

Kynyr's War

The cover art features a dark, textured background of red and brown. A vibrant green snake with a black outline is coiled across the center. On the left, a golden-colored dog is shown in profile, facing right. On the right, another golden-colored dog is shown in profile, facing left. The overall aesthetic is dramatic and intense.

LYCAN BLOOD: VOLUME IV

JANRAE FRANK

Kynyr's War [Lycan Blood Vol. IV]
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

Kynyr's War [Lycan Blood Vol. IV]
by Janrae Frank

LYCAN BLOOD IV

KYNYR'S WAR

BY

JANRAE FRANK

ISBN 978-1-60089-499-2

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

Kynyr's War [Lycan Blood Vol. IV]
by Janrae Frank

DEDICATION

To Steven Beeho, an intense young man whose wit and knowledge continually challenge and delight me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Mark Prins, a gifted translator, for his help with the various forms of linguistics used in my novels. Jane Beresford helped me many times by patiently brainstorming with me whenever I got stuck. I also want to thank author Debbie Morehouse for helping me recover my courage during a major personal crisis. Jack Kincaid deserves a mention for aggravating the hell out of me, and forcing me to think in new ways.

THE EXILE'S CURSE

When the Serpent comes, they all shall perish,
The Redhands fall like sheaves of grain,
Until only the Exile shall remain
Of those who own their name.
When Fireborn law breathes hot upon the root
One born of fire shall perish for the truth
The exile's victory shall be his pardon
Those he claims will rule
The prince from shadows shall emerge
To sit a blood drenched throne
...Alistar Weems' dying words.

THE THREE BROTHERS

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

St. Tarmus of Lorendon

CHAPTER ONE

THINGS BROKEN AND NEW

Malthus Estrobian stood in front of the ruined shop, cursing under his breath. Anger burned in his sensual face, lending an umber-rose glow to his copper cheeks. He pulled at the long ends of his quill thin mustache, stroked his oak-leaf beard, and snarled.

"What in the Nine Hells happened here?"

It looked like a gang of imps had attacked it. The windows had been shattered. Animal droppings lay piled in the doorway and splattered over the walls. He studied the clumsy writing and the curious misspellings of crude slurs written across the walls in a variety of substances, none of which appeared to be ink: stunk-fase; peeg-zucker; auld stunker; lyar lyar; klaburnaner.

The shop belonged to one of his best cats-paws, Baroucha Seaver, a healer and mid-wife. She had been slipping an arcane, nearly undetectable poison into the heart medicine of the lycan Chieftain Claw Redhand at Malthus' direction. The possible inconvenience that would result if something had happened to her irritated him.

He stepped over the threshold to have a better look at the destruction. The lycan guardsmon, Erskine Faraday straddled a chair in the middle of the devastated shop, arms draped across the back, his long legs outstretched, and his lean body settled at a relaxed angle. Assessment flickered in his gray

eyes as he shook his blond head at Malthus. "You'll have to leave. Lawgiver left orders. No one is allowed in until he finishes examining everything."

"Just tell me what happened?"

Erskine shrugged as if the situation mattered not a whit to him. "Baroucha Seaver was murdered last night. Now get out of here."

Malthus acquiesced with a nod and left the building, anger burning beneath his emotionless features.

"I hear they made a mess of her."

Malthus turned and saw Preece Malloy standing at the edge of an alley with his shoulder leaned against a building. "Shouldn't you be working?"

Preece Malloy lazed 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 member. 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.

"Probably. The priest has been gone since yesterday afternoon. So not much is getting done."

Malthus withheld his reply until he stood close enough to Preece that his words would not carry to any who might be passing by. "Clodagh..."

"She don't run the camp. But then, you knew that."

Malthus regarded Preece. The wolf was uneducated and illiterate, but he was not stupid, and he saw deeper, making more connections than the others. Of all the wolves working at the camp; of all those that Malthus had brought within his sphere of influence; the only one he considered dangerous was Preece Malloy. It made him a superior tool.

"Who runs the camp?"

Preece's lips spread with a fleeting wisp of sarcasm. "You do."

"How long have you been here?"

"Long enough."

"Buy you a drink?"

"Hereward's open."

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, warm, dark, and pleasant compared to the chill autumn morning 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. There were few people in the Difficult Horse that early. Malthus and Preece took a table in the rear corner. Malthus liked having a wall to his back and so did Preece. The corner was a compromise between them.

"So what do you know?"

"Sinclair sent to the coffinmaker this morning. They dropped off two boxes just after Caimbeul left Baroucha's place..."

"Have you heard this one?" Malthus lowered his head with a tiny smirk. "They are saying that Caimbeul murdered Donald Greenlea. That it wasn't happenstance."

Preece scratched his nose. "Yeah, I heard that one. It don't surprise me. Caimbeul is the nastiest Lawgiver we've ever had."

"He condemns vigilante violence and then commits it himself."

"Bloody pig-sucker."

Malthus lowered his head with a small glance to the side. "This inconveniences me."

Preece eyed Malthus. "You had something going with the old bitch?"

"She asked me to help her find a decent apprentice."

"And did you?"

"Bella Montegna should be arriving any day now and there's no shop."

"Why kind of game are you running, Malthus?"

"One that pays very good money."

"Next time you go to Hell's Widow, I'd like to go along."

"I'll think about it."

Preece had been caging for another trip to Hell's Widow, the Waejontori town that lay across the Eirlys River from Clan Red Wolf, for weeks—ever since Malthus had him carry a message to his allies there. The wolf had tested the limits of

Malthus' influence and credit, spending the night at the most expensive brothel in nine counties, the Crimson Lady, and came home with a pound of White Fire, one of the highest priced street drugs on the black market, all charged to Malthus' accounts. Preece's audacity had amused Malthus.

* * * *

Cahira's Potions and Notions had display cabinets along two sides with wall to ceiling shelves and drawers behind them and along the back. A table with seven chairs stood at the rear, where customers could discuss their choices and pay for the purchases. The standard merchandise included medicines, salves, creams, and cosmetics on one side and sewing needs on the other. The rest of it changed from time to time as Cahira's suppliers found assorted items of limited availability to offer her. A stack of 'pressed' books occupied the end of one display counter. The city of Havensword in Creeya had three of the new printing presses imported from Iradrim; Red Wolf had none. Whenever a supplier offered her a crate of pressed books, Cahira bought the lot of them, appropriating what looked like a good addition to her own library; then her husband Todd went through to see if any 'naughty' books had been included and made off with those he had not acquired yet; and the remainder were sold in the shop. The newest addition to the shop, a one-time deal, was an array of imported Creeyan blades; high quality swords, daggers, and axes that were selling out fast.

Sitting at the table in the rear, Kady Wiggins ran her hands through her short flaxen curls and watched the hallway door

for the return of Padruig Caimbeul. She had begun to hate the lawgiver.

Cahira stirred, her eyes red from weeping over the death yesterday of her son Branduff. "Do you think he did it?"

"Kynyr?" Kady reached over and squeezed Cahira's frail hand without taking her eyes off the door.

"Yes."

She lowered her voice and whispered. "Yes, Kynyr ... murdered Baroucha. I know it for a fact. He went for a long walk after he saw Bran's body. When he came back, he was covered in blood. I burned his clothes."

"You lied to Caimbeul."

"And I'll keep lying to him. I'm in love with Kynyr. I'm not going to let Caimbeul hang him. Hush. Here he comes."

Cahira stiffened, pulling at her long blonde braid as she lowered her head to avoid Caimbeul's gaze.

Despite the lawgiver's aging paunch, the big mon seemed a harsh and unremitting figure to Kady, gray and grim with a bit of stubble on his unshaven chin. He paused at the door to the street and pinned Kady with a look that made her shiver. "If I find out either of you has lied to me..."

Then Caimbeul went out the door and Kady found that she could breathe again. "There are things I need to take care of upstairs. I'll have Rory come sit with you?"

Cahira nodded.

Kady encountered Rory Scott in the hallway. He came down the stairs yawning and rubbing sleep from his eyes. The scruffy cub, with hair an indeterminate shade of reddish

blond, was Cahira's newest apprentice, although he had been working for her longer than Kady.

"Go sit with Cahira and stay out of trouble."

"I intend to."

She climbed the stairs to the second floor and turned right, pausing outside the door to the kitchen. The voices of cubs and Kynyr's younger sister, Mallory, came from the room and Kady decided that she was not needed there. She moved on to the parlor and slipped inside.

Two coffins sat upon the long trestle table in the center of the parlor, grave offerings spread across the bodies lying within them. All the lycans in the room were male and Kady felt as if she were intruding as all eyes turned toward her. They were all members of Kynyr's extended family, and Kady knew very few of them by name.

The furniture had been moved back along the walls where more than a dozen lycans spread themselves across the chairs and the floor, while others stood around or leaned against the walls. Six lycans stood lined up at the coffin; one by one they left their grave gifts in the coffin and bestowed the kiss of farewell on the cold faces of Kynyr's father Branduff Maguire and his young cousin, Duggan Sinclair.

Ten-year-old Cooley Sinclair nestled on the lap of a large, red-haired lycan of late years, Cahira's husband Todd.

When the cub saw Kady, he flashed her a wan smile and snuggled against Todd. She wondered what Cooley was doing there instead of being in the kitchen with the other cubs.

Todd looked like age had overtaken him in the night. There was a sprinkling of white in his red-hair that Kady would have

sworn had not been there yesterday. He had a strong, hearty face. The folded lines running from the wings of his nostrils to the outer edges of his lips were deep; the crinkles around his dark blue eyes were crevices in the stalwart earthiness of his features; his heavy eyelids did not lend themselves to clear expression of emotion, making any effort to read his features difficult even for those who knew him well.

His calm, centered mien had always suggested to her a man who did not go looking for trouble, but once it found him would be utterly relentless in dealing with it. Now there was a troubling light to those eyes as if he were haunted to the depths of his soul.

Todd had become Kady's *guurmondru*, an almost untranslatable lycan concept that carried with it the responsibilities of father, brother, mentor and—for the present—protector. She had considered him a bulwark against the world, and it tore at her heart to see him so stricken by grief.

Then she spied Kynyr standing in a corner apart from the others. He wore his chocolate and claret uniform, which meant he intended to report for duty despite his losses. Kady crossed the room, wrapped her arms around him, and kissed him, before drawing him out into the hallway by the hand.

"Surely, you're not going in today?" She twined her fingers in his unruly wealth of golden hair, ran her gaze over his chiseled features and lantern jaw, and stared into his deep blue eyes—and wondered how someone like Kynyr could have fallen in love with her.

Kynyr lowered his gaze, and avoided her eyes, uncharacteristically restrained. "I must ... if only to ask for time away until after the funerals."

"Don't be long. We need you here."

"I won't be." He pressed his face against hers, his golden sideburns tickling her cheek. "I guess you know my secret now."

"That you're a prince? Sheradyn spilled that a week ago."

"And you didn't say anything to me?"

"It didn't change my feelings for you, Kynyr. I've always loved you." She nestled tighter against him. "Does Claw know you're his grandson?"

"No. I didn't come here to claim my heritage, Kady. I came to protect my family."

"That's what I love about you."

"I'd better go." He kissed her forehead and walked away.

She waited until he had disappeared down the stairs before heading for the infirmary. It had been rearranged yet again. The far end of the room had been partitioned off with folding screens extended to each side, creating a doorway effect. That gave the three bitches on the other side of it more privacy from the dogs. Three beds and five cots crowded the near side of the screens, containing the wounded males. Trevor Sinclair occupied the nearest bed, his wife Mary sitting beside him in a cushioned chair. The bed beyond Trevor's lay empty, which both amused and annoyed Kady. They were having a hard time getting Wallace Callaghan to rest when he would rather be on the far side of the screen fussing over Leeny and their newborn son.

Although Kady had not yet learned all of their names, it was easy to tell the Sinclairs from the MacIvers. The former were huge and red-haired and the latter slender towheads.

Gillivray Ashby knelt beside the low cots, changing bandages, and Reading the wounded. The silly nancidawg knew his business and looked fresh faced and full of energy—despite having slept in a chair—and she wondered how he managed it. He and his lover, Sheradyn Kelly, both healers, had been spelling each other and Kady tending the wounded, ever since they started to pour in yesterday from the battle at Longbranch.

Kady walked to the bitches section and peered around the screen. Just as she had suspected, there was Wallace Callaghan sitting shirtless with his ribs and side bandaged, twirling a pale yellow curl on his newborn son's head, and beaming at his wife, Kynyr's sister Kathleen whom everyone called 'Leeny.'

She returned to Trevor, where she found Mary bathing the wound in his arm and re-bandaging it. Kynyr's uncle looked much better than he had yesterday, when he suddenly materialized in the shop along with his dying half-brother Branduff and a dead sa'necari soldier. Cahira had thrown all of her power into healing the two sword wounds in his chest, after failing to save Branduff. Trevor's mother was a Mender, not a Healer; and Kady had had to stop her from working on the arm wound, after seeing how drained the act of healing his chest had left her.

Kady dragged a chair up, and sat down beside Trevor's bed. "Should I call you Trevor or Uncle Trevor once Kynyr and I are married?"

Mary perked up. "So it's definite? You're going to marry my obnoxious nephew?"

"Yes. He bought me a house. It needs work."

Trevor frowned. "I heard it was a nice house."

"Oh, it is. It's just not been well-cared for ... and I'm redecorating."

"Getting back to your original question, just call me Trevor. Kynyr does."

"I'm going to feel intimidated living in that big house with just Kynyr, and maybe a few servants." Kady studied her hands, feeling awkward. "I was wondering if maybe some of the family might be willing to come live with us and help out around the place. It's beautiful. It's a good place to raise children. After all that's happened ... Kynyr needs to have some family around. The death of his father has hurt him ... terribly."

Mary glanced at Trevor. "We've been wanting to make a new start...."

"We have four children. Would that be too many?"

"Not at all. Will you stay?"

Trevor nodded. "When I'm feeling stronger, show me the place?"

"I'll be happy to."

Kady's mood brightened as Mary and Trevor began filling her ears with embarrassing stories of what Kynyr had been like as a cub.

* * * *

The Redhand Manor house had elaborate gardens surrounding the back and east side. A large barn and stables swept out to the west side of it, blocking the view of other barns and storage buildings. 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.

The three-story structure was not as large as some sa'necari manors, but it had 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, the wild cousins that freely ran their valleys, which were defensible areas in and of themselves.

Kynyr dismounted in the yard of the manor. Lanky Georgie Rogan came out of the barns and took the reins of his horse. The head groom's gaunt, weathered face held a full measure of sympathy and concern.

"I'm sorry about your father, Kynyr."

"Thanks, Georgie." He gave a nod and kept walking. His insides were tied as tight as knots in a rope.

Kynyr let himself into the manor, hoping to avoid as many people as he could. He should have known he could not avoid Kissie, who popped out of the kitchen drying her hands on her apron.

She was a nibari, one of the genetically altered humans created by the vampires and sa'necari as cattle, bred for thousands of years for complete docility; they were the soul of compliance—unless directed otherwise by their masters. The Redhands preferred to call them servants, but in reality, they were slaves.

Kissie's ample bosom, revealed by the hang of the drawstring neck of her blouse, heaved and she flicked back a strand of blonde hair. "Oh, Master Kynyr, I'm so sorry."

All he could do was nod, his lips tightening.

When he started past the door to the Great Hall, his spiritbrother, Finn MacIver stepped out of it. "What happened last night?"

Kynyr stopped, his head lowered. "War in Longbranch. They killed Duggan. One of your cousins got sliced. If you want details, go talk to Todd. I can't handle it right now."

He managed to reach the second floor without encountering anyone else, only to have the one person he had the least desire to see appear in front of him.

Malthus emerged from a room and stopped in the hallway. "I'm sorry about your family."

Kynyr's lips twisted back in a snarl and he spit in Malthus' face before he could stop himself. "You killed my father."

Then he started walking again, giving Malthus no opportunity to respond to the accusation. Kynyr had no proof that would stand up in court, only Baroucha's dying words: *'Malthus knows. He'll kill you. He'll kill you all.'*

"Not if I can help it, Baroucha," he muttered under his breath.

He nodded at condolences and shrugged away from attempts at comfort. There was only one person he wanted to talk to and he knew where to find her—the only member of the ruling Redhand family who knew who and what he really was: Aisha Redhand, the chieftain's wife.

Coming on top of his fresh losses, Caimbeul's brief interrogation concerning the murder of Baroucha Seaver had thrown Kynyr off stride, making him more determined than ever to hold himself together while matters remained uncertain. Having thrown the gauntlet in Malthus face, Kynyr would wait to see if his enemy picked it up. He felt trapped by rules and laws, and with Caimbeul breathing down his neck, Kynyr could not afford to simply call Malthus out—at least not until he had more solid proof of what was going on.

He schooled the grief and uncertainty from his face, stride, and carriage. He ignored his throbbing leg, focusing so far past it that no sign of his usual limp remained.

Pausing at the door to the Rose Room, he knocked.

"Come in." Aisha's voice carried an edge of strain and Kynyr wondered what was going on.

The Rose Room was regarded as Aisha's private preserve; small—by the standards of the manor—decorated in deep shades of rose and mauve. A mural covered the south wall of lycans at a picnic in the middle of a rose garden the males in hybrid form and the females in human while true wolves romped around them. The wall hangings were all of pastoral scenes. Sofas and chairs formed half circles around three low tables, upholstered in matching rose brocades. A woven reed basket, containing knitting, occupied the corner of a sofa.

Aisha sat on that sofa, knitting. She straightened and adjusted her skirts.

Aisha Redhand had gone grey with age. Very little of her youthful brown coloring remained in her heavy hair. The legendary beauty had long ago faded from her careworn face, replaced by a maternal warmth that continued to draw people to her.

Claw could call her spiky and crotchety all he wished; Kynyr never would. There might be a side of her that he had never seen, but he doubted it.

"I'm only here for a bit, Gramma. My family needs me." He sat down on a chair close to Aisha. He only called her 'Gramma' where no one could hear.

She set her knitting aside, leaned forward, and patted his knee. "I'm so sorry about your father. I wanted to meet him ... see what kind of mon my son had sired."

"You would have liked him." Kynyr tried to smile, but grief and anger gave it a bitter twist.

"Is that what you came to talk about?"

"No. I'm trying not to think about it. When it's not so fresh ... I'll tell you about him." Kynyr clasped his hands together and glanced off at a point on the wall. "It's a selfish subject I want to talk about."

"Kady?"

Kynyr gave a small nod. "Life becomes more precious after a loss ... and I've had too many of them this year."

"During the Rebellion, my heart broke with every death."

"Last night, as we were helping with the wounded ... Kady Called Courtship. Now what do I do?"

His great-grandmother was the only person he could talk to who had had a Wild Cousins' Courtship. The custom was ancient and had largely fallen out of favor, replaced by various things adopted from the human realms, including the practice of brideprice. Kady had found the custom in an old book, mistranslated and invoked it before either of them fully understood the possible ramifications of doing so, locking them into an extraordinary situation governed by Divine Law. They had a time limit on it, and were entering the final phases. Failure meant exiling himself from Kady's presence—forever.

"A step in the right direction."

"She keeps putting me off about changing." Kynyr had to chase her through the forest in wolf form for the right to mate, repeating a pattern of chase and capture until he quickened her womb—only then would they be allowed to marry.

"So, you want to persuade her to change?"

"How did Claw get you to change?"

"Well, it was a far different situation, Kynyr." Aisha's expression turned thoughtful and slowly dissolved into crafty. "Gifts. Wine. Exercising in the nude?"

Kynyr flushed. "You're joking."

Aisha laughed and patted his knee again. "Not at all. It worked for Claw."

"Thanks, Gramma. I'll try all of them."

* * * *

Odhran Lafferty, a tinker by trade, worked mostly as an oddjobber, doing anything and everything. He opened the front door to Cahira's Potions and Notions just enough to poke his head inside and glance around. "Is Pandeena here?"

"She's in the infirmary." Kady paused in the middle of shelving jars and eyed his civilian bridge-watcher tabard. "You must have more jobs than a cat has lives."

"Rather." He crossed the threshold and headed for the stairs; stopped at the door into the hallway and glanced back at Kady. "But I'll be back at the house tomorrow and finish the wainscoting."

"You'd better." Kady raised her hand in mock threat.

Odhran ducked with a grin and headed for the stairs. He found Pandeena in the infirmary tending the wounded. Her perfect features, golden hair, and flawless form always caused a physical reaction in Odhran and he pressed his legs together, hoping she failed to notice it. She was the only bitch in Wolffgard that could walk into a room and have every male present—even the gaffers—react.

Trevor sat propped up with a bed table across his lap, a bowl of stew and a glass of water in the middle of it. Mary spooning stew into his mouth.

Pandeena stood beside the next bed over, working on Wallace Callaghan.

"Pardon me, Pandeena. There is a fellow on the bridge asking for you. He wants permission to enter Red Wolf."

Pandeena finished changing Wallace Callaghan's bandages. "All done."

She walked to the table and rinsed her hands in a basin of clean water. "Have Caimbeul talk to him."

"He's asking for you. Says to say Dyna sent him."

Pandeena's expression changed in a flash. "Dyna? Let's go."

* * * *

Tree trunks formed the support columns of the bridge that spanned the gorge that had been cut through the sheer stonewalls by the deep cataract known as the Eirlys River. The rushing roar of the Eirlys filled the air, drowning out the calls of circling birds. On three sides, the land descended into rugged canyons and twisted valleys that looked like a giant had ripped his fingers through the soil. The lycan clans preferred to make their homes in hard to reach places, areas that could easily be defended against invasion. The half-walls of the bridge's sides offered limited shelter while not blocking the view of people approaching it.

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

On a bench across from the guardsmyn, beneath a thin strand of aspens sat a small mon in a knee-length brown tunic, split to his hips for riding, over a pair of loose-legged

trousers stuffed into short boots. His beardless face had an effeminate sensuality, full pouting lips in a narrow face, and a long, straight nose. Large, long-lashed eyes the color of glistening black pearls dominated his features.

Odhran pointed at him. "Luciano Albertus." He thumbed at Pandeena. "Our priest, Pandeena Moonbow."

"You wanted to speak with me?"

Luciano stood up and extended his hand, fingers half-curved in a lycan gesture that invited sniffing as a means of confirming his nature.

Pandeena brought his fingers to her nose. "You're hu ... mage!" she yelped.

Embarrassment glowed in Luciano's face as he shook his head. "I'm a spiritworker, but I used to run a mage shop in Skullbones."

"The Scarlet Angel?" Pandeena schooled a flash of irritation from her face. She had never expected the owner of Caimbeul's favorite mage shop to show up in Wolffgard—the ones where he always purchased contraceptives known as seed crystals that absorbed and stored the fertile parts of a male's ejaculate so that he did not impregnate his strings of doxies. Pandeena had always blamed the shop for selling them to him as much as Caimbeul himself for using them during their marriage.

"Yes. Dyna sent me to you. The Waejontori are pushing hard along the borders and I had to flee. The sa'necari don't like spiritworkers. They rite us when they catch us. Can we talk privately?"

"Certainly." Pandeena walked farther into the trees and then turned to face him. She could not deny safety to him, since he was pledged to her ally.

Luciano opened his robes and pushed them off one shoulder, revealing a squiggly Dynannan Godmark. "Touch it."

Pandeena touched the mark and her eyes widened. "It's real. Now I've seen everything. A Waejontori Dynannan Spiritworker."

"There's far more Dynannans among my people than you might realize and we're all coming here."

Pandeena rolled her eyes. "We'll be inundated."

"Well, nothing so bad as that."

"The only single males we have at the Refugee Camp are the lycans that work there."

"I don't need to stay at the camp. I want to open a shop."

Pandeena scanned him. "With just the clothes on your back?"

Luciano reached in his pocket and brought out the tiny carrying globe. "My Lady loaned this to me."

Pandeena laughed. "Then you can stay at the Inn until you find a shop to buy."

"Can you take me there?"

"If you'll buy me a drink at the Difficult Horse."

"I'll be glad to."

CHAPTER TWO

SIGNING THE DOCUMENTS

Kady slipped through the living quarters silently on bare feet in the hour before dawn. For the first time in days, the house was quiet. All save the worst of the wounded had returned to their farms. Trevor and his family had moved into the new house to oversee the work there. Iollen was so grateful that it embarrassed Kady at times.

She climbed the stairs to the third floor and slipped into the salle for an early practice alone. She had begun doing this the day after the death of Kynyr's father. She liked working through her forms alone before the day started and other matters laid claim to her attention.

Someone had gotten there ahead of her—and he was working out in the nude. She tried not to stare at his manly parts, but her eyes would start at his face and drift down again. He was as well hung as Cullen had been. She licked her lips watching him, magnificent in his hybrid form, covered in lush golden hair with the merest hint of a snout, moving with an authority and presence she had only seen Todd display—until then.

The last time—the only time—Kady had seen Kynyr naked was when they were digging arrows out of him months ago.

She wavered, knowing that it was only a matter of time before Kynyr noticed her. Impulsively, Kady removed her house slippers and stole onto the mat. *I Called Courtship. I ...*

She glanced sidewise at him again. *I best get used to seeing him naked.*

She took a deep breath and composed herself before beginning her own forms which were not nearly as complex as what Kynyr was doing.

Gradually Kady closed out Kynyr's presence, losing herself in the dance-like movements. A feeling of peace descended upon her, as it always did.

"Very good."

Kady started at his voice, becoming suddenly self-conscious, and lost her rhythm.

Kynyr caught her arm, steadying her as she stumbled. "You're not supposed to do that." He chuckled.

He had changed back to human. She looked into his eyes, noticing that he smiled for the first time since his father's death. "I don't usually."

"Has Todd showed you this one, yet?"

Kynyr's swift movements as he demonstrated the form took Kady's breath away.

"No, he hasn't."

Kynyr walked her through it, correcting her forms as they went. They worked together for several minutes and then he threw her off-stride by leaning in and kissing her. She pushed away from him.

"Change for me, Kady." He kissed her again. "You promised."

"I will. Just not right now." She shivered as his hand slipped beneath her robe, his fingers teasing her nipple in feathery touches so sensual that it robbed her of breath. Kady

melted against him, exploring his body with her hands in tentative touches, circling the scar on his chest.

"Badge of courage," she murmured and kissed it.

Kynyr paused in his seduction and gazed into her eyes searchingly. "You're not offended by them?"

His sudden vulnerability plucked the strings of Kady's heart like a minstrel playing chords of love. Her fingers caressed the scars on his thigh.

"You're magnificent ... My Wolf."

Kynyr tugged the tie on her robe and let it drop to the mat. She arched her back as he pushed her robe open and slipped it off her shoulders, kissing her neck and moving lower. He cupped her buttocks as he sank to his knees, rimmed her navel with his tongue, and went lower still.

Kady moaned as his tongue teased her clit, and searched her womanly parts. No one had ever done that to her before. Her knees went weak. Kynyr must have sensed that because he eased her down onto the mat and licked his way up her body again.

Her loins ached with need by the time he had reached her lips. She wrapped her legs across his buttocks, inviting him inside and he entered. Kady's pelvis moved with him as he thrust deeper and deeper, gently at first and then more strongly with needs matching hers. Kynyr put most of his weight on one hand so that he could stroke her as his member moved in and out and in again. Kady coughed when he brought her to a shuddering orgasm and his seed spilled into her.

"I love you, Kynyr," she murmured against his chest, amazed at how easy it had been to make love to him, and feeling oddly silly for having put him off so long.

"Change for me."

Kady gulped. "I'm not ready."

"Let me convince you." Kynyr started kissing her again.

"Change for me. You Called Courtship..."

"So I did." Kady disentangled herself from him, and leaped off the mat, coming down on all fours and changing into a pale cream-colored wolf with butter tips on each hair. She sprang from the room in a rush, racing down the stairs to the front door.

Kady let herself out, ran around the corner, and raced for the forest at the edge of the village.

She glanced over her shoulder, saw the huge golden wolf chasing her, and put on a burst of speed. Kady had not expected him to overtake her so soon. But she had rarely done anything in full wolf form before. And she had never been outside Wolfgard before either. Waiting tables at a tavern had not prepared her for this.

Kynyr chased her into the trees, caught up with her, and bumped her side with his head, knocking her over.

Kady rolled, gained her feet, and ran again.

She dashed into the concealment of a weeping willow tree, spun about within the autumn browned curtain of its spear like leaves, and thudded into an unexpected boulder, sprawling on her face. Instantly, Kynyr leaped upon her, his forelegs gripping her just behind the elbows as he mounted. Kady squirmed and tried to pull free, but Kynyr held on with

grim determination. Humping furiously, he got his member into her. Kady let out a squall, hooked her front paws on the boulder, and tried to drag herself loose from him, but it was too late. Kynyr's member had swollen huge inside her, locking them together. Kady moaned and whimpered. Kynyr laid his muzzle between her shoulder blades. She turned her head as far around as she could and licked his ear and cheek, while she waited for him to finish pumping her full of his semen.

I love you, Kynyr. I'm doing this because I love you.

Kynyr released her and flopped onto the ground beyond the boulder, his tongue lolling from the side of his muzzle.

"Run again, Kady?"

"Can you do it again this soon?"

"You bet."

Kady pulled herself together and ran.

* * * *

The Town Hall of Wolffgard could have been one of Maldwyn Softpaws greatest achievements—if Claw Redhand had not decided to dabble again in architecture. It was a magnificent Sharani-style building with a marble columned portico and statues of the Patron Saint of Literature, Karren Teylur, on pedestals throughout the front and rear gardens. Unfortunately, Claw had insisted on adding leering gargoyles to the roof.

Luciano Albertus stared up at the gargoyles, shaking his head at the odd hybrid architecture. He held in his hands the signed ownership papers to his new shop, which had cost him one hundred Sharani double-gryphons. The shop had

belonged to a Baroucha Seaver, who had had no surviving family. Her shop and its contents had been seized by the crown and sold to him as is. Luciano looked forward to cataloguing the goods in the shop and discovering what all he had purchased above and beyond the building itself.

He strolled down Main Street, whistling to himself, nodding to the lycans he passed. Some nodded back and others looked at him as if he were a lunatic. Luciano did not care. He and the apothecary, Atreius Ivanstern, were the only two humans living in the village. There were twenty human women living at the Refugee Camp, but so far as Luciano could discover, they never came into the village. There was also that fellow who had married the chieftain's daughter and lived at the manor a twenty-minute walk south of the village—Malthus Estrobian. Luciano had known some Estrobians, and he wondered if Malthus were any relation to them.

Luciano found a young girl, clearly human, sitting on the boardwalk in front of his new shop, crying. "What's wrong?"

"Everything." She turned her tear-streaked face up to look at him.

Luciano sat down beside her. "Where did you come from?"

"Skeleton Creek." She reached inside her bodice and produced a letter, which she handed him.

Luciano opened it and read.

Dear Bella Montegna,

While I would not normally employ a human, I also understand your desire to be safe from the war. Your training in bio-alchemy and apothecary science is impressive.

I most definitely require more help these days as I am no longer young. Therefore, I am willing to employ you on a probationary basis. If I am satisfied with your ability after six months, I will make your employment permanent.

Sincerely yours,
Baroucha Seaver.

Luciano imagined what she must feel, having come all this way alone through dangerous territory in hopes of a job and a home in a safe area. "Dear girl ... She's dead without heirs. The property reverted to the crown and I purchased it just an hour ago."

"I've nowhere to go and very little money."

Luciano nodded. "Well, the vandals wrecked only the front room of the shop. There are six bedrooms. If you want, you can stay with me and help me repair the shop."

"That would be wonderful!" Bella threw her arms around him and kissed him.

Luciano repressed a wince and got to his feet. "Come along."

Bella shouldered her knapsack and followed him inside. "What kind of shop is it going to be?"

"A mage shop." His eyes roved the debris of broken jars and bottles on the floor. No effort had been made to clean it up.

Bella ran her eye over him as if sizing him up for the first time. "You're a mage?"

"No, I'm a spiritworker." Luciano bent down and picked up a bottle that turned out to be unbroken. He placed it on a counter and looked about with a critical eye.

"The place sure needs cleaning."

He nodded, picking up a jar and kicking some of the larger chunks of debris into a pile as he walked. "Why don't you take your things upstairs? The big bedroom on the north end of the hall is mine. You can use any of the others that strike your fancy."

"Okay. If you can find a broom, I'll sweep the front room out."

Luciano opened the door to the backroom, noting that except for the bloodstains on the floor, the room and its contents were undamaged. "Can you cook?"

"Reasonably well."

"Good. I've been told I burn water." Luciano spied a broom leaning in a corner and took it out to Bella. "Here. Get your things settled and have a go at the floor."

Digging in Baroucha's desk for pen and paper to start a tally of the supplies on the shelves and in the cabinets, Luciano's hand closed on a small bottle that he hoped was ink. It lay far back in the drawer and he took it out.

When he opened his hand, Luciano saw that he held a bottle that had no label, the liquid had a faint purplish tinge, and he picked up the lingering vibrations of death on it. His instincts screamed 'poison.'

He heard Bella start sweeping, and he wondered if there were more to Baroucha's decision to hire her than what that one brief letter implied. Luciano put the bottle in his pocket, deciding to get a locksmith over as soon as possible, and make certain that he had rooms that Bella could not get into.

* * * *

Kady bathed and changed into a robe, feeling weary and relaxed as if all the tension of the past months had drained out of her. Consummating her commitment to Kynyr brought peace to her heart. Cullen had always shied away from the topic of marriage; Kynyr embraced it. Where she had been the one to bring it up to Cullen; Kynyr had brought it up to her first. Sometimes Kady felt as if all she had been to Cullen was a convenient hole to sink his bone into. Cooley seemed the proof of that belief and that Silkie had been the only bitch Cullen ever really loved.

She returned the volume on early lycan sexual customs to the bookcase in the library. "I don't need that any longer."

Then she went looking for Cahira. Kady found her in the back room of the shop, grinding herbs. "Will you Read me?"

Cahira set her bowl of herbs aside. "What's wrong? Don't you feel well?"

"I want to know if I'm pregnant."

"So you finally did it?" Cahira lifted an eyebrow, gripped Kady's wrist and Read her. "You're not pregnant."

"Ever since I saw his father's body ... how similar they looked ... it was like seeing Kynyr dead. I couldn't bear it. I couldn't keep saying no."

"I see. Has he caught you in wolf form yet?"

Kady snorted. "Took him less than an hour. I thought it would be harder than that."

"Only if the bitch is very experienced with wolf form and woodcraft like Aisha was."

Kady's lips compressed in a look of bemused rue. "Send for the seamstresses. Wedding dress, here I come."

Cahira chuckled. "Kynyr spent almost as much time in wolf form as human when he was a cub. It won't be easy to stop him from catching you."

Kady sighed and hung her head. "I realize that now."

Cahira patted her hand. "Actually, it's good he caught you so fast."

"What do you mean?"

"The first mating in wolf form turns your hormones inside out. He can't get you pregnant so long as you remain in human form. It also served as a form of early birth control. Your hormones won't switch back to neutral until after you have conceived and delivered a cub from a wolf form mating."

"So all I have to do is stay human?"

"Are you in love with Kynyr?"

"Yes."

"Then you had best not put it off too long. You see Kady, Divine Law, as handed down by the Mothers, holds that if you have not become pregnant within a year of your first wolf form mating, Kynyr will be forbidden from touching or marrying you."

"I really have screwed up, haven't I?" Kady's voice broke, she swallowed, and tears ran down her face. "I guess ... I should just ... let him do it."

Cahira shook her head. "It's not that simple." She opened the book to the entry and began explaining each item under the topic. "You are honor bound to make it as difficult as possible. You're supposed to be testing his strength, his

cleverness, and his determination. I'm good at wolf form. I'll teach you. However, that means we must go out together in wolf form ... and any time that you are in wolf form, Kynyr has the right to mount you—if he can catch you. So we'll have to be sneaky about it. He can't touch you in human form without your permission. That includes stealing kisses."

"Does Kynyr understand all of this?"

"I'll have Todd explain it. Have you filed your intentions?"

"We're going to do it today."

"Pandeena will explain more of it. Todd and I will be your witnesses."

"I appreciate that."

* * * *

Caimbeul dismounted and wrapped the reins of his bay gelding to the tie post in front of the shrine. He remembered telling Odhran that he wished to buy a better horse, but had never gotten around to doing so. Lately, the desire for things that had once seemed important had faded. He could not say whether that was age—he felt more tired with each passing day—or frustration because he had so far failed to establish a clear link between Malthus and the trouble in Wolffgard.

He knocked and then opened the door when he heard Pandeena shout, "Come in."

She sat at her desk laying out papers on the table with a morose expression.

Caimbeul glanced down at the title. "Wild Cousins' Courtship papers? Who's the lucky couple?"

Pandeena glared at him. "Kynyr Maguire and Kady Sinclair."

"Todd told me about it a week ago." A belly laugh erupted from Caimbeul. "No wonder you're looking out of sorts. The Redhands have always resisted your charms."

"Mortals! They make me crazy."

"Well, while they're making you crazy, have a look at this?"

Caimbeul drew the note found on Baroucha's body and the note that he had had Kynyr write. "I think the writing matches."

Pandeena looked them over with a critical eye and began pointing out the similarities. "I assume the one with the blood on it is from Baroucha's shop?"

"Yes."

"Whose is the other?"

"Kynyr Maguire."

"Are you going to arrest him?"

"Nah. Baroucha needed killing. I would rather it had been done legal. I had spies watching her shop ... trying to connect her to Malthus. Kynyr must have found the connection. The problem is going to be in getting him to either confess or tell me what he knows about her."

"Kynyr's a lot like Todd. You can only push him so far and then he starts to push back."

"I've noticed." Caimbeul pulled a chair over and straddled it with his arms draping the back. "Another thing ... another reason I won't haul Kynyr in..." He scratched his chin, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Pandeena's blue eyes took on a serious aspect. "Shall I venture a guess?"

"Go ahead. Someday you might even learn to second-guess me."

"I already can, Old Lecher."

"Prove it."

"It's the same reason you didn't arrest Tarrant when he helped Todd execute Alistar Weems."

"Wrong. Close, but wrong. Nobility isn't above the law, they just think they are. Kynyr is the last male heir. If dragged him in and had him hung for Baroucha's murder, the effect on Red Wolf would be devastating, whether they realize they have a prince at this point or not."

"There's still Merissa's babes."

"No, there isn't. I've come across something strange and I'm not ready to give you any particulars yet." He paused. "Have you got some whiskey around?"

Pandeena fetched a bottle and glasses. She poured for both of them. "I'll ask no questions and you'll tell me no lies?"

"Right." Caimbeul drank his in a single swallow. "I stumbled upon some bitches. They're pregnant, but the genetics have been deliberately blurred. At first glance, the cubs they're carrying seem to be lycan, but there's something else there."

"How does this affect Merissa?"

"I'd bet my life on the possibility that what's growing in her belly isn't lycan."

"Sa'necari?"

"Yeah."

"What about Brock?"

"If he was coming home, don't you think he would have by now?"

* * * *

Pandeena regarded Kynyr and Kady with an expression closed to the point of utter emotionlessness. She had tried to get used to the idea after Kynyr broke it off with her. Looking at his handsome face left her feeling a bit cranky and she had to admonish herself to be tolerant. After all, it had been many years since she had dealt with mortals over such a prolonged period. If she were as unscrupulous in love as her grandmother was, then she would have simply carried him off to her enchanted garden and left him no choice, save to spend the rest of his days making her happy.

Todd stood behind the young couple wearing his best robe and trousers. The knowing look in his eye suggested that he knew about her 'little fling' with Kynyr, and knew a lot more about how hard she had chased Tarrant. That quelled Pandeena's ire, and she repressed a sigh.

Maybe I'm just in love with love. I haven't felt anything as strong as what I see on their faces since ... since I first met Padruig.

Wearing a pale blue traditional robe that matched her eyes, Cahira stood with her arm linked through the circle of Todd's arm. Pandeena could see love there too. Old love that had become more fondness than passion.

Pandeena tapped the three copies of the document, which she placed upon her writing table before their arrival. "It has

been years since I presided over a Wild Cousins Courtship. Have you consummated your intentions in wolf form yet?"

Kynyr nodded. "This morning."

Kady blushed.

"No backing out now." Pandeena thumbed at the quill and ink. "Sign and date all three copies. Kynyr first."

That was soon accomplished and they turned to Pandeena again. She forced a smile. "One copy for Kynyr. One for Kady. One for the Clerk of Records at the town hall."

Kynyr slipped his arm around Kady's shoulders. "What now?"

"Well, first I have a few matters to explain and then I will want to speak with each of you alone in the chapel. I assume you have memorized your prayers for this one?"

They both nodded.

"Good. First off, you have one year and a day to quicken Kady's womb, Kynyr. If at the end of that time, Kady's womb remains barren, you must forever forswear all contact with each other before the Gods."

Kynyr squeezed Kady. "We understand."

"Good. Now, Kady, you must swear not to make it easy upon Kynyr to catch you. You must use all of your wits and cleverness to avoid being caught, short of extreme physical violence, and conquered. Kynyr, you must pursue her with a single-minded determination to mate with her. This must be a true test of whether or not you are worthy to produce cubs with Kady. Determination, strength, cleverness, audacity, and stamina."

Pandeena indicated that Kady and Kynyr should accompany her into the shrine.

"Disrobe completely." Pandeena ordered.

They obeyed.

"Kneel at the altar and say your prayers together."

They did."

"Change."

They did so. Kynyr's ears were perked and his eyes eager. His tail tocked back and forth. Pandeena grabbed him by the ruff. "Kady gets a head start. Run, Kady."

Kady bolted from the shrine, skidded on the dirt, and headed around the back. She ran through the cemetery, jumped the briars and sweet pepper bushes where weeks ago she had been attacked by Preece, and darted into an elm thicket, leaping from boulder to boulder at every opportunity to make it difficult for Kynyr to track her, and soon found herself standing at Lavender Creek. She had never learned to swim.

She prowled up and down the bank, trying to decide what to do. If she turned back, Kynyr would be on her in a flash. Then she heard Kynyr behind her. Kady did not know anything about this place, having never been so far from the village before. The wind changed and now she could smell him, aroused and eager.

She glanced frantically around, spotted a ledge of smooth boulders jutting above Lavender Creek. Kady leaped for them only to discover, as she skidded toward the water, that they were slick with spray and algae.

She had time for a single frantic squeal before landing in the waters.

They called it a Creek, but recent rains had left it swollen. It was deeper than she expected and she sank. Kady fought her way to the surface, paddling madly as the swift current caught her, spun her around, and pulled her down again. Once more Kady fought her way to the surface, gasping for air as her head emerged from the water. She blinked to clear her eyes and saw that she was being swept toward a patch of jagged rocks.

Gods, help me.

She hit the rocks with stunning force, and the current dragged her under.

I'm drowning. Oh gods, I'm drowning.

Teeth closed upon her ruff, and a much larger, stronger wolf lifted her head above the water. Kady came up coughing and snorting, gasping for breath. The current pulled at her, but her rescuer strove against the rain-swollen stream with powerful strokes. She felt dizzy with relief when she felt the soil beneath her paws. He released her ruff and nudged her up the bank.

Once she was on dry ground, Kady shook herself to get the water from her fur. Before she could finish, Kynyr mounted her.

Kady snarled. "*You could let me get dry first.*"

"*You're bewitching when wet.*" Kynyr grunted as he poked her.

Kady moaned and panted, pushing against him. Having sex as a wolf satisfied her on a deep primal level as she felt him swell inside her. *"Gods, that's good. That's so good."*

Once they locked together, Kynyr laid his head between her shoulders, making a noise that sounded suspiciously like a chuckle. *"Let's do this again, Kady."*

"You're not worth drowning for."

"That's not what I meant."

"Oh hell. Fill my belly. Gram's started the wedding dress."

"I'm working on it."

* * * *

Two hundred infantrymyn, sixty cavalrymyn, and several dozen archers with longbows barred the road, spread out in skirmish line, and ready for trouble. Seven Aroanan paladins mounted on their big wynderjyns—a temple-bred unicorn-horse hybrid, sat at the head of the force.

Fergus MacFie raised his arm and signaled a halt, sweeping an appraising glance across their opponent's forces. As stout and muscular as a prime bull, redheaded Fergus MacFie made a striking figure.

"What do we do, Fergus?" Fourteen-year-old Lord Brodrig MacLachlan nudged his sturdy horse closer to him.

"Parley."

"What if they won't let us pass?"

Fergus shrugged. "We cut their balls off."

"They haven't any." Brodrig giggled nervously.

"They don't need them."

Fergus could not spot a single male in the Sharani ranks, but none of those women stood less than six feet in height, broad-shouldered and muscular. He knew better than to underestimate them, especially those seven paladins to the god of war.

Turning in his saddle, Fergus signaled his cousin, Darcy MacFie, and Father Gileaus to come forward.

Gileaus carried his staff with the base in a lance cup and a white banner furled around it and tied with green tasseled cords.

Darcy had strong features and hair the color of a red fox. She wore her hair in a tight braid, revealing that she had only half her left ear and wore a large gold loop in the right. She wore a breastplate over her shirt of heavy chain and carried a broadsword at her shoulder.

"As I see it," said Fergus. "It might take a bitch to talk sense to a bitch. Darcy, you ride out with Father Gileaus and tell these viragoes we wish to parley."

"Consider it done, cousin."

Father Gileaus unfurled his parley flag and rode out with Darcy. Seeing them, two of the Sharani paladins rode forward to meet them.

"You think they'll listen?" Brodrig asked, a note of anxiety creeping into his voice.

Fergus eyed Brodrig, the youngest grandson of Lord Duncan, and shrugged. "Good chance of it ... assuming Darcy holds her temper."

The talking went on longer than Fergus had been expecting, and Brodrig had begun to fidget by the time that Darcy and Gileaus returned.

"We're in luck, cousin." Darcy laughed. "The captain is family sort of."

"What do you mean sort of?"

"I know her. She's the one triaded with Cousin Lucy's husband's brother from Chandler's Rock."

"So what did she say?"

"Make camp and have dinner with her. Give's her time to fetch Tully so's she can have one of our own there."

"He's Red Wolf. Not MacLachlan." Fergus scowled.

Darcy laughed again. "You know how it is with foreigners. Can't tell one lycan from another. But it's in our favor."

"Maybe."

* * * *

Captain Artemisia Leonidian had turned the dinner into a family affair, sitting with her wife, Jocasta on her left, and her husband, Tully Abernathy at her right. Fergus thought they made quite a contrast, the two statuesque copper-skinned Sharani and the slender, blond lycan they had triaded with. He could not get his tongue around the proper terms for their relationship and decided not to try, contenting himself with slapping lycan words all over it. Tully did not bother hiding his amusement as he translated whatever his wives failed to understand. He seemed a good-natured sort and Fergus almost liked him.

The food had been good and the liquor proved tolerable—barely. However, the lengthy period of pleasantries made Fergus itch, and he muttered in lycan. "Can we get to the point now?"

Tully smiled and translated, getting a laugh and a nod from his wives.

"To be honest, it surprised me to have MacLachlan on my doorstep." The Captain gestured and her aide refilled their glasses. "I expected it to be Old Claw instead."

"He got a reason?" Fergus asked.

Artemisia leaned forward. "Not disrespecting your brother, but more than you."

"Why?"

"Four of his couriers were butchered in Hell's Widow."

"And you done nothing about it?" Fergus had never spoken to a Sharani before. Whenever he came to Hell's Widow, he kept to the lycan district and scrupulously avoided them. All he had to go on was what others had told him about them; that they were fiercely territorial and put up with no bullshit; that they kept an iron hand on matters and had a reputation for thoroughness.

"Not much I can do." She made a sweeping gesture. "What you see is all there is of the garrison."

"Can't be." His eyes narrowed in suspicion, certain that she had to be lying to him.

"You don't get much news in MacLachlan. You're too insular."

Fergus exchanged a glance with Darcy. "What news?"

"We lost at Wolfsbane Field. General Mardreth Dovane has retreated to Skeleton Creek to regroup. They're draining the garrisons to reinforce her. More troops have been requisitioned from Shaurone, but they haven't reached us yet."

"If you can't or won't protect our people, we will," said Fergus.

"Off the record?" She ran her gaze across every face. "I sent a request to our Saer'Ajan, asking for permission to seek reinforcements from the Clans."

Fergus nodded. "What did she say?"

"I haven't heard yet, but I'd be a fool not to strike a bargain with you."

Tully shifted in his seat and glanced at his wives as if for permission to say something. She gave him a nod, and Fergus began to suspect that those three had already made their decision before he got there.

"Secure the lycan ghetto. Then spread out east. Let us worry about the West End."

"You've got a deal."

Artemisia smiled and snapped her fingers. Her aide placed a map case at her elbow. She opened it, laying out a set of detailed maps of Hell's Widow that had been printed using an exquisite woodcut. "I have twenty sets of these for you and your officers."

Fergus stared at them in astonishment. "You anticipated us?"

"I've known you were coming for two weeks."

"Spies?" Father Gileaus gave her a disapproving look.

Kynyr's War [Lycan Blood Vol. IV]
by Janrae Frank

Tully laughed. "Family."

CHAPTER THREE

LOKYNEN

Autumn ruled the last days in the month of Racoga with winds and bluster, slowing their progress. Had Lokynen been alone, he would have persevered despite the weather. Very little could slow him down when he set his mind to something. However, he had to be considerate of his aged traveling companion, Phelan O'Reilly.

Lokynen stalked through Wolffgard village, drawing stares from everyone. He carried a great axe twice as large as the average man could wield thrust through his wide belt and a huge sword with a glittering hilt at his shoulder. Beside him trotted Phelan O'Reilly, the headman from Three Stones Village, struggling to keep up.

"Is it much farther, Phelan?"

The headman shook his head. "The manor sits near the bridge, a short walk beyond the village."

Phelan stopped and stared at the two young cubs removing Baroucha's sign from the shop. "I wonder what happened to her."

