, a bottle of wine sticking out of the top, a folded blanket draped her arm. "We can let the children play together. Darmyk kept asking about Ros. He likes her."

The toddler rode his half-grown kitten beside Merissa. Ros and Lyrri rushed up when they saw them and the playing began as they each got the kitten to chase one and then the other in a game of cat tag. Ros and Darmyk grabbed Kenly and fell into a little heap for a moment when he shook them both off. A shiver of concern ran up Malthus' back when he saw the hungry glitter in Ros' eyes as she gave Darmyk's back several strokes. Ros was surprisingly strong for her years, and he wondered how long his coercions would be able to prevent her from sinking her fangs into Darmyk. Blood hunger was a nearly irresistible force, especially in the young. If they lycans knew she was this advanced they would spellcord her.

Malthus took the blanket from Merissa, spread it on the ground, and indicated she should sit first. Her visits had increased from once a week to nearly every day. He no longer had to go looking for her. Her beauty made heat rise in his

body, and his throat tighten with longing for a taste from her veins. Malthus imagined the exquisite pleasure of entering her just behind her delicate ear and opening her legs to his rod of possession. She would be afraid. Done right, there was always fear before passion. He could see how his brother would have wanted her: he wanted her.

Merissa sat and began taking food and drink from her basket, fruit juice for the children and wine for herself and Malthus. He settled close to her where, at the proper moment, his hand could steal across hers.

"Your son is a pretty child, Merissa," Malthus told her, watching the children playing. He was very careful with them, concealing their precocities. Ros had been born with her fangs, which was a very rare thing. It was only a matter of time before she tried to feed on Darmyk, since she was already obsessing on him.

"No more so than your nieces," Merissa replied. She opened the wine and poured them each a glass.

Malthus accepted his with a languid smile and began to sip it. Merissa's wine was always of a better quality than what the sanctuary provided, or what he could buy in the shops. "You are a pleasant surprise, as ever, Merissa. Your presence makes my losses bearable."

Merissa hesitated. "I'm sorry for your losses. I'm glad our *friendship*, eases it." She chewed her lower lip, and then burst out, "I hate wars. They took my lover away from me."

"Perhaps they did. Perhaps they did not. You did say that he didn't love you."

She tensed, her hand choking the glass in her hands. "In his eyes, we were friends only. In mine?"

"I am sorry." Malthus' hand stole over hers and she pulled away from him.

Calling the children to her, Merissa made them sandwiches. "Don't feed your food to Kenly. I know he'll beg, but he's had his breakfast."

A chorus of "awww" greeted her admonition, but when her expression showed no sign of changing, they obeyed her.

Malthus took another swallow of his wine, wishing it had been spiked with blood. Beth did not satisfy him at all. She had stopped keeping herself as clean as she had before she became the village slut. He had to constantly repair her mind. It was fraying around the edges, and people had begun to remark on the changes in her. At least he no longer had to worry about the nosy priest.

"You must get lonely with your lover so long away. I'm lonely." Malthus sipped from his glass.

Merissa gave him a doubting look. "You have Beth."

He shook his head with a small smile. "Merissa, you're too innocent for words."

She drew back, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"Please don't take this wrong. Beth is the village slut."

"Beth? I can hardly believe that."

"I didn't believe it myself at first. Don't take my word for it. Ask Shalto or Torquil or Oswyl. They've all been with her. They're coming and going from her home at all times of the day and night. But don't condemn her, Merissa. It is after all the way of the wild cousins."

Merissa flushed and stared at her hands. "Not like that, it isn't. The wild cousins ... well, that's more like unmarried serial monogamy. And it isn't generally practiced among the upper classes."

"It's the reason I insisted on building my home so far from the main compound. I didn't want the girls exposed to it."

"I never knew."

"Of course you didn't. You're too innocent, Merissa. Too trusting."

"I'm scarcely innocent. I've had a child out of wedlock."

"What did you say your lover's name was? If he rides with the Rowdies, I might have met him."

A cautious light came into Merissa's eyes. "I didn't."

He reached out and brushed his fingers along her arm.

Merissa stiffened as he touched her. "Please don't."

Malthus withdrew his hands. "I meant no offense. Only that you're very lovely and I am very lonely. It's been what? You said yesterday, three years I think? How can you still wait for him?"

"Because I will wait for him until I die." Merissa picked up Darmyk, fleeing in such haste that she grabbed only the basket, leaving Malthus with the wine, glasses, and blanket.

Malthus poured another glass of wine and knocked the contents down. His fangs started to descend and he focused inward to send them back into their sheaths in his mouth. He wanted to sink them into Merissa, but he would have to make do with Beth.

"Or until he dies?" he said so softly under his breath that even Merissa's keen lycan hearing could not pick out the words.

If the sire was Isranon, then his death would definitely be sooner than Merissa could dream: both Queen Tomyrilen and the God-Queen Galee of Minnoras had placed bounties upon Isranon's head and that of Lord Dawnreturning, as had the Sacred King of Rowanhart. Assassins were coming at Isranon from all directions. It was only a matter of time before one of them killed him. Malthus wished he had a way to lure him up here so that the kill would be his. No matter. Even if he had a lure, Isranon would probably be dead before he could arrive here.

Malthus re-corked the bottle of wine, folded the blanket with the bottle and glasses in the middle. At least returning them would give him a reason to see her tomorrow. With Lyrri and Ros in tow, he walked back to the sanctuary. He went to the half-finished two room house he had been building for himself and his nieces, placed his stuff there, and went looking for Beth.

He found her overseeing some of the sa'necari women she had doing laundry in a tub on the left side of the yard. Beth smiled at him.

"Where have you been?" she asked, giving him a hug.

Malthus wished she would not do that, but did not want to risk pushing the triggers too far to the other side. "Ros and Lyrri wanted to play with Darmyk."

"You were chasing Merissa again, weren't you," Beth hissed in his ear.

"Now, now, Beth. Let's discuss this alone, shall we?"

She turned her head in a pouting fashion, dipping her shoulders at him, but did not resist when Malthus took her hand. He walked with her to the copse they had once used for their trysting, and by way of the woods back to his house. The moment he had her inside away from the sight of other people, Malthus pulled Beth down onto his bed.

She leaned against him, unlacing her shift. Malthus crooked a finger under her chin and raised her head so that their eyes met. Beth smiled just as Malthus lunged into her mind. Her eyes glazed and she went still.

"There will be no more jealousy, Beth," Malthus commanded in a silken voice.

"No more jealousy." Beth's voice was toneless and hollow.

Malthus found a vulnerable place in Beth's psyche built around her feeling of self-worth: she disliked the way she looked. He stabbed her there with a needle of power and a thread of spellcraft, knotting another coercion in place. "You want to be beautiful, Beth?"

"Yes."

"You will become beautiful when you lay down upon my altar and die. You will die for me, Beth?"

A frightened gleam of understanding showed in her eyes. "Yes. Upon your altar."

"Good. You will tell no one and you will obey implicitly when I tell you it is time to go there."

"Yes."

"And if I choose to bestow your death upon another as a gift, you will go to him willingly?"

Beth swallowed, tears gathering in her eyes. "Yes."
"Now undress for me, Beth, and lie down."

* * * *

Merissa sat in the spinning room with the carding combs in her hands, slowly working the fine wool back and forth until it was straight and clean. A half filled basket of the carded wool rested on the floor between her knees. Two baskets of the uncarded wool sat beside her. The clan had several herds of sheep and goats, including one whose hair was so fine that a shawl from it could be drawn through a ring and yet was wondrously warm. The latter was from the goats and called kazamerie. When she finished, one of her aunts would spin and then her mother and two eldest aunts would weave on the three great looms by the hearth in the main hall. Only the family was allowed to work with the wool at this stage, not the clumsy servants who had less to gain from it.

Malthus made her feel uneasy. Combining that with this room, made her feel queasy. All of her troubles had started in this room. The motions of her hands became a meditation and she slid without helping it into her remembrances. Yes, all of her troubles had started here.

Merissa wore a voluminous skirted cream dress with a tight, stiff bodice that cupped her breasts and molded itself to them. A cream hair net held her hair in place. Everything was cream, the color of this wool so that the loose fibers would not show when they floated across as some always did. One of the reasons she liked carding was that the lanolin in the wool made her hands so soft.

She worked steadily, drifting off into daydreams. While the clan called her a princess, she was really just a clan chieftain's daughter. At least that was how she thought of it. Real princesses, like those at the court of King Baaltrystan, did not card wool and weave. She was not certain exactly what they did, beyond the descriptions of balls and intrigue in some old books, but Merissa was certain it was far more pleasant and interesting than this.

Taking another handful of the raw wool, Merissa began to card again with a deep sigh. All of her suitors were clan and she fancied none of them. The very last thing she wished was to remain stuck in this valley or another clan valley with each year much like the one before it. Troyes intrigued her. No sa'necari who had come through this valley over the years had ever paid her so much attention, but perhaps that had been nothing more than the fact that before she had been a child. Now she was seventeen, a woman.

The door opened as if her thoughts had called him and Troyes came in. He moved aside some of the baskets and drew a chair over beside her, settling into it. Merissa's heart quickened. They had been flirting for days, but this was the first time she found herself alone with him.

Troyes gave her a languid smile, his eyes soft and sensual. He ran his finger along her arm and took the combs away from her, setting them atop one of the baskets. Merissa shivered at his touch. He stirred her longings in ways that the lycan males did not. Troyes regarded her a moment, then leaned in and brushed his lips across hers. She caught her breath sharply at the electric tingle it sent racing through her

body. Her loins grew wet and aching. Troyes kissed her again and this time he parted her lips with his tongue, sliding it inside. Merissa responded tentatively, twining her tongue with his, wanting him to touch more of her. Her hands crept up his arms and linked behind his neck.

The chair arms separated them, but Troyes leaned as far over as he could and fondled her breasts as he continued to kiss her. Merissa moaned softly. He moved to the floor and drew her after him. She went unresisting and lay there on her back as Troyes pressed his body on top of hers, moving against her. He pushed her long skirt up, reaching for her small clothes to move them aside, while he jerked the strings on his pants loose with his other hand. She caught his hands and stopped him, realizing that he intended to enter her.

"They'll catch us. Mother comes up for wool or sometimes to check on me."

Troyes rolled off her, went to the door, and drew a sign upon it. A black sigil formed, sank into the wood, and vanished to be sensed rather than seen. Then he returned to her.

Merissa's heart hammered with sudden fear. "Troyes, please. I don't wish to go any farther."

Troyes' eyes narrowed and his smile became poisonous. "You've been teasing me for days, weeks. Parading your charms and practically begging me to touch them. I am not one of your farmer boys. I am a grown man, and a sa'necari. I will not tolerate having you get me worked up, and then withholding what you have promised with your eyes and manner."

"I—I'll scream."

Troyes shrugged. "If anyone answers, I'll kill them."

Merissa shivered harder as he knelt between her legs and removed her underwear. His fingers probed her with his thumb on the knob of her clit. She whimpered in a tangled web of fright and desire.

"A virgin. You surprise me, princess of farmers. I understand both your need and your reluctance." He drew his hand back and licked her juices off his fingers. "Anyone coming to this door will suddenly find something else to do," Troyes told her. "Do not fear discovery."

Merissa swallowed. She had not meant to go this far, but now there seemed to be no way out of it. She had never gone beyond petting with her lycan suitors. Yet, the fear was part of the attraction. Merissa had been craving the feel of a male, a powerful male, inside her for two years now. If she did not yield to Troyes, she had no doubt that he would force her and hurt her. The sa'necari was completely different from the lycan youths who had tolerated her retreat before it went too far. He was older, stronger than anyone she had ever flirted with—stronger than any male she had ever known.

If she screamed, it would bring her father and Isranon; and Troyes would kill them. With all the flirting, it would be assumed she had encouraged him, possibly come to him willingly, and then cried rape to conceal her sins. Either way she was disgraced. She wanted to weep and make excuses, but she knew it was already too late.

Supported by one hand, Troyes' bulk hovered above her, while he continued to unlace his pants.

"Please, Troyes, this isn't right. Let me go," Merissa said with more insistence, shoving at him.

Troyes lifted his manhood out. "Don't make me hurt you, Merissa. You want this. You know you do."

Merissa's breath caught in her chest at the size of his member, long, hard and thick—more so than she had expected a male to look. Her pulse raced with fear and an oddly delicious anticipation as fear seemed to increase her need and make it sweeter. His knob bumped against her clit and the entrance to her womanhood, causing it to tingle. Her loins grew more moist and she squirmed, wanting to be touched and terrified of the consequences.

"Don't move," Troyes admonished. He settled his heavy bulk atop her and pressed her down, pinning her.

Merissa swallowed back a scream, his acrid musk betrayed the countless deaths he had caused in the rites, the lives and souls he had eaten to increase his powers to a monstrous level; She felt trapped beneath the pressure of his body. "Ancestors, have mercy," she whimpered.

He entered her without another word. Merissa cried out softly as her maidenhead tore. Blood coated Troyes' cock and stained Merissa's white dress, pooling beneath her hips. Tears ran down her cheeks and he kissed them away.

"Put your legs around me," Troyes ordered and Merissa obeyed. "I will teach you the arts of the slut."

Merissa's crying worsened and he ignored it. Any man she lay with after this, any husband she might be given to, would wonder who had been first. A husband might even repudiate her on learning she was not virgin. Had she been a

commoner, it might not have mattered, but there were different standards for the Chieftain's daughter.

It seemed as if he sawed at her forever, lasting long after her tissues had begun to dry, and she was becoming sore. Merissa wondered if it was always like this, but there would be no one to ask without revealing what had been done to her. Finally, he seeded her and rolled off, to lie there gazing at her. Her underdress was wet with his fluids.

Troyes stroked her hair. "You are very beautiful, princess of farmers. You belong at the King's court, not doing a servant's work ... come to my bed tonight and let me show you how it could be."

Merissa sucked in a deep breath, her head reeling with confusion. "I—I don't..."

Troyes kissed her again with exquisite thoroughness, opened her bodice and took out one of her breasts. His tongue ran around the nipple teasing it to hardness. Merissa moaned low like an animal. His fangs came down and entered the blue vein above the nipple. She gasped sharply and then felt herself swept up as his power took the pain of his feeding from her. Troyes was very skillful. Her perceptions tilted and shifted. She grew dizzy and confused. When, at last, he lifted his bloody mouth from her breast he asked again. "Come to my bed tonight?"

"Yes."

Merissa felt bile rising in her throat. She dropped the combs into a basket and folded over her arms. "Was it rape? Or a forced seduction? Did I really want him? Ancestors, what

else could I have done? What in hell's name could I have done?"

She closed her eyes, breathing hard. "I should have fought him off ... or tried to."

An image of Malthus entered her mind and she wondered why he made her think of Troyes.

The door creaked open, startling Merissa.

"Mommy?" Darmyk came in with Kenly trailing him, and climbed onto her lap. "Are you sad?" He touched the wet streaks on her cheeks.

"No, honey." Merissa set his little hands aside. "I got some wool in my eyes. That's all."

Looking at Darmyk's chubby face, Merissa imagined what his fangs would look like when the appetite for blood came upon him at puberty.

Isranon, I need you. He needs you.

* * * *

In the stillness of the night, Malthus dreamed of the taste of death. *He was back in the manor that a battle-clan had forced him to abandon years ago, standing between two bleeding tables, comparing the speed with which a lycan in hybrid form died versus how swiftly one in human form succumbed to identical wounds. The hybrid form took longer to kill.*

It had been there that he had rited his father when the mon refused to provide him with an inheritance equal to that of his two legitimate brothers. All the tremendous power he gained from his father that night had left him drunk for days

afterward. The image changed. His father lay spellcorded, screaming his lungs out, while Malthus shoved the ritual blades into his body. Gods, how he had hated that mon for way he and his mother had been treated.

The subtle tell-tales he had set on his doors and windows to alert him if someone entered while he slept sounded through his sleeping mind, summoning him from his slumber. He flashed into consciousness, his hand going to the naked sword beside his bed. Malthus slithered from between the covers, his feet making no noise as he crossed the floor and slipped to the door without bothering to cover his nudity.

Easing the door open, he stared into the living area where the two girls slept on their reed beds along the walls. His eyes shone red in the darkness. He could see almost as clearly as if it were daylight. Ros gave a soft moan in her sleep and that was when Malthus saw the bat laying on her chest with its fangs in her neck.

"What the fucking hell are you doing?" Malthus demanded.

The bat hopped away from Ros after closing the wound, and changed into a short, ill-favored looking mon with four rows of heavy frown lines etched into his forehead. His brow ridge jutted over his small, deep set eyes, and a thick nose, humped and hooked above his thin sneering lips.

"Having a small drink," the vampire replied, gazing hungrily at the two little girls. "I assume they are your wine-presses."

"Don't make assumptions in my home," Malthus snarled. "They're my nieces. Don't touch them."

The Lemyari messenger shrugged. "That one," he pointed to Ros, "her blood is intoxicating. She's going to be beautiful when she's grown."

"Stay away from my nieces, Sergei."

Sergei shrugged again. "Maybe I'll pay her another visit when she's old enough to bed."

"Stop it." Malthus' hold on his sword tightened. Lemyari shifters were always mages. Lemyari had a taste for mages, especially for recruiting them into the ranks of the undead. By all accounts, Sergei Wraithsbane had been a powerful battlemage before Brandrahoon turned him. Malthus did not want to test that—yet. He had only met Sergei a handful of times, and knew him mainly by reputation—a reputation that said his tastes ran mainly to girl children younger than twelve years old.

"Why are you here?"

"Egidius has arrived, and he's brought your army. You have anything to drink?"

"From a bottle. My wine-presses aren't accessible at this hour."

"That will have to do." The Lemyari grinned. He followed Malthus into his bedroom.

Malthus opened a chest and took out two golden preserving bottles, passing them to the messenger. "For your troubles. Now get out."

Sergei changed into a bat and left with his payment.

Malthus knelt beside Ros' bed and roused her. She moaned low, her hand going to her neck. "I hurt."

"I know, darling." Malthus Read her and cursed silently at how much Sergei had taken from her. She would be ill tomorrow unless he acted fast. His blood was far stronger than anything he had bottled. He pressed her face into the curve of his shoulder. "Feed, Ros.

"Uncle Malthus?" Ros asked in a dazed and sleepy voice.

"Feed on me, Ros. Heal yourself. A vampire got you, but I chased him away."

Ros snuggled in his arms, and Malthus held her tight against his chest as her small fangs entered his bicep. He allowed her to feed until he felt certain that she had recovered, and then he sent her back to sleep with an admonition not to mention the vampire.

He fetched a bottle of blood and had a long drink before going outside to think. Malthus sat down on a patch of grass, staring up at the brilliant stars. "No one touches my nieces, Sergei. No one."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WAYWARD DECISIONS

Kynyr straightened his brown and claret tunic before knocking on the door to Claw's study.

Sunlight flooded the east side of the deep box of a room, creating an aureole around the chair at the desk where Claw sat. The heavy claret drapes had been tied back and the thin, bleached linen under curtains did little to diffuse the light from the windows. A carved wolf's head topped Claw's tall chair, lending it a throne-like quality. Kynyr always thought that Claw looked most like a king—which he technically was—sitting in that chair.

"You sent for me?"

Claw gestured at one of the three chairs in front of his desk. "Sit down, Kynyr. I've decided upon some changes."

Kynyr settled into the closest chair and sat straight.

"Concerning me?"

"Among others. I want a unit of eight moved into the main living area ... and one officer."

"How do I fit into that?"

"I'm promoting you."

Kynyr sucked in a startled breath. "Belgair..."

Claw gave Kynyr a stern, searching look. "Are you afraid of Belgair?"

"No, sir." Kynyr retreated into formality. "I'm not afraid of anyone."

Claw cleared his throat.

"Except yourself, of course."

The chieftain chuckled at Kynyr's correction, took a bottle of whiskey and a pair of glasses from a drawer in his desk, and gestured at Kynyr with the bottle. Kynyr answered with a nod and Claw poured for both of them.

Kynyr began to relax, sipping the whiskey. "What is it exactly that you wanted?"

"I want nine wolves keeping watch on my womenfolk. Bad times are coming."

"Agreed. So, Fianait, Searlait, and Aisha..."

"And Merissa. I don't trust that mon she's been seeing in the gardens."

"Malthus?"

"Aye. That one. I fill the place up with good looking young wolves ... and who does she chase? A scruffy, grimy human."

"Claw, he's neat, tidy, and clean..."

"You know what I meant." Claw snarled and hair sprouted along his arms.

"Claw, if you're expecting me to compete with this Malthus person for Merissa, I can't do it."

"Why not?" Claw's expression turned ugly, and an edge of bitterness crept into his voice. "I thought it didn't bother you that she'd played the slut for two sa'necari."

Kynyr shifted uneasily in his seat. Every time Claw used a nasty turn of phrase in describing Merissa, he found himself questioning whether Claw's savage disapprobation reflected the chieftain's personal opinion, or if Claw was using it to test Kynyr's feelings. After over three years, the vicious gossip

concerning Merissa's liaison with Isranon had slowed in only the slightest degree. "Your daughter was never a slut, Claw. She loved him."

"Don't defend her. Fifty years ago, they would have stoned her to death for it. Regardless of whose daughter she was."

Kynyr lowered his head, unable to answer that. "I'm fond of Merissa."

"You'd make a fine chieftain when I'm gone."

"I don't wish to be chieftain." Kynyr shifted uneasily.

"Why not? Damn it, Kynyr, just what is the problem? You've been waltzing around it for two years."

"My family would never approve."

"My daughter's reputation..."

"Isn't the problem. It's a private family matter. I'm not at liberty to discuss it."

"Who is?"

Kynyr exhaled heavily and clasped his hands together. "You'd have to ask my grandmother."

"And she is?"

"Cahira Sinclair."

"Sounds familiar. I knew a Cahira once. Now that I think on it." Claw scratched his stubbly chin. "She was a Maguire."

"There are dozens of Cahira's in my family. I doubt they're the same."

"Wispy little blonde thing with the temper of a stung badger?"

Kynyr lowered his head with a chuckle. "Yes, sir. That's my Gram in a nutshell. But that description could match six or seven of them."

Claw scowled and refilled their glasses. "If she's a Sinclair, how're you a Maguire?"

For once Claw refused to let Kynyr side-step the question. Four years ago, Cahira had schooled him in his responses when he told her he intended to join Claw's guardsmyrn. Confronted with the question, Kynyr could not remember all of the permutations of Cahira's replies. He floundered. "I believe I told you about my father?"

"You've told me almost nothing about your family."

"Finn and I have told you numerous things about the Dreaded Horde..."

"Your sisters. What about your father?"

Kynyr felt increasingly trapped by the directness of Claw's questioning and tried to remember what he might have told the chieftain in the past. The more elaborate the lie, the harder it was to sustain it. "My father ... Branduff Maguire ... was a bastard."

"Was?"

"Is. He's alive and well."

"Who sired him?"

There it was. Staring him in the face and if he answered wrong Cahira would never forgive him. Kynyr sucked in a breath and lied. "Todd Sinclair."

"Wrong answer. You don't look like a Sinclair."

Kynyr ran his hands through his hair. "I don't ... Cahira doesn't..." He paused, swallowing. "She's a healer. She followed the soldiers."

Claw's expression hardened. "My sons were not identical. Tarrant was blonde. Logan's hair was auburn. Was one of the soldiers she slept with my son?"

"No, sir. She never met him. You can have me Read if you wish. I'm not a Redhand. You aren't the first ... and you probably won't be the last ... to see a resemblance between myself and your son. But I've been Read by experts, and I assure you, Claw. I'm not related to you. That's not Cahira's issue with your family."

"Then what is?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry, but I don't know."

"Pick your unit." Claw looked suddenly tired and worn as he finished his whiskey. "Kissie will show you to your rooms this evening."

"Thank you. Am I dismissed?"

"Yeah. Get out of here."

* * * *

Kynyr felt that his world had diminished and faded around him. He knew the feeling would pass, yet he could not wrest his thoughts away from it. People always assumed that female healers who traveled with the camps were sluts. Some of them were and some of them were not. Kynyr had not wanted to smear his grandmother's reputation that way, even though he knew that she had done so herself when she fled Wolffgard to protect the child she carried, Kynyr's father, Branduff. He loved Cahira, and hated having to say anything that might hurt her reputation in the eyes of others.

However, she had forbidden him, and the rest of his family, from telling anyone the name of his grandfather except under direst circumstances. So he had had to do one hurtful thing to avoid doing another even worse.

Anger rose in Kynyr, displacing his initial distress, and he realized that if he lingered in the manor that day he would soon be snapping at whatever unwitting targets presented themselves. So instead, he saddled his horse and rode into the village, looking for a place to spend his coins of anger in a more socially acceptable manner.

When he finally freed himself from his brooding, Kynyr discovered that he had ridden all the way to the Sanctuary Refugee Camp without thinking. The sounds of laughter and shouts of encouragement drew him deep into the camp.

The center was empty. No one was working. The sounds grew louder and he turned toward them, wondering what had attracted the entire camp from their daily labors. Kynyr rode north, past the corrals and barns, and that was when he saw them. The females and their children had formed a large half-circle on a cleared space the depth and breadth of the Great Hall of the manor. A few trees dotted the cleared area, but all the rocks, boulders, and brush had been removed from the center, leaving a half-moon of trees, vines, and bushes on the far side. The opened a path for him as he nudged his battle-trained destrier through. The males, all lycan except for Malthus, had formed the inner circle sitting on tree rounds and an oak log. A long trestle table stood off to the side near the remaining woods, covered in various kinds of practice

weapons made of weighted wood and ranging in kind from knives and swords to axes and quarterstaves.

Kynyr dismounted and dropped his reins. Bucky had been trained not to wander when the reins trailed the ground.

"Hey! It's the pretty boy." Torquil wiped his sweating brow on a towel and dropped it in the hands of a female who then sniffed the towel and smiled at Torquil appreciatively.

Kynyr nodded. Torquil took that as an invitation to approach him, although it had actually just been acknowledging that there were bitches among the women. A lot of lycan customs were built around the act of sniffing.

"Come to try your hand, guardsmon?"

Malthus straightened to see past those gathered and a sly smile crossed his lips. "Go a round with me? I'll show you how a kandoyarin fights."

Kynyr considered for an instant before answering, remembering the words of Todd Sinclair that hot anger gets *you* killed and cold anger gets *them* killed. "Why not?"

He unbuckled his sword belt and secured his blades to his saddle. Then he walked over to the table and tested the practice weapons they had sitting there.

Kynyr glanced at the others as he found a longsword that felt right in his hands. None of the wolves wore padding. Most were stripped to the waist and many sported bruises. Out of deference to Malthus, they appeared to have been taking him and each other on in human form, rather than resorting to the unfair advantage of assuming their hybrid forms. To be fair, Kynyr set the practice blades aside and removed his leather armor, tunic, and shirt. An azure crystal, banded in

gold and silver with tiny runes inscribed upon the band, hung from a golden chain around his neck.

An appreciative rumble came from the assembled females at Kynyr's tight abs, broad chest, and heavy muscles. A light thatch of golden hair covered the backs of his arms, spread across his belly and peaked on his lower chest just between his breasts.

Malthus strode up to him, his dark skin as smooth and hairless as a woman's, his silken black hair hanging in a braid down his back, and—Kynyr noted with surprise—not a mark, scar, or blemish on him. Holding his knife at guard, Malthus' sword weaved a sinuous pattern as he approached Kynyr. "Well, Kynyr Maguire, shall we see what you can do?"

* * * *

Finn sat in the Great Hall, watching Merissa's mother and aunts at their looms. His habit of saying yes to Kynyr had left Finn stuck with the work when his friend took off a couple of hours ago. Kynyr always led and Finn always followed—often into adventures that brought the Dreaded Horde down on them for what had seemed, at the time, to be the harmless bending of such rules as no fishing on Willodays or stay out of the beer, you're not old enough to drink. They had been nearly inseparable—except for those times when Kynyr wanted to be alone. That was usually when something was bothering Kynyr and, as youngsters, Finn had once managed to track Kynyr down to his secret brooding spot on a sheltered ledge above the Bonnie Draw River. Finn had never told Kynyr or the Dreaded Horde that he had found Kynyr's

bolt hole. He remembered the pensive look in Kynyr's eyes as his friend would head for the river to think. Which led to Finn's realizing just what he had seen in Kynyr's expression when Maguire left a little bit ago: trouble.

"Excuse me, Master Finn..." Kissie came in, drying her hands on her apron, an apprehensive expression on her face.

A scruffy cub, with hair an indeterminate shade of reddish blonde, followed her. The boy threw himself at Finn, grabbing his arm and trying to pull the guardsman from his chair.

"Kynyr's in trouble."

Aisha glanced at Finn and then the boy. "What kind of trouble, Rory?"

Finn blinked; it had taken a second to recognize Rory Scott under all the mud and grime the cub had managed to smear across his face.

"They're gonna kill him."

Aisha sucked in a sharp breath. "Go on, Finn. Get the others and go."

Finn nodded. "Rory, I'll meet you out front."

Finn ran upstairs and shouted for his friends in the new unit. Ramsey and Eideard appeared first, followed by Morcar and the other four.

They found Rory out in the yard, sitting on Bucky. Finn shook his head. There were times when that horse did not seem natural. Up until then Finn would have said the only ones who could ride Bucky were Kynyr and Todd.

As they saddled their horses, Finn quizzed Rory Scott about what had happened.

"They're gonna kill Kynyr iffen he beats Malthus."

"Who?"

"Dunno. I was trying to sneak in close to watch it. I heard 'em an' it scared me. I backed away an' tried to run ... fell on my face." Rory rubbed at the mud on his cheeks and splashed across his nose. "Then this here horse..."

"Bucky."

"Yeah, Bucky ... he made me get on his back."

Ramsey frowned and came up behind them leading his bay mare.

"Yeah." Rory pulled at the back of his shirt, blushing beneath the mask of mud. "Had me by the collar."

"How'd this start?"

"Them camp wolves was practicin' an' I like to watch. Kynyr comes up an' Malthus asks him to give it a try against him."

"I got it."

They mounted and set off at a gallop.

* * * *

Kynyr and Malthus had been going at it for close to half an hour with neither gaining an advantage. Duels, even with practice swords, rarely lasted this long, except among masters.

They were both breathing hard and drenched with sweat.

"Shall we call it a draw?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kynyr spun about shouting. "Stop it."

He threw down the wooden practice blade and sheltered his face. A rock caught him on the cheek, leaving a long cut. Rocks came from all sides, striking him in the head, chest, back, and stomach. He staggered in the direction that he had left Bucky and saw that his horse was gone. "Hell's goat-sucking ... Stop!"

Malthus walked across the clearing as if nothing were happening.

"Malthus! Tell them to stop."

Searing pain in his back and chest sent Kynyr to his knees. A warm rush of blood poured down his chest and back. The point of a blade jutted from his chest. Only a lycan in hybrid form would have thrown it that hard. From the burn, it was clear that the blade contained silver.

Another shower of rocks struck Kynyr. Bones broke with a loud crack. Kynyr crumpled, curling on his side. His fingers crawled up his chest to the crystal and he grasped it tightly.

"Cahira! Cahira, help me!"

Kynyr dragged himself toward the bushes.

"Stick him again, Thorn!"

"I don't need to..." A soft voice drawled with a northern lycan accent. "It's in his lungs.

"I want to watch him die. Please..."

"Alright."

Kynyr felt the weight of someone on his back force him to the ground and stopped his struggles to reach the questionable safety of the bushes. The hail of rocks stopped. A strong hand grabbed the back of his hair and ground his face into the grass.

The point of a silver blade pricked a long line from his shoulder to his waist.

"Where would you like to put it in? Kidney, heart, spleen? Base of his skull?"

"Kidneys." A soft hand poked Kynyr in the lower side.

"Get your hand out of the way. Or would you like to do it yourself?"

"Sure."

Kynyr shuddered as the blade pricked his side. It would be inside him in another moment and everything would all be over. A long groan escaped him, followed by an ululating howl the lycans called a death scream.

Shouts and the jingle of armor came from the far side of the clearing.

Suddenly the weight left his back.

"Finn." Kynyr gasped out the name as darkness swept through him and he stilled in the grass.

"Disperse! Disperse!" Finn and his companions rode into the crowd, using their horses and the flat of their blades to drive the assembled myn in all directions. Bucky trotted across the clearing and nudged Kynyr, getting no response.

Malthus gestured at the crowd and they ran for the houses.

Finn glanced about for Rory, but the boy appeared to have simply vanished. He dismounted and knelt beside Kynyr. His companions closed ranks around them.

Bruises and bleeding lacerations covered Kynyr from his forehead to his waist. Several places on the back and sides of his head were slick with blood—his blond hair was sopping with it. Finn's eyes trailed down to the hilt of the blade in Kynyr's back and his stomach clenched. From the color of the metal, there had to be silver in it. Silver only hurt if a lycan got it in a wound or touched it to an open sore; and there was often hell to pay over it.

"Damn it, Kynyr! Damn it!"

Finn lifted Kynyr onto his lap, cradling him. He looked up as Ramsey's fingers touched Kynyr's neck.

"This looks bad, Finn. Get mounted and I'll hand him up to you." Ramsey shifted to his hybrid form and took Kynyr from him.

"He's alive?"

Ramsey nodded, turned, and shouted at their companions. "Morcar, find Baroucha and have her meet us at the manor."

Finn straightened, swung onto his horse, and extended his arms. Ramsey got Kynyr into Finn's arms, and the two of them managed to get the unconscious guardsman settled in front of Finn. By then, Finn had begun to recover from the shock of finding Kynyr. "I don't know what happened here, but this is no time to try and find out. Stick close and we'll get him home."

All of the residents and workers at the camp had drifted away and the guardsman found themselves alone. They rode back through the village, drawing every eye as they passed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CAHIRA

The shutters on the airy windows of the kitchen stood open and the windows had been raised to let in the afternoon breezes to ease the early summer heat. It was already one of the hottest summers that Cahira Sinclair could remember. She sat at her kitchen table, peeling turnips to add to the stew she was making for dinner. Cahira had changed little over the years, beyond gaining laugh lines around her eyes and mouth; and remained much as Claw remembered her: a tiny blonde, barely five feet tall; cornsilk hair hanging in a braid past her hips; and a temper like a stung badger.

A chill spread over her as if someone had dropped ice down her bodice. She laid the knife aside, returned the last turnip to the bowl, and reached with trembling hands for the golden chain around her neck. Cahira drew the chain out and stared at the azure stone, identical to the one that Kynyr wore. Ice coated the stone.

"Kynyr!" She screamed his name again and again and again, watching the very tip of the stone start to turn black. If the stone went entirely black, it would mean that Kynyr was dead.

"Cahira?" Todd Sinclair came in, grasped her shoulders, and gave her a small shake to bring her out of it. He was a big wolf, six three and scarred by battles with things that left marks even upon lycans. It had been Todd who returned

Cahira's letters to Tarrant, along with Tarrant's diaries, when the sa'necari executed him. Cahira had borne him three strong sons and a daughter when she finally found herself able to fall in love again.

She turned eyes wide with dread upon him that flashed into anger as Cahira pulled herself together. She held the crystal up. "They've hurt him ... bad. I'm going to him."

Todd stared at the darkening tip and gave a slow nod. "I'm coming with you. Give me a minute to fetch my blades."

