

Trilogy of the Second Age™

# Children of the Dragon



Book Three



Richard E. Dansky

CHILDREN OF THE DRAGON

TRILOGY OF THE SECOND AGE™  
BOOK THREE



# Children OF THE Dragon™



RICHARD E. DANSKY



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# Children of the Dragon™





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ISBN: 1-58846- 802-X

First Edition: September 2002

Printed in Canada

White Wolf Publishing

1554 Litton Drive

Stone Mountain, GA 30083

[www.white-wolf.com/fiction](http://www.white-wolf.com/fiction)



*Dedicated to Saul and Irene Dansky, for years of support and love, their endless encouragement, and most of all their admonition not to be so hard on Ratcatcher this time around.*

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# Chapter One

They cut Ratcatcher down on the thirteenth day after he'd been left behind, thirteen days of torment authored by Holok and Unforgiven Blossom. For close to a fortnight, he'd hung in the branches of the tree, his arms twisted and broken. Insects and birds had fed on his flesh, and spiders nested in the unruly thatch of his hair. The only water that had passed his parched lips had come from two brief rainstorms, and he'd tasted no food in all that time.

He'd not slept at all, and for thirteen days and nights he'd hung, awake, on the tree. At first the pain had kept him from drifting off, the stabbing agonies in his arms anchoring him to consciousness. Then, when pain had ceased to matter, he found himself strangely immune to slumber, and instead had stared out from unseeing eyes both night and day.

Finally, the visions had come. In one, he had seen the great carrion bird, Raiton, who had taunted him and promised to send his servants to feed upon Ratcatcher's rotting corpse. In another, the Prince of Shadows had turned away from him sadly, cloaked in fire and bleeding from both palms. Ratcatcher had tried to call out to him, but his throat was so dry he could make no sounds other than a weak, dry squeaking. He'd heard his hounds baying off in the distance, and once he'd thought he'd seen them, but they remained maddeningly elusive.

✠ And on the last day before succor came, he'd seen her. She'd stood before him, demure as always, in the robes she'd been wearing on the day she had taken his life. Her protector was nowhere to be seen, and Ratcatcher had strained mightily against his bonds in an attempt to free himself and choke the life from her hateful, delicate throat. His efforts failed, though, and he sagged against his restraints, spent, and she began to speak.

"You and I will meet again," she had said.

"This wheel is still spinning." Then she had leaned forward and kissed him on the brow. Then, she vanished, and all he could taste was dust.

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The men came to cut him down the next day. There were a half dozen of them, and they rode strong black horses that bore signs of hard riding. "There he is," one said, and they spurred their horses over the ridge and down the slope to where he hung.

They were not gentle when they cut him down. Wide-bladed knives slashed at his bonds; rough hands pulled his twisted limbs free of their confinement. He would have screamed in agony, but no sound emerged from the parched flesh of his throat. And so they took him down off the tree, roughly, and bore him to the ground nearby. One brought water and bathed his face, then moistened a piece of silk and bade Ratcatcher suck the precious fluid, drop by drop, between his cracked lips. His broken limbs were straightened, crudely but effectively, and a folded blanket placed beneath his head.

"Who are you?" he finally managed to croak, after sufficient water had passed his lips. "Why have you come for me?"

"We serve the Prince of Shadows," one of the men said. "He bade us find you. We did so, for it is not wise to fail the prince."

Ratcatcher laughed, raggedly. "No, it's not."

The man nodded. "So we have been told. The prince rides forth, even now, and Pelesh rides with him. We were told to tell you of that as well."

"Pelesh?" Ratcatcher coughed. "Things must be upside down for that old spider to leave his web. What is the world coming to?"

"I do not know. I simply know I was told, along with my fellows, to find you, to cut you down, to tend to you, and to pass along these tidings. I was also given one more charge, which I may not speak of to you."

"Oh?" He struggled to rise, then fell back against the ground. "What might that be? And when will we be leaving? I'll be strong enough to travel soon, I think. Water is what I need, water and a little time."

"We'll be leaving soon," the man replied softly. All around him was the hustle and bustle of the other men preparing to depart.

"We will?" Ratcatcher looked around. "I don't see a stretcher, or a travois. Will I be riding behind you?"

"No," the man answered, and cut Ratcatcher's throat.

There was surprisingly little blood, a mere trickle. The man who killed Ratcatcher covered him with the blanket which had served as a pillow, and let the thin flow of his blood water the earth.

"Forgive me," he said, and left the knife on the corpse's breast. "It is better that you be judged and reborn. I envy you your journey." Then he, too mounted his horse, and the entire pack of horsemen rode away to the south and west.