"Who?"

"Baroucha Seaver. She was a vicious, treacherous gossip of the worst order. Baroucha hurt a lot of people."

Lokynen frowned as the new sign went up. "A mage shop in Wolffgard?"

"Curious. We don't produce many mages. I've heard there are two in Wolffgard, both old friends of mine."

"Who?"

"Cahira Sinclair, Todd's wife. And Pandeena Moonbow."

"So this is where Todd got off to." Lokynen chuckled.

"You know him?"

"I taught him."

The village dwindled off and ended at a road dusty from the last gasp of summer.

"It's only a little bit further." Phelan said.

When they came within sight of the manor, Lokynen saw three dark-skinned children playing with a half-grown maned-hunting cat beneath a cluster of maple trees near the path leading up to the manor. Teakamon the Shepherd of the Wilds had told him that the child they had been sent to protect in the course of defending the valley was wilderkin, and this definitely suggested wilderkin to him.

Robert Morcar, sitting on a boulder, half blocked from their view by bushes, rose to his feet, assessing Lokynen with a cautious eye.

Lokynen winked at Phelan and paused with the children.

"Hello? Do you know the way to Claw's house?"

The little boy wore only his pants. There was a wine-stain birthmark on his chest in the form of a bear. "Grandpa's house. There!"

Darmyk pointed at the manor.

Ros limped over and stood behind Darmyk with her hand on his shoulder, staring with open suspicion at the

yuwenghau. Lyrri came up and stood on the other side of Darmyk.

Robert Morcar strolled closer, watching the newcomers.

Lokynen grinned. This boy cub was the special child all right and he had found him first. Dynanna would have a fit of jealousy. He crouched and touched the Godmark, for that was what it really was, disguised as a birthmark, and felt the power behind it. "Hello Little Bear."

Darmyk laughed. "Grandpa calls me that."

"We're not supposed to talk to strangers," Ros said.

Lokynen ignored her statement, although he wondered why the girl limped. "Wilderkin?"

Darmyk smiled and his eyes lit up with pleasure and a pure sweet innocence. "Yes." He nodded.

"Then you're very special."

At a nudge from Ros, Lyrri ran to the door of the manor and went inside.

"What is your name, Little Bear?"

"Darmyk Redhand."

"That's a very fine name. I'm Lokynen."

"You must be old Claw's grandson," said Phelan.

"Uhm hm," Darmyk answered with his lips together.

Two adults came out of the house at a run. Something about the way the male moved set off alarms in Lokynen's head. Yet he could not quite put his finger on why. The female wore a loose smock, which swirled around her swollen belly.

"Stay away from my son!" Malthus shouted.

Lokynen straightened and frowned at Malthus. Sensible people took a single look at the yuwenghau and backed down. Size alone was enough to put them off.

Phelan looked startled by Malthus' reaction, and gestured with his open hands, palms out. "We're here to see Claw. We didn't intend any harm."

Darmyk ducked his head. "You're not my daddy," he said in a sullen voice.

Malthus lifted him up and he squirmed. "Stay away from my son," he repeated.

Kenly snarled at Malthus, who then shoved Darmyk into Merissa's arms, and she settled him on her hip as much as her belly would allow. The cat wrapped itself around Merissa's legs protectively.

Merissa looked worn and uncomfortable. "Please, Malthus. Don't start shouting."

"Take the children inside." When she hesitated, he shouted, "Now!"

Lokynen rubbed the scar between his eyes. "I was just asking directions."

"Well ask them from someone else," Malthus snapped. He gestured furiously at Morcar. "You're supposed to be watching them." Then he followed the others inside.

"Never mind Malthus," drawled Morcar. "He's been getting uppity lately."

Phelan shook his head at them. "At least we know we've arrived."

Lokynen had just started toward the door to the manor, when Merissa came back outside.

"Please don't think badly of my husband. Darmyk isn't his and it makes him insecure. He's very protective."

Lokynen shook his head ruefully. If he had acted that way with his wife, Amberlin, she would have knocked him across a room. "We're here to see Claw Redhand."

"He's my father. Don't tell him how Malthus was acting ... please? He's just being over-protective. His niece, Ros—you saw the older girl?—well she was attacked by a vampire and left for dead a few months ago. He barely saved her and hasn't stopped worrying since."

Lokynen sighed. "I'll think about it."

Phelan shrugged.

* * * *

Ros whispered in Darmyk's ear, "Let's go play in the treehouse."

Darmyk looked up at her and fear flashed across his face. He knew what happened in the treehouse. She had not blocked his memories the last time, only his ability to speak of it. Kenly must have smelled his fear, because the big cat pushed between them and hissed at Ros.

"Send Kenly away, Darmyk."

Darmyk swallowed and nodded. "Go hunt, Kenly."

The cat did not budge.

Darmyk sucked in a breath and said more forcefully, "Go hunt."

The cat slunk off, casting backwards glances, and then finally bounded away into the trees.

Darmyk climbed the ladder first, went to the small straw bed, and laid down. He opened his robe and waited.

Ros entered and straddled him. "That's a good boy. You're learning, Darmyk."

Tears ran down Darmyk's cheeks as he watched Ros' fangs descend.

She turned his head to the side, brushed his hair back, and chuckled. "In they go."

Darmyk shuddered as Ros bit him behind the ear where it would not readily show, and sucked him.

* * * *

The day had started off well with Cahira sneaking from the shop with Kady and deep into the forest before changing to wolves. Today they had worked on backtracking and ways to confuse a scent trail.

Cahira heard a noise in the bushes, sniffed, and caught a familiar scent. "*Run, Kady! He's here!*"

Kady leaped the fence and headed into the bushes.

Kynyr bounded into the clearing with his tongue lolling from the side of his muzzle, his ears pricked forward, and a silly, over eager look in his eyes. He bounced over the fence with a wag of his bushy tail and raced off.

A few minutes later, Cahira heard Kady squall and knew that Kynyr had mounted her. Matters were not going at all well. No matter how hard Cahira worked to educate Kady about the forest, the young bitch remained too easy to catch. What made it worse was that for the past few days, Kynyr

seemed to have acquired an uncanny knack for knowing when Cahira and Kady went out for one of their sessions.

The wind changed and then Cahira knew exactly why Kynyr always found them. Cahira retrieved her clothing, wrapped her robe around herself, and stole through the trees as quietly as she could. She squeaked in surprise as a hairy hand slipped around her shoulders, lifting her off her feet and large lips closed over her own in a passionate kiss.

She slugged him in the shoulder and Todd let her go.

"You're helping him!"

Todd shrugged. "You're helping her."

"It's not fair!"

"Well..." Todd formed a droll smile. "I think a late autumn wedding will be nice."

"At the rate he keeps catching her..." Cahira glared.

"It won't take him long. Calling Courtship was the best idea that Kady's had."

"She isn't even nineteen yet."

"So? Remember what it was like when we were their ages?"

"We were never their ages. I was twenty-six and you were thirty-six when you landed Trevor in my belly. And you cheated!"

"You would never have quit mourning for Tarrant otherwise."

A shadow passed over Cahira's face, chasing away all her indignation with a return to the moment. Her shoulders drooped, as mention of Tarrant turned her to thoughts of Branduff. The harder she tried to distract herself from

thinking about her losses, the more they came home to her.

"Let's go home, Todd."

"Cahira? Are you alright?"

"I will be, Todd. Let's just go home."

* * * *

Claw sat in his big chair in his study with a tankard of mead. His guests had been provided with drink also. They had requested privacy for this meeting, and Claw had been grateful to give it to them. He had not wanted Malthus to include himself in the conversation after seeing Merissa follow her husband upstairs with tears in her eyes. He would have Aisha inquire about this latest spat.

Phelan had given his troubling report of the attack upon Three Stones, and how it was turned by the yuwenghau.

"Longbranch was attacked also," said Claw. "They murdered Branduff Maguire. He was unarmed ... they cut him down like vermin."

Phelan's lips tightened. "Gods. He was a good mon. Poor Cahira. She must be devastated."

"She is. But she's handling it well." Claw worked hard not to stare at Phelan's companion. Lokynen was the largest mon the chieftain had ever seen—larger than Todd Sinclair.

"I've heard that her grandson works for you."

"Kynyr?"

"Yes. How's he taking it? Losing his father."

"Better than I expected. That's probably because of Kady. They're courting."

"That must be a comfort to him."

"Yah. Kynyr's my best guardsmon. You know he killed the outlaw chief, Traygarde, in single combat when he was sixteen. I've always been impressed with him."

"I should have known." Phelan looked at his hands. "Kynyr is a common name in the family ... so I did wonder."

Claw's gaze was drawn back to Lokynen. The other newcomer sat as comfortably as possible in the largest chair Claw owned, and it failed to be large enough. "Do you have a last name?"

"Yes," Lokynen replied. "And you would recognize it. Give me your word of honor chieftain and I will tell you."

Claw took a long draw from his tankard and sat forward, with his elbows on the arms of his chair, a look of intense scrutiny on his face. "You have it."

"Willidar."

Claw nearly choked as a gasp exited his throat seconds after a swallow. "Yuwenghau. Pandeena said you were in the valley, but I couldn't let myself hope that she was right."

Lokynen grinned at him. "A friend of Isranon's has asked us to defend your valley and protect a wilderkin child."

"Darmyk. You mean my grandson. You know that Isranon has repudiated the child?"

Lokynen frowned deeply, making his face a mass of valleys. "That changes nothing. The trickster says protect the child and the valley and we will."

Claw settled back, tapping a finger on his chair arm. The increasingly familiar tightness had begun in his chest again at Isranon's name. "Promise me you will not mention Isranon again."

"So be it. Now on to business. The rising of a Queen who is trying to drive the Sharani conquerors out of Waejontor will put pressure on your valley. I am certain you do not welcome the return of the sa'necari overlords."

"True. We don't like the Sharani either. But better them than the sa'necari."

"I intend to send a yuwenghau or a battle-mage to you who can shield your home and garden from these creatures, especially the vampires. The Queen has allied with all the undead factions."

"I heard that. This Lord Daemon is supposed to be a vampire."

Lokynen gave a growly laugh. "This Lord Daemon is Brandrahoon."

Claw gasped and made a sign against evil. The tightness in his chest had become a sharp pain shooting through him. "Once there were three brothers, Brandrahoon the vampire, Dawnhand speaker to spirits, and Waejonan accursed be his name forever."

"Your grandson is a descendant of Dawnhand. Which is why he must be protected."

Claw nodded. "I will accept whatever help you offer."

"Good. I want to ward your daughter also."

"That may be a problem. Her husband does not like outsiders."

"Her husband is an asshole."

Claw grinned. "Then you've met him?"

"Yes."

"That's something else we agree on."

* * * *

Clan MacLachlan entered Hell's Widow riding three abreast with their baggage train in the middle and their banners flying. As they entered the lycan district, people filled the streets to stare, bitches leaned out of windows and waved scarves at them, and cubs gamboled along their line of march. A ragged cheer went up and gathered force until it seemed as if the very ground shook with it.

Fergus grinned and sat straighter in his saddle, basking in the hero's welcome the lycan community gave him.

When they reached the middle, they started breaking up into units and heading for prearranged meeting places.

Fergus drew rein in the yard of the Three Candles Inn, and experienced a twinge of melancholy: Jordi would not be coming from the stables to greet him.

Three ostlers that Fergus did not recognize came and took their horses. The baggage train began pulling in as he and Darcy dismounted. Three Candles had the largest yard and stables of the inns in the lycan district and Fergus wanted them in one place until he could secure the district. A gesture sent guardsmyn to the perimeters of the yard and the entrances to the inn. Only then did Fergus inform Lord Brodrig that he considered it safe to dismount. Anything might be lurking about, and Fergus' gut instinct told him that they were being observed by more than lycans. The one thing he wished he had with him was a mage, but MacLachlan had not produced one in several generations.

Fergus led Darcy, Lord Brodrig, and Father Gileaus into the inn. The common room had only a few people in it, drinking and eating at some of the back tables.

Amos Raggat came from behind his bar and approached them. "Fergus! Where's Jordi?"

"Dead. That's why we're here. The bastards shot him on my doorstep."

"Sweet gods." Amos made the sign of the bear and followed that with the wolfmoon.

Father Gileaus smiled at the innkeeper's evident piety.

Amos thumbed at the door behind the bar. "Keg room's the best place to talk. I'm surprised the garrison let you in."

Fergus gave a silencing shake of his head, and all talk ceased until they entered the keg room.

Amos opened a cabinet and brought out a bottle and glasses. "I assume that whisky is your drink of choice?"

Darcy's face brightened with a cheeky grin. "It's mine and I know it's Fergus' favorite. But I think the good Father would rather have something gentler."

"Mead, if you don't mind." Father Gileaus settled into a chair at the table and was soon joined by the rest of them.

Fergus got the introductions out of the way with brusque directness and put an end to pleasantries. "The garrison struck a deal with us. The lycan district is ours and eventually the whole east side will be also."

Amos' lips twitched and relief mingled with worry in his gaze. "Did my letter arrive?"

"The one you sent to Maguire?"

"Yes, that one. I expected Red Wolf would be knocking on my door by now."

"My aide is delivering it." Gileaus sipped his mead. "Jordi spoke only a few words before he died."

"So we don't know exactly what's going down here." Fergus charged into the conversation again. "Just that they killed my brother over a letter. A letter you asked him to deliver."

"They killed my daughter." Amos stared into his glass of whiskey, his fingers drawing nervous circles on the wood. "You remember Sainy, Fergus?"

He nodded. "That much I knew. The sa'necari we put to the question was very forthcoming. He was steeped-in-death ... lasted a long time screaming. We whittled the flesh from his bones before he died."

"I cut his grapes off." Darcy unshouldered her saddlebags, took a jar from them, and placed it in front of Amos. Testicles and a penis floated in a salty gray-green brine.

Brodrig shuddered and looked away.

Father Gileaus turned pale and faintly greenish. "If you don't mind..."

"Get that off the table." Fergus shoved the jar at her.

Darcy returned it to her saddlebags with a contemptuous look, deliberately missing the point. "It's not like you've never seen one before."

Amos lowered his head. "So you got one of them." He drained his glass and refilled it. "I'm a traitor, Fergus. I broke after they killed Sainy. They were going to take another daughter each week until I gave them what they wanted."

Silence settled over the table until Fergus broke it. "What did you do?"

"I gave them the names and addresses of every lycan leader in the community. They rounded them up."

"Bastard!" Darcy overturned her chair, leaping at Amos with her knife out.

Amos shrieked as he crashed to the floor beneath her, his plump body quivering like a shaken bowl of jelly.

Father Gileaus grabbed Darcy's arm as the blade descended. She elbowed him in the stomach, knocking the breath out of him, but he still held on. "No, Darcy. No."

The battle-bitch threw the priest onto his back, freeing her arm. Frantic to stop her from murdering Amos, Gileaus yanked her arm and kicked the squirming innkeeper in the shoulder, moving him out of the way of Darcy's strike. Tangled together, she struck again at Amos. Father Gileaus jerked her arm, squeezing between Darcy and the innkeeper. The blade came down with great force, but instead of plunging into Amos' body, it thrust deep into the priest's shoulder.

Gileaus clenched his eyes shut with a grunt of shock and pain.

Rage faded from her eyes. Darcy stared at the blood spreading through his robes and released the knife, leaving it in Gileaus' shoulder as she straightened on her knees. "Father forgive me."

Fergus seized her arms from behind and jerked Darcy to her feet. "Bloody hell, Darcy. Look what you've done."

Brodrig knelt beside Father Gileaus, his eyes huge and distressed.

Amos lurched to his feet and retreated to the far side of the room, putting his back against the kegs. Tears ran down his face and he made blubbering noises.

Darcy relaxed in Fergus' grip, signaling surrender. He released her, up righted her chair, and pointed at it sternly. Darcy sat down, laced her fingers together, and stared at her hands.

"Bandages, Amos. Get your fat ass out there and fetch a healer. Then we'll deal with your sins." Fergus sat cross-legged on the floor to examine Father Gileaus' wound. "Be glad she keeps her blades sharp, Father. This is going to hurt, but it should come out easy."

Fergus extracted the knife from Father Gileaus' shoulder and tossed it on the table. Then he poured whiskey on the wound.

Amos showed up a short time later with the unit's surgeon. Once the priest had been seen to, they sent the surgeon away and gathered at the table. The mood had gone still.

Fergus glanced at Gileaus, who now carried his arm in a sling to take the stress from his shoulder. "Perhaps you should go lie down, Father?"

"No. No, I'm going to see this through. Killing Amos serves no purpose." Gileaus scanned their faces. "I'm placing him under my protection."

Darcy grumbled under her breath.

Fergus kicked her shins and turned to the innkeeper. "Are they still alive, Amos?"

"As far as I know. When they kill someone, they make certain we know about it ... leave the bodies in public places." Amos gazed at the table, refusing to lift his eyes, his shoulders drooped.

"Names, Amos. Names."

"He calls himself Lord Heironim Traxton. I've never met him. He sends Alexander Jondries to deal with me."

"Sa'necari?"

"Both of them." Fresh tears rolled down Amos' cheeks.

"There's more. Sa'necari and human both."

"Where do they operate out of?"

"The Green Sheaf. It's a grain warehouse."

Fergus turned to Darcy. "Get our scouts together. Amos is going to show us where this place is."

"We going to hit it tonight?" Darcy asked.

"Yeah. Can't give them time to kill the hostages or move them somewhere else."

CHAPTER FOUR

BRINGING HELL TO THE WIDOW

The Devil's Dance Inn was a quiet, innocuous establishment on the west end. It served as a waystation to the sa'necari and others passing through whose purposes and destinations would not bear close inspection. The owner, Dymier Bianco, kept a herd of nibari and a larder filled with people who would not be missed to satisfy the obscene appetites of his secretive clientele. The second floor contained meeting rooms and the third floor held the bedroom suites. Strangers who did not know the proper code words and phrases were denied access to the upper floors.

The best chamber on the second floor had been reserved for the uses of Heironim and his compatriots. Heironim preferred to have several places to retreat to and gather at; a tactical consideration that had been drilled into them all by the instructors that Sidera Tyrins provided during the years that she trained them.

Since the destruction of the Red Lantern section, all the prostitutes who could be found had been gathered up and moved into a rundown mansion that Heironim had chosen on the southwest side of town and was in the process of restoring. The whores had gotten skittish, and consequently, most of them now had spells in their brains and healing bruises from sa'necari fangs.

Sidera had finally sent them reinforcements, but they were scattered between the inn, the Green Sheaf, and the new brothel that Heironim had named the Scarlet Petticoat.

Jondries sat near the window at their table in a private meeting room on the second floor of the Devil's Dance Inn. The trestle table would seat twenty. Sofas and chairs lined the walls. He glanced at Timocratus sitting on a sofa with his fangs in the throat of a nibari, sucking noisily.

Heironim occupied the head of the table, fiddling with a wooden puzzle box and sipping blood wine.

Jondries frowned at him. "How long are we going to stay here?"

"Until there's news."

"The garrison would be fools to let those MacLachlans into the city."

"You can't tell what they'll do." Timocratus wiped blood from his lips and sent his dinner tottering from the room.

"The captain is married to one."

"Tully Abernathy is from Red Wolf, not MacLachlan." A note of irritation entered Jondries' voice. "There's a difference. Believe me."

The door slammed open and a sa'necari named Vico came in. He slammed the door behind him even harder than he had opened it and staggered breathless to the table. "MacLachlan is riding into the city."

Heironim put the puzzle box aside and shot a quick glance at Jondries.

"I don't like this. What's the garrison doing about it?"

"They parted ranks and let them in."

"Do any of your informers know your face, Alex?" Heironim asked.

"Amos Raggat. I've been doing business with him personally."

"Kill him."

"But, Heironim..."

"Kill him. He knows your face."

"I think you're overreacting."

"Are you disobeying me?"

"Of course not." Jondries sighed and quirked a finger at Vico. "Inform Amos that I want to see him at the Green Sheaf immediately. Once he's there, detain him until I arrive. I'll perform the execution myself."

Vico departed and Jondries turned to Heironim again as Timocratus joined them at the table. "Does that satisfy you?"

"Not completely."

"What now?"

"I want the hostages moved."

Jondries rose from his chair. "I'll see to it now."

"Amos knows about the Green Sheaf?" Heironim abandoned his puzzle and followed Jondries into the corridor.

"Yes. That didn't seem like a problem. He's been very cooperative since I rited his daughter."

"You're taking too many chances, Alex."

"And you're not taking enough, Heironim. We have over one hundred myn now. Not counting the twenty-seven sa'necari."

Heironim fell silent until they had left the inn. They emerged into the early evening shadows and started walking

toward the warehouse district. "How do you have them deployed?"

Jondries scowled at him. "Do you even bother to read my reports?"

"Ellie..."

"Oh, for Bellocar's sake, how long are you going to sulk and moan over a dead whore?" Jondries stretched his long neck and dug his fingers into the base of it. "I've tried to be patient, Heironim. It's getting tiresome. How long are you going to keep leaving everything to me? I can't do it all. Ellie's becoming an obsession. When are you going to let it go?"

"When Maguire is dead."

Jondries could think of nothing to say to that.

The warehouse district lay between the lycan ghetto and the Blood District. They traveled through the edges of the burned out section in the middle of the Blood District just to get off the main streets and away from the possibilities of running into Sharani patrols. The blackened ruin of the Crimson Lady greeted them on Corbie Way and Heironim stopped to stare up at it.

Jondries shook his head, watching Heironim scratch the blackened scars on his arms. Normally blood healed all in sa'necari ... yet no matter how much blood Heironim drank, the scars from Silkie's venom refused to vanish.

"It was a good place, Alex. I miss it."

Jondries repressed a groan at Heironim's sentimentality. "Can we keep walking? Amos is probably waiting for me."

Heironim nodded.

A block from the Green Sheaf, Jondries touched Heironim's arm to halt him. "Lycans."

Heironim reached for his sword and started to run forward.

"No, it's too late." Jondries held him back. "Look."

He pointed to bodies hanging from the windows. "They've left us a warning."

"The hostages?"

"I issued orders this morning ... they were to be killed if the lycans came for them."

"Ellie..."

"Forget it. Let's get out of here. Rally our forces and hope those wolves don't know where to find us."

* * * *

The common room of the Three Candles Inn had been changed about. Most of the tables had been moved to the sides and stacked to the ceiling. A trestle table long enough to seat forty had been assembled in the center. Fergus sat at the head with Darcy to his left, Brodrig to his right and Amos on the far side of the young lord.

"Get your bitches together, Darcy." Fergus examined the penciled map of the warehouse grounds. "We want to do this quick and quiet."

"What am I going to do?" Brodrig gazed at the map.

"You're going to stay here and finish getting the barricades in place."

"But ... Da wants me to fight."

Fergus glared at him. "I intend to take your father back a living son, not a dead one."

Lord Brodrig's lower lip jutted out as if he intended to argue, met Fergus' eyes, and then dropped his. "As you wish."

"Good lad." Fergus had not wanted to bring Brodrig, an untried boy, along, but Duncan had set it as a condition for giving Fergus command of their small army.

Amos shuddered periodically in his chair, watching them with a pensive air. A spiked club lay on the table in front of him. No armor could be found to fit him, not even boiled leather, and if they wished to strike in time to have the slightest hope of rescuing the hostages, there was no time to make him any. "Father Gileaus...."

Fergus scowled. "Atonement, Amos. Atonement. If any of those hostages die, it's on your soul."

"Yes."

Word must have gone out fast, because the streets were clear when the MacLachlan units moved to attack. Nonetheless, Fergus insisted that they take to the alleys as soon as they passed the barricades keeping the humans out of the lycan district. The warehouse district bordered theirs and they only had to travel six blocks to reach the Green Sheaf.

They used the alleys to sneak as close as they could in force and surrounded the warehouse without being seen.

At a nod from Fergus, Darcy's unit of battle-bitches, in full hybrid form to take advantage of their increased strength and speed, killed the sentries, the grooms in the barn and stableboys. No human was spared. They were all considered

guilty by association, and Darcy's unit carried out their sentences on the spot.

They muffled the horses and stole the lot of them.

At a nod from Fergus, his youngest brother Artair took his unit to the roof using grappling hooks. None of them went in human form—except for Amos.

Hiding his club behind his back, Amos sidled up to the front door while Fergus and his fellows crouched low to either side of it.

Amos knocked and a servant answered. "I must talk to Master Jondries. It's urgent. Clan MacLachlan is taking over the district."

The door opened wide to let Amos inside—his girth nearly filled the doorway—and Fergus lunged to his feet with a small axe in each hand. He shouldered the innkeeper out of his way, and split the servant's head open between the eyes. The sound of splintering glass filled the night as other units broke windows and climbed through, hitting the warehouse from all sides.

Amos tried to back up and retreat, becoming an obstacle to the oncoming lycans. A MacLachlan soldier seized him by the shoulders, propelling Amos into the room with a hard shove. They broke into two streams around Amos as he staggered, stumbled, and barely managed to keep his tottering feet beneath him.

The clerk at the desk, guarding access to the rear, rose and turned to flee.

Fergus chopped the clerk's neck, snapping the bone, and spun about. "Which way, Amos?"

"Basement, this way." Amos trundled into the lead, holding his spiked club ready, and led them down a hallway to a door at the end. "Through there to a stairway. Door's warded. I don't know how they get it open."

The only human in their band, a Sharani priest, spoke a prayer and then brushed the door with a sprig of mistletoe. The door opened.

Amos blinked. "They've a temple to Bellocar down there and cells where they keep their captives."

Fergus shoved the fat innkeeper forward. "Lead us."

Amos went down the stairs first, shaking and biting on his lower lip in a determined fashion, having changed into his hybrid form and looking more like a small, rotund wooly bear than a wolf.

No locked door could hold against the prayers of the Sharani priest as she brushed each of them with her sprig of mistletoe. The door at the bottom opened on a corridor running east and west. Amos sucked in a sharp breath, pointing right and then left. "Temple that way ... uhm ... dungeons this way."

Amos lurched into rolling trot, passed two doors on his left. A guard popped out of the third door right in front of him. For an instant, they stared at each other. The guard reached for his sword and Amos smacked him smartly over the head with his club. His opponent collapsed in a jingle of harness and chain mail.

More guards poured from the doors ahead of them and one in a Captain's tabard shouted. "Kill the prisoners."

A mon at the far end turned and ran for the last door as the battle began in earnest.

"Move it, Amos," Fergus shouted, breaking from the fighting to chase the escaping guard.

The Waejontori got the door open, but before he could gain the safety of the other side, Fergus threw his axe, splitting the mon's head like a ripe melon. Fergus jumped over the mon's body and through the door into a narrow aisle between two rows of cells. A table and chairs sat near the door with a ring of keys hanging from a large nail. Fergus snagged the keys and tossed them to Amos. "Get the cells open."

Amos started peeking through the sliding peepholes into the cells and opening the ones that had people in it. Myn in MacLachlan livery poured in behind him, checking the cells.

The first few contained half-starved humans who shrieked when they first saw the lycans. Soldiers hustled them out and herded them toward the door.

Amos made the sign of the bear and shuddered. "The larder. Sa'necari was going to rite them."

Screams came from farther down and Fergus ran. A door stood open and he plunged into a large cell where lycans were chained to the walls. A guard stood before one of them with a bloody knife.

Fergus snarled. The guard turned from the prisoner he had just killed and faced Fergus with an uncertain expression. Fergus struck him in the chest with his axe, splitting his sternum.

The Waejontori guard staggered back and Fergus hit him again. He fell and lay unmoving in the straw covering the cell floor.

Fergus turned and saw that his companions had already freed the city wolves. "Bring the body. We're not leaving our dead behind."

They brought them out, some of them so weak from torture that they could barely stand and had to be supported by soldiers.

Amos let out a scream.

Fergus spun in time to see the innkeeper drop to his knees, clutching his bleeding arm. The man drew back a sword to finish Amos off. Fergus kicked Amos out of his way, slashed the Waejontori across the face, and then split his belly open.

Amos gave Fergus a look of pathetic gratitude, but made no effort to rise.

"Bloody hell, Amos. Get up or we'll leave you behind."

Amos tottered to his feet and ran.

* * * *

The first rays of dawn spread over the edges of the warehouse as Clan MacLachlan's raiders gathered in the yard. Bodies dangled from the windows and hung from the roof, several of them headless, as a grim warning to anyone who had managed to escape them.

Amos had been sent on with the wounded, the rescued lycan hostages, and the frantic humans from the larder.

"Is this everyone?" Fergus asked.

Darcy, standing nearby with a sack of heads, nodded.
"Let's hope we got the leaders."

"Take them to the inn and have Amos identify them if he can."

Darcy darted toward the lycan district.

Fergus gestured at one of his myn. "Burn it."

"No." The Sharani priest interposed herself between the soldier and the warehouse. "Do that and the whole town could go up. When the Red Lantern district burned we had a hard time putting it out. Six square blocks burned."

Fergus considered that. "Let's go."

The day ended on a sour note when Amos confirmed that they had not killed either Jondries or Lord Heironim Traxton.

* * * *

Malthus drove the wagon into Hell's Widow with a long list of goods to pick up for the Sanctuary and one for the manor. Aisha had finally agreed to let him make the run for her, although that was usually Kynyr's job. Kynyr's little courtship romp played into Malthus' hands in unforeseen ways, and he was quick to take advantage of it.

Three myn lounged on the edge of the boardwalk in front of the Devil's Dance Inn as he started to pass it. One sprang to his feet, waving at Malthus to stop. When the mon got close, Malthus recognized Timocratus.

Reining to a halt, Malthus watched Timocratus climb aboard and settle beside him.

"Don't go to the Green Sheaf."

Malthus' brows knit. "Why not?"

"Long story. I'd better let Heironim tell it."

"So where do I go?"

"Scarlet Petticoat."

It was too late in the year for planting, so Heironim had settled for clearing the brush and weeds away from the building. Malthus drove down a long, winding path of flagstones. Myn were at work repairing the veranda, but the sign said that it was already open for business.

A groom took his horses and took the wagon around to the side after Malthus and Timocratus dismounted.

He did not recognize the man manning the desk in the foyer. Most of the people they passed were new; a few Malthus vaguely remembered from the last visit he had paid to his mother.

Timocratus led Malthus through a huge hall filled with prostitutes and sprinkled through with guards. Heironim's living quarters and office were on the first floor, midway between the front and rear doors on that side.

Heironim rose from the meeting table in his office, his clothing rumpled and dark, sleepless circles under his eyes. He embraced Malthus. "I'm glad you're here."

"What happened?" Malthus settled at the head of the table, moving a bottle of wine and two glasses over to his right hand.

Alexander Jondries, sitting on the opposite side, gave Malthus a weary glance. "Lycans. They raided the Green Sheaf."

Malthus' lips pursed and he pulled at his oak leaf beard as Heironim poured wine for them. "I thought you rounded up their leaders."

Heironim took a swallow from his glass. "We did. Clan MacLachlan got a hair up their ass and sent an army."

"And the garrison did nothing?" The Sharani had always kept an iron hand over the occupied territories and took a hard line with anyone offering the smallest challenge to their sovereignty.

"Rumor is they cut a deal with MacLachlan."

Malthus listened to Heironim describing what had happened, his gaze darkening. "MacLachlan." Malthus sipped his wine. "I never expected this. They stayed out of the Rebellion."

"Can you send us reinforcements? Some units from the northwest?"

"That would make it a war, Heironim. The Sharani garrison would have to respond."

"They're undermanned. Otherwise, why allow MacLachlan to enter unopposed?"

Malthus waved Heironim's statement off. "There have been some complications in the north. I haven't had time to assess it yet. Furthermore, I don't want to split my forces, otherwise I would have Egidius dispatch some units to handle them."

"So what do we do?"

"Can anyone connect you to this place?"

"No."

"Then keep your head down. Keep your eyes open. And if any of them leave the ghetto singly or in pairs, kill them."

Take them out a few at a time. Pick them off from a distance."

"So be it."

"Did you lose my mother's shipment?"

"No." Jondries ran his finger around the rim of his glass. "I had them brought here as soon as Heironim bought the place."

"Good." Malthus took the lists from his pocket. "Have your people pick this stuff up for me. Meanwhile, I want to see what Mother sent me and think about this."

Malthus had discovered that the old wolf had a taste for certain types of rare, fine wines. His mother had the connections to acquire them, have them smuggled to Hell's Widow, and held there for him. He had prepared the bottles before leaving Hell's Widow with them. Sidera had offered to do it for him, to treat the wine with one of her most subtle creations, but Malthus had insisted upon doing it himself.

CHAPTER FIVE

TREACHERIES

Malthus sauntered through the manor door with his saddlebags and a backpack hanging from his shoulders. He walked into the Great Hall where he found Claw sitting alone. The hour was late, and the others who were normally to be found there had apparently already gone up to bed.

"So you're back." Claw scowled at him. "Did you get everything on Aisha's list? Or am I going to have to send Kynyr?"

Lines around the chieftain's eyes and mouth suggested he was not feeling well. Malthus repressed a smile at seeing it. "I missed not a thing. And I brought back a few treats. My mother was very generous."

"Hmmmph." Claw rubbed his chest, settling back in his chair. "You take too many chances. It's going to catch up with you."

Malthus shrugged. "I promised to make a few more trips before it gets too difficult to get there. One of them is for Old Hereward." He lowered his pack to the base of his chair and sat down. "I brought some things that you might like. A merchant managed to get a wagon of wine through."

Claw's eyebrows rose at that and he leaned forward. "Anything interesting?"

Malthus gave a tiny smile, lowering his head with a glance to the left as he fished out several bottles, and placed them triumphantly on the table between them. "I think so."

Claw's eyes lit up at a label that featured a dragonfly. "Faewin? Can it be?"

"I have three bottles of their Dragonfly label two of their reds and one white."

Claw seized one of the bottles of red and turned it in his hands. "Aisha and Merissa don't care much for it."

Malthus came out with several more bottles. "I picked up some of the fruity Sharani wine they favor, so they needn't feel they have to share the Faery stuff with us."

"Good enough. I'll reserve this for us." Claw grabbed the bell on the table beside him and rang it. Kissie showed up.

"Two wine glasses."

Kissie returned with the glasses and Claw poured for both of them. She built up the fire without being asked, and the two myn sat enjoying the wine.

"How did you manage to afford it?" Claw asked suddenly suspicious.

Malthus gave him an affronted look. "I arrived here desperate for my nieces' safety, not impoverished."

Claw nodded as he refilled his glass. "A very fine vintage."

"I know." Malthus lifted his glass in a toast. "To your health."

They clinked glasses and Malthus' smile broadened. *To your death, old wolf.*

"This is even better than I remembered it."

"I'm glad that you appreciate it. I made a deal with the merchant to hold back six more for us when he makes his next trip through. Normally it sells out long before he gets as far as Hell's Widow. However, he was on his way to Iradrim and Creeya. His return trip, he'll be loaded with fine whiskey, gin, and anisette. That kind of thing. He buys mead from your farmers. He's concerned about the possibility of the supplies being interrupted, so I suggested that he come talk to you about it when he's next through here."

"That's a mon after my own heart," Claw said in a far friendlier fashion than he normally showed Malthus. "I appreciate this."

After your own heart—I'm after stilling it, old fool.

* * * *

Kady walked into the library sprattle-legged and limping, muttering dire imprecations under her breath.

Cahira, sitting at the central table, had the newest book from the Assassins' Guild out next to a large dictionary. The dwarves of Iradrim had unearthed a library buried beneath their mountains that dated back to the first godwar. Facsimiles had to be created before translations could be done because any books brought out into fresh air crumpled to dust. The Guild had the technology and skills to create the copies without damaging the originals; and Cahira was their top intuitive translator. She stopped writing and laid her pen down. "Are you all right?"

"I'm sore. No matter how hard I try, I can't evade Kynyr."

"Kynyr is very good in the forests. He used to take wolf form to evade the Dreaded Horde."

"His sisters?"

"And Finn's. They used to double-team the boys to catch them doing things they were not supposed to do. Kynyr hid his fishing pole somewhere. He would take wolf form and run for it. They would take wolf form and chase him down. They didn't want him to get dirty."

"That's terrible!" Kady looked indignant.

"Well, it also made him a very good woodsman. You'll never be as clever in the woods as Kynyr."

Kady's shoulders drooped. "I can't learn fast enough. I might as well surrender. Is that allowed?"

"Not exactly. You need to make it a bit of a chase. Make it a game and let him catch you."

"Do you have anything for the soreness?"

"I have a cream that will help."

"I never got sore with Cullen. Kynyr isn't rough. He just wants it all the time."

Cahira smiled and hugged Kady. "Kynyr's young. His stamina and instincts to mate are enormous. Cullen..." She gave an eloquent shrug. "Despite all the randy talk, Cullen was still middle-aged and starting to slow down."

"Instinct. I'm starting to dislike that word."

"You can dislike it, but you can't escape it. Instinct is very strong in our people ... especially at Kynyr's age. We try to cover it up with customs and rules, and we only end up making ourselves unhappy."

Cahira left the room and returned with several jars. "This one will ease soreness. Apply it to your womanly parts four times a day."

Kady picked up a jar of yellowish stuff that looked a bit like oil or grease. "What's this?"

"A lubricant. Use it just before you change and you won't get as sore."

Kady gathered up the jars.

Cooley popped his head in the room. "Kynyr's here."

Kady rolled her eyes. "Here we go again."

Cooley frowned up at her, his eyes serious. "Even tail-peddlers get tired of it. But you gotta do what you gotta do. If you're gonna get storked, get your legs open."

"Go play, Cooley," Cahira said.

Cooley shrugged and ran from the room.

"That cub knows entirely too much about sex," said Cahira.

Kady managed a rueful smile. "What can we expect, Gram. He's only ten, but he grew up in a whorehouse."

"Todd needs to have a talk with him."

"I agree. Now I must get ready for Kynyr."

"There's a lesson to be learned from all of this, Kady."

"What's that?"

"Bad translations should never be acted upon. If you had come to me with your problems, I might have found you a decent custom to invoke. There are many that would have served your purposes."

Kady nodded. "I wish I hadn't done this. I'm not ready for marriage ... and a child." She swallowed, her lips parted, and she gazed into the distance, unfocused yet troubled. "The

situation is my fault. I had only read the first three paragraphs when I threw it in his face. Now, I must either get pregnant or lose him forever."

Cahira hugged Kady, holding her tight. "Kady, we'll all help with the cub. We won't let you get overwhelmed by it. I promise."

Kady nodded again, unable to think of what to say. She went to her room and applied the creams.

Kynyr knocked on her door. "Kady, change for me."

"I'm applying some creams. You've made me sore, Kynyr," Kady snarled, pale fur sprouting along her arms.

The door opened and Kynyr entered, closing the door softly behind him. His eyes roved her nudity and he took the jar from her. "Let me help. It's my fault."

Kynyr poured water into a basin and washed his hands.

Kady watched him with a baleful glance, torn between anger at herself and anger at Kynyr.

He reached in his pocket, brought out a small box, and tossed it to her. "I bought you a present."

Kady opened the box and her anger melted away at the stunning star sapphire pendant on a white gold chain. "Oh, Kynyr, I've never had anything so beautiful. It must have cost a fortune."

With a tiny shrug and a sidewise nod, Kynyr basked in Kady's reaction. "My family has never lacked for money."

"Then why are you a guardsman?" Kady slipped the necklace on and laid back on the bed, touching it and looking at it.

"I was trained for war. So it seemed the right thing to do. Those of us with the skills to protect our people should do so." Kynyr knelt on the end of the bed and dipped his fingers into the jar, coming out with a dollop of the cream. "Spread your legs a little more."

Kady shivered, a tiny giggle escaping her as Kynyr's fingers slipped inside her. The cream felt cold and soothing; and his touch was gentle. "I'm sorry I shackled you into this."

"I'm enjoying it." Kynyr left the bed, cleaned his fingers on a towel, and put the lid on the jar. "How's that?"

"It feels like magic."

The left side of Kynyr's mouth turned up. "It probably is. Gram charges the herbs she uses in her recipes."

"Spend the night with me, Kynyr?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Gram's started my wedding dress. It's green."

"I like green." Kynyr unbuckled his knife belt and sword harness, hanging them on the weapons rack beside Kady's bed, striped his clothing off, and climbed onto it with her. "I love you, Kady. Now and forever."

Kady kissed his hand and then began to change. She sprouted pale hair over her entire body. Her legs and arms altered.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" He stroked her.

She paused half way through the change. "Kynyr, the sooner I'm—" She searched for a discreet euphemism, but all that Kady could think of right then were the ones used by the clientele of her father's tavern. "The sooner you get me up the stick, the sooner we can get married."

Kady completed the change and barked at Kynyr. "*Come on, slowpoke.*"

Kynyr, used to making the change under combat conditions, changed so swiftly it made Kady want to swallow her words. "*All night, Kady?*"

"Just don't forget the cream."

"I won't."

Kady darted out the door, counting down the head start that custom granted her. She raced downstairs and Rory opened the door into the street for her.

"Run, Kady! Run!"

She glanced back and saw Rory and Hamish moving small crates into the middle of the floor, turning the shop into an obstacle course to slow Kynyr's pursuit of her.

* * * *

Claw kneaded his left arm as he shed his clothing and climbed into bed with Aisha. Everything that he had learned from Lokynen had left him troubled, and as he had done throughout their century of marriage, Claw sought comfort in making love to his wife. He remembered how it had first been when he courted her, and Aisha had been the fieriest young bitch in the valley. She had made him chase her through the woodlands in wolf form for the right to mate with her, and when he had caught her beneath the moonlight....

As always, they coupled in hybrid form so that he could feel her soft fur beneath his hands. Stroking and licking each other, Claw finally began to forget his worries, and completely

separated himself from them as he entered Aisha and heard her moaning beneath him in response to his thrusting.

Claw stiffened as a fist of pain slammed him in the chest. His eyes widened and he blinked, before toppling across her. "My ... heart," he gasped, and then darkness claimed him.

"Claw?" Dread fluttering in her stomach like ugly moths around a candle, Aisha pushed at him, and got no response. "Claw?"

She touched his face. "Claw, please wake up."

Still no response.

Aisha turned him on his side, and slipped from beneath him. She grabbed a robe, wrapped herself in it, and went to the suite next door to her own, pounding on it to wake Isbeth and Kissie, the two nibari who were the principal ones on call for her needs.

Isbeth answered the door, tying her robe closed.

"Mistress?"

"Wake Sheradyn, it's the master."

Isbeth's eyes rounded with concern and worry, as she ran off to fetch the healer from his bed.

Kissie appeared and cradled Aisha's elbow, steadying the old lycan as they returned to Aisha and Claw's suite. She brought Aisha to a chair in the bedroom, and then tucked a blanket around Claw. "I'll fetch something for your nerves."

Aisha sat rigidly in her chair, her knuckles whitening as she tried not to appear like the frightened, worried bitch she was on the inside. Her sharp hearing picked up the sounds of Kissie waking more of the nibari. It was a sign of Claw's wealth that they could afford so many of the docile and

devoted slaves. She had very few lycans among the household staff. Isbeth, Kissie, and the others never failed her, and never complained.

By the sound of hurried footsteps, the entire household had begun to awaken.

Sheradyn and Gillivray arrived with their satchels and got Claw shifted onto his back in the middle of the bed. Gillivray cleared off the nightstand, while Sheradyn settled into a chair and gripped Claw's wrist, Reading him.

Merissa entered the suite with Malthus at her side. She went to her mother and squeezed her arm. "What happened?" Merissa asked, in a hushed voice.

"I don't know," Aisha said. "We were ... talking. And your father fell over."

Kissie returned with toddy, and pressed it into Aisha's hands. "This will steady you."

Aisha nodded without taking her eyes from Merissa. "Thank you, Kissie."

Sheradyn administered a bluish powder to Claw's nostrils and gums, and then Read him again. "He's had a heart attack. Has Claw ever said anything at all about chest pains?"

"No. Why?"

"Because there is a lot of old damage. It leads me to suspect that he might have been having small heart attacks and angina for months."

"He's said nothing at all about it."

Malthus covered his reaction to that news by turning his head away. *I've been more successful than I knew. The old bastard has been keeping secrets.*

"Aisha, I want you to understand how serious this is. At the rate of progression, judging from the past damage, Claw will probably not be with us come spring. If I cannot get it under control, I would say his chances of living until winter solstice are extremely poor."

Aisha sucked in a sharp breath and blinked back tears.

"Get some rest, Aisha. Gillivray and I will sit up with him tonight."

"Get some rest all of you," Gillivray said, making a shooing gesture.

Aisha went to Claw and kissed his forehead. "I'll sleep in another suite tonight."

"Mother, you shouldn't be alone."

Aisha shook her head. "I won't be. I'll comfort nest with Isbeth and Kissie."

Merissa kissed her father and walked back to their chambers in Malthus' arms.

Malthus worked hard at keeping a concerned expression. He had decided to hasten Claw's death, using stronger spells. He wished he could have been present to see the old bastard collapse. Claw would have his next heart attack within a few weeks, maybe even a few days; depending on how much Claw wanted another drink of the Faery wine and how often he stressed his failing heart. *Finally, Claw's attacks will come in quickening succession, one after another, and another, and another, until.... I'll help Merissa pick out a nice black dress to wear at her father's funeral.* Claw will be dead by early winter at the latest.

Drinking that first glass of wine with Malthus had insured that the old wolf had only a few months left to live. Claw liked to pour his own wine. The spell on the bottle had been keyed to Claw. So Malthus had been able to drink it safely, and the death magic had poured down Claw's throat, settled into his bloodstream and been drawn through his veins to his heart where it was lodged until it killed him. Everyone else but Claw would be able to pour a glass from those bottles and be unaffected.

He would also refresh the spells on all of Claw's pipes once the household slept again. Claw's heart attack had provided the distraction he needed to achieve his next goal.

Malthus waited until he was certain that Merissa slept soundly and went out to the barn. He slipped his horse and a pack animal out, and rode to his cottage. Hanging from a tree branch where the predators could not get it was the carcass of a deer that Preece and Rheu had killed for him.

He rode back with it to one of the places he had discovered that Kenly frequented in his nightly foraging. Malthus sliced the deer carcass open in several places, and poured into it a special poison that he had blended. He splashed it on the entrails, and rubbed another type into the flesh.

Malthus straightened and slipped the empty vials into his pouch. It occurred to him that he ought to take Cahira's talents into consideration. Scrying was a fairly common gift among mages. He had not yet managed to fully assess her abilities, and she might try to scry for the cat out of her evident fondness for Darmyk. Malthus set scry-wards around the clearing, adding spell traps and arcane trip wires of dark

energy. Anyone with mage gifts, who stumbled upon the clearing, either psychically or physically, would die.

When he finished, Malthus carefully disguised his track so that Kenly would not know that he had touched it and withdrew to watch.

Just an hour past midnight, the big cat made his usual circuit of the nearest stand of woodlands. Kenly sniffed around the carcass and then bit into it. He ate rapidly. Malthus watched him tear at the meat, swallowing it in huge chunks. He had used an arcane poison that the healers would have trouble identifying. It would act swiftly, and within an hour the cat would be dead.

Midway through its meal, the cat began to groan and whimper, writhing upon the ground. When Kenly's final convulsions began, Malthus strode from his hiding place and kicked him. Kenly managed a fading snarl, and stilled. Malthus dragged the cat's carcass, along with that of the deer across his irrfelghau-trained horse and rode to a high point of the cliffs over the Eirlys River. There he cast them both over the edge to be swept away by the rushing waters.

The household would most likely be too caught up in worrying over the chieftain to go searching for the cat, and even if they did, Kenly's carcass would never be found.

Now, he needed to work a bit harder on Claw. The sooner the chieftain died, the better off Malthus would be. Claw's bitches would prove very cooperative without him. Of course, they would be even more cooperative dead. And so would Kynyr Maguire.

CHAPTER SIX

VICTIMS

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

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

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

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

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

"You had a heart attack."

Claw lay still, searching for words, feeling suddenly vulnerable. He had been expecting this; and yet, now that it had happened it made him bitter and resentful. Usually the members of his family were hale and hearty all the way to the end. He wondered what could possibly be different in his case. "How bad?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The cat went missing last night."

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

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

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

* * * *

Kady blinked sleepily in the morning sunlight, rolled over, and stroked Kynyr's face.

"Mmm." Kynyr kissed her on the nose and slipped his hand between her legs. "Change for me?"

"Convince me."

"We had a wonderful night." Kynyr stroked her hair, her face, and her breasts. "Can I sleep here again?"

"My bed is your bed." She shifted into her hybrid form.

Kynyr changed into his hybrid form and kissed her. "The Autumn Hall has opened for the season. Shall we go dancing this evening?"

"I'd love to." Kady changed the rest of the way into a wolf and flicked her tail in his face.

Kynyr swatted at her tail. "Shameless hussy."

"*Only with you.*" She flicked her tail in his face again.

Kynyr completed the change, licking and nuzzling her. She cocked her bushy tail to the side, indicating her readiness and Kynyr mounted her. Kady let out a long moan as they became locked together.

* * * *

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

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

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

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

"When?"

"Soon." Merissa wondered why Kenly had chosen to vanish the same night that her father had his heart attack. She pushed the event aside as coincidence. Kenly was old enough to be attracted by the scent of a she-cat in heat, and that probably accounted for his absence.

"Can I visit Grandpa?"

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

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

Merissa kissed his forehead. "I know."

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

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

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

"Go play," Malthus ordered him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * *

Todd went down to the shop. The replacement glass had arrived for the display cabinet that Kynyr had broken the night that his father had been murdered. Todd did not hold

with displays of temper like that, and only the depth of Kynyr's grief had saved him from a tongue-lashing. Todd laid his tools out on the rear table and started removing the bolts that held the broken panel in place. The broken piece had been promised to the local glassblower who intended to melt it down and reuse it. Lycans hated waste and produced very little real trash as a result. They recycled anything and everything that could be. Accounts of how the earlier races had turned the world into a trash bin filled their lore.