"Mama, we're coming too." Trevor arrived from the garden with his hoe propped against his shoulder at the same instant that his wife Mary rushed in through the side door.

She had been out in the garden gathering herbs, something Cahira's aging knees could no longer cope with. Mary put her basket of herbs on the table. "I'll fetch your satchels and your black case."

"If there's going to be a fight, don't leave me out." Queran strode in from the sitting room. Trevor and Queran were as large as Todd.

"Then arm yourselves. We won't know till we get there."

They rushed to their tasks and returned.

Cahira drew strength from Todd's steady patience that she had finally succumbed to ten years after Tarrant's death. "I warned him."

Todd wrapped his arms around her as if to shelter her from the world. "What can we do?"

Cahira extended her hands. "Join hands."

Todd released her, gripped her hand, and extended his other one. Trevor grasped his hand and reached for Mary.

She tucked Cahira's black case under her arm and joined hands with her husband and his brother. Queran grasped Cahira's other hand and the circle was completed.

A tingle swept through them and golden light over them. Their forms shimmered for an instant and Cahira made the jump to Wolffgard with them.

They materialized in the courtyard, bringing a startled shout from a pair of patrolling guardsmyn.

The front door opened and Ramsey stepped out. "What's going on?"

Todd scowled in disdain. "Back off. We're here for my boy."

"Your boy?"

"Kynyr Maguire."

"Oh." Ramsey blinked. "We were about to send word..."

"Don't need it." Todd headed for the door with his family in tow. "Claw can tell it."

Ramsey gave a puzzled nod and led them inside. The servants stared as they walked past.

* * * *

When Finn had found himself stuck with setting everything up while Kynyr rushed off into the village for his confrontation with Malthus, one of the first things that Finn had had to do was assign rooms for the new unit. Five suites on the second floor had to be divvied up between nine myn. He had had Kynyr's belongings moved to the largest of them, since that seemed fitting for a commander.

Baroucha, the village healer, an ill-tempered crone with an unsavory reputation for vicious gossip and not being able to hold onto apprentices and assistants for long, arrived at the manor and chased everyone out of Kynyr's bedroom: except for Finn. Having grown up in a household dominated by strong-minded bitches, he had long ago learned to dig in his heels with them. His only concession was to sit in a chair in the far corner of the room and stay out of her way. It did not give him a clear view of her efforts, and he intermittently attempted to lean forward enough to see around her.

Finn winced as Baroucha drew the blade out of Kynyr's back. Where Cahira would have pulled the blade out with care, Baroucha simply gave it a yank. She looked more like a broad, over-large toad than a wolf, and her breadth partially blocked Finn's view of her actions. Finn blinked. While he could not be certain of what he had seen, he could have sworn she had twisted the knife before she pulled it. Finn rubbed his eyes, deciding that he had seen it wrong; for such an act would have been crazy when he thought about it. Baroucha packed the wound to staunch the bleeding, cleaned Kynyr up and bandage the rest of his injuries.

Baroucha wiped the blade off and examined it. "Runed-silver. His lung is badly torn." She wrapped the knife in a bit of black cloth and laid it on the nightstand. "Nothing can be done for him."

"Nothing at all?"

"I've stopped the bleeding. For all the good it'll do. Which is none."

Finn felt as if he had been simultaneously hit in the head with a hammer and stabbed in the gut. He could not imagine life without Kynyr.

Baroucha took a glass and a bottle of brown liquid—so dark it verged on black—from her satchel. She set them on the nightstand and poured a generous measure into the glass.

Finn frowned at the bottle. After years around Cahira Sinclair, Kynyr's mother Ulicia Maguire, and his sisters, Finn liked to think that he could recognize most drugs and potions that healers employed. However, he had never seen anything like that before. Finn started to ask what it was and then held back, knowing that they all tended to have their little secret recipes, and Baroucha would probably bite his head off for asking.

Baroucha roused Kynyr, supported his head, and put the glass to his lips. "Drink this and there will be no more pain."

Kynyr had taken only a few swallows when the door slammed open. Golden light struck the glass and the contents vaporized. Baroucha yelped, dropped the glass, and spun around.

A tiny, blonde bitch stood in the doorway snarling. "Get away from my grandcub, Baroucha, or I'll rip your throat out!"

"Cahira!"

Baroucha edged away from the bed, glanced back, and saw that she had left the bottle and her satchel behind her. She turned to get them.

"Grab her things, Finn." Cahira stalked toward Baroucha, shaking with rage; and although Baroucha had six inches and forty pounds on Cahira, the larger bitch retreated.

Finn lunged across the room, grabbed the bottle and the satchel.

"If that's what I think it is, I'm going to dice you up for stew meat."

Cahira extended her hand and Finn placed the bottle in it. She unstopped it, sniffed and the flush deepened to crimson across her face. Her eyes hardened. "The Gentle Path. What ... in the name of all that's holy ... did you bloody well think you were doing?"

"A mercy. The blade's runed silver."

"You? A mercy? Not bloody likely."

Baroucha's expression when suddenly sly. "I Read him. He's Tarrant's."

"Grandson. Tell anyone and you'll wish you were dead."

Seeing Cahira like this, Finn wished he could crawl under the bed and hide.

"Get out of here, Baroucha. Once I've tended him, I'm coming to visit you."

Baroucha fled.

Finn set Baroucha's satchel down and stared at the bottle. "What is that stuff?"

Cahira put her case on the nightstand and shrugged out of the straps of her satchels. "Close the door and sit down."

Finn obeyed with alacrity.

"How much of that did she get into him?"

"Not much. I think. I mean, I really couldn't see around her." Finn's Adam's apple bobbed nervously. Only Cahira had that effect on him. "What is it?"

"Euthanasia drug." She picked up the knife and turned it in her hands. "Idiot. The runes are etched but not charged. This is dead silver, not living silver."

Cahira returned the blade to the nightstand, and turned to find a chair so that she could comfortably Read Kynyr.

Finn leaped up, brought her one, and then retreated back to his corner.

She removed the bandage on the blade wound, eased her fingers into it, and sang softly. A golden light sprang up around the wound. Cahira drew her fingers out a fraction at a time, continuing to sing. When she finished, the light faded and she wiped her fingers on a bit of cloth. "He'll live."

"You healed him?"

Cahira shook her head and Finn could see how tired she looked. "I mended him. He'll need rest ... a few weeks at least."

Finn sucked in a breath. "What she said about Tarrant..."

"Don't tell anyone."

"But if he's a Redhand—"

Cahira rose and went to Finn, placing her fingers on his lips. "Hush. Don't tell anyone."

"But why not?"

"It's a long story. I don't have the energy to tell it. But I suppose you deserve to know, considering how you've stood by him."

Finn nodded. "Is that a promise?"

Cahira smiled, weary and fond. "Yes, Finn. It's a promise."

* * * *

Todd and his sons pulled three of the four chairs in the ante-chamber close to the bedroom door and settled into them.

The bedroom door opened and Baroucha ran out. The door closed behind her. She stopped short in the middle, turned and stared at him. "Todd..."

He put his pipe down and got to his feet. "Baroucha."
She shrank away from him. "Don't touch me."

"Don't give me a reason."

Baroucha spun and fled into the hallway.

Trevor exchanged a glance with his brother. "Is she the one that hurt Mom?"

Todd nodded, resumed his place, and relit his pipe.
"Ayup."

"What was she doing in there?" asked Queran.

Todd shrugged. "We'll know soon enough."

A grizzled old wolf stalked in and stared at them. "Todd Sinclair! I heard you were dead."

Todd took his pipe from his mouth and gestured at Claw with the stem. "Chieftain. People get funny notions." He took another draw from his pipe. "Mostly from rumor and gossip."

Claw dragged the fourth chair close and sat down. "Kissie!"

The nibari appeared in the doorway. "Yes, Master Claw?"

"Whiskey and four glasses."

Kissie left and the four myn looked at each other for a moment.

Claw studied Trevor and Queran. "Your boys, Todd?"

The Battle-Clan armsmaster turned farmer gave a slow nod, pointing to each in turn. "Trevor. Queran. I got two more back home. Branduff's my oldest. Then Trevor, Queran, and Jordy. Gotta daughter too. High tempered little bitch just like her mother. Lilybeth. Cahira's given me five strong cubs."

"You married Cahira Maguire?"

"Yup."

"Kynyr..." Claw paused, got his pipe out, and started to load it.

Todd reached in his pouch and produced a packet that he tossed to Claw. "Try that. It's Tovantè Red Leaf."

Claw grinned and opened the packet, sniffing it. "Good stuff. I haven't seen any in years."

"It's getting harder to come by. I brought plenty. You can have that packet."

"Thanks." Claw filled his pipe and took several draws, savoring the aromatic southern tobacco. "Kynyr..."

"My grandcub. Branduff's boy. Cahira's in with him now. What happened to him?"

"Near as I can tell..." Claw spoke slowly between puffs of his pipe. "There was a riot at the Refugee Camp. We don't know what started it."

"And?"

"Someone shoved a blade in his back. Runed silver."

Trevor snarled and hair sprouted along his arms in a cinnabar rush. "Cravens! Couldn't take him from the front..."

Todd gestured at his son and Trevor subsided.

"He looks like my son."

Todd looked thoughtful. "Must rip the heart out of you ... looking at him. But he isn't Tarrant's. He's my grandson."

"There's no chance?"

"None. After the ambush that captured Tarrant, the bloody soul-eaters left me for dead. By the time I could travel again, Cahira had vanished. Took me well nigh on ten years to find her and my boy, Branduff. By then, the cub didn't want my name."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. We get along fine now."

The door opened and Cahira emerged. "Todd, you need to find us a place to stay for a few weeks and a wagon to move Kynyr."

"You could stay here," said Claw.

Cahira noticed the chieftain for the first time and stiffened. "We'll not stay under your roof, Claw."

Claw frowned and started to argue, only to swallow his words unsaid. He had too many crotchety bitches in his life, not to recognize the tone of Cahira's voice as brooking no argument. "The lawgiver house isn't in use right now."

Todd leaned forward. "You don't have a lawgiver?"

"We have one. Nikko Softpaws. He lives with his mother."

"We'll take it. Now what about a wagon?"

* * * *

Once the guardsmyn had departed, Malthus rounded all of the young males up who had been present at the attack upon Kynyr. All fifteen of the lycan youths worked at the camp. Some of them he influenced, and others he owned through

insinuations of power so subtle they did not realize he had touched them, and a few he held in his pockets for money and favors. Regardless of the methods, they all belonged to him.

He surveyed his little kingdom harsh eyed and searching. "Which of you put the blade in Kynyr?"

No one answered.

"I won't have you ruining things for the rest of us."

Preece Malloy leaned against a tree with his arms loosely folded across his chest. Years of working in the sun had weathered his fair skin to a nut brown. Preece's drawstring pants slouched around his lanky hips and if they had been any looser would have slid to his cock. A pair of long fighting knives hung from a worn leather belt, the sheaths lashed to his thighs for an easy draw, and his pants legs bunched around them. While his sturdy bones could easily have carried more weight, Preece did not lack for muscle and the long curves of his biceps looked like hammered steel. A length of leather held his long, mustard brown hair in a tail at his neck. He regarded Malthus with dead, jaded eyes and an indolent smile. "I always wanted to stick a guardsmon. So I did."

"Don't do it again, Preece."

All eyes turned to Preece, watching uneasily for his reaction.

Preece shrugged. "Whatever."

Malthus gestured at the others. "All of you go. Except Preece." He pointed toward his cottage. "Come with me."

Preece shrugged again and sauntered after Malthus.

They did not speak until they reached the cottage and settled onto tree rounds beside a rough hewn table. Malthus paused and extended his necromantic senses in a low level scan to be certain they were alone.

"Can that blade be identified?"

Preece's lips parted and he ran his tongue over them. His mouth quirked into a lop-sided smile. "I filed all the markings off."

"Where did you get it?"

A snort preceded Preece's answer. "It was sold to me as runed silver. It isn't."

The discernment in the answer surprised Malthus. "How do you know it isn't?"

"After I bought them, I tested them on him."

"You killed him?"

"That's what I said."

Malthus began to understand why the rest of the wolves never crossed Preece, although they did so to each other frequently. "Shalto is forming a little gang ... under my tutelage."

"The Lycamornots. Sounds juvenile."

"It isn't."

"Shalto asked me. I said I'd think about it."

"Now I'm asking you."

"Will there be gold in it? I'm tired of breaking my back for a few bits of copper."

"More than you can imagine."

"I can imagine a lot."

Serpent's Quest [Lycan Blood Vol. I]
by Janrae Frank

Malthus reached in his pouch and brought out two gold coins and three silvers. He tossed them to Preece who snapped them out of the air with a quick economy of motion that impressed Malthus.

"Count me in, Malthus."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TROYES

A month had passed since Malthus first received permission to hunt on Clan lands. He took Shalto and Oswyl along on his first three hunts, gradually going farther and farther afield, matching landmarks up to the maps he carried of Red Wolf Valley in preparation for going alone. As soon as Malthus felt certain that the wolves were no longer watching him as closely, he packed his horse up, intending to go north and see what lay there for himself. The first of his units would meet him there.

He had bettered himself faster than the other refugees because he had plenty of gold to spend and other things came easily into his hands to trade and bribe the lycans with for their assistance. And then there was Beth. She had begun to talk her "lovers" out of gold on behalf of the sanctuary and splitting it with him. She had also had to turn down several offers of marriage from young males thrilled to have a female under them that would be so cooperative in acting out their nastiest fantasies.

That had worked out so well, that Malthus began considering the possibility of turning the Refugee Camp into a discreet brothel, one female at a time. Brothels were illegal on Clan lands; although the city wolves delighted in them. Conservative lycan logic held that sluts—whether male or

female—and brothels caused friction among the younger wolves and provoked duels.

He periodically went into the town of Hell's Widow to meet with his contacts there. So far, none of them had been Sergei. His bow case hung from his side. It had a double chamber for his arrows, the shafts with the blue and white fletching were hunting arrows, and those with the black and red were for killing myn, which he had poisoned in the night.

Nikko's reluctant permission to hunt on clan lands had resulted in frequent visits from the suspicious lawgiver to make certain that Malthus was sharing his catch with the others at the sanctuary. Malthus sensed that the lawgiver mistrusted him, but had no evidence to back up his feelings beyond the fact that Nikko appeared to be watching his every move. If Nikko became a problem, Malthus would give him a taste of what he gave the priest. The lawgiver was too young, inexperienced, and uncertain of himself to prove much of a challenge.

Beth came up to him with a basket of food. "You'll get hungry," she said.

"You didn't need to do this, Beth." Malthus knew that everyone was saying she had fallen in love with him. Just as many were saying that Malthus was chasing Merissa. If they expected to see sparks fly between the two bitches, they were sadly mistaken. Malthus had his psychic hooks into Beth too deeply now for her to object to anything he did—even sticking a knife into her plump body. She brought him all the gossip, spied on those who distrusted him, and covered for his absences.

So far, except for Beth, no one knew he was also jacking Kandaishee and the other four sa'necari. He resorted to them rarely, and only when Beth's bed was already occupied. He had no desire to bed the humans because he did not like the way that human females smelled, among other reasons. So far the only use he had put them to was in trying to kill Kynyr. Although he found the failure of his plot disappointing, Malthus experienced a small gratification at just having Kynyr out of his hair for the nonce.

"I just wanted you to know I care," she said.

Malthus blinked, realizing he had let his thoughts drift. "I know, Beth. You're sure it's not too much trouble for you to watch the girls for a few days?"

"No trouble at all, Malthus. I enjoy having them."

"Good. Now I must be off."

Malthus rode along the path through the Sanctuary that connected up with Cheshire Road, which ran north northwest from Wolffgard, heading for the mountains where he had been told there were caves. As he reached the entrance to the camp, Malthus saw Nikko standing at the side of the path talking to three large wolves who were driving marker pegs into the dirt at the entrance. There had been talk of fencing the Sanctuary in and putting a gate across the path there.

The small dog, Moss, danced around Nikko's feet, wagging his bushy tail and watching Nikko for signs of having been noticed. Nikko scooped Moss up and stroked his head.

"Hunting again, Malthus?"

"Lot of mouths to feed, Lawgiver."

Nikko said something else, but Malthus pretended not to hear as he nudged his horse into a canter. He followed Cheshire Road until it petered out into country lanes, and finally into a spider web of hunter's traces. At that point Malthus left the road and kept deep in the forest, making his own paths, traveling through shadowed places where he was unlikely to be seen. Glimpses of the distant mountains, seen through partings in the thick vegetation, served as landmarks to keep his bearings.

After riding for two hours along a hunter's trace, Malthus caught a flash of orange moving through the trees above him. More and more of his watchers began to come out of hiding. Imps scampered through the trees on every side of him, through the brush and briars, and up in the trees leaping like wizened orange-skinned monkeys. He had been promised the service of dozens, under the leadership of the imp-warlord Gahni. Malthus and Gahni had worked together many times over the years. Yet it had taken substantial promises of food, gold, and booty to persuade Gahni to bring his people from the West Bank of the Hillora to Waejontor.

Lord Daemon had promised that to make Malthus his agent here if he could infiltrate the lycans; and he had. In return, Lord Daemon had kept his promise, and given Malthus all that he asked for: substantial forces at his disposal, a wide range of units, and enough dark creatures to encompass all possibilities.

The trees gave way steadily, thinning into a rocky fell. As Malthus' horse topped the first treeless rise, he saw the northern border of Claw's lands, the Place of Boulders. Huge

rocks, which had fallen from the mountains rising above it, broke up the landscape like the remains of a giant's scattered toys. It looked like a good place for an ambush and Malthus rode cautiously through them.

When he reached the far side, he saw a stone bleeding table with a tool table sitting next to it almost beneath the cliff. Remembering Nikko's admonitions about no rites on clan lands, Malthus had not expected to find one just inside the clan borders. He rode closer and could now see that a cave with a shaggy overhang of moss and briars opened beyond the tables.

He dismounted and dropped his reins, knowing that his horse was well enough trained to not wander far unless something spooked it, which was unlikely given that it had learned at the hands of an irrfelghau. Lord Daemon had sent this one to him, bringing his mounts to three at the compound. The lycans assumed he had purchased it in Hell's Widow. He fastened his pack horse to an oak sapling and headed for the table.

Malthus approached the bleeding table obliquely, extending his awareness in a low level scan of the area, keeping it trained in a narrow focus that only the most sensitive would detect if it brushed across them and make it difficult for anyone to get a fix on his location if they did detect it. He reached the table and ran his hands over it, feeling the deaths lingering on the auric surface. No rites had been performed here in—he estimated—close to four or five years. Which would place the last rite around the time that his brother vanished. He sensed human, lycan, and a single

sa'necari death there. That last one disturbed him. Could it have been his brother?

He shook the thoughts loose and ducked into the cave. No one had been here in several years. The air smelled stale. There were two interlocked caves, and they were roomy, around the size of a bedchamber. The first one had a dusty cabinet, a table, and two chairs in it. He ran his fingers across the table, trying to pick up any vibrations that might linger and identify who or what had last lived here. All that he accomplished was to leave tracks in the grey dust covering the table's surface. Dust flew in his face when he opened the cabinet's doors and he sneezed hard. Wiping his face on his sleeve, he raised his eyes to the contents. He found blood in the magical preserving bottles crowding several shelves. Why would anyone abandon such a well-stocked larder?

One by one, Malthus turned all the labels to face him. Several of them read "vengeance." That sent a rush of adrenaline through him. He reached for one and hesitated, uncertain that he wanted his answer in that way: sa'necari bottled the blood of their own kind and always labeled it "vengeance" in some form. Instead he opened a drawer and found his answer there: two of Troyes' blades and the empty hilt of a third. The blades only shattered when they were used to kill their makers. Beside the blades lay the crest of their family carved into an ivory round, painted, and attached to a golden chain.

Malthus closed the drawers after pocketing the necklace. Then he took down one of the bottles of sa'necari blood, pulled the cork out, and smelled it. He recognized his

brother's blood: Troyes was dead. A cold rage shivered through the icy nerves of the sa'necari mercenary.

He lifted the bottle, as if in salute, "For remembrance!" Then he drank from the bottle. "I will punish them, Troyes. I will see that they suffer." He spoke between swallows, carrying the bottle outside where he sat down and finished all of it. "I will send Beth here soon and make an offering of her to Bellocar in your name."

* * * *

Late in the evening, two riders showed up. They dismounted and approached Malthus, throwing back their hoods so that he could see their amaranthine eyes glowing in the darkness.

"Malthus!" A tall mon hailed him, extending his arms for Malthus to grasp them in greeting.

"Egidius." Malthus smiled, ignoring the mon's arms, to drag him into a tight embrace. They parted, and Malthus regarded the shorter mon, wondering where he had seen him before. "It is good to see you. What have you brought me?"

"You remember my cousin Laetus?"

"Laetus! Of course, I do. It's been years, hasn't it?" Malthus turned and clasped the shorter mon as well. "You hadn't grown into your fangs yet."

Laetus grinned, baring his fangs. "You realize it's been fifteen years since I was blooded?"

"You must be what? Twenty-five now?" Malthus slapped him on the back.

"Twenty-six." Laetus glanced around from the bleeding table to the cave. "You wouldn't happen to have some vein-juice? Or a lovely piece of flesh I could sink my pleasure spears into? I'm absolutely famished."

"I have plenty bottled. So far nothing but imps have shown up." Malthus led them into the cave and took several of the bottles down. "For the sake of his memory, share this with me?"

Egidius frowned. "Whose blood?"

"My brother's. Troyes. They killed him."

Laetus shared a glance with Egidius and waited for his cousin to speak.

Egidius nodded. "Of course we will. In his memory. Troyes was a fine sa'necari. A powerful mon. A good friend."

Malthus handed each of them a bottle and led them back out. When they finished there would be no more of brother's blood left. "What about the units I was promised?"

"They're camped north of here, just outside clan lands. Our scouts have found evidence of another force moving in the valley."

"Lycans? A battle-clan?"

"No. We don't know what they are yet, but we can tell you what they aren't."

Malthus took a long drink of his brother's blood. "So what aren't they?"

"They're not Sharani, not lycan, not human. One of our Rakshasha scouts was found ripped to shreds."

"That doesn't sound like sylvans. Could it be Shivari?"

"That's the best guess we've come up with. But if so, they're traveling like humans at least."

"How so?"

"Horses and boot prints. But the scent is all wrong."

Malthus pulled at his moustaches, stroked his oak-leaf beard, and asked the inevitable question, "Yuwenghau?"

"What the hell would yuwenghau be doing up here?" Laetus asked. "They've never cared about what happened in Waejontor before."

"Just because it hasn't happened before, doesn't mean it can't happen now," Malthus said. "We need to be cautious. Locate and assess every village in the valley. When the time comes, I'll eliminate the chieftain ... and his family."

"I hear there are some battle-wolves in the eastern villages."

"Kill them first. I will meet you back here in seven days or send you a present."

"A present?" asked Egidius.

A smug smile touched Malthus' lips. "Yes. A lycan bitch I'm tiring of. I made her my tool the first night I arrived. But now she's getting in the way. Rite her here, if you wish. However, I want her remains so torn up she's unrecognizable and left on the east side of the valley."

Egidius slapped Malthus on the back. "You always knew how to welcome a friend. You send her along and we'll take care of the details."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

OLD WOUNDS

The Lawgiver House was an eccentric pastiche of various styles of human architecture designed by Maldwyn Softpaws, Nikko's father, with too much interference from Claw Redhand. As a result it stood four stories high with a basement equally divided into store rooms and dungeons. It had balconies, parapets, gargoyles, towers and dormer windows, as well as other architectural nightmares that made foreign visitors wince to look at it. Rivaling the manor for size, it had taken ten years to complete. Rumor had it that Claw had built this house as a way of relieving the sense of emptiness that had plagued him after the deaths of his sons, turning it into an obsessive hobby and Maldwyn's artistic bane.

Claw had lent Cahira twenty of his Nibari to get the dust and cobwebs out and render the place somewhat inhabitable after four years of standing empty. Cahira made do by limiting their efforts to a single small section of the House and pretending the rest did not exist.

Kynyr sat propped comfortably by a pile of goose-down pillows, eating from a bowl of roasted mutton cut into chunks that sat on the bed table across his lap. His bruises had cleared up and the scabs of his wounds had vanished, leaving unblemished skin beneath. A bandage still covered the blade wound, to keep the stitches from catching on his clothing.

Company had arrived and encircled him. Nikko, Finn, and Cahira. His friends came by at every opportunity.

Kynyr chuckled. "At least Mary's letting me feed myself now."

"You still don't remember?" Finn leaned closer.

"What's to remember? I remember beating Malthus. Then nothing until I woke up here. Gram calls it concussion."

"And that's what it is." Cahira gave an authoritative nod.

Kynyr touched the back of his head gingerly. "Hell, my head's still sore."

Moss nestled in Nikko's lap, dozing in doggy contentment. "I don't like what is happening at the camp. I've questioned everyone and they act as if nothing happened. No one will talk to me."

Finn frowned. "Place gives me an itch. It ain't been the same since that Malthus moved in."

Nikko gave a weary nod. "I know."

"You should toss his butt out."

Nikko shook his head at Finn. "I'm supposed to be enforcing the laws and customs ... not breaking them."

"Laws and customs change, Nikko," Cahira said. "When I was young they would have stoned Merissa to death for sleeping with a sa'necari ... much less bearing his cub."

Kynyr winced inwardly. Every time someone mentioned changing customs, the first example they gave was always Merissa. "Isranon was a good mon."

"Was he?" A wisp of irritation crept into Cahira's voice. "I wouldn't know. I've always stayed away from the sa'necari ... including the Dark Brothers. What freedoms we have, we

gained from the Sharani conquest. Thirty years of Sharani rule. If not for them, the sa'necari would still be demanding a ritual tithe of our young." Cahira threw a hard glance at the young wolves, as if daring them to disagree with her.

"Gram..." Kynyr tried to derail it, but could not think of what to say.

"No. You listen to me. The Rebellion was Claw's dream. He paid for it with the lives of his sons. And it got him nothing."

"The clans would like to be rid of both of them," said Finn.

"If not one, it will be the other. I, for one, would rather have the Sharani than the sa'necari."

Nikko ruffled Moss' ears. "I agree with Cahira. After all, the secret histories..."

Cahira made a disparaging noise. "The secret histories are just the wishful braggadocio of the elders and the clan chieftains, claiming responsibility for the deeds of others. You should know better than to take them seriously, Lawgiver."

The door opened and female voices filled the air. Moss gave a yelp, made a flying leap from Nikko's lap onto the bed, and clambered over Kynyr to the pile of pillows behind him. Then the little dog spun about barking and snarling with astonishing ferocity.

Merissa halted with Darmyk by the hand and stared at Moss. Her gaze dropped to Kenly and she grasped the big cat by the collar, turned him about and put him out of the room. "Darmyk, tell Kenly to wait outside. He's scaring Moss."

Darmyk slipped his hand from his mother's grasp and hugged his cat, making growly noises in the cat's ear. Kenly

gave an unhappy rumble and settled on a rug beyond the door.

Aisha, Fianait, and Searlait, who had been following her, stepped over and around Kenly. Cahira got to her feet. Her eyes met Aisha's briefly as if in silent objection. Then she straightened her skirts and went to the door. "Please, excuse me. I have things to do in the kitchen."

Finn jumped up. "I got things to do. I'll be back in a bit."
He went after Cahira.

Merissa settled into the chair that Finn had vacated. "Your grandmother doesn't like us."

Moss calmed down the moment the door closed, and began licking Kynyr's ear.

"Cahira's just a bit..." Kynyr groped for a word that would not cost him in hurt feelings. "Odd. She's a bit odd."

"She always was, if you ask me," Aisha snapped.

Silence descended and remained until Darmyk broke it by crawling onto Kynyr's bed. He planted a wet kiss on Kynyr's cheek and said something he could only have gotten from his grandfather. "Crotchety bitches. Don't listen to them."

Everyone stared at Darmyk for an instant and then laughter erupted all over the room.

Kynyr hugged Darmyk. "Smart cub."

"I know it." A pleased smile of childish superiority spread across Darmyk's face, and he nestled against the injured guardsman. His robe gaped open and Kynyr's eyes went to the wine-stain birthmark on the cub's chest that had given Darmyk his nickname. Kynyr stroked the birthmark and

chuckled with a wink at the assembled females. "You are so right, Little Bear."

* * * *

Finn sat across from Cahira at the kitchen table. "I saw how you looked at them."

Cahira took the tea kettle from the stove and poured hot water over the little ball in her cup. The fragrance of mint tea filled the room. She let it steep and fetched sugar and fresh cream before answering Finn. "You're far too observant, Finn."

"I guess. Comes from growing up with the Dreaded Horde. Ignore the warning signs and get thunked with a hair brush."

"Do you dislike them so much?"

Finn shrugged, an impish smile stirring the corners of his lips. "Nah. I love 'em all. But I'm much happier without them."

"Why did you follow me?"

"You made me a promise and I've been waiting a week for it." Finn ticked the days off on his fingers. "Nah, week and a half."

"You're not going to let me off?"

"No. If I'm gonna keep my promise to the Dreaded Horde, there can't be secrets when it comes to Kynyr."

"What promise is that?"

"That I'd keep him safe. So far I ain't done very good at it."

When the mood was on him, Finn could speak with the aplomb of a nobleman, but most of the time, he preferred to relax and not worry about it.

"Take my tea to the study for me. We'll talk there. I don't want to be overheard."

Finn did as Cahira asked and they were soon settled into a small room on the second floor that contained a desk, four chairs, two sofas and a small table. Books lined the walls in floor to ceiling cases.

"Keep your promise, Cahira," Finn said with more confidence than he felt.

Cahira took a sip from her cup, composing herself. "How much do you know about the Rebellion?"

"Just what Branduff told me when he was teaching me my letters."

"We shall have to hope my son was thorough, because otherwise some of this will not make sense to you."

Finn nodded encouragement.

Cahira's voice took on the tones of a teacher as she began her story, and Finn could see where Branduff Maguire had gotten some of his airy inflections from. "It could be said that Claw Redhand inherited his dream of rebellion from his father Suileahan. But it took an incident to provoke it."

"Uh huh. I know that part. Prince Shintar ran off with Old Romney Silverpaws' daughter, Bridget. No one knows what happened to her. They say she was rited though."

Cahira shook her head. "There's no record of her being rited. The sa'necari are obsessive record-keepers on those

matters. Whatever her fate was, we'll probably never know. However, most scholars doubt that she was rited."

"Okay."

"She was promised in marriage to Tarrant Redhand, Claw's son. And he used the incident to rouse the Nine Great Clans against the sa'necari."

"Can we cut to the chase, Cahira? I didn't ask for a history lesson."

An angry flush spread over Cahira's features and she snapped at him with a full measure of bitterness. "Like how a little nobody like me ended up with a prince's cub in her belly?"

Finn's eyes widened and he made a fending off gesture. "I didn't say that, Cahira. I didn't say that."

Cahira's anger subsided as quickly as it had risen. "I haven't talked about this in close to forty ... no." She sighed. "I told Kynyr five years ago when he insisted on leaving for Wolffgard. It's a fact of life, Finn. Memory is an odd creature. Some things diminish with time and others grow stronger."

Finn clasped his hands together and bit his lips to keep from responding.

"I'm certain I don't remember everything any longer. There's gray patches and some of the pieces don't fit right now. I'm not entirely sure what happened first or second. If something doesn't make sense, just accept it as it is. I'm old."

"Not as old as Aisha."

"True. But at a certain point, it makes little difference."

"Okay."

"Todd would probably tell it completely different if you asked him."

"Can I ask him?"

"You might as well. I can't guarantee he'll answer."

"I'll take my chances."

Cahira drank her tea, put the cup down, and stood up. "If I'm going to tell this, I need something stronger. Would you like a glass of whiskey, Finn?"

"Sure."

She fetched a bottle of Dragonsbreath from a drawer in the desk and a pair of glasses. Cahira poured for them both, knocked hers down like a soldier, and refilled it. Some of the tension eased from her face. "It was the second year of the Rebellion. I was sixteen. The clans had put out a call for healers, physicians, surgeons, and the like to join the armies. I was young, talented ... my father was thinking of sending me to Creeya to train at the Royal Medical College in Havensword. That didn't happen."

Finn leaned forward with his elbows propped on his knees. "But that did happen."

Cahira sipped at her second glass of whiskey, her eyes going distant. "After I married Todd, yes. Todd insisted." Abruptly, she knocked the second glass into her mouth, swallowed, and poured a third. Stress began to return to her features, deepening the lines around her eyes and mouth. "I ran off with a group of healers from Blue Lake who were passing through on their way to the war."

"And that's how you met Tarrant?"

"And Todd." She stared at her hands for a moment and lifted her head again. "At that time, the front had pushed as far west as Skeleton Creek and it looked for a time as if we might drive the sa'necari from all of our ancestral lands. We sent emissaries to Shaurone and Creeya. They turned us down."

Cahira fell silent and Finn moved closer to her. As he reached for her hands to comfort her, he saw tears in her eyes. Finn dabbed at her tears with his fingers. "If it hurts too much, you could finish later."

She shook her head. "No. There isn't going to be a later. I don't ever want to talk about this again. Let's get it over with now."

"Okay."

"Baroucha was one of the Blue Lake healers. She was a slut. Sleeping with first this one and then that one. Often a different dog every night. She's much older than I am. How much I no longer remember. But I was very impressed with her. She seemed so knowledgeable and experienced. She took me under her wing." Cahira paused, her expression tightening. "At least I thought she had."

A long silence followed and this time Finn waited patiently for her to continue.

"We arrived at Skeleton Creek two weeks ahead of what turned into a disaster. The sa'necari brought in diviners. They had rounded up all of the city wolves who had tried to remain neutral in four cities. A four fold rite of hecatomb was used to hit us. Four hundred lycans from the cities were sacrificed. Then they attacked. The very ground seemed to

move beneath our feet. Demons and creatures out of nightmares swarmed us."

"I know that part, Cahira. You don't have to go into it."

"Thank you." She drank a third glass of whiskey and a fourth. Her words began to slur, yet she slogged on through her memories. "Less than a quarter of our army got out alive. We were scattered, broken. Tarrant was wounded. There was only Sheradyn, Baroucha, and myself, among the healers to escape with the prince. Baroucha wanted to be the one to tend Tarrant, but Sheradyn refused her and asked me to do it.

"Tarrant was feverish. He kept calling me Bridget. I was terrified that he might be dying ... and ... and when he pulled me into bed with him ... I didn't say no."

"And that's when you got Branduff?"

"Yes." Cahira began to sob brokenly.

Finn gathered her into his arms and held her. "There's more?"

"Yes, but I can't deal with it right now. I need—I need to lie down."

Finn put Cahira to bed as if she were the young cub and he the elder. Then he found a spot in the garden, knelt down, and prayed to Willodarus that Cahira would find the strength to tell him the rest of the story.

The sound of a horse in the courtyard interrupted Finn's prayers. He rose to his feet, and walked around the building to see who had come. A lycan cub in hybrid form sat perched on a tall black mare that seemed somehow familiar. The cub spotted Finn and turned the horse, trotting her up to him.

"I'm looking for Kynyr Maguire. I've a message for him."
The cub pulled an envelope from his shirt and waved it at Finn.

"Need help getting down?"

"Nah. I can do it. My Dad taught me." The cub swung his leg over and dropped to the ground grinning.