## Chapter Two

In the days after the town's entire population had been slaughtered, Qut Toloc acquired a reputation as a haunted place. Travelers who'd stopped in seeking shelter or a meal found instead piles of scorched bones, livestock dead in the streets, and a desecrated temple. Walls stained with blood and offal provided no clues to the fate of the inhabitants, save that it was violent and sudden. The temple's fate was just as mysterious, as the idea of the Immaculate Order abandoning a holy site was almost unknown. Yet here the temple stood, its doors hanging off their hinges and birds nesting in the sanctuary. No industrious monks repaired the damage; no devout ones prayed in the corridors. A few brave souls dared as far as the heart of the temple, where they found shattered doors lying on the floor of a roughhewn chamber, and a gaping doorway whose maw exhaled foul vapors.

A few were brave enough to steal temple artifacts. None were foolish enough to venture into the darkness. All spread the story of the horror at Qut Toloc wherever they went, and those whom they told spread it even wider. Prudent women and sensible men heard the tales, and chose to hurry past the ruins on their journeys. Sage mapmakers modified their wares accordingly. Those whose products had been so detailed as to show Qut Toloc now removed it; those who'd ignored the hamlet before now marked it as a

dangerous, ghost-ridden place. Itinerant priests began using tales of the destruction of Qut Toloc as abject lessons in their sermons, and the Thousand Gods turned their faces away and would not speak of it when asked.

And so, in a mere handful of months, Qut Toloc went from a deserted outpost, a secret few had heard of and fewer still cared to remember, to a name bandied about far and wide by the tale-tellers and wags of Creation. It became a place to be shunned and feared, a town whose name was heavy with the stink of death.

Which, of course, is why the treasure hunters immediately found the place irresistible. They expected to find beasts to slay, relics of the First Age for the taking, and treasure and glory scattered on the streets of the village like shells on a sandy beach.

What they didn't expect to find was Eliezer Wren, coming up out of the long dark.

The instant he reached the top of the spiral stairs, Wren knew he wasn't going to get the bath he was hoping for. Dim light and stale smells flooded the air as he approached, and he could see that the doors sealing the catacombs off from the temple proper had been torn from their hinges by some angry force. Brown stains on the floor and walls could only be blood, and he could see deep gashes in the stone that had clearly been made with malicious intent.

Absently, Wren scratched his forehead and stepped into the room. The air here was a bit cleaner than in the catacombs, but it was scented with old rot and animal smells. Bird droppings marked the floor where the blood didn't, and cobwebs filled every corner.

If Kejak ever saw this, Wren decided, a lot of monkish heads would roll immediately. If the heart of the temple was such a disaster, the Unconquered Sun alone knew how bad the rest of it was.

He stooped to examine the pattern of bloodstains on the floor, and frowned. These were old, older than he would have expected, somehow. From footprints left in the



dried gore, he traced the steps of the battles that had been fought in the room, and didn't like what he saw. Gashes in the stone belied the ferocity of the combat. A bloody handprint against one wall made him shudder; the deep cut into the stone behind it spoke volumes.

"This is wrong," he muttered, and stood. "Someone should have been here to consecrate the temple anew. To see to the dead, at the very least. To shut the doors on the catacombs." He looked over his shoulder and down into the dark. Nothing stirred there, which was exactly what he wanted to see. "The fact that no one from the Order has been here tells me that something is very wrong."

That the temple was apparently bereft of monks wasn't necessarily a bad thing, Wren decided as he followed the smeared trail of blood through the temple corridors. While most guests, particularly fellow Immaculates, were guaranteed some form of hospitality within the temple walls, Wren was fairly certain that his Exaltation would preclude any friendly reception. At best, there'd be awkward questions about the daiklave and what he'd been doing down among the dead men. At worst, there would have been an impromptu Wyld Hunt staged in the temple's chambers.

Even so, caution seemed wise, so Wren passed slowly through the temple's halls, stopping often to examine the evidence of carnage. Looters had been here, he saw. Sconces for torches had been ripped out of the walls, and braziers and tapestries had been either savaged or stolen. Everywhere, the tale of the temple's destruction was written in dried blood, smeared on the walls or spattered on the floor.

One man had done this, Wren decided. One set of footprints led from slaughter to slaughter, and the hacks and scores marring the walls were all of a consistent size, shape and depth.

"One man," Wren said softly, and whistled. He recalled the endless mornings in the courtyard for training, the incomparable speed and grace of his peers and instructors. To think that one man could have simply strolled through the temple and dispatched so many monks with such ease was unthinkable.



"Ratcatcher," he whispered. No one else could have done this. The odds against it were too great. The man who'd dragged him, a prisoner, to the Prince of Shadows' dungeon had carved himself a bloody place in the war against the heavens here.

A war, he realized, in which he, too, was a soldier.