Someone knocked on the front door and then peered through the window. Todd opened the door, eyeing the tense look on Erskine's face. "What's wrong?"

"Is Kynyr here?"

"He's asleep upstairs."

"Claw had a heart attack last night."

"How bad?" Todd remembered the day of the ambush, when he caught Claw dosing himself with Foxglove extract.

"He's conscious, but very weak."

"Why didn't you send for Kynyr last night?"

"Aisha didn't want to rob Kynyr of a night with his lady. We need him right now."

"I'll get him."

Todd knocked on Kynyr's door and when he got no answer, he looked inside. Kynyr's bed had not been slept in. He was certain that Kynyr had said he was spending the night.

Kady came out of her bedroom looking flushed. Something had changed about her.

"Are you okay, Kady?"

"I think so." She gave Todd a mysterious smile and headed downstairs to open the shop.

Todd got one of his suspicions and walked down the hall to Kady's room. He leaned against the wall and waited facing the door. It opened quietly and Kynyr slipped out of the room looking heated and rumpled.

Todd folded his arms and cleared his throat.

Kynyr straightened. "Good morning?" he asked tentatively.

"When did you start sleeping in Kady's bed?"

Kynyr flushed to the roots of his hair. "Last night."

"Whose idea was that?"

"Kady proposed it."

"So are you doing it in bed as human or wolf?"

"Uhm." Kynyr squirmed. "Both."

"Her idea?"

"We have an agreement. Well, you see ... I kept catching her so quick ... she hasn't gotten away from me once in two weeks. So ... you see ... she decided..."

"She surrendered?" Todd's expression softened and he chuckled.

"Yeah."

Todd sobered, putting a stop to that discussion with a wave of his hand. "Claw had a heart attack last night. Erskine's waiting for you downstairs. Get your gear together."

Kynyr ducked back into Kady's room and returned with his knife belt and harness buckled on, sword at his shoulder and fighting knives in place. "If I can't get back tonight ... would you take Gram and Kady dancing at the Autumn Hall? I promised to take her."

"I don't know if I can still dance, but I'll try."

Kynyr hugged his grandfather, and then rushed down the stairs.

* * * *

Kynyr accompanied Erskine to the manor. A hush lay over the place. The Great Hall stood empty. "Where's Aisha?"

"The Rose Room. Sheradyn wants her to rest and not spend all her time hovering over Claw."

"I know the way."

Kynyr took a deep breath before knocking on the door. When he got no answer, he put his ear to it, remembering how his sisters sometimes refused to answer when they were upset and did not wish to burden the rest of their family with their tears. The sound of soft weeping confirmed that his guess had been correct, and Kynyr slipped inside the room, closing the door behind him.

Aisha started, lifting her face from her hands. She tried to smile through her tears and failed, rising from the brocade sofa to throw herself at Kynyr, sobbing. "He's so sick, Kynyr."

He held her close and let her cry for several minutes before guiding her back to the sofa. Kynyr kept his arm around her as they settled together on the soft cushions. "No more nights away, Gram. I'll be here when you need me."

Aisha pushed away from him, wiping her eyes with a lace handkerchief, and putting on a brave face. "Kady..."

"Kady and I have plenty of time." Kynyr stroked her hair in an ageless gesture of comfort that spoke deeply to their canine side.

"No." Aisha dabbed at her eyes again. "I'm not going to let you cut yourself off from her ... trading one for the other is not good."

"I don't know..."

"I have an idea." A wan smile stronger than her previous attempt contradicted her damp eyes. "Hold your trysts in the edges of the garden ... or the woods just beyond them. Kady could howl at the window at night when she got here."

"I don't know if she'd do that or not." Kady had been showing a lot of courage in human form, but Kynyr doubted she was prepared to travel to the manor after dark in wolf form.

"Ask her. Write a note and I'll have Robert take it to her."

"Worth a try."

"Another thing, Kynyr. Talk to Cahira. Sheradyn says that Claw's heart is damaged. He isn't going to make it past winter solstice. It would be a kindness, if Cahira would let him know the truth before he dies. He won't tell anyone."

Kynyr considered in silence. Malthus knew ... therefore the enemy knew. Whether it was happenstance, coincidence, or the curse Cahira feared so terribly; keeping his ancestry secret seemed more and more pointless. "Let's tell Claw now. Together. I'll make Cahira understand."

* * * *

Claw lay in bed looking more pale than Kynyr had ever seen him. A twinge of anticipated grief told Kynyr that he did not have his recent grief as under control as he had believed. With so much danger all around him, it was not yet safe to

allow himself to feel it fully and Kynyr wrestled it down as he approached Claw's bed.

Aisha sat on the edge of the bed, waking Claw with a fond touch of her hand. "Beloved, Kynyr has something to tell you."

Claw opened his cobalt eyes. "Kynyr?"

Kynyr pulled a chair up and sat down. "I've come to make a confession."

"What about?"

Kynyr fumbled for a way to put it, saying awkwardly, "You have eight great grandchildren and twelve great-great grandchildren with more on the way."

Claw came more awake and struggled into a sitting position with help from Aisha. A knowing gleam lit his eyes mingled with satisfaction as he asked, for the hundredth time, the question that had never been satisfactorily answered.

"Who's your grandfather, Kynyr?"

"Your son." Kynyr averted his eyes. "Tarrant Redhand."

There. It's out. Kynyr felt as if he had been stripped naked.

"I knew it! I knew you were mine. I've got me a real heir."

Kynyr paled and made a fending off gesture. "No. Not me."

"Claw, no." Aisha squeezed her husband's arm to get his attention. "You mustn't tell anyone."

"Why not?"

"We suspect the enemy knows about Kynyr. However, it would be better to keep it as much to ourselves as possible for now. Cahira's lie may be the only thing standing between Kynyr and those trying to find and kill him."

Kynyr raised his eyes, darkened by sorrow. "They know. The two attempts on my life were not coincidence. When they killed my father ... they called him 'prince.' They killed him because he was your grandson."

Wariness dimmed the excitement in Claw's eyes. "I'll keep my mouth shut. I want those murdering bastards caught."

"They were. Not a mon of them survived." Kynyr's expression tightened. "However, we don't know who sent them."

Claw nodded and changed the subject. "What's this I hear about a Wild Cousins' Courtship?"

"Kady and I..." Kynyr faltered and flushed.

"Hah! Stick it to her!"

Kynyr's flush deepened to crimson all the way to the roots of his hair as he glanced at Aisha.

His great-grandmother got a tiny, prim smile. "I'm leaving before you can embarrass me any further."

She rose, flicked her skirts into place, and left Kynyr alone with his great-grandfather.

"Have you caught her yet?"

"Every time."

Claw chuckled. "You're good, Kynyr. Good at everything you put your hand to."

Kynyr sucked in a breath through his nostrils, and stared out the window, remembering the ambush with a twinge of grief. "Not everything."

"Sit and talk with me for a while and then have Kissie hang the paintings of your grandfather and his brother in the Blue Room. I had them taken down because every time Aisha

looked at them she wept. I think that's changed now ... because we've got you, Kynyr."

* * * *

Darmyk Redhand scuffled his feet along the wooden floor of the hallway, his eyes red and irritated from weeping. He wiped his nose on his sleeve because he had forgotten to bring a handkerchief from his room and he did not wish to go back after it. No one would let him in to see his grandfather and now his cat was missing. The child had extended his wilderkin powers as far as he could and found not the slightest trace of Kenly.

Everyone who he had asked to look for his cat had put him off. They were all too busy or too worried about his grandfather to make time to worry about a cat. They told him to go play, that the cat would return when he was ready to. Darmyk had a feeling that Kenly was not coming back this time and he did not have the words to articulate his fears.

He heard footsteps coming toward him and looked up just in time to see Kynyr before the guardsman caught him under his arms and lifted the boy off the floor.

Kynyr frowned when he did not get the usual giggle from Darmyk. "What's wrong, Little Bear?"

"Kenly's missing," the child said in a woebegone voice. "No one will look for him."

"How long has he been missing?"

"Since last night." Darmyk perked at the note of concern in Kynyr's voice.

"Did you put food in his dish?"

"Yes."

Kynyr shifted Darmyk to his hip and carried him down to the kitchen.

The huge dish of meat sat untouched by the side door.

"If he's not home by nightfall, Kady and I will look for him."

"I like Kady."

"So do I."

* * * *

While the household slept, Malthus crept down to the Great Hall. Something had happened in the afternoon that returned the color to Claw's face and that irritated Malthus. The only one standing between himself and control of Red Wolf Valley was Claw.

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

Sheradyn had remarked about the strange coincidences of the old priest, Tempest Anstey, and the mother of the slain lawgiver Nikko Softpaws, having both died of heart failure close together, and now Claw was having heart problems. It was common knowledge that sa'necari could kill by stopping the hearts of their victims with a touch. Claw would have to be the last one he killed that way. By engendering Claw's heart condition in a slow and methodical fashion, Malthus hoped that people would not make a stronger connection to Tempest Anstey and Granta Softpaws, whose deaths had been swift and sudden. He did not want them looking in his direction as a way of explaining those deaths he had caused.

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

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

attacks soon—they would arrive in a quickening succession until one finally took the aging chieftain's life.

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

* * * *

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

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

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

"Perhaps we ought to start charging." Shalto scratched at the tan sideburns he had recently grown that contrasted with his black hair. Caimbeul had never seen Shalto in his wolf form, but suspected from the sideburns that Shalto would be a black-masked brown.

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

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

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

Shalto snarled. "There's others want time with her. You'll slack off with her."

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

"I am."

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

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

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

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

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

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

I've been fooled before. But that time they were posing as lycans. Could the Serpent be one of the young wolves working at the camp? A shape-thief?

He went to Clodagh's longhouse that had once belonged to Beth, the bitch that founded the refuge camp called Sanctuary, and knocked. Clodagh answered her door nude with an unhappy expression on her face. While the lycans had no nudity taboos, few of them would have answered the door like this; especially in an area that had humans around it. She looked tired. Caimbeul guessed that the young dogs must have already been using her, and he wished he had come earlier to chase them off, but he had had matters to attend to in his function as lawgiver.

He disliked admitting it, but he had become fond of her and protective, although he could not yet take action on her behalf. At least not until he had completed his investigation. Caimbeul's heart warmed when he watched her eyes light up at seeing him.

Caimbeul stepped inside the longhouse, which had a room at either end, separated by half walls with a curtained doorway and a window that looked out into the rest of the house. Unlike the rest of the longhouses at Sanctuary, Clodagh had a hearth rather than a simple firepit, and carpeting over the dirt floor. She had nice cabinets beside the hearth and a hand carved table with ornate chairs. Caimbeul had wondered, at first, what could have made her move into the Sanctuary when she had had a much nicer home in one of the better sections of the village. But, then, she had probably not moved here of her own free will. He needed to examine

her mind more deeply, but scanning her on the sly while distracting her with sex was not always easy. Over the past weeks, Caimbeul had caught glimpses what he suspected were death commands in both hers and Kandaishee's neural nets.

He turned and dropped the bar.

Clodagh reached for the bar. "No, Shalto will be angry with me for not sharing my loins."

"Shalto will keep his mouth shut ... or I'll shut it for him."

He made love to Clodagh in her soft bed, cherishing her body, giving her as much pleasure as he gained from the act; and using it to conceal his psychic explorations of her, of which she was unaware. By the time he covered her with his body and entered her, Clodagh was moaning and writhing. Caimbeul wrapped her in his fireborn aura to block her contacts with the Serpent and loosen her tongue. As he pumped and thrust, his awareness slid through her mind and slithered around sniffing for areas of damage.

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

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

Her hands fluttered to her belly.

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

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

"He'll try."

* * * *

The hour had grown late. Kynyr lounged on a chair in his bedroom, near the open window, wearing a loose robe that he could shrug out of easily the minute he heard Kady howl. He glanced at the full moon. The generous silver light of their god's chariot in the sky made it a good night for tracking. He imagined Tala driving her horses across the heavens, accompanied by her moonwolves. Legend had it that lycan chieftains who served their people well in life became moonwolves after their deaths.

Kynyr began to wonder whether something had happened to Kady or if she had decided not to come. As the moon reached its zenith, Kynyr speculated on what might have kept Kady from arriving and visions of Preece Malloy haunted him.

A familiar howl came from the woods beyond the manor and Kynyr smiled. He threw off the robe, shifted to his hybrid form, and leaped from the window into the top of a tree. From there he made it to the ground and changed completely. Kady howled again and he headed for the rendezvous. She waited for him along a hawthorn hedgerow. Moonlight limned her pale hair, lending her a ghostly aura.

She rose on her hind legs and danced around him. *"I get a head start."*

"Wait."

Kady settled on her haunches, her head tilted at a quizzical angle.

"I thought we were going to romp."

Kynyr gave her a sidewise glance. *"Much as I would like to spend the entire night riding your back. This is more urgent. It's going to rain tomorrow. I can smell it."*

"So?"

"Claw had a heart attack and Kenly went missing the same night. They're Darmyk's two main protectors." Kynyr set off into the trees, circling the manor in a methodical fashion.

Kady trotted along beside him. *"That doesn't sound like happenstance."*

"The rain will wash away the scent clues."

Kynyr moved through the forest with his nose to the ground. A twinge of grief flashed through him, remembering how Ramsey had always had the best nose.

"Are we searching for Kenly?"

"There it is. I've picked up his scent."

They trotted through a stand of willows. The spear like leaves had turned brown and would soon be littering the ground. Beyond the willows, a clearing opened. Kynyr put his nose to the ground, sniffing along the edges. He circled it twice and then sat down in the middle of it.

"This is strange. Kenly entered but he didn't leave." Kynyr rose and found a spot of black soil where the unmistakable imprint of a horseshoe broke the ground. *"Horses. That's how Kenly left."*

Kady gave a long howl of anguish.

Kynyr spun about and saw her writhing on the ground, alternating between bouts of whimpering and howling. Lines of power wrapped her like a spider's web, black against her white coat. He had missed the spelltrap in the darkness, forgotten about Kady's fledgling gifts that made her vulnerable to such things.

"Don't move, Kady. You're making it worse." Kynyr glanced about for a rowan tree, knowing that a sprig of rowan held the potential for dispelling dark magics.

He spotted a tree near the bank of the river and found a few twigs laying on the ground beneath it. Kynyr picked up the largest twig he could find and headed back.

Kady lay staring into the night, whimpering. Kynyr brushed away the dark lines of magic, dropped the twig, and nuzzled her, licking her face. *"Kady."*

Her eyes went wide and she snapped at him, her teeth tearing his shoulder and drawing blood.

Kynyr shrank away, but did not offer to bite her back. *"Kady?"*

"You killed him. You poisoned Kenly." Kady growled, crouching, head lowered to protect her throat, teeth bared. *"I saw you."*

"Kady?" Kynyr licked her forehead frantically. *"Kady, snap out of it."*

She sprang to her feet, shrieking and running in circles. Every time Kynyr got close to her, she tried to bite him.

He danced around her, dodging and darting as Kady leaped at him, going for his throat. Kynyr tried to remember all the things that Cahira had told him over the years about breaking spells and trances. Whether this was vision or trance, illusion or hallucination, Kynyr had no way to know for certain as she forced him toward the cliffs.

His grandmother's words came back to him as Kady missed his throat, and tore his wounded shoulder again. Blood spread through his golden fur. A rush of adrenaline

kept Kynyr going. Touch was the greatest source of comfort to lycans, contact with each other. The more intense the physical sensation, the more aware of their bodies they would become, and the more likely it was to force clarity upon a mind lost to arcane circumstances. The greatest physical sensation that Kynyr could imagine was sex. Kynyr gambled that mating might force Kady from the grip of her visions and back into her body. He mounted her. She twisted and snapped at his face. Kynyr's teeth closed on the back of her neck and he forced her head down.

"You killed him! You killed him!" she continued to growl and snarl, refusing to submit.

Kynyr experienced an urge to beg her forgiveness, but if he released her, Kady would bite him again. He felt dirty and desperate as they became locked together.

Kady relaxed abruptly, and settled beneath him, quivering; when at last they came apart, Kady lay quiet on the ground, and the panic faded from her eyes.

Relieved, Kynyr licked her face. *"You had a vision, Kady."*

"A vision? Is that what you call it, Preece?"

"It's Kynyr. Not Preece, Kady. Kady can you hear me?"

"I hate you." Kady backed away from him. *"You killed him."*

Kynyr followed her. *"Killed who?"*

"Kynyr. You killed Kynyr ... and now you've raped me."

Grief and rage warred for dominance in her voice. She threw her head back releasing a long keening howl. Then she fled toward the cliffs to throw herself off.

"No!" Kynyr dashed in pursuit, got ahead of her, and blocked her path with his teeth bared. "Get away from the cliffs. I'll bite you."

"You've torn my heart out. All that's left is my flesh." She retreated.

Kynyr followed, stiff-legged and threatening. "Snap out of it."

Kady whirled and ran for the treeline.

Kynyr leaped over boulders, darted around trees, and plunged through bushes. He found Kady whimpering beneath the hawthorns of a dense hedgerow. He pulled at her, dug around her, whined and pleaded, and finally got her out of the hedgerow.

The roaring of the Bonnie Draw River, descending in wild rush to join with the Eirlys, came from the left of them. Kady crept away from him on her belly. He licked her ear hopefully, wagging his tail in slow, uncertain motions.

Kady wiggled between a parting in a thorny tangle of briars.

"Kady?"

The hole was not large enough for Kynyr, yet he forced his way through it, ignoring the long cuts the clinging thorns left along his sides, chest, and belly.

Kady lay upon a smooth boulder, staring down at the swift waters that foamed around the many jagged rocks breaking the surface.

"Kady?"

She stood and glanced back at him. "I hate you, Preece. I hate you every bit as much as I loved Kynyr."

Then Kady threw herself into the water.

Kynyr charged to the rock, searched the water for an instant for Kady, failed to see her, and jumped in. He hit with a large splash. The current spun him about. Kynyr took a deep breath and dove.

Kady hung lodged between two wicked looking stones, her legs moving with the current. He swam to her, grabbed Kady by the ruff and jerked her free. He got her to the bank and dragged her onto the grass.

Don't be dead. Don't be dead.

He nuzzled her, put his ear to her chest, and heard the beating of her heart.

Her eyes snapped open and she snarled.

Kynyr retreated. "*Kady, please.*"

She fled again.

All the trappings of humanity faded from Kynyr as the chase continued. He became the primal essence of a wolf. Her scent drove him wild with lust and he mounted her every time he overtook her. He herded her toward the manor, cutting off her escapes with great effort, digging her out of briar patches.

Dawn lit the sky, and Kynyr felt exhausted. Yet Kady's energy never flagged. She bolted away from the manor and Kynyr realized that she was heading toward the old McCain Estate. There were all kinds of hazards and opportunities for suicide. A fresh rush of adrenaline flooded him with a second wind and he raced after her. As he got closer, he barked at the house and Trevor emerged.

His uncle laughed at him. "If you're looking for a hot-tailed little bitch named Kady, she's waiting for you in the bedroom."

Kynyr's nails clicked on the floor as he bolted into the house and down the hallway to their bedroom. She stood in the middle of the bed with her tail to one side in invitation and her head hanging down in shame and humiliation.

"You have worn me out, Kady. I don't think I can do it."

She growled at him. *"Bastard. Climb the mountain or never speak to me again."*

Kynyr frowned. The did not sound like Kady at all. He sucked in a breath and mounted her. They had barely locked together when Kady collapsed beneath him unconscious. As soon as he could get loose, Kynyr changed back to human, grabbed a robe from the closet, and staggered down the hallway to the kitchen where he heard his aunt and uncle talking.

He tried to blink the blariness from his eyes, but could not clear either that or his head. Kynyr clutched at the door facing, stumbled, and did a crumpling pirouette.

Mary screamed. Trevor spun around and caught Kynyr under the arms before his face would meet the floor. He wrestled his nephew to the sofa in the living room and spotted Old Henry.

"Henry, fetch Cahira."

"Sheradyn's closer."

"Cahira. I have a bad feeling about this."

That did it. Henry ran from the house and headed for the barn. Trevor's intuition was becoming something of a local legend.

Mary came out of the kitchen with towels, a ewer of water, a basin, and smelling salts. Blood had soaked through Kynyr's robe and she opened it up. He wore nothing underneath, but it did not faze Mary. She had been a healer too many years. "Look at him, Trevor. He's all torn up like he's been running through briars all night. Fetch my kit."

She plucked a thorn from his chest and another from his arm. "Well that settles that. Blackthorn. Hawthorn. Rose thorn. Pyracantha. Are there any briars she didn't drag him through? I'm not certain what this one is." Mary held up a long thin thorn.

"I'll clean him up." Trevor moved an end table closer and spread Mary's kit over it. "Check on Kady."

* * * *

After weeks of being directed hither and yon, zigzagging his way north from one group of Maguires to another, Brother Malcolm reached the town of Blue Rock. If he went any further north, he would find himself in the capital of Clan Red Wolf, Wolffgard.

There he made his way to the Straw Dog Tavern across from the town common. The interior, brightly lit by elegant chandeliers, was done in maple polished to a high degree. Booths lined the walls with round tables in the center and a long bar in the rear.

Talbot Maguire sat at a table near the back, holding court as if he were king of all he surveyed. He was a slender mon, made large by arrogance and wit, and a celebrated painter best known for his portraits of the aristocrats and wealthy. Five people sat around the table with Talbot, breathing in his every word, transfixed. A passer-by dared to ask what the mon had painted recently.

"The ceiling of the new temple to Tala. All day on my back with my neck turned to a challenging angle. This is the work that I shall be eternally remembered for."

Brother Malcolm swallowed nervously and tried to compose himself as he approached Talbot's table. "If I might ask a question, kind sir?"

"Certainly, Brother?"

"Malcolm. Brother Malcolm of St. Albans."

Talbot grinned broadly and winked at his companions. "And what does St. Albans require of me? A portrait of Bishop McIlaney?"

"St. Albans requires nothing...." Brother Malcolm felt the silence fall around him like a blow. All eyes stared at him as if he had delivered a mortal affront to the august personage of Talbot Maguire.

Talbot made a dismissive gesture. "If you have come upon some trivial matter, I haven't time for it."

Brother Malcolm gathered his nerve. "Your sister Marsali said you could help me."

Talbot's manner softened. "How is Marsali? I haven't seen her in three years."

"Well. She expects to be delivered of her fourth child around winter solstice. The midwife says it's a boy at last and she plans to name it for you."

"Hah! I'll send her a birthing gift that will make eyes shine like the stars in a summer sky."

A loud round of cheers for the coming child erupted and drowned out Malcolm's next words so completely that he had to wait for it to die down before starting over. He brought forth two letters, and handed one to Talbot. "She also apologizes for not writing more often."

Talbot put the letter to his nose and laughed. "She still scents her letters with rose oil."

"I have another matter also. I'm trying to find a Kynyr Maguire."

"I know several Kynyr Maguires. You'll have to give me more information than that."

Malcolm poured out the story of the letter and his travels while Talbot listened intently with few interruptions.

An arrogant twist came to his lips. "I know exactly who you want."

Relief flooded Malcolm and lifted his spirits. "Where do I find him?"

"Wolffgard. Kynyr is the great-grandson of my Uncle Erland. He's also the grandson of Todd Sinclair, and trained by him."

Malcolm felt a rise of excitement. "No wonder Amos sent for him."

"Aye. He's a good one. He's young, but not untried. When he was sixteen he killed the outlaw chief Greygor Traygarde

Kynyr's War [Lycan Blood Vol. IV]
by Janrae Frank

in single combat. Mark my words, that young mon is going to be a legend in his own time. Kynyr's a do or die fellow. You can't beat the Maguires."

CHAPTER SEVEN

SETTLING IN

Sunlight tickled Kady's eyes. Her eyelids fluttered and she gazed at the unfamiliar room through the veiling tangle of half-parted lashes. A breeze through the open window breathed across her nude body and the silken coverlet she lay upon slid sensuously beneath her as she shifted. Her eyes opened wider as she gazed first at the azure bed curtains tied back against the stout posts, and then at the midnight blue drapes framing the window. She pushed herself into a sitting position and sucked in a sharp breath as movement made her head swim and bile rose to the back of her throat in a rush of nausea.

Broken, scattered images filled her awareness. Kady remembered leaving the shop in wolf form as twilight darkened toward nightfall. Past that, nothing she recalled could be coherently assembled. Instead, it spiraled in disjointed visuals limned in brilliant shades of hallucinatory colors, pasted together into a collage of nightmares.

Malthus poisoned Kenly and laughed as the big cat died in violent convulsions.

Kynyr lay dead, his shattered body twisted and rent by massive wounds.

Grief stricken.

Trying to throw herself off the edge of the steep shelf above the Eirlys River.

Preece mounting her and chasing her through the briars.

Kady swung her legs over the side of the bed and reached for her robe. "It was a nightmare. It can't be real."

Then she noticed the scratches and cuts on her arms and legs, a long scrape across her left breast. "No."

Kynyr. Please let that have been a nightmare. Tala, Holy Mother, don't let it have been real.

She wrapped the robe around herself and tottered into the hallway heading for the kitchen. Kady put her hand to the wall to steady her trembling legs.

The image of Kynyr dead swept through her mind again so strongly that she almost sank to her knees before she could stop herself. "Kynyr."

Cooley emerged from one of the bedrooms, and fell into step beside her, watching her face. "Kady's pregnant."

"What are you doing here, you little beast?" Kady snarled, sick and frightened; and wished she could have taken the words back because Cooley looked stricken and fled.

The serene normality of what greeted Kady in the kitchen threw her thoughts into disarray, making her wonder again what was real and what was not. She dropped into a chair at the table. A teapot in a cozy sat in the middle of it beside a pitcher of fresh cream and a bowl of sugar. Kady made herself a cup of tea and stared at it, whey-faced and trembling. Cahira and Mary sat on the other side of the table sipping tea, calm with no signs of the grief or upset.

"Kynyr ... Where's Kynyr?"

Mary frowned at the edge in Kady's voice. "Sleeping."

Cahira moved to sit beside her. "How are you feeling, Kady?"

"Terrible. I feel like I haven't slept. I had nightmares all night."

Cahira looked grim as she reached for Kady's wrist. "You stepped into a spell trap. It nearly tore your soul out of your body."

Kady shivered and extended her wrist to Cahira. "I saw Malthus poison Kenly."

"Malthus is, at the very least, a mage ... at worst, he's sa'necari. You can't take a vision to court. You were still very fragile when I reached you. It took me hours to free you from the effects."

"Kynyr ... I thought they'd killed him."

"He's fine. He's not a mage. I suspect the trap was set for me ... except it caught you instead."

Kady's thoughts circled around again. "Killing an animal is a crime of property. I have no way to prove anything. But if he is sa'necari? Shouldn't we tell Kynyr?"

"No," Cahira said emphatically. "We don't know for certain that he is. If Kynyr so much as suspected it, he'd simply kill Malthus ... or try to ... and get himself killed."

Cahira shivered, her eyes going distant and troubled. Kady suspected that Cahira was remembering the tragic Lycan Rebellion in which her lover, Tarrant Redhand died.

"Sooner or later, we're going to have to fight them, Cahira."

"Let's not talk about that." Cahira grasped Kady's wrist and read her. A gentle smile bloomed upon Cahira's face. "It's time to finish your wedding dress."

Kady felt her distress ease as her free hand drifted to her belly. "Can you tell if it's a boy or a girl?"

"It's entirely too early. Ask again in two or three weeks."

The nightmare image of Kynyr's torn body rushed through her again.

"I want Kynyr." A low sob of yearning escaped her. She wanted more proof than their words that he was alive and well.

Cahira patted her hand and turned to her daughter-in-law. "Mary, see if he's awake."

Mary left and soon returned with her disheveled nephew. Kynyr had long scratches and scabs on his face and arms.

Kady's eyes widened with concern. "What happened to you?"

"You don't remember?" Kynyr slipped into the chair on the other side of Kady with rueful dismay written large on his face.

"No," Kady said in a very small voice.

"You dragged me through every patch of briars from here to the far side of the manor." Kynyr ran his hand through his thick mane. "You nearly drowned yourself in the Bonnie Draw."

She shook her head, trying to separate memory from nightmare. "I..." she frowned in concentration. "Malthus and Preece chased me."

"No." Kynyr sucked in a breath and ran his hands through his hair again. "I chased you."

Kady's cheeks colored. "Oh. Well. Uhm. I suppose it was you landed me one in the belly then?"

Mary laughed and Cahira chuckled.

Kynyr's face brightened. "Get dressed. Let's go get married."

"Don't. Move. An. Inch." Cahira glared at him. "You're not running off to the Clerk. I've had six seamstresses, Mary, and myself stitching madly for weeks. Kady is getting a proper wedding."

* * * *

Kynyr straggled into the manor in the early afternoon and tried to sneak past the Great Hall without being noticed. Cahira had assured him that Kady would recover from her enchanted ordeal, but that it would take time. Exhaustion blunted his elation over the prospect of becoming a husband and father. He wanted to get upstairs to his rooms and grab another few hour's sleep; but if someone saw him, he would never get any.

"Where have you been?" Erskine appeared in the doorway to the Great Hall, grabbed Kynyr by the arm, and jerked him through the door.

"Hey, not that arm!"

Erskine released Kynyr and looked him up and down. "You look like hell. What's wrong with your arm?"

"Kady bit me."

Erskine brushed his finger across Kynyr's cheek. "She do that too?"

"Yeah."

"You must have done something to deserve it, brother." Finn joined them.

"It's a long story." A rueful grin split Kynyr's face and he scratched at his sideburns.

"What's got you looking like a cat that just raided a bird's nest?" Finn demanded.

"Kady's..." Kynyr shifted from one foot to the other, trying to find the right words, and settled for a euphemism. "Up the stick."

Aisha reached between Finn and Erskine to take hold of Kynyr's arm, interrupting their hearty congratulations. They moved out of the way, as she drew Kynyr further into the Great Hall. "The wedding will be held here." She raised one hand to fend off his protestations. "Here. I'll talk to Kady and Cahira about it."

Malthus scowled from one of the false alcoves in the Great Hall and made no move to join the others in congratulating Kynyr. More and more they were treating Kynyr like a son and less like a guardsman. It quickened his suspicions as he watched them.

Another heir to deal with.

* * * *

Kady eyed her swiftly emptying room as Trevor, Henry, and Todd carried her belongings out and loaded them into the wagon in front of the shop. Butterflies kept company with the

child in her belly. Her feelings felt mixed and confused, and more than a little disoriented. On the one hand, Kady had felt happy and needed here. She adored Cahira, and would miss her steady instruction. On the other hand, she had gained things that she had never hoped to possess. Although Kynyr continued to refuse to acknowledge his ancestry, technically Kady had become a princess. She lived in an incredible mansion with over one hundred rooms, complete with servants, orchards and gardens, a stable of prize horses, and best of all Kynyr.

"Too many changes. So much to get used to. Seems like I barely moved in here and now I'm moving out again." A wistful note entered Kady's voice. "My life has turned upside down and inside out."

"You'll have more space." Trevor grinned at her. "You'll like that."

"I'll have entirely too much space. I have no idea what to do with it all."

"I'm sure you will think of something."

Todd handed Kady the cane that Kynyr had carried while his leg was healing. "You'll want to carry this from now on."

"Why would I need a cane?" She frowned, gazing at the kendaryl gryphon on the head and the heavy hard-rock maple shaft.

"Hold the base tight and give the top a twist."

Kady did so and pulled a long slender sword from the cane. Pleasure rushed through her spiked with delight. "Oh, I like this."

"You can train until your seventh month, but no sparring."

Her face brightened still more as she realized that her dearest dream would not be taken from her by motherhood. "I can?"

"Since you'll be living at the house now, Trevor can walk you through your practices each day and I'll come out a couple times each week to check on your progress."

"Sounds good." Kady glanced around. "Where did Iollen and Aghavie get off to?"

"They went to pick up that formal dining table you commissioned for the Great Hall. And probably a stop at the candy store, if I know Aghavie's sweet tooth." Trevor grinned.

"I'm going to find them." Kady set off.

Todd nodded at Trevor and his son trailed Kady.

* * * *

Iollen carried a burlap sack slung over his shoulder with the results of Aghavie's shopping. She had dragged him through every shop between the furniture store and the candy shop, happily spending his first wages. He watched her with fond bemusement. His act of atonement had blossomed into love unforeseen. He still slept on the sofa. If and when Aghavie decided she genuinely wanted him, they would make a real marriage of it. Until then, Iollen felt content to simply love her. He had never dreamed that anyone could ever care for a mon as maimed as he was.

She had five pence to spend and happily bought a penny's worth of this and a penny's worth of that, coming away with a significant hoard of sweets.

Old John Donegal put the candy into Iollen's shopping bag with a crinkly smile. "When is the little one due?"

"Cahira says around winter solstice." He shouldered the bag again. Iollen had expected to be reviled by the community after Caimbeul punished him on the scaffold. The loss of his arm had mitigated their reactions. The Gods had punished him and now he could be forgiven. Whatever debts remained in their eyes had become paid accounts when he married Aghavie and made an honest bitch of her.

"Auspicious time for a birth."

Iollen nodded and left with Aghavie following him. He slung the sack over the side of the wagon and settled it against Kady's table.

"Hello, Aghavie."

Iollen whipped around when he heard the familiar voice. "Preece."

Aghavie stood frozen like a mouse beneath the eyes of a predator.

Preece put his hand on Aghavie's belly. "Which dead mon's melon is it?"

Iollen shoved Preece away from Aghavie and stepped between them. "Stay away from my wife."

"You wouldn't fight me when you had two arms. You gonna fight me now, cripple?" Preece chuckled mirthlessly.

"He won't. I will," said a new voice. Kady drew the sword from the cane, advancing on Preece with chill anger in her eyes.

"The bastard's whore wants to fight." He brayed contempt in a long laugh.

A hand on her shoulder halted Kady. She glanced and saw Trevor standing behind her. He motioned her toward the wagon and she obeyed with obvious reluctance.

"Cowards pick fights with bitches and one-armed myn." Trevor's hands dropped to the knives at his hips.

Iollen winced at the further reminder that he was maimed. He faltered; trying to decide what—if anything—he could do, and turned his back on it. Walking to the wagon, he leaned against the side to hide his troubled face.

Aghavie moved close to him, putting her hand on his lower back. "Iollen?"

"I'm not man enough for you, Aghavie. I'm sorry."

Preece considered Trevor with empty eyes, devoid of feeling; measuring the newcomer. "Most folks know better than to mess with me."

"You're Preece Malloy?" Trevor thumbed the pommel of his blades.

"Yeah." A sly twist of a sneer curled the edges of Preece's lips as he waited to see if Trevor Sinclair intended to draw steel on him or back down as most did.

Trevor spun into a roundhouse kick that sent Preece slamming into the side of a shop.

Preece's head connected with the wall hard enough to stun him. He blinked, trying to clear his vision.

Trevor strolled over and kicked him in the side. "A warning. Don't mess with the Sinclairs, the Maguires, or the people under our protection. You'll live longer that way."

Preece staggered to his feet, clutching his side, and disappeared into an alley.

Depression dulled Iollen's eyes as he helped Aghavie onto the wagon.

Kady exchanged a glance with Trevor and nodded at Iollen.

The big lycan went to Iollen as the maimed wolf was climbing onto the seat. "Iollen, I'll expect you in the salle this evening."

"But..."

"No buts. The salle. This evening."

"Yessir."

* * * *

Malthus sipped mead, leaning back in his chair at the Difficult Horse. He currently spent a few hours there each evening, hoping for a glimpse of the newcomers now living at the old McCain place. Preece sat silent, a dour turn to his mouth.

His present tools did not have access to the Maguire place. He needed a new one. Malthus watched Larena waiting tables, dug into his pouch and came out with a Sharani Double-Gryphon. When he and Heironim had been boys growing up on his mother's estate, they had made a game of placing spells on innocuous objects to harass the other children over imagined slights. He closed his hand over the coin and placed a come-hither on it with a thought.

Kynyr, Erskine Faraday, and Robert Morcar swaggered into the Difficult Horse and settled at a table. Large grins lit their faces.

"Drinks on me!" Erskine shouted. "My friend here." He patted Kynyr's back. "His lady wears her apron high and the wedding is to be held at the Manor. Claw's giving the bride away himself."

A roar of congratulations went up.

Hereward winced as he filled tankards with mead and Larena began distributing them.

"My slut of a sister gets all the good things in life." Larena grumbled, setting tankards in front of Malthus and Preece. "I keep my legs closed and get nothing at all."

"Maybe if you opened them to the right mon, Larena, you could have everything you wanted?" Malthus smiled.

"And who would that be?"

Malthus flashed the Sharani double gryphon at her before dropping it down her bodice and whispering. "Come to my cottage this evening?"

Larena blinked as the coin settled against her pale white skin. A blank expression crept into her eyes and faded. She simpered. "I'll be there."

Preece shook his head at her retreating back. "She'll never come."

"You might be surprised, Preece."

* * * *

Iollen sat at the table in his apartments with a bottle of cheap whiskey. He held the glass of amber liquor up to the lamp and contemplated his situation as if he could find it reflected in that glass.

Aghavie watched him over the edge of an embroidery hoop.

"I never was much." Iollen drank his whiskey and refilled the glass. He knew that he was halfway to shit-faced, but did not care. The confrontation with Preece had rattled him and Trevor's long talk in the salle afterward had only made him feel worse—although he knew Trevor had not intended it that way. "I'm a coward."

"You weren't a coward today," Aghavie said quietly.

Iollen ignored her. "I was afraid of their jeers as much as their fists. I was afraid of Cormic Parry. Afraid of Preece. Donald Greenlea beat me bloody one night ... while Cormic held my arms so I couldn't fight back ... couldn't run. That's what I always did ... run away. They wanted to be sure of me ... sure that I wouldn't tell anyone what we were doing."

"You're not a coward." She laid her embroidery on the sofa and joined him at the table.

"Then we started pulling bitches down. You were the first, Aghavie."

"You didn't poke me." She laid her hand on his arm and he flinched away from her.

Iollen refilled his glass a third time with a bitter snort. "I was too nervous to get it up. Otherwise, I would have crammed it into you like the others. I'm not a good mon, Aghavie."

"You're trying to be. That's what counts."

"Now that I only have one arm..."

"You're my husband." Aghavie drew her chair closer, and began unbuttoning his shirt.

"Don't." He stopped her, grasping her small hands in his large one. "I don't want you to see it."

"It's too late for that. I peeped at you while you were sleeping."

"It's ugly."

"It is what it is." Aghavie shrugged. "Besides, I married you. Not your arm."

"You're not offended?"

"Not in the least."

Iollen released her hands.

She removed his shirt. Her fingers caressed the shoulder of his missing arm. "Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes. It aches." He drank his whiskey and refilled the glass. "Sometimes the fingers itch ... and they aren't there."

"I can make it better." Aghavie reached for the drawstring on his pants.

"Don't." He stopped her hands again.

"We're married."

"I can't get it up. I haven't been able to since that day on the scaffolds."

"Then let me help you."

The sweet earnestness in her voice brought tears to Iollen's liquor reddened eyes and he surrendered.

* * * *

Kady sprawled in the middle of her bed, wearing the sheerest nightgown from the chest of new clothes that Cahira had given her for the wedding and attempted to look sensual,

anticipating Kynyr's returning home that night. She glanced at the little clock from Iradrim, and realized that her husband to be was late. After another hour passed, Kady went from feeling aroused to irritated. By the end of the third hour, Kady heard her stomach rumble and decided that, if she had to wait up for him, tea and a snack were required.

"So much for the grand seduction," she muttered, wrapping an old brown robe over the nightgown.

She padded to the kitchen and found Kynyr at the table with Trevor, eating his way through the plate of cookies that she and Mary had baked earlier that day. Kady snatched the plate and dropped into a chair with a flounce. "Some of those are mine."

"I wasn't going to eat all of them." Kynyr grinned at her.

"How many did you intend to leave for me? One?" Kady made a show of counting the cookies. Kynyr walked his fingers across the table in the direction of the plate, and Kady slapped his hand. "There were four dozen cookies when I went to bed. Now there's one and a half."

"I'm a growing cub?" Kynyr ducked his head.

"The only thing you've got that grows is in your pants." Kady thumped him on the forehead. "We'll have no talk of growing anything here."

Trevor's smile faded. "I've been telling Kynyr what happened with Preece."

"Why did you stop me, Trevor? I could have handled Preece."

"Maybe." He paused, setting his blades and the whetstone on the table. "It wasn't you I was worried about."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"There's a cub in your belly now. One blow in the right place ... wouldn't have to be a hard one even ... and the cub would be dead before it's born."

"Oh." Kady looked thoughtful for an instant, and then sent Kynyr sprawling on the floor chair and all. "This is entirely your fault."

The two dogs stared at her. Kynyr's lips twitched into a fresh smile of utter naughtiness. "Maybe we should finish this discussion in bed?"

"I should think so." Kady grabbed a handful of cookies. "These are mine. Don't touch them."

CHAPTER EIGHT

LONG NIGHT

Malthus filled glasses with wine and placed them on the table. "I'm so glad you came. I have wanted to be alone with you for a long, long time."

Larena swallowed, a smile flickering uncertainly upon her face. "I'm not sure about this. I mean ... I'm not a slut. You can have your coin back if you want it. I don't know what I was thinking. I'm a virgin. I just..." She fiddled with a strand of her long blonde hair. She knew she was babbling, but could not stop herself. "I just like to flirt. That's all. I mean."

Malthus lowered his head with a contrite expression. "I didn't mean to imply that you were."

"You're married."

Contrition faded into sorrow. "She doesn't love me."

"But she married you." Larena looked confused.

"Merissa..." Malthus closed his eyes with a pained look and sucked in an unsteady breath. "My wife is a slut. The twins she is carrying ... they aren't mine."

"Whose are they?"

Malthus refilled Larena's glass. "I suspect..." Malthus' shoulders drooped. "That they're Kynyr's. I-I caught them together."

"But, if Kynyr's sleeping with her ... why didn't he marry her? She's the Chieftain's daughter. My sister's a little bit of nothing slut."

"He can't marry her."

"Why not?"

"He's her brother."

Larena choked on a swallow of wine. "That's terrible!"

"Oh, gods, you mustn't tell anyone. Claw says he'll kill me if word gets out." Malthus' face tightened and then a tear slipped down his cheek. "I don't know why I'm telling you all of this. I'm so lonely and it's getting so hard to keep it all inside."

Larena rose from her chair and went to the liquor cabinet. She returned with a bottle of Dragonsbreath and a pair of whiskey glasses. She poured for both of them. "You need something stronger. I never knew how bad things were. You've kept such a brave face."

She pulled her chair close to his and they sat together, drinking whiskey in silence for a time. Malthus looked so broken-hearted that after a couple of whiskeys, Larena got her courage together and rose from her chair and held him.

Malthus raised a tear streaked face and kissed her deeply. Larena started to draw away from him, but an odd buzzing in her head caused her to stop and blink for a moment. She felt dizzy and disoriented; and yet, she knew she was not drunk. Although she was only seventeen years old, she had a decent capacity for hard liquor.

Suddenly, Larena wanted him more than anything she had ever wanted before in her life. His hands slipped to the fastenings on her bodice and undid them.

"Touch me. Touch me." Larena panted with eagerness and desire. She felt as if her body was on fire. Her loins ached

with an violent longing to feel him inside her most intimate places.

His hand closed upon her breast and his lips upon the opposite nipple. It felt so much more intense than when she played with herself. She moaned. Malthus undressed her, kissing and licking as he went.

She pressed against him as they slipped to the floor. Malthus opened his pants, and lifted his maleness free, but otherwise did not bother to undress. He loomed above her, spreading her legs with his hands on the insides of her thighs. His member looked so huge and long, that Larena wondered how he could possibly get all of it in without hurting her. She started to pull away from Malthus, but that buzzing came again in her head and she forgot everything except wanting him.

His member bumped her clit tantalizing her. "Your cock is huge."

"Shall I put it in?" A victorious sneer spread across Malthus' face.

"Yes."

The flush of desire burning in Larena's cheeks vanished as she screamed in terror when Malthus' fangs plunged into her neck. She stilled beneath him, her eyes dulling, and barely felt it when Malthus ripped away her maidenhead.

* * * *

Brother Malcolm hesitated with his fist raised to knock on the front door of the great house. The hour was late, and the family had most likely gone to their beds, but Malcolm had

come too far and on too urgent a matter not to go the final steps.

Malcolm banged upon the door with all the courage he could put into it.

The door opened and an aged wolf in russet homespun held up a lantern to compensate for his worn old eyes. "The hour is late, Brother."

"I'm Brother Malcolm from the monastery at St. Albans in MacLachlan. It is urgent that I speak with Kynyr Maguire. I have a message for him."

Henry nodded. "If you'll follow me to the kitchen, I'll put on a pot of tea and wake the Master."

Brother Malcolm marveled at the wonderful house as Henry led him from the foyer, down a short hallway and into the kitchen.

It had nicely finished cabinets, a cast iron stove imported from Iradrim, polished counters, and a large table with a bright tablecloth in spring patterns.

Henry lit the wood in the stove, filled a kettle with water, and put it on to heat. Then he left, soon returning with a large, red-haired lycan who radiated quiet dignity and steady confidence.

"Master Maguire?"

The newcomer shook his head. "Trevor Sinclair, Kynyr's uncle. If it's urgent enough to drag my nephew out of bed, it's urgent enough to rouse the family."

"Oh, right. Yes, it is. It's very urgent. I've been walking for weeks to get here."

* * * *

The joys of anticipated matrimony filled the young couple with delight. Kady had teased and playfully resisted for close to an hour before Kynyr managed to get her clothes off. He lay half atop her, sucking her nipple, and playing with her clit. A knock at the door caused him to freeze, and disappointment sank his ship as Kady shoved him off her.

"I'm coming." Kady snatched on a robe, and padded to the door. "What is it, Mary?"

Kynyr rolled up in the blankets with a sigh, trying to catch what they were saying.

Kady turned and closed the door, her expression tight. "Get dressed. There's trouble."

Although she would not have noticeable swelling from her pregnancy for some months yet, Kady had begun wearing her blades on her arms and a modified harness for her sword to get used to the feel of them. She dressed and settled her weapons in place.

Kynyr followed her lead, dressed, and armed himself.

Then they went downstairs together.

They found all of the adults awake and gathered in the kitchen: Trevor, Mary, Iollen and Aghavie, Fychan and Henry. An aura of expectancy lay over the room.

An unopened letter lay in the center of the table near a Willodarian monk.

"I'm Kynyr Maguire, Brother?"

"Malcolm. I'm from the Monastery of St. Albans in MacLachlan."

"You're a long way from home, Brother Malcolm."

"Yes, I am. It took me weeks to get here. I've been searching for you all over. I had no idea you were in Wolffgard."

Kynyr caught Trevor's eye and received a shrug indicating his uncle knew nothing at all yet. "How's that?"

"The letter is from Amos Raggat. He asked Jordi MacFie to get it to you."

Trevor opened his mouth to interpose a question and closed it again at Kynyr's gesture.

"Go on."

"Jordi's dead. That's why I didn't know where to take it."

Kynyr got that ice and steel look in his eyes that Kady was beginning to recognize. He dragged the letter over. "Who killed Jordi?"

"The enemy pursued him to his brother's home and shot him."

"What enemy?"

"Sa'necari. There are sa'necari in Hell's Widow. Fergus MacFie was raising the clan to take an army up there when I left."

Trevor frowned his skepticism. "You think they'll really go? MacLachlan hasn't ventured beyond their borders in force in over two hundred years."

"No idea." Kynyr opened the letter and read it.

Kynyr Maguire,

The sa'necari are expanding their control of Hell's Widow. One of them, Alexander Jondries, rited my little Sainy. They are operating out of the Green Sheaf warehouse. Their leader is Heironim Traxton. Please, come soon.

Amos Raggat

"Poor little Sainy. She was everyone's pet. I should have gone back sooner." Kynyr passed the letter to Trevor. "Mary, wake Cooley and send him for Todd."

"You'll ask Claw to bring soldiers?" Malcolm asked.

"Claw is ill. I'll bring them myself."

Malcolm's forehead furrowed, slanting his right brow across the lid of his eye. "What's wrong with Claw?"

"He's dying," Mary said, rising from the table. "Heart disease."

Brother Malcolm looked stunned. "Terrible news. He has no heir."

"He has an heir." Kynyr's mouth tightened into a grim line, feeling more of his choices stolen from him.

"But I haven't heard of one," Brother Malcolm protested. "Who is it?"

"Me." Kynyr rose from the table, gesturing for Kady to follow. "Explain it to him, Trevor."

Kynyr took Kady's hand and led her through the back door and out onto the veranda, where he stared up at the waxing moon for a long time before speaking. "This will make you unhappy. Probably make most of the family unhappy."

"What?" Kady frowned at the seriousness in his voice.

A haunted calm shaded Kynyr's face with a twist of iron resolve. "Tarrant died before he could marry Cahira. I don't want that to happen to us. I must go to Hell's Widow. I don't have a choice. It has to be me."

Kady closed her eyes. The passing days had muted the edges of the image from her nightmare ... yet the vision of

Kynyr's dead body still stalked the courts of her mind. "We'll go to the Clerk tonight. Roust him out like Iollen and Aghavie did."

Kynyr leaned in and kissed her. "Thank you for understanding."

* * * *

Malthus looked down at Larena with a dispassionate eye. She lay sleeping in his bed. The bitch was not as pretty as Merissa, but she would serve a different purpose. Larena had responded to his subtle Sways with such ease that it pleased him. *She genuinely believes that coming to my cottage was her own decision. How amusing.*

He extended his powers and twisted the original Sway that he had set in the tavern when he gave her the coin. Malthus worked patiently and the Sway became a Coercion known as a 'come-hither link.' Larena had been so angry at Kady and Kynyr that her mind had been wide open to him. She now belonged to him.