"Not bad." Finn touched the horse's shoulder, felt a greasy residue on his fingers, and stared at them. A black smudge was smeared over his hand. "She's not black?"

The cub shook his head. "It's a disguise. Larkspur's a sorrel."

"That's Cullen's horse." Finn's stomach clenched. Only death could have separated Cullen from Larkspur.

The cub's face crumpled and he looked ready to cry. "My Dad's dead."

"Cullen's your dad? What's your name?"

The boy nodded and struggled to keep his voice from breaking. "They call me Cooley. I'm Cullen Diomedes Blackwood ... junior." He swallowed and his budding Adam's apple bobbed. "Ma says I gotta give Larkspur and this letter to Kynyr Maguire."

Finn led Cooley around to the barns, where they turned Larkspur over to an ostler, and then he took the cub to Kynyr.

"Who's this?" Kynyr smiled at the cub as he accepted the letter. "Rather young for a courier."

"Cooley. Just open the letter."

Kynyr caught the edge in Finn's voice. "What's wrong?"

"Cullen's dead. It's in the letter. This is his son."

Kynyr ripped the envelope open and a ring fell out on the bed. He scooped it up and his expression went cold. "It's that ring Cullen was so proud of. The one Sonden gave him."

Dear Kynyr Maguire.

Cullen trusted you. So I am trusting you. By now you must know, or at least suspect, that Cullen is dead. They forced me to watch him die. The sa'necari have returned to Hell's Widow. I am trusting you with our child and my secret so that you will understand why I do not dare go to the garrison with this. You know me as Silkie Faggini. I was born Silkanna Mircala de Waejonan. Get word to the garrison, but do not tell them how you know. And, I beg you. Take care of our child. Cooley is no longer safe in Hell's Widow.

Sincerely,

Silkie

Kynyr raised stricken eyes to Finn. "Ask Gram to give Cooley a room."

"Uhm. She's passed out drunk."

"Gram?"

"Yeah."

"Take Cooley to Todd. Tell him Cooley's my..." Kynyr's head spun at the entire concept. "My ward. Don't tell anyone else but Todd about Cullen. I need time to think." *And grieve.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MESSENGERS

Malthus walked with Merissa in the garden while the children played under the watchful eyes of two nibari and Kenly. He surreptitiously stole glances at Merissa's breasts and loins when the dress she wore shifted as she moved and revealed a bit more to his hungry eyes. He carried a satchel with the strap crossing his chest, weighted down by the three bottles of cursed wine he had brought as a gift for Merissa's father.

Last night, Malthus had gone to Beth to slake his thirst, and found her wallowing on a cum soaked bed, sniveling about Shalto and Oswyl for always insisting that she give them their jollies together. Beth had so appalled him, that he could barely tolerate feeding on her, and made her clean herself first.

On the other hand, Merissa smelled of fresh rosemary and honeysuckle, and beneath her perfume, the scent of clean washed flesh. He wondered what her thighs would look like when he finally parted them—sooner or later Merissa would give him what he wanted, just as she had given his brother. Troyes had always set his sights on the best, and being the legitimate son, always gotten it whether he deserved it or not—even when it was something Malthus had wanted first. Except for Isranon, who had come to Prince Mephistis' court at fourteen, a comely and inexperienced youth. The proud

youngster hated his own kind for reasons that Malthus had not understood at the time, but looking upon Isranon made everyone at the court hungry for him. Including Troyes and Malthus. The more Isranon refused their beds and fangs, the more they had all wanted him. So Malthus had gotten a potion from his mother to allow him to pass for human for a few days at a time. He seduced Isranon. The affair lasted several weeks, before Malthus lost control and bit him. Isranon became incensed and resisted Malthus, so he had calmly raped the youth. The next day Mephistis showed up and informed Malthus that if he touched Isranon again, the prince would order Malthus rited. And that was the end of that. It had made no sense to Malthus why Mephistis would be so incensed over a mere rape—it wasn't as if he had seriously injured the young mon. Now that Isranon's secrets had come out, it made more sense to Malthus.

"What did you do before you came here?" Merissa asked him.

Her voice shook Malthus free of his memories. "I was a soldier. My father was nobly born. A high caste sa'necari. He served King Baaltrystan at court as one of his personal defenders."

"Have you ever been to court?" Merissa asked, with a trace of eagerness in her voice.

"Yes. I served there for a time, but a sa'necari court is not the place for a human who wishes to rise in the world. So I went south and became kandoyarin. My father died beside the king, trying to shield him when the palace collapsed after the Legacy was destroyed. When I heard about the rebellion,

I feared for my siblings and returned. However, I was only here two weeks before the Queen's forces destroyed my family. She's slain all of the old nobility who refused to follow her against the Sharani."

"I am sorry. I did not mean to bring up bad memories."

"You didn't. My father was a brave man. My nieces and I are all that remain of my family."

"I am sorry..."

Malthus put a finger to her lips. "Don't—Don't keep saying that. You haven't done anything wrong. I made my peace with their deaths."

"Have you seen the new queen?"

"From afar. She is very beautiful and powerful. But not as beautiful as you. Merissa, you would turn every head at the queen's court."

"Don't say that."

Malthus saw how Merissa shivered in reaction to his simple compliment. "Why not?"

"A sa'necari once said that to me. He convinced me to run away with him. I thought he was taking me to court, but instead he tied me to a bleeding table in the hills."

It had to have been Troyes—*what a fool*. "A terrible tale. But you've nothing to fear from me, Merissa. I'm human. As for the queen, with Lord Daemon at her side, she cannot fail but win back her ancestral lands from the Sharani."

Merissa shivered, drawing her shawl tighter. "This rebellion frightens me."

"Don't let it frighten you. Let the war pass you by here."

"If the palace is gone..."

"The summer palace of Waejonan at Torment Lake still stands. That is where the Queen dwells. Lord Daemon has been granted the ancient estates and titles that belonged to Waejonan's brother, Brandrahoon."

"It's almost as if time were re-setting itself. I *am* afraid. How can I not be?"

"I would protect you, if you would let me."

Merissa dropped her head. "Beth's in love with you."

"But I am not in love with Beth. How could I be when she's had half the males in the village between her legs? I stopped touching her once I knew the truth that I was just one more male to conquer."

"I can see that. I feel sorry for her."

"Beth will be all right. I'll talk to her, Merissa. I'm certain that it's just a passing fancy."

"I hope you're right."

Malthus stopped short and slapped the satchel. "I almost forgot. I brought your father a gift from Hell's Widow. Perhaps he'll think more kindly of me once he gets them."

Merissa smiled as he placed the three bottles in her hands. She looked at the labels. "Oh, they're his favorites!"

"Wonderful!"

* * * *

Malthus rode into the clearing with Beth beside him. He had arranged to meet her midway between the compound and the caves. She had cleaned herself up before leaving, so at least he could stand the smell of her. Her eyes widened at the sight of the bleeding table and she began to cry, shaking

her head and refusing to get off her horse. Malthus dismounted and tied his horse up to a sapling growing near the mossy entrance.

He pointed sharply at the ground. "Come on, Beth. Get down."

She swallowed, sucked in a long breath, and left the saddle. "I'm not ready to die, Malthus. Please—"

"Disrobe and lay on the table like a good girl," Malthus ordered. "Legs open wide."

Malthus gestured and the coercions in her brain tightened painfully. Beth took three tottering steps and her legs failed her. She went to her knees.

Shaking his head in a remonstrative fashion, Malthus sauntered over and tapped Beth on the shoulder. "Now, now, Beth. Do as I told you."

Egidius and Laetus emerged from the cave and approached them. Laetus crossed his arms, a contemptuous moue on his lips, and moving with an exaggerated swagger.

"Is this the present?" Egidius asked.

Laetus snickered. "Can't you make her more cooperative?"

Malthus scowled at them, spun, and hit Beth in the face for embarrassing him. "Up, Beth. Go to the table."

Beth rose on wobbly legs, and her eyes teared. "I love you, Malthus."

"Then obey me." He added in the trigger phrase. "Be beautiful."

Beth staggered to the table, breathing hard. She fumbled with her dress, pulling ineffectually at the lacings for several

heartbeats before managing to get it open. Her large breasts sagged through the parted middle.

Laetus laughed and shook his head.

She flushed, shoving the shoulders down and wiggling her arms out. Beth's belly jiggled as she pushed the dress over it, got it to her hips and then her knees. She sat on the table, dangling her legs, and kicked out of the encumbering garment. Beth wrapped her arms about her and lowered her eyes.

"Lie down, Beth! On your back," Malthus commanded.

"Don't hurt me. Please don't hurt me." She reclined on the slab, putting first one shoulder to the cold stone where so many of her people had perished, and then the other. Beth shivered on that chill bed of death, which not even the heat of the sun could warm, with her eyes haunted and pleading.

Malthus strolled over to the table and slapped his hands between her thighs. "Legs open. Wider, wider."

Beth spread her legs until the basalt edge pressed into her inner thighs and her ankles bumped the fetters attached to the holed knob of stone that secured the first link in the chain. "I don't want to die."

"Yes, she's the present. However, I may need her still. I should know in an hour or two."

Egidius secured Beth's wrists and ankles, straightened, and ran his hands over her body. "An excellent catch. All I've caught so far were a handful of bitches too lean for my taste, and a handful of scrawny cubs."

Malthus got his bow and quiver from his saddle, settling them at his side. He walked back to stroke Beth's naked

body. "Sweet Beth, when a sa'necari slips a blade into a bitch like you, it's like sex and strong wine. Yours will be a beautiful death. Egidius is a true artist of the rites."

"Can we at least enjoy her while you're gone?" Egidius said.

"That you may do. Now I need to get as high up here as I can. A wind-folk courier arrived at Claw's home this morning. I expect that he'll be leaving about now."

With his bow in his hand, Malthus climbed to the highest point atop the piled boulders marking the northern limit to Clan Red Wolf's territory as the sun began to dip over the distant snow-capped mountains. It formed a shadow patch against the red glow and spreading orange of sunset. He strung his bow as a wind-folk courier winged over the treetops.

So that is how they are getting messages in and out of the valley. Or at least one of the ways. I'm certain they must use four foots also.

Six imps crept out from among the rocks and gathered at his feet.

The movement of couriers on horseback had dried up to a trickle and then ceased completely when word had gotten out concerning the death of Cullen Blackwood. He savored the memory of shoving a blade into the little bastard's heart and then fucking Cullen's lover beside his dead body. If that whore's son had not shown up claiming to be Cullen's cub, they would probably still not know that Blackwood was dead. It had thrown Malthus' plans off, but not irreparably.

Malthus decided to put a stop to the final source of messages entering and leaving. He would assign other units to do likewise. It would still take time to close all the paths a messenger from the shifter clans could take, but Malthus felt capable of doing so.

He opened the compartment that held his mon-killing arrows, their large, swallow-tailed heads were poisoned with his own special recipe, comprised primarily of blended plant toxins, snake feces and venoms—venoms he had spent years painfully immunizing himself against as his rite-enhanced resistances grew—and as a tribute to the toughness of lycans, Devil's Silver.

His mother was a bio-chemist, and had served his late father as a poisoner, creating and sometimes administering deadly substances. Her family were the first to discover and refine Devil's Silver. It was silver liquefied in an arcane solution compatible with snake venom and other specialized toxins. One arrow was all it took to kill a lycan. The more arrows he put into one, the faster they died. So far as he knew, no antidote for Devil's Silver existed.

With the fall of his father's house, his mother had become employed by Lord Daemon, which was what led to his own work with the mysterious lord. Malthus had a sudden urge to visit her and see what else she might have developed and was testing.

Malthus set an arrow to his string and drew, following the messenger with his eyes for a moment and then released the shaft. The courier jerked in its flight and struggled to remain in the air. Malthus smoothly nocked, drew, and released,

putting three more shafts into the small body. He smiled as he watched the dead messenger plummet to earth on the far side of the Eirlys cataract.

"I never miss."

He glanced down at the six imps gathered at his knees, orange-skinned withered looking creatures with blowguns and darts, as well as belt knives. "Fetch it for me and don't be seen."

They skittered over the rocks in a rush to do his bidding, squeaking to each other in eagerness. The imps would cross the Eirlys by way of two large trees that had been dropped over the cataract north of Claw's borders. Malthus stretched himself out across the boulder in the evening light to wait. He wondered how Egidius and Laetus were managing with Beth.

The place of caves and boulders, the northernmost limits to Claw's lands was an interesting area. There were so many niches to conceal things. Were Troyes' bones hidden here? What had they done with his brother's body? Clearly Troyes had broken the rules. The lycans could have slain him simply for committing the rites on their lands.

Then a thought occurred to him that should have sooner. Lycans did not bottle blood. They were not hemovores. Troyes died here and Isranon went south—Isranon had to be the one that bottled Troyes' blood. Did the lycans merely kill Troyes, and Isranon bottle the blood afterward? Or did Isranon kill Troyes? Malthus felt he was getting closer to the facts of his brother's murder.

Malthus slid down the boulders, off the final one, and walked toward the table where Beth lay, running his finger

along the bleeding table with its grooves and spouts for carrying the blood of victims into basins. She flinched when he touched her. Malthus ignored that, observing that her womanhood was still oozing with Egidius' and Laetus' cum. There were fresh bite marks on her arms and legs. The bloodstains interested him more than Beth did. They were old and nearly erased from the stone, but rites had been committed here, he could feel it. He wondered if Troyes had died on this table.

"Have you decided about her?" Egidius asked, sauntering up to him. "Her body is strong, but her mind is going. The sooner I can stick her, the more pleasure I'll get out of it. I don't get off on sticking the mindless. They don't react to the pain as well."

"I want to see what's in that courier's satchel first. Then I'll tell you whether you can stick her now or not."

Laetus came over and leaned against the table with his elbow propped on Beth's breast. "Can we at least cut her a little? She's lycan. She'll heal."

"Very well. Just a little."

Malthus sat down beside the table and waited, enjoying the sound of Beth's screaming, inhaling the fragrance of her terror and pain. Night deepened and Malthus dozed against the table, dreaming of dead women. A little past midnight the returning imps awakened him.

They laid the slain courier's body at his feet and placed the message pouch beside it. It had lost its bird form and was now a fragile-boned, feathered mon. Some pieces were missing from the body, indicating that at least one or two of

the imps had fed on it. They had an interesting resistance to toxins that allowed them to eat both poisoned and spoiled meats. Once he had his lands, he would create a large laboratory and test the limits to their resistances and immunities. But it would not do to tell Gahni that.

"No messages get in or out of this valley that I do not send," Malthus ordered. "Make certain that is understood by the others."

The imps scattered to spread the word.

Malthus fished in the satchel, bringing forth three letters. Two were addressed to Nevin Scarface, the lycan battle-clan chieftain, from Claw. The third, in Merissa's lovely hand, was addressed to Nevin also. He tore that one open first.

Nevin,

When are you going to tell him about the child? I cannot keep pretending that he'll come. I know he isn't coming back. But please, please tell Isranon about his son. Grant me that much."

Merissa.

Malthus crumpled the paper angrily. So the renunciate butt-boy had sired the child, not Troyes. Had Troyes and Isranon fought over Merissa and his brother been slain? No, that was impossible. The prince's catamite had not been powerful enough to stand against Troyes. Although Isranon may have bottled the blood afterwards, Malthus still felt certain the lycans had slain his brother.

He went inside the cave and lit a lamp. Then he took up pen and paper, writing a swift letter to Lord Daemon.

Lord Daemon,

The lesser renunciate, Isranon, has a son by Merissa Redhand, out of wedlock. The child is two and a half years old and named Darmyk. As you know, he runs now with the other renunciate, Lord Dawnreturning and that cursed freeranger unit called Gryphonheart's Rowdies. If this information has served you in any way or will, send me a token and details on what you wish me to do about it.

Ever your servant,
Malthus

Abruptly, his mind turned another corner. Merissa had lied to him about the mon wanting to know his son. Isranon did not even know he had one. Interesting. Merissa did not want anyone to suspect how deeply she felt rejected, how much she feared her son would be rejected by his father just as she had been by her own kind when the knowledge of her pregnancy emerged. She would prove a more vulnerable target than he had dreamed.

Malthus ran his tongue over his descending fangs. The sa'necari was hungry, very, very hungry. He would go out and wake Beth, who had spent the night sleeping on the bleeding table, waiting to die. At least he had something solid to answer his suspicions. Darmyk was Isranon's son. It scarcely seemed possible that a woman like Merissa would prefer a half-a-mon like Isranon to a male as powerful as his brother had been.

The only thing he wanted more was proof that Isranon was Dawnreturning. The possibility was the source of endless debate, but if Isranon was Dawnreturning, then it would answer how he had been powerful enough to overcome

Troyes—if that was what had happened. Malthus remembered the feel of Isranon's fourteen-year-old body squirming under him, desperate to get free, and how easily he succumbed to Malthus' spells. There was no way he could be Dawnreturning. There was no way he could have killed Troyes—not without some kind of treachery.

He bit into Beth's arm wakening her. She moaned and then began to whimper. Feeling malicious, Malthus drew his belt knife and caressed her body with the point while he fed.

The chieftain was fond of his grandson and so were the rest of the clan, even if the matter had gotten off to a rocky start. It would be worth all his time and effort among these trembling, boring folk, to take their little prince. First he needed to get Merissa to trust him. Then he would find a way to get the boy away from her so that he would rite the child—unless, of course, Lord Daemon had a better offer to make him.

Malthus was tired of concealing his nature, scent, and essence from them; tired of being simply Daemon's agent. The sa'nekaryiane would pay him well for the child's death once she learned of its existence. He might even get paid by both of them, Daemon and Galee. If their offers weren't substantial enough, however, he might decide to rite the boy and send pieces of him to his sire, simply because he belonged to Isranon.

One of the things that made him more accomplished than other sa'necari who chose to support themselves through bounty hunting, was that he did not rely upon his spells and hellblades to achieve the deaths. He had trained from

childhood with all the weapons that the humans, sylvans, and their allied races used. None of his kills would have the earmarks of a sa'necari assassination.

He lifted his lips and wiped the blood off with a handkerchief.

Egidius came out of the cave yawning. "Well? Have you made a decision?"

"I need Beth a little longer."

"Thank gods," Beth murmured. "I wasn't ready to die."

"You're giving her too much free speech," observed Laetus.

"She has none in front of outsiders. Find a vein and breakfast before we leave."

* * * *

Malthus sat on a bench in the chieftain's garden watching the children play. It had become a daily ritual. Merissa sat beside him, her hand on the cold stone, and his hand covering hers. She allowed him that much without pulling away from him, but she still refused to give him more. Today she was very unhappy with him.

"I don't care what kind of woman Beth is," Merissa repeated. "You must be blunt with her. If you are going to keep seeing me."

"Merissa..." Malthus lowered his head in shame. "I keep telling her that."

"Then you are not being firm enough."

"I don't want to hurt her."

"What about me? You're hurting me. If you are going to continue seeing me, then you must stop seeing Beth."

Malthus let his shoulders sag. "So be it. I will stop seeing her except in public on matters pertaining to the camp." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. "You are too precious ... too dear to me. I won't let anything or anyone make you unhappy."

"Malthus..." Her tone softened.

Malthus leaned in with her fingers on his lips until only her fingers remained between her lips and his. Then he drew her hand slowly down until his lips pressed hers. His other hand slipped to the back of her head as he parted her lips and kissed her deeply.

* * * *

Nikko went looking for Shalto and Oswyl. He missed Tempest and, with the death of the old priest, had no one to really advise him. At nineteen, Nikko was the youngest lawgiver the lycans had had in their extensive history. He had shouldered the burden at sixteen when Nevin left abruptly with his spirit-brother Isranon. Nikko knew all of the laws with the perfect memory of one who had trained since childhood by reciting them. He knew the cases and histories of the clan. Because of Tempest and Nevin, he was also literate, unlike three-quarters of his people. Yet, he didn't always know how to proceed on some matters.

He wanted to know how the rumors about Beth had started and when she had begun seducing half the village. It troubled him because he had grown up around her, and part of him could not let go of his memories of her as a warm, soft, comforting presence that he could curl up with when he

was a cub. He used to play in the field where the camp was now. Beth always licked the blood off his skinned knees, cuddled him when he cried because the older children played rougher. It was Beth he had gone to when Nevin left, and Nikko felt overwhelmed by his responsibilities.

The image of Beth as a slut who could not get enough jarred painfully against his memories. If she had been a slut before, surely someone would have noticed it, surely he would have noticed it. Certainly, Nevin would have told him before he left. Sluts were troublemakers, whether they were male or female. And then there was that newcomer, Malthus, who seemed to exert an uncanny influence over Beth. He could not help but notice the unseemly adoration in her eyes for the mon, and the way he failed to reciprocate it. All of his instincts were screaming that Malthus was trouble.

He went to the Difficult Horse Tavern. Hereward always kept the lamps either off or turned down in the daytime to keep the dark interior cooler during the summer. It took Nikko's eyes a moment to adjust.

"Can I get ya somethin' nice, lawgiver?" Hereward the taverner shouted.

Nikko shook his head as he scanned the room. "No, thanks, Hereward. I'm looking for someone."

He spied Shalto and Oswyl having a tankard of mead at their favorite corner table. Nikko strode over, put his palms on their table, and loomed over them. "I want to talk to you both. Now. Outside. Or I'll have you both arrested."

Shalto looked up, his brows knitting. "We didn't do anything!"

Sensing trouble, Hereward laid his big club on the bar and eyed them. The club had silver spikes circling the top, making it a nasty weapon. "Do what the mon says."

Oswyl raised his hands in a fending off gesture. "I don't know what has you upset, but I'll cooperate."

Shalto, seeing he would get no support from his cousin, and fearing Hereward, gave a quick relenting nod before following Nikko out of the tavern behind Oswyl.

"Now what is this about?" Shalto asked.

"Beth."

"I don't know what's got your hackles up there. I heard you were getting your share," Shalto said.

"I haven't touched Beth and you shouldn't be either. Something's not right about all this."

Shalto settled his shoulders against the wall of the Difficult Horse, arms crossed. "Everyone was talking about it. So we decided to get our share."

A flush of anger swept Nikko and he started to shake, which startled him because he had never been that upset before. He grabbed Shalto by the collar and jerked him hard enough to stagger him. "You stay away from Beth. Tell the others to also. If matters are as you say, I can have her whipped out of the village and the rest of you with her."

Shalto's mouth parted, but no words came out. His lips wiggled a moment and then he sighed. "Lawgiver, you'll be making enemies."

"Are you threatening me, Shalto?"

Shalto lowered his eyes and shuffled his feet. "No. Just stating facts."

Nikko gave Shalto a shove that sent him stumbling, and turned on his heel, heading for the camp. When he reached it, Nikko paused in the yard and scanned it for signs of Malthus. He found none. So he knocked on Beth's door.

The door opened a crack and Beth peered around the edge. Nikko saw an odd glimmer in her eyes, and wondered why she didn't simply open it like she used to.

"As the lawgiver, I need to speak with you," Nikko said.

Beth's eyes widened and she gestured for him to enter. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"I'm hearing things that I wanted to talk to you about." Nikko walked past her and sat on a small stool.

"What kind of things?" She swayed her hips suggestively as she approached him.

Nikko blushed to the roots of his hair, and he could feel the red blooming all the way to his navel. "That you're a sl—a loose female."

Beth began unlacing her dress. "I've been waiting for you, Nikko. I knew you'd come eventually. They all do."

"That's not what I meant—I'm not here for that. I just wanted to talk."

"Of course you did, Nikko." She dropped her dress as she spoke.

Her nudity did not bother Nikko as much as her obvious intent. Furthermore, Beth's eyes looked strange and she smelled odd. He stood up. "We'll talk later."

Beth caught hold of his pants and shoved her hand in. Nikko yelped and changed to his hybrid form, which gave him

the strength to lift the heavy bitch bodily away from him.

"Stop it, Beth."

"So you like it rough?" Beth changed to match him. "I like it rough too. Do what you want to me."

She pulled the drawstring on his pants undone, and shoved them around Nikko's hips. Nikko clutched at his pants, and knocked her to the floor. She hit the ground hard, smiled, and opened her legs to him.

Where Nikko had been shaking with anger earlier, he was now trembling. He darted around her and left the longhouse. As he reached the yard, Nikko stopped to tie his pants closed, and the very last voice he wanted to hear greeted him.

"Got some, did you?" Shalto laughed.

Malthus, Shalto, Oswyl, and Torquil stood there watching him.

"It isn't what you think." Nikko blushed.

All of them except Malthus laughed at him.

"No more holier than thou, lawgiver," Oswyl said.

"Was she a good ride?" Torquil asked.

"It's not what you think!" Nikko shouted. "I didn't touch her."

Malthus inclined his head with a glance to the side. "And what else would it be, seeing you coming from her home pulling your pants up?"

"You're dirtier than the rest of us, Nikko," said Shalto. "At least we don't lie about it."

Nikko fled.

* * * *

Malthus returned home and found Beth waiting for him in the living room of his home. The girls were already sound asleep in their room. His temper flared. Nikko was probably out there at that very moment, watching the house. He had to rid himself of Beth. Merissa had kept repeating to him on their last walks together that he had to tell Beth that he was not interested in her.

Beth got up and embraced him, opening her shift. "I love you, Malthus."

Malthus shrugged her off. "Did you actually sleep with the lawgiver?"

Beth dropped her eyes. "No. I tried, but he refused me."

Malthus snarled, baring his fangs at her. "I have no use for you."

"Malthus, please. Don't be angry with me. I help you, Malthus."

"At least his reputation is stained now. No one believes that he hasn't been sticking it in you. I'd like it better if he had."

"I tried, Malthus. I tried."

He caught her arm, steering her into the room at the far end, where he shoved her down on his bed.

Malthus stripped his clothing off, dropping it in the corner by the bed. His member jutted from the thatch between his legs, hard and thick. His fangs came down. "Undress."

Beth obeyed.

Malthus spoke the triggering phrase that would make her go gladly to her death. "I'm going to make you beautiful."

Beth gave him a radiant smile. "I am ready for that."

"I know you are." He slammed into her mind with no pretense of art, twisting and turning the blade of his power. She whimpered and writhed.

"Tomorrow afternoon, in front of everyone you will run crying into the woods. You will refuse to tell them why. You will go to that cave I showed you and stay there with my people until Egidius comes for you. You will tell Egidius that you are ready to be rited. He will rite you with the greatest of artistry. Your death will be a thing of beauty."

Beth shuddered and tears ran down her face. "Yes, beloved."

He touched the hollow of her throat and stole her voice completely so that there would be no more words or sounds from her.

"He will let out your life with exquisite slowness." Malthus voiced the words as if he were speaking of love. He leaned over her, licking the tears from her face, enjoying the taste of fear and sorrow. "The blade will slide into you again and again, as he slips his cock into you."

Malthus' hands roved her body. "You will die well, Beth. When your soul shatters, part of you will always belong to him. Egidius is a master of elegance. He works slowly, using five blades in the style called Fifteen Piercings."

Beth shuddered as he walked his fingers over her, poking her in the places where the blades would be inserted. Then he bit savagely into her breast, and began to suck, determined to enjoy his final taste of Beth.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE BUTCHERING SERPENT

Malthus struck the ground again with his hoe, driving it in, heaving up grassy clods of earth, breaking up more clods, and then repeating in a nearly unendurable monotony. Ros and Lyrri sat beside the row of ground, shaking the bits of grass loose, and making piles of them to the side. Once finished, the girls would feed the gathered grass to the goats. Tomorrow they would put in the seed and the seedlings from the community mudroom.

"Ah, hells, I hate this," Malthus muttered.

Sweat glistened on his smooth chest, gilding the flare of his wide, bronze shoulders. His cotton, drawstring pants—the lightest weight garment he owned, which he had purchased in the deep south—felt heavy with sweat, and had slipped from his narrow waist to hang around his well-formed hips.

The lawgiver had informed him that now that his house was up, he had to have a private vegetable garden like the others. Those in the central sheelings had to work in the communal garden or help with the building and other camp chores. The ultimate goal, according the Nikko, had been independence, so that everyone became less of a drain on the resources of the camp and the donations of larger lycan community. He hated keeping up this pretense of being part of the community. At least his house was at the farthest edge out of sight of the others. He still spent the first half of each

day working at something the lycans considered normal, except when he went hunting. Hunting. If the lycans knew what he did when he went *hunting* they would not sleep so soundly in their beds.

Beth had been missing for a week, and no one had bothered to go look for her. Everyone assumed she had run off with someone, or moved on to a village where her reputation was not known. Clodagh, the young lycan who had taken over the day-to-day handling of the camp following the discovery of Beth's body, refused to stay there after dark. That had limited his opportunities to add Clodagh to his collection of tools.

Malthus had wanted to watch Beth rited, it had been years since he had witnessed the kind of artistry that Egidius brought to the rites, but had not wanted to risk being discovered away from camp on the same night she vanished. There had been no further sign of Sergei, but he didn't want to leave the girls alone on the chance that the vampire was lurking about, and someone would have known he was away if he left them with a sitter. Kandaishee was turning out to have an extremely susceptible and pliant mind. Eventually he would have her watching them whenever he needed to be away, and covering for his absences.

The sound of rushing footsteps on packed earth, and a swish of skirts and petticoats alerted Malthus of Merissa's approach. She was one of the few lycans who dressed like the ladies of the queen's court, with a form-fitting bodice and a wealth of under garments. Most of her people preferred clothing that would not hamper the change to wolf or hybrid.

Seeing her run along the path toward him, Malthus quit working. He walked to his house and leaned the hoe against it. "Go feed the goats and don't come back for a while," he told his nieces. They ran off obediently.

"Oh, Malthus! It's terrible!"

He could tell she had been crying. Malthus opened his arms to Merissa and she threw herself into them. "What's happened?"

"It's Beth. She's dead."

"Oh, gods, no." Malthus' voice caught. "What happened?"

"You remember the day she ran off, crying?"

"Yes, of course. How can I forget it? It was the day I told her I could never see her again." Malthus set Merissa back a bit to look in her eyes and noticed someone moving in the trees, watching them. Nikko. Every time he turned around that god-forsaken lawgiver was spying on him. Sooner or later, he'd catch that young idiot alone and that would be the end of him.

Merissa swallowed and then began to sob. "I'm sorry I made you tell her. Truly I am. I just thought..."

"It isn't your fault. If it's anyone's it's mine. Where did they find her?"

"Iudris Meadow where those battle-clan myn were slain. There was barely enough left of her for the Readers to identify. It's horrible."

"Were they able to tell what killed her?"

"No." Merissa began to weep harder.

Malthus wrapped his arms around her, holding her close, her face pressed against his neck. She was so deliciously

distraught and helpless, that it was all he could do to keep his fangs in their sheaths. "I am so sorry, Merissa."

"I'm afraid the war is coming here. I'm afraid that is what it means. I worry about Darmyk and his father."

"Why won't you name your lover, Merissa? Are you ashamed of him?" Malthus asked.

Merissa looked startled. "No. I'll never be ashamed of loving him."

"Does the boy know his father's name?"

"No."

"Love and what results from it, is nothing to be ashamed of." Malthus leaned in and kissed her. Merissa's lips yielded to his, parting. He slipped his tongue between them, flicking hungrily around her own. She pressed against him, her body moving along his. He cupped her breast, catching her nipple between his fingers and kneading. Merissa moaned, and arched her back. His hand traced her thigh, wishing that her petticoats were not preventing him from feeling the special place between her legs.

Abruptly, Merissa made a soft, almost indescribable sound that Malthus read as a sob mixed with longing. She pulled away from him and lowered her head, her face flushed, her breathing rapid and hard.

"I'm not ready."

Malthus crooked a finger under her chin and lifted her face up. "I'm falling in love with you."

She twisted away from him, refusing to face him. "Don't."

"Why? Am I that ugly?"

Merissa raised startled eyes to his face. "It isn't you."

"Is Beth going to haunt us?" He gripped her arms, kneading them.

"No. It isn't Beth either. I'm just not ready." Merissa shoved away from him and he let her go.

Malthus watched Merissa as she ran, her skirts lifted to free her feet. He licked his lips and ran his tongue across his fangs. "You'll be ready very soon, Merissa. Very, very soon."

More movement caught his eye, and Malthus observed Nikko leaving the grounds. "Follow me into the forest, Nikko," he murmured. "I know a good place for you to die."

* * * *

Like most shops in towns and villages, whether lycan or human, Baroucha's living quarters were upstairs above her work rooms. Ordinarily a village as large as Wolffgard would have had several healers and midwives. However, Baroucha resented competition. Gossip was her chief weapon and she wielded it with great effect to drive out anyone who dared to set up a competing shop and business. She tolerated the human apothecary, Atreius Ivanstern, only because he had access to drugs and herbs that she could not come by—mostly through connections in Creeya—and he was willing to sell to her at discount.

Clodagh had ordered some special creams from Baroucha after several of the camp's children had encountered a patch of poison ivy. Atreius had offered her large sums for her recipe, but she refused to sell it, thus making him dependent upon her for his own supplies. She had spent the day filling

seven jars for Clodagh and had them sitting on her counter waiting to be picked up.

The past few weeks had not been pleasant for Baroucha. She had caught glimpses of Cahira several times, always accompanied by Todd, or her two huge sons, or her daughter-in-law, that uppity bitch named Mary. They had not yet paid Baroucha the promised visit, and Baroucha wavered between fits of nervous anticipation and hope that it would never happen. Somehow, between the intervening years, Cahira had gone from being a healer of modest talents to becoming that rarest of lycans: a mage. The change in Cahira had left Baroucha feeling unsettled.

Baroucha went to the taverns each night in hopes of gleaning bits of rumor concerning Cahira, but learned nothing useful. Apparently, Cahira and her family were keeping to themselves. Baroucha sat in the front room of her shop at a long table, grinding dried herbs to powder with her mortar and pestle, work she normally did in her back room. So long as Cahira remained in Wolffgard, Baroucha wanted to spend her days watching out her windows for Cahira's approach.

When she finished with the herbs, Baroucha gathered it all into a basket and carried them into the backroom where she kept them. The room was a maze of cabinets, tables, and bookshelves. She had just begun putting the jars of herbs away when the bell she had hanging on the front rang, announcing a customer's arrival.

Baroucha flinched at the sound. "Cahira?"

"No," a male voice replied.

"Have a seat. I'll be right with you."

"Clodagh sent me."

Baroucha did not recognize the voice and started for the door when he appeared, silhouetted in sunlight from the front room. "No. No. Customers are not allowed back here. Go sit down."

"I'm allowed wherever I wish to be."

She frowned. "I've seen you around. You're..."

"Malthus. Malthus Estrobian."

"Malthus, you're not allowed back here. I must insist—"

He continued into the room and, as he came nearer, a shiver ran down Baroucha's back. She retreated from him.

"What do you want?"

"A private talk. I turned your sign to closed. No one will disturb us."

"Why?"

Malthus smiled and his fangs descended.

Baroucha glanced at his wrists, saw that he was not spellcorded, and decided not to provoke him. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Sit down over there." Malthus pointed at the table farthest from the door.

She obeyed, a sense of dread gathering in her chest.

"What do you want?"

Malthus moved about the back room, opening and closing the cabinets, examining their contents. He took out a bottle of black liquid that lacked a label, opened it, and sniffed the contents. "The Gentle Path. You're Guild?"

"No. I've a supplier in Creeya. That's all." Baroucha's voice shook.