More than just a soldier, he suddenly knew. All at once, it struck home. This was no game, not even one of Kejak's intrigues. The powers among whom he moved were mighty and terrible, capable of miracles or slaughters with either hand. When he'd rejected the dead god's offer, he his mind had simply refused to comprehend what he had done. The power was too vast, the scale on which it worked beyond his comprehension. Even Idli, treacherous, vicious Idli was simply too alien to be comprehended, save when the blows flew and the demands of combat put all philosophizing out of his head.

But this, this brought it home. Ratcatcher was perhaps the lowliest of the creatures he'd striven against thus far, a vain, arrogant, sadistic toady. He danced at the end of the prince's strings, intrigued with the prince's other servants, and upon occasion wiped out entire temples full of trained, dedicated Immaculates.

With a chill, Wren realized what sort of enemy he'd made in Ratcatcher. His survival of the duel in Unforgiven Blossom's chambers now seemed like a fluke, a joke played by the Unconquered Sun.

And if the Unconquered Sun had not chosen to Exalt him, he too, would have died, would have fallen to the rage and power of the Anathema....

Of course, he was now Anathema, too. Gently, gingerly, he tickled awake the power inside him. While it seemed likely that Ratcatcher was long gone, there was still the chance he might have returned, and the depth of the scores in the walls told Wren that now was not the time to take chances.

He continued on, working his way inevitably toward the central sanctuary. There was no reason to go there, he knew, save a morbid curiosity and a lingering faith. Perhaps

Ratcatcher had at least left the sanctuary alone. Perhaps, Wren told himself, it still mattered.

He came around the last bend and nearly doubled over in shock. The sanctuary, or what remained of it, lay before him. Time had not been kind to it. Birds nested on the altar and in the eaves, and their droppings bespattered the room. Old stains on the walls and floors were precisely the wrong shade of brown, and a lingering stench told Wren the extent of the desecration. All of the temple ornaments were gone, either stolen or destroyed. By the smeared trails on the floor he could see that bodies had been dragged out of here, many bodies. It was clear that the sanctuary had become an abattoir, with priests and their servants the beasts to be slaughtered.

Feeling sick to his stomach, he turned away. Those who used the word "abomination" should first come here ere ever uttering it again. This, he saw, was a true abomination, not what he had become. This was the real horror. For the first time, he felt he truly understood why, on a day in the dim and distant past, Kejak and his advisors had felt it necessary to call the first Wyld Hunt.

The fact that the Hunt would now ride him down just as gladly as it would the author of this desecration was not lost on him, however, and he was quite certain that if anyone found him here they'd lay the blame for the slaughter at his feet. Never mind the sheer impossibility of it all; people tended to be less than logical where mass death and the Exalted were concerned.

He had even, Wren admitted to himself, been guilty of it a few times himself.

Now, however, was not the time for self-recrimination, or a reflection on the ironic nature of things. A quick glance around had told him that there were no bodies needing to be buried and no souls needing their way hastened. That, at least, was a blessing. He would leave the temple, scour whatever lay outside for supplies, and depart. The weight of the sword at his back was a reminder of the debt he owed the ghosts from the catacombs below; his sudden thirst was a reminder of a more immediate need.

With haste he worked his way through the temple corridors and out away from the sanctuary, hoping against hope that there might be a village nearby.

He felt a sudden heat on his brow, and amended his wish: a village of the blind, or foolish.

There were still traces of blood on the temple steps when Wren emerged, not that he had expected anything different. The elements had done their work here and softened the memory. Given enough time, they'd tear down the temple's ceiling and do their work inside as well.

There had been a village here once, Wren saw. Most of the buildings still stood, though some showed signs of having burned. There were perhaps a couple of dozen homes, a stable, a blacksmith's shop and a few other buildings at whose purpose he couldn't guess, all in greater or lesser states of disrepair. Some bore scorch marks, others were little more than outlines of burned timbers on the ground.

In the center of the gathering of huts was a rough town square, and at its center was a pile of well-burned bones. Animal skeletons lay in the street, leading Wren to believe that the bones in the square were human remains. No doubt those of the town's inhabitants, he thought, and loped down from the temple.

There was no smell of death in the streets, and for that Wren was thankful. There was only dust and soot, which rose up in choking clouds with each step he took. Looking behind him, he saw the breeze whip the dust away. Anyone in the area would know someone was here, and if they were clever, they'd know he was alone. The thought did not fill Wren with confidence. He slowed his pace and lightened his tread, and was gratified to see that the puffs of dust rising behind him were correspondingly smaller.

The town square, when he reached it, proved to be roughly paved with massive cobblestones. Thus, it was mercifully free of dust, save for that which the winds had blessed it with. The mound of bones lay in the square's center, and at a



glance Wren could see it for what it was: a pyre. This was not part of the slaughter. This was part of the aftermath. Someone had been here after all, had seen the destruction and done what they could for the victims. It hadn't been much, but there had been some effort made to give the corpses of the dead protection from scavengers, and to give their souls a reason to rest.