He woke her with a kiss. "You need to go home before your father discovers you're missing."

Larena grabbed her clothes and dressed. "When will I see you again?"

"As soon as I can get away. They watch me."

"I hope it's soon."

"It will be. I think you should apologize to your sister and tell her how happy you are for her."

Larena smiled. "I'll do that."

CHAPTER NINE

STALKERS

Kynyr leaned against the bole of a twisted oak, watching the window open on the second floor of the manor. Searlait climbed out, her skirts and petticoats tucked into her belt, her bare white calves showing as she caught the edge of a tree and climbed down with a nimbleness that belied her age. A grin broadened on his face.

He faded into the trees and brush, circling about to a bend in the Bonnie Draw River that ran through the manor's 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."

"Searlait." He gave her a polite nod and joined her, sitting in her favorite spot, a large smooth boulder that thrust out over the water from a root-tangled shelf of dirt and rock.

"You're fast. I thought I would get here first."

"I know all the short cuts." Searlait cast twigs and leaves into the water, watching 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 among the upper classes.

Kynyr noticed a sudden tear run down Searlait's cheek. "Is something wrong?"

"Aisha has re-hung the portraits of Tarrant and Logan in the Blue Room. She's getting them all out of storage and putting them back on the walls."

"That makes you sad?"

"A bit. I never wanted cubs ... or a husband ... after I saw how long she grieved."

Kynyr averted his eyes, thinking hard. "Searlait, I have a confession to make."

"If you're going to tell me that you're secretly in love with me, I'll have to remind you that you're engaged to be married." She forced a laugh and another tear squeezed from her eyes. "Gods, you remind me of Tarrant. Seeing the portraits again after all these years. The resemblance is uncanny."

Kynyr disregarded the second half of her words. "Not engaged. Married. Kady and I went to the Clerk last night."

"Oh! Is that your confession?"

"No." Kynyr studied the fading traces of Searlait's vanished beauty. 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.

"So what is this confession, young wolf," Searlait prompted him.

"Promise not to tell?"

"Cross my heart."

"My grandfather ... was Tarrant."

Searlait paused with a twig in her hands, turning it about in an uncertain manner. "Kynyr..."

"It's the truth. I have his diaries ... and the love letters he wrote Gram."

Searlait dropped her twig and hugged him. "Does Claw and Aisha know?"

"Claw wanted to name me his heir. I refused."

"Why?"

"I don't want to be chieftain. That's not why I came here."

"Then, what did bring you here? We've all speculated."

"My family has always been close and loving."

"Your father's death hurt you deeply."

Kynyr gave a small nod. "I try not to think about it." He shifted on the rock as if suddenly uncomfortable. "I grew up listening to Todd and Gram's stories about Tarrant. They say he was easy to love."

"So are you."

He let that pass. "I wanted to know the rest of my family. I wanted to see Tarrant's grave. I don't want anything from the Redhands. I never have."

"No wonder you've been so protective of us." Searlait sucked in a deep breath, her eyes going serious. "They say there's a curse on our family..."

"If there is, I'll face it down. I'm not running from it anymore."

* * * *

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

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

"Worthless little lycan cub," muttered Ros, her voice oozing with contempt and crusted with hate. She kept her weight on her good leg, with the damaged one twisted slightly to the side so that none of her weight rested on it. A month ago, a powerful Lemyari had raped her and left her for dead after sticking a single venomous nail into her thigh close to her groin. If Uncle Malthus had not fed her his blood and nursed her, she would have been paralyzed. As she shifted her feet, pain shot up the damaged leg. Ros thought of that vampire, and she hated him with a cold, hard hate, just like she hated Darmyk. When she grew into her adult powers, Ros intended to destroy every Lemyari she could get her hands on. They would all pay.

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

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

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

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

"Do you hate him, Ros?"

"His daddy killed our daddy."

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

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

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

Ros let her fangs descend and her tongue darted across them. *Sharani killed our mama, but lycans killed our daddy. I want to eat them all.* Resentment flared, shading her hatred like a tombstone above a grave. Her uncle had told her about it in an effort to frighten her into obedience to his plans; instead, it only made her stubborn. "It's not fair that he should have a mama, when we have neither."

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

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

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

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

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

Fianait, Claw's younger sister, an ugly old crone of a bitch walked toward them, her thin white hair caught at the back of her head in an impeccable bun. Ros feigned a delighted laugh and rocked Lyrri, her face lit with girlish innocence. Fianait smiled at them in passing and continued on. Ros heard her murmur, "Such good little girls." That set off a peal of laughter from Ros.

* * * *

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

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

The boy found himself fantasizing more and more about his father, who he had never met. He knew his father's name, although he had been forbidden to speak it. Isranon. Darmyk wondered what his father was like. His mother and his grandparents used to tell him that Isranon was a good mon, but recently they had begun to say that Isranon was a bad mon. The boy could not understand how that could change so quickly. However, he had decided that his father must be a good mon and had begun to create his own private stories about him in which his father was a courageous swordsmon, fighting bravely against the darkness.

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

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

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

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

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

"Lie down," Ros hissed.

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

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

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

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

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

Darmyk whimpered as Lyrri covered the bleeding wound with her mouth. She shoved her tongue into the wound and

wiggled it around inside as she sucked. Darmyk's stomach heaved, but nothing came up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'd like that."

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

* * * *

Kynyr walked Searlait back to the manor and headed upstairs to find Claw sitting up in bed with his checkers on a lap table. His gaze fell upon the two paintings that had not been there the day before, and they drew him. Kynyr glanced at the auburn-haired young wolf in the left painting and then

stared at the blond in the other. It was the image of what he saw in the mirror each day when he shaved.

"There's no damned difference," Claw growled. "You're my son come back to me."

The air around Kynyr seemed to chill and a cold hand ran fingers down his spine. "I never realized..."

He shook himself, prying his gaze from the portrait of his grandfather.

"Have you come for a game?" Claw set the checkers on the board. "Now that Sheradyn has declared me a useless old mon, I don't know what to do with myself."

"You'll never be useless, Claw." Kynyr sat down across from him. "I feel like the hand of fate is on everything I do. You haven't seen my baby brother yet ... He was born with a full head of auburn hair."

"Like Logan."

"Yes. Except that there's no red hair in our family."

"Hah! You should have seen Sorcha."

"Your mother?"

"Yes. There's a portrait of her in the North Hall. I'm looking forward to meeting your family at the wedding."

"You'll get to meet them ... but there isn't going to be a wedding."

"Why not?"

"Kady and went to the Clerk of Records last night. We're already married."

"Why'd you want to go and do that? Now you'll have all the bitches growling at you."

Kynyr explained about the letter and Brother Malcolm. "I want to go quietly. The moon will be full in three days. I'll assemble the baggage train at my home, hand-pick twenty soldiers, and leave with no one being the wiser until long after we're gone."

"What about drivers?"

"I don't trust the grooms to keep their mouths shut. I'll ask Cahira to fetch our kin."

"Good plan."

"Kynyr!" Merissa entered the room breathing hard. "Darmyk's missing. I can't find him."

Kynyr came from his chair fast. "I'll look. Tell Belgair to get myn to comb the gardens. Have Kissie and the servants search the building."

* * * *

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

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

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

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

"He's that."

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

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

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

"Yah. They've always been close."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Aye."

Malthus left through the guards' door into the yard and went to the treehouse. He gripped the rope ladder, gazed up at it, and called Darmyk's name. When he received no answer, Malthus discreetly extended his necromantic

awareness in a low-level scan. Someone was there. Malthus climbed the rope ladder and perched on the edge. Then he got his feet under him and went inside. Darmyk lay upon the bed, his face pale and pasty with a bluish tinge to his lips. His head dangled limply off the edge revealing a long smear of dried blood on his neck.

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

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

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

Darmyk rested limp against Malthus' shoulder, his arms dangling.

Kynyr Maguire, Robert Morcar, Erskine Faraday, and Vayle Stewart ranged behind Caimbeul, making the situation all the more fraught with danger for Malthus.

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

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

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

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

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

Malthus scanned the faces, wanting to refuse, and knowing that the lycans might easily take it wrong. Kynyr had a look in his eyes that suggested he hoped Malthus would misstep. Malthus could not risk the gains he had made so far.

Kynyr gestured to his companions. "Caimbeul has it under control. Come on. There's something that needs doing."

Malthus felt a flutter of trepidation, wondering exactly what Kynyr was going after.

However, when no one was looking, he would punish Ros. Malthus understood that Ros had been obsessing on Darmyk for months and her prematurely adolescent appetites were hard to control; however, if she kept this up someone would

discover that she already had her fangs. Malthus yielded Darmyk to Caimbeul.

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

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

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

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

"Darmyk."

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

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

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

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

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

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

The crowd watching from the door into Darmyk's bedroom moved aside as Sheradyn arrived, carrying his satchel of medicinals on his shoulder. His assistant and lover, Gillivray, came along behind him. They were a mismatched pair in every way except ability. The aristocratic Sheradyn, educated in Creeya's finest medical school, dressed like a human in close-fitting buttoned pants and shirt, his long white hair, with only a single strand of his original russet color, hung well brushed and tied at his neck with a bit of black ribbon. Gillivray, eighty years his junior, slouched comfortably in his traditional lycan sashed robe and pants that would easily accommodate shape-shifting, and watched Sheradyn with a glance so fond it frequently embarrassed those around them. Sheradyn motioned Caimbeul away from Darmyk, pulled up a chair, and sat down by the bed. Taking Darmyk's small wrist in hand, Sheradyn Read the cub with an expression that grew steadily more serious. Finally, he shook his head. "He's extremely weak. The blood loss is severe. But, I'll do what I can. Gillivray and I will take turns sitting with him tonight."

"Send for the priest," Caimbeul said.

Merissa gasped. "My baby."

Searlait held Merissa tighter. "Courage."

Caimbeul took Merissa's hand, his dark eyes kind. "I didn't mean to imply he needed the prayers for the dying, Merissa. I

want her to ward his window so that the bats or vampires or whatever they were, cannot get him again."

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

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

Caimbeul pulled at his stubbled chin. "He's a bit young, but you should try getting him to drink fresh blood. It might help. Bleed one of your nibari enough to fill a glass and mix it with fruit juice. Get that down him as often as he's willing to take it."

Sheradyn lifted an eyebrow at Caimbeul.

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

* * * *

Once the crowds had departed, Kynyr circled back to the treehouse with Finn and Erskine. He put his hand on the rope ladder. "I'm going to have a look around."

"Why?" Finn stared up at the treehouse.

"Because I don't trust Malthus."

His companions followed him up the ladder and the three of them crowded into the treehouse. Kynyr changed at far into hybrid as he could without making the kendaryl armor he wore beneath his outer clothing uncomfortably tight. He spied a few drops of blood on the coverlet and put his nose to it, sniffing. "This is where it happened. Double-check me, Erskine. You've got a good nose."

Kynyr straightened and moved aside.

Erskine lifted his head from the bedding, frowning. "There's been no one here except for Ros, Lyrri, and Darmyk."

"That's what I was afraid of." Kynyr walked to the door and stared out. "Keep it quiet, but we're riding to Hell's Widow in three days. I want every member of the unit in on this, and eleven others that you consider trustworthy. Picked myn. Those who started training with Todd..." Kynyr started to add 'since Ramsey's death' and swallowed the words back, leaving them unsaid. Following the death of his wife, Erskine had taken Ramsey under his wing, turning a youth into a soldier as a way of mitigating his private sorrows.

Erskine nodded. "Something happen?"

"Amos is in trouble. His daughter was murdered."

"Which one?" Finn eased back into human form.

"Sainy." Kynyr exhaled through his nostrils. "Another thing. I want the members of the unit to go to the shop and tell Todd I sent them for armor and weapons."

"You got armor in the shop now? I didn't see it the last time I was there." Erskine joined Kynyr at the door.

"Not exactly. We've a room filled with kendaryl and rustrametan that we've been hoarding."

Finn let out a low whistle. "Who's paying for this?"

"I am."

"First come, first pick?"

"Yeah."

"Mind if Erskine and I head over there now?"

"Go on. I can take care of matters here."

* * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He had begun to worry about his family. The heart attack and the lingering weakness in his body made him feel, for the first time in his life, that he was no longer as able to protect

them as he had once been. One thought led into another, and he found himself reliving the night Troyes died.

They had found a note from Isranon that Troyes had run off with Merissa. Claw flew into a rage and set after them with one hundred guardsmyn, all running as wolves with blood lust roaring in their veins, and a desire to simply tear Troyes apart. Aisha and his sisters had insisted upon going with them, certain that Merissa would need them.

Dawn light suffused the clearing as they plunged into it, growling.

Along the way, they had picked up mounted warriors from Angus' battle-clan that dwelled in Red Wolf and had pledged allegiance to Claw.

Troyes' body draped a stone sa'necari bleeding table on his belly, positioned for the rite of mortgiefan. Isranon lay wrapped in a blanket beside the table. He roused and caught the edge of the table, using it to stand and once erect, he pushed away from it. His eyes flicked from Troyes' body draping the altar to Claw.

"So, Isranon." Claw regarded him steadily, his head tilted and his eyes hard. Filthy sa'necari. They always turn. Sooner or later. Claw forced the thought away, reminding himself that this was still Isranon. "Mort ta giefan at last."

"Nahn. Nahn mort ta giefan."

"You killed him. You drank from him. He is lying on that table. Is it yours? You cut him up good."

"Nahn. Nahn mort ta giefan."

"There was a rite. A rite, if not the rite. It's all right, man." Claw came closer. "It's your nature. You're sa'necari. You took on his power."

Isranon's expression turned to horror. "I am not a monster. Yes, I killed him and I drank from him—I drank from him after he was dead. Not before. And I filled his bottles."

"The bottles he intended to fill with my blood, father." Merissa emerged from the cave.

"He said we would run away together. But it was a lie, just to get me to his table in the hills." She hung her head, her dark hair falling about her shoulders. A sob wrenched up from her stomach and forced its way through her throat, bursting at last from her lips. Aisha went to her, gathering her daughter in her arms. "If Isranon had not followed us ... Isranon had to feed. He was desperately injured. It's all my fault. I filled the bottles."

"Merissa! Don't defend me!" Isranon stepped toward her and faltered, crumpling, unconscious.

Nevin reached Isranon first, gathering the youth into his arms and pressing his head against his chest. He touched Isranon's forehead and then glanced at the crude bandages around his chest and stomach, noting the fresh stain. "He's fevered and he's bleeding."

Merissa screamed Isranon's name, tearing herself free to kneel at his side. "Father, I had to fill the preserving bottles with every single drop. Every bit of strong blood. Troyes nearly killed him."

Claw gave her a resigned, disgusted look. "I'm going to beat hell out of you when we get home. I'd rather have you

badly bruised and thinking than lying dead somewhere. See to him," he nodded at Isranon and then at the body on the table. "Cut the asshole's heart out, I want to eat it. Always wanted to eat one of them." Two lycans moved to the table and began systematically butchering what remained of Troyes.

Aisha went to tend Isranon. Fianait hesitated and hung back, as Searlait joined her sister-in-law.

"Whatever is in the cave belongs to Isranon," Aisha decreed before anyone could start toward it, "by right of conquest, and I will personally call challenge on anyone who tries to take the smallest piece of it." Aisha had been the fiercest of the young wolves in her youth, which was what had drawn Claw to her; he liked a feisty bitch.

"Aisha!" Claw protested, disliking the way she always put him on the spot in front of his myn; and yet he had a grudging admiration for it that he would never admit to either. They would have a big argument about it in private later, but the kiss and make up afterward would be passionate and intense. He always liked the kiss and make up.

"Old mon," she replied in her most crotchety oldwife voice. "He saved our daughter's life."

He scratched his head and then ran his fingers through the thick black thatch. "Well, there is that, isn't there?"

Belgair brought him the heart and he sat down chewing on it thoughtfully. Some of the others got a big fire going while they served up Troyes body and the clan ate.

Searlait grinned and set to the obscene meal with gusto. Fianait flinched from the bit of sa'necari flesh that Erskine placed in her hands. She nibbled at it, forcing herself to swallow.

"I was strong then." Claw shoved the memory away.

Aisha returned with Malthus. Claw wondered why it had to be his wretched son-in-law, when he would far rather it had been Kynyr. Malthus did try to get along with him, but too often they disagreed, and Claw disliked him on a gut level. A frown passed over Claw's face and he wondered at the more than racial similarity between Malthus and Troyes.

He started to refuse the help, caught Aisha's disapproving look and fell silent. *No need to make a bigger fuss than has already been made today.*

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

Gillivray sat in a chair on the far side of the bed, so Malthus fetched a second chair for Claw and got the chieftain settled into it. The old wolf held one of Darmyk's little hands, rubbing his thumb over it, thinking how much he loved the cub and how desperately he wanted him safe. When Merissa first informed him of her pregnancy, Claw had been outraged to discover she had been sleeping with a sa'necari—even one

so well regarded as Isranon had been in those days. Fifty years ago, Merissa would have been stoned to death, chieftain's daughter or not, for sleeping with a sa'necari, much less for having become pregnant by one.

Claw had tried to force her to abort Darmyk, but now he was grateful that he had allowed Nevin to talk him out of it. The innocent love and affection that the cub showed him blessed Claw's old age with an indescribable joy that filled his heart to overflowing every time Darmyk climbed on his lap. He remembered building the treehouse, and the way that Darmyk had stood watching them, laughing and clapping his small hands with delight.

Darmyk's blanket had slid down, and his robe had opened enough for Claw to see the bear-shaped birthmark on the cub's slender chest. "I love you, Little Bear."

The cub's eyes fluttered open. "Grandpa?"

Hope surged within Claw. "Yes, Little Bear. No one's going to be pushing you away from my door again." He shot Gillivray an irritated look. "I'll always have time for you."

* * * *

Malthus walked Claw back and the chieftain halted him at the Blue Room.

He could taste the aura of suffering surrounding Claw and he knew that the chieftain had begun to have chest pains again. "What is it?"

"I don't want to go to bed. Grab a bottle of wine, some glasses, and a deck of cards," Claw ordered.

A broad smile spread across Malthus' face. "That Faewinian wine?"

"Yeah, that one." Pleasure shone in Claw's face.

Malthus did as he was ordered, taking time to refresh the spell on the bottle, and brought it to Claw.

The old wolf poured for both of them. They sat, drank, and played cards for two hours. Malthus smiled, joked, and deliberately lost to Claw. It kept the old wolf happy and drinking his death. With luck, the next heart attack would come sooner than Malthus had first anticipated. The fragrance of Claw's discomfort, which was slowly turning into outright pain, pleased Malthus' necromantic senses. He could almost make a meal off the taste and smell of Claw's suffering it was so heady and strong.

Claw tensed, rubbing his chest, lines deepening in his face. He grimaced and laid his cards down.

"What's wrong?" Malthus asked, his tone urgent. "Are you all right?"

Claw blinked and then grimaced again, the lines deepening in his face. "I think I need to go back to bed."

"I think so too. Maybe you've done too much, too soon."

"Help me get back. I need to lie down."

Lie down and die, old wolf. That's the best thing you can do.

"I'll do it." Kynyr stepped into the room and past Malthus, practically brushing him aside. He cupped Claw's elbow.

Malthus glared at Kynyr's back, visualizing a dozen blades in it.

And you can die, too, Kynyr Maguire. I just need to decide how to do it.

* * * *

Caimbeul changed to Patton and went to the Difficult Horse to watch for Shalto and Oswyl to turn up as they usually did. He chose his usual table and put his back to the wall where he could scan the room without fear of getting a blade in his back. Gwythyr, the son that Pandeena had borne him, had died that way. Caimbeul still blamed himself for it, although in all of his arguments over their son's death he had never admitted it to Pandeena. Perhaps the time was drawing near when he would have to tell her the full story and acknowledge his part in it.

Old Hereward the tavern master had begun to regard him as a regular and automatically sent a nibari to his table with a tankard of mead without being asked. He paid for his drink and dropped a few coppers down the front of her blouse. Even slaves deserved a few extras.

She giggled and he wondered what she would buy with it. Probably ribbons for her hair. Nibari were silly creatures. What they never tried to buy was their freedom. Certain genetic problems ensured that they did not survive well on their own and rarely lived more than a couple of years without a master to see to their special needs. The sa'necari and the vampires had made a mess of their genes, Caimbeul thought with a trace of bitterness, and it was exactly what they wanted to do with his own people. It had been one of

the dependencies the Butchering Serpent had been trying to create in lycans with his experiments.

Shalto and Oswyl came swaggering in with Preece. Of all the Lycamornots, Caimbeul disliked Preece the most. Preece had a cold, quiet presence as if he were measuring people for a kill. It reminded Caimbeul of the ones who had murdered his son Gwythyr.

The trio spotted Caimbeul and joined him at his table.

"So I see you're still here," Shalto said, as if it had been he who had won their last cock-wagging match instead of Caimbeul. The old wolf let it slide.

"And so are you." Caimbeul took another swallow of mead. He noted that they were wearing pairs of long blades at their sides instead of the usual multi-purpose knife commonly carried by his people. "So do I get to meet him?"

"He doesn't want to see you."

"I don't believe you've spoken to him yet."

Preece half turned in his chair, leaving one arm on the table, checking the room before he spoke. "Don't mess with us."

"I think it would be a good idea if you stopped visiting our bitches," said Shalto.

"I'll stop when I'm ready." Caimbeul drank down the last of his mead and left.

He headed home, taking a roundabout approach to it. Walking along Elmind Street, Caimbeul paused in front of Cahira's Potions and Notions. The shop was closed at that late hour, however, if he pounded on the door loudly enough, someone would answer.

He wavered in temptation, but he dared not change to his proper form and Todd would receive him with suspicion.

The sound of soft footsteps made Caimbeul glance behind him. He saw Shalto and Preece sauntering toward him. He assessed his situation with a scan of the street and spotted Torquil leaning against a building in the mouth of an alley. Oswyl, Nesswen, and Yren waited at the other end. One or, possibly, two he could handle; but not all of them at once.

Caimbeul darted around the side of the shop and jumped the fence into the backyard. He crouched in the shadows, his back against the rear of the shop. His heart pounding, Caimbeul crept across the yard and slipped into the barn. The horses stirred uneasily in their stalls. He extended his fireborn aura to calm them. Two ladders, one at each end, accessed the loft. Caimbeul picked the second one.

Climbing to the top, he found himself in what appeared to be a cubs meeting place. A small, low table sat in the center with the bales arranged as layered seating. Resuming his true form, the lawgiver leaned back and dozed against the hay as soon as he felt certain that he had not been spotted there.

* * * *

Trevor watched Kady work through her forms on the reed mats of the drawing room that he had turned into a temporary salle until Erwin Twelvetoes could finish the addition to the house that would include the permanent one. "So how does it feel to be Kady Maguire?"

"Terrible." She grimaced. "I can't stand to eat. Especially if it's green. I almost vomited when I saw the asparagus on the platter last night."

"Nauseous?"

She completed her forms and stepped off the mat. "Yes."

"Go on down to the kitchen and have Mary fix you something soothing. We'll work out again this evening if you're feeling up to it."

Trevor had taken over Kady's training from Todd since Kady had moved into the house. Todd stopped by twice a week to check on her progress and offer suggestions.

Kady nodded and walked out. The fact that Kynyr was leaving in a few days to go to Hell's Widow and fight troubled Kady more than she wanted to admit. Her hand went to her belly as she ambled toward the kitchen and she thought about the little bit of Kynyr growing inside her.

"I don't want for you to be all I have left of him."

Kady went into the kitchen and settled into a chair. Mary, and the three nibari that Kynyr had purchased two days ago, had dinner started and the smell of roasting duck made her mouth water.

Mary immediately put a cup of tea in front of her.

Kady smiled. "I'm not used to people fussing over me like this."

"Get used to it. You're the lady of the house."

Mary hugged her and then sank into the chair beside her, took Kady's wrist, and Read her. "It's a boy, Kady."

"A son for Kynyr." Kady's smile brightened. "And then lots of sisters."

"To keep him from going fishing."

"Why fishing?"

Mary laughed. "I'm surprised that Kynyr hasn't asked you to go fishing."

"He's been too busy fishing me out of the rivers." Kady's lip curled into a grimace of disdain.

"Well, fishing is why Kynyr tends to flinch whenever a bitch tells him he's handsome."

Kady leaned in, folding her arms together on the table.

"What has fishing got to do with compliments?"

"Kynyr's sisters never liked him to get dirty. Whenever he came back from fishing, he was absolutely filthy. I swear he must have rolled in the mud banks. They were constantly combing his hair and treating him like a pretty toy. One day, he ran to Todd while trying to elude them. Kynyr couldn't have been more than seven. And, anyway. Kynyr looked up at Todd and said in a very, very serious voice, 'ugly cubs have more fun.' When Todd stopped laughing, he took Kynyr fishing. And they both came back filthy."

Kady laughed until her sides ached while Mary gave her an extremely detailed account of what Kynyr and Todd had looked like coming home that day.

Henry poked his head through the door. "There's a bitch outside wants to see you."

"Who is she?" Kady's laughter dwindled to an intermittent snicker.

"Larena Wiggins."

Kady stiffened, remembering the last time she had seen her sister. "Send her in."

Mary put her hand over Kady's. "You don't like your sister?"

"I don't like my family. Larena flirted with Kynyr and I knocked her down for it."

Mary laughed. "No wonder I like you. I wasn't the only bitch chasing Trevor and it got hairy at times."

Henry held the door for Larena.

Kady noted the demure way her sister entered and wondered what had changed. Larena hugged Kady before sitting down at the table.

"Can I talk to you alone, Kady?"

"There's nothing you can say that can't be said in front of Mary."

Larena flushed. "I came to apologize. I'm sorry for what happened in the shop that day. You were right to hit me."

Kady felt staggered. Larena had never apologized for anything; not even when they were children. "I accept your apology."

CHAPTER TEN

MISDIRECTION

Pandeena Moonbow had just finished assembling the lesson for the children of the refugee camp, and closed her books, when a soft, yet urgent knock came at her door. The moon had reached its zenith, and she could see its sliver glowing through her window. Pandeena did not need to see the moon to feel its phases and movements keenly. As the granddaughter of the moon god, Tala, Mistress of Wolves, she experienced the moon and its patterns more intensely than the rest of the lycans.

Pandeena opened her door to find Caimbeul there.

"Let me in quick," he said, glancing around.

She stepped aside and allowed him to enter, closing the door quickly. "What is it? If you've come to break your promise...."

"Hush. Listen...." Caimbeul went quiet, abruptly swallowing back his words. He had come to inform her that lycan males came and went from the camp all night long, that it had been turned into a brothel. But then he remembered Pandeena's temper, which he could not always mitigate or influence, and decided not to gamble on persuading her not to act once she had the information. He knew that the Serpent had placed death spells in all of the women, not just Clodagh, to be triggered if they were discovered. Caimbeul would not risk the women's lives, if he could avoid it.

"You've discovered something, haven't you?" she asked suspiciously when he went quiet.

"I can't tell you. I can't risk you doing something before I'm ready."

"Then why bother to come? I clearly heard alarm in your voice."

Caimbeul settled his big frame into the largest chair near the window. "I think I may have been pushing too hard and too fast. My life could be in danger."

"From who?" Pandeena sat down on the sofa in the corner closest to him.

Caimbeul smiled thinly, reading a slender acquiescence in her move to the furniture. "Again, I can't tell you."

"You are operating too much on your own," Pandeena snarled. "The Butchering Serpent is the deadliest sa'necari in existence."

Caimbeul sighed heavily. "I know that. But I need to play it close to my chest until I have something more solid. If something should happen to me, it's all down in my journals."

Pandeena lowered her head, and tangled her fingers in her hair. "Be careful, old lecher. I don't want to lose you."

Caimbeul perked up. "Aha! You do still care."

"Not that way," Pandeena snapped. "We're friends."

Caimbeul wiggled his eyebrows at her and put his hands in his lap. He sobered. "There's a gang of juvenile dogs that appear to be running with the Serpent or one of his agents."

"Moonlight pure." Pandeena gasped. "This is a tangled web. Are we betrayed by our own kind?" She licked her lips, fighting for calm. "You think it's Malthus?"

"He's human and he used to live here at the camp, all of which gave him opportunity to become acquainted with them. However, we both know ... or ought to—" Caimbeul paused to frown deeply at Pandeena, "-that ... he's not the Serpent. The Serpent is sa'necari."

"Don't remind me."

"Have you considered the possibility that the Serpent is a shape-thief?"

Alarm washed across Pandeena's face. "They are rare, aren't they?"

"Not as rare as I would like." Caimbeul considered things. Shape-thieves were sa'necari who could access the memories and take on the form of someone they killed in a special way. "It means the Serpent could be anyone."

"Do you think the Serpent attacked the little prince?"

Caimbeul shook his head and moved to the sofa beside Pandeena.

"Oh, no, you don't, you old lecher!" Pandeena jumped up and took over his vacated chair. "Stay where you are, and just answer my questions."

"No, I don't believe the Serpent attacked the prince. Vampire more likely, but if so it was either in bat form or one of the smallest vampires I've run into." Caimbeul showed the width of the bite between his thumb and forefinger.

"That is small." Pandeena sounded thoughtful. "I warded both the windows of his room, and all of the entrances to his play house."

"Thank you, Pandeena." Caimbeul reached inside his robe and rubbed the Godmark that Pandeena had burned into his

shoulder as a link between them. "See if you can find out what happened to his cat. Kenly has been missing for a week. Ask the animals."

"I'll do that."

* * * *

Claw sat in the main upstairs drawing room, the Blue Room, feeling frustrated. Aisha refused to allow him in the Great Hall because she did not trust him on the stairs yet. They were making an invalid of him and he resented it. Aisha, Merissa, his sisters also. Even Belgair and Malthus. That was the reason he had decided not to tell them that every single day he had more twinges of chest pain, more feelings of pressure as if someone were piling stones around his heart. It worried Claw, but the price of confession would be that they would gang up and put him back to bed again.

At least sitting in the drawing room meant that people came by to visit with him and he did not feel as isolated.

Claw stared down at his lunch: slices of lamb cooked with some of Aisha's pickled plums, a chunk of his favorite sharp cheese, and the half a bottle of that red wine he had shared with Malthus the other night. Claw worked the cork out and filled his glass. He still had two unopened bottles left of that Faewinian wine that Malthus had brought back from Hell's Widow for him. Malthus could be very thoughtful at times, but Claw could not get past all of his misgivings about the mon.

"Are you eating?" Fianait stood in the doorway.

"Yes."

"I'm going to look at your plate before it goes back to the kitchen, you know."

"Don't be such a pushy bitch!"

"Well I am." Fianait turned and walked off.

Claw grumbled for a few minutes about all the pushy bitches in his life, and then took a few bites of the lamb. Nothing tasted right, except for the wine. There was a vacancy in his life brought about by having no work to do. It made him itchy. Claw decided that he would insist that they find him something that he could do sitting here in his chair. Sheradyn had promised that if he continued to improve, Claw would eventually be allowed to take short walks in the garden. All the more reason to lie to the healer about the twinges. Shape changing and sex had been forbidden also. Claw felt as if he were suffocating beneath all the restrictions. The old doctor had tried to take away his tobacco, and his wine and spirits; however, at that point, Claw had rebelled.

The old wolf took a long swallow of wine and then another. He forced himself to chew up a few more bites of lamb and swallow it.

"Appetite's gone to hell," Claw muttered. He finished off the glass of wine and poured a second one. Drinking that glass faster than the first, he rang the bell for a servant.

Kissie came in, wiping her hands on her apron. "What would you, master?"

"I want the other bottle of red wine, like this one." Claw handed her the empty bottle. "And a corkscrew."

Kissie took the empty with her when she left.

Claw dug his fingers into his chest. Sharp pains jabbed through him, far more than the usual twinges. He felt cold and clammy. Claw shivered. His awareness grew fuzzy around the edges, and it seemed for a moment as if he were going to put his face down in his plate.

"Are you all right?" Malthus walked over and sat down at the table across from him. "You should eat more of that. Aisha and Merissa are going to worry if you don't start eating better."

Claw glared at Malthus. "I'm fine. I'm just not hungry," Claw growled. "Fianait and Searlait have already been in to lecture me. I'd eat more if they'd let me do more."

Malthus nodded thoughtfully, glanced down and to the side with a small smile. "But it will be difficult to convince them."

Kissie appeared with the bottle of wine, and set it on the table. Seeing Malthus, she asked him, "Will you be having some?"

"Yes, I would like that."

Claw started on his third glass of wine while Malthus harassed him into eating half of the lamb. Once Kissie returned with a glass for Malthus, they both sat drinking.

"No more than two glasses," Malthus said, covering his glass as Claw tried to refill it again. "I'm driving into Hell's Widow to pick up a few things. Merissa and your sisters made a list for me. Clodagh wants a few things for the camp."

"You come and go more than anyone else," Claw observed.

"That's because I'm coming and going for other people."

Claw's eyes narrowed. "And you've never run into any trouble."

Malthus pulled at the long, drooping ends of his mustache and his beard before answering, considering his reply. He could taste Claw's pain. Seeing the old bastard drinking the cursed wine had been a pleasant surprise. "I wouldn't say that. I've had to hide from the Queen a few times, and the Sharani have stopped me more than once."

"For months, young wolves have been killed not far from the bridge. Arrows poisoned with Devil's Silver and other arcane shit. Yet, you come through unscathed, time and again."

"It's a valid question." Kynyr Maguire had entered the room without Malthus hearing him.

"Remember I was a scout and forager for a kandoyarin company. I'm trained to handle situations like this one." Malthus downed his glass and stood to leave. "I must be on my way. I want to get there before dark."

Malthus left the Blue Room, and Claw gestured at Kynyr to close the door.

Kynyr did so, and joined Claw at the table. "Kandoyarin or not, he's either damned lucky, or he's part of the problem."

"His decision to go there seemed rather sudden." Claw pinched the corners of his eyes. "You think he knows you're planning a trip there?"

"We've kept it under wraps ... no, I don't think he knows."

"Be careful."

"As careful as I can."

Claw reached in his pocket and came out with a ring that he placed in Kynyr's hand. "Before I forget again, I want you to have this."

Kynyr stared at the ring for several moments, his throat tightening. "That's Tarrant's signet ring?"

"Yeah. It's yours by right. Wear it for me?" Claw gave him an uncharacteristically beseeching look that cut Kynyr to the heart. "I'm dying, Kynyr. Grant me this much before I die. Wear the ring."

Every fiber of Kynyr's being cried out to refuse, but he could not bring himself to do so. He slipped the ring onto his right hand. "I'll wear it."

Claw's expression faded into a grimace and he dug his hand into his left arm.

Kynyr's brow knit. "Are you all right?"

"Just tired. I tire too easy these days. I'll get a nap." Claw rang for the servants to help him back to bed.

* * * *

Darmyk lay in his bed, staring out the window. He wanted to go back to his treehouse, but his mother would not allow it yet. Everyone seemed worried that the vampire would get him again. He always cried when they said it was a vampire that attacked him; he wanted so desperately to tell them that it had been Ros. He had a hard time sleeping because he imagined that she would drain him in the night.

His nightmares caused him to wet his bed some nights, so his mother now had the servants putting pads beneath his sheets. That humiliated Darmyk and made everything worse. Six times a day they brought him a glass of blood and juice.

Claw's visits became the highlight of every day for him. A troll hunt had been suggested and some of the guards were

riding out each day to ask the farmers if any had been sighted. Troll blood and flesh had been suggested as medicine for Darmyk if he did not improve faster. The idea of eating a troll did not appeal to Darmyk at all.

His eyes filled up with tears. "Kenly's dead. Grandpa's dying. I hate them."

"Darmyk, don't say those things." Merissa's dress swished as she entered the room and sat down on the edge of the bed. "We don't know that Kenly's dead and your grandpa isn't dying. He's getting better. Just like you are."

The boy swallowed and said nothing.

"You must stop blaming everything on Malthus. He's a good mon and he cares about you."

Darmyk turned his face away. "He hits me."

"Only because he wants you to be a good cub."

"I am a good cub. Grandpa says so."

"Sweetheart, you're making it very hard on me when you keep telling people that you hate Malthus."

"He's not my father."

"Darmyk, your father doesn't want you!" Merissa spoke before she could stop herself.

The boy burst into tears. Merissa gathered him into her arms and held him while they both wept.

* * * *

Heironim's renovations of the Scarlet Petticoat pleased Malthus as he strode through. The boards on the veranda had been replaced, as had most of the furnishings. Lewd paintings adorned the walls of the foyer, setting the mood for obscene

tastes and perversions that cost extra. The clerk at the desk in the foyer, guarding the entrance to the rest of the mansion turned brothel, nodded to Malthus.

The sa'necari paused at the desk, placing his hands palm down atop it. "Did you work at the Crimson Lady?"

"I used to relieve Flavio there."

"Did you get a lot of lycan customers?"

"Yeah. Mostly for the cheaper whores."

"Have any lycans come here?"

The clerk shook his head. "We're the only brothel in town. But there hasn't been a one here since MacLachlan arrived."

"Lycan whores?"

"None of those either. If any survived the fire in the Red Lantern district, they've gone to ground somewhere else."

"I see." Malthus turned down the hallway to his right and spied Alexander Jondries. He dug in his pocket for the list and waved it at him. "Alex."

"You're back early." Jondries clasped Malthus' forearms in a casual greeting.

"I was offered an excuse to come and took it. Can you get this list filled for me fast? I can't stay long."

"Certainly." Jondries took the list and Malthus walked on.

He found Heironim in his office, going over a stack of reports. His appearance troubled Malthus. Heironim looked worn and tired, his clothing rumpled as if he had been sleeping in them, dark circles under his eyes.

Malthus embraced him. "Have matters gotten worse?"

"Yes and no." Heironim ran his fingers through his black hair. "It's getting hard to bring anything into Hell's Widow."

The garrison has barricaded the west road. They've begun erecting a palisade on that end."

Malthus did not like the sound of that. A wall around the town would make it difficult for him to receive shipments from his mother. "What's happening with MacLachlan?" Malthus asked him.

"Nothing. That's the problem. If they're looking for us, there's no sign of it."

"Don't let it lull you into a false sense of security."

"I won't." Heironim yawned and ran his fingers through his hair again.

Malthus raised an eyebrow. "Are you getting any sleep?"

"Not much."

"Get some tonight."

"I'll try."

"Has my mother sent anything else?"

"Just what's stacked over there." Heironim pointed at two crates sitting in a corner between two cabinets.

Malthus went over and pried them open. One contained bottles of expensive liquor. He carried it to the table and settled in, lifting one bottle at time out and reading the labels. "Ildyrsetti Rum. Claw will like that."

"The chieftain is taking an awful lot of killing," Heironim remarked, watching Malthus set death spells on the bottles.

"Not much more, I should think." Malthus sketched the spell on the golden glass. "He had a heart attack recently. There's enough here to give him a second one."

Jondries joined them, bringing with him a bottle of blood wine and glasses. "Your wagon is loaded."

"Good. Get these crates carried down to it." Malthus turned to Heironim. "Arm yourself. You're riding with me halfway."

"I am?" Heironim looked startled. "Why?"

"Don't ask questions. Bring your weapons, especially your bow, and meet me in the stables."

Malthus went down to his wagon. The rest of the supplies he had ordered were waiting for him in the back. He shifted the drugs, powders, and poisons to the wagon seat, took a necklace of small colored globes from a pouch at his waist, and spoke the command that sent those supplies into a green globe. Then he climbed over the seat and returned to the packages in the rear. Malthus added nine more bottles of liquor into the chest, spelling them as he worked.

Heironim appeared, yawning as he headed for his horse, which Malthus had ordered saddled. His bow case rode at his hip. "It's a long bow, Malthus. I can't comfortably use it from horseback."

"You're not going to be shooting from horseback."

"So I am going to be shooting?"

"Shut up."

Heironim had never seen Malthus so edgy, and acquiesced with a shrug.

They journeyed until late afternoon, which placed them at the last bend in the road before reaching the bridge over the Eirlys River onto Clan Red Wolf lands. It was the same spot where Heironim's units had ambushed Kynyr Maguire last summer. Malthus reined in, tied his team, and set the break.

Heironim looked about. "I don't see anyone to shoot. Am I going to ambush someone?"

"Yes," Malthus snapped at him. "Me."

"I'm what—"

"More than one person has remarked that I appear to be the only one coming and going safely," Malthus told his companion. "I don't want them becoming suspicious of me."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Simple. You're going to shoot me."

"Malthus...." Heironim's face twisted up in mingled doubt and distaste. "This is insane. The lycans will never buy it."

"They're stupid and emotional. They react with their hearts before their heads."

"You know them better than I do."

"I need some breathing space, Heironim. This will get it for me. Matters have been going well until now. Claw and Kynyr are becoming thorns in my sides with their suspicions."

"I hope you know what you're doing."

"I do. Now, you do have a few that aren't poisoned?"

"Well, yes. I carry both kinds. But...."

"Good. Get them out."

Heironim frowned and took several arrows from his quiver. He pushed the tips into the soil in a line so that they could be drawn fast in succession.

"Pepper the wagon first. Don't hit the horses; I need them to get home."

Heironim backed off and shot. Sidera Tyrins, Malthus' mother, had insisted upon the sa'necari she reared in her hidden estate learn to fight the way that the other races did,

especially the humans. Most sa'necari relied on spells and the hellblades—small daggers that frequently held a soul captive in their hilts to empower them—that they created and runed in arcane rites. The 'Band of Friends' as Sidera called them, could ride, shoot, and fence with the best the humans and their allied races could throw at them.

Once Malthus was satisfied with Heironim's efforts, he gestured for him to come close. "Read me while you shove it in. I want it left side of my chest, right up against the shoulder blade."

Malthus gritted his teeth. Heironim gripped Malthus shoulder to steady him. The breath whooshed around Malthus' teeth as the swallowtail arrow went deep into his flesh and he groaned.

"Are you all right?" Heironim frowned uncertainly.

Malthus nodded, sagging against the wagon seat. "Back off and...." Malthus swallowed. "Shoot me in my left leg ... and arm."

Malthus jerked and shuddered with each wound.

Heironim grimaced at the blood spreading through his spiritbrother's clothing. "I don't like this."

"Just do it." Malthus snarled. "Now the poisoned ones, Heironim."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm resistant to most poisons ... I should be fine. Right here." Malthus patted his chest.

"I'll be putting it in your lungs."

"If Sheradyn can't handle it, a bottle of blood will."

Heironim reached out to Malthus as he slumped across the reins. "Malthus..."

"Do it!" Malthus stiffened when the arrow entered his chest. "Go home, Heironim. Go home, damnit."

* * * *

The wagon creaked over the bridge into Red Wolf lands in the late afternoon. Using the ring of concealment that Lord Brandrahoon had given him to deceive the lycans as to his race, Malthus had reduced his enhanced healing ability to the level of a normal human, making the pain and weakness from blood loss the worst he had ever experienced. He drove slumped forward over his hand that clutched the knotted reins against his mid-section, fighting dizziness that threatened to drag him down into darkness. His ragged breathing emerged in struggling intermittent gasps, punctuated by coughing that brought up blood. The wagon slowed to a halt as it reached the middle. Malthus felt himself starting to black out.

The guardian wolves charged the bridge, led by Odhran who had duty that day.

They smelled blood, saw the way Malthus sat, and ran forward.

Odhran's eyes went to the shafts. "He's been shot."

Malthus heard Odhran's voice close by and rallied. He managed to lift his head a bit, groaned, and clutched his chest. "Help me...."

Odhran climbed onto the wagon, and took the reins from Malthus. He whipped up the horses, driving them across the

bridge, and down the road into the yard of the manor. Malthus sagged against Odhran, slipping into a semi-conscious state, barely aware of his surroundings. Odhran broke the shafts off in the middle to make it easier to handle him, and handed Malthus down to two of his companions. Changing into his hybrid form, he jumped to the ground, lifted Malthus from his companions' grasps into his arms, and cradled him to his chest. Two ran ahead of him to get the manor door open, while Odhran carried him inside.

Isbeth and Kissie appeared, followed by their mistress. Aisha's hand went to her mouth. She recovered in a flash, and started giving orders, sending a nibari to fetch Sheradyn and another after Merissa.

Odhran bore Malthus to his bed and laid him atop it after Aisha threw back the covers.

Sheradyn arrived, settled on the edge of the bed, and read Malthus. "Swallowtails. Hard to get out and ugly. Is there something he can bite on?"

Odhran pulled a leather glove from his belt and handed it to Sheradyn, who rolled it up and put it between Malthus' teeth. Malthus ground his teeth on the leather as the healer opened the wound in his chest a little wider with a tiny scalpel, stuck his fingers in carefully, and worked the barb out.

Gillivray extended a tray and Sheradyn dropped the arrow on it. Finally, the healer poured whiskey on the wound and stitched it closed.

Merissa rushed in, her face flushed with alarm. She swept to his side. "Malthus!"

At the sound of her voice, Malthus swallowed, and opened his eyes. He extended his hand to her and she clutched it. A suffering groan escaped him as Sheradyn began digging out the arrow in his thigh.

Once finished, Sheradyn gave him poppy milk to ease his pain. "Let him rest, questions are for later."

"Merissa ... I love you." Malthus gritted the words out and fainted.

* * * *

Pandeena and Caimbeul sat on the sofa together in her apartment. The lawgiver had procured one of the arrows that had been drawn out of Malthus' body and Pandeena sat turning it over and over in her hands.

"Swallowtail. This is the type of arrow that was pulled from Nikko's body ... and from Kynyr's."

Caimbeul stroked his rough chin and pulled at it as he thought. "So what do you make of all this, and can you get me a beer?"

Pandeena rolled her eyes at him, rose, and refilled his glass. "I think it's an attempt at misdirecting our suspicions from Malthus. After all, only one of the wounds were dangerous. It happened close enough to the bridge for him to get help easily. And...." She gave him the glass. "Most damning of all to my mind is that only a single arrow was poisoned ... and the blend was far more dangerous to lycans than to a human."

Caimbeul took a long swallow before nodding. "All of the others who have been shot coming and going ... the arrows

were poisoned. But everyone in the village is treating Malthus as if he were a hero."

"Which makes it all the worse for our cause. I'm afraid that only the most damning of evidence is going to convince anyone that Malthus is linked to the Butchering Serpent. Have you discovered anything more since we last spoke, you seemed close to something."

Caimbeul drained half his glass. "No. I've been promised a meeting with the person behind this gang I discovered, but so far it hasn't been forthcoming."

"And just who are the members of this gang?"

"I can't tell you that yet, Pandeena. If something should happen to me, it's all in my journals."

"You keep saying that. What if they should simply kill you and take the journals?"

"They'll never find them, but you can. I drew your mark on them in my blood to key it."

* * * *

Kynyr studied the placement of the arrows that had struck the wagon. It would all come down to his word against that of Malthus, and everyone knew that there was bad blood between them; which would make anything he said about Malthus suspect from the outset. Something wasn't right. If he could just put his finger on it.

"You going to stare at that wagon all day, Kynyr?" Erskine joined him with Finn trailing.

"Something isn't right."

Erskine chewed on his fingernail and walked all the way around the wagon. The tall lean wolf had an easy-going, low-key manner that made his observations seem considered and weighty. "Arrows only on one side. They were on both sides the day you were shot."

"Malthus caught one in the right lung, but Sheradyn says he's in no danger." Kynyr scratched at his sideburns in a gesture that those who knew him well had learned long ago indicated questions whirling around in his mind.

"Lucky shot?" asked Finn.

"Odd shot." Kynyr stepped around to the right side of the wagon. "If they were shooting at him from the front or the right, why weren't the horses hit? Why aren't there a few stray shots on this side?"

Erskine made another circuit. "You think it was staged?"

"Yes, but I've no way to prove it."

"Are we still riding out tonight?" Finn asked.

Kynyr nodded.

* * * *

Kynyr rode into Hell's Widow with Finn MacIver and Erskine Faraday flanking him and Vayle Stewart riding beside Robert Morcar behind them at the head of twenty soldiers. His handpicked myn had all been training with Todd, but only since the ambush that killed Ramsey Fitzgerald and Eideard Doyle. They went armored and wore their uniforms. Six wagons followed, driven by Kynyr's Sinclair cousins.

A haunted calm possessed Kynyr's spirit as he traveled the empty main street. Death seemed to shadow him. Too many

of his friends had died here, or on their way home from this town.

Passing Corbie Way, Kynyr glanced down at the burnt out ruin of the Crimson Lady brothel and his thoughts strayed to Cooley's mother, remembering how she had begged him to get her out. He had promised to return for her, but had not anticipated the ambush that killed two of his friends and left him wounded.

"Forgive me, Silkie."

Arriving at the edge of the Lycan Quarter, Kynyr found the streets barricaded and manned by soldiers in MacLachlan colors along with armed civilians.

Kynyr raised his hand and signaled the dismount.

He, Finn and Erskine walked up to the barricade.

"What's going on?" He called out to the guards.

A stout, red-haired lycan in an officer's tunic with the badge of House MacFie blazoned on the upper left corner, strode forward and glared at him. "None of your business, Red Wolf. Clan MacLachlan's done your work for you."

"I want to speak to the mon in charge."

"That'd be me." Fergus MacFie climbed over the barricade and jumped down. He strode up to Kynyr with a hand on the broadsword hanging from his hip. "Who the hell are you?"

Kynyr faced him with utter calm, every inch the leader of his myn. "Kynyr Maguire."

"You took your own sweet time getting here."

Kynyr shrugged. "I only got the message a few days ago."

Fergus' shoulder twitched, betraying the punch before he threw it.

Kynyr glided to the side and then in, avoiding the blow. He grabbed Fergus' wrist with a twist and a yank, moving too fast for Fergus to stop him. Kynyr twisted Fergus' arm up behind his back, bent him over, and placed a hand on the back of Fergus' neck. "That was stupid."