"Good. I don't like Guild." Malthus continued to open bottles and jars, sniffing the contents. "You have quite a collection of poisons for a simple village healer."

"What would Guild be doing in Wolffgard?" She rubbed her hands together in a nervous washing motion.

"Looking for the Butchering Serpent?"

"The Serpent here?"

Malthus left his explorations of her supplies, walked around behind her, and kneaded her shoulders. "He's just become your partner."

"Gods, no." Baroucha shuddered as he breathed along her wrinkled neck.

"Be a good girl and I won't kill you."

"I'll be good." She flinched as his fangs broke the skin and he sucked her. His power swept through her mind and Baroucha sagged in her chair.

Malthus withdrew from her, licked the wounds closed, and stroked her dull gray hair, finding it as coarse and dry as straw. "I need workspace for some of my projects."

A small sob escaped from Baroucha as she managed a tiny nod.

He patted her shoulder. "There. There. I didn't hurt you that much."

"No."

Malthus chuckled at the timidity of her response. "I heard you were a surly bitch. Yet, what do I find? A mouse."

"Please..."

"Please what?"

"Don't hurt me."

He pulled at his oak leaf beard. "So predictable. I assure you, Baroucha ... some of the adjustments I intend to make to your brain will be extremely painful. But not all of them. Just remember, the less you resist, the less it will hurt."

"I'll be good."

"I assume those creams on the table are for Clodagh?"

"Yes."

"I'll take those now, but I'll be back tomorrow."

* * * *

Tension had begun to build up within the Lawgiver House ever since Nikko brought them word of Beth's death. That was also the last time either Finn or Kynyr had spoken to Nikko. It troubled the two young guardsmyn that the lawgiver had stopped coming around to talk. While they considered Nikko to be level-headed, they also knew the young wolf seemed to be carrying around a load of undeserved guilt that could easily drive him to some uncharacteristically rash actions.

Merissa came by nearly every day to check on Kynyr, sometimes with her mother and aunts in tow, and sometimes without them. Whenever they did, Cahira would absent herself.

Finn watched Kynyr cross the sitting room and settle into a large chair near the window. Cahira had begun letting him move about the house a few days ago. That meant that Cahira would be going back to Longbranch soon and she had not yet given Finn the rest of the story. His patience began to wear thin.

The sound of a coach and four outside alerted Finn to the arrival of the Redhands, and he got to his feet. "You've got company, Kynyr."

Kynyr nodded and stared at the ceiling. "You might as well tell Gram to have the Nibari bring lunch out instead of doing it herself."

Finn heard the door open. "I better duck out now. Merissa's starting to think I'm avoiding her also the way I keep excusing myself."

"Yeah. You do that."

Finn found Cahira sitting in the kitchen, her eyes focused on a window, yet looking at nothing.

"I heard them, Finn."

He slid into a chair across from her. "How much longer you going to be here?"

Cahira rubbed her eyes. "A week at most ... I think."

"Then you gotta finish the story."

"Finn, can't we just ... not?"

Finn shook his head. "If I don't know all of it, I can't help Kynyr."

When she looked at him, her eyes were so sad and worn that Finn almost withdrew his demands.

"The study?"

Finn stood up and went around to Cahira, offering her his arm. "Let's take the servants' stair so you don't have to deal with them."

Cahira managed a meager smile as she took his arm and allowed him to lead her upstairs to the same place where they had spoken before.

This time she went straight for the whiskey without bothering with tea first. Cahira drank two glasses of whiskey before she even began to talk, and Finn could see that it was costing her a lot.

"Where did I leave off?"

"You slept with him."

She covered her mouth, breathing deep and struggling.
"We fell in love. That's easy enough."

"I guess."

Cahira rubbed her hands over her face again, poured a third glass and sipped at it. "Baroucha found us in bed together. She spread it all over camp that I was a slut."

"You know for sure it was her?"

"Alistar told me it was her."

"Skinny old Alistar Heathwick?"

Cahira shook her head. "You never met him. He died before Branduff was born."

"Okay. Different Alistar. Keep going."

"You know what the word guurmondru means?"

"I don't think I've ever heard it before."

"I'm not surprised. It's one of those customs we've lost. I haven't heard anyone use that term in years. Take the terms godfather, mentor, and spiritbrother. Wrap them all together and you have a guurmundru. That's what Todd was to Tarrant."

Finn frowned, trying to get his head around that and not quite making it all mesh. In the end it seemed best to just let it go, pretend he understood, and keep her talking. "Okay."

"Todd and Sheradyn knew what was going on between Tarrant and me from the first. Nothing came of it. Nothing changed for me in camp ... until Baroucha stumbled upon us. At that point life became awkward. It suddenly seemed like all of the dogs in camp were trying to get into bed with me. I turned them down. Some were polite about it, and others got extremely ... insistent. Even rude. Especially Alistar Weems."

Cahira finished off another drink, refilled her glass, and resumed talking. "By then, Todd had taken me under his wing the way he had Tarrant. More to the point, Todd busted heads..."

"Those who were harassing you?"

"Yes. We made a pact not to take it to Tarrant. I was just to tell Todd if it got too hard to handle and he would take care of it."

"Did he take care of this Alistar?"

Cahira released a trembling sigh. "I'm getting there. Alistar refused to take no for an answer. He said that Baroucha told him I liked it rough and he intended to give it to me."

Finn's expression darkened with anger. "He raped you?"

"He ... tried. Todd caught him ... pulled him off me before Alistar could ... could consummate it. Todd not only beat Alistar senseless, he told Tarrant."

"Whoa!"

"To say that Tarrant was enraged would be understating it. They staked Alistar out over an anthill. Nude. Smearred with honey. Drove runed silver spikes through his wrists and ankles ... and one through his belly."

"That's nasty. But how does this—"

Cahira leaned close and put her fingers over Finn's lips. "Hush. If you keep interrupting, I'm not sure I can finish."

Finn swallowed and nodded.

She drank her whiskey and poured another.

Finn felt certain that if Cahira kept drinking at this rate she would be even sicker than she had been the previous time. So he gave another nod and waited for her to continue.

"Rumor claimed that Alistar had several minor mage gifts. There was only one I knew he had for certain. Alistar Weems had the Evil Eye."

Finn sucked a question back and left it unsaid.

"They took Alistar far from the camp to do it. I didn't know what they intended. Todd told me not to follow them. I did and I shouldn't have. I was like a moth circling a candle flame. Alistar kept screaming. On and on and on." Cahira shuddered. "The more he screamed ... the more I felt driven ... to look."

Finn grasped Cahira's hand, patting it without speaking.

"I'm okay. I'm okay. I'm almost finished." Cahira freed her hand from Finn and wiped at the tears running from her eyes. "By the time I got to Alistar, Todd and Tarrant had already left. The moon was full. I could see Alistar's face clearly. Oh gods." A sob escaped from Cahira. "Eighty years later and I can still see his face."

Cahira went silent and Finn struggled not to speak. Eventually, when Finn had nearly given up hope, she started talking again.

"Alistar looked at me and that's when he laid the curse. His voice was so strange. He didn't really sound like Alistar ... and

yet the words were coming from his mouth. The next day, Baroucha came to me. She called me a murderer. She said I had led Alistar on. She said he had cursed me and everyone I loved would die." Cahira poured herself another drink. "And that she was pregnant ... by Alistar."

Cahira folded her arms across her stomach and doubled over sobbing. "Finn, bear with me. This is where everything gets jumbled and patchy. Don't ask me to explain anything, because I can't.

"Tarrant was on his way home from Clan Silverpaw. We had learned that the diviners were destroyed and we no longer needed to fear them. There were rumors that the Guild had finally involved itself. The surviving diviners had gone into hiding. Everywhere, our people were celebrating it as a victory."

Finn nodded.

"Halfway between Running Horse and the Bonnie Draw River, they were ambushed. Tarrant and his brother were taken captive. Todd was the only survivor. They left him for dead. If a peddler named Dyna had not stumbled upon him, Todd would have died with the rest of them. When word of it reached us..." Cahira sucked in a troubled breath. "It came on the heels of ... sighting a large force of Sa'necari led troops, most of them demons and the like. I was more than halfway through my pregnancy with Branduff. We didn't even stand and fight. We broke and fled."

Cahira took another drink of whiskey. "I thought both Tarrant and Todd were dead. I couldn't think straight. Baroucha and I fled together. I don't know why I left with her

... only that I did. She abandoned her cub at a monastery in the mountains. She knew I was terrified and she kept ... reminding me of Alistar's curse upon the Redhands ... telling me his curse had killed Logan, Tarrant, and Todd. And when she wasn't telling me that, she was telling me that the Redhands would take Branduff away from me and cast me out as a slut. She said many other things too. I don't remember half of it. I was so frightened and confused. By the time I reached Wolffgard, Claw and Aisha had been allowed to return to the manor with the bodies of their sons. Tarrant had been laid in the ground weeks before I got there. Baroucha went with me to see Aisha. Gods, I wish I could remember it right. I'm sorry, Finn. But I don't. I fled as soon as Aisha asked if Branduff belonged to Tarrant. I babbled that I had slept with half the army."

Cahira drank her whiskey down, poured another, and drank that. "You want to know what the strangest thing is?"

Finn nodded.

"Everything I said to Aisha about myself ... described Baroucha, not me." Tears started down Cahira's face. "Baroucha followed me as far as Three Stones, telling me I owed her a child and that she intended to take Branduff in payment. I suppose I would have been lost completely, except I encountered a friend of Todd's named Phelan and he got me back to my father's home in Longbranch. And that's where Todd found me."

"But why won't you tell them now? That's in the past."

"Because..." Cahira fixed Finn with a stare. "I believe there really is a curse." She drank her whiskey and poured another.

Finn covered her hands. "I think you've had enough."

"Let go of my hands."

Finn reluctantly released her.

"Curses are odd things. You have to know how to break them or how to evade them. They're very literal. I know nothing of breaking curses, Finn. But I know a lifetime's worth of how to outrun them."

"What did the curse say, exactly?"

"I don't remember it all. Just pieces of it. All the Redhands shall perish, until only the exile remains. There were a couple of other lines in there. Then 'the exile's victory shall be his pardon and those he claims will rule.'"

Finn licked his lips thoughtfully. "Maybe it isn't a curse."

Cahira looked startled. "What else could it have been?"

"A prophecy?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

NIKKO

Nikko knew that Malthus rode frequently into the forest, allegedly to hunt; yet he rarely came back with anything these days. So Nikko began staying out all night in his wolf form, watching Malthus' home. He always left his home, went into the forest and changed into a wolf there after hiding his clothing. Then he would swing wide and come around behind Malthus' house, which required crossing a stream that ran through the village, to lie in wait for Malthus to leave. Eventually his patience was rewarded, and Malthus rode out just before sunrise one day with his packhorse in tow. Nikko slipped through the trees and underbrush after him, moving from shadow to shadow, trotting as fast as the terrain allowed. Malthus turned onto a hunter's trace, and Nikko followed. As Nikko moved deeper into the forest he knew so well, he began to hear creatures in the trees, chittering back and forth in a language he failed to recognize.

He gradually became aware of them being on all sides of him. Their numbers increased steadily and now he caught flashes of orange skin. He did not know what they were, for their scent was unfamiliar. Yet he could smell their hostility. It raised the hackles on his neck. One of them stood forth in the treetops, giving Nikko his first clear view of one. It was a nude male, wearing only a belt of pouches that also held a blowgun, a bandoleer of darts, and a necklace of bones.

Nikko recognized them from drawings in Tempest's books: imps. Their darts would be either poisoned or drugged. Nikko realized that he was in trouble, and knew that he needed to break free before they closed with him.

He reared up in his transitional form and broke for what he believed to be the weakest portion of them. Nikko found two facing him with their blowguns to their lips. They fired, striking Nikko in the shoulder and arm. He throttled one and broke the other's head open against a tree, dropping the bodies on the tarry black soil. Darts peppered him from all sides. Nikko shrugged them off, bursting into the open. For an instant, Nikko experienced a lightness that he interpreted as relief at getting free of them. He felt over his body, grabbing the darts from his flesh, and dropping them on the ground.

Then suddenly, he felt as if he had struck a wall or run headlong into a large tree. Nikko blinked dully, feeling the poison hitting his system harder than he had expected. He had hoped that his hybrid form would be able to shake off most of it. But he had been wrong. Lethargy crept over him and a trembling weakness swept through his muscles. Confusion and disorientation caused Nikko to make a stumbling circle that brought him back onto the game trail. Gazing ahead of him, Nikko saw Malthus standing with his bow raised at full draw and an arrow to the string.

"What are you doing?" Nikko asked, swaying like a drunkard.

For answer, Malthus released the shaft and drew another.

Nikko tried to dodge the missile, but the dart drugs had slowed his reflexes. The arrow struck Nikko in the chest and

he staggered, feeling the burn of some incredible poison in his body, far worse than the other.

"Devil's Silver. I'm killing you," Malthus said calmly, releasing his second shaft.

Nikko clutched at the shaft protruding from his chest as the second one hit him in the ribs. He crashed through a stand of briars and stumbled into the trees trying to flee. The shaft snapped off in his hand and fell into the briars when he tried to jerk it out, leaving the long, barbed head lodged in his chest and lungs, spreading the poison into his blood stream. *Devil's Silver ... oh, gods. It must be...*

Two more arrows pierced his back, making him jerk and stagger. Another flight of darts punctured his body. The imps chattered excitedly, crying out their victory over him.

All of Nikko's muscles hurt from the swift acting toxins. He thought of Nevin, his first mentor, who had been an exemplar of courage, and steeled himself to fight it. He had to tell someone, but his sense of direction failed him.

"You're dying, Lawgiver. No need to run." Malthus put another arrow to the string.

Nikko did not stop. A fifth arrow pierced his thigh, nearly dropping him. Nikko's fingers dug into the wound around the shaft, forcing the leg to hold him up. Had it not been for the Devil's Silver, he might have won free. Lycans could take horrendous damage from normal weapons. He forced himself a few more steps and then a few more. A sixth arrow hit him low, close to his spine. The smallest movement had become torment. He could hear Malthus and the imps following him.

"I killed the priest. I killed Beth. Now I've killed you. No one interferes with me," Malthus shouted at him. "I'm sa'necari."

Nikko staggered on, weaving from side to side. *Sa'necari! How could we not have known it?* A fit of coughing nearly sent him to his knees. Blood, white froth, and yellow bile foamed around his muzzle. Some force inside him said, "keep going, keep going," and he did, even though he knew Malthus was right—he was dying.

The young lycan clutched at his chest and stomach as he struggled onward. *I'm a fool. I should have gone to Claw with my suspicions.*

"Follow him. He won't get far. There's enough poison in him to kill twenty lycans," Malthus said. "Retrieve my points from his body. And my shafts."

Imps scampered after Nikko.

You're right, you bastard ... I won't ... get far. But maybe ... far enough.

He heard Malthus riding off in another direction. Nikko's vision blurred. Fits of spasming rushed through his muscles, making his body twitch and cramp. Nikko felt weak and tired, with a pressure in his chest like a fist closing around his lungs and heart. The constriction left him struggling to breathe, unable to voice a warning howl into the dwindling light—assuming it could be heard by anyone—or scream at his pain and anguish.

He could barely keep his feet, could barely move. He focused on picking one foot up and then the other. Nikko's feet slid around under him. His knees kept threatening to

drop him as if they belonged to a broken doll. Two huge willow trees grew close together ahead of the young lawgiver. He heard the river rushing a few feet beyond the trees. If he threw himself in the river, perhaps his body would wash up near one of the fishing villages. They could match the arrows in his body to those Malthus carried, identifying his murderer.

Nikko tottered into the trailing curtain of branches, clutching at a trunk to hold himself up. The fletching on five shafts protruding from his body looked like small, dark birds perched in the willow curtain. The shafts caught on the branches as he struggled for one last step—the step that would carry him into the water—and twisted the heads in his wounds. The death scream he had been unable to voice earlier erupted from his throat in a long ululation of suffering.

* * * *

Malthus dismounted before the bleeding table at his brother's cave—that was how he had begun to think of it—his brother's cave. A dead body draped the table and seven more hung from sturdy poles with their heads tied back, their throats cut, and their blood draining into basins. He hoped that his companions had brought plenty of preserving bottles: the valley was rich in blood. Malthus had arrived at the meeting ready to be fed, but not expecting it. Food appeared plentiful and fresh—assuming they had held something back for him.

Egidius, Laetus, and five others sat on the ground and small boulders: two Rakshasas in their lovely female forms, sat sharing a dismembered arm, slicing chunks from it with

their long knives; a huge, barrel-chested brukulaco kept licking his lips hungrily while gazing at the bodies on the poles; and a pair of lamiae waited for their share of lycan flesh, their female human torsos emerging from the coils of their serpentine legs. Malthus nodded at them. Lord Daemon had procured him some very powerful allies, which was necessary when dealing with the tough lycans.

A banshee like cry, half-wail, half howl shattered the air.

Egidius' head came up sharply. "What was that?"

Malthus shrugged. "Lycan death scream. You've heard them often enough."

"Yes, but so close to here..."

Malthus smirked. "That was the lawgiver. I shot him. Nikko turned out to be a more impressive specimen than I expected." He moved around the table, examining the dead lycan there. She had been almost pretty. "I hope you saved some for me. I haven't had a rite in months."

"We did. Our scouts stumbled on an isolated group of steadings. The last of the males have been drained, as you can see." Laetus pointed at the bodies on the poles. "We have a dozen women and children chained up in another cave."

"Excellent. I've been craving a rite." Malthus stroked the corpse, sticking his fingers in the wounds, pulling them out, and licking them. "You haven't been done with this one long."

Laetus laughed, his eyes dancing merrily. "You're good, Malthus. I'd barely gotten my pants pulled up when we heard your horse."

"Lycans don't call me the Butchering Serpent for naught." He slapped Laetus on the shoulder. "I'll pick out some to be

sent to my estate in Carrion Crevasse. I want to start my experiments again when this job is done."

"What did you mean by impressive?" Egidius asked.

Malthus chuckled. "My imps had him looking like a porcupine. I put three arrows into him before it even slowed him down. I put two more into him to be certain he didn't get far. And then another. Judging from that scream, it still took him a while to die."

The imps would eat Nikko and then bring a few trophies back to Malthus, as they always did. The toxins in Nikko's corpse would not so much as give them indigestion. With luck, the imps would bring him Nikko's runes. He wanted to analyze the way they had been consecrated. The lycans were primarily ancestor worshippers, only recently turning to the Nine Elder Gods of Light.

"What news?" Malthus asked them.

"Our eastern units saw fighting with the remnants of that battle-clan. We exterminated them. Word should be reaching the villages eventually. We butchered the bodies to feed our allies, drained the captives and wounded. But you know lycans; they don't need bodies to know what went down there. That's why they have wet noses."

"We need to take a few hamlets soon," Malthus said, pulling at his mustaches. "Eliminate the little stuff and then move on to bigger game. I want to frighten the lycans."

"Our units are in place around three of them. And what are you going to be doing in the meantime?"

"I'm getting married to the most beautiful lycan in creation."

"You said that about Dyllys. You rited her the day before the wedding. You have no idea how that affected me. I was looking forward to the parties afterwards."

"I had my reasons," Malthus snarled. "But Merissa is far more beautiful than Dyllys ever was. Furthermore, she's already had one sa'necari child. That means she should be able to give me several heirs."

"Thinking of settling down?" Egidius smirked.

"I am. Mother would approve of her."

Laetus guffawed. "Your mother would approve of anything that got you back into the family business."

Malthus shrugged and turned his back on Laetus, the fool was young and too easily amused. "I forgot to ask, Egidius ... did you enjoy Beth?"

Egidius joined Malthus beside the table. "Yes, indeed. I made a proper rite of it. The full Fifteen Piercings. Dedicated her death to Bellocar in your brother's name."

"Thank you." Malthus hugged Egidius. "You're a fine friend."

* * * *

Nikko fell to his knees, hunched over. Some of the shafts struck the ground, moving the barbs in his body. He groaned, wheezed, and coughed up more blood. Nikko broke off the shaft whose point lay buried in his lower ribs. He desperately wanted to lie down. Weak and exhausted, he bent forward, resting on his hands among the roots of the willow trees, unable to go any farther. He thought of trying to crawl to the water, but his arms trembled violently and gave out. With no

strength or will remaining, Nikko instinctively curled up on his right side to die, which slowed the amount of blood seeping into his good left lung.

He smelled reeds and the sweetness of the water lilies.

He wished he could have heard birds one last time, but the imps had scared them away.

He thought of his mother, and wondered who would take care of her when he failed to come home.

Another round of small convulsions shook him and the world went hazy. Each moment of anguish seemed to stretch forever.

How long does it take to die? Let it end. Please, gods, let it be over. I can't take anymore ... I can't take the pain.

Nikko tried to embrace his death, and slide away into it, so that the pain would cease. People in the stories did it. Nikko couldn't.

The imps came out of hiding and crouched around him, licking their lips like hungry scavengers. The one that Nikko had seen earlier wearing a necklace of bones and teeth approached him. Nikko tried to lift his hand to shove the creature away, but could not find the strength to move. It squatted in front of him, grinning with a mouthful of misshapen, yellowed teeth. The leader gestured, speaking in a few high-pitched sounds.

They grabbed Nikko and yanked him out of his curl. One behind him forced the shafts through his body so that the barbed heads ripped out of him. Nikko groaned, and cried aloud. His body discharged its wastes, leaving him feeling like a sick, brutalized puppy.

The leader broke the heads off, and dropped them into a pouch at its waist.

Mother, I'm so cold. For a moment, he felt her presence, his mind blurred and he was a cub being wrapped in a blanket. *Mother, hold me. I'm afraid.*

The sensation vanished with a wave of fresh searing pain as the one behind Nikko jerked the betraying shafts back through him. The imp bundled the shafts, and passed them to the leader, who tied them to its bandoleer: there would be no evidence of who had slain him. Despair enveloped Nikko like a wet blanket in the snow, chilling him to the marrow of his bones.

Another one picked up his arm and bit a chunk from it. A canine whimpering, more animal than human, came from Nikko's throat. Their leader, the one wearing the necklace, thrust this fellow away, and gestured for the others to draw back. They obeyed, making complaining noises.

The one that had bitten Nikko sat chewing the piece of his flesh and grinning. "Guud," he muttered in that squeaking imp tenor. "Tasty."

Nikko's stomach surprised him by clenching up—he had thought his body incapable of reactions. This one had spoken in Common to be certain that Nikko knew they were going to eat him. Nikko prayed they would let him die first.

The imp leader grabbed the lawgiver runes around Nikko's throat to yank them off, and yelped. He sat back on his haunches, shaking his burned fingers. The runes had been consecrated generations ago and could not be touched by a creature of the darkness.

Nikko felt a small flash of satisfaction at that.

The leader snarled, seized Nikko's hand, bit his forefinger off, and dropped it in a pouch.

Nikko grimaced, moaned low in his throat, and closed his remaining fingers.

It can't be much longer. Not when I hurt like this.

The leader stepped back, gestured for the feast to begin, and left. They swarmed over Nikko.

Oh gods, no. Nikko's mind shrieked as they bit him. He realized what the deer felt like when his people, running as wolves, pulled them down in the winter hunting.

A large creature crashed through the trees near Nikko and then another. The imps screeched. Nikko could smell their panic. He heard a swish of something heavy and several imps fell dead across him, their blood mingling with his. The others fled through the trees with a crashing of leaves and branches. Battle-magics filled the air with an acrid odor.

Then silence.

Nikko's awareness narrowed into darkness. He knew it was nearly over for him and the evidence had been carried away.

Hands touched him and he felt the wash of a Reader's power through him. Someone forced a bottle between Nikko's teeth, a burning liquid poured into his mouth as a hand thumped his chest. "Swallow, damn you. Swallow. It will help."

Nikko swallowed convulsively. The liquid burned worse going down than it had in his mouth, yet the pain eased.

"It's bad," said a voice with the lilting accents of the Faery folk. "I don't think he'll make it. There's Devil's Silver all through him."

Nikko opened his eyes and his fading sight took in the visage of the ugliest human he had ever seen. Beside that one crouched a slender Fae with a pair of golden fans folded and tucked into his sash. He had to tell them, and tried to force the words out. "Saaaa ... Saaaaa ... necari. Mal—" Nikko's head listed to the side, settled on the arm of the ugly human, and he went still.

"Was that a word or name he was trying to say? Mal?" Hathura asked, glancing at Lokynen, as he unshouldered his pack, dug around in it and brought out lengths of linen. He bandaged Nikko's wounds, and removed the darts from his body.

"Devil's Silver?" Lokynen asked, wishing that his wife Amberlin were with him. She knew all of that stuff. However, she was too close to giving birth to be risked out here.

"Silver dissolved into an arcane acid that is compatible with certain snake venoms and plant poisons," said Hathura. "Unless we get him to Navaryn fast, he'll die. It may already be too late. He's lapsed into shock." He shouldered his pack and rose with Nikko cradled in his arms like a child as if the full-grown lycan weighed nothing at all.

"Jump out of here."

"I can't. The Jump alone would kill him. Run with me."

* * * *

Three dead lycans had been removed from the poles and Malthus' allies sat eating them. The brukulaco had a femur in his hands from which all the flesh had been gnawed off. He broke the femur open and began sucking out the marrow as he watched the imps approaching.

"Ahhhh," Laetus said. "Here they come."

The leader of the imps trotted up to Malthus. He reached into his pouch, took out a bloody severed finger, and put it in Malthus' hand. "Dead now." He gave Malthus a pouch, untied the shafts, and dropped them at Malthus' feet.

Malthus opened it and counted the points. "All here. You did well, Gahni." Counting the shafts, he frowned. "One's missing."

"Give more meat?" Gahni asked, gesturing at the lycan corpses hanging from the poles.

"Take one down and enjoy it," Malthus said. "But see that you find the other shaft before morning."

"Generous. We find."

Malthus wondered about the missing shaft. Perhaps he should change his fletching. No. Gahni's people would find it. He felt certain of that. "Well, it's time for you to show me that cave. I want to pick one out and have that rite I've been starving for."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DECISIONS

Navaryn's house nestled in a tiny dell that had only one outlet, a narrow neck in the stone that required myn to pass single file. A sheer cliff blocked the back with a waterfall descending from its heights to feed the stream running through the center of the little valley. Her gifts concealed the entrance from those who had been given permission to approach her. Elms and maples shrouded the garden and the yard. Goats and sheep bleated in the pasturage behind the house. Two big dogs rushed out at Lokynen and Hathura, sniffed at them and then the mon in Hathura's strong arms. The dogs trotted back to the house to let their master know that she had company.

The master of the house was standing on the veranda when they reached it. Navaryn toyed with a long length of her pale, silvery hair as she reached out to touch Nikko. "A village lawgiver," she said, noting the runes hanging from his neck. The lycan born yuwenghau Read Nikko with a quick brush of her fingers. "Arrow wounds and he's full of Devil's Silver. Bring him."

Hathura tossed an irritating glance at Lokynen, as if to say: *yes, there is such a thing.*

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

more rooms and a stairway to the second floor. Navaryn's daughter, Pandeena was just coming down the stairs. She wore a soft, knee-length shift and light sandals whose thongs wrapped up her shapely legs to the hem of her shift.

Navaryn gestured for Pandeena to come with them. "I need you."

Pandeena squeezed against the balusters so that they could pass, and followed them back upstairs. She ran to the linen closet in the hall and returned with several thick pads.

Hathura carried Nikko into a guest room that Navaryn indicated with her hand. Pandeena darted past Hathura, turned back the covers, and spread the pads on it. It was easier on a patient to change the pads than to change complete bed linens. They were also very absorbent and easily cleaned.

Navaryn helped them settle Nikko on the bed. She glanced at them. "Hathura, you know better than to tear barbed heads from someone."

Hathura looked distressed by her statement. "I didn't do it. Imps did. None of the shafts or heads were left behind either."

Navaryn frowned. "That's strange."

Pandeena went to tall chest of drawers, opened one, and started laying her mother's tools and medicines out on the nightstand.

"What's more." Hathura touched Nikko's hand, indicating the missing finger. "Their leader bit his finger off and took it with him as a trophy."

"Proof of his death?" Navaryn suggested. "Imps don't use arrows, although they've shot him full enough of Death Lotus to put him down."

Hathura and Lokynen exchanged glances. "We didn't see anyone else," Lokynen said.

Navaryn began cutting away the bandages and probing the wounds as she spoke. "Damn! These imps never leave evidence behind. Their master is cunning."

"You know him?" Lokynen asked.

"Only by his deeds and his trademark. Hundreds of my people have died at his hands. He's the Butchering Serpent."

"You should leave now," Pandeena said. "Mother and I must try to draw the poisons out of him and mend his injuries." She gazed down at Nikko. "He's so young, mother, to be suffering like this."

"It's always the young males who die first in these wars. Now hush and work," said Navaryn.

* * * *

Hathura followed Lokynen down to the sitting room before either of them said anything. Dark brown polished furniture filled the airy room, contrasting pleasantly with the whitewashed walls and blue carpets. Linen curtains fluttered in the breeze from seven huge windows. Sofas, heavy chairs, and long, low tables filled it. Despite the obvious stoutness of the furniture, only the largest chair at the far end felt comfortable to Lokynen's massive body. So he headed for that one, as was his wont.

"What do you know about this Butchering Serpent?" Lokynen asked.

"Rumor mostly," Hathura replied. "A battle-clan hit a manor house that the Sharani missed. It was well hidden in one of these interminable craggy valleys. There are thousands of them in the Eiralyskali Mountains. Any way, their leader had heard that someone was kidnapping lycans, mostly city lycans, and experimenting on them. The manor was abandoned when they arrived. The owner must have gotten wind of their coming."

Lokynen took his favorite seat.

Hathura's eyes lidded as he sat down in a chair by the window nearest him.

"And?" Lokynen asked impatiently.

Hathura sucked in a breath. "What they found in the basements were cells filled with dead or dying lycans. Mutilations, vivisections, poisonings. Those that lived long enough told them of mass graves on the estate. Spellcorded lycans, with coercions in their minds to prevent flight or fight, had been forced to dig the graves for their own kind. The graves were found. They contained more than two hundred bodies. All lycan."

"Did they describe the bastard?"

"No. He came to them masked. They did know one thing. He was sa'necari."

"Damn them! I'd like to see every single one of them dead."

"So would I," Hathura said softly. "Sooo would I."

"How many villages are close to where we found this mon?"

Hathura considered. "Close enough for him to have traveled in half a day?"

"Yeah."

"Three. There's a fishing village near Big Willows. That's where we found him. Big Willows. There's Wolffgard where the chieftain lives about half a day southwest on the banks of the Eirlys. I seriously doubt the main village would have such a young lawgiver. Last time I was there it was a big lycan named Nevin Scarface. And there's Muddy Paws to the east of Big Willows."

"Can I get either of you wine?" Navaryn's housekeeper, a middle-aged lycan named Ruthvena, entered with a tray bearing a bottle of red wine, plates of cheeses, and glasses. She set the tray on a nearby table and opened the bottle.

"I could use it," Lokynen said.

They drank for a time and then Lokynen asked, "Could you Jump me around to those villages to have a talk with some of the folk?"

"Jumping, old friend, isn't as simple as you think it is. First you have to have visited a place or already gotten some kind of fix on it. Then you must make certain you're going to pop out in an unoccupied spot. You don't want to materialize partly in someone else's body or a wall."

"Then how am I going to check these places out?"

"Nothing is simple. We either walk or we see if Navaryn will loan us horses. Assuming she has anything big enough to carry you."

Lokynen glared at Hathura. "Okay. We walk."

"And another thing. They aren't going to trust you right off. You're not lycan."

"And we can't simply walk in and declare ourselves yuwenghau."

Hathura laughed at him. "No, we certainly can't. The first thing this Butchering Serpent would do would be to shoot us both—in the back."

"Take me back to where we found him. Maybe we can find which way he came from."

"All right my friend, finish your glass and give me your hand. Ruthvena, we're leaving. Tell Navaryn we won't be gone more than a day."

Lokynen put his big hand over Hathura's slender one and felt the tingle of a Jump. Instantly, they were back at the spot in Big Willows where they had come across Nikko. The bodies of dozens of slain imps lay scattered upon the ground and among the trees. Flies buzzed thick, crawling over the orange skinned corpses.

Hathura studied the ground, walked around the tree that Nikko had been found beneath, and pointed to the broken brush. "There's your trail."

They backtracked from there, and found the place where Nikko had left the hunter's trace. A bit of crimson and black feathers caught Hathura's eyes.

"Hmmm. What's this?" Hathura knelt and stuck his hand gingerly into the briars, withdrawing a broken shaft. "Let's take this to Navaryn and see if she recognizes the fletching."

"I want to know where he came from first," Lokynen said.

"I can tell you that. The game trail leads to a road that way." Hathura said. "He came from Wolffgard."

"Then I'm going to Wolffgard. The Serpent is there."

Hathura caught hold of Lokynen's massive arm; his long fingers could not encircle the limb. "Lokynen, listen to me. Our wounded wolf could have lived somewhere else and simply been visiting. We need to get someone inside that village to ask questions without drawing undue notice. The Butchering Serpent is extremely dangerous."

Lokynen shrugged Hathura and started down the game trail.

"If you mess up, Amberlin is going to be very disappointed in you."

Lokynen stopped in his tracks, turned slowly, and glared at Hathura.

"Just ask yourself, Lokynen, what would Amberlin do?"

"Talk to Navaryn."

Hathura nodded.

* * * *

Malthus sat feeding upon another slain messenger, sucking all the juices out of the limp body. His imps crouched around him, begging for pieces. They preferred the flesh. Thanks to his efforts, the valley was becoming increasingly isolated. He had slipped the garrote around their unwitting throats, yet they would not realize it until he tightened it and cut off their breath. No messages had gotten in or out for weeks. It was time to send Merissa one of his own and sign Nevin's name to it. Apparently Isranon had known about the child since late

spring, but Claw had chosen not to inform Merissa of that. He would need to send Claw one also in the same package.

He had begun to see many strange faces among the last batch of newcomers to arrive here. Most had come asking for refuge like the others, but some had simply appeared out of nowhere and taken up residence in various households or built their own on the east fringes of the lycan village. Some of them smelled of power, which made Malthus both curious and cautious.

His imps had eaten Nikko and tossed his bones in the river like they always did. No Reader would be able to establish Nikko's identity from his bones, nor what had killed him. Malthus had never expected that the poison would take so long to kill Nikko; therefore, he would change the formulation a bit, increase the amount of Devil's Silver in it, or use a more concentrated form on his next batch. If the right Reader got hold of those points, or the remains of one of his victims, they would recognize his trademark poison—but he had never missed a kill yet and no one would be able to connect his face to them. No victim had ever lived long enough to describe him.

Malthus liked the name the lycans had given him over the years: the Butchering Serpent. He had enjoyed telling Dyllys just who she had almost married that last morning, when she had awakened from drugged slumber on his altar. She had cursed, pleaded, told him she loved him, right up until the moment he shoved the first blade in. Then she had screamed. She deserved it for betraying the location of his manor to that battle-clan.

He wanted to take the chieftain alive, if possible, and kill him last. That would serve Claw for taking the Sharanis' part in this war. Once they took the first villages, Claw would be forced to take the field against them and that should leave the main village more vulnerable to their tactics.