But who had made the effort? The question nagged at Wren. If it had been Immaculates, why had they not cleansed the temple as well? And who else would have done such a thing? Surely looters wouldn't have bothered. Perhaps the townsfolk had been friendly with local spirits? None of the explanations seemed satisfactory. He took a step closer to the pile of charred bones and frowned. *Did it even matter?* he wondered. *After all, they were long dead in any case.*

The sound of hooves interrupted his woolgathering. With a half dozen quick steps, Wren left the square and faded into the shadows between a pair of relatively sturdy huts, ones whose exterior walls seemed unlikely to collapse in a strong breeze.

Two riders came into view, riding slowly. The leader was bearded, burly, and heavily armed. He wore riding leathers that had seen better days, and a necklace of tyrant lizard teeth. There were throwing knives prominently visible on his vambraces, not to mention other bits of metal. A hat that was red with road dust slouched on his head, and there was a wicked-looking short blade strapped to his thigh. He looked around with mild interest, methodically scanning the square.

The second rider was a woman, tall and wiry. A wicked scar ran down her right cheek, pushing her across the border from plain to ugly. Her black hair was tied back with a silver clasp, and she wore leathers much like her partner's. Not for her, though, were the numerous blades her companion favored. Instead, a short bow hung from her saddlebow, and a full quiver was strapped to her back.

Watching them pass by, Wren frowned. By all rights, he should have seen them long before he'd heard them. The dust alone should have seen to that.



Unless, he realized, they had already been in the village when he'd walked out of the temple.

"Halloo!" The cry came from the square. It was deep and loud and not at all good humored, and Wren felt himself disinclined to respond to it.

"Halloo!" The call came again, this time from the woman. "We know you're here. Just come out and show yourself, and you won't be hurt."

Wren had to stifle some laughter at that. They wouldn't hurt him? Oh, they might try, but as for actually hurting him, regardless of the effort they made, he was quite certain they wouldn't be able to hurt him. Still, he remained in the shadows, curious to hear what they had to say next.

It was the man who spoke again, riding in slow circles around the blackened remains of the pyre. He seemed impatient, while the woman behind him remained phlegmatic and professional. She, Wren decided, was the dangerous one of the two.

"Look, there's enough treasure in that temple for the three of us. Come out and we'll cut you in for a share. Keep hiding and you'll get nothing."

Ah, Wren thought, *That explains it. They were treasure hunters, and they'd somehow heard tales of the fabulous treasures of this lost temple. Well, unless they've got a buyer for a two-foot mound of pigeon shit, they're going to find themselves sadly disappointed.* For a moment, he thought about warning them of what lay within, but decided against it. He had nothing against treasure hunters, grave robbers or other looters of the dead, having been one himself numerous times. What he did object to, however, was the profession's notoriously homicidal attitude toward interlopers, competitors, claim jumpers and witnesses. Wren suspected that the two regarded him as falling under one of these categories. It would certainly be a more believable explanation than the truth, namely that he was a newly Exalted fugitive who had just emerged from the Underworld after defying one of its rulers and escaping from the Prince of Shadows' dungeons by hurling himself into oblivion. Mentally, he



sighed and held himself still. With luck, the two would soon grow bored and either wander off or head into the temple, and then he could raid their camp for supplies and vanish. He didn't intend to take much, but in the wake of the duel he'd fought in the catacombs he had no wish to indulge in any particularly strenuous exercise. Besides, he wasn't quite sure he was up to dodging arrows, at least not yet.

Out in the square, the sounds of horses' footfalls on the rough flagstones abruptly ceased, and Wren could hear the two sliding off their horses. "If you're not going to come out," the man said, "we're going to have to find you. You won't like that." Then came the rasp of a blade being pulled from a sheath, and the soft moan of a bow being strung.

Mentally, Wren cursed. They were being stubborn. Moving silently, he faded back away from the square. Finding a window, he flipped himself backwards through it and landed on dirt floor covered with tattered and rotten mats of woven straw. They rustled when he landed, and Wren hoped devoutly that the sound wasn't as loud as it seemed to his own ears. He scuttled away from the window, then crouched on the floor. Barely breathing, he listened.

In the alley outside, there were stealthy footsteps. "There's footprints in the dust," he heard the woman say.

"Those are yours, or maybe mine," the man retorted. Silently, Wren cheered him on.

There was a pause, and then, "Since when are either of us barefoot?"

The man cursed, loudly, and then came crashing in through the wall with his long knife drawn. Before the debris had settled, Wren was on him. One hand slapped the flat of the man's blade, knocking it away. The other came in under his chin in an open-fisted punch to the base of the throat. The man gurgled, half spun, and collapsed.