"You're the reason my brother's dead."

"Who's your brother?"

"Jordi MacFie."

"He was a good mon." Kynyr released Fergus with a shove and kicked him in the ass to send him stumbling. "Can't say the same for you."

Fergus regained his feet and spun around with his fists raised.

Kynyr gave him a chill look, ice and steel with a dash of skepticism. "You heard of Todd Sinclair?"

"The Battle-Master?"

Kynyr gave a slow nod.

"Everyone's heard of him."

"He's my grandfather."

Fergus wavered. "He train you?"

"Yeah."

"I'm Fergus MacFie." Fergus lowered his fists and extended his hand. "Glad to meet you."

Kynyr shook hands with him. "Glad to meet you too, Fergus MacFie. Can you open this barricade? We've brought food, liquor, and medical supplies. Also a healer."

They opened the barricade and Kynyr's myn and the baggage train rolled through.

"We've got a healer," said Fergus.

"Ours is better." Kynyr walked to the first wagon and helped Cahira down. "Fergus MacFie, I would like you to meet my Gram, Cahira Sinclair." He pointed at the big red-haired mon holding the reins of the wagon. "And my grandfather, Todd Sinclair."

Fergus' eyes nearly popped out of his head at the sight of two living legends.

"I assume you have a command post set up?"

Kynyr's question brought Fergus' attention back around. "At the Three Candles."

"To be honest, I didn't expect to find you here."

"And why shouldn't we be here?" Fergus bristled.

"I didn't say you shouldn't be. I said I didn't expect you. It's been two hundred years since MacLachlan marched."

"They didn't have me then."

"True." Kynyr lowered his head to conceal a tiny smile.

* * * *

Although Lord Brodrig MacLachlan sat at the head of the table, Kynyr could tell that Fergus MacFie ran things. Kynyr's pride experienced a twinge of resentment that seemed to come out of nowhere. If Kynyr had allowed Claw to acknowledge him, the head of the table would have belonged to him as Prince of Red Wolf. Kynyr began to see more disadvantages than advantages in hiding his ancestry, especially in terms of influence.

Darcy kept giving him hungry bitch looks that he knew too well, so Kynyr put his hands on the table, hoping that she would notice the wedding band on his left hand and stop.

Instead, she grabbed his right, turning it so that everyone at the table could see Tarrant Redhand's signet. "Willodarus' balls, you're a Redhand."

Silence struck the table. Robert and Erskine stared open-mouthed at Kynyr. Vayle Stewart dropped his gaze, lips pursed. Finn squirmed and broke the silence with a mutter. "Had to come out eventually, Kynyr. Especially with that thing on your finger."

Cahira, sitting at the end of the table with Todd, let out a sob and fled.

Amos, who had been seated on the other side of Cahira, looked stunned and bewildered.

Kynyr scanned the lycans at the table, trying hard to think of what to say. "All these years ... Gram tried to keep it secret. She thinks there's a curse on the Redhands."

"But you are one." Darcy turned Kynyr's hand about again for a closer look at the ring.

"Tarrant was my grandfather ... not Todd." Kynyr sucked in a deep breath. "Todd married Gram after Tarrant died."

Lord Brodrig MacLachlan rose from his seat. "You're the heir to the throne."

"Yes."

"Then this seat is yours."

Kynyr hesitated, glancing down the table.

"Go on, Kynyr. Take it." Robert gestured at the seat. "But don't think this lets you off the hook when we go out drinking."

"Go on, Kynyr," Finn shouted. "Otherwise I'll tell Kady and she'll give you a set of knuckle bumps."

"Kady?" Darcy turned toward Finn.

"His wife."

"Oh." Darcy looked so disappointed that it made Finn chuckle.

"Kady'd give a god knuckle bumps if she took a notion to."

Kynyr took his place at the head of the table. His thoughts drifted to Cahira, wondering if she would forgive him for breaking his promise and letting his ancestry become known.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DEADLY PRESENTS

When Malthus awoke the next day, he gave the servants the list of who to deliver what to among the things in the wagon, and had the crate of liquor brought to him. The rest of that day and for several afterward, the hours passed in a fog created in equal measures by pain and the fire poppy Sheradyn gave him for it.

That morning, Malthus sat propped up in bed, with pillows to his back, reading an innocuous book. Sheradyn wanted him to stay off his leg as much as possible, and when he could not avoid it, to use the cane resting against the nightstand. The door to his bedroom opened and Claw walked in accompanied by two servants; one carrying a small table and the other the checkers and board.

A nice gesture from the old wolf, but one probably provoked by something Aisha said.

"I brought you some gifts." Malthus pointed at the crate of liquor.

"And got shot for your trouble," Claw grumbled under his breath. "Set up the checkers and I'll have a look."

Malthus got the game pieces arranged on the board while watching for Claw's reaction.

Claw's expression brightened and some of his usual curmudgeonry dissolved into delight as he pulled bottle after bottle out. "Four bottles of Tormuth Whiskey!" Claw

exclaimed excitedly, patting a bottle. "Six more from Faewin! Five bottles of dark rum from Ildyrsetts. How the hell did you manage this miracle?"

Malthus smiled in a self-deprecating manner. "I wrote my mother. She has an estate along the Creeyan border these days. The Creeyans have access to nearly everything. I had to pick it up in Hell's Widow because the Creeyans won't fly into a lycan valley without advance permission from the chieftain, and I wanted to surprise you."

"Oh ho! You've surprised me. However," Claw's voice turned stern, "you will be more careful next time. I don't want to see my daughter a widow."

Malthus lowered his head to conceal the brief narrowing of his eyes at the false concern in the chieftain's voice. "We wouldn't want that certainly."

Claw gestured to the servants. "Bring two glasses. I must have a taste of this."

They sat and played checkers and drank for several hours. Malthus eagerly observed Claw drinking glass after glass of rum, calling his death closer and closer. The chieftain's capacity for alcohol impressed Malthus, and told him that he had chosen the proper vehicle to end Claw's life. Gradually, Claw began to feel the power of Malthus' curses, the lines of his face becoming ragged with pain. Malthus knew then that it would not be weeks, but only a matter of days before Claw had his next heart attack.

Claw sagged back in his chair, breathing heavily. "Ring for the servants. I need to lie down. Have them put my presents in a cabinet in the Blue Room."

Malthus nodded and reached for the bell on the nightstand.

* * * *

Kynyr walked to the window of his room, rubbing sleep from his eyes, and glanced out. Todd worked his forms in the yard as he did every morning at home in the salle. Six of Kynyr's Sinclair cousins drilled with their grandfather, while an audience in MacLachlan colors watched. When it switched to displays of weapon skills, sparring with practice weapons, the MacLachlan soldiers asked to be—and were—included only to find themselves bested by what was, ostensibly, wagon drivers. That prompted Kynyr's decision that it was time to make an appearance.

As Kynyr walked out into the yard, Darcy noticed him and fell into step beside him, giving him the eye again.

"Good morning, Prince Kynyr."

"Kynyr. Just Kynyr ... and good morning, Darcy."

Finn joined them and Kynyr muttered to him sotto voce, "Ugly cubs have more fun."

Finn winked, and grasped Darcy's arm to get her attention. "Seeing as how you're all armored up, would you go a round with me?"

"Go on, Darcy. Show him." Kynyr grinned and breathed a sigh of relief when Darcy walked off with Finn.

Kynyr approached the gathered crowd. His name rippled through and they opened a path for him. When he reached the front of the crowd, he gestured to catch Todd's eye.

Todd gave him a nod and finished giving Fergus MacFie pointers on form before excusing himself from the practice and leaving Kynyr's Uncle Queran in charge of it.

"Can we talk?"

"Ayup."

A path opened up and they strolled toward the inn.

"Todd, about what I did last night..."

"Let's find a quiet spot without an audience. It's all over the district that you're the Prince of Red Wolf."

When they stepped into the Common room, they found a dozen Sharani soldiers seated there drinking mead. Amos sprang to his feet and rushed to Kynyr, where he grabbed Kynyr's right hand just before sinking to one knee. "My prince."

Amos kissed the back of Kynyr's hand. Kynyr stiffened and stepped backwards, pulling his hand free. "Don't, Amos. Don't."

The innkeeper went from kneeling to complete prostration, causing Todd to chuckle.

Kynyr backed farther from Amos, bumping into the Sharani Captain who had approached him unnoticed. He looked up into her eyes—she topped him by a full six inches. "Excuse me."

"Hell's Widow is honored by your presence, your highness."

Oh shit. "Thank you, Captain?"

"Artemisia Leonidian, at your service."

Kynyr recovered from his surprise and extended his hand.

Artemisia shook his hand and then thumbed at the table.
"I'd like to have a few words with you."

"Of course." Kynyr took his place at the head of the table and Todd settled at his right hand.

"I hope that you won't take this wrong," the Captain began. "But having a royal prince in Hell's Widow carries with it the potential for a diplomatic incident that would go hard on my garrison."

"I came here to fight."

"Exactly my point."

"If you're asking me not to fight ... I don't lead from the rear."

"I could arrest you and toss your royal ass back on your side of the border." She gave him a look of bemused speculation.

"But you're not going to do that."

She snorted, eyeing Fergus and Brodrig who sauntered up to the table. "I doubt that MacLachlan would let me get away with it."

"Damned right," Fergus growled.

Captain Leonidian swiveled in her chair to face Kynyr again. "I'm attaching six ha'taren and fifty soldiers to this expedition of yours. Assuming you can even find this nest of deathmages you insist is here..."

"We can find them."

"You're very sure of yourself."

"I doubt that you've heard of Todd Sinclair..."

The Captain interrupted him with a loud chuckle.
"Everyone's heard of Todd Sinclair ... he's the only lycan ever allowed to train with the Ha'taren Guard."

Todd folded his arms on the table and leaned over them.
"I'm Todd Sinclair. Kynyr's my grandson."

"Ajan Sinclair, forgive my previous skepticism. But I still must insist on providing protection to Prince Kynyr."

The transformation in the Captain's attitude, the almost reverent undercurrent to her voice astounded Kynyr.

"Forgiven." Todd gave her a nod. "Accept them, Kynyr. They're good at what they do."

"So long as they obey orders."

"They will," the captain assured Kynyr.

"Then I thank you. We have only three healers. Can you provide those also?"

"I'll send six surgeons and their aides."

"And priests or mages?"

"Priests I can provide. Mages, I have none." Captain Leonidian shook her head. "They were all sent north to support General Dovane."

"Let me show you something." Kynyr drew his sword and laid it on the table. "How much lore do you have?"

"Some. I was a scholar before I became a soldier." She leaned closer to look at the sword, studying the maker's mark, the embedded runes of power, and the inscriptions on the blade. Her eyes widened in profound astonishment.
"That's Ladyfaith. Eldarion Havenrain forged her for his wife, Valestari the Silent, when the sa'necari under Waejonan—"

accursed be his name forever—first threatened the borders of Vallimrah. It's a deathmage killer. How did you come by it?"

"A gift from a god."

Captain Leonidian made the sign of the Aroanan Axe.

"Good luck to you, Prince."

"Thank you." Kynyr spied Darcy entering the common room with Finn. She saw him and made a beeline across the room in his direction. *Oh shit.* Kynyr rose to his feet to make a hasty retreat. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I must have a private word with Todd."

Darcy glared and propped her hands on her hips as Kynyr escaped upstairs with Todd close behind him. Finn whispered in her ear. She laughed and linked her arm through his, walking off with him.

* * * *

Kynyr ran his hand through his long hair and re-tied it. "I thought the bitches would stop chasing me once they knew I was married."

"You mean Darcy?"

"Yeah."

"Some just don't care. Wild Cousins is as much an instinct as a set of customs. No matter how much civilized polish you put on us, we're still just animals. You're what the ancients called an 'Alpha,' and it attracts them."

Kynyr glanced sidewise at Todd, wondering if he was about to get one of his grandfather's rare lectures. "I don't have to like it. But that's not what I wanted to talk about."

"When did you start wearing Tarrant's ring?"

"The night we left Wolffgard. Claw gave it to me ... begged me to wear it. He's extremely ill ... dying he says. I couldn't refuse."

Todd went to the cabinet near the door and took out a bottle of whiskey that Kynyr and he had stashed there the night before.

"Pour me one too."

Todd gave him a questioning look and grabbed a second glass. "You don't usually drink this early."

"Lot on my mind." Kynyr settled on a chair at the table standing catty corner from the bed. "He wanted to name me his heir. I refused. Now I'm cornered by a ring."

"Never underestimate Old Claw." Todd joined him and poured whiskeys for both of them. "How did he know? Did you tell him?"

"Yeah, I told him. The day after his heart attack."

"I knew it had to happen eventually. I guess I always did. That's why I trained you so hard, Kynyr. Bran didn't have the right stuff."

"My father was a good mon."

"I'm not saying he wasn't. He was too gentle for his own good."

Kynyr dropped his eyes and stared into his glass. "Somehow gentle seems like a bad word."

"It isn't. We need our myn of peace every bit as much as our myn of war. But, it is the duty of our myn of war to protect our myn of peace."

"Trevor tried."

"Kynyr, Bran went out to try and talk to them while Trevor got all the children to safety. Just as he got the last of the children out, Trevor heard your father scream."

"I didn't know." Kynyr fought down a wave of grief and knocked the whiskey back in his throat, pouring a second one. "How's Gram handling all this?"

"Not well. I wish you had waited longer before you put that ring on."

"I didn't have a choice."

"You had a choice, Kynyr."

"Had I refused to wear it, I would not have been true to myself." Kynyr looked away again. "Duty is where you find it."

* * * *

They gathered in an upstairs room that Amos rented out for meetings. It had a large table in the center. Fergus, Darcy, Lord Brodrig, and Father Gileaus were there on behalf of MacLachlan. Todd, Cahira, Finn, and Kynyr represented Red Wolf in the room. And a Sharani priest named Leanajys sat with an ha'taren—paladin of Aroana—near Cahira.

Cahira spread the map out on the table, placing small smooth rocks on the corners to hold it down, each a different color. Next, she set a bowl at the head of the map and filled it with water from a ewer. Opening a small black silk pouch, Cahira took out two clear crystals with long natural points. She placed one in the bowl of water.

Fergus scratched behind his ear. "Won't they have some kind of wards up?"

"Exactly. Scry wards. This may take days to do, but I'm going to check each building on the map until I find one that I can't get into. That will be it."

Fergus whistled.

"I'm not as good as Pandeena, but I'm thorough. Thoroughness will make up for much."

The Sharani priest, Leanajys, looked at the crystal that Cahira held. "Shouldn't that be on a chain?"

Cahira shook her head. "I'm doing a Telesthesian scry. It's the best way to discover a warded place. Watch the bowl as I work.'

Kynyr leaned across for a look at the map. "Did any of the brothels survive the fire?"

Darcy frowned at Kynyr. "You're married."

Kynyr ignored her. "Shortly after Cullen Blackwood was killed, the madam of the Crimson Lady sent me a letter. Later, I rode in and spoke to her. The sa'necari tried to buy her out. When she refused to sell, they employed other means to take control of it. My guess is that if there are any surviving brothels, that's where they'll be."

"None of them survived ... however, a new one went up. The Scarlet Petticoat." The Sharani officer said.

"Can you find it on the map?"

The Sharani officer scanned the map and put her finger on a spot.

Cahira laid the point of the crystal on the spot that the officer had indicated. She bent her powers and nothing happened. The water in the bowl remained clear. A prim smile spread across her delicate features. She moved the crystal to

Kynyr's War [Lycan Blood Vol. IV]
by Janrae Frank

the building beside the brothel and the bowl filled with images. "We found it. They're in the brothel."

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE HEIR WHETHER HE LIKES IT OR NOT

Using his cane, Malthus made his way through the halls of the manor early that morning. His wounded leg ached and twinged when he walked on it too much. He wondered how humans dealt with their wounds, or how they ever managed to survive the smallest of them. Had he dared to access his normal healing rate and fed on blood warm from the veins, Malthus would have been fully healed in less than a day. As it was, it was taking too long. Perhaps he needed to begin testing humans in his laboratories as well as lycans when the time came.

He found Claw in the Blue Room, sitting up alone. The chieftain kept kneading his left arm and digging the heel of his palm into the center of his chest as if he hurt. Malthus could tell that Claw was in bad shape, and guessed that pain was what had awakened the old bastard at such an early hour. It had to be severe to force Claw from a sound sleep. The room smelled of Claw's favorite tobacco, so Malthus knew that more of the spells were lodged in the old wolf's body.

A bottle of the cursed rum sat at Claw's right and a half-filled glass sat in front of him.

"It's a bit early to be drinking. Sun's barely over the horizon."

Claw paused in his rubbing and kneading to glare at Malthus. "I'll drink when I want to."

"If you aren't feeling well, wouldn't that medicine Sheradyn mixed for you be better?" Malthus' voice filled with concern.

"You're sounding as bad as Aisha and Merissa. You didn't let them fuss over *you*. Fetch yourself a glass and have a drink with me."

Malthus pulled at his mustache. "I don't—oh, all right." Malthus took a glass from a cabinet and sat across from Claw, who immediately filled it to the brim with rum.

"They're always getting on me to give something else up." Claw growled loudly.

"Don't wake the household. One of those silly servants will immediately get Aisha up if they think there's anything wrong with you. Then Merissa will arrive and they'll try to put both of us back to bed."

"Too true. Just let the damned bitches sleep," Claw growled, his palm started again on his chest.

Malthus sipped at his glass, staring into the contents, and finding it hard to conceal his pleasure at the taste of death in Claw's aura.

Claw refilled his glass. "They're trying to treat me like an invalid. It gets on my nerves."

"In your place, I would resent it too."

Claw drank two glasses in the time it took Malthus to finish one.

Malthus sipped thoughtfully, watching the lines of suffering deepen in Claw's face. The wolf was close to another heart attack. Malthus' necromantic senses became aware of the increasing agony in Claw's auric field, the way the heart

attack neared moment by moment. Anticipation filled Malthus with ecstasy. *Any minute now ... any minute. Yes!*

Claw went pale; sweat broke out on his grizzled face as he bent suddenly across the arm of his chair, his breathing hard. "Gods, it's a bad one."

The chair tipped over and hit the heavy carpets with a dull thud, spilling Claw into a twisted heap where he lay unmoving.

Malthus left his chair too quickly and his injured leg gave, dumping him onto the floor beside Claw. He crawled closer, glanced around to see if anyone had heard them. Malthus turned Claw's face and saw that the chieftain was unconscious. That thrilled Malthus. Killing the old bastard properly would take more time than Malthus could risk, and doing it wrong could leave traces that Readers might question. He bent close and inhaled the fragrance of Claw's agony before slipping his hand inside Claw's robe. His smooth hand slid across Claw's hairy chest and came to rest over the chieftain's heart.

At least, he could hurry the process and with luck Claw would be dead by evening. Malthus sent three precision strikes into Claw's heart, damaging fresh sectors of the heart muscle and constricting the blood flow from his arteries. He wanted to do more, but his sense of caution overrode his desires. He reminded himself that Claw was already dying; it was just a matter of pushing him over the edge; Malthus could afford to be patient.

Malthus used his cane and the edge of the table to get to his feet. *Damnit.* His insides were parched and he was totally

unhappy being lame. He still had some bottles of blood in his carrying globes and Malthus intended to heal himself while everyone was too busy worrying about Claw to notice his own improvement.

He limped from the room and up the stairs, turning right along the corridor and pounded on Sheradyn's door. "Claw's having an attack in the Blue Room. Quickly. Come quickly."

Gillivray opened the door, blinking and nodding sleepily. "We're coming."

Sheradyn threw a robe on and grabbed his satchel. When they reached the Blue Room, the healer Read him and immediately administered a bluish powder to Claw's nostrils and gums, rubbing it in.

Malthus roused the servants to carry Claw to his bedroom. By then the entire household was moving. Merissa grabbed at Malthus and he slowed down, wrapping his arms around her. "What happened?" she asked, her eyes wide and wet.

"We were sitting here talking and he collapsed."

When they had gotten Claw to bed and left a servant to sit with him, Sheradyn called Aisha, Merissa, and Malthus into Malthus' study. "Two attacks this close together ... well, my news isn't good. Claw is old. His heart is worn out and it's failing him. There is a strong possibility that the next one will kill him." Sheradyn lowered his head, searching for words. "And I expect that it could come in the next three ... maybe four weeks."

Merissa sobbed against Malthus' shoulder while he held her long after the others had left.

Malthus patted and stroked, making comforting noises, yet all the while feeling exhilarated by the taste of Claw's pain.

* * * *

Claw looked up from the bed table when Pandeena entered. He shoved the sheaves of paper at her. "Make three copies. I want yours, mine, and Caimbeul's signatures on them."

"What is it?" Pandeena moved a chair close to the bed and sat down.

"My last will and testament."

"They told me you were ill, but not what."

"My heart. I've had two heart attacks in less than two months. Sheradyn says the next one will kill me." Claw looked down at his hands, clearly uncomfortable talking about it. "He also doesn't think it's far off."

Pandeena lowered her eyes and then reached out a comforting hand to squeeze Claw's forearm. "I'm sorry. Can I Read you?"

"You won't find anything that Sheradyn hasn't."

"But I would like to anyway."

Claw nodded and extended his wrist.

Pandeena Read Claw. She saw the extensive weakness of his heart, the narrowed arteries, and damage around his lungs also. Yet there was an odd residue of something. She could not quite call it arcane, and yet it was clearly not chemical. "Sheradyn is right. I doubt you'll see Solstice."

"I thought as much." Claw grasped her hand as if he were fighting for words. "I have a brother."

Pandeena's head came up and she regarded Claw in surprise. "This is the first I've heard."

"We don't speak of him much. Brock left under a cloud a century ago. And it wasn't his fault. He's only been back twice. The last time was when Merissa was twelve." Claw paused, thinking. "Odd thing was. He looked young enough to be his own grandson."

"Any long lived in your family?"

"None."

Pandeena pursed her lips and nodded. "Yet you are sure it was Brock?"

"Yes. Now, take care of those papers," Claw told her. "Don't let anyone know you have them."

"I promise."

"I want Brock as regent. He's in Creeya. Go to the Grand Master. Find my brother."

"I'll find him."

"Before you look at that ... do you know about Kynyr?"

Pandeena's brow furrowed into a distressed line. "That his father was Tarrant's bastard?"

"How long have you known?"

"I'm long-lived. I fought in the battles of the Rebellion."

"You're *that* Moonbow?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about my son and Cahira."

"It was after the Battle of Skeleton Creek where Tarrant was wounded. He was feverish and a bit addled. He kept calling her Brigit. She was just sixteen, young and inexperienced in her craft, but very talented. Cahira told me

later that she had been so afraid that he was going to die ... that she did not resist when he pulled her into bed with him. The next day she told me what had happened and asked me to Read her. Tarrant had gotten her pregnant."

"I see." Claw could not hide his disappointment.

"No, you don't. As Tarrant healed, he fell more and more in love with her. The day before he rode off to Kinsdale Wood, he told Todd and me that he intended to marry her. Then he and Todd left and the Ambush at Kinsdale Wood happened."

"I thought Todd died there. Until I saw him last summer."

"So did I. One of the survivors told me that Todd kept fighting, covered in wounds, trying to reach Tarrant and save him. When Todd went down, the survivors broke and fled."

"I don't see how he lived."

Pandeena sucked in a breath and focused herself to finish the story. "A peddler named Dyna stumbled upon Todd. She healed his wounds and nursed him back to health."

"Lifemage?"

"No. She had one of the last existing bottles of the Sapphire Elixir of Idyn in her possession." Pandeena decided that it was best not to tell him that the peddler had been Dynanna and that the elixir had been stolen from the Sun-God Kalirion. The Trickster stole from gods, dragons, demons, and mortals indiscriminately.

Claw considered that. "I want Kynyr as heir, but he's already refused me twice."

"There are a lot of ifs, ands, and buts in this thing," Pandeena said as she read the documents and her eyes widened. "You're disinheriting Merissa and her children?"

"Kynyr is my heir of choice. But if he won't take it, there's still his infant brother, Bran. Or the child that Kady is carrying." Claw managed a harsh chuckle. "Kynyr doesn't want the throne. Brock might be able to change Kynyr's mind ... but who knows? I have to cover all possibilities. Assuming Brock refuses to come ... then Kynyr is my second choice for Regent. One way or another, heir or regent, Kynyr is getting stuck with the job."

"I'm in favor of that. When push comes to shove, I am certain that Kynyr will accept his duty to Red Wolf. I doubt you need to bring Brock into this."

"If matters are bad as I suspect, Pandeena ... Kynyr will need allies, powerful allies ... and only Brock can bring them."

When Pandeena left the manor, she carried the papers in her pouch. She had hated lying to Claw about her knowledge of Brock, but the more years Claw could add to estimate her agelessness, the more danger that he would figure out the truth. Walking quickly into a dense stand of trees in the nearby forest, she jumped from Wolffgard to her mother's home. She found the long living room nearly empty for once. Little Moss ran yapping around her feet and she scooped the dog into her arms, scratching behind his ears.

A cheery fire burned in the hearth, throwing its warmth through the room to chase away the late autumn chill. Her mother, Navaryn, looked up from her conversation with Teakamon the Shepherd of the Wilds.

Navaryn crossed the room and hugged her daughter. "What is it, dear? You look like you have something on your mind."

"I do." She explained about Claw and Brock. "I've never been to Creeya, so I can't get a psychic fix on it to Jump there."

Teakamon flicked back his heavy green hair that hung to his waist. "Dynanna and Dynarien have been there, but they've been elusive lately."

"Dynarien I can understand. He's caught up in this triadic marriage of his to Edouina Hornbow and Talons Trollbane. But Dynanna dragged you all out here to fight the dark ones and protect a child ... a child I might add who is threatened by the Serpent. Then she just disappears to play a lone hand as usual." Pandeena did not attempt to conceal her irritation.

"I could ask my stepmother to help," suggested Teakamon.

Pandeena shook her head at that. "I would never feel comfortable calling upon the Queen of Imralon. Will you ask the others when they show up? It may take time finding Brock and I want to start as soon as possible."

"Certainly, Pandeena," said Teakamon. "They come through all the time."

* * * *

Lying in bed, spooned around Darcy MacFie, Finn MacIver decided that being spiritbrother to a prince had its advantages. He did not mind being second choice, so long as he got chosen for some of life's more delightful pastimes. He had never had such an energetic bedmate before. Darcy was as passionate in bed as she was on the battlefield.

Finn nuzzled her neck, his frost blond hair contrasting against her crimson locks. She opened her eyes, giving him a deceptively languid glance as she ground her buttocks into his loins. He tongued her maimed ear.

A preemptory knock sounded on his door, it opened, and Erskine stuck his head inside without waiting for an answer. "Finn, haul your ... uhm ... You've got company."

Darcy sat up with a snarl, grabbed an empty whiskey bottle from the nightstand, and threw it at him.

Erskine retreated, and gave his message through the closed door. "Finn, Kynyr wants you and Darcy in the command room anon."

"We'll be there." Finn turned to Darcy with a wry grin. "It's not nice to throw things at a superior officer."

"He's not my superior."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

UNWANTED DISCOVERIES

Claw sat alone in the Blue Room, playing a hand of solitaire. Merissa had gone to visit her granddam, taking Darmyk, Aisha, and his two sisters with her in their carriage. Normally he would not have felt so alone. After all, he had the servants and the myn-at-arms. They were only going for a day, and would return by nightfall.

It had been difficult for him to get his bitches back to a normal routine, to persuade them to stop fussing over him. If he was going to die, then he would die whether they were gone or not. Deep down inside, Claw did not want Aisha with him when the end came. The old chieftain wanted to spare her the sight of him slipping away. With luck, when the time finally came, it would be while they were away on one of their regular visits to see Aisha's mother.

He poured another small glass of the rum that Malthus had given him. Claw appreciated the smooth, sweet taste of the amber liquor, the sensual way that it clung like syrup to his palate and throat. He wished Kynyr would get home. The more his health worsened, the more Claw felt as if the reins of power in his own home were slipping from his grasp, and only Kynyr stood between him and disaster.

Malthus stopped at the door and looked in at him. "I'm going into the village. Is there anything you wish me to bring back?"

Claw waved him off. "Nothing at all. The liquor was the best present you could have given me."

"I'm glad that you think so. It's a pleasure to see you enjoy it."

Malthus walked on and Claw was left once more alone.

Belgair came in and sat down at the table beside Claw.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Claw lied.

Belgair picked up the bottle of Ildyrsetti rum and examined the label. "That's a legendary year."

Claw nodded. "You want some?"

"I'd like that." Belgair fetched himself a glass and poured a measure from the bottle. He sipped his drink a moment. "I didn't come to make small talk, Claw."

"I didn't think you had."

"I wanted to talk about Merissa."

"No, you didn't," Claw grumbled. "You've come to talk about Sheradyn's saying I'm going to be dead soon."

Belgair knocked down his drink and poured another. "I didn't want to put it that way."

"Don't dance around the issues, Belgair. It irritates me."

Claw refilled his own glass.

"The children will need a suitable regent to run the estate for them. Malthus can't serve."

"Thank the gods for that."

"You don't like him."

"I don't."

"Why? He's a good mon, Claw."

"Just because I don't." Hair sprouted along Claw's arms in irritation. "I wanted Merissa to marry her own kind."

Belgair gave a small nod of acquiescence. "I understand. You'll have to choose a lycan to be regent until the babes that Merissa is carrying come of age."

"I already have."

"Who?" Belgair lifted his eyebrow.

"Brock."

"Pssah! He hasn't been seen in nearly ten years and he went eighty without being seen before that."

"Brock will come."

"I doubt that Fianait could bear to have him here. My father says she threatened to kill herself over it."

"Brock is a good mon."

"Brock cocked-up his own sister. Some say he raped Fianait. You really want someone like that raising your grandcubs?"

Belgair's statement hit Claw hard, and his chest tightened painfully.

Fianait had admitted years ago that she had used an arcane aphrodisiac to force her twin Brock into a sexual relationship, but people still blamed his brother for getting her pregnant. A side effect of the potion, which she had gotten from a shrine to Ishla, had nearly killed Brock. As a result, their father had thrown the Ishlanan priests out of the valley and torn the shrine down. Old Suleahan Redhand tried to clean up the disgrace by exiling Brock and forcing an abortion on Fianait. The result destroyed Fianait and left her emotionally and physically fragile.

Claw's lips curled back and his eyeteeth looked wolfish.
"Are you suggesting yourself?"

"I'm doing most of it already."

"I want my own flesh and blood looking out for my grandcubs."

"Claw, this is a bad decision."

Claw's face flushed and he smashed his fist on the table.
"Don't argue with me! My mind is made up. I want Brock."
Sharp pain lanced through the chieftain's chest. Claw's face went from bright red to pasty white. "Help me back to bed and fetch Sheradyn."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BATTLE OF THE SCARLET PETTICOAT

After getting as much information as possible from his scout reports, Kynyr decided to attack at dawn when most of the prostitutes and non-combatant employees of the brothel would be gone to bed. Fighting room to room at close quarters had enough inherent complications, that he did not wish to add somewhere between thirty and forty terrified whores into the mess. Fergus wanted to go in and kill everyone as he had done at the Green Sheaf, but Kynyr had overruled him.

Odds were that at least some of the prostitutes had been Silkie's girls; and Kynyr felt that he owed it to Silkie's memory, since he had been unable to save her, to save as many of her girls as he could. Silkie had run her brothel like a fiefdom, protecting her own against all threats.

They moved into position at moonset. Darcy and her bitches took out the sentries and patrolling guardsmyn. Units were set in place to catch anyone attempting to escape after the action began. All the lycans had changed to hybrid form, but Kynyr's myn were the best-armed, armored, and trained thanks to Todd.

Kynyr, at the head of his personal guard, hit the front door. Three guards in the foyer looked up as the door crashed inward. Kynyr gutted the first one before his sword could clear leather, glanced, and saw that Finn and Erskine had

already eliminated the other two. Two doors opened to his right and a third to his left. Acting on his gut instinct, Kynyr went right and his myn followed him while the Sharani units took the left and the second right.

* * * *

Fergus, his axes bloody, checked rooms as he went.

Kynyr could bloody well complain later, but Fergus MacFie had no intention of taking chances and leaving anyone alive in his path. They were all guilty by association.

The bedroom he entered contained a prostitute. She screamed and tried to wedge herself between the back of the bed and the floor. Fergus popped her between the eyes with his axe and jerked it free oozing with bits of gray matter and blood. He wiped it on the bedspread and went on.

The bedrooms thinned out and he began finding empty offices.

Guards started appearing and Darcy bolted past Fergus to engage the nearest one.

* * * *

Jondries burst into Heironim's quarters with a dozen soldiers at his back. He had his blades buckled on and a loaded crossbow in his hand. "They've found us."

"Tell me something I don't know." Heironim went to the weapons rack, loaded two crossbows and hung them from his harness with a quiver of bolts, settled an array of knives on his waist, his harness, and his arms. "We're getting out of here, Alex."

"I don't know how they found us," said Jondries.

"Doesn't matter." Heironim made one last adjustment to his harness and started walking with a crossbow in hand.

He gathered his myn and headed down the corridor to the back door.

"What do we do?"

"We get out of here, Alex. That's what we do. The game is lost."

A lycan appeared in the corridor.

Heironim shot him, and paused to reload. One of his soldiers shoved a blade into the wounded lycan's throat and finished him off. Then they went on.

"Where do we go? Sidera's?"

"Northeast. Try to link up with Egidius."

* * * *

"Bloody hell, Darcy! Don't get so far ahead."

Fergus trotted down the corridor with his soldiers trying to overtake her, but the scent of blood and death had brought out the wolf in her and she was in hot pursuit of a fleeing enemy.

Darcy overtook the Waejontori in an intersection of hallways, and slammed her sword into his back. She kicked him off the blade and turned as Fergus caught up with her.

Fergus glanced down the hallway just as a group of armed myn appeared led by a tall, broad-shouldered sa'necari and a lean spindleshanks of a mon. The crossbows in their hands registered.

"Bloody hell, get back, Darcy." Fergus stepped between her and the approaching soldiers. He grunted as a bolt hit him in the stomach, staggered and started to fall. A second bolt caught him in the shoulder. He struck the wall and slid to the floor, settling in a seated position with his back to it. Fergus' fingers dug vainly at the chain mail around the bolt in his belly, as a howl of anguish ripped from his throat, which the lycans called the death scream.

Fergus' vision grayed, his head settled sideways onto his left shoulder. Then his shoulders sagged, and his hands slid to either side of him.

Darcy stared for an instant at her fallen cousin. "Fergus."

His name caught in her throat, waves of emotion rushing through in her rapid succession. Grief and guilt melted into rage. "Bloody sa'necari."

The MacLachlan soldiers faltered at seeing him fall.

Darcy rallied them with dire imprecations and they engaged the enemy.

The two leaders broke free of the melee and started past Fergus. Desperate to take one of them with him, his fingers closed upon his axe and his blurring vision focused upon Jondries' thin legs. Fergus chopped into Jondries' back with all his failing strength.

Jondries' shrieked, spun, and plunged his sword into Fergus' chest with a twist.

Fergus' face screwed up into a grimace, his lips parted, and he stilled.

* * * *

Covered in golden fur, Kynyr fought his way down the corridor in hybrid form, as were the rest of his myn. Only in hybrid form could they hope to match the stronger of the sa'necari. They had finally stumbled upon the most heavily guarded sections, which could only mean that Lord Heironim Traxton and Alexander Jondries were nearby.

He arrived at the intersection of corridors in time to witness Jondries driving his blade into Fergus before following Heironim through the back door.

"Bastards!" Kynyr bolted for the door with Finn at his heels.

Finn scooped up Fergus' axe.

Hair the color of cream and honey coated all the exposed surfaces of Finn MacIver's skin. They emerged into the frost killed gardens that offered little concealment. "Finn, take the skinny one. Be careful. The way he shrugged off Fergus' blow. They're both steeped-in-death."

Jondries had left a trail of blood on the flagstones that veered left. Finn took off after him.

Kynyr scanned the paths and noticed footprints leading ahead and right, breaking the brittle patches of frost on the ground. He overtook Heironim near the rear walls of the garden. Twelve feet of gray and black mottled stone blocked Heironim's flight. A gilding of frost left the gold and orange cobblestones slippery, melting along the edges of the autumn killed grass. Leafless oaks and maples raised stark brown fingers into the air, sprinkled through with white pines. Wooden benches stood scattered, some beneath the trees and others fronting the path. Boulders, placed for artistic

effect, pressed close to rose bushes gone dormant for the winter.

"Turn, bastard." Kynyr stepped off the path, taking in all the potential obstacles and every thing that might offer him a tactical advantage. "I'm Kynyr Maguire."

"Maguire." Heironim smirked. "Finally."

"Lord Traxton, I presume?"

"The name of your death, prince."

Heironim unsheathed his broadsword and lunged at Kynyr, his amaranthine eyes glittering as he swung. The differences in their styles showed immediately. Heironim relying on sheer brutal strength and hammering ferocity; Kynyr defending and attacking with an elegant economy of motion, unfazed by the novelty of a sword-wielding sa'necari.

The shock of impact as their swords met revealed that Heironim's strength matched Kynyr's hybrid own. Heironim's blows might not pierce his kendaryl corselet, but a solid strike would break Kynyr's bones beneath it.

"I killed your friend." Heironim sidestepped a blow aimed for his head and thrust at Kynyr.

Kynyr parried, rage heated his veins, but intellect cooled it to ice. "Which one?"

"Cullen." Heironim retreated before a furious attack and launched his own.

"Bastard."

They danced across the garden amid the hedges and rocks, pushing each other to their limits.

"I nailed him to a chair ... after breaking his arms and legs."

A cold shiver ran up Kynyr's spine and words came into his mind out of nowhere, found their way to his tongue, and he spit them at Heironim as if at the promptings of a ghostly whisper. "I killed Ellie."

Heironim lost control with a shriek mingled equally of grief and rage; throwing everything he had at Kynyr without thinking, desperate to damage the wolf.

Kynyr changed tactics, jumped onto a bench and struck hard at Heironim's head. Their swords met. Kynyr locked Ladyfaith against Heironim's blade and forced it up, and then kicked Heironim in the chest and sent him stumbling.

Springing from the bench, Kynyr struck swiftly, coming at Heironim from all directions in quick succession before Heironim could recover his balance. Every time Heironim's blade became entangled with Kynyr's own, the wolf kicked him.

Gradually, Kynyr's assault forced Heironim to back up. Heironim's foot struck a decorative boulder and he went sprawling onto his back on the wet ground.

Before he could rise, Kynyr grasped his sword in both hands and drove it into Heironim's belly. The sa'necari's chain mail parted like warm butter beneath the force of Kynyr's inhuman blow.

Heironim shrieked. His sword slipped from his hand as his fingers gouged the soft earth. He bucked and writhed.

Ladyfaith began to hum and glow.

Heironim convulsed, screaming. A white mist flowed from his lips as Ladyfaith forced his body to expel all the pieces of stolen souls that had given him his power and strength.

Kynyr released the hilt, leaving it standing in Heironim's belly, and stared, unable to believe what he was seeing.

Out of the mist a feminine shape formed. She reached out to Kynyr.

"You are the true and only prince. You are the King of the Wolves."

"The curse..."

"Is not a curse ... it is a prophecy. Ask the boy with the book."

She faded away to nothingness and vanished.

* * * *

Finn tracked Jondries by the trail of blood, the Sharani longsword with its hand and a half hilt held ready, glinting in the frosty morning sunlight. The blue-violet kendaryl blade bore a maker's as distinguished as that of Kynyr's Ladyfaith: the minor god worshipped by the dwarves, Gimligloikynen. So far as anyone had been able to determine, it had no name, although it was common knowledge that Gimligloikynen had always named his master blades.

As the splashes of blood grew farther and farther apart, smaller and smaller, Finn knew that the sa'necari's healing gifts had kicked in and started closing the wound. *Steeped-in-death is right.*

A scream followed by a whimper drew Finn around a stand of evergreens and he saw Jondries crouched over a scantily clad female, his fangs deep sunk in her neck. She must have been one of the whores who had fled the fighting only to end up as Jondries' dinner and healing elixir.

Blood would heal the wound that Fergus had given him. Finn darted across the distance separating them, determined that Jondries would not heal himself.

"Get off her, bastard."

Jondries' eyes slitted sideways as he dropped her. He limped toward an arbor, the curved and interlocked trellises bent above a low bench. The marked limp betrayed the fact that Jondries had not had time to drink deeply enough to heal himself.

He climbed through the arbor as Finn knelt to check on the female. She was dead.

"Damn."

Finn snarled and climbed through the arbor after Jondries. Beyond it lay a postern gate, rusted solid by years of disuse. Jondries pounded on it, trying to force it open.

As the sa'necari turned at the sound of Finn's arrival, the lycan chopped into Jondries' side with the axe, re-opening the half-healed wound, and jerked it free.

Alexander Jondries shrieked, twisted to face Finn, and his gaze fell upon the kendaryl blade.

"It won't help you, wolf." Jondries sneered, lunging to the side as he brought his sword to guard. "I'm steeped-in-death."

For a moment, they faced each other.

"Alexander Jondries?"

"Yes."

"Finn MacIver." Finn's lips curled back from his teeth in a wolfish grin. "Amos says you rited little Sainy."

All of Claw's guardsmyn who frequented the Three Candles Inn had been fond of Sainy. Finn had known Sainy since she was eight years old, a laughing, happy cub always eager to help; and watched her blossom into lovely young bitch.

"I did. Filthy little beast ... like fucking a dog."

If Jondries was hoping to provoke Finn with that remark, he was doomed to disappointment. Todd had trained Finn well. Finn assessed the terrain of the garden as he circled Jondries, taking in the decorative boulders and benches, the leafless rose bushes with their thorns. Sa'necari wielding swords instead of their banesblades and spells would take some getting used to. Finn watched Jondries' free hand for signs and gestures that would tell him a spell was being readied.

Jondries favored his right side as he launched a darting attack upon Finn. The wolf retreated, dodging to the right and forcing Jondries to put his weight on his injured side. Finn came about with a forward lunge. Jondries parried, his weight came down too hard on the right and he stumbled.

Recovering his balance, Jondries fled and Finn pursued. Their course paralleled the high stonewall encompassing the garden. Jondries had to be looking for another exit. A long hedge forced Jondries to veer from the wall and head back into the garden.

Finn closed with him, striking again and again at the right. Jondries snapped into garde stance, executed a lunge, and followed with a circular cut.

Finn took a gliding step to the side and dropped to the ground avoiding Jondries slashing riposte. One hand on the

ground, he thrust hard and his blade hit Jondries in the belly, knocking the wind out of the sa'necari and breaking the links on his chain mail.

Jondries staggered back, gripping his stomach as blood leaked through the broken links. Rage and shock mingled in Jondries' eyes. The kendaryl blade had not gone deep, but it hurt. He plunged through an evergreen bower.

Screams came from the other side. Finn followed, his sword extended and Fergus' axe readied. Two children crouched behind a bench, their backs to a hedge. Jondries reached for them, his fangs down, and his eyes glittering with blood hunger, determined to heal himself.

Finn smacked Jondries in the right with his sword. Jondries pivoted on his left leg, his limp had worsened. The children bolted from behind the bench. Finn moved to block Jondries' pursuit of the youngsters.

"You're not getting them."

Jondries backed away, snarling wordlessly.

The lycan sprang onto a boulder, from there to a bench and then executed a somersault over Jondries' head. Finn landed behind him and hit him with a side slash to his injured right. The sa'necari's right knee gave and he went down, twisting to keep Finn in view.

Finn's fur thickened and his face snouted as he went as far into the hybrid form as he could. He parried Jondries' counter, side-stepped into a lunge and drove the blade with all his force into Jondries right side, into the same spot that Fergus had broken the links of Jondries' armor with his axe earlier.

Jondries screamed.

The lycan twisted the kendaryl blade in the wound, kicked Jondries in the ass, and sent him face down. Stomping on the sa'necari's blade arm, Finn moved to bring his sword down across Jondries' neck.

The swift gesture of a spell caught the edge of Finn's vision and he threw himself sideways to avoid it. Black force struck Finn in the chest, passed through his armor, and sent pain raging through his body.

Death Web. Finn sank to his knees, fighting the burning fire in his lungs. He had been so caught up in fighting Jondries as a swordsman, that he had forgotten to watch for the magic.

Jondries dragged himself up, entangled Finn's blade from above, and pulled a runed hellblade from his belt.

Breathing hard, Finn threw himself backwards and rolled. Jondries gained his feet and took a tottering step after Finn. The lycan's eyes narrowed. One cut from that hellblade, and depending on the runes it carried, Finn would be in serious trouble.

He rose to his knees with a series of swift feints of his sword, twisted and chopped hard at Jondries' left hand with the axe. Bone snapped and the hellblade dropped from Jondries' grip. The sa'necari made a staggering retreat.

Finn lurched to his feet. The pain from the spell had started to fade and Finn guessed that the armor must have absorbed or deflected the worst of it. Mastering his body, Finn beat Jondries' defenses down and hit him again in the right side. The sustained punishment to his right finally told and Jondries collapsed.

Clutching his wounds, Jondries stared up at Finn and whimpered. "No."

"You killed Sainy." Finn's words emerged hoarse and rasping, spoken with the savagery of an injured animal. "She was the sweetest little thing ... never hurt anyone."

Jondries tried to writhe from the path of Finn's descending blade, and failed. The kendaryl sword passed through his neck and broke through the bone. The sa'necari's head parted from his body. Jondries' amaranthine eyes blinked and then glazed in death.

Finn settled on a boulder, wiped his sword in the frosted grass, and sheathed it. His shoulders drooped, and his head lowered. His eyes closed in exhaustion. The sound of footsteps made him open them again.

"Finn?" Kynyr gripped his spiritbrother's shoulder. "Are you hurt, Finn?"

"Nah. I'll be okay." His gaze was drawn to Heironim's head hanging from Kynyr's belt by the hair. "That the bastard killed Cullen?"

"Yeah."

"He's Jondries." Finn snagged Jondries' head and tied it to his belt by the hair.

He rose wearily and staggered two steps.

Kynyr caught him and shouldered his weight. "Ugly cubs have more fun."

"Yeah we do."

Walking to the brothel together, they noticed that the sounds of fighting had ceased.

* * * *

Fergus' hand closed on Darcy's. The Sharani surgeons had given him a large dose of Pollendine, a narcotic so potent and potentially addictive that it was usually only given to the dying, yet it barely eased his pain.

"Darcy ... tell Siusan ... I loved her."

"I will, Fergus. I promise."

Lord Brodrig grasped the arm of the Sharani surgeon as she walked off from treating Fergus. "How is he?"

She shook her head. "Nothing we can do. Nothing at all. None of us are Menders."

A forlorn look came over Brodrig's young face. He went to Fergus and stroked a lock of sweat-drenched red hair from his friend's face. "Hold on, Fergus. Just hold on."

Fergus gave him a long, weary glance. "Face it, boy. It's the end of me."

"No." Brodrig spun on his heel, glancing frantically for Cahira. He failed to see her, but reasoned that as short as she was, she would be easy to miss. He worked his way through the common room crowded with wounded and dying, searching for her.

He had about given up when he heard her distinctive voice coming from a corner of the room. Cahira stood talking to a pair of Sharani priests who had come to pray for the dying.

Brodrig pushed between the priests, getting a glare from them.

Cahira took his hand and drew him to her. "What is it, Lord Brodrig?"

When the priests realized that he was the MacLachlan lord, their attitudes shifted to concerned and attentive.

"It's Fergus MacFie. He's dying. He needs a Mender."

"I'm exhausted..." Cahira began.

"Can you draw from rapport?" asked Leanajys.

"I haven't done it in years."

"Are you willing to try? We'll help you."

"Yes." Cahira allowed Brodrig to guide her through the room to Fergus' side with the two priest walking behind them.

She unshouldered her satchel and placed it on the table that Fergus lay upon. She grasped his wrist and Read him.

"It's going to be iffy. Very iffy."

Cahira wiggled her fingers into the belly wound. "Circle."

A pattern of white energy snapped into being, linking the priests to Cahira. She closed her eyes and drew upon their psychic energies. Despite their augmentation, Cahira swayed and looked ready to faint from exhaustion when she finished.

"What have you done?" Darcy asked.

"Mended his wounds." Cahira forced herself to focus, snapped her case open, and took out a box and several jars. She smeared Idyn Gold into the wounds. Then she opened the little box and they saw that it contained needles stained with a golden substance. Cahira examined Fergus' arm for a good vein and inserted the needles into it. "I'll need a board. His arm must be immobilized while the drug enters his system."

"Will he make it?" Brodrig asked.

"I don't know, but his chances are improved. Last time I had to deal with something like this, I saved two and lost one."

Finn put his arm around Darcy as she began to cry. Reaction had set in and she was feeling her losses. She put her hand to her face, pressing her leaking eyes.

"Come on, Darcy. Let's have a drink. There's nothing more you can do here."

Darcy nodded and walked away in the circle of Finn's arm.

They settled Fergus into a bed upstairs, and his brother Atair straddled a chair to sit with him.

* * * *

Malthus met the Lycamornots at the old cottage that he and his nieces had once lived in on an isolated section of the land that had been ceded to the refugee camp by the previous owner, Beth. He had enjoyed Beth, taking her mind and body on his first night living in the camp. She had run this place with some help from the old Willodarian priest, Tempest Anstey. Malthus had murdered Tempest and, a little time later, his friend Egidius had rited Beth.

He delighted in the deception that compound and surrounding lands were run by Clodagh and Pandeena, when it was actually himself. This place had been his first conquest, and Merissa had been his second, when all of her family were dead and he ruled through Merissa, then he would complete his conquest of the Red Wolf Clan.