A daydream of Merissa flitted into his mind. Malthus vividly imagined her writhing desperately and ineffectually beneath him as he violated her and sank his fangs into her lovely neck; watching her belly swell with his child; taking her home to his mother to show what a docile and loving wife she had become.

"You're daydreaming about her again, aren't you?" Egidius climbed up the rock to sit beside Malthus.

Malthus lifted his blood rimmed mouth, lowered the fragile windsmon's body to his lap, and snarled, "So what if I am?"

Egidius shrugged, making a gesture for peace. "I don't get it. That's all. I don't mind them on my altar or in my bed, but I'd never marry one."

"You don't appreciate their finer points."

Malthus tossed the body to the imps and watched them scramble to divide it up with their knives.

Egidius settled against a boulder, sitting on one with his back to the rocks and his legs hanging from a sharp edge. He pulled a preserving bottle from his pouch—they were nearly unbreakable—and took a long drink before continuing. "And how is she going to handle it when you execute her family? They're traitors to the queen, after all."

Malthus wiped his mouth on a handkerchief and returned it to his pocket. "I'll make her understand. Even if I must rip her mind apart to do it."

"You could have done that with Dyllys. Then we would still have had a wedding and parties."

"I don't wish to speak of Dyllys. Never mention her again."
Egidius shrugged. "So be it."

* * * *

Granta walked into the refugee camp as Malthus came looking for Ros and Lyrri who had been playing with some of the other children. She scanned the yard, searching through the faces of each young lycan male she spotted. Her hands clutched each other at her waist, opening and closing, tightening and releasing. The old crone was so evidently disturbed that people stopped work to look at her.

Malthus caught Ros by the shoulder. "Get your sister and go home. Stay there."

The tenor of the camp had changed since Beth's murder. The children were watched closely and the women did not venture out alone, only the males did.

Clodagh crossed the yard, and the crowd parted, allowing her to reach Granta's side. "What's wrong?"

"Nikko." The old bitch looked at every face. "Has anyone seen my son? My Nikko? He's missing. Two days."

"I'll help you look for him, if you wish," Malthus offered. He glanced at Shalto and Oswyl. "Well?"

"Yes," Shalto said. "We'll help too."

"Wait. Two days? I'm going for Claw." Clodagh gestured at Kandaishee. "Make her comfortable."

Kandaishee took Granta to a tree round under a spreading chestnut tree, and fetched her a dipper of water.

The females gathered close around her in a circle, murmuring words of reassurance.

"I've looked everywhere," Granta said. "It isn't like him to be gone so long without telling me. A day I could understand. He has duties. But two?"

"That doesn't sound good," said Kandaishee.

Malthus pulled at his mustache and stroked his oak-leaf beard. "We'll find him, Granta. Don't worry. I'm certain he's okay."

* * * *

Cahira surveyed her packed belongings piled in the sitting room of the Lawgiver House. "I never realized I had bought so many things here."

Todd lounged on the sofa, his thick legs widespread, smiling at her with undisguised fondness. "Shopping's what bitches do best."

"And spoiling me is what you do best." Cahira joined Todd on the sofa.

He dragged her onto his lap, brushed her braid aside, and kissed his way up her neck. Todd's big hand closed on her breast. "I thought this is what I did best."

Cahira giggled like a young girl, nestling tightly against him. "That too."

A young male voice broke over them, clearing his throat.
"Aren't you a bit old for this?"

Todd jerked his hand away from Cahira and sat on it.
Cahira flushed. "Kynyr!"

Kynyr grinned. "You know what dad says? If you don't want to get caught, don't do it in the sitting room."

Todd's eyebrow arched, glancing at Cahira. "And who taught him that?"

Cahira's blush deepened. "I caught Branduff and Ulicia in the kitchen one night. I told him, 'if you don't want to get caught ...'"

"Don't do it in the kitchen." Kynyr and Todd chorused, and then they all laughed.

Cahira sobered. "Kynyr, are you certain you won't come home with us?"

"Duty is where you find it, Gram." Kynyr quoted the old Creeyan proverb.

"He's found his duty, Cahira. Best to let him be." Todd turned his steady gaze on Kynyr. "I may not like it, but I respect it. I'm proud of you, Kynyr."

The front door slammed open and Finn came staggering through the foyer into the sitting room, winded and out of breath. "Kynyr! Nikko's missing."

Kynyr's eyes went steely. "Since when?"

"Two days. Granta went to the camp looking for him and Clodagh informed Claw. They want everyone looking."

Kynyr glanced at Cahira and Todd as silence yawned. "I have to go."

Finn and Kynyr ran out of the house, leaving Cahira and Todd sitting alone. Mary had insisted upon one last round of shopping accompanied by Trevor and Queran since Wolffgard was the closest thing to a town she was likely to visit most years.

Todd rubbed two fingers across his chin. "Gut instinct ... they won't find him alive."

Cahira looked stricken. "The war's found us, Todd."

"That's the talk in the taverns." Todd saw that she was shaking and pulled her close again, a protective arm slipping around her thin shoulders. "I didn't want to tell you. There was a massacre at Iudris Meadows."

"That's not far from Three Stones."

"Three units of Angus McCutcheon's battle-clan got wiped out. The attackers spoor ... some human. Mostly not."

"I've been talking to Finn..."

"You've been getting drunk with Finn."

Pink crept into Cahira's cheeks and she nestled into Todd's arms. "He wanted to know about Tarrant."

"Did you tell him?" Todd's voice softened and a haunted light darkened his eyes.

"Everything I could remember. Finn needed to know ... he wants to protect Kynyr."

"Spiritbrothers. Have been since Kynyr first crawled across the floor and smacked him with a wooden soldier."

"I told him about Alistar's curse. Finn needed to know what he's up against."

"Alistar." Todd growled deep in his throat. "I should have put a spike in his heart ... as well as his belly."

"Baroucha started it all. She threw Tarrant in my face in front of Finn. So I had to tell him."

"You never paid her that visit."

"There's time. There's a little shop for sale a block from the Commons, around the corner from the Difficult Horse. Three stories, brick, with a basement."

Todd kissed Cahira's forehead. "I thought we were going home."

"Kynyr won't come home. I had to think ... consider what to do if he wouldn't."

"If Branduff had had six sons instead of six daughters..."

She shifted on the sofa, moving just far enough from Todd to look him in the eyes. "Duty is where you find it. I can't leave, Todd. I'm needed here. Kynyr needs me. Wolffgard needs me."

"I need you."

"Want, not need." Cahira put her fingers over his lips to still his protests before he could voice them. "I've always known that sooner or later, I would have to turn and face the darkness. I have to stop running away from it. Todd, I'm staying."

Todd hugged her again. "Then I am too. There was a little boy who read to me from an odd book when I was wounded after the ambush. His name, if I remember right, was Bodi. And there was a little girl named Lilac who kept patting her pouches to hear them jingle. He looked in his book and told me where to find you." Todd's eyes went distant. "And he said to me, 'duty is where you find it, and yours is Cahira.' He was right. We'll stay."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE SEARCH

Kynyr and Finn arrived at the camp the same time as Claw. The camp's overseer, Clodagh, walked beside the graying chieftain and sixty guardsmen followed them wearing boiled leather armor with swords at their shoulders and long knives at their hips.

Ramsey spotted Kynyr and sidled over to them. "I'm with you."

Kynyr answered with a nod and gestured at Claw.

"What's this about the lawgiver?" Claw demanded.

Voices rose in a chatter of concern and Malthus lifted his hand. "Let Granta tell it."

"Acts like he runs the place." Ramsey muttered, running his hand through his red hair. "You sure he didn't arrange that little incident a month ago?"

"That's the one thing I'm positive of." Kynyr kept his voice down, trying not to intrude on Claw. "But I don't like him either."

Claw's sharp eyes raked Malthus' and then he turned to Nikko's mother. "Speak, old bitch."

Granta's face furrowed and she looked on the edge of tears. "Nikko's bed has not been slept in for two days. He did not say where he was going or that he would be away."

"All the males, come with me," Claw said. "The rest stay here, in the yard together."

Claw instituted a formal search, beginning in the center of the village. Increasing numbers of people joined in as the day progressed. Knocking on doors and asking if anyone had seen Nikko, they searched all the dwellings in the village, all the shops, and businesses, all the streets. Tired and exhausted by late evening, the searchers gave up and Claw told them that he would send riders to the outlying farms.

Kynyr remained standing in the middle of the camp, his eyes distant, thinking hard as the crowds dispersed.

"I know that look, Kynyr." Finn drifted closer to his friend with Ramsey and Eideard in tow.

"Uhhmn. Nikko's been obsessed with Malthus for weeks. I'd lay good odds that Nikko's been stalking him."

Eideard's pale blue eyes scanned their faces. "You think Malthus killed him?"

Kynyr shrugged, staring off into a patch of elm trees beyond the longhouses. "It's a possibility. I'm the only one in Wolffgard who's better with his blades than Malthus. If there was a fight ... Nikko never had a chance."

"So what do we do?" Ramsey's feet shifted into a sturdy stance and his hands went to his knives.

"We get our horses first. Which of you has the best nose?" Finn pointed at Ramsey.

* * * *

Merissa sat with Nikko's mother at the small table in the kitchen where Granta and Nikko had sat so often together. Her ginger hair veiled her lowered face, and her long fingers drew idle patterns on the surface. She and Nikko's sisters had

been taking turns sitting with Granta. Moss climbed into Merissa's lap, and she patted the dog without looking at him.

"Can I make you another cup of tea?" Merissa asked.

Granta shook her head, her shoulders drooping, and her white hair disheveled. "No. I don't want anything. Just my Nikko. My baby."

Nikko was the youngest of five, a change of life child for Granta, and her special baby. When Nikko was ten, his father Maldwyn died of a stroke while overseeing some new houses being built. Nikko had been at his side at the time, and it affected the boy deeply. Maldwyn's death, the Reader's said, had been swift and relatively painless, but that was small comfort.

"I could brush your hair," Merissa suggested, looking at the disheveled white locks.

"No."

The sun westered toward evening, and most of the riders that Merissa's father had sent out had returned. All of them had the same thing to say: no one had seen Nikko.

By nightfall, Granta's hopes had faded, and she launched into periodic bouts of weeping that Merissa did not know how to handle. Granta's two daughters had promised to return soon, once they had taken care of their own families. There would be comfort nesting in Granta's house tonight. Her daughters would not let her sleep alone while she was this troubled.

"My Nikko is dead. I know it. I feel it in my heart." Granta slapped her hand over her heart for emphasis. She began to weep again.

Merissa felt Granta's sorrow. It mirrored her own for Isranon when she learned the Beast had taken him. "You mustn't give up hope, Granta."

"I have no hope. He's dead. My little Nikko."

Merissa swallowed. She rose from her chair and hugged Granta. "Don't give up."

"One of the newcomers killed him. I know it in my heart."

Merissa's heart skipped a beat. There were forty newcomers, counting the children, but only one that Merissa had fallen in love with. "You can't know that."

Granta straightened and wiped her eyes. "Yes, I can. He was suspicious of one of them. Tempest had been also."

"Which one?" *Oh gods, don't let it be Malthus.*

"He did not say the name. That would be a violation of his ethic."

"Then you can't go making accusations, Granta," Merissa admonished.

Granta glared at Merissa. "I can and I will. Nikko kept diaries. I'll find the name there, I'm certain."

"Oh, Granta, don't tell anyone about the diaries. Give them to my father. If someone did harm Nikko, they'll steal them and maybe even hurt you."

"It doesn't matter; I've had a long life. I want the murderer caught."

"Then give them to my father."

"I'll think about it."

Granta's two daughters arrived and Merissa gratefully excused herself, almost fleeing into the yard.

* * * *

Malthus waited for Merissa in the shadows of a stand of trees growing at the edge of Granta's property. Every tragedy seemed to make her more vulnerable, lending her a sweet, defenseless innocence that made his mouth water and his cock harden. Granta's daughters arrived, and Malthus knew that Merissa would be leaving soon. He licked his fangs and drew them back into their sheaths. *Soon, soon*, he told himself, fighting an urge to simply drag Merissa off into the bushes the moment he got his hands on her. The door opened again. Merissa stood there, briefly illumined by the lamplight, in her tightly laced bodice that pushed up her fine breasts so that the upper curve of their mounds showed. Recently, she had begun dressing in a way that showed her charms off. Malthus suspected that it was for him. He straightened and stepped from the darkness into the light from the windows.

"Let me walk you home? I don't think you should walk alone."

Merissa stood swaying. Her eyes lifted to his, her lips trembled, and she rushed into his arms to be held and comforted. "Granta's convinced that someone from the camp killed Nikko. I couldn't talk her out of it. She thinks she'll find it in his diaries."

Diaries? The lawgiver was literate. "I can't imagine anyone from the camp harming the young mon." Malthus felt Merissa's shivering, inhaled the fragrant aura of her fear and worry. He kissed her mouth, long and deeply. He clasped her firmly against his body, his hardening spear begging for

release. "If there is anything I can do to bring Nikko back, I will. I'm riding out with Shalto and Oswyl tomorrow as part of the search party."

"Be careful. I don't want to lose you."

She slipped her hand into his, and they walked slowly back through the village. From time to time, he would lift her hand to his lips and kiss her fingers, or stop beneath a sheltering tree to press another long, searching kiss on her mouth amid the green concealment. Lights shone in the houses they passed. The sounds in the taverns were muted. The village seemed to have folded in on itself in its concern for the missing lawgiver.

"If something were to happen to me, Merissa, would you take care of my nieces?"

"Oh, Malthus, you mustn't let anything happen to you." Merissa's voice caught.

"You haven't answered my question." Malthus kissed her fingers.

"Of course I would. They might as well be my own. They're sweet children. They adore Darmyk and he adores them. And ... and they'd be all I had left of you."

"I love you, Merissa."

"I don't know what I feel. Only that I don't want to lose you."

"What do you feel this very moment? Say the words. I won't hold you to them tomorrow."

"I love you."

Malthus pulled her into the shadows of a huge chestnut tree, pressed her up against it, and kissed her again. His body

moved along hers, with only their clothing separating them, and he kneaded her breasts. Merissa moaned, melting into him. Abruptly, Malthus pulled away, grabbed her hand, and ran toward this manor. "This won't do. I must get you home before we do something you might regret."

They reached the manor house, Malthus kissed Merissa goodnight at the door, and left her.

He walked back through the darkening village, beneath the sprawling shadow forms of thickly planted trees that loomed blacker than the night. Lycans never bothered with street lamps, having little need of them; but neither did sa'necari need them, although they liked them. Malthus reached the middle of the village and turned onto the side street that Clodagh lived on. Despite the lateness of the hour, the lights were still lit in Clodagh's small longhouse. Malthus' resentment had festered for a week over the Chieftain giving an outsider supervision of the camp. If they had given it to Shalto or one of the others who already worked there, Malthus would have felt secure. However, the chieftain had not done that. They had sent again to Shaurone for a priest—who wasn't coming, because Malthus' agents had overtaken their messenger a day's ride beyond Hell's Widow and secretly killed him just as they had Cullen who had been the first one they sent—in the meantime, Clodagh ruled the camp. Malthus intended to change that with this visit.

He knocked on her door.

Clodagh answered, opening the door a bare crack and peering around the edge, which suggested to him that she was nervous of the night—but then a lot of the females were

becoming cautious. She recognized him, stepped back, and swung the door wider.

"Hello, Malthus." She swept her arm at the interior. "Come in. Is there a problem at the camp?"

Malthus noted the fact that Clodagh wore the old-fashioned lycan robe that wrapped around with a simple sash and could be easily shed to accommodate her shape changing.

"The people in the camp are frightened, Clodagh," he said, as she showed him to a chair. Clodagh had nice furniture, but a dirt floor and the traditional half walls to separate rooms on either end. A square table sat in one corner with four chairs around it. A long folded cloth lay on the table, with a section caught in a round embroidery hoop and the brightly colored threads beside it. Instead of a fireplace, she had a small hearth in the rear, with cabinets to either side of it.

Clodagh brushed her fingers through her long sienna hair, with a troubled shake of her head. "I don't know what to do about it. I've tried to reassure them."

Malthus regarded her. She was pretty in a round faced fashion, and about the same age as Merissa. Clodagh would be a pleasant change from Kandaishee and the other sa'necari he had begun sating himself on the day after Egidius killed Beth. "As have I."

"Can I get you something?" she asked. "Beer? Wine? Water?"

"Wine."

Clodagh fetched a bottle and glasses from a cabinet. She poured for them both.

While her attention was away from him, his fingers darted to the hollow of her throat. A spider-web of dark magic melted through her flesh and choked off her voice. Her eyes widened and she dropped the bottle. The heavy bottle struck the floor, and rolled at her feet.

She staggered back from Malthus, changing into her hybrid form.

Malthus overturned his chair as he straightened and lunged at her. "You can't win."

Clodagh came at him snarling and swiping at him with her claws. Malthus sidestepped, seized her wrist, and whipped her arm behind her back, doubling her over as he planted his knee in her stomach. He forced Clodagh to her knees, and then down on her face. Placing his knee on the small of her back, Malthus raised her shoulder and shoved his hand between her breasts. Black energy lashed through Clodagh's chest.

She cried aloud in pain, but her voice failed to carry past the muting spell.

Malthus touched her temples and the fight went out of her. He released her, and Clodagh curled up, sobbing. Slipping his hand inside her robe below the tie belt, he ran his finger from her loins to the top of her belly, sending waves of anguish through her.

"Stop! Stop, stop, stop. Please."

"I hate making this rough and rushed," Malthus said. "But I have very little time."

Malthus pushed her over onto her back, pulled the tie on her robe, and opened it. He struck her in the chest and ribs

with another round of spells to be certain that not the slightest bit of resistance remained in her. Clodagh went limp, but her eyes watched him, knowingly.

"You killed them, didn't you?" Clodagh's whispery voice rose from her throat with an edge of fear and a slice of grief.

"Who else? When I'm finished, you'll not be able to tell anyone."

Malthus caressed her breasts, pinched her nipples, and stroked her face. He enjoyed the feeling of lycan fur beneath his fingers. She shivered, but did not move from the position Malthus placed her in. He liked that.

Tears came to Clodagh's eyes. "A sigurni said ... one of you ... would get me."

Needles of energy went into her brain, making her whimper. "But, did she know it would be the Butchering Serpent?"

"You? The Serpent?" Clodagh's voice shook.

He stitched and knotted the sways and triggers in her mind, and bound her tongue so that she could not betray him. "Yes. You'll be ill for a few days. Rushing it this way has that effect on a lycan."

She would recover nicely and be very useful to him from now on. Malthus opened his pants, and lifted his spear and his rocks free. Clodagh shut her eyes and turned her face away from him. That, being her first and only movement since he enervated her, brought a chuckle from Malthus.

Clodagh's tears finally escaped her eyes.

"Never had a lover before?" Malthus lowered his body on top of hers, parting her legs with his knee. He pressed his

fingers to her temples, inserting more arcane needles into her mind, her psyche, and her awareness. Since Clodagh was lycan, Malthus needed to build the compulsions and coercions slowly as he had with Beth.

Clodagh's whimpering turned to sobbing.

His cock pressed the edge of her mouth of pleasure.

His fangs came down.

"You have a sweetheart?"

Clodagh sucked in a long breath, struggling not to answer.

Malthus sent a wave of sharp, blinding pain through her head. "What is his name?"

"Odhran." She wept.

"Break it off, or I'll kill him."

Then he bit deeply into her breast, sucking her rich, ripe blood as he raped her.

* * * *

Kynyr and his friends started their search behind Malthus' cottage after making certain that the mon was not home. Ramsey ran with his nose to ground, his thick fur was a shade more cinnamon than his human hair and he blended into the night shrouded trees and brush with ease, frequently becoming lost to sight as he forged ahead of them.

None of them said it, but they all knew they were looking for Nikko's dead body.

The moon reached its zenith, a slice past full and headed for half wane, throwing a silvery illumination over the forest.

A long howl from Ramsey told them he had found something. Kynyr's first thought was that Ramsey had found

the corpse, and his second was that Malthus was too clever to have dumped Nikko's remains that close to the camp.

They rode through the trees and found Ramsey standing in hybrid form with something brown in his hands beside the banks of Lavender Creek. "Nikko's clothes. Looks like he crossed the creek here."

Kynyr dismounted and took the clothes from Ramsey. He held the brown robe to his nose and sniffed it. Kynyr nodded. "Nikko."

He scanned the creek banks. "We'll make camp here. There'll be a better chance of picking his trail up on the other side once it's daylight."

Ramsey went to his horse, which Eideard had been leading, took a robe from his saddle bags, and wrapped himself up before settling with his back to a willow tree. "Least we know he wolffed it."

"You think he's dead?" Eideard asked the question they had been avoiding.

Kynyr pulled his saddle and kit off Bucky and started brushing him down before answering. "I know he is."

* * * *

A flame danced upon the wick of an oil lamp sitting on the nightstand in Malthus' bedroom. Kandaishee lay nude beside him, her cheeks damp from weeping, the quilted coverlet clutched so tight in her hands that her knuckles were white. The nights were cool this far into the mountains, even when the summer days were hot.

Malthus touched her cheeks, trailing his fingers through her tears, musing that she always wept when he forced his rod of possession into her. It delighted him. His fingers moved lightly from her face to her breasts and he stroked Kandaishee's body. Malthus' fingers lingered on the almost unnoticeable puffiness along the lower half of her belly.

"Growing a little present for me?"

She writhed away from him. "It's not fair! You're too old to be fertile."

"You're forgetting who I am."

"The son of Sidera Tyrins ... oh gods ... she cured it."

Malthus chuckled. "Indeed."

He pinched her nipple.

Kandaishee yelped.

"Be still. I want to Read my gift."

Kandaishee obeyed with a sob.

Malthus extended his awareness through her, narrowed his focus, and smiled. "A son. Very good. I think I'll keep you."

"You killed him."

"Nikko?"

Kandaishee shivered as he began stroking her again.

"Yes."

"There's no body. But they might find his bones in the Bonnie Draw."

As soon as he released her, Kandaishee curled into a tight ball of misery. "Why are you here? Why did you have to come here?"

"My orders are simple. Kill the Redhands before they can bring the clans into the war."

"You've never forgotten the Rebellion."

"It would be foolish to forget it. Those who fail to study history, lose."

* * * *

It took Kynyr half a day to pick up Nikko's trail again and they found that it backtracked to Cheshire Road. Claw's messengers, heading for the farms, overtook them at midday and Kynyr hailed one of them.

"Glendon! Wait."

The messenger was a wiry wolf, small in stature, but with a reputation for getting rowdy in the taverns. He reined his horse and waited. "What's up?"

Kynyr reached into his saddle bag, bringing out the brown robe. He extended that to Glendon who took it from him.

"What's this?"

"We found Nikko's clothes last night at Lavender Creek. Take it to Claw and tell him they need to search in this direction." Kynyr gave a quick, but detailed account of everything they had found, leaving out their suspicions concerning Malthus. They did not want to find that Glendon had been spreading that part in the taverns.

Glendon tucked the robe under his knee, turned his horse, and kicked it into a canter.

Cheshire road branched, the main road turning east and a narrow cart road bending toward the Bonnie Draw. After a few searching sniffs, Ramsey led them down the cart road, which ended a few hours later at the Clegg farmstead.

Neither Old Man Clegg nor his son Douglas had seen Nikko. The four friends rode back down to the road and sat in silence for several minutes that was finally broken by Ramsey.

"What now?"

Kynyr's brow furrowed in thought. "Hunter's traces. There's some around here that run all the way to the northern caves."

Ramsey shifted back to wolf and took off. An hour later he gave them a howl and a shout. "Look what I've found!"

Kynyr dismounted and led Bucky off the road to a game path littered with recent deer droppings. "Nikko?"

"Imps."

They found Ramsey standing over the rotting corpses of two imps, one of which had clearly died from having its skull smashed.

"What the hell are imps doing in Red Wolf?" Kynyr dropped to his knees and turned the corpses over with a stick.

"Looks like Nikko made his stand here." Ramsey squatted beside Kynyr.

Finn stood gazing at the trees, wary and tense. "If imps got him, then Malthus had nothing to do with it."

The closer they came to the Bonnie Draw, the more dead imps they found. When they reached the willow trees along the banks, they stumbled upon a cluster of fifteen orange skinned corpses. Some of them had bits of rotting meat caught in their teeth.

Kynyr sucked in a fortifying breath and dug the meat from the teeth of one with his knife. He sniffed it and his face

hardened, his eyes clenched shut. "Nikko ... and Devil's Silver."

Finn's eyes widened with incredulity. "Imps don't use Devil's Silver."

"I know." Kynyr nodded wearily. "Ramsey, you and Eideard go for Claw. Finn and I will wait here."

"You dogs be careful," Ramsey admonished them as he climbed onto his horse. "Imps are a bad way to die."

"We will be."

* * * *

For three days Merissa and Nikko's sisters had taken turns sitting with Granta. The old lycan refused to be comforted by anyone. On the evening of the third day, Merissa had managed to convince Granta to sit in a comfortable chair in the parlor with her. A long, low table occupied the space between the chairs and the sofa. Merissa had drawn her chair up as close to Granta's as she could, so that she could periodically pat the old one.

The door opened, Claw came in looking grim. Granta's two older sons, as well as Malthus, Shalto, and Oswyl followed the chieftain inside. Claw carried a bundle of clothing in his hands that he laid on the table in front of Granta.

"We found these. I'm sorry, Granta. Your son's dead."

Granta let out a long keening cry, collapsing onto the floor and pulling at her hair. "My Neeekko." "

Merissa knelt beside her, gathering the old bitch into her arms. She held Granta while the mon wept.

"Have you brought his body in?" Merissa asked.

"No body." Claw's lips twisted into a grim expression.
"Imps got him. They ate him."

"Then how can you be so certain?"

"We found his clothes, and then stumbled on the scent of a blood trail. It ended at Big Willows. We found some dead imps. From the amount of blood soaked into the ground, he was already badly wounded before he made his stand there. Some of his flesh and fur was caught in the dead ones' teeth."

"But if you didn't find—"

Claw shook his head regretfully. "The blood stank of Devil's Silver. Imps eat those they bring down. They devour them alive. The trail ended there." Claw rubbed his hand over his face. "Nikko did not walk away or we would have found traces. He died there. I'm sorry."

Granta shrieked again.

Malthus covered his surprise by lowering his head. *So Nikko managed to kill some of Gahni's people before he died? Impressive.*

"I'll stay with her until her daughters get here," Merissa said.

"I don't want you walking home alone." Claw grimaced in distaste, looking impatient to be out of there.

"I'll see that she gets home." Malthus stepped close to Merissa.

Claw eyed Malthus. "You're that Malthus who's always hanging around the gardens."

"I am. My nieces like playing with Darmyk."

"I've heard a lot about you," Claw growled. "No messing around. Just bring her straight home. You understand?" He

laid the bundle of Nikko's clothes on Granta's table, turned, and strode out.

Once Granta's daughters arrived, Merissa walked home with Malthus' arm around her shoulders, leaning her head against his chest. Fresh bouts of weeping continued to come. "Why Nikko? He was so kind. Tempest, Beth, and now Nikko. I feel like my heart is being ripped out of me."

"He was a good mon. The village couldn't have wanted for a better lawgiver."

Merissa turned her tear streaked face to Malthus. "Nikko and I grew up together. If I hadn't already been in love with someone else at the time, I think I could have loved him. He was so kind and gentle. So patient."

They paused beneath a spreading chestnut tree and Malthus drew Merissa into his arms, holding her protectively. "I love you, Merissa. It breaks my heart to see you so unhappy ... so overburdened with grief."

"Malthus..."

His lips covered hers as he pressed her back to the elm tree. She wrapped her arms around him, moaning softly as his body moved suggestively against hers. Merissa's hand slid down to the conspicuous bulge in Malthus' pants, and he responded by grinding his erection into her loins so hard it seemed as if the cloth separating them would tear.

"Get inside, Merissa!" Kynyr strode into the courtyard, glaring at Malthus. "Your father can see you from the window."

Merissa paled and twisted free of Malthus, fleeing into the manor.

"Stay away from her, Malthus. Stay the bloody hell away from her."

Malthus regarded Kynyr, a dark, arrogant turn to his lips. "Make me."

Kynyr's fist shot out, caught Malthus in the face, and sent him sprawling into the dirt. Then he turned on his heel and stalked back into the manor.

"I'll give you that one. Next one will cost you."

CHAPTER TWENTY

SHOPS, DIARIES, AND MURDER

Cahira stood in the street, her head craned back as she watched Todd and the two Scott cubs, Rory and Hamish, hang the big wooden sign on her shop: Cahira's Potions and Notions. Underneath the words were three sets of symbols that the largely illiterate lycan community could understand: a mortar and pestle; a serpent wrapped staff; a book, a bottle of ink, and a quill.

"Potions, healing, scribe, and translator. I do it all."

When Todd suggested they should hire some help around the place, Cahira had immediately decided upon Rory, because Finn had told her about Rory fetching them when Kynyr was in danger and she felt she owed the boy a debt—although she had not told Rory that. Rory had turned out to be an impressive negotiator for just nine years old, persuading her to hire his eight year old brother also. So now the Scott cubs worked around the shop and living area for two coppers each a week, plus lunch.

Rory glanced over his shoulder as he started down the ladder, and gave a loud derisive hoot. "Watcha lookin' at ya old stink face!"

Cahira lifted an eyebrow and turned around to see who Rory had directed his insult at.

Baroucha stood on the wooden boardwalk across the street, glaring at the sign. "Don't get too cozy, Cahira. You won't last."

Despite the summer heat, Baroucha wore a high collared dress of heavy fabric that snugged her neck. It tied on the from shoulder to hips. Baroucha made no attempt to hide the fact that her breasts sagged almost to her waist. She carried a fighting knife on her belt that made Cahira wonder what might have changed with Baroucha: she had never carried one when they were young.

"I like it here, Baroucha."

"Don't cross me, Cahira. You'll regret it."

Cahira's lips tightened. "You weren't so bold when I caught you trying to poison Kynyr."

Baroucha sucked in a sharp breath and retreated as Cahira approached her. "It wasn't poison."

"But it would have killed him. So what's the difference? Hmmm?"

"Get away from me." Baroucha made a sign against the Evil Eye, and scuttled off down the street.

Todd stepped from the ladder, chuckling. "It's a god's guess what she'll try to pull. But she'll try something."

"I hope so. Then I'll step on her and squash her like a bug."

Rory and Hamish sauntered over to them giggling. Hamish flipped a victory sign to her. "You go, Cahira. We'll shy a rock up her ass if you want."

Hamish pulled his sling from his pocket and brandished it, swinging it around and around.

Cahira put her arms around the cubs and walked them into the shop. "If anyone's going to throw rocks, it will be me. I want both of you to stay out of trouble."

Rory and Hamish slipped from her grasp and ran to a stack of wooden crates sitting in front of a fine cabinet that was wood halfway up and glass the rest. They started unpacking the crates and putting things on the shelves without being asked.

Cahira stood near them smiling. "You know, Rory, when you turn ten, you can be legally apprenticed."

Rory beamed. "To you?"

"Who else?"

Cooley stepped out of the backroom and watched them with longing in his eyes. He started to turn away, but Cahira had seen him.

"Come here, Cooley."

He came, shuffling his feet and staring at them. Cahira pulled him into her arms and held him for a long time in silence. The Scott cubs gathered beside them. "You're lonely. I can see it."

"I want to be an apprentice, too."

"You can't be."

A tear trickled down his cheek. "Why not?"

"Because you're family and that's much more important."

Cooley blinked back more tears. "I am?"

Cahira kissed his forehead and hugged him tighter. "Todd and I petitioned the temple to adopt you. Our petition was granted yesterday. We were going to surprise you with a party and announce it then. However, today will do."

A tremulous smile came over Cooley's lips. Then, inexplicably he burst out weeping.

Rory put his arm around Cooley's shoulders. "And I can be your spiritbrother, if you'll have me."

Cooley sniffled and then his smile steadied. "I'd like that."
"Done deal."

* * * *

Malthus had rearranged Baroucha's shop and her home above it. The table farthest back in the workroom had been replaced with a sofa. One of her two storerooms now contained a desk and chairs for Malthus to do business from. Baroucha's unused guest room had been refurbished, and turned into luxurious accommodations that included a large bed with a goose feather mattresses where Malthus could do a different kind of business.

Baroucha felt an odd satisfaction in the alterations. She had begun to pride herself on her self discipline, which allowed her to deal with Malthus to her advantage. Having Malthus for a business partner made her feel less intimidated by Cahira. After all, what was a minor lycan mage compared to a consummate sa'necari.

She was just closing for lunch when Malthus arrived. Baroucha knew what he would want first. He turned the sign to closed and headed for the workroom without a word. The healer followed, opening her collar and stroking her neck in anticipation. It still hurt when he bit her, but Baroucha had learned quickly how to endure it.

Malthus sat on the sofa waiting for her as she entered the workroom. She joined him there, settling against the arm of the sofa so that it would support her once he began to feed. Fresh blood had qualities that flesh lacked. The sa'necari were dependant upon those qualities of the blood, relishing and feeding upon them at every opportunity. She knew it well.

Anticipation sent a rush of adrenaline through her.

His fangs descended and he wrapped his arms around her, breathing along her neck. "Heaven or Hell, Baroucha."

"Heaven. Let me feel young again."

She shuddered as Malthus bit into her. Then he triggered her endorphins and sent her into dreams. For a little while, it was her beloved Alistar sucking on her neck. Baroucha was young and in love again. The dreams ended too soon as Malthus released her.

He licked away the drops that had eluded his mouth as he fed. "I'm going to hire you an assistant, Baroucha."

"Why? I've never needed one." She grumbled low in her throat, half formed words that Malthus had trouble discerning.

"You can do more important things for me." Malthus took a gold coin from his pouch and slipped it into her hand.

"Carrot and stick?" She stared at the coin, which was half a year's pay for the average lycan laborer. "You tie my mind in knots and then give me gold?"

"Which would you rather have?"

"Gold. There won't be much for me soon."

Malthus caught the bitter edge underlying her words. "What do you mean?"

"Cahira Sinclair ... Kynyr's grandmother ... She's opened a shop around the corner from the Difficult Horse."

"You want to get rid of her? Or are you asking me to?"

Baroucha's eyes glittered. "You're my partner, aren't you?"

Malthus stroked his beard, thinking. "I'll have a look at her. If it's to my advantage, I'll remove her. Meanwhile, I have other matters to take care of."

He got up to leave and Baroucha clung to his arm. "One more thing."

"What?"

"Rumors. I've heard that your mother has potions to restore one's youth."

A sly smile slid across Malthus' lips. "She has such."

"How can I get them?" Baroucha's hold on Malthus' arm tightened with desperation.

"Kill someone for me."

* * * *

In the middle of the afternoon, while everyone was working or at their chores, Malthus went to visit Granta with an empty satchel hanging from his shoulder. He had been watching her home for days, and he knew when he would find her alone. The little dog was tied out back. Malthus let himself in quietly, uncertain about how much age had reduced her hearing. After a quick search, he found her in the kitchen with the diaries spread over the small table in front of her. Her loosely tied robe gapped open at the top and parted at the knees, revealing the upper edge of her shriveled breasts, and her bony legs.

The semi-literate crone read them aloud to herself, struggling with each word.

On the far side of the kitchen, Moss began to bark and scratch at the door, demanding to come in. Granta's head came up with a frightened look and she closed the diaries.