Some instinct told Wren to collapse along with him, and he was thankful for it when an arrow whistled just overhead. Twisting out of his fall, he rolled into the alley and sprang to his feet just in time to avoid another arrow.



The woman stood there, fluid as water as she nocked, drew, fired, and reached for another arrow. Wren admired her form for a long instant, then leapt into the air as a cloak of light shimmered into existence around him. Straight up he went, and then over onto the rooftop opposite. Another arrow whizzed past, and he threw himself to the roof, willing the flare of power around him to melt into him.

"Bright Crow," the woman called, her eyes never leaving the spot where Wren had disappeared over the roof's horizon. "Are you all right?" The only response she received was a gurgled moan. "Damnation," she muttered, and loosed another arrow. "He's up on the roof."

There was a pause in the rain of arrows, and Wren took advantage of it by wriggling over to the other side of the roof to see if the next building was within jumping range. It was, or would have been if it still had a roof. But fire had destroyed half of it, and the elements had taken care of the rest. Wren realized that unless he wanted to make a target of himself, he was trapped.

There was a soft plopping sound, followed by the crackling of burning straw. Wren looked up, and saw an arrow with a burning rag tied to it sticking out of the rooftop. The flames were already beginning to spread.

"Oh, hell," Wren muttered, and jumped as the flames swept towards him.

He landed on his feet in the alley on the other side of the house from his bow-wielding assailant. A cloud of dust rose up as he landed, but the sound of his heels hitting dirt was masked by the rising roar of the fire.

He could, Wren realized, simply run at this point. There was nothing to be gained by prolonging the conflict, and much to be said for moving on as rapidly as possible. But the woman's casual attempts to exterminate him rankled, and her partner's clumsy bravado was irritating. They had begun this, not him. There was nothing wrong with finishing it.

He stooped and closed his hand around a shard of pottery. It was heavy and thick, and one side was painted

with what looked to be a pattern of dancing cranes. Wren looked at it for a second, decided it was hideous, and tossed it in his hand. The weight was suitable for his purpose. Silently, Wren glided to the right. To the left was the town center, a space much too open for his liking.

The fire was growing now, the heat forcing him back away from the hut's smoldering walls. Dimly, he could hear the woman on the other side still calling out for her partner. Wren smiled, and crept around the side of the building. He took a moment to gauge distances, then tossed the potsherd into the mouth of the alley between huts.

It was an old trick, of course—toss the distraction to the right and then go left. Wren had no intention, however, of going left. No doubt the woman had seen this before and would react by looking left, bow drawn, ready to perforate him as he came around the corner. Instead, he'd go right, following the path of his crude missile, and surprise her.

That, at least, was the theory, one which Wren found to be gratifyingly accurate as he slipped around the corner of the burning building.

She stood there, her back to him and an arrow sighted on the other end of the alley. Wren smiled and leapt. His intent was to land a single kick at the base of her neck. At the worst, she'd stumble forward and drop the bow; at best, it would kill her.

With a shout, he struck. She half-turned at his cry, her mouth open in surprise and her hands coming up instinctively to block his attack. His heel struck the side of her neck with both his weight and the force of his leap behind it.

By all rights, it should have shattered her neck, sent her spinning into the dust as her arms and legs flailed wildly. By all rights, it should have killed her.

Instead, there was a flash of pale light, and an unpleasant shock that ran up Wren's leg. He gasped, recovered, and landed to the woman's right, between her and the flames. His right leg felt numb.



She finished her turn and smiled grimly. Her hands still held the short bow; the string still held the arrow. On her breast he could see a small white stone hanging from a golden chain. It was glowing, softly, and he cursed himself for missing it before.

"First Age charm against the strike of the hand," she said, smirking. "You find a lot of these in our line of work."

"Really?" Wren said, and threw himself to the left as the arrow came whistling at him. He rolled, the hilt of the sword he bore digging painfully into his back as more arrows exploded into the dust where he'd been. The woman drew and fired swiftly and easily, and for a brief instant Wren wondered if she'd had Immaculate training. The range was too short for her to keep missing forever.

His shoulder brushed the wall of the hut he'd hidden in, and he sprang to his feet. Another arrow whizzed under his chin, and he flipped himself backwards, out of the way.

"Mind you, I don't think we'll find any of those here." She paused for a second in her rhythm as her fingers slipped off an arrow, and in that instant Wren counterattacked. A flare of light trailing from his fist, he threw himself forward.

He struck, not at the woman, but at her bow. The wood was lacquered and strong, the bow itself a remarkable bit of craftsmanship. But at his touch, it shattered. The string whipped back and cut her face, and she cried out in pain. Half-stumbling backwards, she struck blindly with the arrow she held, but Wren caught it and spun it out of her hand. She turned to run, but he caught the falling shaft with his left hand and thrust it forward, low. It caught her ankles, and she tumbled forward into the dust. In an instant, he was on her, the arrow held at the base of her neck and her face pressed into the dirt.