The table they sat at had made for him by Shalto and Oswyl so that they would have one large enough for all of

them to sit around it. Preece had his chair right up against that of fourteen-year-old Rheu, the smallest and youngest of them. Malthus knew they were lovers, although they used the women also. Nesswen, a shaggy young blond, with watery blue eyes, and an overbite, watched the others over his tankard of mead. Torquil was the largest member, a huge strapping smith's apprentice. But Malthus' favorite was Yren who was sitting between Oswyl and Torquil. There was not much to Yren physically, he looked like a stick figure with a mop of reddish brown hair, but he made up for it in feistiness.

And he liked to hurt people.

They were all good with the long knives riding at their hips, but only Torquil could claim a moderate expertise with swords and axes. They wore simple wool drawstring pants, and knee length robes that wrapped loosely around their upper bodies in a variation of the traditional lycan garb that allowed them to switch freely into their powerful hybrid forms.

"This Patton sounds suspicious, Shalto," Malthus said over a tankard of ale. He had tired of drinking mead all the time just because that was what the young ones liked.

"He's certainly asking an awful lot of questions, just as many as that lawgiver is." Yren wrinkled his nose and red hair sprouted along his arms in reaction to his irritation. "He tried to pin me against a tree for some answers, but I got away from him."

"I don't think it would be wise for me to meet him." Malthus lowered his head, gazing off to the side. "I'm still healing. You'll have to take him yourselves."

"It's good that you're getting better." Shalto refilled his tankard.

"It was a very near thing, Shalto. An inch lower and that bloody barb would have been in my heart."

Shalto's face filled with concern. "You be careful, Malthus. We don't want to lose you. You're our inspiration."

Malthus lowered his head still more as if overcome by the praise, tilting it to the side with a small smile. "Thank you, Shalto."

"We'll take care of this," Torquil said. "Trust us. We'll go at him like wolves on a deer."

"Make sure no one sees you do it."

Preece smiled and ruffled Rheu's hair. "I'm good at ambushes."

Malthus regarded Preece. He was more and more certain that both Preece and Yren had killed myn before and enjoyed it. "The other thing we need to do is to get the pregnant women out before anyone notices them. Kandaishee's getting huge."

Shalto chuckled. "You must have got her up the stick good first try. She was already swelling before the rest of us started taking our rides."

"She's due to deliver me a son long before my wife is."

"So what are we doing with them?"

"Sending them to my mother's estate. I have some friends who will meet us in the forest half a day's ride from here and take them the rest of the way."

"Sounds good to me," Shalto said.

The others murmured an agreement.

* * * *

Malthus rode out of Wolffgard village with a packhorse tied to his mount's saddle, supposedly going hunting to bring back meat for the Sanctuary. It had been hard convincing Sheradyn that he was well enough to travel. Even old Claw had argued against his going, and normally the bastard did not give a damn what happened to Malthus. He rode north alone, heading for the mountains where the caves were that formed the north boundary to Red Wolf lands. He needed to arrange the rendezvous that would take the pregnant women, not to his mother's estate, but to his own at Carrion Crevasse where he was re-establishing his laboratories and preparing to resume his old experiments on lycans and other races once his job in Red Wolff Valley was done.

He stayed deep in the forest, traveling through the shadowed places where he was unlikely to be seen, sheltered from view by the pine forest and diverged late in the day onto the same hunter's trace where he had killed the lawgiver Nikko Softpaws months ago. After riding for two hours, he began watching for flashes of orange moving through the trees above him. By now, he should have seen imps scampering about on every side of him, through the trees on every side of him, through the brush and briars, and up in the trees leaping like wizened orange-skinned monkeys. He had been promised the service of dozens, under the leadership of the imp-warlord Gahni. Malthus and Gahni had worked together many times over the years. Yet it had taken substantial promises of food, gold, and booty to persuade

Gahni to bring his people from the West Bank of the Hillora to Waejontor. Malthus had also provided Gahni's queen with a large supply of one of his mother's most potent arrow poisons in return for the queen releasing Gahni and his myn to Malthus' service.

Malthus wondered why they were not around, greeting him and looking for food. Legend had it that imps were genetically altered monkeys, created by a hellgod named Jasmeden during the last godwar.

"Where's Gahni gotten off to?" he muttered.

The trees gave way steadily, thinning into a rocky fell. As Malthus' horse topped the first treeless rise, he saw the northern border of Claw's lands, the Place of Boulders. Huge rocks, which had fallen from the mountains rising above it, broke up the landscape like the remains of a giant's scattered toys. It looked like a good place for an ambush and Malthus rode cautiously through them.

When he reached the far side, he saw a stone bleeding table with a tool table sitting next to it almost beneath the cliff, saw the mossy overhang that concealed his brother's caves, and saw a lycan *body* on the bleeding table on its belly. If it was female, then he would be very irritated with Egidius and Laetus.

He had told them to spare as many of the bitches of childbearing age as possible and send them to his manor in Carrion Crevasse. He knew that none of them would arrive there virgins, but that did not bother him. Any that arrived there pregnant would be a bonus to his plans to create a new

race of genetically altered slaves. He would succeed where Waejonan had failed.

He dismounted and tied his horse to a tree near the cave before investigating the body. To his relief, it was a young male perhaps fifteen years old. The runes painted on the nude corpse drew Malthus' eyes. This one had been an offering for the soul of the dead. He wondered who warranted that attempt to send a soul to Bellocar, their liege-god, instead risking its capture by Hadjys the dark judge.

"Egidius!" He called out, turning around. "Egidius!"

Malthus walked into the cave. There were two interlocked caves, and they were roomy, around the size of a bedchamber. The first one had a cabinet, a table, and two chairs in it. He thought of it as his brother's cave because it was here that he found the first proof that his half-brother Troyes had been killed. He would never forget finding two of Troyes' blades in one of the drawers along with the empty hilt of a third. The blades only shattered when they were used to kill their makers. Beside the blades had lain the crest of their family carved into an ivory round, painted, and attached to a golden chain. They had bottled his brother's blood after killing him on that bleeding table. Malthus had found it, and then he, Egidius, and Laetus had drunk it in remembrance of what a fine sa'necari Troyes had been.

He had still not gotten his full vengeance against Isranon and Claw, but marrying Merissa had given him a start on achieving it. Once Claw and Darmyk were dead, and the valley had fallen to his armies, then his vengeance would be complete and Malthus would reveal himself.

A man slumped across the table, making small sobbing noises, with his hand on a bottle of blood wine.

"Egidius? What happened?"

Egidius lifted his head and his sa'necari eyes, amaranthine without pupils, iris, or whites, looked at him glistening with tears. Malthus could tell that he was half-drunk.

Malthus gripped Egidius' shoulder and shook him.

"Whatever it is, you can't let it unman you."

Egidius put the bottle to his mouth and drank more, the wine dribbling into his thin beard. "Laetus is dead. I promised my family I'd take care of him, and he's dead."

"How did it happen?" asked Malthus, his voice low and dangerous. He knew that Egidius and his much younger cousin, Laetus, had been very close, but this display of grieving sottery irritated Malthus.

"Three Stones ... near Iudris Meadows...."

"Where you exterminated that battle-clan?" Malthus' head tilted back, rising to an alert angle. He had given permission for Laetus to take a sizeable force against the hamlet, more than enough to have taken on whatever the lycans might have been able to field. There wasn't a surviving battle-clan in the area, just farmers. Around three weeks ago, Lokynen and Phelan had come from Three Stones insisting on a private talk with Claw. *Did they tell him about this? And he said nothing to me? Why hide a victory?*

"Yes. Oh, hell, it seemed so easy. Just a little hamlet. Laetus wanted to lead it himself. To show me what he could do, you know? I let him. Gods of Hell, I should have been with him."

"What happened, damn it. Get to the point! What went wrong?"

"They were wiped out. No one escaped, not even the three brukulacos I sent. Since then, the hamlet raised a fort around their perimeters ... and an ugly abatis that would be hell to get past."

"How do you know he failed to escape?"

A long sob came from Egidius and he took another drag from the bottle. "They piked his head above the gates. I saw it."

"How could this happen?" Malthus searched his memories of Lokynen. That mon had a stench of power about him. Lokynen must have been part of the force that defeated Malthus' units. But what kind of force? He needed more information.

"That's what I keep asking myself."

"They had to have had help of some kind. And it didn't come from a battle-clan. There are none left in the east here." Malthus' thoughts circled around and around.

"Remember those odd prints we found when those Rakshasha scouts were killed? I asked then if you thought it might be yuwenghau and you laughed at me."

"Yuwenghau." The word tasted nasty in his mouth. Lokynen had to be yuwenghau. Malthus connected more pieces together. Lokynen had to be Lokynen Willidar the Battle-Master, a very dangerous yuwenghau, and the odds were that he was not the only one. Lokynen had spent time with both Claw and the priest. Was the priest also yuwenghau? "We need weapons from the godwar. There's a

rumor that Lord Daemon found a cache of them. He'll want something in trade, and I have an idea of just what to give him. Call the others."

Malthus held back on informing Egidius that Lord Daemon, principle advisor to Queen Tomyrilen was actually Lord Hoon, possibly the most dangerous vampire in existence. Brandrahoon had created the golden band on Malthus' hand that concealed his nature for his brother, Waejonan the Accursed.

* * * *

Pandeena answered the knock on her door with a knot of irritation in her middle. "If that's you again, Odhran, go away."

"It isn't."

A smile flashed across Pandeena's face at the sweet male tenor that spoke from the other side. She yanked the door open and threw herself onto Hathura.

"If I had known such a greeting awaited me, I would come more often." The Fae kissed her forehead as she ushered him inside. The son of Willodarus God of the Woodlands, Hathura was slender to the point of appearing fragile, yet flaring through the shoulders, translucently pale skinned with white hair and silver eyes. He carried his golden fans tucked into his belt. The points of his ears peeked through his hair, which was held in place by a dark green headband.

"What brings you?" Pandeena fetched a bottle of wine and glasses. She and Hathura had slept together a few times over

the centuries, but as with the majority of the minor divines, nothing more than friendship had ever come of it.

Hathura settled onto the sofa and stretched his legs out. "My brother Teakamon said you needed someone who has been to Creeya before."

"I need to talk to the Grandmaster on a matter of some urgency."

The Fae nodded, rolling his wine around on his tongue. "Nice wine. Are you hunting or enlisting?"

"Neither." Pandeena explained the situation with Brock and Claw.

Hathura listened closely, interrupting from time to time to ask a clarifying question. "It is shame about Claw. He is well regarded among your people. But everyone gets old ... except us."

"Can you take me?"

"Of course." Hathura took another swallow of his wine. "My sister, StealsThunder, is second of thirteen in Lord Channadar's band of chosen. I visit her often at court."

"Can we go now?"

Hathura finished his wine, nodded and rose, reaching for Pandeena. "Give me your hand. Once I have taken you, you should be able to get back there on your own if need be."

Pandeena felt the betraying tingle throughout her body that presaged a Jump and then they vanished from her apartments.

They appeared in the Great Central Hall of the palace of the grandmaster. Pandeena sucked in a sharp breath at the glory of it. The huge chamber was beautiful, with its forest of

green-veined marble columns, three-story high groin vaults and ribbed arches that merged one into the other to form curving conchoidal points, and broad skylights in a tremendous central dome. Broad galleries looked down upon the chamber, sweeping along the sides, reached by wide staircases.

Sofas, chairs, and tables formed small alcoves throughout the room. In the middle stood a half rail around a descending stairway that led to a cloverleaf of shops and cafes beneath the chamber. People were spread throughout in small chatting groups.

"All those myn you see moving through the crowds in the black uniform with the golden threads and the book and the blade embroidered...."

"They're Guildsmyn?"

"Yes."

Pandeena turned completely around with her head back to take in the ceiling. "It's beautiful."

Hathura nodded, and then pointed a small band of Fae. "There's my sister."

Pandeena saw the little white-haired Fae in her elegant mauve breeches and tunic wearing a sword at her shoulder and a pair of golden fans in her sash. "She's tiny."

"Don't let her size fool you. She eats vampires for breakfast."

Pandeena laughed.

"No, seriously. She roasts them with garlic and onions and eats them."

"I'm impressed."

Hathura led the way to a sofa where a black-haired Fae with streaks of fiery orange in his hair held court to a rapt audience of both Fae and humans. As he spoke a Fae with pale yellow hair wrought illusions with her pair of flashing fans and dancing steps.

"I've never seen it done that way before. Doesn't the storyteller do his own illusions?"

Hathura nodded at the storyteller. "Look at his arm. That's Lord Channadar. The dancer is his wife, Dragonfly."

Pandeena noticed that one sleeve hung empty. "He's maimed."

"Yes. Dynarien saved his life with the staff of Dawnhand, but the arm refused to heal properly. A month later, the Guild surgeons were forced to remove the arm when infection set in."

Channadar spotted Hathura and smiled at him, an impish turn at the corners of his lips. "Hathura, welcome back."

Hathura crossed the room and joined the rest of the Fae and their audience.

Channadar regarded everyone. "I fear we must continue our story later. We must greet our kinsman."

A dark-haired human with doves resting on her arms, rose suddenly and the birds flew in all directions. She knelt before Pandeena and kissed her hand. "Holy One."

Pandeena licked her lips and wondered how the woman had detected her. "Please stand up."

The woman stood and pushed her sleeve up, revealing the crescent moon and stars. "I'm Chucomei Who Calls the Birds, the Mage of Wings, and I serve your mother."

"A Talian paladin?"

"Yes."

"Tala is my grandmother, not my mother." Pandeena smiled and extended her hand. "I'm Pandeena Moonbow."

"Second Mother of the Lycan." Chucomei's hand went to her mouth.

A tall golden skinned and golden-eyed Fae came to stand beside Chucomei with a smile. "Welcome to Creeya."

His hand rested on one fan as he regarded Pandeena.

She extended her hand to him. "You must be Tiderider, First of Thirteen."

His eyes slewed toward Hathura with a tiny bow. "You've taught her well, kinsman."

StealsThunder took that moment to throw her arms around her brother and he swung her off the ground into a hug that brought a delighted laugh from her.

"What brings us such intriguing company?" Channadar gestured at Pandeena with a closed fan, although the question was directed at Hathura.

"A matter of urgency, Lord Channadar. Pandeena needs to speak with the Grand Master."

Channadar lifted an eyebrow and then gestured with his fan at the white-blond Fae who had been dancing his story for him. "Isn't that Aramyn over there?"

"I'll fetch him." She sped off.

Channadar's lips formed an impish smile. "My Dragonfly. My wife."

Pandeena dipped her shoulders to him politely. "She's beautiful."

"Yes, she is."

Dragonfly returned with an innocuous looking mon in a Guild uniform. "This is Aramyn; he should be able to help you."

"What brings you here?" Aramyn was a clean-shaven, dark-haired mon with regular features and nothing to set him apart as anything special except for his chestnut eyes. If it had not been for the uniform, Pandeena would have taken him for a servant—or a farmer.

"I need to speak with the Grand Master. I'm looking for a certain Guildsmon."

"Why?" The cool detachment in his voice belied the seriousness of the simple question.

Pandeena guessed that he was wondering if she had come seeking vengeance against the mon—it was not unheard according to Hathura. "I'm looking Brock Redhand. His brother is dying."

"Tell him all of it," Hathura urged when Aramyn looked uncertain.

"Somewhere private?"

Aramyn nodded and led Pandeena with Hathura in tow down a hallway and off into a side corridor that had dozens of branching rooms.

There they sat while Pandeena poured out the story about Claw and the Serpent.

"I think that Claw is being poisoned somehow, but I've Read him and can find nothing." Pandeena leaned across the table.

"You know that you'll not only be involving Brock, but the Guild itself?" Aramyn sat with his arms folded casually in front of him.

"I was afraid that I might be."

"That makes you nervous?"

Pandeena's lips pressed together tightly. "A bit. We try hard not to introduce ethics to Clan lands that are not Clan. But unusual circumstances...."

Aramyn looked thoughtful. "I nearly caught him once."

"The Serpent?"

The Guildsmon nodded.

"I didn't know you operated in Waejontor."

"We don't normally. It was right after those battle-clans found his estate and laboratories. The crime was so terrible ... genocide on a massive scale. Before they fled ahead of the clan, they used a device we call a Serpent's Tooth to inject every lycan on the estate with a massive dose of Devil's Silver. They were all dying by the time the Clan arrived. In addition to that, he murdered a Guildsmon named Dyllys, a lycan agent, who had uncovered the estate's location. He rited her."

"Oh gods...." Pandeena's face turned ashen.

"Precisely. Come back tomorrow, and I'll have that appointment set up for you. Just talk to Queiggy at the front desk to the Guild wing."

"Thank you."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FATE OF THE WOMEN

The bright sun burned through the chill autumn air laying over the communal garden. The camp's women were out in force, gathering in the remainders of their crops. Once the last of it was in, what was not going to be eaten soon would be cooked and preservatives added before filling the jars to keep it for the winter months.

The fifteen pregnant women, of which Kandaishee was the most swollen, kept to the most isolated sections of the garden with Preece standing lookout so that they could vanish into the nearest house should the priest or someone else who was not supposed to know about their condition appear heading in their direction. People would want to know who the father was and they could not tell them.

Malthus' child shifted restlessly in Kandaishee's belly. She paused with her hand on another tomato, released it, and pressed her fingers to her stomach. Kandaishee was trying very hard not to hate the child she carried.

Her five-year-old son, Gilzean, squatted in front of her. "He's kicking, Mama."

Kandaishee's throat tightened and she fought to keep the bitterness out of her voice so that she did not upset Gilzean. "Yes, your little brother is kicking."

Malthus had been in Wolffgard Village for seven months, and he had been here less than a week before he raped all

five of the sa'necari women who had taken refuge here, binding their minds so that they could not reveal what he was and what he had done. Four of them had become pregnant by him, just as Clodagh was. His potency was unnatural for a sa'necari his age, and Kandaishee suspected that was because of something his bio-chemist mother, Sidera Tyrins, had discovered and given him. Sa'necari were usually infertile by thirty. Malthus would be thirty-seven in two months.

Kandaishee returned to gathering tomatoes into her basket. The bright sun beamed down on her face. Malthus had made her a slut to the wolves by placing coercions and compulsions in her brain, just as he had the others.

"Kandaishee!"

She looked up at the sound of her name and her heart quailed. She sucked in too much air and felt dizzy. "Malthus."

The rest of the women in the garden glanced away from her, ignoring the scene. Kandaishee knew why they did it: he had taken the minds of every female in the camp. If they felt anything for her, it was pity—and relief that he had singled her out and not them this time.

He leered at her. "Come to your house with me. I want to talk to you."

"Gilzean, stay outside and play until I come for you."

"Yes, Mama."

He skipped off, heading for the other children farther in the garden. As always, Kandaishee saw so much of his dead father in him that it brought tears to her eyes. Sa'necari had murdered her beloved Domhnall simply because they

objected to a lycan having married a sa'necari woman—a hideous double standard in Kandaishee's opinion. Her wrists itched under the spellcord with their silver seals. She rubbed around the cords carefully, not wanting to set off the seals that would kill her for tampering with them. The cords cut her off from her powers, but it had always seemed like a small price to pay for the safety of her lycan child until Malthus got here and she found herself unable to protect either her child or herself.

Not that she could have any way. Malthus was too powerful for her; even had she had access to her powers.

She gave her basket to one of the women working close to her and followed him into her longhouse. It had a dirt floor with a firepit in the center, and a room at either end, partitioned off by curtained half walls with a doorway and window facing into the interior. A small crude table sat to the right side near her bedroom.

"Sit down," Malthus indicated a chair.

Kandaishee tried to contain her trembling as she obeyed.

Malthus untied the sash on her lycan style robe and ran his hands over her bare stomach. "I wanted to feel my son moving in your belly before I send you away."

"Send me away?" Kandaishee's voice caught.

"I'm sending you to my manor at Carrion Crevasse. My mother will take care of you."

"What about Gilzean?"

"He'll be fine. You'll take him with you."

"I don't want him hurt. Please." Fear had her by the throat.

Malthus laughed and put his hands on her temples, lunging into her mind. It hurt and Kandaishee whimpered as he tightened his compulsions. Suddenly she realized what he was doing and a sob broke from her lips. "Domhnall! Domhnall, no."

The memories of her dead husband faded through the desperately clutching fingers of her mind and vanished.

Malthus gave the arcane needles another thrust into her awareness and knowledge, stitching his spells through her and knotting them tightly.

Kandaishee's body relaxed. She hurt, yet an unexpected warmth and joy spread through her. "I'm so happy about our son. Your mother must be a lovely person."

"She is. She'll see that you're comfortable, and after the child is born, she'll teach you to be a proper concubine."

"What about the others?"

"I will send them to join you soon."

* * * *

Malthus nodded to Preece as he passed him on his way back to the manor. Preece acknowledged the nod with a self-satisfied smile. They were getting closer to discovering Patton's secrets, and all the clues seemed to imply a connection to the lawgiver, although they had not yet caught them together. If there was a link, then the Lycamornots would kill both myn on the same night.

Satisfaction warmed Malthus' core. He had the gang primed to attack, and he had finished up the last of the compulsions and coercions in Kandaishee. Malthus intended

to do the rest of them over the next few nights—at least the ones that needed doing. Rewiring a mind like Kandaishee's took time and care so as not to damage her psyche in the wrong ways. Lycans also took time because he did not want any of their people noticing too sudden a change in their personalities. Beth's mind had frayed away to nothing because Malthus had needed to work too quickly on it: there had been almost nothing of Beth left by the time that Egidius had rited her.

As he passed through the village, lycans nodded, waved, and greeted him in a variety of ways, many of them stopping to chat for a bit. Malthus basked in it. Returning wounded with his goods intact had raised his reputation to that of a local hero. He presented all of the fools with a pleasant exterior, and behind it, he gloated that they had no idea he was responsible for the raiders murdering their people in remote locations throughout Red Wolf.

Striding briskly into the manor, he encountered Kissie polishing tables in the Great Hall. She paused and turned to him. "Master Claw's been asking for you."

"Where is he?"

"The Blue Room."

Malthus headed upstairs, wondering what the old bastard wanted now. He found Claw at the table drinking more of the spelled rum. The chieftain looked haggard, as if he had aged twenty years in five months. *In a sense, he has*. The pain must have become constant except when Claw was too drunk or drugged to feel it.

The chessboard sat to the side.

"You wanted me?"

"You promised me a game and you didn't show up," Claw grumbled.

Malthus sat down and poured himself a drink from the same bottle as Claw. "I forgot. I'm sorry. I got word I was needed at the Sanctuary."

Claw frowned at him. "They have plenty of help there."

"They have boys," Malthus said smoothly, pulling at his mustaches. "They haven't a lot of experience, while I have."

"I'll grant you that." Claw rubbed his chest. "We'll have to play after dinner. I need a nap."

"I can't play then, ask Belgair."

"I don't want Belgair. He's too easy to beat."

"Claw, I promised that I would leave tonight to hunt. The children need meat again. I'll be gone a few days."

"You're gone more than you're here."

Malthus shook his head regretfully. "That isn't true and you know it. But I have responsibilities. Beth wanted me to take care of them."

"So you're going to take care of them?"

"I gave my word and I never break it." *I promised to kill you and your family ... and I am.*

* * * *

Malthus showed up with two horses and a pack animal at Kandaishee's home after the sun went down. She was the farthest into her pregnancy of the women carrying his children. He knocked on her door, called for her to come out, and told her that it was time to leave. Kandaishee emerged

with a small bundle of her belongings and that of her son, Gilzean. She mounted the boy in the saddle in front of her and they rode north.

They traveled along a hunter's trace as dawn rose and reached the place of scattered stones around noon. He had set an easy pace out of consideration for Kandaishee's condition. Gilzean spent the journey watching the imps leaping through the trees around them. Malthus, while glad to see that Gahni had returned, still wanted an accounting of why the imp warlord and his people had been absent the last time he came to the caves. They were supposed to be on constant guard, ready to kill anyone who ventured into this area to spy.

Kandaishee's eyes filled with tears of distress when she saw the bleeding table with a lycan body draping it. It stirred memories of someone else, but she could not reach them. To the right hand side of the table three yards off, stood poles with shackles at the top where victims could be hung by their feet, their throats slashed and their heads tied back to allow their blood to drain into basins.

Malthus cursed. Egidius' appeared to be offering more sacrifices for his cousin's soul. At this rate, Egidius was going to exhaust their larder before they had time to take another set of hamlets and villages.

Egidius emerged from the cave with six humans in the Queen's livery, four other sa'necari, and a lamiae in her huge serpent form. Malthus noted that Egidius was sober and considered that an improvement.

As soon as Malthus dismounted, he went to Kandaishee, lifted her son down, and then helped her to the ground. The myn surrounded her in a tightening circle. She knelt, her arms around her son, looking frightened.

"Tie her to a pole, but don't hurt her," Malthus ordered.

Kandaishee wept, but did not struggle as they bound her wrists behind her around a pole and tied that to a metal eye in the back. Her son started to run to her, but Malthus caught his arm.

"Please don't hurt my son."

"No one is going to hurt him." Malthus sneered. "A child's mind is easy to alter."

"No, please, not Gilzean."

"Shut up, Kandaishee. Hold him, Egidius. I don't want him squirming."

The child's eyes were large with fear, as he stood there frozen and staring at his mother.

Malthus put his fingertips to Gilzean's temples and lunged into the child's brain with needles of power. Gilzean whimpered. Malthus erased many of the boy's memories, and altered the rest. "Your name is Darmyk. Your mother's name is Merissa."

Kandaishee let out a long shriek.

"Your father's name is Isranon. He was taken by the Beast and your mother fears he's dead." Malthus continued to fill Gilzean's mind with information, right up to the present moment. As young as Gilzean was, his imagination would fill in the rest.

A vacant look came in the child's eyes. Kandaishee screamed again.

Gilzean sagged in Egidius' grip. Malthus straightened with the boy in his arms and handed him to Egidius. "Take him to Lord Daemon. But first let me write a letter. The child is worth a lot to us, delivered alive and unharmed."

Out of the corner of his eye, Malthus caught the small form of the imp warlord, Gahni, approaching and he turned to face him. "Where have you been? I've passed through three times without encountering your folk. What kind of sentries are you?"

Gahni's face twisted up in hate and anger. "My tribe all gone."

"What do you mean your tribe's all gone?"

"All dead. Isranon Dawnreturning kill them all. All that's left are with me in north."

Malthus squatted and gripped Gahni's forearm. "I'm sorry for your loss. I will avenge them."

"How?"

"By killing his son and sending him the pieces of the child."

"You let me eat some?"

"Yes. That would be very appropriate."

* * * *

Caimbeul frequented only two women since his first survey of the camp: Kandaishee and Clodagh. After three nights of trying to get Kandaishee to answer her door, he finally let himself inside. The beds had not been slept in. He investigated the cabinets and dressers. Kandaishee and

Gilzean's clothing was missing. A spellcorded sa'necari woman with a child would not be running away like this.

Suspicion raised the hairs on his neck. He began checking the houses of each woman that he knew was pregnant and in each of them he found the woman and her children gone.

Finally, he went to Clodagh. He almost did not knock, fearing that he would find her gone as well. There was an almost forgotten tightening in his stomach as his hand wavered at the door. He had not felt this way since Pandeena divorced him.

"Please, don't let them have taken you too. I—I love you."

Gathering his nerve, he knocked. No answer came. He put his ear to the door and listened. Sounds came through, grunting and whining. Someone was using Clodagh and it sounded like they were being rough about it. His hackles rose and hair started to sprout along his arms. He turned the knob and stepped inside, striding to the bedroom. Throwing back the curtain over the doorway, Caimbeul surprised Preece and Yren two upping her. Tears of pain streamed down her face.

Caimbeul seized Preece, lifted him off the ground by an arm and a leg. "Get off her. It's my turn."

"You'll pay for this," Preece said as he hit the ground.

"I doubt it."

Clodagh's scream made him turn and he caught Yren's arm as the youth tried to put a knife in him. Whipping Yren's arm up behind his back, Caimbeul forced the blade from his hand and kicked it away. He tossed Yren out and dropped the bar.

"Are you all right?" Caimbeul asked.

Clodagh shook her head. "They were rougher than usual. They hurt me ... the baby...."

Caimbeul took her in his arms and held her, extending his awareness through her body. "The baby is fine."

They walked back to the bedroom. Caimbeul held her, stroked, and comforted her until dawn.

When it came time for him to leave, Clodagh took his face in her hands and kissed. "You must stop seeing me. It angers them. I'm afraid they'll kill you."

"I'm not easy to kill, Clodagh."

* * * *

Only the human women remained in the camp with their children as refugees. Pregnancies put their secret brothel at risk of discovery by the lawgiver and the priest. In the middle of the night, Malthus carried a satchel of his mother's solutions to the problem on his shoulder as he gathered his seven key Lycamornots and went to the house farthest from the center of camp first. He knocked on the door and Klari answered. She started to remove her clothing, and then panicked when she saw how many there were. Malthus had no intention of betraying himself by using his powers. However, he had brought along a small crystal rod that he had told them was magic. He lunged and touched her throat with it, muting her voice.

Her mouth opened and closed as she tried to scream and found that she couldn't. Her hand went to her throat.

"Preece, Torquil, strip her and stretch her out on the dining table."

She shook her head in panic, backing away from them. Preece and Torquil seized her without a word and carried her by her limbs to the table. Klari struggled, but the two lycans were too strong for her.

"Oswyl, make certain the children don't wake up and come out."

"What are you going to do?" asked Shalto as Preece and Torquil went about their business and finished by tying her wrists and ankles to the table legs.

"I'm fixing it so she can't get pregnant. I just received a package from my mother." Malthus unshouldered his satchel and took several things out, setting them on another chair. A bottle, a needle with catgut through it, and a round, flat sided, blood-red crystal. He poured the bottle across her abdomen, took a tiny blade from his bag, and made a small incision just above her thatch.

She writhed and tried to scream.

Malthus shoved two fingers into the wound and felt around for a moment. Then he inserted the crystal and stitched her closed. He poured more of the liquid over her. "See if there's some liquor in the house. I'm sure she could use a drink. No one rides this one until the wound heals. We'll do the others a few at a time."

"What did you do?"

"The crystal has bonded with her organs and is killing her egg sacks. She'll be sterile by morning."

"Hsssah," said Rheu. "You know a lot."

Malthus chuckled and tousled his head. "My mother wanted me to go into the family business, but I liked selling my sword better."

"What was that?"

"She was a bio-alchemist and bio-magicalist to Lord Feodras."

* * * *

Pandeena jumped into the Grand Central Hall of Ishladrim palace.

She strode up to the door to the Guild Wing and stared at the little man at the desk that barred her way into it. Queiggy had pecan colored skin and his face was a gaunt web of folds and seams. Queiggy's hair, which hung in half-tangled disarray as if he could never get it combed through properly, was a brown barely two shades darker than his skin. Overall, he looked like a walking stick that had sprouted limbs with the currycomb's catch of discarded horse's hair on top.

"Hello, Queiggy. It's that day."

"So it is. I'll have someone see you up."

He gestured at one of his assistants who were awaiting their next orders seated on a bench to his left hand. "Take Pandeena to the Grand Master. Announce her properly, Yusef or I'll take a stick to you."

The young man, who could not have been more than sixteen, nodded with a serious air. "Yes, Master Queiggy."

They traveled up two flights of stairs in the Grand Central Hall, down a northeastern hallway, and then up two more flights at the end before reaching a hallway that was almost

entirely windows, some clear glass and others stained glass images of saints and heroes before reaching a final door. Yusef knocked politely and opened it. A huge black mon in pants with a lionskin wrapped around his waist, and a black tunic with the Guild emblem on his shoulder greeted them, leaning on a crutch.

"Master Mohanja, this is Pandeena Moonbow. Lady Pandeena, this is Master Mohanja Raam..."

"Enough, Yusef. Dismissed." Mohanja had a slow, considering manner as he indicated a chair. He exuded a kind of purposeful serenity. "Sit. They will be a few minutes yet. The queen was napping. This pregnancy has been leaving her more tired than the previous ones."

"I came to see...."

Mohanja gestured for silence. "Ceejorn likes to have Isen with him as much as possible."

Pandeena took a chair in the small circle of seats. At the head sat two chairs with flaring backs like thrones and to either side of those were two chairs that must have been for advisors—Mohanja settled into the one on the right—and then two petitioner chairs opposite the throne chairs.

"You hurt your leg...."

"Hah! Now that is a tale. I nearly lost it. But I killed twenty lesser bloods before they pulled me down."

Looking at the huge mon, taller than Lokynen, but not quite as heavily muscled, she could easily believe that. "And you lived to tell of it...."

"Because it happened at the doors of the High Temple, and the priests came to my aid."

The side door opened and two people came out. Pandeena knew instantly that the tiny woman who looked pregnant enough to burst like an over ripe melon, had to be Queen Isen Osterbridge. She had large dark eyes with golden flecks in them that caused Pandeena to think of swans for some inexplicable reason. Pandeena shivered under the intense scrutiny of Isen's eyes. There was something uncanny about the young queen. Rumor said that she was just seventeen, yet her eyes seemed to bore into Pandeena's soul.

The Grand Master eased his tall, lanky frame into the throne and got his legs comfortable. "Now what is this all about?"

"Majesties," Pandeena rose and bowed to them. "I have come seeking a lycan. Brock Redhand is his name. The last that was heard of him was that he left for Creeya as a youngster. He last visited his family in Waejontor's Red Wolf Valley close to ten years ago, and told no one where he had been or what he had done. He told his brother that if he was ever desperately needed, to come and ask the Grand Master about him."

"It sounds like he's Guild," said Isen. "Is he very, very tall with busy black hair?"

"I have no idea what he looks like, nor if he's Guild," Pandeena replied. "Only that his family has desperate need of him."

"Then you aren't looking to punish a Guildsmon?" Ceejorn asked, his brows knitting.

"No. His brother, the chieftain of Red Wolf is dying. I suspect some kind of poison, but I can't prove it. We need Brock to become regent over his brother's grandchildren."

"You Jumped here?" asked Isen.

"Yes, your majesty. But it would be better if I did not Jump him there. It would also be best if Brock did not come alone. The Butchering Serpent is in Wolffgard, our capital, and I believe he is murdering Brock's brother, Claw."

Isen's face took on a distant quality and she stared at the wall, as if reading words on it. After a long silence, she shook herself. "A very dangerous opponent. I know Brock. He used to bounce me on his knees. I will send a unit of the Netherguard with him."

"And I will dispatch myn to Wolffgard, as well as contributing elite units of the Guild."

"Thank you." Pandeena remembered Claw telling her that if anyone could bring Kynyr the allies he needed, it would be Brock.

"Furthermore, we will fly them to your borders and sneak them across," Ceejorn smiled and winked at his wife. "We're good at that, aren't we?"

"Yes, we are."

He patted her belly. "It's a girl this time. Our first. I was beginning to think she was giving me only sons."

Isen frowned at him. "Will you stop saying that?" She blushed and turned to Pandeena. "We have two sons. It might be something to crow about if I'd given him eight sons and then a daughter. But noooo, just two sons and...."

Pandeena lowered her head with a small smile. "I'm very happy for your majesties. But does this mean you'll help me?"

"Yes," they chorused and then grinned at each other like a pair of happy children.

They chatted for several hours before Pandeena left and by then she felt much more hopeful.

* * * *

Kynyr emerged from his rooms with the intention of finding something to eat. Amos' wife, Nainsi, and their three surviving daughters saw to it that there was always something available to eat in the command room, even if it was just cakes and ale.

When he got there, he found Lord Brodrig sitting alone, a pensive edge to his face. At fourteen, Brodrig was little more than a cub. He looked up when Kynyr sat down across from him.

"Fergus refused to let me fight." Brodrig clenched and unclenched his fists, staring at a spot on the table in an unfocused way. "He told me he intended to take my Da back a live son rather than a dead one."

"Wise mon."

"I wanted to fight."

"War isn't just about fighting." Kynyr grabbed a plate, filling it with scones, a dollop of butter and strawberry jam. He smeared his scones with butter and jam and took a bite from one, chewing slowly.

"Two more died last night."

That brought the total MacLachlan dead up to twenty-three. Red Wolf had three wounded and no dead. Out of thirty-seven prostitutes, Kynyr had managed to save only nine. The enemy dead and the slain whores were being burned in the town square by the Sharani.

"Fergus?"

"He lingers." Brodrig heaved a sigh. "I would appreciate it ... if you'd stay until we can make all of the arrangements to take our dead and wounded home." He stretched his head back. "I'm so used to having Fergus telling me what to do..."

"What about Darcy?"

"She gets impatient with me."

Kynyr considered while he finished off two scones and licked his fingers. It took the edge off his hunger and his stomach stopped growling. "I'll stay as long as I can."

He washed his fingers off in a basin, and then headed off down the hallway. Kynyr passed Erskine helping Vayle Stewart along. Vayle had his head bandaged and limped. He had taken a long slash across the forehead and a thrust to the meaty part of his thigh.

At least I didn't get any of them killed this time.

Kynyr entered Fergus' bedroom. Cahira sat beside the bed, holding Fergus' wrist as she Read him.

Fergus' skin had gone sallow. His eyes had that wet glitter suggesting fever and pain putting him to his limits. His breathing sounded raspy and harsh. "Kynyr."

Cahira finished Reading Fergus and laid a wet cloth across his forehead.

"Lift him up, Kynyr." Cahira held a dosing glass of Pollendine to Fergus' lips while Kynyr supported him. Fergus drank the drug, and Kynyr settled him back. "Stay here while I fetch Father Gileaus."

"The prayers?"

"Not yet. It's the good Father's turn to sit with him."

"Soon..." Fergus' eyes followed Cahira as she left the room. "Darcy says..." He paused, struggling for enough breath to finish the sentence. "Finn ... got him."

"Yeah. Finn killed Jondries. I got Heironim."

"Thanks." Fergus coughed hard, bringing green blood-speckled phlegm.

Kynyr wiped Fergus' mouth and chin with a cloth laying on the nightstand. He recognized the signs of infection. "My wife is carrying our first child. Midwife says it's a boy. Mind if I name him Fergus?"

A smile crossed Fergus' lips and Kynyr could tell that he had started to feel the drug. "Prince Fergus ... I'm honored."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AN OLD WOLF'S LOVE

The first thing that Pandeena noticed when she began arranging her papers at her small desk beside the large slateboard was the many missing children. Over half of her class, comprised of children that lived at Sanctuary, were not there. She questioned her class, but received only shrugs and shaken heads for answers.

After several minutes of this, Pandeena's worries overran her sense of propriety. She gave the children the rest of the day off and went looking for Ailsa Softpaws, cousin to Nikko, who currently taught reading and basic math for two hours each morning. She found Ailsa in her garden, packing the turned earth in her garden with moss in preparation for the first snows which could not be more than a few weeks off.

"Ailsa, did you find that some of the children were missing?"

Ailsa looked up and straightened, wiping her hands on her apron. "So are their mothers. Several of the sheelings and longhouses are empty."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Ailsa appeared taken aback and hesitated before answering. "I assumed you knew. You live on the edge of the camp. You must have seen them go."

A chill of fear ran up Pandeena's back and raised her hackles. How could she have missed the departure of fifteen

women and twenty children? How could anyone have? "Thank you, Ailsa. I'll ask around."

"Do you mean you didn't know?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

She returned to the camp and asked the young wolves who worked there, starting with Shalto who had served as foreman of the camp's maintenance and building crew since before Beth disappeared. Pandeena found Shalto splitting more logs for the barns with his cousin Oswyl.

"How the hell should I know?" Shalto responded to her questions in a surly tone that few would have used with a priest.

Pandeena ignored it this time. Shalto frequently spoke to her like this because she had broken his arm last summer following his pushy attempt at seduction. "Perhaps I should have you replaced with someone who has a better eye for these matters."

"You can't do that. Clodagh's in charge."

"I can overrule Clodagh by going to Claw."

"Are you threatening me?" Shalto bristled and started to go hairy along his arms.

"I am. We know how the last time turned out ... now don't we?"

"I still didn't see them."

Once it became apparent that she would get nothing more out of Shalto, Pandeena began asking around the village itself. As far as she could tell, no one had seen the women and children leave. They had not gone over the bridge and they had not gone down any of the roads. Fleeing through the

forest seemed unlikely since none of the mothers had been lycan. The whole matter stank.

Pandeena went to the manor with reluctance dragging at her heels. She did not want to upset Claw, but felt that she had no choice. More and more, the priest felt convinced that the Butchering Serpent and his allies must have taken them, but why?

Kissie let her in and showed her up to the Blue Room. Claw looked worse than ever sitting by the fireplace playing checkers with Belgair. He had a blanket wrapped around him as if he had trouble staying warm despite the nearness to the fire. The lines in his face had become deeper, and his color paler. Since early summer, she had watched him aging before her eyes, and Pandeena almost turned around and left.

Claw pinned her with his gaze, which was as sharp as ever. "I can tell this isn't a social call."

Pandeena dragged a chair close and sat down. "I'm afraid it isn't." She sucked in a breath through her nostrils and noted that even Claw's scent was off somehow. "There are fifteen women and twenty children missing from the camp. Ten humans and all five of the sa'necari. The missing children were an almost even mix of human and lycan."

"Tell me about it. Did anyone see them leave?"

"Claw," interposed Belgair, "Sheradyn says that you're not to be stressed. Let me handle this."

"Shut up, Belgair," Claw snapped. "Stop interfering with me."

Belgair subsided immediately. Claw had become increasingly short tempered with him, and he knew better than to push it.

Claw poured himself another glass of Ildyrsetti rum and listened to Pandeena's tale.

"I came to you because I didn't know what else to do," Pandeena said when she had finished with the story.

"Belgair get a search going and try to pick up their trail."

"What? And make them return? I say good riddance if they want that badly to leave."

"It's an order, Belgair," Claw snarled at him. "Get out and do it."

The villagers, the guard, the Lycamornots, and Malthus, all joined in the search. Yet no sign of the women and children was found. Clodagh, claiming that she now felt unsafe, moved Shalto, Oswyl, Preece, and Rheu into the abandoned longhouses on the compound over Pandeena's objections. Sheradyn kept her away from Claw during that period and eventually Pandeena gave up for the time being.

* * * *

Ever since the rest of the pregnant women disappeared, Caimbeul had feared for Clodagh. He had checked on a few of the other females each night, and discovered that they had all been sterilized with all the earmarks of Sidera Tyrins' craft. Matters were coming to a head with the Lycamornots: they had tried twice to ambush him and not succeeded. Shalto had tried various ploys to keep him out of Clodagh's bed. Caimbeul knew that he had to make a decision about it all

and he had to make it now. He had been wearing Patton's form for days at a time, and it was slowly exhausting him.

Caimbeul lay in bed with Clodagh, stroking her body. Caimbeul extended his auric presence, wrapping it protectively around her, shielding her to the best of his ability. To work his power to this extent meant allowing her to recognize what he was doing. Gambling, he said, "I know someone who might be able to help you. Your womb carries the psychic echoes of rape."

She felt his power and her shoulders slumped. Some of the coercions in her mind loosened. "Then you know it's his."

Caimbeul frowned, feeling a prickling along his arms. "Whose?"

"If I say his name I'll die. He set a death command in my mind. That's why I'm the only pregnant one still here. He still needs me."

"Who is he?"

"I can't tell you." Tears began to come down her cheeks. "The child is sa'necari."

"Let me help you."

"You can't. Oh by the Nine Elder Gods, be merciful. When I was seven I was given a vision, and it was interpreted and sealed in my mind. I was prevented from remembering it until the wolf from the vision appeared."

The prickling along Caimbeul's arms increased until it was almost as intense as the day he had been struck by lightning when he ran under a tree during a storm as a cub. "Are you saying it's me?"

"Yes." Clodagh straightened. "The vision was this: if you rescue me, you'll die, but I'll live."

"Fate can be changed, if one's will is strong enough."

Clodagh pushed at Caimbeul's chest. "Please go away, and don't ever come back."

"No. You're coming away with me tonight."

Caimbeul put his fingers to her temples and sent her to sleep. He caught Clodagh as she fell backwards on the bed. Then he wrapped her in a stasis, but he felt the Serpent's power fighting him. Sealing the stasis would take too much power for him to retain this form. Padruig gave way to Caimbeul's shape. He sealed the stasis, and lifted Clodagh in his arms.

He carried her out of the longhouse, and a shape formed in the darkness.

"Where are you going with her?" Shalto demanded.

"I'm taking her home with me."

"You can't do that, old mon."

"I can do anything I damn well please. I'm your lawgiver and you'll show respect or you'll end up in the dungeons."

Shalto backed off. "You're making bad enemies."

"So are you."

Caimbeul carried Clodagh to his home and laid her in his bed. Then he slipped his hand inside his robe, placed his fingers on the Godmark, and called out with his mind and heart.

—Pandeena, I need you. Please, come now.—

A shimmer of light shone in the corner of his bedroom. Pandeena appeared.

"What is it you need?" Her nose crinkled. "You both smell of sex. What did you do to her? Get too rough in bed?"

"Oh, please, Pandeena!" Caimbeul said irritably. "Don't start this now. She's pregnant."

Pandeena's face screwed up in a frown of distaste that Caimbeul remembered well from their marriage. "Old lecher, did you get her apron high?"

"Shut up and listen! It's the Serpent's."

Pandeena looked stunned as she walked to the bed, touched Clodagh, and Read her. "You've got a stasis on her. I didn't know you could do that."

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Pandeena. She has a death command in her mind. It was the only way to save her. Take her to your place for the night."

Pandeena sucked in a tight breath. "All right."

Caimbeul walked to the desk and opened the drawer. He pulled out all of his journals, shoving them into a satchel. "And these. All my evidence is in them. Take them someplace safe."

"You must think they're coming after you."

"I do. Shalto tried to stop me from taking her."

He added in the seed crystals, that he had used to prevent any of the females from getting pregnant by him when he was first sampling the illicit brothel in his efforts to discover how many of the women were involved. The crystals absorbed the fertile parts of a male's ejaculate and stored it for later release. Pandeena recognized what they were and lifted an eyebrow at him.

"Don't ask. It's in the journals."

"You're making them come after you. What can you possibly hope to gain?"

"A glimpse of the Serpent's face. They know I'm fireborn. He'll have to be with them when they come. I can tell you his identity through the Godmark."

Pandeena's eyes softened and she hugged him impulsively. "You're taking a terrible chance."

"It will be worth it ... if we catch him. Now get out of here."

Pandeena took the satchel, lifted Clodagh in her strong arms, and Jumped.

* * * *

"Where's Clodagh?" Malthus demanded of Shalto.

"The lawgiver came and took her away."

"Damn it! We have to get her back. The lawgiver will use the slut against us all. He'll get every single member of your band outlawed or worse."

"Why?"

"Remember when the priest busted you and Oswyl up? She said she'd punish any wolf caught using the women. Well she'll go after all of you. Claw will send his guards to help her do it. Considering what became of Tempest, Nikko, and Beth, we'll probably all be chained in his dungeons and put to the question."

Shalto looked stricken at the suggestion of being tortured. "What do we do?"

"Gather your friends at my cottage immediately. I didn't spend years as a kandoyarin without knowing how to handle this kind of thing. Tell them to bring their masks."

"What are we going to do?" Shalto repeated.

"We're going to kill the lawgiver," Malthus snarled. "And the priest too. No one messes with us."

"Yeah," Shalto grinned savagely. "No one messes with us. I'll get them."

"I'll need to prepare a few things at the cottage. Didn't you tell me the lawgiver has fireborn blood?"

"Caimbeul is famous for it. That's why he's so long lived."

"I can take care of that." Malthus sneered.

Malthus headed for the cottage, carrying a satchel. Once inside, he opened the satchel, and took out a string of crystal globes. He Read them and picked out the ones he wanted. A tap and a word of command brought forth the contents of three of them. Several blades, all wrapped in various shades of silk came first. He set those aside. A wealth of vials, bottles, and jars came next, accompanied by bowls, mortars, and pestles, measuring spoons, and stained brushes.

He considered his options carefully, and it came down to using a Devil's Silver base as he always did. His mother's family had discovered and refined Devil's Silver. It was an irradiated variety of silver liquefied in an arcane solution compatible with snake venom and other specialized toxins. Malthus had developed his own special recipe for death, comprised primarily of blended plant toxins, snake feces and venoms—venoms he had spent years painfully immunizing

himself against as his rite-enhanced resistances grew—and as a tribute to the toughness of lycans, Devil's Silver.

Normally he only coated his arrowheads and a single matched pair of long knives with it—knives he didn't usually carry. One arrow was all it took to kill a lycan. The more arrows he put into one, the faster they died. As far as he knew, no antidote for Devil's Silver existed.

He chose the most concentrated and deadly blend he had ever formulated using Devil's Silver, unstoppered the bottle, poured some into a bowl, and added from various other bottles. Malthus dipped his brush in. With careful, precise strokes, he poisoned each and every blade with it, leaving a dirty copper stain. When he finished, Malthus put that aside.

Then he turned to another set of bottles and vials. They would need to poison both Caimbeul's lycan and the fireborn aspects in order to be certain that Caimbeul would not rise if his body were burned. Fireborn tended to have at least two complete forms.

Everything clicked in Malthus' head and he realized that Caimbeul and Patton were probably one and the same person. Yren had said that he smelled odd. Malthus would have preferred blades runed for slaying fireborn, but had none with him, and he did not have time for subtlety. Instead, he blended another new poison with an arcane acid and spelled it for death. This one would need to be poured into a body cavity through a large wound.

Yren arrived first, looking eager. "We're going to stick the old bastard?"

"Yes, indeed, Yren," said Malthus. "But since you're here first, I have a special task for you."

"Sure." He grinned at Malthus

"Once he's down, slit him open, and pour this inside him to kill the fireborn half so he doesn't rise." Malthus stoppered the vial tightly and handed it to Yren who put it in his pouch.