"Hello, Granta. Can I help you with that?" Malthus asked, sauntering toward her.

"You didn't knock." Granta pushed her chair back from the table.

"You should not be alone, you know. Not with a murderer loose."

"Get out of my house." Granta stood and changed to her hybrid form, which caused her belt to come untied. The robe fell open. Old and frail, completely white with age, Granta's skin sagged on her withered body, and her breasts drooped to her waist.

Malthus halted just beyond her reach. "Did Nikko write about me, Granta?"

She brandished a thin claw at him, snarling, "Get out."

"When I'm ready." Malthus lunged, and threw an arm around her, pinning her wasted body to his, her arms to her sides.

"Bastard." She twisted in his grasp, straining against the tremendous strength imprisoning her, and suddenly the realization of what he was shone in her eyes. "Sa'necari."

Malthus touched the hollow of her throat with a word of command, and she could no longer speak above a whisper. Granta's eyes rounded like tree burls.

She bit for his face, but he lifted his shoulder and bumped her under the chin. Her mouth closed on his shoulder and the chain mail he wore hidden beneath his garments turned her worn old teeth.

"None of that," Malthus said, brushing his finger along her collarbone, black power burning on the tip, as he spread her robe open more.

"Aiiii. Aiiii." Granta's scream sounded hoarse and rasping beneath the smothering spell.

His fingers formed a claw with his middle finger resting in the hollow between her breasts, and he enervated her with a word. Granta's head lowered, and she hung flaccidly in his grip. Her hands closed into impotent fists.

"Don't ... hurt ... me."

Malthus smiled thinly, cocking his head with a glance to the side. "Relax and the pain will be short." He pressed his face into her neck, murmuring, "It's time to join your son."

Granta panted hard, her heart palpitating. "Gods mercy, please no."

"Yours ... will be a kind death ... compared to his." Malthus spoke in a soft voice, utterly without harshness, calm and dispassionate.

He inhaled the pleasant lycan musk clinging to her as he slipped his hand beneath Granta's robe and placed his palm over her heart. The spell worked best flesh to flesh, although clothing, and even armor, was no barrier to it. He gave a sharp arcane jab into the heart muscle, and lapped up her suffering.

Pacing was an art that he had mastered long ago. Hurt them a little, or hurt them a lot, but never let them know when the next is coming. Besides, this had to look progressive and different from the one suffered by Tempest.

When he finished it would look as though she had suffered from heart problems for years. He knew lycan physiology and bio-alchemy inside and out. Inside and out. The phrase almost made him chuckle when he recalled how many vivisections it had taken to master the knowledge.

Tears of pain and terror ran down Granta's face. "Stop."

Malthus liked the way flesh felt as it died. The auric taste of it, added to the rhythms of her fear, whetted his necromantic hunger. Her shuddering anticipation enhanced his pleasure and fed him. "Now, in earnest. Ready?"

Granta's feeble yanking and pulling at her arms in an attempt to get them loose achieved nothing. "Please don't."

He Read her, finding that her heart was not strong—for a lycan—not nearly as strong as Tempest's had been. Still, to deceive the Readers who would examine Granta's remains, it paid to proceed carefully.

She writhed in his grip, knowing what was coming, but not when. "Please."

Kissing her cheek, he sketched a death web over her left breast. The spell melted through her flesh and settled around her heart. He returned his palm to its place on her chest and stabbed her with power.

Granta yelped at the shooting chest pains, yet her spell-muted voice released the sounds softly and sharply punctuated.

Malthus began kissing her face as he increased the flow of the dark energies into her heart as he had with Tempest, all the while describing how he had killed Nikko, what it felt like for a lycan to die from Devil's Silver.

"Neeekooo." Granta sobbed as much in grief as in pain.

Beyond the door, Moss continued to bark and growl with increasing desperation.

Malthus doubted the dog would attract attention at this time of day, but decided to quicken the process of Granta's dying, since he needed to do it in stages to cover its arcane origins. He forced Granta back into fully human form with a needle of power in her mind, his arm tightening around her as she shrank. She would fail faster in that shape.

The old crone whimpered in that canine fashion Malthus enjoyed hearing, her head wagging back and forth listlessly. It aroused him. Rubbing his erection along her body, Malthus realized how rite-hungry this was making him. Granta's breathing shallowed out, and increased again in a fluttering struggle. Her body erupted in a cold sweat. He licked the moisture from her face.

"Don't fight me, Granta. It won't hurt as much," Malthus said in a soothing voice.

Granta moaned, her eyes widened, and her mouth frothed, drool sliding from the corners. "Please, no," she begged in a shaking whisper, fighting the unyielding spell lodged in her throat.

Malthus savored the way her heart weakened. He covered her mouth with his own and sucked her breath out. Granta's legs gave and she slipped against him. Malthus held her to his

chest, his lips touching her white locks. He straightened Granta's chair, settled her into it, and pushed it back to the table.

Drained and debilitated, Granta's neck could not support her head, and it flopped backward on her shoulders, which forced her to look into Malthus' smiling face. "Please stop..." Granta gasped out. "I won't tell."

"Hush. The less you resist, the sooner it's over." He thought her eyes looked lovely with the glaze of pain in them. Malthus placed two fingers on each of her temples, sending the power into her head. "Grief has caused you to have a fatal stroke, Granta."

Granta clenched her eyes shut against the sensation of searing needles in her skull. She shuddered. Malthus read her as he worked, selectively disrupting various impulses in her brain. Her eyelids trembled madly, face twitched, and abruptly the left side drooped.

"Nearly finished." Malthus shoved his hand inside her robe, placed his palm firmly against her sagging breast, and renewed the pressure on her heart. "You're dying nicely, like a good girl." He kissed her forehead. "You and Nikko will be reunited soon."

Malthus scanned her damaged organ, and discovered that the lower aorta was closing faster than the others. He focused, wrapped his gifts around it, and shut it off. Tilting her face so that it lay in the crook of his shoulder, Malthus held her like a lover, his cheek atop her head, to drink in her body's fading efforts to cling to the life he was stealing.

He felt her awareness gray into shock, as Granta lost consciousness. "Yes, Granta," he said, although he knew she could no longer hear him. "Just a little bit more and we're done."

Malthus tightened the grip of his power and stopped her heart.

Her body gave a final convulsive jerk.

The air rattled from her lungs.

Granta's eyelids quit moving, her lips parted, and she slipped sideways over Malthus' arm. He held her up, moved the diaries aside, and allowed her corpse to settle face down upon the table.

"A fine effort, Granta. Exactly why I favor lycans."

As he had with Tempest, Malthus searched her remains with his necromantic senses, studying his artistry to see how closely he had mimicked a stroke and a heart attack in her. Satisfied with his results, Malthus scooped the diaries into his satchel, searched the house for more without leaving a trace of his passage, and left swiftly.

Moss howled.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SEDUCED BY DARKNESS

Claw,

Isranon doesn't want the child. He says that the child isn't his. That Merissa was sleeping with Troyes and other sa'necari who came through. He called her a slut. Isranon, also says, that even if that were not so, that he would never recognize a half-breed bastard boy as his own. He has called the boy an abomination.

He has changed a lot. Some months ago he embraced the darkness of the rites to save his life from the embedded spells on the blades that wounded him. He has embraced his birthright. The Rowdies and Lord Dawnreturning drove him out after learning this. I have no idea where he is now. But if he should, somehow, turn up in the valley, grant me a favor and kill him. He is no longer the boy I helped raise and train.

Nevin

"No," Merissa said, crumpling the letter and throwing it on the floor. "This letter is a lie."

"Merissa, it's Nevin's writing, his code, his seal," Aisha responded, trying to put her arms around her daughter. Merissa twisted away from her.

"You should have expected it, Merissa," said Claw. "He's sa'necari. You saw what he did to Troyes. He'll do anything to stay alive. So he's crossed the line and committed the rites. That changes them."

"Will you repudiate his adoption into the clan?" Aisha asked, her voice quiet.

Claw growled wordlessly before answering. "Yes. And if he shows here, I will kill him myself and eat his black sa'necari heart."

"It's a lie! The letter is a lie." Merissa fled the room.

Kynyr reached for her as she ran past him in the hallway. "Merissa, what's wrong?"

"Don't touch me! Don't come near me! I hate you!"

He stared at her in confusion. "What did I do?"

Merissa spun about, snarling, hair sprouting along her arms, going wolf on him. "You've been trying to chase off the only man who ever truly loved me."

"Malthus?" Kynyr blinked. "He's not good for you."

"Because he's human? He loves me, Kynyr. If you touch him, I'll never speak to you again."

"Merissa..."

She turned her back on him, raced out of the manor into the yard, and scanned the gardens frantically, looking for an avenue of escape, not wanting to face anyone. Merissa blinked, trying to get hold of herself, realizing that people were staring at her, that the children had stopped in their play to look at her. All the gossip would start again, except that this time would be worse. Everyone in the valley and the village would be saying they had told her so, that sa'necari were not to be trusted, and calling her a whore and a slut behind her back—and the boldest would do it to her face. She saw Darmyk playing with Ros and Lyrri, which meant that Malthus was in the garden. For an instant Merissa wavered as

she spotted him sitting on a boulder beneath a spreading elm tree. Part of her wanted to go to him, part of her wanted to snatch Darmyk up and run off with him, while yet another part simply wanted to run until she exhausted herself.

He rose to greet her, and Merissa knew she had to make a decision: she fled.

* * * *

Malthus sat on a boulder watching his nieces playing with the other children. The forged letter had arrived that morning and he had been here waiting for their reaction. Merissa was too emotional not to react in some spectacular and revealing fashion. He glanced when he saw the door open and Merissa came stumbling out with her hands over her face. He rose and headed for her. She wavered in front of him and then bolted past.

Running after her, Malthus caught up to Merissa in a tangle of oak trees. She stood stock still, her fingers gripping her hair, her eyes red and half-wild, her cheeks wet. He went quietly to her side, hoping she did not flee again.

"Merissa? What is wrong?" he asked, his voice oozing with concern.

She tore at her hair. "Go away. I can't breathe. I can't think."

Malthus lifted her head up with a crooked finger under her chin. "Why are you crying?"

"My ... my lover has repudiated our son. He embraced the darkside of his nature and declares that Darmyk is an abomination."

"Ahhh. I am sorry. What a terrible thing for him to do. My father would never have denied me, despite my human mother."

She swallowed back another round of crying.

"Let's go for a walk and talk about it. Darmyk's life will be better than mine, because he has his grandparents and a wonderful mother. But it's difficult when a child is rejected."

Malthus slipped his arm around her and she leaned against him. They walked across the yard and headed for a bench in an isolated stand of ash trees.

"I loved Isranon. Since childhood..." Merissa's voice kept breaking. "I thought I knew him. He killed Troyes to save me."

Malthus stiffened slightly, listening to it come out. So Isranon had slain his brother. He would make certain to send Isranon some of Darmyk's body parts. A little hand perhaps?

"I love you, Merissa. Marry me. I'll be a good father to Darmyk."

"Let me think about it."

* * * *

Kynyr's eyes clenched shut for the space of several breaths and he shook his head in weary frustration. He had overheard Malthus propose to Merissa. After Kynyr's wounding, Claw had given him complete freedom to come and go as if he were a member of the family, rather than one of his guardsmyn. As a result, Kynyr had become Claw's eyes and ears both in the manor and in the village.

He faded deeper into the trees and brush, circling about and that brought him to a bend in the Bonnie Draw River that ran through the extensive property. The rocky, Waejontori soil showed its teeth along the river in a sharp slope to the far side with piles of wind and rain smoothed boulders, worn flat and jutting out in layers. The near side, although less steep in its descent to the deep waters, had almost as many boulders and rocks as the far side. Rocks, many of them as jagged as a dragon's tooth, broke the surface of the creek, and water eddied around them in foamy whirls.

"Hello, Kynyr."

At the sound of her voice, he turned and saw Claw's youngest sister. "Searlait. So this is where you hide."

"You found me."

Sitting in her favorite spot, a large smooth boulder that thrust out over the water from a root tangled shelf of dirt and rock, Searlait cast leaves into the water and watched them swirl around in frothy ripples, a distracted air clinging to her. A willow tree sheltered the rock, pressed along the right side, its roots humped across the edge and rear like a confusion of dried brown serpents. The long skirt of Searlait's blue dress spread out around her thin hips and legs, revealing her ankles and the lower part of her age-withered calves. An inch of cleavage showed above her tightly laced bodice, just enough to tease in the current *de rigueur* of fashion.

Kynyr could see the fading traces of Searlait's vanished beauty, and wondered why she had never wed. She resembled her niece Merissa, with a wealth of ginger hair that had begun to fade toward white with age and a single ivory

streak at her left temple. He imagined that Merissa would look like Searlait when she grew old.

The young guardsman climbed up to the smooth rock she sat on and settled beside her. "I don't trust him."

"Who? Malthus?" Searlait cast another twig from her small pile into the water. "I think he's dashing."

"Yeah, Malthus. He's proposed marriage to Merissa."

"You were eavesdropping?"

Kynyr blushed at her tone. "It's part of my job. Keep the sweet little bitches out of trouble. That includes you." He winked at her.

"Foo. I'm not a sweet little bitch; I'm a crotchety old crone." Searlait looked away from Kynyr, her eyes going distant as she turned them back upon the waters. "I was lovely once. All the finest young dogs paid court to me. Age changes everything."

"You're still lovely."

"And you're still sweet." Searlait patted his cheek. "But I'm too old for blandishments. I know what I look like now." She looked away and then turned toward him again. "So you don't like Malthus?"

"That's right."

"You can't dictate love, Kynyr. When it happens, it happens. I haven't seen Merissa so in love since Isranon abandoned her. Like it or not; he's good for her."

"I think she's making a mistake."

"Is she?" Searlait looked at him with gentle patience. "Are you in love with her, Kynyr?"

"No." He shook his head. "She's like a sister to me. I'd be a lot happier if she picked someone like Finn or Ramsey. Then I'd know they'd take good care of her."

"Kynyr..."

"Searlait, I've got six sisters. Some younger; some older than me. And I grew up with Finn's eight right next door. We call them the Dreaded Horde. Merissa reminds me of Kathleen, my sister who's two years older than I am. She was seeing this dog from Three Stones who was working at the dry goods in Longbranch for the summer. I was just twelve and she was fourteen. One time he made her cry. I took a stick and beat the holy crap—" Kynyr stopped short, a faint blush spreading across his cheeks. "I beat the ... well you get the idea."

"Kynyr, as dearly as we all love you, you're not family. Leave Merissa and Malthus alone."

Kynyr scratched the back of his head in an offhand manner, feeling a bit stung. They were his family and he could not tell them so. "I'll leave Malthus alone where it concerns Merissa. But if he steps out of line with me ... then it's on his head."

* * * *

Malthus possessed the largest home in the camp, having added a study and a bedroom for his nieces onto it. Ros and Lyrri walked sedately beside him: they had worn themselves out playing with Darmyk and his cat all day. Once they entered the deeply forested area in the waning light, Malthus extended his necromantic senses in a low level scan of the

area. He still feared that Sergei would return for Ros. His hand settled on the hilt of a long knife at his hip as he sensed two presences near his home.

"Stay behind me," he whispered to the girls.

They dropped back without a word.

Malthus found Shalto and Oswyl sitting outside waiting for him. He touched Ros on her shoulder, "Take your sister inside, and stay there until I say you can come out."

"Yes, Uncle Malthus." Ros took Lyrry by the hand and they went inside.

Malthus waited until the door had closed before turning to the two young lycans. "What's brought you here?"

"We wanted to ask you a few questions," Shalto said.

Malthus tensed, wondering if they had seen him doing something better left unknown. So far they had proved too good a tool to waste by killing them. "Certainly. Would you like a drink?"

Oswyl grinned and nodded.

"Yeah, that'd be nice," said Shalto.

Malthus fetched tankards of mead. He hesitated a moment and sat them on the table before going back outside. The tankards were a deliberately mismatched set, one a coppery color with a hunting scene in bas relief, the second was a goldish tone with a leaping stag, and the third bore a dragon wrapped around a tree. He sketched a rune with his fingertip on the first two tankards. The runes glowed for a moment, and then vanished. Malthus carried the tankards out and handed them around.

The two young myn looked delighted, as always, to drink with him. Malthus watched them drink deeply and smiled with his head lowered. "Now tell me all about it, good fellows."

"All the deaths are making folks nervous about coming around the camp," said Shalto.

"Yeah," said Oswyl. "We're having trouble getting more help."

"Tell me everything that's troubling you. I'm listening," said Malthus in a silken tone designed to set his suggestions into their psyches as deeply as possible.

Shalto scratched at his chin and took another long pull from his tankard. "People are saying that either someone in the camp is doing it, or the camp is cursed."

"Which do you think?" Malthus asked.

"Bad luck and coincidence," Shalto replied and Oswyl nodded agreement.

Malthus noticed that they had gone through the contents quickly. "Would you like me to get you another?"

Both of the young myn nodded eagerly. Malthus repeated his steps, refilling and renewing the spell on the tankards. He returned to them and sat down.

"I agree with you both. Just an unfortunate coincidence." He handed the tankards around. "Is there more?"

Oswyl made a silly face at Shalto and nudged him.

"Females. None of us have been getting any since Beth—you know—and since you know so much about females, we thought you could..."

"Shalto, my friend," said Malthus. "I have the perfect solution to your troubles."

Oswyl's expression grew sillier, filling with a drunken delight.

"I knew you would," Shalto said. "You always do."

Malthus licked his lips, savoring the way his spell added with the liquor made them more open and suggestible by the moment. "Have you considered the sa'necari?"

"Sa'necari?" Shalto looked surprised.

"Yes. Sa'necari are all sluts. Every last one of them. It's their nature."

"Won't they try to bite us?"

"No, Shalto. Not if you don't want them to."

"Have you ever done it with one?" Shalto asked.

Malthus chuckled. "I've played nibble games. I've tried everything. I'm a very experienced mon."

"Wow, maybe I'll try that," Shalto said.

Malthus gave a tiny glance to the side. "None of the women in the camp can really say no. They have no rights. They are here by your forbearance."

"Clodagh won't like us getting sluttish with the women here," Oswyl said.

Malthus laughed long and loud. "She's no one to speak. She's as big a slut as Beth was."

Their eyes saucered and they stared at Malthus.

Malthus wagged a finger at them. "Just be more discreet about it this time. The chieftain and elders will shut the camp down, if they think it's turning into a whorehouse."

"Yeah, they will," Shalto said.

"Can we tell our friends? Like Torquil?" asked Oswyl.

"Those that you can trust to keep their mouths shut."

"We will," Shalto said. "You think it's a good time to roust out a couple of those whores?"

Malthus' smile broadened with a secret turn at the corners. "Clodagh moved into Beth's place today. Why don't one of you tell her I sent you and the other do the same with Kandaishee?"

"Howls, yes!" Shalto slapped Oswyl on the back.

"Is there anything else?"

"Nah," said Shalto. "We gotta go get some."

Malthus watched them race through the trees while he sipped his mead. "How very amusing. They'll believe anything I tell them now ... as if they didn't to begin with. Shalto, Oswyl, you don't know it yet, but I own you both."

* * * *

Nikko lay on the bed at Navaryn's, barely breathing, his skin almost translucently pale. The day had turned hot, and Navaryn had turned the sheet back to his hips to let the afternoon breezes cool his skin, which was bare except for his bandages. She leaned close, touching the back of her hand to his forehead to check for fever. Navaryn stroked his cheek, her head titled to the side, and concern twisting the corners of her lips when Nikko failed to respond with so much as a fluttering of his eyelids.

"I'm afraid we're going to lose him," Navaryn said.

"Has he said anything else?" Lokynen asked, coming to stand beside the bed where Nikko lay in fevered slumber.

"Anything that would help us identify his attackers?"

"He's said nothing." Navaryn flicked back her silvery hair. The lycan daughter of Tala, Mistress of Wolves, and God of the Moon and Hunt, Navaryn was a legend to the lycans who did not suspect she still lived. "I recognized the poison. There's an assassin in one of the villages. No one knows what he looks like. Only his handiwork. This mon is a lawgiver. Rather young for one, but his runes cannot be handled by anyone who serves the darkness."

"Can you send someone out to check around and see who's missing a lawgiver?"

"Ask Pandeena. She can do that for you. I don't dare leave this poor wolf alone for more than a moment. I keep having to call him back when he starts to slide into the final darkness. I've drawn a lot of the poison out of him. But there's still more. It takes time."

"You'll send me word if he speaks?" Lokynen asked.

She nodded. "Or if he dies, which is more likely."

"Or if he dies. We need one of those lifemages out of Rowanhart."

Navaryn shook her head and the silvery strands slid around her face. "They would not be able to do much more than I am. None of them is a master mage."

"A master exists. Lord Dawnreturning."

Navaryn's head came up and she looked at Lokynen with keen interest. "Can you get him here?"

Lokynen's lips squeezed together and he stared at his big hands. "I don't exactly know where he is. Last I heard, he was just south of the Ruins of Aubrudrin."

"Then your information does me no good."

Hathura grinned at Lokynen's discomfort. "You should get outside the valley more often, Navaryn."

"Well, I don't dare now. Not with this young mon depending on me and the Butchering Serpent in the valley."

"There's a catch to it anyway," Lokynen said.

"Dawnreturning is sa'necari."

Navaryn cast him an indignant glance, hot with skepticism. "Impossible."

Lokynen shook his head. "He's one of the last two Dark Brothers of the Light. Furthermore, he's a freak. A polymancer. A descendant of Dawnhand."

"Well, that explains it. Dawnhand was a good mon," said Navaryn. "I wept when word reached me of his death. Without him I could never have saved my people when the sa'necari cult first began. The necromancers wanted to turn us into genetically altered cattle, like their nibari."

A sly look came over Lokynen's face. "The Trickster gathered us here to protect the last descendant of Dawnhand. Yet, I hear rumors that Lord Dawnreturning is of that lineage. The descendant in the valley is a small child."

"His cub?" Navaryn guessed.

"Must be."

"Then it has come full circle. We failed to rescue Dawnhand's children from the grasp of the evil ones. We shall not fail this time."

* * * *

Malthus woke before dawn, rolled over, and spooned around Clodagh, twisting her nipple to wake her. She

squeaked, and shifted onto her back, wearing a whey-faced, get-it-done-with expression. Bruises covered her breasts, many of them from his feedings, and some from simple, sa'necari maliciousness.

"You don't look well," Malthus said.

"I always look this way in the mornings," Clodagh spit back at him. "It's your fault."

Malthus chuckled as he mounted her. "Shut up, Clodagh."

Clodagh turned her face away.

"Look at me!"

A stab of pain tore through her head, and she yelped. Clodagh looked him.

"Good."

He sawed at her for a long time before he came. Like so many sa'necari who were steeped in the rites, Malthus had problems reaching climax, unless murder was involved. He fed with his flaccid cock still sheathed inside her. Then he pulled out and kicked her off the bed.

"Go home before someone sees you."

Clodagh pulled her robe around her, sashed it, and fled.

Malthus drew his pants on, snagged a bottle of blood from the chest, and padded out into the living room. He heard the girls playing in their bedroom. Malthus poked his head in and a fond smile blossomed on his face. They sat in the middle of the floor in their nightgowns, moving carved wooden figures around. "Come out and I'll get you some breakfast started."

He poured Ros a glass of blood and gave Lyrri plum nectar. "When you're finished with your breakfast, we'll go pick wildflowers."

"You're going to see Merissa?" asked Lyrrri.

Getting a fire going in the hearth, Malthus sliced cheese, placed it on bread, and slid the pan with it onto brick and metal shelf above the fire to melt the cheese.

"Is she going to be our new aunt?" asked Ros.

Malthus grinned, leaned in, and put his finger to his lips. "Shussssh. Yes. The flowers are for her."

Ros ran her tongue as far around her mouth as she could reach, capturing even the smallest bits of blood. "I like her."

Wrapping a cloth around the handle, he brought the pan to the table and sat it in the middle. Malthus put plates around and served the food up.

"And Darmyk? How do you feel about Darmyk?"

A smoldering heat entered Ros' eyes, and her fangs came down. "He wouldn't last long, Uncle Malthus. I want to taste him. I ache for him."

Malthus realized that he would not be able to contain Ros' appetites much longer. Children and youths experienced their need for blood with greater intensity than an adult, just as at puberty the desire for sex burned hottest. "Soon, Ros."

* * * *

Clodagh started home, and changed her mind. She turned into the trees, slipping between the bushes and the undergrowth, careful to leave no trail. Every time Malthus touched her, she felt soiled. She dropped her robe and sat down on the stream bank with her legs dangling in the water. The fragrance of the thick stand of sweet pepperbush delighted her nostrils, and she inhaled it gratefully. A loon

called, shivering the air with its high eerie notes. The sound of splashing came from two trees over and Clodagh leaned out to see who or what was there.

Kandaishee paddled around, came up to the bank, and settled on it. The slight swelling of the sa'necari's belly drew Clodagh's eyes, and she spoke before she could stop herself.

"You're pregnant!"

Kandaishee startled, seized a stick, and looked around. She calmed when she saw Clodagh, waded over, and sat beside her. Her light amaranthine eyes—their pale color reflecting how few rites she had committed—held a haunted mirror to Clodagh's own. "You have that look. Are you *his* also?"

"Yes. Is the child *his*?"

Kandaishee placed her hand across her belly, lowering her head with a faint nod that spoke eloquently of both her shame and sense of helplessness. "He got me the first week he arrived."

"I think mine is also. If the coercions were not in so deep ... I'd take tansy and lose it."

Kandaishee sighed. "I tried. But the coercions are in too deep."

Clodagh kicked her feet in the water, watching the ripples as she formed the questions she did not wish to face, yet felt forced to ask. "Are there other women like us?"

"Do you mean pregnant or under his sway?"

"Both, I guess."

Tension threaded Kandaishee's voice. "All of the women living at the camp are under his sway. He's taken us all."

Clodagh sucked in a breath, her hand going to her mouth.
"Even the humans?"

"All of us. There are five other pregnancies besides ours."

"Which ones?"

"The other four sa'necari, and one human."

"Are they all his?"

Kandaishee snorted. "Certainly not the human's child. That one must be a lycan's bastard. The Butchering Serpent wouldn't stick his bone," her mouth twisted in distaste, "in a human unless she was on his altar. He likes lycan flesh best."

"Could you Read us?"

"Not wearing these things." Kandaishee waved her spellcorded wrists at Clodagh.

Clodagh broke the white flowered end off a stalk of sweet pepperbush and stroked the water with it. "If I took them off, would you let me put them back on?"

"I would have no choice. I can't leave with what he's done to my brain."

"Is—is this what Waejonan did to Dawnhand's wife?"

Kandaishee touched Clodagh's arm, and the lycan flinched. "Look at me when you speak, Clodagh. Please. I'm not the enemy."

Clodagh raised her head, still clutching the stalk, playing with it nervously. "I didn't think you were. It's a shame that it makes me look away."

"Then we share it. I recognized him and failed to speak in time. As to Melisandra Dawnhand, yes. Waejonan did to her, what Malthus has done to us. Only she found the strength to throw herself from a balcony after he filled her belly."

"I wish I had that kind of strength..."

Kandaishee shook her head. "None of us do. The arts have been perfected since Waejonan's day, and Malthus is a master. We cannot do anything he would not wish us to."

They dressed and Clodagh led Kandaishee back to the camp by a path that only she knew. Reaching the longhouse that had been Beth's, Clodagh went in first. Entering this house always made Clodagh shiver for several breaths until she grew accustomed to it. She had done everything possible to get Beth's scent out of it: while Malthus had never said as much, they all knew Beth had been rited. A small brick oven covered the fire pit, and carpets topped a layer of woven reed matting on the floors. Malthus had not allowed her to bring much from her old house when he moved her in here. She used her tinderbox to get the fire going in the oven and put a kettle on for tea.

"Will you fetch them, Kandaishee?"

Kandaishee gave a nod and left.

Clodagh removed her clothing and draped it over a chair. She put her precious grandbitch's teapot in the middle of the table surrounded by cups, added a sugar bowl as a special treat—sugar being expensive—and answered the first knock at the door.

Ystina and Laleyna, two sa'necari stood looking at her uncomfortably.

"Please, come in."

Ystina ran her eye over Clodagh's nudity. "Are we doing this lycan-style?"

"Yes." Clodagh noticed that her kettle was steaming. She put the tea leaves in a small ceramic ball that hung from a tiny chain, and dropped it into the teapot before pouring the hot water over it.

Clodagh noticed that Laleyna was as swollen as Kandaishee and shivered. That one had to be his also, for the lycan youths had not begun using the sa'necari that early. Ystina was not showing yet, but that did not mean that it might not be his.

Oliffyia and Tryphaina, also sa'necari, arrived next, and seeing the others' nakedness, disrobed without comment. Clodagh saw the way their bellies had begun to round, and a hollow, heartsick feeling settled in her chest and stomach. *Malthus' child. Malthus' child. Oh gods.*

Kandaishee brought Ethne, one of the humans, last. Ethne looked hesitantly about her. "Disrobe," Kandaishee said, as she shrugged out of her loose shift. "It's the best way to do this."

Ethne nodded, and removed her clothing.

"It would be best if we sat in a circle on the floor," said Kandaishee, taking a place with her back to the half wall into Clodagh's sleeping room.

To set the example, Clodagh joined Kandaishee and sat at her right hand. Clodagh sucked in a breath to strength her resolve, and reached for Kandaishee. "Give me your hands."

"You're really going to do this?" Ystina asked.

Kandaishee extended her wrists. Clodagh's hands shook with an extremity of trepidation as she touched the seals and opened them with a word that worked only for Clodagh,

because she had been attuned to the seals. Deep-rooted fears of sa'necari, made worse by the violation of her mind and body by Malthus, made her tense.

"Freedom doesn't change me, Clodagh. I'm still your friend. Relax." Kandaishee rubbed her wrists with an expression of relief as her powers surged back to her. She turned her awareness inward. "Yes. My child is his. Who next?"

"Me," Clodagh said. "I've been used by all of them, but I think I felt it happen with him."

"I would not be surprised. It's a fairly common womanly talent among my own people," said Kandaishee. She placed her hand on Clodagh's belly, and Clodagh felt the tickle of Kandaishee's Reader's gift. "I'm sorry, Clodagh. It's his."

Clodagh's shoulders sagged.

The others looked hesitant, as if dreading the knowledge. So Kandaishee took charge. "Come, Ystina. You next."

Kandaishee Read Ystina. "The child is lycan."

"Can you tell which one sired it? He's made me sleep with all of them," said Ystina.

"Not without having the possible fathers here to compare the genes with."

"That won't do," said Clodagh. "I can't afford to get into trouble."

"I hope it's Odhran's. He's the only one who doesn't get rough with me."

Clodagh flinched. The love that she had felt for Odhran drained out of her, knowing that he was using the females in the camp. The dream she had once held of becoming his

mate and bearing his children, which she had harbored since childhood, dissolved like a bitter powder in water. She became lost in her unhappy thoughts and barely heard the rest of it.

As she had expected, Oliffyia and Tryphaina's bellies contained Malthus' offspring. Laleyna and Ethne's were lycan.

The sound of Oliffyia crying drew Clodagh back from her troubled musings. She rose, fetched a small glass and a bottle of Dragonsbreath from the cabinet. Clodagh pressed a glass of the powerful Dwarven whiskey, more famed for its strength than its taste, in Oliffyia's hands. "I think you need this more than tea."

Oliffyia nodded, and sipped it.

Clodagh turned to Kandaishee. "I never believed sa'necari were so fertile."

"We're young and not deepened in the rites," said Kandaishee.

"But what about him?"

Kandaishee considered for a moment. "His mother is human and a bio-chemist of great talent. This could be her doing. She's also a half-breed. Her mother was a sylvan harem-slave." Kandaishee extended her wrists to Clodagh. "Put them back on before I lose my nerve."

"At the rate your people are using us, Clodagh, every woman here will be pregnant by mid-winter," said Tryphaina.

Clodagh restored the cords and seals to Kandaishee's wrists. The look of pain that crossed Kandaishee's face made her stomach clench.

"Even during our menses, they come to us. The smell excites them." Ystina said.

Clodagh looked weary. "That's because we're wolves who became myn. When the wild cousin comes into season, she bleeds.

"The story goes that our packs were being hunted to extinction on a distant world in a realm called Skawtsslund. We appealed to the moon, and she sent us Navaryn who made us myn. Navaryn led us through the world gate to this place and we settled here."

* * * *

Malthus arrived at Claw's door holding a bouquet of wild roses behind his back. His nieces, who were being watched by Kandaishee, had enjoyed the morning gathering them for Merissa. All felt right in his world.

The door opened and a nibari stood there. "Who have you come to see?"

"Merissa. I'm Malthus."

"Please follow me." The nibari led him from the foyer into the main hall where Claw sat whittling. He looked up.

"Malthus?" he growled suspiciously, leaning around to see the flowers. "I know you didn't bring those to me."

Malthus' lips drew together in a roguish smile. "They're for your daughter."

Merissa descended the stairs and entered the room wearing her carding dress. Malthus gave her a bright, eager smile and brought the flowers out.

She laughed. "Oh, they are beautiful, Malthus!"

"I spent all morning gathering them near the falls."

Merissa hugged him. Malthus kissed her chastely on the cheek.

Claw made a grumpy noise. "If you're set on courting my daughter, remember this, sirrah, last one that hurt her, I ate his heart."

Troyes' heart? Malthus swallowed back his reaction, placed the flowers in Merissa's hands, and faced Claw. "I assure you, Lord Claw, my intentions are honorable."

"It's just Claw. And, keep them that way."

"On my honor, I swear it." Malthus gazed at Merissa.

"Walk with me, darling?"

"Yes."

A nibari came up to them smiling and extended her hand to Merissa. "I'll put them in water, mistress."

"Thank you, Isbeth," Merissa said.

Malthus walked with his arm around Merissa and her head leaning on his shoulder. They left the house, crossed the yard, and walked down a narrow path through the trees. Sunlight shimmered in patches on the ground like a scattering of jewels. His hand stole up and brushed the base of her breast as he kissed her cheek. Merissa stiffened momentarily and then pressed more firmly against him. He cupped her breast and felt her nipple harden through the fabric. "I am in love you with you, Merissa."

She looked away from him. "Malthus..."

Malthus' voice softened until it was like a little boy's full of woe. "Have you no feelings at all for me? You said the other night you loved me."

She shifted in his arms, turning half away from him, yet not quite rejecting his nearness. Her ginger hair veiled her face from him, so he could not see her expression. "I feel confused. Frightened. I have made so many wrong decisions."

"Just because you made a single mistake, is no reason to reject love."

Merissa tensed. "Two mistakes. I have had two lovers. Both sa'necari. I never expected to fall in love with a human."

Malthus stopped walking and pulled her into his arms, cupping both of her breasts. "Let me make love to you. Let me show you how much I love you." He could simply have shoved his power into her mind and body, rendered her incapable of resisting, but he did not wish to take her that way and reveal himself. There were too many dangers to trying to take Merissa. She could have wards from her two previous sa'necari lovers, or her mind could be stronger than it seemed. Certainly she had a core of strength or she would never have been able to insist upon her rights to bear Darmyk.

"I love you, Malthus. But please don't ask for more than I can give yet."

Malthus lowered his hand to her waist and continued to hold her. "So be it. I love you enough to wait. I want to marry you, Merissa."