"You know," he said pleasantly, "none of this was necessary. I didn't want anything except a look at a map and some water, you know, and the temple's empty anyway. Oh, you can try the catacombs underneath, but I don't recommend it. I've been down there, you see. Now, where's your camp?"



She spat, and made an attempt to wriggle free. Dispassionately, Wren reversed the arrow and struck her on the spine with the butt.

“That was stupid. Not as stupid as your friend, whom I don’t expect will ever speak again, but fairly stupid nonetheless. You don’t have to answer me. This isn’t a large village. I expect that once I kill you, I’ll find it on my own soon enough. It’s up to you, of course.”

The woman coughed. “You did this, didn’t you?” she said thickly around a mouthful of dirt. Wren found himself wondering if he’d knocked any of her teeth loose.

“What, the slaughter? Hardly. Near as I could tell, I was half a world away. I know the man who did it, though, and he wants to kill me, if that makes you feel any better.”

“Liar!”

“No, just thirsty. You do have water at your camp, don’t you?”

She refused to answer, and, with a shrug, Wren struck her in the nerve cluster in the side of the neck with the shaft of the arrow. She stopped squirming, blessedly unconscious, and he dragged her into the next hut with her still-moaning companion. The charm around her neck he took for himself, though a rumble in his gut warned him against donning it.

“Watch her,” he said, once he had her inside.

“I don’t think you’re going to be good for much else.” The man she’d called Bright Crow cowered back in a corner, and Wren shot him a look of disgust. A disgrace to the trade, this one was, and possibly better off dead.

He turned to go. “You may want to move her, if those flames spread,” he added as he walked through the impromptu entrance the man had made. “You may want to do that quickly.”

Scrabbling sounds behind him told Wren his warning was being heeded.

The horses were in the square, and a quick check of their saddlebags showed Wren that they in fact carried everything he needed. Water, food, maps—it was all here

for the taking. For a moment, he pondered the moral implications of leaving Bright Crow and his friend here without their steeds or equipment, but he brushed it aside. It was part of the trade. No doubt they'd done this to others; no doubt they'd shown less mercy than he had.

He mounted up and tethered the second horse, the man's horse, to his own. Both were surprisingly docile, which he took as a good sign. He clucked and dug his heels into the horse's flank, and headed toward what the maps had assured him was a road.

Behind him, the fire grew. Wren ignored it.





## Chapter Three

The problem, Chejop Kejak thought, was not that good help was hard to find. Good help was everywhere, assuming you didn't ask too much of it. After all, he had no shortage of perfectly competent underlings, servants, allies, bound spirits and pawns all quite capable of doing whatever he requested of them. Then again, what he asked of most of his agents was usually quite simple: smiting unbelievers, securing the interests of the Immaculate Order and its sponsors, and occasionally riding out with the Wyld Hunt to eliminate threats to the stability of the Realm.

No, Kejak decided, the problem was that *smart* help was difficult to find. A man in Kejak's position inevitably was beset with difficult, delicate circumstances, ranging from covering up sexual scandals at outlying temples to tracking down First Age artifacts that had passed illicitly through a dozen hands, and those tasks called for at least a modicum of intelligence. Unfortunately, finding willing (or at least pliable) agents with the right combination of wit, skills and temperament was heavens-bedamned difficult, and of late it had been impossible.

And that was why he had spent so much time recently looking for Eliezer Wren.

He'd tried to find Wren, of course, numerous times. Messages had gone out to his agents across the Threshold and



beyond: "report in if you see Eliezer Wren." A dozen false alarms were reported, checked out, and dismissed and their authors suitably chastised. But of Wren himself, there was no sign.

This, in and of itself, was not *too* alarming. Creation was large, after all, and Wren was just one man with a knack for concealing himself. On the other hand, Wren was privy to enough of Kejak's secrets to make him a valuable prize, and if he'd decided to leave the Sidereal's service he'd no doubt have plenty of other suitors. If Wren were dead, as seemed likely—there'd been no word from him at all since he'd left the temple in Stonebreak half a year ago—that would be one thing, one that Kejak could deal with. He was just a man, as Holok had been so fond of pointing out, and ultimately replaceable. If he was alive, however, he would have to be found and either brought back into the fold or eliminated.

Kejak stood and scowled. The room he currently occupied was a bare monk's cell, an attempt to get himself as far from the ambience of the crumbling orrery as possible. There was now a brace of monks in the chamber around the clock, constantly shoring up moldering bits of the ceiling or replacing celestial spheres that had fallen. Soon, he decided, it would be time to brick the damn thing up and start over. Having the stars over his head as he made plans had been useful for centuries, but now it was crippling him. All of his astrological predictions were off, and he felt blind. It would be difficult to find another site so perfectly suited for the purpose, but it couldn't be helped. This, undoubtedly, was enemy work, and if something was striking at him in this manner then he needed every weapon in his arsenal at his disposal.