"Like undead?"

"Very much so. You don't want him coming back to life and eating us, now do you?"

Yren's eyes widened and he sobered. "Shiiiiitt, no."

"But you can do this?"

"Absolutely, I'm your mon."

"And I have blades for everyone, but don't cut yourself on the edges. They're coated with Devil's Silver."

"How the hell did you get that?"

"I told you, my mother is a bio-chemist. I can get anything I want."

Yren grinned, snapped his stilettos from his armsheaths, and extended them to Malthus. "Poison all my blades?"

"Go have a sit outside and have a tankard while I work."

Yren left.

Malthus mixed up two more blends designed to kill fireborn and filled stoppered bottles with them. He put those in his pouches.

Preece slipped into Malthus' study. He watched him a moment. Malthus handed him a blade with a coppery shine down the middle. Preece leaned against the door facing as he accepted the blade. "Is this the same stuff you gave me to stick Kynyr with?"

"Devil's Silver and some other things. A specialty of my mother's."

"You must have an interesting mother," Preece said softly.

"I do."

Preece turned the blade back and forth, studying the edge without touching it. "This ought to slide into the cockwhore nicely."

Malthus smiled thinly. "Was this revelation supposed to shock me?"

"Not at all. I think we're kindred spirits. Any time there's killing to be done, count me in. I'll follow you to hell and back."

Shalto stepped past Preece, casting a glance up and down him. "What's the plan?"

"We're not going after him tonight. We're just arming up. Tomorrow, we ride out of town on a group hunt like we've done so many times in the past. Only we double back at dusk."

Malthus tapped another globe, and several more objects appeared on his large desk: glass rods, two wands, talismans on chains, rings, and a box of darts.

"Hsaahh," Shalto breathed. "Globe of holding. Never thought I'd ever see one. Expensive."

Malthus chuckled. "And reasonably rare in most places."

"Where you get them?"

"Charas, but that's a long story and we don't have time for it." He placed three of the glass rods into a leather case with a flap lid and a belt loop. "I'll need these to deal with Caimbeul."

"Aren't we just going to stick him?" Rheu said, pushing between Preece and Shalto.

Preece gave Rheu's head an affectionate ruffling. Rheu was an orphan who had lived with Preece for a year now. Malthus suspected it was not a case of comfort nesting, for he had caught a glimpse of Preece fondling Rheu in the sweet pepper bushes near the stream. Yet, they both spent a lot of time with their sticks in the females.

Malthus explained it all again and by then Nesswen and Oswyl had arrived. He could taste the blood lust rising from the auras of the young wolves, just as it did when they hunted deer in the winter in wolf form. It would be a pleasure to watch them tomorrow.

"What if Caimbeul kills one of us?" Oswyl asked. "They say he was a fighter in his day."

Malthus regarded all of them. Oswyl was a liability that he needed to eliminate. He was too weak willed and worrisome. If any of them were seriously wounded in the fight ... Well, he would take along several vials each containing a fatal overdose of concentrated Pollendine, a powerful narcotic, in case one of the others might be foolish enough to ask a healer to look at the wounded, and draw dangerous attention to the rest of them.

"You've all seen someone felled when an elk turned at bay, yet the pack continued to attack...." Torquil said.

"No quarter asked, no quarter given," Malthus said quietly, his steepled fingers tapping his lips. "We're all taking an equal chance. Shall I get us all some mead?"

Malthus spelled the tankards before bringing them in to ensure that all the gang was even more susceptible to his plans, and handed them around.

"The more you stick him the faster he dies," Preece said.

* * * *

Claw walked to his study, and dropped into his chair breathing hard. Just that much walking and he was exhausted. It grated on his nerves. Sheradyn had ordered him to take it easy, and Aisha was enforcing that by not allowing him out of the house. Malthus, they had informed him, would handle his duties for the nonce. That made him edgy and got on his nerves. Malthus was not lycan.

Merissa should have married a lycan.

What would happen to Darmyk without him to protect his grandson? The fact that Darmyk was godmarked would not be counted as much as the fact that he was sa'necari. The hatred of sa'necari went too deep.

He could only hope that when the time came, Pandeena could find Brock and get him here fast enough.

Claw opened a drawer in his desk, pulled out the last bottle of Faery wine, a glass, and poured himself a drink. He drank two glasses before he felt the chest pain start. A tremor of panic ran through him, and he drew a flask from his pocket. Claw poured the medicine into the glass on top of the wine, and drank all of it. Sheradyn had told him to keep the medicine with him at all times, and at the first symptoms to drink it. He probably should not have added it to the wine,

but he didn't have another glass and didn't want to waste something as expensive and rare as that vintage.

The chieftain tried to hold his eyes open as he felt the heavy cottony sensation of pressure in his head. Claw fainted at his desk, his head folding forward over his arms.

* * * *

Kynyr's units from Red Wolf had had the fewest casualties of the three groups that attacked the brothel: three wounded and none killed. He counted himself lucky. He had postponed going home because of Fergus MacFie. He had just started to like the spiky wolf, and now Kynyr had watched him grow weaker with the passing hours despite everything that Cahira and the Sharani surgeons did.

He sat at the table in the upstairs meeting room with a glass of whiskey in his hand, staring at the rows of sa'necari heads that Cahira had placed a preservation spell on. Twenty-two heads, counting Jondries and Heironim.

"I suppose that's a catch worth dying for." Kynyr saluted the heads with his whiskey and drank it.

Todd stepped through the door. "You'd better come. Fergus is going."

Kynyr pushed away from the table and rose, following his grandfather to Fergus' room.

Father Gileaus shoed everyone out except for Kynyr, Darcy, and Finn. His spiritbrother held Darcy sobbing against his shoulder, stroking her head in a vain gesture of comfort.

Fergus' eyes opened as Kynyr dragged a chair close and sat down beside him. Fergus gasped and coughed weakly as

he spoke, breaking up his words. "My wife ... Siusan ... tell her ... I ... loved her."

"We will. You're a fine wolf, Fergus. You did well, fought well."

A weary smile flickered across Fergus' lips and went slack. The breath rattled from his lungs. Kynyr reached and closed Fergus' staring eyes; and then gave him the kiss of farewell to the dead, forehead, cheeks, and lips.

"He's gone."

Kynyr left the room, trying to hold in a fresh wave of grief. He went to his rooms, snatched the bottle of whiskey from a cabinet, and settled at the small table in the antechamber, swigging from the bottle with a morbid light in his eyes.

Todd appeared, grabbed a pair of glasses, and pried the bottle from Kynyr's hands before settling opposite him.

"That's no way to drink it."

Kynyr leaned his head back, staring at the ceiling. "I wonder who's going to close my eyes after I'm dead. Or am I going to rot on the battlefield like so many have."

"Don't go fey on me, Kynyr." Todd poured and pressed a glass in Kynyr's hand.

"Isn't that how the story goes? The prince always dies."

"That's why you and Kady went to the clerk?"

Kynyr gave a faint nod. "I never really expected to go home from here ... except in a box."

"Is that why you were so willing to wear Tarrant's ring?"

"Maybe." Kynyr sipped the whiskey, turned his hand up so that the ring showed and ran his finger over the crest. "I

don't really know. There's this big empty hole in me that I'm afraid to look inside."

"Tarrant said the same thing to me when he was your age."

"If you don't mind ... I'd like to be alone. There's a lot I want to think about before we leave for home tomorrow."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ROOTS OF ALL EVIL

In the middle of the bed lay a sleeping bitch, the folds of her traditional robe revealing the pregnant rounding of her stomach.

Pandeena studied Clodagh, who lay locked into a dream from which she could not awaken until someone released the spell imprisoning her. The priest flicked her forefinger up and down against her pursed lips. Clodagh seemed an odd choice for Caimbeul to have fallen in love with. She was completely different from any of the lycan bitches that Pandeena's ex-husband had ever shown an interest in, soft and gentle rather than strong and aggressive; round-faced and pleasantly attractive, but not beautiful. She wondered if age had finally mellowed the old dog out.

Caimbeul's stasis spell on Clodagh prevented her from dying of a death spell lodged in her brain by the Butchering Serpent, a sa'necari with a long history of lycan genocide. That Caimbeul could cast spells astonished Pandeena: he had never shown the slightest ability during the years of their marriage. She should have suspected it, since he had inherited fireborn blood from his father's side.

"I can't believe he's fallen in love again. You must be an impressive bitch."

Pandeena warded the room and Jumped to the Lawgiver House. She materialized in his bedroom startling him, and he spun with a blade in his hands.

Her eyes narrowed, taking in the impressive length of the wicked fighting knife in his hands. To her knowledge, Caimbeul had not wielded one since their son was killed nearly a century ago. "Is that any way to greet me?"

His eyes went angry. "You've left her alone."

"I warded the chamber. If anyone touches her locked door, I'll Jump back and stop them."

Caimbeul sheathed the knife at his hip, ran his hand through his thick hair, and settled heavily into a chair. "I barely slept last night. I kept having nightmares."

"You? Nightmares?"

"Oh stop the shit, Pandeena. You've never forgiven me for our son's death. And yes, it was my fault. I've spent years trying to deny it. But I can't any longer." Caimbeul's face turned to expressionless stone, yet his eyes leaked—the only sign of his feelings.

Pandeena's eyes softened, and her cheeky attitude faded. "You're finally going to tell me what really happened?"

Caimbeul's shoulders slumped. "If I don't tell you now, I may never get to. I'm gambling my life on a throw of the dice, on the chance of seeing the Serpent's face. The only thing standing between me and him is your mark." He opened his shirt and touched the Godmark of the Second Mother of the lycan race—only he knew that the Pandeena of the legends and his ex-wife standing before him were the same mon. The rest of those who dwelled in Wolffgard simply

thought that she was named for the Second Mother as so many daughters of their people were.

Custom and law constrained them both with iron fetters. They had to catch the Butchering Serpent without breaking the laws of the clan that Pandeena, her mother Navaryn First Mother, and her grandmother, the god, Tala, Mistress of Wolves, had given them when they first turned wolves into myn. To do otherwise invited chaos and unwanted change.

Pandeena knelt beside his chair and folded her arms across his knees, giving him a look of sorrow and compassion. "Tell me."

He managed a tiny nod, tight with emotion. "I knew it was dangerous. I don't usually deal with clan quarrels amongst city wolves. They begged me to arbitrate. The feud had cost many lives on both sides ... had been for years. It's always a tragedy when clan battles clan. So I went. Gwythyr wanted to go with me. I had been training him so very long, Pandeena. He had grown impatient. I refused. He followed me."

"That much I knew."

Caimbeul's mouth twitched and his jaw tightened. "I could have sent him packing at that point. But I gave in. You were away so much of the time. I knew what I was getting into when I married a yuwenghau ... I'm not blaming you. My hubris was that I thought I could handle it. I filled his head with stories, legends ... history. He wanted to be a hero." Caimbeul sucked in a breath to steady himself.

"Except that, Pandeena, I never stressed the fact that heroes—heroes die young." Caimbeul paused in his story, breathing heavily. "We rode into Skeleton Creek. I spoke to

both sides the first night we were there. They seemed willing to negotiate. I arranged a meeting between the chieftains. But there was something not quite right about it. It nagged at me and I disregarded it.

"Gwythyr was so excited to be in a city for the first time. We took in the theater, attended several musical performances, and shopped. I bought him a new bow case and quiver—" Caimbeul turned his face away, pressing his hands over his eyes. "I buried it with him."

Pandeena reached up and pulled him into her arms. "You don't need to go on, if it hurts you this much."

A single sob broke from Caimbeul's throat, and he swallowed back the next one. "I kept thinking it was all too easy, and then pushing those thoughts aside because ... I was the great Padruig Caimbeul, everyone wanted to listen to me. No one could compare to me. I was the wisest, the strongest, and the best. And I never saw it coming."

She stroked his head, ran her fingers through his hair, and kissed his tears. "Saw what?"

"There was a third side. There was a third bloody side!" Caimbeul screamed and began to tremble violently in her arms. "Sa'necari ... manipulating both clans. They came to the meeting shielded, passing themselves off as lycans. They were from a minor family, but strong and knowledgeable. They wanted the clans' holdings, but weren't positioned to take them outright. They knew about the fireborn blood in Gwythyr and myself. We were sitting at the table, talking with the chieftains. I sensed the raising of their powers and looked about.... "Caimbeul's face twisted up into a mask of

hopelessness, and another sob escaped. "I gathered my power ... I killed two of them ... and then I saw Gwythyr falling ... three blades in his back ... runed for killing fireborn and coated with Devil's Silver. I went into an unthinking rage. I lost all sense of myself. Gods, Pandeena. I have no memory of how I got out with his body. When I came to myself, I was on a horse, riding with him in my arms ... his horse in tow, and that wonderful quiver and bow case that I buried him with. Oh gods forgive me, forgive me."

Caimbeul broke down completely and all that Pandeena could do was hold him.

* * * *

Malthus arrived for dinner with his wife, Merissa on his arm. They arrived last, as always, and his father-in-law, Claw Redhand, glared at him from the head of the huge trestle table. He seated Merissa, pushing her chair in for her. She folded her hands across her hugely swollen belly and cast her eyes demurely before her. A flicker of uncertainty in her eyes reflected the tension between her and Malthus.

Claw's sisters, Fianait and Searlait, sat at his left hand; his wife and daughter on his right. Malthus was seated beside Merissa, and Belgair, the Captain of the Guard, sat opposite him.

The table could have sat forty with ease. However, lycan chieftains did not usually maintain a court or Privy Council that would have filled the tables at human king's abode, although they did, from time to time, entertain guests. Claw had not had guests in several years. He discouraged most

visitors because Merissa had borne an out of wedlock child, Darmyk, by a sa'necari. There had been a time when lycan custom would have stoned Merissa to death for bearing a sa'necari child. It still happened in some of the more isolated villages on clan lands.

Darmyk ate at the far end, bracketed by Malthus' two young nieces, Ros and Lyrri.

Nibari slaves waited upon the table.

Malthus' gaze slid along the table and he smiled when he recognized the label on the bottle of rum Claw had brought to the table with him from the liquor cabinets in the Blue Room. The rum was from Ildyrsetts, very expensive, and a gift to Claw from Malthus.

Searlait cut up all of Fianait's food for her, and gestured for Kissie to fill Fianait's wine glass. The way they all catered to Fianait, babying her endlessly, irritated Malthus.

Claw poured himself a second glass without offering any of his prize to the others. "When Brock gets here, I intend to make a lot of changes."

Belgair stiffened, his expression souring. He started to say something and bit it back, eating in stony silence. Making a scene at dinner was not allowed. Aisha, Claw's wife, rigidly enforced the no quarreling at the table rule, and Claw usually backed her up.

"Are you sure he's coming?" Fianait asked with a trace of wistfulness in her voice. "He's been gone so long."

"I sent for him. He's coming. This exile was his own pig-headed decision. Not mine." The irritability with which Claw spoke ended that discussion before it started.

They all knew that Claw had rescinded the edict of exile on Brock within a month of their father's death. They had expected him to come home then. A century later, they were still waiting. Stubbornness ran in the Redhand family, as much a curse as a virtue.

Malthus watched for an opportunity to excuse himself and leave. The chance came as the conversation moved to sheep, goats, and whether fences needed mending.

Until Claw's last heart attack, he would have been on top of it all. Now he was dependant upon Belgair to oversee that, and it showed in the sharp manner in which Claw kept asking questions throughout the meal.

Malthus began to lose patience. "Please excuse me, but I need to go hunting. The Sanctuary has run out of meat again."

Claw scowled. "All you do is fuck my daughter and hunt for that damned refugee camp. You should take more interest in the needs of this household."

Malthus sucked in a breath to hold back an aggravated reply. "I promised Beth, before her death, that I would see to the needs of the camp."

"Go on then," Claw snarled.

Aisha frowned at Claw, anticipating an outburst, and quieted him with a glance.

Malthus rose, went upstairs, and changed into his hunting leathers. Then he went to his study and took a string of carrying globes from a drawer. It looked like a simple necklace of baubles, and he never told anyone different. He

buckled on his knife belt, shoved the necklace into a pouch, and picked up his bow case. Then he departed the manor.

* * * *

Ros sat at the table in the Blue Room, drawing on sheets of cheap paper with wax crayons. Her sister Lyrri played on the floor with her dolls. Searlait came in and watched them a moment.

"Girls, this isn't the playroom. You were told to go to bed after dinner."

Ros licked her lips, and then wagged her tongue up and down inside her cheek. "Where's Darmyk?"

Searlait glanced around and failed to see him about. "I assume he's in bed. He's an obedient cub."

A flash of meanness twitched across Ros' face. "That's not what Uncle Malthus says."

"Don't talk back. Get on to bed."

Ros and Lyrri gathered their things and walked to their suite.

Lyrri flopped onto her bed. "Those old bitches are mean."

Ros shrugged. "They're lycans," she said as if that explained everything.

Ros got out of her clothes and laid them neatly across the back of a chair near her bed. She took a pink nightgown from the drawer of her dresser and pulled it over her head.

Lyrri watched her sister closely. "You going to bed?"

"No. Put your nightgown on."

Lyrri obeyed, sensing that Ros was up to something.

Ros went to the outer door to their suite and peered through a crack, listening. "It's clear. Come on, Lyrri."

After nearly six months in manor, they knew all the best hiding places, the nooks and crannies into which they could dart on hearing someone walking toward them. They made their way across the second floor to the servants' stairs, situated in a narrow stairwell.

"We going to play with Timerly, Ros?"

Ros let her fangs down and licked them. "I'm hungry.

A sa'necari prodigy, Ros had been born with her fangs instead of developing them at puberty, which was still at least five years off. She drank blood with her milk as an infant.

They stole up to the third floor where most of the nibari rooms were and slipped into the room where four nibari male children slept. Three of them had been sterilized as unfit for stud purposes—they did not castrate them, but clipped and cauterized the vas deferens. Timerly lay beneath the window, wrapped in many quilts against the mid autumn chill.

Ros stroked Timerly's cheek, waking him. She flashed her fangs in the dark, catching a sliver of moonlight on their whiteness.

Timerly slipped out of bed and followed them down the hall to the playroom the nibari children used. He slithered out of his robe and smiled as Ros pushed him onto the floor and bit him.

* * * *

Malthus rode north through Wolffgard and then took the west fork at the end of town, which led to the Camp. There he

continued on to his old cottage along the outer edge of the ground belonging to the camp, screened by pine trees from the view of the others.

A table with sat in front of the cottage with tree rounds set around it substituting for chairs. However, the meeting would take place inside the cottage because of the chill of the evening and the lessening of credible concealment since the deciduous trees had shed their leaves for the season.

This was the only habitation on the grounds built in the human style. The rest were traditional lycan longhouses and a few scattering sheelings of woven fibers, currently uninhabited because the disappearance of nearly a third of the females and children a few weeks ago had left enough houses vacant to move everyone out of the sheelings and into the warmer housing.

Malthus poured mead into mismatched tankards and sketched spells along the sides that blazed for an instant and then faded into the metal. The spell would make the Lycamornots more open to his suggestions, unlike the ones he had placed upon the bottles of expensive liquor he had given to Claw—those were keyed to the old chieftain, a curse that weakened his heart and body and would eventually kill him.

Preece and Rheu arrived first. They wore knives belted at their waists that Malthus had coated with Devil's Silver and other arcane poisons a week ago. They carried elaborate animal masks in their hands.

One by one the others arrived, similarly prepared.

"So we're going to do it tonight?" Preece asked, fondling Rheu.

Malthus nodded with a tiny smile. "Tonight we kill the lawgiver and the priest, and we get Clodagh back."

* * * *

Darmyk Redhand stole through the manor of his grandfather, the lycan chieftain Claw Redhand. Fear rode his heels, crawling up and down his spine, and twisting the muscles of his neck. Somewhere in the darkened hallways, two terrifying little girls named Ros and Lyrrri were stalking him again.

Once this had been a happy place, a safe place, a place where he played without fear, basking in the love of his mother, grandparents, and two doting old aunts. Then his mother had married Malthus Estrobian, who had come to live with them, bringing his two orphaned nieces along: seven-year-old Ros and six-year-old Lyrrri. Since then it had become a place of hidden dangers and every shadowed niche and cranny seemed to promise fresh horrors.

Before her marriage his mother, Merissa, would have put him to bed and tucked him in with a kiss. Now half the time she forgot about him—except for when his stepfather was away. She was tired and distracted all the time, her belly so swollen in pregnancy that she looked like a farmer had filled her with watermelons.

No one had come to look for him when he fell asleep hiding in a cabinet in the drawing room they called the Blue Room. When he had woken up, all the candles had been blown out.

Darmyk had been so frightened at first that he wanted to cry. After gathering his courage, he had headed for his rooms, only to hear the ominous step, drag, step, and drag sound of Ros' bad leg somewhere in the darkness.

He scrambled a little farther, heading for his rooms that the priest, Pandeena, had warded after Ros nearly killed him a few weeks ago. They hadn't known it was Ros. They had thought it was a vampire. Yet the wards held and Ros could not enter his suite.

Down the corridor and around a corner he ran as lightly and soundlessly as he could, wishing he had been born lycan, and not sa'necari, because as a wolf cub he would have moved faster and quieter. He paused to listen again, trying to discover where they were. After swallowing several times, he bolted as far as the edge of a linen closet and crouched near the door.

Lyrri stepped out of the closet in front of him with a small laugh. "What are you doing out of bed?"

His heart leaped into his throat and Darmyk felt backwards onto his bottom. Before he could gain his feet, Ros appeared, and unshielded a candle lantern. Blood rimmed her mouth. "More food."

He whimpered in fear, feeling the coercions that Ros had placed in his mind tighten.

"Don't move."

Despite his strong desire to flee, once Ros spoke a command his body obeyed her will.

She touched his throat and stole his words. Lyrri giggled. They dragged him into the linen closet, shoved him down, and Ros straddled him. Her fangs descended.

Darmyk looked up at them, tears staining his cheeks.

Ros tangled her fingers in his hair to get a good angle to enter the artery in his neck. "Uncle Malthus says I can't kill you until after he kills your Grandpa. So I'm just going to hurt you."

Darmyk sobbed. Malthus had killed his maned hunting cat, Kenly, to deprive him of the cat's protection, and now he was killing Claw. Ros' coercions prevented him from telling on them.

She licked his neck, found a spot she liked, and opened his vein with her fangs. Her mouth tightened on him as blood spurted from the artery. Her sucking felt obscene and she hurt him. Darmyk grew dizzy as his life slipped down her throat. He wet himself as his weakening body lost control of its muscles.

Lyrri made a face. "Oooh. He stinks!"

Ros' nose wrinkled in distaste, she pulled her fangs out of Darmyk, and licked the wound closed.

"Your daddy killed our daddy. Your grandpa ate his heart. I'm going to kill you and eat your heart."

Lyrri made another face at him. "Nasty little lycan cub."

They dragged Darmyk to his room. Ros touched his door and jerked her hand back, the tips of her fingers blistered. She had forgotten about the warding. "You'll have to dump him in yourself, Lyrri. I can't cross the threshold."

"Why does it let me in?"

"I don't know. Maybe because you don't have your fangs yet."

* * * *

It had taken longer to get ready to leave than Kynyr would have liked. He had deferred to Lord Brodrig's wishes and remained until Fergus' body had been prepared for burial and placed within its casket. Kynyr had helped load the casket onto the wagon that was taking Fergus' home to lie with his ancestors.

Darcy was being left in command of the MacLachlan forces in Hell's Widow, since Brodrig and Father Gileaus were escorting their dead and wounded home.

Kynyr sat his big warhorse, Bucky, as the MacLachlan wagons trundled from sight and then signaled his company to move out.

Finn nudged his horse alongside Kynyr's. "Darcy says she's going to come visit."

Kynyr gave his spiritbrother a sidewise glance, noting a silly glint in his eyes like a hound dog that smelled a bitch in season. "You're sleeping with her, aren't you?"

Finn flushed. "Yeah. But it isn't what you think ... I mean ... well..." Finn sighed. "Now that you're married and all, I'm kind of like a third wheel when you don't got a fourth."

Nearly as well educated as Kynyr, Finn could school the sloppiness from his speech when he had a mind to—problem was that he rarely had a mind to. "Finn, tell me you haven't already gotten her up the stick?"

"Nah, no such luck."

Kynyr's War [Lycan Blood Vol. IV]
by Janrae Frank

"But you are thinking of proposing to her?"

"Yeah."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DEATH AND DESECRATION

In the aftermath of his confession, Caimbeul felt hollowed out from releasing the inner storm he had so long suppressed. He barred all the doors and the shuttered windows, so that they could not sneak into the house. His primary form, as a lycan, was old. It had been nearly a century since he last fought with anything besides words. Caimbeul considered taking on his fireborn shape, but he had heavily taxed his aging powers fighting the Serpent's hold over Clodagh for the past two weeks. Placing the stasis spell on her had exhausted him.

He wore a coarse, traditional robe that wrapped comfortably and would accommodate changing to his hybrid lycan form. The fighting knife he had not used since the death of his son, now hung again at his hip from a wide leather belt. He dozed in his chair after Pandeena returned to her home to put things in order for being gone a few days. She intended to take Clodagh to her mother's house and then stay there.

A knock at the door roused Caimbeul.

On his threshold stood eight myn with animal masks over their faces: a cat, a dog, a lion, a serpent, a bird, a bear, a frog, and a deer. The overpowering scent of their blood lust flooded the sitting room, like the stench of rotting corpses, too strong to be missed or overlooked. They wore traditional robes and were already in their hybrid forms. His stomach did

a slow roll. They had come to kill him, as he had expected. Until that moment, he thought he was prepared for it, but now that it stared him in the face, Caimbeul realized that he didn't want to die. "What do you want?"

He started to close the door, only to have it shoved back in his face hard enough to stagger him. Caimbeul retreated, trying to concentrate and reach for Pandeena through the Godmark, but it was not as easy as he had expected it to be with these youths confronting him. Age and a comfortable century of life had cost him his edge.

The youths pushed in past him.

The one in the leering serpent mask carried a long glass rod in his hands.

"What's going on?" Caimbeul's hand dropped to the hilt of his blade, and he changed to his hybrid form. "Get out of my house."

"I'm sorry," said Bear Mask. "We must protect ourselves."

"I'm not doing anything to you. Show me your faces, and we'll discuss it."

—PANDEENA!—He sent his thoughts racing into the Godmark and reaching for her.

No answer came from her.

Let me kill one of them. At least one of them. I know I'm old, but Tala ... hear me.

Bird Mask's dagger flashed in the lamplight as it came at Caimbeul in an overhand strike. Caimbeul drew his knife, sidestepped, and hooked Bird Mask's blade, locking their hilts together. Snapping his leg out, Caimbeul kicked Bird Mask in the groin, doubling him over, freed his blade, and shoved it

into Bird Mask's ribs. He turned to face another as Bird Mask folded onto the ground, groaning and weeping.

Bird Mask's noises seemed to whip them into a greater frenzy; the scent of blood lust intensified into a smothering cloud.

Searing pain in Caimbeul's gut made him pitch forward. He lowered his eyes to the hilt of Bear Mask's blade that had been shoved into his belly. Caimbeul hit Bear Mask in the chest, slamming him into the wall. Bear Mask straightened and lunged in. He seized the hilt of the blade still lodged to the quillons in Caimbeul's body, jerked it out, and swept it into a thrust from below. Caimbeul blocked it with a shield hold on his knife—one hand on its hilt and the other on its blade—forcing Bear Mask's knife down.

Dog Mask slashed the lawgiver's right forearm open from wrist to elbow, and then plunged the knife into his ribs. The blade fell from the lawgiver's hand. Caimbeul felt the burn of Devil's Silver in his bloodstream.

Devil's Silver killed my son.

They circled him with drawn knives and Caimbeul could see the coppery stain of Devil's Silver on all of them. His skin crawled, knowing he would get it in the back like his son Gwythyr had. The lawgiver started to unleash a long ululating cry would bring myn running, but Serpent Mask darted in and put the rod to his throat. Sa'necari power plunged into him, silencing his voice.

"Kill him," Serpent Mask ordered.

The Butchering Serpent. Sa'necari.

Caimbeul reached for the serpent mask, desperate to see the butcher's face so he could call out to Pandeena the mon's identity. Serpent Mask stepped out of Caimbeul's reach as the big lycan in the lion mask caught him by the hair, yanked him off balance, and thrust a blade into his chest with a ripping twist. Caimbeul blinked, and his lips parted in a sharp gasp. Intense pain beyond anything the old wolf had ever experienced in centuries of fighting swept through him. He shuddered and his knees wobbled like a drunk's.

Devil's Silver. Too much Devil's Silver.

Bear Mask's expression begged Caimbeul's forgiveness as he slipped the blade into the lawgiver's ribs.

Three blades tore into Caimbeul's back. Two more plunged deep into his sides. His attackers made gleeful noises, howling with excitement. They danced around him, knowing there was no fight left in him, stabbing and slicing for the unholy pleasure of it.

The scrawny one in the deer mask kept jostling Bear Mask whenever he hesitated, pressuring him into delivering more cuts to Caimbeul's body, more insertions of the blade.

Internal bleeding counted for the worst of it, yet Caimbeul's body was awash in crimson, and it stained the shreds of his robe. Blood and gore splattered his assailants' masks and clothing.

Lion Mask held onto Caimbeul's hair, plunged his blade expertly into each of his shoulders, severing the radial nerves, and then striking again to shatter the shoulder blades. Caimbeul's arms went dead.

Breathing hard, he started to slump as the knives continued to pierce his sides, his back, his chest, and his stomach. Only Lion Mask's hand in his hair held him up.

The Serpent chuckled, tilting his head to the side as if considering a work of art. "Lovely."

Then Lion Mask released him.

Caimbeul collapsed in the middle of the floor, listening to their laughter. Blood pooled around his body. He reached desperately for Pandeena through the link she had placed between them, magnifying his inner voice with his emotions.

—I'm dying. They've killed me. Take Clodagh, the journals, and flee.—

No answer came.

He lay in a crumpled heap, dizzy and disoriented, too weak to move. They unbuckled his belt, rolled him over twice to get his robe off, and left him on his back nude. The chill air made him shiver violently as he broke out in cold sweat. His body rippled with convulsions.

Despair lurched through him when Pandeena did not respond. No one would call his killers to account. The masks muffled their voices and he could not identify any of them. Fear touched him: *have they killed Pandeena?*

Cat Mask studied his body. "We cut him up good and fast."

Rheu, wearing a dog mask, licked his lips. "The blade slid in so easy..."

"It's good steel." Torquil adjusted his lion mask. "Parts the flesh like cheese."

Preece knelt and cleaned his blade on Caimbeul's robe, rose with the cloth in his hands and passed it around. "Take care of your blades, and your blades will take care of you."

"We're not finished." Malthus snarled impatiently. "Open him up, Yren."

Deer Mask slit Caimbeul's belly open from groin to sternum, and poured a vial of liquid into the lawgiver's guts that burned like acid, poisoning the fireborn half of him. A canine whimper forced its way from his throat. "That takes care of that. He'll be good and dead when we're finished."

Cat Mask wiped his blade and passed the robe on to Bear Mask. "The priest is next. I'm going to fuck her while she's dying. Give her a taste of what she gives others."

Lion Mask leered. "I want inside that trolleymog bitch myself."

Bear Mask sucked in a breath and stepped away, shaking his head. "I don't know."

"Shut up." Shalto hit Oswyl's shoulder. "You stuck him at least twice. I saw you."

"I know. I just ... didn't expect it to feel like this." Oswyl knelt beside Bird Mask, who still groaned and sobbed. He pulled a wadded handkerchief from a pocket of his robe and stuffed it into the wound. "What about Nesswen?"

"What about him?" Lion Mask came to stand beside Oswyl.

"I think he's dying."

I killed one. Caimbeul felt a glimmer of satisfaction. His body jerked as he coughed hard, bringing up a bloody froth from his lungs.

"We all took our chances, Bear. We all knew he might get one of us." Torquil growled behind his lion's mask. "Would you rather it had been you?"

Malthus scowled, knelt beside Nesswen, and pulled the bird mask off. He took a blue vial from his pouch, and lifted Nesswen's head up. "Drink this. All of it. It will take the pain away."

Nesswen took a long swallow of Pollendine, and closed his eyes.

"All of it." Malthus coaxed in soothing tones, putting the vial to Nesswen's lips again. "You must take all of it, or it won't help."

Nesswen took another long swallow.

"You do want the pain to stop, don't you?"

"Yes," Nesswen whispered hoarsely.

"Then take the last swallow. When we're finished, I'll find you a healer."

Nesswen gave Malthus a look of gratitude, and drank the last of it.

Malthus pocketed the vial. "Grab a pillow off that sofa for Nesswen. It looks serious, but I don't think it's fatal."

Oswyl put the pillow beneath Nesswen's head. "Don't die on us."

"I won't." Gradually the lines of pain eased in Nesswen's face, his eyes closed, and he lost consciousness.

Malthus stood, walked back to Caimbeul, and kicked him. "That's for Nesswen."

"Did you like sticking him, little dog?" Preece ruffled Rheu's hair. "Do you want to stick another?"

Fourteen-year-old Rheu looked up at Preece. "It's exciting."

Seeing what Malthus had done, Yren also kicked Caimbeul. "For Nesswen."

"I ought to cut his damned cock off." Shalto spat on Caimbeul. "If he's Patton, as you say, then he's been sticking it in the women too."

Preece parted his robe and pissed on the lawgiver. "Wheee!" He shook his cock to get rid of the dribbles.

They all followed suit, until it seemed like there was as much urine as blood on the floor.

Caimbeul's awareness grayed and grew misty, but he cried out again with his mind and emotions to Pandeena.

—Pandeena, flee. Take Clodagh.—

—What happened?— Pandeena asked in his head.

—I'm dying. They're coming for you next. One of ... is Yren. Serpent called his name. And Nesswen.—

The Serpent pushed at them. "We're losing time. Search the house. Find Clodagh."

The youths dispersed, leaving Malthus alone with Nesswen and Caimbeul. As he knelt beside Caimbeul, he noticed the wolf's head Godmark on the lawgiver's chest near the junction of his shoulder. "Godmarked...." Malthus ripped a piece of Caimbeul's robe off and used it to wipe the Godmark clean, careful not to touch it and burn his fingers.

"I don't recognize it. I've never seen a godmarked lycan before. It's a shame you're in no condition to explain it. You were an interesting old wolf, pity you stuck your nose where it didn't belong." Malthus shoved his fingers into the wounds,

glanced to see that he was alone, and licked them off.

"Delicious."

Malthus took out a second vial of the fireborn poison, pouring a little into each of the wounds until he had used up the last of it. Then Malthus put the glass rod to Caimbeul's chest, beside, but not touching, the Godmark. He sent a lance of death magic into Caimbeul. The wolf's eyes bulged and he gasped like a landed fish.

Caimbeul's lips silently formed the words, "Cockwhoring bastard."

"Intriguing. There's more life left in you than I expected. You might have been fun to play with in my dungeons." Malthus slipped the rod into his pouch, placed his palm on Caimbeul's chest, and stabbed his dark energies into Caimbeul's heart savagely.

Caimbeul felt Malthus' Readers gift swirl through his body, and knew the asshole was enjoying the taste of his suffering, dining on it.

"Relax and it will soon be over." Malthus spoke in a venomously soothing tone. "Fight me and the pain will be worse."

"Go to hell," Caimbeul mouthed the words. Knowing the longer it took him to die the more time he bought Pandeena to escape; Caimbeul reached into his fading gifts and wrapped what little strength remained to him around his heart.

"I've killed fireborn before. I can make it slow and agonizing or I can make it swift. It depends on how hard you fight me."

"Damn you."

Malthus' lips drew back into a sneer. He sent a black wave of death into all the organs of Caimbeul's body.

Caimbeul experienced a final flicker of consciousness, realizing the terrible power of the Serpent, wondering if he might be more than a match for a yuwenghau. *Tala, Master of Wolves, to thee I commend my spirit. Find me worthy to stand in your presence.*

Malthus hit him again, harder still. Caimbeul's body jerked, gave a convulsive shudder, and stilled. His lips parted and his eyes stared unseeing. An intense erotic pleasure rippled through Malthus in the instant that Caimbeul died. It whetted his necromantic hunger and he wanted more.

The Butchering Serpent stood up, laughing softly, took his cock out, and urinated on the lawgiver's corpse. He went to Nesswen, put two fingers to the side of his neck as if feeling for a pulse, and Read him necromantically. While the wound had been serious, it had not necessarily been fatal, and a healer might have been able to save Nesswen. However, the overdose was doing its job—Nesswen's heart was slowing to a stop. Malthus gave the organ a small squeeze with his powers and stilled it. Although Nesswen's death tasted good, it had been too peaceful to sate Malthus' appetite.

The others gathered into the sitting room.

"She's not here." Shalto adjusted his cat mask.

"What about Nesswen?" Oswyl knelt by his friend.

Malthus glanced at Oswyl, then the others, saying with a sad edge to his voice, "He's dead."

It hit them all at the same time, and they stood in silence staring at Nesswen's corpse.

"There's nothing to be done about it." Malthus kept his voice calm. "The priest and the lawgiver forced us to it. We would have all ended up like Nesswen, except the priest would have had us tortured first."

"Malthus is right." Preece's tranquil voice stilled the room. "Brace up, we need to see this through."

Shalto's brow furrowed. "Next time we ride to the hunt ... we can hold a howl for Nesswen's spirit where no one hears us."

"Let's get us some vengeance on the priest," snarled Torquil. "This is her fault for interfering."

Malthus gestured at Yren. "See that no one's coming. We need to get rid of the bodies."

Yren bounced to the door, opened it a crack, and peered out. "All clear."

"Torquil, fetch two blankets."

They wrapped Nesswen and Caimbeul's bodies so that no one could tell what they had. Torquil carried the corpses out, threw them across a horse, and lashed them down. Then they rode back to the camp. They drew rein at the door to Pandeena's apartment and saw that the lamps were lit.

Torquil laughed. "It's time my stick tasted a priestly flesh-hole."

"We'll take turns until there's nothing left of her," Shalto promised his friends.

Oswyl hung back, shaking so hard he had to clasp his hands together. The corner of his eyes caught a small

movement in the bushes. He flinched, startled, and saw a black and orange, tiger-striped tomcat watching them. Oswyl lashed out with his foot to kick the cat, but the cat was too quick. It ducked away from him and disappeared into the night. "Damn cats."

"What's going on here?" Odhran walked up, emerging from the shadows beneath the trees. "What are you doing here at this hour? What's the reason for the masks?"

A worried frown creased Oswyl's face beneath the bear mask.

Shalto sauntered up to Odhran. "It's very simple, Odhran. It's a surprise party."

Light from Pandeena's windows revealed the blood and gore on Shalto's clothing. Odhran's eyes widened.

"You killed someone." Odhran retreated two steps, turned to run, and came face to face with Malthus. The Serpent put two fingers to Odhran's temples and sent a charge of power through his head. Odhran collapsed.

Shalto blinked. "What'd you do?"

Malthus grinned. "Pressure points. I have a use for him."

"What?" asked Yren.

"He's seen us, so we can't let him live. But I have an idea that will throw the blame on a different group of people."

"We're going to kill Odhran?" Oswyl folded his arms across his chest and seemed to shrink inward. He held back as the others crowded around Malthus.

"Which ones?" Excitement gripped Shalto, lending an edge of eagerness to his voice.

With a sly smile and a glance to the side from his lowered head, Malthus said, "You know all those reports that have been filtering in about sa'necari and others raiding the outlying villages?"

"Yes." Shalto noticed his cousin's reluctance, caught his arm, and pulled him into the group. Oswyl dragged his feet and Shalto jerked him with an irritated noise.

"We'll kill him on the altar and desecrate it. A raiding party will get the blame. They always send in a small party to take out the lawgiver and the priest first."

"Let's get that priest!" Shalto shouted, running up to Pandeena's door and pounding on it. "I'm going to fuck her to death on her own damned altar."

Oswyl followed as slowly as he dared.

* * * *

A shivering chill spread through Pandeena as Caimbeul's mind voice faded away to nothing. She had been reading his journals and become so engrossed in them that she had not heard him cry out to her the first few times. Shame colored her cheeks, certain that she might have been able to save him had she not been reading where she had had no right to yet and obsessed on it.

Pandeena gathered the papers and journals that he had left with her and stowed them in a satchel along with several memory crystals, and the suddenly precious seed crystals, that he had used to prevent any of the females from getting pregnant by him when he was first sampling the illicit brothel in his efforts to discover how many of the women were

involved. She went into the bedroom where Clodagh lay, and pulled the bitch into her arms.

A banging started on her door.

Pandeena heard a voice, muffled by a mask, yell, "I'm going to fuck her to death on her own damned altar."

Part of her wanted to go down and fight them, avenge Caimbeul, but she knew that her first responsibility lay with Clodagh. It would be too easy for one of them to slip past her while she fought the rest, and kill Clodagh.

She focused hard to close out the distractions of the murderers who had come for her and Jumped to her mother's house.

Pandeena sank to her knees in the middle of the downstairs sitting room. Clodagh slid from her arms. Tears came, with shuddering hoarse sobs. "They killed him."

As was often the case since the war had begun, and Dynanna had sent out the call for divine assistance throughout the two settled continents, yuwenghau—minor divines—filled the airy sitting room. Her mother's house had become their headquarters. Five yuwenghau and their fifteen companions-in-arms overflowed the chairs and sofas near the seven large windows.

Frost-haired Hathura Waveskimmer looked up from his conversation with dark Toniqua Nightsbane at her arrival. Meleajys Sun-Child stirred his long, lanky body and went to Pandeena.

Seven-foot Teakamon shook back his leaf-green hair, rose from his chair and knelt beside her, looking like he had been

carved from mahogany wood and polished with every muscle sharply defined. "Who?"

"Caimbeul. They murdered him. It's all because of her." Pandeena brushed a strand of dark hair from Clodagh's face. "They knew we'd taken her."

"There's a stasis on her."

Pandeena nodded. "The Serpent put a death command in her psyche. It's the only way to keep her alive."

"Get hold of yourself." Navaryn grasped her daughter's shoulders. "Caimbeul has fireborn blood. You must find his body swiftly. The longer you wait, the less possibility of raising him in the flames. And only you can, because of that link you put on him."

"I'll go back." Pandeena rubbed her hands across her eyes and straightened.

"Not alone." Navaryn scanned the assembled yuwenghaus. "Some of you go with her."

Four more yuwenghau trickled in as they spoke.

"I'll go." Hathura gripped the golden fans tucked into his belt as if ready to pull them, snap them open, and fight. The half-Fae was slender to the point of appearing fragile, yet flaring through the shoulders, translucently pale skinned with white hair and silver eyes. The points of his ears peeked through his hair, which was held in place by a dark green headband.

In the end six of them went to Wolffgard with Pandeena to look for Caimbeul's body: Hathura, son of Willodarus; Meleajys son of Kalirion, a dark-skinned blond, whose lanky build stretched his ropy muscles along a raw-boned frame;

small, dark Toniqua Nightsbane, a granddaughter of Hadjys the Dark Judge; Hathura's cousin Jushan; arrogant Seosaf, grandson of Badonth; and moonlight-haired Gyongy of the Valdren.

They took horses, and with Hathura adding his powers to that of Pandeena, Jumped all of them with their animals to the front yard of Caimbeul's home. While five of them waited with the horses, Pandeena and Hathura went inside. She saw the pool of congealing blood on the floor, and Caimbeul's bloodstained robe discarded near where his body had lain. Fighting back a sob, Pandeena knelt, vanished her clothing, and changed to a wolf. She smelled the urine mixing with the blood, the scent of dark magic, and the odor of a strange arcane substance. Pandeena closed her eyes for a second retreating from the pool. The odor of Devil's Silver lingered in her nostrils, and she knew he had died in terrible pain. *I would never have kept you from my bed had I known how soon I would lose you.* Her anger rose hot, burning away the grief as she steeled herself to act.

—*I can track from here.*—Pandeena sent to Hathura.

"Good. Let's go."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A SHALLOW GRAVE

The youths rushed through Pandeena's apartment, breaking things in their rage and frustration at not finding either the priest or Clodagh. Malthus listened to them with a smile playing about the edges of his lips. He draped Odhran over his shoulder and carried him into the shrine.

Malthus' boot heels clicked on the tiled floor as he angled through the ranks of benches eight deep on both sides of the central aisle. 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.

He dumped Odhran onto the polished stone of the altar, stripped Odhran's clothing off, flipped him onto his stomach, and bound his ankles and wrists to the base of the altar.

"Impressive," drawled a soft voice.

Malthus spun and saw Preece watching him from the doorway. "What do you mean?"

"Odhran's bigger than you are."

"So?" Malthus realized where Preece was going, realized that he had been careless, and realized that if he said the wrong thing he would be fighting his own pawns.

"Strong as that. If I didn't know better...." Preece shrugged. "I'd say you weren't human."

Malthus tensed. "What if I wasn't?"

A slow, languorous smile spread across Preece's face. He fingered his neck. "I'd know what to do about it."

Malthus studied him, trying to decide whether Preece meant that as a threat or a come-hither. Before he could inquire further, the others arrived, glowering and snarling.

They gathered around him.

"Can you wake him up?" Shalto thumbed at Odhran.

Malthus gave Shalto a tiny secret smile. "I can. But we want this to look good."

"What do you mean?"

"Someone has to fuck him so that there's semen in his body."

They all looked uneasy. Finally, Shalto screwed up the courage to speak. "The rite?"

Malthus tapped his fingers on the altar in tune to his impatience at Shalto's obtuseness. "There's more to it than fucking and sticking. A deception ... a believable deception is required."

"I don't know about that." Shalto pulled his mask off and scratched his head. "I don't think any of us want to put our stick up a male."

"If you're going to be squeamish, I'll do it." Malthus scowled at Shalto. "All of you need to stab him once my cock's inside him."

"You got some strong guts." Yren pulled his mask off and grinned at Malthus with open admiration.

Malthus laughed. "I guess I do, but I spent many years as a kandoyarin and we did whatever was needed to survive."

Rheu pressed against Preece, looking up into his eyes. "Do I get to stick him too? I like sticking them."

Preece ruffled Rheu's hair. "Yes indeed, little dog."

Malthus woke Odhran. Shalto went around to the front and dragged Odhran's face up by his forelock.

"I bet you never expected to be our alibi, Odhran."

"Gods mercy, let me go," Odhran pleaded and then gasped as Malthus' cock plunged into his anus. The altar cracked at the bottom and listed to the side. For an instant, everyone except Malthus stared. They had not expected the altar to react in such a dramatic fashion.

"Do it," Malthus ordered.

Shalto grinned and stabbed Odhran.

Rheu laughed as Odhran screamed, plunged his blade into Odhran's back close to the spine, and twisted the knife around and around, playing with it like a stick in a mud pie.

Preece ran his fingers through Rheu's hair, while considering his options. He sliced Odhran's side open, reached through, and pulled his entrails out.

More cracks appeared in the altar.

Torquil made a series of long, slow cuts across Odhran's ribs, then shoved his fingers through partings in the lycan's flesh, and played with Odhran's lungs, which triggered a fit of violent coughing. Odhran spewed blood onto the tiles.

The floor around the altar heaved; breaks ran in a spider web pattern through the tiles.

Oswyl glanced nervously at the floor, his hands clenching and unclenching.

Shalto whipped around, glaring at his cousin. "Stick him, you stupid git!"

The knife play paused, and the rest of the Lycamornots stared at Oswyl. Preece regarded Oswyl with an unreadable expression. "You going yellow on us?"

For answer, Oswyl darted forward and drew his knife. "I'm so sorry, Odhran," he muttered under his breath. Then he thrust his blade into Odhran's ribs and retreated, shaking, staring at his bloody knife. The play of blades resumed; the others nudging Oswyl, and forcing him to participate.

Odhran's tortured cries filled the chapel, mixing with his murderers' joyous exclamations. If anyone in the camp heard him, they did not answer. Malthus had placed coercions in the minds of all the females who dwelled here at the same time that he had sterilized them. They might suspect the meaning of the screams, but would not dare to speak of it, nor to emerge from their homes before dawn. The young lycans using the refugee camp as a whorehouse would not investigate either. Brothels were forbidden on clan lands and none of them wished to be caught while dipping their rods into the flesh holes that Malthus had so generously—and secretly—provided them with.

A scream came from the doorway. The bloodletting ceased as the Lycamornots spun about. Near the door stood the nibari who swept out the shrine every night.

Malthus paused in his thrusting, his cock lingering in Odhran's flesh hole. He modulated his voice to speak with the command of a master that could not be ignored. "Come here."

She hesitated.

He extended his power in a low level summoning, forcing her to him. She came unresisting. "Kill her in the schoolroom. Fuck her first, if you wish. I will finish here alone."

Yren laughed, gesturing with his blade. "In and out, in and out."

Torquil threw the nibari over his shoulder and carried her out with the others following him. Here was meat they could fuck.

Malthus drew his hellblade from a sheath hidden beneath his tunic close to his skin as soon as he was alone. A proper rite required a proper blade. "Clodagh loved you. But the Butchering Serpent took her mind and made a slut of her. Think on that as you die."

"Daaaaamnn yooouu!"

Malthus harmonized his gathering orgasm to Odhran's failing life, sliding the blade in and out of the lycan's flesh. The altar cracked down the middle and Odhran's blood oozed between the cracks. It continued to fracture with the desecration until the only thing holding it together was Odhran's bound body. Malthus felt the glow on the tip of his cock and the pressure in his loins that portended his orgasm. He moved the blade to a point above Odhran's heart, shoving it in to still the organ as his seed erupted. Odhran's soul shattered at the moment of death. Malthus sucked up the pieces, and licked his lips as he withdrew his flaccid cock from the corpse. He dipped his hands in Odhran's blood and drew obscene runes on the panel behind the altar.

A feeling of satiation came over Malthus, easing his hunger.