"I will think about it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE NEW PRIEST

Pandeena sauntered onto the bridge over the Eirlys River dressed in green and brown ranger leathers, pants and tunic, bow at her back and arrow case at her side, sword and two knives buckled to her belt. Seven lycans rushed out to face her. An eighth emerged from the sheltering trees in human form, and she noticed immediately that he did not wear the runes of a lawgiver. It should have been a lawgiver who met her here if they were going to question her right to cross.

"Peace brothers," she said. "I'm Pandeena Moonbow. I have heard you needed a priest."

"Are you a priest?" the older male asked.

"I am indeed. Priest to both Tala and Willodarus in their guise as joint guardians of the wolves." She drew her silver runes and the symbol of a bear holding the lunar orb from beneath her tunic and flashed them at the lycans.

The leader eyed her closely. "A wolf priest?"

Pandeena favored him with a cheeky smile, extended her arm, and allowed it to change. "And lycan."

"Come across, fur-sister," the lycan leader said. "You will need to meet with the chieftain."

"The chieftain? Why not the lawgiver?" Pandeena wondered what was going on. She had learned from a lycan at Hell's Widow about the dead priest, and thought it a fine

opportunity to ease her way into the community. However, she had heard nothing about problems with the lawgiver.

The other wolves changed to myn and stared at each other.

The leader rubbed the back of his neck, and refused to meet Pandeena's eyes. "We have no lawgiver. He's dead."

Dead, not missing? Was the Serpent killing all the lawgivers? Pandeena wondered as she crossed the bridge.

"I'm Odhran," he said, extending his hand to her. They clasped hands and sniffed each other's fingers.

Satisfied, Odhran took her to Claw's house and knocked on the door.

Isbeth appeared. "What is it?"

She frowned at the unfeminine clothing and said nothing at all about it. Some of the females who ran with the Battle-clans dressed that way. But in general very few bitches did so.

"Who's this, Odhran?" Claw sat in the Great Hall to the left of the foyer, smoking his pipe, and playing checkers with the handsomest young dog wolf Pandeena had ever seen.

Odhran dipped his shoulders to Claw. "A priest answering our request for someone to take Old Tempest's place."

Claw's eyes raked Pandeena. "You're a priest?"

Pandeena showed him her runes. "I am."

"You don't look like much of one," Claw grumbled testily.

Pandeena's brows arched, her back straightened stiffly, and her head came up at a proud tilt. "Why? Because I'm female?"

"Another crotchety female," Claw chuntered. "No. Because you're dressed out like a Battle-Clansmon or one of those freerangers that show up here sometimes. Can you use all that weaponry?"

Pandeena gave him a bright smile. "And more."

"You're gonna need it."

The young blond wolf gave her a bow of his shoulders. "I'm Kynyr Maguire. The chieftain is right. Lady?"

"Pandeena Moonbow." She flashed Kynyr an appreciative smile, and turned back to Claw. "Because of the rebellion? I thought it hadn't reached here yet."

Claw mumbled low, and Pandeena failed to catch all of it.

"What was that?"

"I said, don't be too sure. There's been a lot of deaths in the valley. A steading was wiped out northeast of here and the attackers' spoor was strange. Like nothing I've ever seen. An eastern Battle-clan was destroyed. Something's out there in our forests."

"I can take care of myself, if that's what you mean."

"I hope so. You're an attractive young bitch and I wouldn't like to see something happen to you."

"Like what happened to your lawgiver?"

Claw shot Odhran a sharp look. "He told you?"

"I asked him. It isn't normal for a commoner to be doing the work of a lawgiver."

Claw bristled and went hairy on her. "Imps got him. Grief killed his mother a few days later. Our old priest is dead, and the bitch that ran the refugee camp was killed and eaten. Possibly by imps, but possibly not. Some children from the

local farms have gone missing and we've not been able to pick up a trail on them."

"Whose side are you on in this rebellion?"

"Ours. Whatever it takes for my people to survive."

"Our people." Pandeena crossed and extended her hand to him. He sniffed her.

"Lycan? I expected you to be human."

Pandeena shook her head, her eyes narrowing. "If you side with the Sharani, or try to remain neutral, and should the queen win, Queen Tomyrilen will take a tithe of our people for her rites."

"They were taking tithes already. I want no part of the queen."

Pandeena's smile broadened. "That's what I hoped you'd say. Just between us..." She glanced from Claw to Kynyr to Odhran before finishing her statement. "With nothing of this being spoken beyond this point..."

The three males nodded.

"The gods have promised us help. Teakamon, shepherd of the wilds, is in the valley, as is Hathura Waveskimmer and Lokynen the Battle-Master."

A long, low whistle escaped Kynyr.

Claw's eyes lit with hope. "Praise the guardians."

"Yes, indeed. I'll have you a lawgiver as soon as possible. I know several who trained as such, but haven't been given a see yet."

"Thank you. Odhran will show you around, get you settled."

"We'll speak further, chieftain."

"Yes, we will."

"If there's anything I can do for you, just ask," said Kynyr, earning himself a bright smile from Pandeena.

Odhran showed Pandeena through the village. She strode along, attracting every eye with her unfeminine garb and her golden beauty.

"You'll live in the old priest's home beside the shrine. It's built on the western edge of the refugee camp," explained Odhran. "If there is anything you need, just ask."

"I appreciate that, but Kynyr offered first."

* * * *

Malthus had been lounging against a tree, talking to Shalto and Oswyl when he saw Odhran coming toward them with a pretty young lycan. He swept his eyes over her and licked his lips. He had never seen this one before.

"Come everyone!" shouted Odhran. "Come meet our new priest."

Clodagh emerged from the longhouse, flinching when she saw Odhran, recovered herself, and crossed the yard to hold out her hand to Pandeena. "Welcome, priest."

"Pandeena. Call me Pandeena."

Clodagh smiled at her. "I'm Clodagh. I supervise the camp, although I suppose you'll be doing a lot of it now. The priest always has the governance here."

Malthus blinked. That slip of a girl was a new priest? Where had she come from? How did she know they needed a priest? His agents had killed the lycans' messenger before he

could get beyond Hell's Widow. He caught Shalto's eye and nodded toward Pandeena. "Awfully pretty for a priest."

"Much better to look at than old Tempest."

"Shalto, my friend, you're learning." *Another threat to be eliminated.*

They sauntered over and studied Pandeena.

She spied Malthus and offered her hand to him. "I am Pandeena Moonbow, priest to the Guardians, Tala and Willodarus."

Malthus extended his awareness through the palm of his hand and took a quick assessment. Lycan, but with the stink of power, and heavily shielded from enchantary prying. The wolves produced albinos more frequently than mages. Something was distinctly odd about her.

Pandeena withdrew her hand as a frown flitted across her features.

"I'm Malthus Estrobian. I live at the camp with my nieces." Malthus felt a quiver of worry. Had she detected his attempted intrusion? Was she mage gifted in some way? Except for Cahira, he had not heard of a lycan with that gift in a long time. Perhaps it was a priest gift of some kind.

"You're one of the refugees?"

"Yes. My nieces—my half brother's children—are sa'necari born. We escaped the clutches of the queen and came here. Tempest, our priest, was teaching the girls to embrace the Light. They've had no teacher since the deaths of the priest and the lawgiver. I hope that you will be stepping into their shoes."

"I will be." Pandeena turned to Odhran. "You have a schoolroom?"

"Yes. It's attached to the shrine."

"Explain to the mothers that I want all the children there tomorrow, bright and early. I'll have a lesson planned for them."

"I'm very helpful around here," Malthus interjected. "If there is anything you need, ask."

Pandeena gave him a look that Malthus could not interpret. "I will. Now, Odhran, explain a few things to me. How many children?"

"It's just the camp children. Religious training, writing, and reading."

Malthus watched them walk off together. His gums itched around the sheaths of his fangs and he licked them. Something was not right about this. If she got in his way, she would meet the same fate as the others. And, yet, he coveted her, almost as strongly as he did Merissa. He found it difficult to say which was the more lovely. With Beth gone, he had been using Clodagh and Kandaishee most often. He wanted something finer. If he had not encountered her shields, he would have gone after this new priest. Her youth suggested inexperience, but her shields suggested otherwise. She was a disturbing enigma—one that he wanted to discover more about.

"Well, what do you think of her, Shalto?" Malthus asked.

Shalto grinned. "I may have to put it to her."

"Shall we discuss it over a tankard? I'm buying." *Maybe he could let them handle her.*

Oswyl nudged Shalto.

"Yeah, let's get one," Shalto said.

* * * *

The Shrine to Willodarus proved to be a simple building, a square box with two wings, located in a shady yard with grass and flowering hedges. Pandeena liked it.

"We gave it the best we knew how," Odhran said, opening the door and gesturing for Pandeena to enter ahead of him.

"I'm sure you did." Pandeena gazed about her, taking it all in as she stepped through the doorway. "That young bitch, Clodagh I think her name was. She kept looking at you strangely."

Odhran looked uncomfortable, staring at his feet. "Your holiness..."

"Pandeena."

"Yes. We were sweethearts ... since childhood. A few weeks ago, she rejected me. I don't know why."

"Would you like me to speak with her?"

Odhran brightened. "Yes, holiness. It would ease my heart, if only to know what I did wrong."

The interior was dusty with disuse. Pandeena's boot heels clicked and she glanced down to see that the lycans had given the shrine a tiled floor. Apparently some of the congregation had money and a willingness to give. The ranks of benches for the worshippers were eight deep on two sides. Ahead of them stood a railing, separating the altar from the congregations' space. A basket for offerings from the congregation sat on the floor by the far right of the railing, so

that they could make their offerings after receiving the priest's blessing.

Pandeena noted the basket was empty and dust had collected in the bottom. "How long has it been since you lost your priest?"

"Months."

Pandeena stepped around the railing and went to the altar, running her hands along it. The vibrations were warm and loving. The entire place had been properly consecrated. If someone here was harming the people, why hadn't he desecrated the altar? "What happened to the priest?"

"Heart attack. He was old ... but there are rumors."

"Of what?"

Odhran glanced away from her in a manner she interpreted as reluctance. "Well, for one thing he was found in a part of the forest he had no reason to be in. None of the farms are out that way. Nothing to attract him. It was all very strange."

"And?"

"No footprints. No scent trail."

"As if the body had been dumped there."

Odhran pursed his lips. "Yes. Exactly."

"If I were you, I wouldn't mention this to anyone else."

"Oh, I won't. Believe me, your holiness."

"Pandeena. Just call me Pandeena."

"Thank you. I will."

Pandeena left the altar area and walked around to a hallway on the side, Odhran followed her, trying to look helpful and she smiled at him from time to time. The first

door opened on the priest's apartments. She found three cozy rooms, a sitting room, kitchen, and bedroom.

Plenty of nice furniture filled the apartments, including a huge bed that dwarfed the rest of the furniture. "Why such a large bed?"

Willodarians weren't sworn to celibacy like the Taladrim, however, she was looking for clues.

"A donation. I remember Tempest saying that at his age, he didn't need something that large ... but a gift is a gift."

Pandeena nodded and raked her teeth across her lower lip. "I'll want clean linens. Can you arrange that?"

"There are several women in the camp who used to help out with the housekeeping here. I will get them over to see you."

"Good. So the priest had no liaisons in the village?"

"I doubt it. I doubt he even touched the slut."

Pandeena frowned. "The slut? You have a slut here?"

"Had. The bitch that ran the camp here, name was Beth. She was a slut. Rumor says she even had the lawgiver and possibly the chieftain between her legs."

Pandeena's mouth opened in a surprised 'O' that she chose not to voice, instead her tone went dark and dangerous. "And did you ride the slut?"

Odhran flushed.

"Truth. I'll know if you're lying."

"Yes. Many times."

"That's probably the reason Clodagh rejected you. I want to talk to her."

"She's dead."

Pandeena nibbled her lower lip. "How convenient ... for someone. How did she die?"

"Imps, near as anyone could tell."

"Where did they find her body?" Pandeena strode out of the apartments and back into the hallway, which formed a U around the rear of the shrine.

"East side of the valley, over near the piled boulders. Iudris Meadow, I think, it was."

"What was she doing over there?"

"Don't know. Last time she was seen here, she was in tears and wouldn't talk to no one. She ran off."

"Why? Did she have family over there?"

"Nope. No family. Rumor's that the fellow she had her cap set for rejected her."

"Who was that?"

"Now you're asking too many questions..."

Pandeena's gaze went harsh. "I'm your priest. And until I find you a lawgiver, I serve in that capacity also. So answer me."

"Malthus."

"That fellow I met back there?"

"Yup. Malthus. He's seeing Merissa these days."

"The princess?"

"Yup."

Continuing around, Pandeena guessed that the one at the back led out of doors. She confirmed that there was another door on the far side, which had to lead into the west wing and the schoolroom. The school could wait, she wanted to see the grounds.

Directly behind the shrine, she found an area marked off as a graveyard by a dotting of white stones. A wooden arch framed the entrance with the likeness of the Willodarian bear atop it. She walked through and discovered only a single headstone.

She spied a fuzzy little dog lying on the grave, his head on his paws and a woeful expression, tail and ears drooping. "Whose grave is that?"

"Tempest's. He was our priest."

"And the dog sleeping on it?"

"That's Moss. He was Tempest's dog. Our lawgiver, Nikko, took the poor little lad in after Tempest died. But imps got Nikko and his mother died of grief. Moss won't let anyone else keep him. He spends nearly all his time here. A few people have tried to lure him inside, but he always gets out and comes here. The whole village feeds him, waters him."

Pandeena squatted down. "Come here, little fellow. Come here, Moss." She made a soothing noise in her throat.

Moss perked up and stared at her.

She repeated her words and noises, patting the ground in front of her.

Moss came and sniffed her hand. His tail swung back and forth. Pandeena extended her wilderkin gifts and comforted Moss. He climbed into her arms. Pandeena stood, cuddling Moss.

"Well, I'll be," Odhran said. "He hasn't done that since Granta died."

"Granta?"

"The lawgiver's mother."

"Moss and I are going to be good friends."

Imps got the lawgiver ... or did they? Pandeena looked down at Moss and wondered. *What was that word or piece of a word, the lawgiver had said. Mul, marl, mal?* She needed to ask her mother.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SPY HUNTERS

Nikko woke in a bright sunny room that he did not recognize. A pleasant breeze blew through the windows, carrying the scents of the forest, flowering bushes, and farther away goats and sheep. A soothing lethargy held him in a gentle imprisonment on his bed, with no desire to move. His awareness felt cottony and displaced. Nikko yawned. He wondered if one of his people had found him. Then he wondered who were his people, and why they should have found him. Why should they even have been looking for him? The emptiness in his mind shoved needles of panic into his chest. His pulse raced and his heart hammered, which brought on a feeling of increasing pressure in his chest as if a tremendous hand were squeezing his heart.

"Awake finally, lawgiver?" said a nice female voice.

Nikko started to turn on his side, and gasped sharply in pain. A pair of long-fingered hands pressing on his naked chest stopped him from moving further.

"I'm having a damned hard time keeping those wounds closed." Navaryn put her cool fingertips to his temples. "Relax. Breathe deeply. Your heart is damaged. Tense up like this and you'll set off an attack."

Nikko dropped flat and obeyed her, feeling her warm power flow through him. The chest pain eased.

"Lawgiver?" He angled his head to glance at the bandages on his chest, ribs, and stomach. Beneath the light coverlet, he felt another near the base of his spine and one on his thigh. Nikko could not remember being hurt. He reached for the memories, and his mind flinched away from it, leaving him staring into a darkened abyss again.

"Yes. You wear a lawgiver's runes," said Navaryn. "What is your name? Which village are you from?"

Nikko blinked, his thoughts racing as he became aware of the chain around his neck and pulled the runes forth from where they had settled along the edge of his neck amid the pillows. "My ... my name? I don't remember. It's all gone."

"I'm not surprised, really. You had nearly as much poison as blood in you. Death lotus—it took me days to dig all the broken off ends of the darts from your skin. Snake venom and Devil's Silver. It shocked your system. It's the gods' own miracle that you're alive. If you wish to stay that way, don't get out of bed without my permission. You're still in bad shape."

"How bad?"

"To start, you only have one lung left. I managed to save one kidney and your liver. I may yet be able to fix your damaged heart. Time will tell. If that arrow that struck near your spine had been a fraction closer, you'd be paralyzed. So count yourself lucky. Now do you understand why I want you to stay in bed?"

"Oh, gods. Yes."

She rose from her chair and poured a greenish liquid from a bottle into a small glass. "Devil's Silver does that when they get enough of it into you."

Nikko turned a pleading face to Navaryn, as he accepted the glass and drank the contents. Despite some sweetening, it tasted dreadful. He wiped his mouth with his arm, grimacing. "Do you know who did this to me?"

"We were hoping you could tell us."

"I can't remember anything."

"You're the only person alive who has ever seen his face. It was the Butchering Serpent who shot you."

"Oh, gods. And he's loose among my people."

Navaryn smiled and Nikko thought she was the loveliest female he had ever seen. She touched his forehead and he felt the wash of a Reader's power through him. He caught her hand when she removed it and sniffed her fingers. At least he could move his arms without pain so long as the rest of him did not move. "You're lycan."

"I am," Navaryn said. "At least all of your knowledge is intact. It's the personal you can't access. There's hope for that."

Nikko felt his mind and body go cottony. "What did you give me?"

"Holadil and a pollonae extract. Among other things."

"Not pollendine?"

"You're not dying. Unless you try to do more than your body's ready for. Hathura gave you the last of the Sapphire Elixir when they found you, or you would never have reached here alive."

"Who is Hathura?" he asked. "Who are you?"

Navaryn's lips curled into the smile of one who had a secret and expected the revelation to take some getting used to. "Hathura Waveskimmer. I'm Navaryn Moonbow."

Names out of legend. Nikko's brows knit. "You're descended of the First Mother?"

Navaryn's bemusement deepened. "I *am* the First Mother."

The lawgiver looked so stunned that he could have been knocked over with a daisy. "I—I think I want to sleep."

"Good. If you need anything, just pull the bell cord. I've tucked the end under your pillow." Navaryn stood, preparing to leave him.

"One more thing. How long have I been here?"

"Nearly four weeks. Now, rest. I'll be back to check on you."

Four weeks. Urgency clutched at his middle, and a feeling of displaced danger that he could not hold onto. Nikko closed his eyes as Navaryn left him. Soon he slept. Finally he dreamed of a faceless man chasing him through the woods, shooting him with burning arrows. And he wept in his sleep.

* * * *

Pandeena sat at the small desk in the living room, books stacked around her and a quill in hand as she scribbled notes, preparing the next day's lesson for the children. She had been there a week, knew everyone in the camp by name, yet Pandeena could not get past the air of distrust that the camp's adults displayed. She found that odd and disturbing, considering that the rest of the villagers accepted her with

open arms, as befitted a new priest. Just after nightfall, a knock came at her door, and she answered it, finding Shalto and Oswyl standing there.

"What do you want? It's late."

Shalto pushed past her with a leer and Oswyl followed.

"I didn't ask you in." Irritation rose in Pandeena's voice. She slammed the door closed and treaded toward Shalto, who appeared to be the one in charge of the pair.

"You didn't need to," Shalto said. "You've been begging for this visit since you laid eyes on us."

"What?" Pandeena's eyes narrowed, surreptitiously scanning her living room and deciding how to avoid breaking any furniture. "I want you to leave."

Oswyl nudged Shalto.

"We know you must be lonely," Shalto said. "A fine looking bitch like yourself shouldn't be alone nights."

"Get out, or I'll throw you out," Pandeena growled, placing herself near the door into the hallway that circled the shrine, well away from the sofas, end tables, chairs, and desk.

Shalto circled her casually. "You don't mean that."

"We wanted to talk about the wild cousins," Oswyl said, an eager note in his voice.

"I'm your priest, not your slut," Pandeena growled still lower.

Shalto sidled up to her. "Everyone's talking about the way you look at me."

"Way I what?"

Shalto slid his arm around her, and cupped her breast with his other hand.

Pandeena stared down at his hand. "Move it, or lose your fingers."

"Awww, you don't mean it."

Oswyl came up on the other side of her. "Maybe she likes it rough?"

Pandeena elbowed Shalto hard in the face. He released her with a sharp howl, staggering backwards, hunched over, and clutching his bleeding nose. She spun faster than the eye could follow and kicked Shalto in the stomach, slamming him into the wall by the door. He slipped to the floor and lay stunned. Pandeena followed and stamped his hand, grinding his fingers under her boot heel.

Shalto screamed.

"Maybe *you* like it rough," Pandeena snarled.

Oswyl heard the bones break in Shalto's hands, his eyes bulged, and he ran for the other door, but Pandeena was faster.

"You came for some together," she sneered. "So you'll get some too, Oswyl."

"Hey, I didn't mean no harm ... We weren't gonna hurt you none. It's just a friendly weapon, after all." Oswyl backed away from her.

Pandeena hit Oswyl in the nose and heard the bone crunch. Oswyl cried out, and his hand went to his nose. She saw Shalto getting groggily to his feet, grabbed Oswyl by the arm, and hurled him on top of Shalto. The two young males went down in a heap together. Before either could recover, she came at them like a fury out of hell, kicking and stomping on them.

They shrieked, screamed, howled, and finally begged. Yet, Pandeena did not relent until she had damaged them enough to satisfy her. When they lay in a bloodied curl, too frightened to move, she stood over them with her arms crossed.

"I'm your priest, damnit! If I find out you're treating the women of the camp like you tried to treat me, I'll give you a worse thrashing next time."

Shalto shook his head frantically, his eyes like dishes on an alabaster cloth. "Won't happen again, holiness."

"Nope, won't happen again," Oswyl agreed.

Pandeena threw her front door open and stared. It looked like the entire camp was standing in her yard. She spotted Malthus, Clodagh, and Kandaishee near their head.

"This is what happens to anyone who mistreats a woman in this camp," Pandeena shouted. She snatched Shalto up and sent him tumbling into the yard.

"My leg!" Shalto screamed. "She broke my leg ... and my fingers."

Pandeena tossed Oswyl out next.

He landed sobbing. "My arms! My arms, she's broken them both!"

Pandeena wiped her hands off on her pants leg. "Someone find them a healer. I refuse to help them. They got what they deserved."

She closed the door and went to wash the blood from her hands before settling down again to work on the lesson plan.

* * * *

Malthus sat cross-legged on the floor of his study, dipping his arrowheads in the newest batch of poison. He had increased the amount of Devil's Silver. Images of Pandeena circled through his mind, blending with the way Shalto and Oswyl had looked lying in her yard when she finished with them. He wanted to fuck her, or rite her, but he felt certain that he would have to shoot her instead. *Such a waste.*

A small knock preceded Lyrrri's entrance.

"I told you not to come in here."

"Uncle Malthus, I can't find Ros."

"What do you mean you can't find Ros?"

Lyrrri blinked and dropped her head. "We were playing hide and seek. When she didn't find me and it got dark, I started calling her. But she doesn't answer."

Malthus set his arrows aside. "Go into my bedroom and stay there. Drop the bar on the shutters and the door. Don't come out for anyone except me."

He waited until he saw Lyrrri go in and heard the bars drop into place. His bedroom had the strongest magical defenses in the house. Malthus had relied on tell-tales for the girls.

Once in the yard, he started calling. "Ros? Ros, come here. Come now. No more games."

Fear was a rock in his stomach and a fist in his chest. He circled the house, still calling and getting no response. Malthus extended his necromantic senses and caught a flicker of something. It drew him to a thicket of aspen trees, beyond that to a tangle of briars, and then to the clustering stands of sweet pepperbushes bordering a small freshet. Cattails thrust their green brushes thickly along the edge, shoving against

the long tips of the sweet pepperbush stalks with their profusion of tiny white bells. Ahead of him, a large willow tree overhung the edge of the stream. He saw a bit of blue cloth among the humped chaos of roots and cattails. Ros had worn her favorite blue dress that morning.

"Ros!"

Malthus got no answer.

He scrambled over the roots.

Ros lay half in and half out of the little stream, water flowing across her dangling legs halfway up her naked thighs, her skirts ripped away, and her small clothes gone. Blood and drying cum coated her loins. A courier pouch lay tucked behind her head. Malthus dropped to his knees, dragged her into his arms, and turned her head to the side. On her neck he found the distinctive scrape and pierce marks of a Lemyari. He extended his awareness through her body. Life—he almost missed the flicker of it. A moment more and he would have found her dead. Malthus slit his wrist and pressed it into her mouth. Blood flowing over her tongue caused her fangs to come down, she bit reflexively without regaining consciousness, and sucked him.

Rage brought Malthus' fangs to full extension, and sent a flush across his dark features. He saw a piece of paper folded and shoved into the neck of what remained of her dress. Opening the pouch, Malthus shoved that in with the rest, not bothering to try and read it in the darkness—he knew already who had written it.

His lips writhed back from his fangs. "I'll kill you, Sergei. I'll kill you for this."

The rumors that Sergei had a taste for little girls had finally been confirmed to Malthus. If the vampire had fallen into the grip of Passion-Dance of Obsession, Sergei would keep coming back until he had killed all of them, and then go looking for the rest of Malthus' family. Malthus intended to make it Sergei's last dance.

Malthus let Ros feed until he was certain that he'd pulled her back from the edge. Lifting her in his arms, he settled her against his shoulder, picked up the pouch, and carried her home. He put Ros to bed, and then fetched a basin, ewer of water, soap, and a soft cloth. One he had cleaned Ros up, he let Lyrri out.

"Lyrri, your sister is hurt. She fell in the water. Don't disturb her."

Her eyes were large as she nodded solemnly. "I won't, Uncle Malthus.

Malthus put Lyrri to bed, and sent her to sleep with a touch of his hand. Afterward, he took the pouch to his office and sat down at his desk. Malthus untied the leather thong holding the pouch closed and drew out two sealed letters and the folded paper he had found shoved into Ros' dress.

He unfolded the paper first, and found that the message had indeed come from Sergei. The note, written in an elegant hand with graphite said simply:

"Playing both sides of the game? That could get you killed.

"By the way, she was delicious. I'll come back for the other one."

Sergei.

Malthus crumbled the paper angrily, kneading it in his hand for several minutes before dropping it into the woven basket beside his desk. He would see that it was burned with the rest when he finished. Sergei was so certain of his power, that he was taunting Malthus, and it rankled. Was Sergei threatening him? More reason to kill the vampire and be done with it.

Two more letters, one from Lord Daemon, and the other from the god-queen Gylorean. *No wonder Sergei made that threat. He must think he can blackmail me here. No matter.*

Malthus broke the seal on the first letter.

Malthus,

I want the child alive. He is worth a chest of gold to me. If you can get me his mother also, I will make that two chests. They are more valuable than you can imagine. But only if they are alive when they reach me. I am the only one who knows how to use them. Do not disappoint me.

Daemon, Lord Brandrahoon.

Malthus felt a moment's elation until he read the signature. Lord Daemon had just given his true name, and with that name came an implicit threat. For the first time in his life, Malthus knew fear. He wished now that he had not told Brandrahoon of the child and its mother.

He knew all the stories and most of the rumors concerning the oldest vampire in existence. He was one of the three brothers who had founded Waejontor.

Once there were three brothers: Brandrahoon the vampire; Isranon called Dawnhand, speaker to spirits; and Waejonan the Accursed, first of sa'necari.

The words trembled in his mind. The hellgod-queen Gylorean Galee had made Brandrahoon the first vampires. Back in the days that the sa'necari were merely a cult led by Waejonan the first king of Waejontor, they had learned to fear Brandrahoon. The dreaded Lord Hoon, a vampire lord with many holdings throughout the continent, had to have been Brandrahoon all along.

Historians and others had long speculated on whether the ancient vampire still lived or not. Now Malthus knew and he wondered how many others did also. Brandrahoon would only have revealed himself if he felt secure in his position and his power. The queen must be aware of this, after all she had given him back the estates he held before Waejonan exiled him—before he and his she-creature killed Waejonan and disappeared into the shadows for centuries, rising only as a rumor here and there.

Did the she-creature still exist also? If so, he would not risk a face-to-face encounter with her—he would shoot her from a distance. Were his poisons enough to kill her? What more could he add to the blend? Lemyari. There were rumors of an antidote, but Malthus didn't credit them. He would secretly take one of those Lemyari who served him, and imprison it to milk its venom. *Sergei. It ought to be Sergei. If only I could trap that one.*

Considering his choices allowed Malthus to recover from his initial shock, and he pulled himself together. So Brandrahoon wanted Merissa as well as Darmyk. Malthus wanted Merissa for himself. She had given Isranon a child, she could give him one. He needed legitimate heirs, and he

could not afford to wait much longer. At thirty-six, Malthus knew he should have already been nearly sterile, yet to judge from how many camp females he had impregnated he was far from it.

While there existed many theories concerning his people's progressive infertility, none of them fully explained it. Although almost humanly fertile at adolescence, it degenerated rapidly into sterility, and no one's theories had yet proven out. He suspected that his mother might be correct when she said the rites caused it. Acting on that belief, she had periodically dosed him for prolonged periods with the same potions that had allowed him to appear human in the hopes of maintaining his fertility.

And, of course, there was also a small percentage of variation there, but not enough to remark on. When they bred outside their own kind, more children resulted, but few of them were born sa'necari. Here was a young lycan who had borne a sa'necari child. It made him want Merissa all the more. That decided him. Malthus would find a way around yielding Merissa to Brandrahoon.

Then he thought of Pandeena, the mysterious priest, and his loins tightened. He wanted that one also, but something about her disturbed him. Spellcord. Yes, that was what he needed. Spellcord her, and then make her his. Make her spill her secrets, and open her legs to him.

Malthus opened the letter from Minnoras and discovered that the god-queen had written him only a single line:

Send me the child alive.

Damn! They both wanted the child delivered to them alive. So there was no possibility of getting paid double.

Malthus reconsidered everything. The gold would be nice. However, he had already been promised a title of nobility, lands, and slaves for betraying the valley into the Queen's hands. Malthus ran his tongue over his fangs thoughtfully. He had not specified whether the child had been born lycan or sa'necari. Perhaps he could substitute Kandaishee's child for Darmyk ... That was a thought. The two cubs were the same age. Give that child to Brandrahoon. He was more of a threat than Galee was. The god-queen still had Angrim, Beltria, and Shaurone to plow through before she could reach him.

He would have his promised vengeance on Isranon for killing his brother—butcher Darmyk and send pieces of the child to his father.

But Merissa? Merissa was another goal entirely. Perhaps he could substitute Clodagh for Merissa after a bit of fiddling with her mind to convince the bitch she was Merissa.

He should never have sent those letters, but at least he now had a plan.

* * * *

After closing all her curtains and shutters in her apartments, Pandeena cuddled Moss in her arms. He licked her face with a wag of his tail. "Yes, I love you too, Moss. We're going to visit a friend of yours."

Pandeena Jumped to her mother's house, and as she walked past the front room, she saw that the chairs, sofas, and floor overflowed with members of Teakamon's band in

mottled gray and brown. Teakamon sat at the head of the room in the chair that Lokynen favored, wearing his natural form: his hair the color of fresh spring leaves hung loose to his buttocks, a seal-brown loin cloth was the only clothing on his sorrel skinned-body and his lean frame with its well-defined muscles, and modest flare at his shoulders, looked as if he had been carved from a light, reddish-brown wood and then highly polished.

Teakamon rose from his chair when he saw Pandeena, straightening to his full seven-foot height. A gray-eyed woman dressed in doeskin trousers and tunic shoved herself from a chair and followed him. Pandeena's eyebrows lifted at the sight of Reynan Sharani, the Watcher of the Woods, knowing that Teakamon would only have brought her if times had become exceedingly dangerous.

"What have we here?" Teakamon asked, reaching out to stroke the dog in Pandeena's arms. "I do believe it's little Moss."

"You know him?" Pandeena asked, startled.

"Why, yes," Teakamon replied. "I gave him to Tempest ten years ago. He's a cedar puppy. I grow them on my special tree. They're very intelligent as dogs go, and long-lived." Teakamon parted the hair on Moss' tail to show the green spot where Moss had once been connected to the tree he sprouted from.

Pandeena sucked in a sharp breath. "Tempest is dead. They say it was a heart attack."

Teakamon frowned, his bushy green brows knitting tightly together across his narrow forehead. "That's not possible."

"He was old..."

The son of Willodarus shook his head. "Tempest could not die of that. I linked his heart to a tree. He was one of my favorites."

Tension rippled through Pandeena. "Could a sa'necari have stilled his heart? As if it were a heart attack?"

"Death magic, yes. Did you see Tempest's body?"

"No. He was returned to the earth months ago. He's buried beside his shrine in Wolffgard."

Sorrow washed across Teakamon's features. "Poor little Moss. Has he been alone all that time?"

"No. I think he had other people for a time. Actually, I think our injured wolf upstairs belongs to Moss."

"I assume that you are taking him there?"

"I watch and see, but may not tell, of all the evil that I smell," said Reynan in a singsong voice. "I hunt it down, I kill it well, I show to all however small."

Pandeena shivered. She had never heard the Watcher speak before. All she knew about Teakamon's great paladin was that the mon had been geised at birth by her bloodmother's enemies. "Yes, I am."

"Shall I come with you?" Teakamon asked.

Pandeena shook her head. "I'll come back down and we can talk then."

"Good. Reynan and I have things to show you."

Pandeena climbed the stairs with Moss. When she entered Nikko's bedroom, Moss began squirming to be let down and whining. Pandeena tightened her hold on him.

"What do we have here?" Navaryn asked, glancing over her shoulder as she handed Nikko a glass of one of her potions.

"A friend of his, I think." Pandeena knelt and released Moss. The little dog immediately ran across the room, jumped onto the bed, and bounded up to Nikko. He licked Nikko's face furiously.

"Moss! How did you get here?" Nikko said. He stopped and blinked. "That's his name, isn't it?"

Pandeena grinned broadly. "Yes, it is. Moss!" she spoke sharply to get the dog's attention. "Find Nikko."

Moss bounced at Nikko again with a loud bark.

"Well, that settles that," Navaryn said. "Your name is Nikko."

Pandeena nodded. "Nikko is the missing lawgiver from Wolffgard Village. They think you're dead, Nikko."

"It's just as well," Navaryn said. "If the Butchering Serpent knew you lived, he'd come looking for you."

"Does the name Malthus mean anything to you?" Pandeena asked.

"Mal—Malthus?" Nikko abruptly doubled over with a cry, clutching at his chest and stomach. Navaryn sprang from her chair and slipped her hand onto his chest, flooding it with warmth and energy, taking from her own life force and sharing it with Nikko, linking the beat of his heart to hers, so that hers beat for both of them. Pandeena put her hand on her mother's arm and linked with her in rapport, lending her own strength to Navaryn's. There was still too much of the

poison lingering his Nikko's body, too much damage had been done.

Navaryn pulled Nikko into her arms and cradled him, maintaining the link between them, which was all that was keeping him alive. "Get me the powdered Amphereon and the tube."

Pandeena broke rapport and brought the bottle from the cabinet. She filled the steel tube with Amphereon and passed it to her mother. Navaryn shoved it into Nikko's nostril and blew. She passed the tube back to Pandeena. "Refill it."

The inserting and blowing was repeated, bringing the highly refined Amphereon into Nikko's blood stream fast through the mucus membranes. Navaryn Read him and saw that his damaged heart had steadied.

"Now the blue arcane and the pollendine, quickly."

They managed to get the drugs down him.