In the meantime, however, he was cut off from one source of intelligence, and it irked him. He'd tried to substitute other resources, but time and again, he'd failed. It was irritating.

More importantly, it was time to do something about it. If magical and human intelligence were both denied to him, he was crippled. He had to have at least one of the two, and then he could work on regaining the other.

And that, he decided, meant that it was time to find Eliezer Wren. He struck the small gong that sat on a shelf near the door of the cell. Almost immediately, a monk appeared in the doorway, his face serene but inquiring. "May I assist you, Revered One?"

Kejak scowled. "Obviously, or I wouldn't have called for you. Have the Chamber of the Unbroken Circle cleansed and purified. I'll need seventeen braziers in there, all bronze, and herbs for meditation. Also, bring me salt and a leather thong knotted around nine stones."

"Revered One?"

"You have three days. At the end of that time, I will need a few other things, but that will do for now. And while you are about, inform the kitchens that I'll be taking no sustenance for a while. That is all."

"Yes, Revered One." The monk bowed and vanished. Kejak smiled. Good help, at least, he still had.

Kejak sat, cross-legged and naked, on the bare stone floor. Small bronze charcoal burners sat in significant locations around the perfectly circular chamber, fragrant smoke rising from them. An acolyte named Roben Salashi, carefully chosen, wandered the chamber as she constantly placed small bundles of herbs over the flames.

Kejak, as was appropriate, ignored her. Hands placed palm to palm in the air in front of him, posture ramrod straight, he closed his eyes and chanted an incantation that was as familiar to him as breathing. It had been three centuries and more since he'd recited it, but there was no hesitation in his voice, no lapse in his memory.

The price he had paid in order to learn it ensured that.

There was no protective circle on the floor, not that there was any need for one. The creature he was summoning was too powerful to be held in check by a mere circle of chalk, and might be insulted by the attempt. Kejak had more powerful protective measures at his disposal, but he judged their use to be not worth the effort. He wished to

approach what was coming as an equal, not a cringing postulant. Doing so might make the negotiations easier.

And so, he had ordered the chamber prepared, its walls and floor scrubbed with fragrant oils. Seventeen braziers had been placed in the chamber, and the sweet scent of dried herbs that flowed from them was unending. Kejak himself had fasted for three days and three nights before beginning the rite, and had purified his flesh with salt and ritual flagellation as well.

Most of this, he suspected, was deeply unnecessary, but it made the rather irritable deity he was summoning happy, and so he submitted to it. It usually paid, he had learned, to make the spirits comfortable in dealings of this sort. It let them forget, at least for the moment, the true nature of the position they were in.

A gong sounded somewhere in the distance. It was followed by another, and then a third. The sound of birds exploding into flight filled the chamber, and a breeze rushed down from the vaulted ceiling. Clouds of scented smoke swirled through the air, and the acolyte shrieked as the wind tore the carefully knotted bundles of herbs from her grasp. These flew up into the air, dancing, as the din continued, while she ran vainly back and forth across the chamber trying to catch them.

"Who calls me?"

Kejak ceased chanting and opened his eyes. The din of wings was deafening now, and the shadows of birds swooped and dove along the chamber walls. The acolyte, her hands full of loose strands, was on her knees against the chamber wall, staring up in horror. Kejak almost felt sorry for her.

The center of the chamber was filled by a titanic figure, roughly man-shaped but twice as tall as any man could be. Its unsexed body was formed by a shifting, screeching mob of birds of all shades and hues. Above it, the room's ceiling had vanished, replaced by a swirling vortex of cloud and shadow.

A constant stream of feathered shapes flew into and out of the room, mingling with the monstrous form of the bird god before splitting off and fleeing once again.





Kejak stood. "I call you. I call you by the wind that lifts you and the earth that holds safe the nest. I call you by the fire that is in your blood and the iron of your talons. I call you by the water of your eye, which is clear and sees all. And I call you because great is my need of your gifts, and I ask that you grant me your succor."

The man-thing's shape shifted, giving the appearance of peering down at where Kejak stood. "Ah. You. I should have known. You have no bond on me. I am here because I will it."

"You are here because you have been summoned, and I have made the chamber of your summoning fragrant for you. I have purified this place and myself, and I have brought for you an unsullied gift." He pointed to the acolyte, who on cue dropped her scattered bundles and shrieked.

The bird-god laughed. "She's not unsullied. Ask her about her evenings in study with Most Dignified Wielder of the Pen Peleps Danini."