The Lycamornots drifted back into the chapel, laughing and joking.

"We two upped her, Preece and me." Rheu wiped his blade on a bit of her clothing as he walked, with Preece's arm around his shoulder.

The youngster snickered and pointed at Oswyl. "He wouldn't fuck her ... sacred she'd die with his stick in her."

Oswyl winced.

"She's dead?" Malthus asked.

Preece gave Malthus a chill look. "Very. We dismembered her like mutton."

Oswyl trailed out after the rest. As he passed the flower bed along the side of Pandeena's apartment, that strange cat reappeared and sat staring at him with accusing eyes. Oswyl shivered. "Gods, you're a creepy thing."

They mounted up and rode north into the forest. Since Oswyl kept dragging his feet, they made him lead the horses with the bodies draped over them. In an isolated place far from the roads and hunter's traces, they dug a shallow grave. Torquil and Preece hauled Caimbeul's nude body from the packhorse, unrolled it from the blanket, and tossed it in the hole. Malthus knelt beside the corpse, opened the stomach wound further, and poured in another vial that made the dead flesh smoke.

"You're really worried about them maybe raising him," Shalto said.

"You can't be too careful with fireborn. If there was any spark left, that should finish it off. We still have to try again for the priest."

"Don't worry, we'll get her."

Torquil covered Caimbeul with dirt, and stomped across it, packing it down well. "What about Nesswen?"

Malthus regarded Torquil's efforts thoughtfully and gestured at Preece. "Cut a piece of bush and brush it off here. Get rid of the footprints. We don't want the body found."

"Nesswen?" Torquil repeated, stepping out of Preece's way as he began removing their traces. Preece quickly had the area looking undisturbed.

"Bury him far from here. So if they do find the lawgiver, they can't connect us to him. Besides, Nesswen was a courageous mon and deserves a tranquil resting place far from scum like Caimbeul."

Silence reigned and Shalto broke it. "Come on. It's been a long night. We need to get this done and get back before we're missed and we need to take a different route back."

Malthus surveyed them a moment. "Shalto, Oswyl, Preece, and I will go butcher those deer we have penned up so it looks like we've been hunting. Torquil, Rheu, Yren, I want you to bury Nesswen and then make your way back without anyone seeing you. Make certain that your alibis are in place."

Yren shrugged. "Ma always covers for me."

Torquil snorted at the image of Raonul, the smith that he was apprenticed to, who was always passed out drunk at

night. "So long as I've got the forge going at dawn, the old bastard never knows I'm gone."

* * * *

Darmyk's neck ached where Ros' fangs had pierced him. The terror of being caught alone in the hallways by her stained his dreams with darkness. Darmyk twisted and turned in his sleep, his legs moving as if he ran, a listless moan emerging from his diaphragm. "Ros, no. Ros, please no."

His noises drew the tiger-striped cat from the treehouse. It walked along the branch that extended to Darmyk's window, pawed at the shutters, and opened them a crack. The cat sat on the windowsill and watched the boy.

Ros advanced on Darmyk, her fangs looking larger than ever, like some incredible predator.

He backed away from her, whimpering and moaning. "Ros, no. Ros, please no."

"It's time to die, you nasty little lycan cub."

Darmyk screamed and pleaded, backing farther and farther away.

"Take your shirt off. Lie down."

Darmyk obeyed. He had become so conditioned by Ros, that his body obeyed her as completely in his dreams as in his waking. He turned his head to side, as Ros liked it, exposing the large vein in his neck.

Lyrri tossed a shovel down beside him. "I've dug the grave, Ros. Hurry and do it. I want to go play."

Ros dropped to her knees beside Darmyk, stroking his neck. "It looks too shallow."

"Nah, he'll fit. I used Searlait's tape measure."

His stepfather emerged from the trees, a venomous smile on his lips. "I told you not to misbehave, Darmyk. You made me do this."

"I wasn't bad. I wasn't bad at all."

"You're a bad cub, Darmyk. Born to evil like your father."

Ros sank her fangs into him and Darmyk screamed.

Malthus squatted next to Ros. "Suck him well, darling. When you finish, I want to eat his heart."

"I want my daddy!"

As if the wish had been a summons, a god-like figure strode into the clearing, clothed in white and carrying a strange staff. Lances of fire came from the heavens, striking Malthus and his nieces.

The tall mon knelt and gathered Darmyk into his arms. "No one is ever going to hurt you again."

Darmyk nestled against him. "I knew you loved me, Daddy. They lied and said you didn't, but I knew ... I knew you loved me."

"I love you, Darmyk, my son."

"I love you, Daddy. I love you."

The cat nodded, hearing the contentment in Darmyk's sleeping voice, turned and left.

* * * *

Oswyl trailed Shalto into the little barn behind the longhouse they shared on the Sanctuary Refugee Camp. The brown painted structure of rough-hewn planks of pine, smoothed down with the careful application of adze by

Nesswen contained two stalls, and a crude tack room that also provided storage for supplied and grain sacks.

Shalto glanced back at Oswyl, scowling. "You humiliated me."

Oswyl walked with lowered head, leading his brown mare, Mudlark, into her stall. He closed the stall gate and pulled off the saddle, settling it on the left hand half wall.

"Did you hear me?" Shalto slammed his fist against the wall, startling both horses.

Oswyl patted his horse's shoulder to calm her. "Yeah, I heard you. You haven't stopped bitching at me in hours."

"Well?"

Oswyl ran his tongue around the back of his teeth. "I don't feel right about it."

"You wussed. They're saying you're yellow as a wet-tailed cub."

"I know." Oswyl flinched. The entire ride back, Oswyl had been hearing Odhran's screams in his mind, seeing the look in Odhran's eyes as Oswyl shoved the blade into him, felt the slight soft suck of flesh around his blade, the way that Odhran's flesh had parted. Oswyl shuddered. "I'm a coward, I guess..." *Otherwise, I would have refused to stick them.*

"Next time we gotta stick someone, you'll act like a grown dog instead of a yellow pup."

Oswyl grabbed a towel and wiped the sweat and dirt from Mudlark. His voice took on a distant, soft quality as if he didn't want to face the reality that Shalto kept shoving in his face. "Is there going to be a next time?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

Shalto snarled, hair sprouting along his arms, his face going snouted. "Because we're not going to let them push us around."

Oswyl finished with Mudlark, and stepped out of the stall. "You're starting to sound like Malthus and Preece."

"They're real men."

"I thought you were the leader."

"I am."

"Are you? I think Malthus is."

"I don't give a good gods' damn what you think. Don't give me anymore limp-wristed pony shit."

Oswyl walked off without answering. Exhausted in body and spirit, Oswyl made his way to the stream and tore off his bloodstained robes. He could hear the other wolves coming and going from the sheelings and longhouses, pretending not to notice the others arriving to play Jack in the Orchard with the refugee females, and those leaving after shooting their wads. Brothels were illegal on clan lands. They all knew which young wolves were jacking the women, yet they all pretended they had not seen it. While they could get it free here, contributions were expected. After Malthus and Shalto had taken their cut, they shared the rest out with the other Lycamornots.

The silence by the stream beat at Oswyl's ears like muted hammers. If he listened closely he could catch the sounds of sex, a female crying out at some over eager young wolf's rough handling. He thought of his two sisters safely at home

with his parents, grateful that they were not being forced to whore as these females were.

He remembered the beating that Pandeena had given him and Shalto when they came on to her a bit too insistently. Suddenly, what she had done seemed well deserved.

Oswyl realized that he was breathing hard, almost panting. His heart raced a like a lone cub faced with an antlered stag too large for him to handle.

He drew his knife and stared at it. Although he had wiped the blade clean after they left the camp to bury the lawgiver, the moonlight glinting upon it appeared blood red, not silver.

Odhran's screams echoed through the corridors of his mind again, pathetic, desperate, suffering. Once more Oswyl saw the altar crack and break in reaction to the sacrilege committed upon it. Oswyl began to shake so hard he nearly dropped the knife.

"Forgive me. Gods, forgive me. Odhran, I'm so sorry."

Oswyl stood up and threw the knife as far into the stream as he could. The splash as it hit the water sounded like an explosion in the quiet.

His mouth twisted and tears ran from his eyes unheeded.

"I'm damned ... I'm damned to hell. Willodarus forgive me. Tala have mercy."

But there came no answer from the offended deities. Oswyl pulled his shattered nerves together, found a large rock, and buried his clothing beneath it.

Malthus had told him to burn the robes, but he could not cope with carrying them back to the long house.

He sat on the banks and watched dawn rise in the east in a rare blaze of scarlet and crimson line with gold and orange.

For a few minutes, he entertained the thought of gathering his things and moving back in with his parents. Oswyl shook the dream of escape off. The others would view it as a desertion ... and Oswyl suspected they would kill him if he tried to leave the gang. He was in too deep. The pleasant game had become the coursing of wolves through the halls of nightmare.

Oswyl changed fully into a wolf, found a sheltered spot among the rocks, and slept.

CHAPTER TWENTY

UGLY TRUTHS

Running as a golden wolf, Pandeena found small drops of blood that created a scent trail. Caimbeul's body had been so torn up that, even wrapped in a blanket, blood and fluids had dribbled onto the ground. His attackers had used an old lycan trick of applying oils to boots and bodies to alter and confuse their scents so that it would not be easy to identify them from the trail they left in the lawgiver house—not that that would have been easy to begin with because so many lycans came and went from the house each day.

She followed the trail through the darkness of the sleeping village to the northeastern edge to where it stopped at her apartment. Pandeena found that her door had been broken off its hinges. She changed to her hybrid form and started to step inside.

Hathura stopped her. "I'll go first."

Pandeena started to protest that she could defend herself, saw the others shake their heads at her with stern looks, and stepped back to allow them to go past her.

The small band entered and moved through the ruined apartment. Pandeena's stomach tightened at the sight of all of her smashed furniture—even the big bed had been overturned and broken. Seeing all this, her thoughts sprang to the rest of the building, the shrine, and the schoolroom.

"The shrine. We must check the shrine." She moved into the corridor and pointed at the door. Hathura went first, his deadly fans in hand.

Pandeena followed. She cursed at the shattered benches had been, striding through the chaos toward the altar, and stopped short at the railing to scream. A mutilated body lay upon the altar. Sacrilege had been written in blood on the wall behind it. Her insides went cold. She sucked in a deep breath to master herself, and went up the steps to the altar.

"Odhran." Her voice caught and her expression tightened. "Poor Odhran. He's been coming every night for the past few weeks to check on me. He must have caught them breaking in."

Hathura joined her beside the altar. "They killed him for it."

Pandeena steeled herself, touched Odhran's torn shoulder, and Read him. "He's been dead nearly two hours. They ... rited him. His soul's shattered. Pieces missing."

"Are there any other rooms?" Meleajys stalked to the door and glanced back at them.

"The school room."

Pandeena led the way. She doubted that it had been spared. Whoever had done this was probably long away, yet she changed to her hybrid form to be certain. She half hoped that they would find Caimbeul's body amid the wreckage, but apparently, the attackers had carried it off with them.

Everything in the schoolroom had been broken and shattered. Blood coated the walls. Pandeena wondered who else had been murdered in this insane rampage.

"Over here." Hathura stood behind the overturned lectern.

Pandeena joined Hathura. Her stomach churned at the sight of the pile of body parts that had once been a nibari that the camp owned. Pandeena regretted that she had not made more time to learn their names.

"I need to go to Claw about this, but first I need to find Caimbeul. Two of you stay here and don't let anyone in, put a shield on it if you have to. If anyone asks, it is on my orders."

Toniqua trailed in, arriving in time to hear Pandeena's request. "I'll stay. That's one of my talents. The rest of you go on."

The trail had gone cold by the time that they left, and Pandeena tracked by following the fading link she still had to Caimbeul. She found the grave as the sun came up. His murderers had buried him well, leaving little evidence behind. The earth had been smoothed over beneath a stand of elm trees, but the night breezes had blown the loose dirt away from Caimbeul's dead face. She dug furiously until she had unearthed him. Dirt filled his open mouth, and crusted his face and body. Pandeena changed to human, cradled his filthy head on her lap, and wept. Her tears falling on Caimbeul made splotches of mud on his cheeks and forehead.

The sound of voices told Pandeena that the others had caught up with her.

Hathura dismounted. "Move away from him, Pandeena. I must burn him. It's the only way to rouse the fireborn in him, if enough of it remains alive."

Pandeena slipped to the side. The others quickly cleared a place of brush and grass, and then carried Caimbeul's body to the center.

Hathura snapped his fans open and flashed them across Caimbeul's corpse. He summoned a fiery bird that lighted upon the lawgiver's body and ignited it. With another flick of his fans, Hathura sent the bird away.

Caimbeul's corpse burned brightly, the flames consuming it swiftly. His skin cracked and the fat ran like water. The muscle fell away from his bones and blackened.

Pandeena wept. "They did something to him. He's truly dead."

"Wait." Hathura grasped her shoulder.

Within the ashes a light shone, the flames vanished as if the corpse drank it up. The body changed and gained substance. Padruig's form emerged from the ruin of Caimbeul's.

"What's this?" Pandeena blinked and shook her head. "That's not Caimbeul."

Padruig's eyes opened and his lips parted. "Pandeena ... it's me. Gods, help me." Gashes in his body oozed. The transformation had failed to restore his wholeness. "Can't heal ... them. Poisoned ... fireborn half."

Hathura knelt and Read him. "He's in bad shape, but I think he's strong enough for me to Jump him to Navaryn."

The Fae lifted Caimbeul as if he weighed less than a squirrel and they made the Jump together. All five of them arriving in Navaryn's sitting room at the same time. Navaryn sensed their arrival and rushed down the stairs.

Padruig's eyes had an odd glaze as if he could not focus them. "Navaryn ... help me.... Poison ... fireborn poison."

He stilled in Hathura's arms, his eyes closing.

Navaryn touched Caimbeul's shoulder, Reading him. "Put him in the east room."

A heaviness settled over the assembled yuwenghau and those who quietly joined them from other areas of the house. They knew that Navaryn put those she could not save in the east room so they could die in peaceful surroundings.

Caimbeul slipped in and out of consciousness repeatedly as the bitches bathed him, wrapped him up, and made him comfortable in the large bed beneath blue and green quilts. Navaryn dosed him with Pollendine, a narcotic pain-reliever so potent and addictive that it was rarely given except to the dying. Pandeena sat beside the bed, refusing to leave Caimbeul's side, although she knew she should have reported everything to Claw as soon as she discovered it. Others came and went throughout the night, sharing the deathwatch she kept.

"Old lecher.... "Pandeena swallowed back a sob before it could escape. "I warned you ... told you it was a terrible chance ... you were taking."

Caimbeul's eyelids fluttered open. "Don't cry ... I gambled ... I lost."

His eyes closed and he slipped away from her again.

Pandeena grabbed his hand. "Caimbeul—"

The Butchering Serpent had been thorough in his work, and Padruig Caimbeul—the greatest lawgiver of his time—failed steadily, growing weaker as the hours passed. When

dawn spread its golden light across Caimbeul's face, he opened his eyes and extended his hand to Pandeena.

"Memory crystal...."

Hathura stood in the doorway and gestured for Pandeena to remain with Caimbeul. "I'll get it."

When Hathura returned with the narrow white crystal, he put it in Pandeena's hand so that she could be the one who gave it to Caimbeul. She placed it in his hand, and Caimbeul closed his fingers around it. "Won't ... be pretty. But maybe ... your evidence ... is here."

By the time that he finished, his memory of the attack and his death was lodged firmly in it, but not the reawakening as fireborn. The act of reliving it for a psychic record left him weaker, in more pain than he had been, and it showed in the lines of his face.

"I love Clodagh...."

"We'll save her somehow, Caimbeul. I promise."

His hand relaxed, his fingers opened, and the crystal slipped onto the bed as life faded from Caimbeul's body.

She touched his neck and Read him, finding that he had died. Pandeena sank to her knees, keening loudly and pulling at her hair. Myn gathered outside the room. Navaryn went in, saw the crystal, pocketed it, gathered her daughter in her arms, and held her.

Everyone in the house formed a line outside the door, along the hallway and down the stairs. They filed inside one at a time to kiss Caimbeul's forehead, cheeks, and lips in the final farewell to the dead.

When she could finally compose herself, Pandeena went to her bedroom, and prepared a few things to take with her back to Wolffgard since everything she owned in the village had been destroyed. Then she went downstairs where her mother met her in the sitting room.

"We'll bury him beneath the birches near the waterfall." Navaryn placed a soft doeskin pouch in Pandeena's hand.

"The memory crystal?"

"A copy of it. The original needs safekeeping. I viewed it. You don't want to. It was ugly. Take this one to Claw."

Pandeena rubbed her eyes and fought back another round of weeping. "Has anyone seen Lokynen?"

"Hathura says he lost touch with him after Three Stones."

"Lokynen left Wolffgard more than three weeks ago. Caimbeul was his friend."

"He'll rip Wolffgard apart, Pandeena. He isn't lycan. He won't follow our laws."

Pandeena's eyes narrowed and her voice lowered to a dangerous whisper that vibrated in her throat. "That's why I want him ... in Wolffgard."

Navaryn raked her teeth across her lower lip, and shook back a strand of pale silver hair that had slipped over her shoulder. "So be it. I'll put the word out that you're looking for him. I'll also have people look in on you."

"Thank you." Pandeena laid her head back with a sigh, staring at the ceiling as she ran her hand through her hair. *I used to think it would serve him right if a gang killed him after what happened to Gwythyr. I didn't want him to die like this.* Her lips tightened.

"Don't thank me yet. I'm putting requirements on your going back. Hathura and Meleajys are going with you."

"They can stay at the lawgiver's house."

Navaryn frowned, her mouth thinned into a stubborn line. "No, I want them staying at the refugee camp with you."

"I'm staying at the lawgiver's house. The villagers will want to cleanse the shrine and its buildings." The way that lycans cleansed a place where an atrocity had occurred was to burn it to the ground and plant cleansing herbs like rue in the ashes. Within a few days there would be nothing left of the shrine, her apartments, and the schoolroom. She would need Claw's support to prevent the villagers from doing the same to the lawgiver house.

"Won't that hurt you? Knowing what happened there?"

"I'm going to sleep in his bed."

* * * *

Malthus changed clothes at his old cottage and burned his blood stained tunic and trousers to ashes in the fireplace, before returning to the manor. Yren and Rheu had spent the remainder of the night with Yren's mother, who would cover for them without asking questions—just as she always did. Torquil had returned to his bedroom above the smithy without his master being the wiser. Shalto, Oswyl, and Preece had delivered an impressive catch of six deer to the smokehouse at the camp. His secret minions, hidden near the northern border of Red Wolf Valley, would refill that larder with more deer in a few days.

There was no way that anyone could find a connection between the Lycamornots, himself, and the murders. Malthus felt satisfied as he slipped inside the manor through the servants' door and glided along the corridors heading for his suite. A noise drew his attention as he passed the opened doors of the Blue Room and he glanced inside.

His father-in-law, Claw Redhand sat at the large table in the drawing room, kneading his left arm and digging at his hairy chest. The chieftain's robe hung half-open as he poured a glass of whiskey and drank it. Malthus' lips drew together in a tiny smile, and he joined Claw at the table. "Shouldn't you be resting?"

Claw glared at him. "Shouldn't you?"

"I'm not the one with a bad heart," Malthus snapped, and then reined in his pique. "My wounds healed weeks ago."

"Aye. So where the hell have you been?"

"I just returned from hunting. Shalto, Oswyl, Preece, and I made an outstanding catch. Six deer."

Claw's expression lightened. "That's real good."

Malthus inhaled the fragrance of Claw's pain. It was not as intense as Caimbeul's had been when the lawgiver died, but it was still delicious. Malthus turned the whiskey bottle around, knowing the moment that his fingers touched it that the bottle was one of those he had cursed before giving it to Claw as a present. "At the rate you're drinking it; I'm surprised you have any left."

"Rum's nearly gone." Claw grumbled. "Still got about half the whiskey and most of the wine."

Leaning in to savor the pungency of Claw's suffering with his necromantic senses, Malthus tilted his head to the side with a friendly smile. "Perhaps I should write my mother again, and replenish the rum since you like it so much."

"Yeah, do that." Claw Redhand sounded listless.

Malthus poured himself a drink from the same bottle of whiskey and drank it down. Claw snatched the bottle and refilled his own glass. Curses and spells were far more subtle than poison and less easily detected. Malthus could sense another heart attack approaching within Claw's body. If the next one did not kill the old bastard, then Malthus intended to catch him alone and finish him. The entire charade had gone on long enough, and Malthus felt impatient.

He nodded to Claw and stood up. "I need to get some sleep. We rode all night to get our catch back before the meat could spoil."

"Yeah." Claw's face turned steadily paler as Malthus watched and the sa'necari knew that he had to be having increasingly frequent incidents.

Killing Caimbeul and riting Odhran beneath the noses of his companions had aroused Malthus. He went into the bedroom of his suite, and gazed at his wife Merissa—Claw's daughter—she was hugely swollen for this early in the pregnancy. He climbed onto the bed and ran his hands along Merissa's body, awakening her.

"Sweetheart?" Merissa blinked sleepily.

"Open your legs." Malthus snarled, unbuttoning his trousers, and lifting hardened member free of the imprisoning cloth. If he could not feast on more physical pain tonight, he

would settle for emotional suffering. "I'm very disappointed in you."

"What did I do?" Merissa's voice caught.

"You know what you did." He pushed her nightgown up, forced her legs apart, and shoved into her. "Shut up and be still, at least grant me that much."

Merissa began to cry. Malthus' lunged into her mind to mute her voice. Her eyes widened in shock and she shoved at his shoulders as he continued to plunge into her.

"Feosaik-leanon," Malthus growled the ugly word in Merissa's ear that lycans gave to their kind who coupled with sa'necari. "You've had three sa'necari between your filthy legs ... and nothing else."

Merissa shook her head in denial. Malthus pinned her head to the pillows with his mouth over hers, and breathed a spell between her lips. She went limp, her eyes glistening.

Like most sa'necari, Malthus was slow to climax because of the large number of deaths he had digested over the decades. Merissa bore his attentions like a dutiful wife as she always did, but now terror had blended itself into the core of her being as well. Malthus finished and rolled to the side. He kissed her ginger hair and stroked her.

"I love you, Merissa. Don't ever cross me."

She shook her head, her eyes pleading.

"Which one had you first? Isranon or my brother Troyes."

Merissa struggled to get his name past the spell. "T—Troy ... es."

"Appropriate." It pleased Malthus to know that his brother had taken Merissa's virginity and not Isranon.

A freshet of tears dampened Merissa face.

"You're a true cairden-spiursak." Malthus twisted the lycan word for blood-whore on his lips as if it were a blade in Merissa's heart. "Lord Hoon gave me a choice of lycan clans. I chose this one because I wanted to know what happened to my brother."

Merissa trembled. "He ... raped me."

Malthus covered her lips with his own and breathed another spell into her body. "You enjoyed it."

He sealed her lips so that she could not betray him, no matter how deeply her heart felt broken. Malthus now had another source of pain to enjoy. He had gone too long without free access to the suffering of others to feed his necromantic appetites. Killing Caimbeul and Odhran had left him craving more like an addict. Malthus knew that he had to have a source of arcane nourishment in the manor itself, that going without was no longer something he could handle.

"Your people made a grave mistake when they killed my brother. I'm far more dangerous than Troyes could ever have been." Malthus breathed a third spell past her lips. "I'm the Butchering Serpent."

Merissa's tears became a torrent. She knew then that she and her family were all going to die because of the mistake she had made in marrying Malthus. Merissa had brought the viper into her home and there was nothing she could do about it. *Isranon. Isranon, why did you forsake me? If only you were here.*

* * * *

Kynyr rode into the yard close to midnight. He wanted with all his heart to see Kady, but after being gone so long duty had first call upon him and he felt certain that she would understand. The members of his unit who were billeted in the family section of the manor followed him through the front door.

He had hoped to get upstairs and snatch a few hours sleep before having to deal with the household and other matters.

An aged, yet still girlish voice called out from the door to the kitchen as he passed. "Kynyr, you're home."

Kynyr gestured for the rest of them to go on and get some sleep before turning to face Fianait. He wagged a teasing finger at her admonishingly. "What are you doing up at this hour?"

"I couldn't sleep so I came down for a bit of chamomile tea and cakes." Fianait pulled at a strand of her thinning white hair. "Join me?"

Kynyr slipped an arm around her withered shoulders. "Of course."

He followed her into the kitchen, opened a cabinet, and set out a glass and a bottle of whiskey for himself. "I hope you don't mind if I have something stronger?"

"Not at all." Fianait settled onto a chair, pulling her robe around herself better. "I missed you."

"I missed you too." Kynyr kissed her forehead and fetched a sharp knife and a wedge of cheese. "Would you like some?"

"Yes, but..." Her eyes went to the knife, reminding him of her fear of sharp objects.

"I'll cut it for you."

Kynyr sliced the cheese up, sliding several pieces onto a small plate and passing that to her.

Fianiat's eyes lit on his hand. "That ring was Tarrant's. Where did you get it?"

He tried to think how to phrase it. The facts felt more awkward each time he had to repeat them. "Aunt Fianait, Tarrant was my grandfather."

"I knew it! I knew it." She rose from her chair, trembling and hugged him. Abruptly she pulled away from him, her expression turned serious. "Claw had another heart attack while you were gone."

Kynyr sucked in a sharp breath. "How bad?"

"Sheradyn says the next one will kill him."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

REVELATIONS

Darmyk woke in the hours before dawn feeling sick and exhausted as if he had not slept at all. He reached down and patted the crotch of his pajamas. To his relief they were dry. Ever since the first time Ros bit him, Darmyk had developed a humiliating tendency to wet the bed when he had nightmares.

But then, his dreams had not been unmitigated nightmares; there had been the god-like image of his father, whom he had never met, and the striped cat that sat on his windowsill. Darmyk dragged himself out of bed and went to the window; the image of the cat had seemed so real, that he felt driven to check.

There on the windowsill were several muddy paw prints.

Darmyk smiled and tottered back to bed, feeling as if he had found a guardian angel.

* * * *

Pandeena sat on the couch in the sitting room of the Lawgiver House, staring at the two congealed pools of blood on the floor, her head on her hands, elbows propped on her knees, and eyes emptied by grief. She had not changed her clothing in two days, and wore the same loose trousers and tunic that she had when she fled to her mother's home with Clodagh. Few bitches wore trousers, most wore the same traditional robes as their granddams, and great-granddams

had worn for generations, although the upper classes were more and more adopting human-style dresses. Trousers generally marked a bitch as belonging to one of two classes: battle-clansmyn and hired laborers in the farming and building professions. As a priest, Pandeena had marked herself out as an anomaly.

Hathura watched her from a chair, idly opening and closing one golden fan, waiting for her to recover enough to give them orders. She had told Hathura about her suspicions concerning Malthus and he wanted to run the razor-edge of the gold-chased kendaryl fan across the mon's throat and watch him bleed to death.

Hathura raised an eyebrow at his own thoughts, murmuring under his breath, "Do not hunt the Fae—or their friends—for then the Fae will hunt you."

Pandeena caught part of what he had said and guessed the rest. "Fetch Toniqua. If she has finished examining the shrine for clues, then she needs to do it here. After that we'll talk to Claw."

"You haven't slept yet."

"Later. I'll sleep once I know something is being done ... about the murders."

Toniqua, having spent several years working among the Assassins' Guild as a healer/coroner, had taken samples from Odhran's body, including that of the semen found oozing from his anus, preserving them in special crystals. She recorded her findings, including cause of death in memory stones, and stored tissue samples in holding crystals as she had been taught by the Guild.

Hathura Jumped to the shrine and back, bringing Toniqua, and they appeared in the sitting room of the Lawgiver House in a shimmer of silver light. Toniqua carried her two satchels with the straps crisscrossing her body, and a cloth bundle of what looked like a sword and a bow case under her arm.

Toniqua ran her fingers through her dark hair. "I hope you don't mind, but when I finished, some young wolves and a couple of older ones had shown up. I gave them permission to remove the bodies and prepare them for burial."

Pandeena frowned. "Who were they?"

"Preece, Yren, Shalto, and Oswyl were the young ones. I got the impression that three of them live on the grounds."

"Yren doesn't. Who else?"

"Odhran's two brothers came looking for him. They started howling and keening when I told them he was dead."

"Silas and Tenny?"

Toniqua nodded as she settled the bundle and her satchels on the low table in front of a sofa. "I rescued your blades and bow from the rubble. They appear to be intact."

"Thank you." Pandeena stood and armed herself. "What are your findings?"

"Well, the genetic pattern of the semen is definitely sa'necari." Toniqua drew some fresh crystals, slender and pointed from her satchel, got down on her knees and examined the bloodstains on the floor. She placed her hand on the stain and her gaze turned inward. "There's urine mixed in with it. At least five of them must have pissed on him. It's going to take time to sort this out."

She brought out a tiny knife and scraped samples into the crystals, sealed them and continued to examine the room. Toniqua went to a separate large pool of blood and dipped her finger into it. "This isn't Caimbeul's."

"Nesswen. One of his attackers."

Toniqua nodded. "Don't bother looking for the young wolf. He's dead."

"Are you certain?"

"There's no spirit left in the blood."

"When you're finished, we'll go see the chieftain."

Toniqua completed her examination of the crime scene and Pandeena chose Hathura, Meleajys, and Toniqua to walk to the manor with her. She left Jushan, Seosaf, and Gyongy at the lawgiver house.

Myn paused to stare at them as they walked down the main street. Hathura conspicuously Fae with his golden fans stuck through his belt. Diminutive Toniqua, her dark brown skin with coppery tones to it, wore a pair of short swords at her hips, and used a javelin as a walking stick. Meleajys, a dark-skinned blond, whose lanky build stretched his ropy muscles along a raw-boned frame, carried a Sharani longsword at his shoulders, a pair of stilettos up his sleeves, and a brace of throwing daggers in each of the slender baldrics crossing his chest.

Villagers nodded, but no one stopped to talk to them, even though the rumors of what had happened at the camp were already making its way through Wolffgard. The anger in Pandeena's face turned them all away.

She spied Torquil standing in the awning of the smithy watching them and an inexplicable shiver ran down her spine. He had been at the camp three days ago helping to distribute grain to the women there. Something about him had always seemed off-kilter and Pandeena could never quite interpret it.

A tiger striped tomcat slipped past Torquil and darted into the smithy. Pandeena felt a momentary startlement at the size of him, gauging him to be at least thirty-five pounds, and nearly fifteen inches at the shoulders. He had to have some wild blood in him; otherwise, Pandeena could not account for him.

When they reached the manor, Kissie let them inside and led them into the Great Hall. Aisha rose from her loom and approached. Fianait nodded from her spinning wheel and Searlait smiled from her loom, but they did not rise. Like all the females of Claw's household, they wore dresses with tight-laced bodices that forced their aging breasts up at a youthful angle and provided no accommodation for shape shifting except to the most limited degree. A full change to their hybrid form would tear the seams of the dresses.

Kynyr Maguire sat talking to Fianait. Pandeena felt a flicker of relief to see that he had returned at last.

"Is something wrong?" Aisha met the anger in Pandeena's eyes, steady and calm, before flicking her glance over the newcomers.

"I need to speak with Claw."

"Is it something I can handle? I don't want him stressed. His heart...."

"I'm sorry, Aisha. It isn't. There's been a murder."

"Have you spoken to the lawgiver?"

Kynyr Maguire swiveled in his chair, took the measure of the newcomers, and rose to his feet, his eyes steely and considering. "Excuse me, Fianait. I'll be back."

Pandeena's voice went chill as the north wind. "He's dead. Murdered."

"Shit," Kynyr muttered under his breath, saw Finn start to rise and shook his head at his friend with a curt hand sign to stay where he was.

Aisha sucked in a breath. "I'll take you up."

Pandeena heard a sharp exclamation and glanced at Claw's sisters. Fianait had gone pale and Searlait was swaying as if ready to faint. She decided that when her business was done, that it would pay to examine them both. Claw had told her that heart problems did not run in his family, that his condition was a fluke; yet seeing them right then made Pandeena wonder.

Aisha led them upstairs to the Blue Room, and Kynyr trailed after them. She went to her husband's side, and turned to look at them, her arms folded and her air defensive, as if to somehow protect him from the news that had to be spoken.

Claw sat in his usual spot near the hearth in the Blue Room, whittling. A bottle of whiskey and a glass sat on the small table next to him. A blanket had been draped across his lap, so Pandeena knew that he was still having trouble staying warm.

Belgair, Claw's Captain of the Guard, leaning against the wall near the hearth. He scowled at Kynyr. "Get out of here."

Kynyr gave a slight bow of his shoulders. "When Claw tells me to."

Belgair's eyes fell upon the ring that Kynyr wore, and pulled him aside. "Where did you get that?"

"It was my grandfather's. Tarrant Redhand."

"You're lying."

"Am I?"

Pandeena caught the hostile edge in their voices, wondering what was going on between Belgair and Kynyr.

Kynyr stepped to Claw's side, his expression filled with ice and steel as he laid his hand on Claw's shoulder.

"Grandfather, there's trouble."

The chieftain placed his hand over Kynyr's. "We'll deal with it."

If Pandeena had not felt so overburdened by grief and rage, she would have rejoiced to see that Kynyr had finally taken his proper place at Claw's side. "I'm grateful that you've returned, Prince Kynyr."

Belgair looked as if he had been pole-axed.

Claw glanced at the newcomers. "What's happened? Who are these people?"

Pandeena dropped into a chair beside Claw. "My guards. Hathura from Faewin, Toniqua from Doboheer in Jedrua, Meleajys from Shaurone. I sent for them. There was a series of murders last night. The shrine has been desecrated."

Kynyr tensed, focusing tightly on Pandeena.

Claw's face hardened. "Who?"

"Caimbeul for one. Odhran for another. They killed Odhran on the altar of my shrine." Pandeena debated how much she

should tell Claw, and then held back. "Clodagh is missing. They also killed a nibari in the schoolroom. Everything is smashed and broken. Everything in my apartments, the shrine, and the schoolroom."

Malthus sauntered in with Merissa on his arm. Pandeena looked up and everything in her cried out to accuse him, but she had no proof, only a loose weave of suspicions. Pandeena winced at Merissa's swollen belly. The healer said she was carrying twins, both lycan. She was certainly belly bound enough for twins. Remembering when the marriage arch had been taken down to signify that Malthus had gotten Merissa pregnant, she was most likely due in mid to late winter.

"What's this about a murder?" Malthus asked. His eyes swept over Hathura with sudden arrogance at seeing a Fae so far from his homeland.

Hathura pursed his lips, his eyes gleaming at Malthus with mischief in their depths and a hint of threat.

Aisha scowled. "Not in front of Merissa in her condition." She took Merissa from Malthus. "Let's go to your suite where you can rest a bit while they're discussing it."

"A good idea." Malthus gestured at the door. "Go on, Darling. We can have our walk later."

Merissa started to object. Malthus frowned deeply and she gave in with a flicker of fear in her eyes.

Pandeena caught the exchange of glances and wondered what Malthus had done to make Merissa afraid of him.

"Don't go yet." Claw gestured at Aisha and his daughter. "This is the second lawgiver they've killed. Aisha, I want you to take Merissa, my sisters, and Darmyk to visit your mother.

Stay there until I send for you." He turned to Belgair. "Tell off a guard unit to accompany them."

Aisha's eyes flashed and her lips parted in indignation. "Why?"

"Because I said so."

"I don't want to go."

Claw growled deep in his throat. "For once, just do as you're told. I'll send for you when I know what's going on."

"You're not well...."

"I'm still chieftain, Aisha. So long as I draw breath...."

Aisha acquiesced with a nod and placed her hand on Claw's arm. "At least, let Belgair handle this. You're not well."

Claw glared at Aisha. "I'm going. This is too urgent." He paused, reflective. "I want you all gone within the hour."

Aisha and Merissa left. Kynyr straightened, walking as far as the door to follow them out. "I'd like to stay."

"I want you to," said Claw.

Malthus sat and listened as the group went over what they had found. Pandeena deliberately left out the transformation of Caimbeul and the fact that she knew where Clodagh was.

"They came for me, but I fled," Pandeena explained. "I went to Caimbeul's for help, and found his sitting room floor and walls covered in his blood. Too much blood for him to have survived it. There were also pieces of entrails and flesh. From the scent, it's his."

"Belgair have ten of my guards ready to ride with me."

"I'll come with you." Malthus regarded the newcomers, raking them with his eyes, suspicion written large upon his face.

"I expect you will," Claw growled. "I want more work out of you than fucking my daughter and hunting for the Sanctuary."

A hot flush spread over Malthus' face. His gaze traveled from Belgair's consternation to Kynyr's cool self-assurance and spied the ring, immediately wanting a closer look at it. "That's an interesting ring."

"It was my grandfather's. Tarrant Redhand."

* * * *

Merissa went to Darmyk's rooms to get him ready to leave, and found him still in bed, looking whey-faced and ill. She sat on the edge of the bed and touched his forehead. "Little Bear? Are you sick?"

Darmyk opened his eyes. "Don't feel good."

Merissa pressed his cheek and turned his head to the side. She saw a fresh bruise and tiny fang marks. Her stomach clenched. "When did this happen?"

"Don't know, Mama."

"We're going to great grandma's for a few days. I'll have someone carry you to the carriage."

Darmyk's eyes brightened. They never took Ros. He would be safe.

Since they did not know how long they would be away, Merissa packed several changes of clothes for Darmyk, including his warmest cloak. Then she summoned Kissie, one of their nibari.

"Carry him down for me?"

"He's not feeling well?"

Merissa's lips tightened and she shook her head.

Kissie lifted Darnyk to her hip and stepped out into the hallway.

Kynyr Maguire went up to Kissie. "Let me carry him."

Kissie smiled and gave Darnyk to Kynyr.

As Kynyr shifted Darnyk to his shoulder, he twitched the cub's collar open discreetly, spying the fresh fang bruise. A flush of anger flashed across his face and vanished into a schooled mask with a smoothness that would have done credit to a far older wolf. You'll have a good time at your grandma's Little Bear."

"Yes, I will."

"Good cub."

The carriage, which had been readied while they packed, waited for them in the yard.

Malthus stopped Merissa as he saw Darnyk carried past him. "What's wrong with him?"

Merissa tapped her neck.

"It got him again?"

Merissa nodded, and then ran to catch up with the servant and Darnyk.

Aisha and her aunts were already down at the carriage waiting for her. The carriage was a huge monstrosity with driver and footmyn, lavishly fitted out, and had been imported from Shaurone at great expense for Aisha as a one hundredth wedding anniversary gift from Claw. The luggage was loaded in the boot and on top. Four guardsmyn mounted up and rode alongside the carriage as it rolled out of the

courtyard and down the road to Dogwood where Merissa's granddam lived.

* * * *

Kynyr slowed his horse level with Pandeena's mount.
"Come by the house this evening?"

"What?" Pandeena scowled at him, still cognizant of the fact that he had dumped her for Kady.

Kynyr licked his lips, made a discreet sign of the bear, and tapped his neck with a quick, meaningful glance.

Pandeena pretended not to notice, her tone changing to friendly. "Mind if I bring friends?"

"Fine by me." Kynyr started to nudge his horse, back to his proper place in line beside Claw.

Gorgarty grinned at Kynyr. "She's a mean one. Don't go waving your stick at her."

"I'll remember that."

"She busted up those two wet tailed dogs that live at the Camp fer waving their sticks at her hole."

"Gorgarty, when you're ready to take your head out of your ball sack, I'll talk to you. Until then, just shut the fuck up."

"You're as uppity as she is. Bet your mama still wipes your ass."

"Haven't you heard yet?"

"Heard what?"

"I'm the heir to Red Wolf."

Gorgarty made a choking sound.

Kynyr ignored that.

When they reached the Shrine, the bodies had been removed, but the blood and discretion remained as mute testimony to the atrocities done there. Finn glanced at Kynyr. "Wolves wouldn't have done this."

Kynyr's lips had tightened into a frown at the lawgiver house and remained that way since. "Wolves *did* this."

By the time that the searchers returned, after having retraced all of Pandeena's steps and found no trail to follow, Claw was pale faced and breathing hard. He dropped into his chair as if his legs had gone weak.

Kissie took one look at him and fetched Sheradyn, who administered more of the medicine.

"You must not keep doing this," Sheradyn admonished Claw.

"I'll do what I have to do."

"Is your chest or arm hurting?"

"A bit, just a bit. Not much, so quit worrying," Claw snarled at him.

Sheradyn turned to Pandeena. "I think that you should leave and allow him to rest."

Pandeena had thought long and hard about confessing to Claw concerning her psychic link to Caimbeul while they searched and examined the crimes, and how he had told her about Yren. She did not want to reveal too much of what she could do. She certainly did not want him to know that she was the Second Mother, daughter of Navaryn.

Yet Caimbeul had given her a name: Yren. If she put it off, the Serpent might strike again. Everything had to be weighed. She drew herself up, her gaze moving from

Sheradyn to Malthus. "We need to speak to Claw alone. Malthus, Sheradyn, please leave us."

Malthus frowned at her. "I think you've distressed our chieftain enough."

Pandeena lifted an eyebrow. "Speaking as senior priest to the clan, I'm ordering you two out for a private discussion with Claw."

Sheradyn left immediately, but Malthus lingered until both Pandeena and Claw snarled at him. Then Malthus departed.

Kynyr pushed past Malthus and entered the room. "I'm staying."

She gazed at Kynyr. "I suppose you can stay. I found something. It requires the utmost secrecy." She went to the door, giving Claw a shake of her head and a finger to her lips. Then she closed the door and sketched a sign in the air. Beside the door, the sign melted into the surface.

Hathura tilted his head with an impish smile, drew a single fan, joined her at the door, and waved the fan across it. The door vanished.

Claw blinked and straightened in his chair. "What did you do?"

"Scry ward." Hathura snapped his fan closed and shoved it into his belt again.

A look of consternation crossed Claw's face. "Why would anyone—"

Pandeena pulled at her hair. "Many reasons. Caimbeul was fireborn as well as lycan. He had many talents. Some that even I didn't know, and at one time we were married."

"I am sorry."

"Married?" Kynyr's brow furrowed.

"Don't interrupt, Kynyr." Pandeena turned again to Claw. "I didn't come seeking comfort, chieftain. I came for vengeance and to tell you things that are for your ears only—and Kynyr's. I don't want you telling even your wife."

"You have my word."

"The Butchering Serpent is in the valley. We suspect he's hiding in Wolffgard."

"The valley maybe. Wolffgard? No. There are no sa'necari in Wolffgard since those females vanished."

Meleajys leaned against the wall near where the door had been, his arms folded. Hathura moved to a chair near Pandeena and Claw.

Kynyr slipped over to Hathura's side. "Haven't I met you before?"

"When you were ten. Creeya. The summer faire."

"This may convince you." Pandeena took the crystal from her pouch and put it in Claw's hands.

"Memory crystal?"

"Yes. It's the record of Caimbeul's murder, which recently came into my hands."

Claw's eyes widened to saucers. "How do you use it?"

"It's keyed to a word, just close your hand on it. Close your eyes and call his name."

Claw's expression looked sicker and sicker as he lived Caimbeul's memories of the attack and his death. Now and again, Pandeena saw him shudder as if it were Claw's own body being pierced by the blades. "They slit his belly open and put something inside to kill the fireborn half."

"Give me that." Kynyr took the memory stone from Claw and shoved it on his pouch before anyone could stop him.

Claw shook himself free of the visions with a great effort and sat in silence for a long time. When he finally met Pandeena's eyes, he had a haunted, troubled expression. "You found his body and didn't tell me."

Pandeena nodded. "We managed to raise him, but his fireborn half was too damaged to survive. That's when he made the crystal. The effort cost him dearly. He died a second time, a final time, moments after finishing it."

"The pretense of a search was necessary." Hathura pulled a chair close to Claw and sat down. "We needed to convince the dark one that we were deceived."

Toniqua took a chair also and settled her satchel on her lap. "I wish there were Guildsmyn in your valley."

"Guildsmyn—" Claw leaned back in his chair, breathing heavily with his face flushed.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," Claw said dismissively. "I'm just short of breath lately."

"Let me Read you." Pandeena reached for the chieftain and he waved her off.

"All you're going to find is what you found before."

Before he could say her again, Pandeena grasped his arm and Read him. "You're worse."

Claw sighed. "I'll be dead by mid-winter. Find my brother Brock. Don't wait. Malthus has too much influence in my household. I don't trust him."

"You have me, grandfather." Kynyr placed a protective hand on Claw's shoulder.

"You can't do it alone, Kynyr. You need Brock."

"We found Brock a week ago. The Grand Master has sent for him." Hathura leaned forward in his chair, grasped Claw's wrist and Read him also. "You're in a bad way."

Claw glanced from Hathura to Pandeena and back again. "How?"

"We Jumped. Pandeena and I both do it. However, I was the only one of us who had been there before so she could not do it without me."

"You're mages?"

Hathura shook his head. "I am after a fashion. Pandeena isn't."

Claw glanced sharply at Pandeena. "Then what are you?"

Hathura lifted an eyebrow at Pandeena, received a nod of permission, and answered. "Yuwenghau. I'm Hathura Waveskimmer." He pointed at each of his companions. "Melejys Sun-Child. Toniqua Nightsbane. Pandeena Moonbow."

Awe lessened Claw's pain and he started to push from his chair to kneel before Pandeena. "The second mother of our race...."

Pandeena rose and stopped him. "I require no worship. That isn't our way."

"And the First Mother?"

"She sent me."

Claw struggled to absorb that fact. "Praise Tala. Tell me the rest of it. We have a male sa'necari hiding himself somewhere in the valley."

"Nikko's alive."

"Alive!"

"Yes. He was shot by the Serpent and a horde of imps. My mother saved him, but he's physically fragile from the attack, and remembers nothing. At first, he couldn't even remember his name, but it has been coming back. When he collapsed wounded, he murmured something to Lokynen, it sounded like marl or murl, or mal, no one is certain."

Claw growled low to himself. "You're telling me the Serpent married my daughter?"

"We don't know that he's the Serpent. I tried to Read him the first day I met him, but all I detected was human with nothing sa'necari about him."

"That's a relief, I guess." Claw stared at his hands uneasily, painfully aware of how dependant he had grown on others since his health had worsened. "I don't like the mon, but Merissa loves him. She and Aisha talked me into the match. Sheradyn says the cubs Merissa is carrying are lycan."

"That doesn't prove anything. Caimbeul's memories only show us that we have a male sa'necari loose here."

"Are you all here because of the Serpent?"

"Not originally. Dynanna held a meeting of yuwenghau and gathered a small army to find and protect a child that is the last of the lineage of Dawnhand. We haven't found the child yet, but we did stumble upon Nikko and discovered that the Serpent was here."

"I can tell you who the child is. He's my grandcub."

"Darmyk?" A shiver ran through Pandeena at this confirmation of her suspicions that Darmyk was the last descendant of Dawnhand and that the mon she suspected of being the Serpent lived under the same roof as the special child. Then she wondered if Lokynen knew and had withheld the information. *It would be just like that big oaf.*

"His father is Isranon son of Isranon. He was the last Dark Brother of the Light, but he has turned to the darkness and repudiated the child."

"I'm sorry."

"I'll have guards arrest Nesswen and Yren. Once they've had a taste of the irons and the whip, they'll tell us who the others were, and lead us to the Serpent."

"Nesswen is dead," said Toniqua.

"Brock is coming." Pandeena gripped Claw's forearm in a gesture of reassurance. "And he's not coming alone. He's bringing Netherguard and Guildsmyn with him. He intends to get to the bottom of whatever is going on."

Claw managed a smile. "That sounds like Brock. You've given me hope, Pandeena."

* * * *

Kady sat with her arm around her husband's shoulders. She was the only bitch in the room. Kynyr had called a council of war and all of the adult male Sinclairs had been summoned to it, including Todd and those who were currently still living in Longbranch. His face was hard, his eyes like steel, and a barely contained icy rage clung to him.

"They murdered Caimbeul. Those bloody bastards. This is my war now. If Claw doesn't do something about it, I will."

Kynyr scanned the faces of those gathered at the table.

"There's something I haven't told you. I killed Baroucha."

Todd nodding with an appraising look. "I knew that."

"You didn't know this. While I was killing her she said that Malthus knew about me ... about my family ... and he would kill all of us. She told Malthus about my father ... and now he's dead. So are you with me?"

"We are." Todd slapped his hand into the middle of the table.

Trevor stood and placed his hand over Todd's. "If there's one thing Sinclairs do well ... it's wars. I'm in."

Kynyr added his hand to the stack.

One by one, all of the Sinclairs added their hands. "If truth dies, then all that is left in life is darkness and lies," Kynyr quoted Caimbeul's poem. "I will not let the truth die with Caimbeul. Are you with me?"

"Aye!" they chorused.

Kady laid her hand atop the dogs' hands. "And I. I'm in this with the rest of you."

* * * *

EPILOGUE:

Larena sat on her bed with her hand on her belly and cried. Her menses were three weeks late. She had prayed and left offerings at the shrine repeatedly. But they still did not come.

She considered her choice. She could not afford Sheradyn; Cahira would probably refuse to help her; and Atreius would probably tell her father if she tried to buy tansy. Or she could tell Malthus.

Her father would throw her to the wolves like he had done to Kady.

Preece was waiting for her on the common when she slipped from the house that night. He walked her to Malthus' cottage without more than a few words.

Malthus let her in and dismissed Preece.

He curled his finger under her chin and lifted her head up. "You're sad."

"Malthus ... I'm pregnant."

Malthus hugged her. "I love you, Larena. I love you more than anyone ... including Merissa."

"You do?"

"Yes. And if you help me, I will divorce Merissa and marry you."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Poison your sister."

THE END

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this eBook by going back to your bookshelf at www.fictionwise.com.