Navaryn released the link and they settled Nikko back among his blankets and pillows.

"What happened?" Nikko asked in a soft, dazed voice, his hand on Moss' back.

"A name triggered a paroxysm. We won't say it again until you're stronger."

Nikko stared at a point on the wall, raking his teeth over his lower lip. "Can I keep Moss?"

"I have no problem with that, Mother. I doubt that anyone will notice that Moss has vanished. They'll probably decide something happened to him and get on with their lives. No one is going to go looking for a small dog."

"Then, yes, you can."

"Thank you." Nikko cuddled Moss and was soon asleep with the dog beside him.

Pandeena knew that Nikko was nineteen, but right then he seemed more like a frightened little boy. "Well, I think we know who shot him."

"Don't say the name until we're out of here," Navaryn said, and led her daughter down to one of the lower small sitting rooms.

Pandeena licked her lips and raked her teeth across her lower one. "Malthus. He appears to be human, but he tried to Read me."

"He's the Butchering Serpent. Be careful."

"I'll kill him."

"No. We can't break the very laws we helped to create. We gave the lycans laws, culture, and civilization. Ours will not be the hands that destroy it. Watch him. Catch him in the act or find a witness to it. At least we finally know what the Serpent looks like."

"We have a witness."

"Not Nikko. Not until his memory comes back completely."

"We have Moss."

"A dog cannot be a witness. You know the laws."

"Then I'll watch him."

"And I'll get hold of Lokynen and have him join you at the village. Teakamon's people are too conspicuous."

"That's a sound plan." Pandeena leaned against the wall beside the linen closet, her arms crossed. "Teakamon wants to show me something."

"You don't need to see it. The Watcher has a basket of trophies. Lemyari, sa'necari, and Rakshasha. You must get another lawgiver for the village. Under the laws, you will need one to find the truths and declare Malthus guilty of his crimes."

Pandeena thought for a moment. "Caimbeul of Running Horse. It will probably take me a few days to talk him into it, but his apprentice is thirty years old and more than ready to take over."

"It would be easier to get the apprentice. Besides, do you really want to complicate your life with Caimbeul again?"

"I don't want the apprentice, I want Caimbeul. And I can handle the old lecher." Pandeena winked at her mother.

"I know. Do what you can."

Pandeena Jumped back to her home in Wolffgard and made arrangements to be gone for a couple of weeks, figuring that it was better to allow for more time than she expected to need, rather than too little. She shoved a few items in her backpack, and Jumped to Running Horse in Clan Silver Paw's valley. Only Caimbeul would do for her purposes. Red Wolff would not normally accept an out-clan lawgiver. Caimbeul, however, was a legend and one of the long lived owing to having a fireborn among his ancestors. His wisdom was considered so wide and all-encompassing that he was frequently called in to settle disputes between clans.

* * * *

Sergei's attack upon Ros had unsettled Malthus far more than he wished to admit. He slept badly, constantly getting up

to check on the girls, and finally fell asleep in a chair in the living room. It had been years since anything had left him feeling this threatened, even when removing his people to safety after learning that Battle-clan planned to assault his holdings. He shifted uncomfortably in his dreams.

Images of Sergei and Brandrahoon haunted him. His nieces crouched at his feet, terrified as the vampires seized him. Brandrahoon shoved a blade into his heart while Sergei recited what he intended to do to Ros and Lyrri. "I should not have brought them—I should not..." he mumbled in his sleep, writhing as the blade went in and he felt himself die.

A tug on his shirt brought him lurching from sleep.

Lyrri stood there, her eyes wide with worry. "Ros won't wake up."

His breath caught in his throat as he propelled himself from his chair at a run. He threw open the shutters to allow the morning light to play across Ros' still features. She looked as pale as fresh snow. He sat on the edge of Ros' bed, took her wrist, and read her. She lived, yet remained extremely weak. Malthus mentally kicked himself for not looking for it last night. But it had seemed so unlikely that a Lemyari would give a seven-year-old a taste of the venom when fascination and blood loss would do for her.

Malthus stripped Ros out of her nightgown and began going over every inch of her body. He found it partially concealed by other bruises along the inside of her thigh, high up near her vagina: a single puncture.

A little of the venom paralyzes, more kills. "How much did you give her, you goat-jacking bastard? I'll kill you." Another

thought entered Malthus' mind. "No, I'll chain you in my dungeon and milk you like a cockwhoring serpent."

He opened his wrist and put it in Ros' mouth. Her bite and suck reflex worked, but her eyes did not open. Malthus let her take as much as she would, then he closed the wound on his wrist with a swipe of his tongue, cleaned away the blood rimming her mouth, and slipped her nightgown back on her.

Ros needed more attention than he could give her, a female's attention—which meant fetching Clodagh. But what if Sergei was out there watching him? He could put the strongest wards he knew how on the bedroom and have Lyrrri stay there with her sister, while he went for Clodagh. But what if that priest showed up? She appeared to have several arcane talents. If any of those could detect mage-craft, then she would know what he was if she arrived while he was away. Malthus remembered how Tempest had been waiting for him the day that he murdered him.

"If she gets in my way, I'll kill her."

He strengthened the wards and went to his study. Taking out the necklace of carrying globes and placing it on top of his desk, he tapped the red one with a word of command. Three bundles of blades came out, each wrapped in a different colored cloth, crimson, azure, and black. Malthus unwrapped the blades in the crimson cloth. Two knives as long as short swords lay there. He handled the plain, unadorned blades cautiously, exchanging them for what he normally carried at his hips. A tap and a word put the rest of the blades back into the globe.

The poisoned blades prepared him to deal with Pandeena should he need to. Malthus shielded his nieces into their bedroom and left. He paused in his yard long enough for a low level scan for undead. If Sergei was still out there, then he had withdrawn beyond the reach of Malthus' ability to detect. Sergei, like the one who turned him, used his powers discretely and rarely, so that no one knew their full range and what he was capable of. Flashy mages who used their abilities constantly and for every little thing, generally did not live long—someone eventually ate them.

Malthus strode along the dirt path leading back to the main compound. He could hear women's voices as they queued up for their weekly allotment of dry goods. When he came in sight of them, Malthus could see the buckets each woman held and the three at the head of each line, who were dispensing goods from large sacks. The camp's small buckboard was pulled up, and Torquil was handing the large sacks down to another male. The smith's apprentice did this once a week with his master's permission. Clodagh stood at the head overseeing everything.

"Clodagh, I need to speak with you. It's important."

"A moment, Malthus. I'll be right there." She excused herself and turned over her duties to another before crossing the yard to his side. "What is it?"

"Ros is hurt. I need you to come help me with her."

"Oh, no." Her hand went to her mouth. "What can I do?"

"Sit with her, keep her comfortable."

"What happened?"

Malthus glanced around the camp. "I can't tell you here."

"Let me throw a few things together."

Soon they were headed back along the path through the patches of sunlight and shade. Malthus stopped in one of the largest patches of sunlight and looked a long time at Clodagh.

"Is something wrong?" she asked him.

"Your color is off. It's been like this for days."

She dropped her head. "I'm nauseated in the mornings. So are seven of the other females in camp."

"Morning sickness?"

Clodagh flinched away from Malthus. "Yes."

"Has anyone told a Reader or the healer?"

Clodagh shook her head, her shoulders sagging.

"Kandaishee Read us."

"Kandaishee?"

"I uncorded her long enough to do it. We were afraid to ask anyone else. We were all terrified that what we're carrying is yours."

"I hope they all are." Malthus' lips curved into a sly smile. "My sire was unusually fertile for a sa'necari his age."

Clodagh shuddered. "Only four are."

"Only four?" Malthus licked his lips and started walking again, forcing her to follow him. He might have left children behind him somewhere. He didn't know because he had spent too many years moving around. Dyllys, his only long time mistress, had insisted upon using herbs to protect herself from pregnancy. Neither the herbs, nor the other method of contraception—having a mage seal their wombs through kweigeyl—were available to the camp's females because the

methods cost money they did not have and there were no mages at Wolffgard.

"Which four, Clodagh. I will move them to safety before my forces take Wolffgard."

Clodagh's shame painted itself across her face.

Malthus chuckled. "One of them is you? Who are the others?"

"Kandaishee, Oliffyia, and Tryphaina. They're farther along than I am. Kandaishee and Oliffyia are already showing."

"Is what's growing in your belly sa'necari or lycan?" His thoughts strayed to Silkie Faggini in Hell's Widow. The Madam of the Crimson Lady was already very pregnant by him.

"Sa'necari. They all are. What about their other children?"

"I'm feeling generous. The children will go with their mothers.

"And those who aren't carrying your children? What's going to happen to all these females you've taken?"

"I may still decide to keep my little harem."

They reached the house and Malthus released the seals on it before ushering her inside. He settled her in the most comfortable chair in the living room.

"Stay there."

Then he released the holds on his nieces' bedroom. Ros looked the same as she had when he left her. Lyrrri was curled up crying.

"She's hurt, but I'm making her better. Clodagh's here to help."

Lyrrri rushed out, and started to climb into Clodagh's lap.

"Not yet," said Malthus. "Go sit down, while I do something."

Lyrri went and sat down in a corner.

Malthus opened Clodagh's robe and put his hand on her belly. She flinched when he began to Read her. "Kandaishee's right ... yes." A broad smile spread over his face. "It's mine. He's sa'necari. My first son."

Clodagh's shoulders sagged. "I knew it when it happened. I'm gifted that way."

"Really? And when was that?"

"The first rape. That too was foreseen."

"Foreseen? Foreseen! What is all this foreseeing? Who did it?"

"An old wandering peddler named Dyna."

"What else did she foresee?"

"I don't remember. I was Ros' age at the time. All that I remember is her telling me that ... actually she was telling it to my mother, but I was listening at the crack."

Malthus put his finger to her head and lunged into her mind, searching. He had not known to look for it, so he hadn't found it. In a tiny corner was a ward, surrounded by a forgetfulness spell that stank of yuwenghau. His moment of joy was spoiled. "Come on," he snarled, grabbing her by the arm. "I'll show you what to do for Ros."

* * * *

Lokynen, Hathura, and Meleajys the son of Kalirion stalked through the pines and hickories on the northeast side of the Valley near where a Battle-clan had perished at Iudris

Meadows. The arrival of Teakamon and his entourage, who were heading for the area around Wolffgard to join Pandeena, had freed the trio to investigate this area.

The three yuwenghau were a study in contrasts: massive Lokynen with his barrel chest, and arms like temple columns, his legs like tree trunks; Hathura, slender to the point of appearing fragile, yet flaring through the shoulders, translucently pale skinned with white hair and silver eyes; Meleajys, a dark-skinned blond, whose lanky build stretched his ropy muscles along a raw-boned frame.

They emerged onto the broad expanse of open ground with asphodel already sprouting to mark where one hundred lycans had died in battle with an unidentified force. One thing was certain, they hadn't been any imps here. Imps never fought in the open where their small size worked against them. Iudris Meadow was awash in golden flowers on tall stalks as well as the pale, white asphodel—death flower—and shone brightly in the morning sun.

White oaks clustered with thickets of hickory on the far side of the meadow and the ground rose up beyond that into stands of aspens that whispered in the early breeze. A dark object rose above it all in the distance.

"What's that over there?" Lokynen pointed to a hillside barely visible beyond the trees circling the meadow.

Hathura's eyes narrowed as he strained to make it out with his sharp Fae eyes. "It's a steading on that hill."

"Let's have a look."

They all carried an array of weapons that reflected their divergent origins, for Hathura's mother had been Fae,

Meleajys' two mothers had been Sharani, and Lokynen's mother had been half-Sharani. Hathura carried his silver longbow at his back a pair of short curved knives at his sides. Lokynen wore his big sword, Thunder, at his shoulder, two long knives at his hips and a pair of axes thrust through his belt.

Light-footed, Hathura ran ahead of the others. Lokynen and Meleajys crossed the meadow, but by that time Hathura had already disappeared up a winding dirt path that climbed the hill. Lokynen's eyes searched the woods as they walked. When they reached the stands of aspens, they saw Hathura racing back to them. The Fae's eyes were troubled.

"Something's wrong up there."

"What do you mean?" Meleajys asked.

"I saw no one in the fields or moving about the three houses."

Lokynen's mouth tightened. "Come on." He strode out ahead of the others, authority in his movement and purpose in the way he held his arms. Hathura strung his bow and followed.

Silence.

The creak of a broken shutter in a sudden breeze.

That was all they heard. Not even the lowing of a cow in the fields.

Lokynen paused and unsheathed his big sword. "That door is standing open."

He pointed at it and Hathura nodded as Meleajys moved to Lokynen's opposite side. Lokynen strode up to the house, and pushed the door fully open with his sword. A flight of ravens

rushed out, skimming his head. None of the yuwenghau so much as flinched in surprise, completely calm and centered. Hathura unstrung his bow and put it in his case, pulling the deadly golden fans from his sash instead.

Hathura's eyes hooded a moment. "There's death upstairs. I can sense it."

Broken and overturned furniture littered the front room. Lokynen stepped through it, heading for a crude stair into the loft where the bedrooms had to be. The buzz of swarming flies could be heard as they climbed. A narrow corridor opened on three rooms at the top.

Lokynen looked in the first one. Two child sized beds stood against opposing walls. A nightstand was overturned in the middle. Lokynen walked into the center and studied the room for an instant. A huge red stain was spread across a patchwork quilt. A large crockery basin sat beside the bed with a cup in it. Lokynen picked up the cup and scratched at the red-black crusting it around the imprints of lips. "Blood. Old blood. A child died there. They drained him and drank his blood."

The eyes in every face hardened.

Hathura nodded. "Check the other rooms."

Meleajys went to look in the next room while Lokynen and Hathura took the one at the end. Lokynen jerked the door open. The third room swarmed with flies, huge flies. Hathura snapped his fans open and spun into the room. From his fans emerged white birds with trailing tails that consumed the flies and vanished. In the middle of a double bed lay a body bound spread eagle, the narrow chest showing that the female must

have been spellcorded in her hybrid state. The cords were gone now and only the ropes that held her to the posts remained.

"Mortgiefan," Lokynen snarled.

"We know what happened to the people who dwelled in these three houses."

Lokynen nodded, his lips tight, and walked out.

They met Meleajys looking as grim as they did. "There's a body in there." He pointed at the second room.

"Mortgiefan?" Lokynen asked.

"Yes."

"One in there also." Hathura pointed back where they had come.

They searched all the houses, finding six more rited bodies.

"Fire the buildings and pray for their souls," Lokynen said.

Hathura went to each doorstep and summoned a firebird with his fans. They checked the barns and found them empty. "It looks like the livestock was driven off by the attackers."

"There's nothing in the fields," said Meleajys, staring out across the open grounds.

"Let's see if we can pick up their trail," said Hathura.

Lokynen nodded and they walked to the far end of the little road beyond the houses.

"See," Hathura said. He pointed to a trampled area with many and diverse footprints. "A meeting was held here. The Trickster is right. The valley is endangered."

Lokynen knelt beside a large paw print and measured it with his huge hand, spreading his fingers. "Rakshasha. Several of them."

"And myn. Many myn and imp prints," said Meleajys from the far side. "Some are going toward the hamlet of Three Stones."

"Let's follow them," Lokynen said.

When they drew near to the village, Lokynen signed a halt. "We've lost them. The Trickster hasn't said anything about our revealing ourselves to the locals yet."

"We have a group of predators to find and destroy," said Hathura said. "I wonder how Pandeena is doing?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

WEDDING

Malthus arrived to take Merissa walking. She carried a basket on her arm and wore a red ribbon in her hair, the first bit of brightness he had seen on her since she received his forged letter concerning her lover's betrayal. Merissa wore a slate skirt of soft material that swished around her ankles alluringly, drawing Malthus' eyes instantly, and a loose blouse that matched the ribbon in her hair. There were no petticoats and tight bodices to guard her from his hands. It brought a speculative smile to his face. She had dressed for him; the red vibrant against her fair complexion.

He glanced around for Darmyk and the cat, but found they weren't there. "Just us?"

"You don't mind, Malthus?" Her voice held a tentative edge, a soft vulnerability that attracted him and made him hungry. "Do you have someone watching the girls?"

Malthus kissed her. "Need you ask? And, yes, Clodagh is watching them. Where would you like to walk?"

"Silver Veils."

His hopes rose, knowing that the Silver Veils was a lycan trysting place. Malthus took the basket from her, slipped his arm around her shoulders, and pressed her close against him, feeling the warmth of her. She leaned into him and, when his hand chanced to brush her breast, Merissa smiled.

The folks they passed nodded greetings. They were becoming accustomed to seeing them together. Some stopped them as they passed, extending invitations to dinner, telling them to bring the children. Merissa laughed delightedly at this. Nothing had turned out as badly as she first expected and she felt she owed it to Malthus, her ever-present defender. Rather than treating her child's repudiation as more reason to chide her for her mistakes, they were responding to Malthus' arguments for compassion.

"See, I told you they like you, Malthus," she said.

"It isn't me, Merissa, it's finally seeing you smile again." He kissed her dark hair and her face brightened. She slipped her hand into his. He squeezed her soft fingers.

They spread their blanket beneath a tree near the largest of Silver Veil's falls, the rush of the water like a counter-point to their words. Malthus' hand stole across her to lightly brush the firm, fullness of her breast.

Merissa stiffened for an instant. "I—I haven't let anyone touch me in nearly four years ... Not since he left."

"Too long without a man's touch for someone as lovely as you." He cupped her breast, patiently observing her reaction. She shivered, yet did not retreat from him. His thumb moved across her nipple, rubbing gently. Merissa rested against him, her head on his shoulder. He pressed his lips to hers, pushing them open as he slid his tongue inside. She twined hers about his, accepting him hungrily. Malthus' eyes glittered: yes, she had come to give him what he desired.

He freed the bottom of her blouse from the skirt, sliding his hand along beneath it, finding not to much as a

breastband to interfere with him, and fondled her breast. She moaned softly. Malthus stripped her blouse off, and laid her on the ground. Merissa's eyes filled suddenly as the blouse came free and she lay half-exposed to him.

"I can never replace him, Merissa. I can only love you, poor man that I am."

Merissa swallowed back her tears. "I know."

Malthus nuzzled her breasts. His mouth closed over her nipple, teasing it with his tongue, sucking it to hardness. She moaned again, this time long and low. Malthus gave her one last flick of his tongue and straightened.

Time to act the gentleman and pull back. "If you wish, I will leave it at this. I don't want to push you, Merissa. I love you too much."

"No. I want you." She stroked his hardness, slid her hand inside his pants, her fingers closing firmly around his cock. "I love you."

Malthus reached beneath her skirt, ran his hand up her leg, and discovered that she wore nothing beneath it: she had come prepared to yield to him. His hand covered her womanly parts and his long forefinger played with her entrance.

"Oh gods, I shouldn't let you do this..."

"Why?" He slipped his finger inside her.

Merissa caught her breath sharply. "I'm too close to my fertile time ... What if I'm making a mistake."

"Marry me, Merissa. I swear I will try to be a good father to your son ... And to ours should we have them. I love you."

"Yes. I'll marry you." She lifted him free of his pants, caressing him.

Malthus removed his clothing. Merissa slid out of her skirt, opening her legs to him. Her beauty filled him with an eagerness beyond anything he had experienced before, even with Dyllys. *This is the sweet bitch who will bear my heirs ... legitimate heirs. Forget my concubines and their bastards. I'll keep them, as my father did his, but nothing more.*

He stroked her body, sucking and probing, bringing her to readiness. Malthus entered her and her legs tightened around him. He began to move gently, and then harder, deeper at her body responded to his. Malthus was slow to come when a death was not involved. Merissa wept at the height of her passion, yet Malthus had not yet had his. She gave him an odd look as he strove harder. When his seed spilt into her, Malthus dropped, rolling to the side so that his weight was off her. "When we return, Merissa, we will tell your parents."

Merissa clung to him. "Yes."

"Let us marry immediately. Life is too fragile to wait."

"Yes."

* * * *

"Marriage?" Claw looked Malthus up and down. They stood in the large main hall of the house near the hearth where Aisha, Merissa's mother, and her two aunts had their looms. "If you are looking to get something out of this, mon, forget it. You're not lycan. Everything goes to my grandson and any lycan heirs you get on her."

Malthus met his gaze squarely. "All I want is Merissa. I love her. And I've grown very fond of little Darmyk. He and my nieces get on well together."

"Father, I have a right to a little happiness," Merissa protested. "I love Malthus more than I've ever loved anyone."

"What did you do for a living?" Claw demanded. "What can you do now?"

"I was a soldier. But I can learn to farm and herd. Whatever is required to provide for Merissa and Darmyk I intend to do."

Aisha rose from her loom and put her arm around her daughter's shoulders. "Let it be, old mon," she said in her crotchety old wife's voice. "Let her have her love."

Claw grumbled under his breath and shook a hairy finger in Malthus' face. "You treat her well, or you'll answer to me!" Then he stomped out.

"Was that a yes?" Malthus inquired.

Aisha nodded. "Now both of you go sit down over there and I'll have a nibari fetch some of those rolls I baked and a little mead."

* * * *

The wedding was a small one by lycan standards, mostly just the people who lived at the manor, and took place in the gardens. Malthus provided Claw and Aisha with gifts in accordance with lycan customs: jewelry for Aisha; liquor, four pipes, and tobacco for Claw.

As the party descended into complete informality, Claw sat apart from the festivities, grinding his palm into his chest and grimacing.

Aisha walked over, her brow furrowing. "Are you all right?"

Serpent's Quest [Lycan Blood Vol. I]
by Janrae Frank

"No. I'm not all right." Claw snarled. "I've been having chest pains lately."

"I'll send for Baroucha."

"No. You won't. I'm just fine. It'll pass in a bit."

"I hope so."

THE END

SF/F/H FROM PAGETURNER EDITIONS

CAMPBELL AWARD WINNER ALEXIS A. GILLILAND'S ROSINANTE TRILOGY

Revolution from Rosinante

Long Shot for Rosinante

Pirates of Rosinante

THE CLASSIC SCIENCE FICTION OF STUART J. BYRNE

Music of the Spheres & Other Classic SF Stories

Star Quest

Power Metal

Hoaxbreaker

The Alpha Trap (1976)

The Land Beyond the Lens: The Michael Flannigan Trilogy
(writing as John Bloodstone)

The Metamorphs & The Naked Goddess: Two Classic Pulp
Novels

Children of the Chronotron & The Ultimate Death: Two
Classic Pulp Novels

Beyond the Darkness & Potential Zero: Two Classic Pulp
Novels

The Agartha Series #1. Prometheus II

The Agartha Series #2. Colossus

The Agartha Series #3: The Golden Gardsmen

Godman (writing as John Bloodstone)

Thundar, Man of Two Worlds The Land Beyond the Lens:
The Michael Flannigan Trilogy (writing as John Bloodstone)

Last Days of Thronas (writing as John Bloodstone)

The First Star Man Omnibus: #1 Supermen of Alpha & Star Man #2 Time Window

The Second Star Man Omnibus: #3 Interstellar Mutineers & #4 The Cosmium Raiders

The Third Star Man Omnibus: #5 The World Changer & #6 The Slaves of Venus

The Fourth Star Man Omnibus: #7 Lost in the Milky Way & #8. Time Trap

The Fifth Star Man Omnibus: #9 The Centaurians & #10 The Emperor

The Sixth Star Man Omnibus: #11 The Return of Star Man & #12 Death Screen

STEFAN VUCAK'S EPPIE NOMINEE SPACE SAGA "THE SHADOW GODS"

In the Shadow of Death

Against the Gods of Shadow

A Whisper From Shadow

Immortal in Shadow

With Shadow and Thunder

Through the Valley of Shadow

JANRAE FRANK'S #1 BESTSELLING FANTASY SAGAS

Dark Brothers of the Light Book I. Blood Rites

Dark Brothers of the Light Book II. Blood Heresy

Dark Brothers of the Light Book III. Blood Dawn

Dark Brothers of the Light Book IV: Blood Wraiths

Dark Brothers of the Light Book V: Blood Paladin

In the Darkness, Hunting: Tales of Chimquar the Lionhawk

Journey of the Sacred King I: My Sister's Keeper

Journey of the Sacred King II: Sins of the Mothers

Journey of the Sacred King III: My Father's House
THE COSMIC KALEVALA

The Saga of Lost Earths—Emil Petaja (Nebula nominee
author)

The Star Mill—Emil Petaja

The Stolen Sun—Emil Petaja

Tramontane—Emil Petaja

JACK JARDINE'S HUMOROUS SF AND MYSTERY

The Agent of T.E.R.R.A. #1 The Flying Saucer Gambit

The Agent of T.E.R.R.A. #2 The Emerald Elephant Gambit

The Agent of T.E.R.R.A. #3 The Golden Goddess Gambit

The Agent of T.E.R.R.A. #4 The Time Trap Gambit

The Mind Monsters

Unaccustomed As I Am To Public Dying & Other Humorous
and Ironic Mystery Stories

The Nymph and the Satyr

ARDATH MAYHAR'S AWARD-WINNING SF & F

The Crystal Skull & Other Tales of the Terrifying and
Twisted

The World Ends in Hickory Hollow, or After Armageddon

The Tupla: A Nover of Horror

The Twilight Dancer & Other Tales of Magic, Mystery and
the Supernatural

The Black Tower: A Novel of Dark Fantasy

Forbidden Geometries: A Novel Alien Worlds

HAL ANNAS' COSMIC RECKONING TRILOGY

I. The Woman from Eternity

II. Daughter of Doom

III. Witch of the Dark Star

THE HILARIOUS ADVENTURES OF TOFFEE

1. The Dream Girl—Charles F. Myers
2. Toffee Haunts a Ghost—Charles F. Myers
3. Toffee Turns the Trick—Charles F. Myers

OTHER AWARD WINNING & NOMINEE STORIES AND

AUTHORS

Moonworm's Dance & Other SF Classics—Stanley Mullen
(includes The Day the Earth Stood Still & Other SF Classics—
Harry Bates (Balrog Award winning story)

Hugo nominee story Space to Swing a Cat)

People of the Darkness—Ross Rocklynne (Nebulas nominee
author)

When They Come From Space—Mark Clifton (Hugo winning
author)

What Thin Partitions—Mark Clifton (Hugo winning author)

Star Bright & Other SF Classics—Mark Clifton

Eight Keys to Eden—Mark Clifton (Hugo winning author)

Rat in the Skull & Other Off-Trail Science Fiction—Rog
Phillips (Hugo nominee author)

The Involuntary Immortals—Rog Phillips (Hugo nominee
author)

Inside Man & Other Science Fictions—H. L. Gold (Hugo
winner, Nebula nominee)

Women of the Wood and Other Stories—A. Merritt (Science
Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame award)

A Martian Odyssey & Other SF Classics—Stanley G.
Weinbaum (SFWA Hall of Fame author)

Dawn of Flame & Other Stories—Stanley G. Weinbaum
(SFWA Hall of Fame author)

- The Black Flame—Stanley G. Weinbaum
Scout-Octavio Ramos, Jr. (Best Original Fiction)
Smoke Signals-Octavio Ramos, Jr. (Best Original Fiction
winning author)
The City at World's End-Edmond Hamilton
The Star Kings-Edmond Hamilton (Sense of Wonder Award
winning author)
A Yank at Valhalla-Edmond Hamilton (Sense of Wonder
Award winning author)
Dawn of the Demigods, or People Minus X—Raymond Z.
Gallun (Nebula Nominee Author)
THE BESTSELLING SF/F/H OF J. D. CRAYNE
Tetragravitron (Captain Spycer #1)
Monster Lake
Invisible Encounter & Other Stories
The Cosmic Circle
PLANETS OF ADVENTURE
Colorful Space Opera from the Legendary Pulp Planet
Stories
#1. "The Sword of Fire"—A Novel of an Enslaved World". &
"The Rocketeers Have Shaggy Ears"—A Novel of Peril on Alien
Worlds.
#2. "The Seven Jewels of Chamar"—A Novel of Future
Centuries. & "Flame Jewel of the Ancients"—A Novel of
Outlaw Worlds .
#3. "Captives of the Weir-Wind"—A Novel of the Void by
Nebula Nominee Ross Rocklynne. & "Black Priestess of
Varda"—A Novel of a Magic World.
NEMESIS: THE NEW MAGAZINE OF PULP THRILLS

Serpent's Quest [Lycan Blood Vol. I]
by Janrae Frank

#1. Featuring Gun Moll, the 1920s Undercover Nemesis of Crime in "Tentacles of Evil," an all-new, complete book-length novel; plus a Nick Bancroft mystery by Bob Liter, "The Greensox Murders" by Jean Marie Stine, and a classic mystery short reprinted from the heyday of the pulps.

#2 Featuring Rachel Rocket, the 1930s Winged Nemesis of Foreign Terror in "Hell Wings Over Manhattan," an all-new, complete book-length novel, plus spine-tingling science fiction stories, including EPPIE nominee Stefan Vucak's "Hunger," author J. D. Crayne's disturbing "Point of View," Hugo Award winner Larry Niven's "No Exit," written with Jean Marie Stine, and a classic novelette of space ship mystery by the king of space opera, Edmond Hamilton. Illustrated. (Illustrations not available in Palm).

#3 Featuring Victory Rose, the 1940s Nemesis of Axis Tyranny, in "Hitler's Final Trumpet," an all-new, complete book-length novel, plus classic jungle pulp tales, including a complete Ki-Gor novel.

4 Featuring Femme Noir, the 1950s Nemesis of Hell's Restless Spirits, in an all new, book length novel, plus all new and classic pulp shudder tales, including "The Summons from Beyond" the legendary round-robin novelette of cosmic horror by H.P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, C.L. Moore, A. Merritt, and Frank Belknap Long.

OTHER FINE CONTEMPORARY & CLASSIC SF/F/H

A Million Years to Conquer—Henry Kuttner

After the Polothas—Stephen Brown

Arcadia—Tabitha Bradley

Backdoor to Heaven—Vicki McElfresh

Serpent's Quest [Lycan Blood Vol. I]
by Janrae Frank

- Buck Rogers #1: Armageddon 2419 A.D.-Philip Francis Nowlan
- Buck Rogers #2. The Airlords of Han—Philip Francis Nowlan
- Chaka: Zulu King-Book I. The Curse of Baleka-H. R. Haggard
- Chaka: Zulu King-Book II. Umpslopogass' Revenge-H. R. Haggard
- Claimed!-Francis Stevens
- Darby O'Gill: The Classic Irish Fantasy-Hermine Templeton
- Diranda: Tales of the Fifth Quadrant—Tabitha Bradley
- Dracula's Daughters-Ed. Jean Marie Stine
- Dwellers in the Mirage-A. Merritt
- From Beyond & 16 Other Macabre Masterpieces-H. P. Lovecraft
- Future Eves: Classic Science Fiction about Women by Women-(ed) Jean Marie Stine
- Ghost Hunters and Psychic Detectives: 8 Classic Tales of Sleuthing and the Supernatural-(ed.) J. M. Stine
- Horrors!: Rarely Reprinted Classic Terror Tales-(ed.) J. M. Stine. J.L. Hill
- House on the Borderland-William Hope Hodgson
- House of Many Worlds [Elspeth Marriner #1]—Sam Merwin Jr.
- Invisible Encounter and Other SF Stories—J. D. Crayne
- Murcheson Inc., Space Salvage—Cleve Cartmill
- Ki-Gor, Lord of the Jungle-John Peter Drummond
- Lost Stars: Forgotten SF from the "Best of Anthologies"-(ed.) J. M. Stine

Metropolis-Thea von Harbou
Mission to Misenum [Elspeth Marriner #2]—Sam Merwin Jr.
Mistress of the Djinn-Geoff St. Reynard
Chronicles of the Sorceress Morgaine I-V—Joe Vadalma
Nightmare!-Francis Stevens
Pete Manx, Time Troubler—Arthur K. Barnes
Possessed!-Francis Stevens
Ralph 124C 41+—Hugo Gernsback
Seven Out of Time—Arthur Leo Zagut
Star Tower—Joe Vadalma
The Cosmic Wheel-J. D. Crayne
The Forbidden Garden-John Taine
The City at World's End-Edmond Hamilton
The Ghost Pirates-W. H. Hodgson
The Girl in the Golden Atom—Ray Cummings
The Heads of Cerberus—Francis Stevens
The House on the Borderland-William Hope Hodgson
The Insidious Fu Manchu-Sax Rohmer
The Interplanetary Huntress-Arthur K. Barnes
The Interplanetary Huntress Returns-Arthur K. Barnes
The Interplanetary Huntress Last Case-Arthur K. Barnes
The Lightning Witch, or The Metal Monster-A. Merritt
The Price He Paid: A Novel of the Stellar Republic—Matt
Kirkby
The Thief of Bagdad-Achmed Abdullah
Women of the Wood and Other Stories-A. Merritt
BARGAIN SF/F EBOOKS IN OMNIBUS EDITIONS
(Complete & Unabridged)
The Andre Norton Omnibus: Three complete novels

Serpent's Quest [Lycan Blood Vol. I]
by Janrae Frank

The H. Beam Piper Omnibus: Three complete books
The E. E. Smith, Ph.D. Omnibus: Three complete novels
The First Lord Dunsany Omnibus: 5 Complete Books—Lord
Dunsany

The First William Morris Omnibus: 4 Complete Classic
Fantasy Books

The Barsoom Omnibus: A Princess of Mars; The Gods of
Mars; The Warlord of Mars-Burroughs

The Second Barsoom Omnibus: Thuvia, Maid of Mars; The
Chessmen of Mars-Burroughs

The Third Barsoom Omnibus: The Mastermind of Mars; A
Fighting Man of Mars-Burroughs

The First Tarzan Omnibus: Tarzan of the Apes; The Return
of Tarzan; Jungle Tales of Tarzan-Burroughs

The Second Tarzan Omnibus: The Beasts of Tarzan; The
Son of Tarzan; Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar-Burroughs

The Third Tarzan Omnibus: Tarzan the Untamed; Tarzan
the Terrible; Tarzan and the Golden Lion-Burroughs

The Pellucidar Omnibus: At the Earth's Core; Pellucidar-
Burroughs

The Caspak Omnibus: The Land that Time Forgot; The
People that Time Forgot; Out of Time's Abyss-Burroughs

The First H. G. Wells Omnibus: The Invisible Man: War of
the Worlds; The Island of Dr. Moreau

The Second H. G. Wells Omnibus: The Time Machine; The
First Men in the Moon; When the Sleeper Wakes

The Third H. G. Wells Omnibus: The Food of the Gods;
Shape of Things to Come; In the Days of the Comet

The First Jules Verne Omnibus: Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea; The Mysterious Island; From the Earth to the Moon

The Homer Eon Flint: All 4 of the Classic "Dr. Kenney" Novels: The Lord of Death; The Queen of Life; The Devolutionist; The Emancipatrix

The Second Jules Verne Omnibus: Around the World in 80 Days; A Journey to the Center of the Earth; Off on a Comet

Three Great Horror Novels: Dracula; Frankenstein; Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

The Darkness and Dawn Omnibus: The Classic Science Fiction Trilogy-George Allan England

The Garrett P. Serviss Omnibus: The Second Deluge; The Moon Metal; A Columbus of Space

The Robert E. Howard Omnibus: Three complete books
ADDITIONAL TITLES IN PREPARATION

pageturnereditions.com

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this eBook by going back to your bookshelf at www.fictionwise.com.