"That's not true!" the young woman called out, but Kejak ignored her. "She's not?" His voice was full of surprise. "But she assured me, as did my servants! Father of Wings, how can I assuage this insult I have accidentally given you!" He bowed his head, his posture utterly submissive.

Again, the bird-god laughed. "It is no insult. You are only human, after all, even though you bear the mark of the skies. You can be fooled. I cannot. My children's eyes are everywhere. I see what they see. I know what they know. They bring whispers to me, and tell me no lies. Can you say as much for your flock?"

Kejak shook his head. "No. Great is your wisdom and strength, and loyal are your children. I envy you that. Would that mine were so faithful."

The bird-god's shape shifted, mimicking Kejak's posture. "They are not, I see. Shall I tell you how many nights this girl has spent in her tutor's arms? How loud her cries where? The holy places she has defiled with her lust? You, Chejop Kejak, need to discipline your charges."

"You see all, Father of Birds. Great is your knowledge, greater still your wisdom."

"Indeed." The man-shape broke apart for an instant, filling the air with chattering birds before it reformed. This time, the shape was shorter and broader, with longer arms and shorter legs. "What boon would you ask of me, and what price would you pay for it?"

"She is not sufficient, then?"

"That depends." The bird-god's voice was fluting and sweet, the sound of songbirds at dawn. "If you were to ask me the location of a trinket you'd misplaced in your ablutions, perhaps. If you were to ask me the name of seven in this palace who plot against you, certainly not, not for her and a dozen like her. What do you wish to know? Then I shall name my bargain."

"Oh, it is but a trifling thing for one who sees so far. I do not need the names of those who plot against me; those I already know. But I do wish to know where I might find a man who is loyal."

"Interesting." Again the bird-god's shape fell into chaos, and when it reconstituted itself it did so in what Kejak recognized as an desexed effigy of his own form. "It seems a trifling favor. Why call upon me?"

"Why, because it is a trifle for *you*. If I cannot accurately judge the purity of a member of my own household, surely my eye is not keen enough to spot a wandering servant. For you, however, it would be just a matter of a moment."

"You go to a great deal of trouble for a trifling matter, Kejak. I like this not at all."

Kejak bowed. "Then go. I have no bonds on you. No circle holds you. I would not insult you thus."

The bird-god's shape melted and flowed, now little more than a dark, hovering cloud. "You speak of insults. Be careful, lest you speak of them too often. Now, what is this boon you would ask, this trifle for which you have moved mountains? Tell me quickly. I am curious."







"I wish to find a bird who has flown from my nest. A man named Eliezer Wren, a priest who was in my service."

A great screeching arose, and the rough shape in the air collapsed completely. The wind from above rose to gale strength, overturning burners and scattering hot coals on the stone floor. Feathered shapes beat against the walls of the chamber, the din of their shrieking rising above the sound of the rushing air.

Kejak stood and watched the spectacle. The birds swirled around him, never touching him, even as they descended on the hapless acolyte. She beat at them with her fists and cried out as they tore at her hair, her clothes, her soft skin.

Then, abruptly, the din ended. The wind ceased, and figure of the bird-god once again overstrode the chamber. "Is that all?" the creature asked. "You wish to know where the man Eliezer Wren is?" The god's voice was harsher now, the croak of a carrion bird mixing with the nightingales' tones.

There was an odd emphasis on the word "man" that Kejak disliked, but he merely nodded.

"This, then, I give to you. It is a gift from the Father of Birds, Chejop Kejak, one that I give freely. The man Eliezer Wren is dead. He died in the dungeons of the Prince of Shadows, and thus has passed from your service. My children have few eyes in the Underworld, but they say he has been seen there, traveling with strange and fell companions. Your servant is lost to you."

"Ah," was all Kejak said, a wealth of bitter disappointment in a single syllable. "I had feared as much. I thank you, and I will honor your children in the gardens of this temple. Twenty-five pans of bronze and silver will be filled with grain and left in the temple's courtyard for them to feed upon. This shall be repeated every day for a month, to honor the Father of Birds."

"Do it every day for a year, and I may consider it an honor. For a month, it is simply prudence."

Kejak nodded. "As you wish."

"I do," said the Father of Birds. "And do not call on me again for such tiny things. There are other gods in the world who are weak enough to be bent to your will. I am not one of them." It exploded upwards in a shower of winged shapes, which passed into the swirling storm overhead and vanished. A single red feather drifted down from above and then, as if it had never been, the vortex of cloud vanished.

Kejak reached out, and, with two fingers, caught the feather as it fell. He smiled.

"Is it gone?" The acolyte sat huddled in a terrified ball, peeking out from between her fingers. Her hair and clothes were torn, and her bare arms were scored with scratches.

"It's gone," Kejak said, looking upwards. "And it won't be back."

Little by little she unfolded, and stood on shaky feet. "Were you... were you really going to offer me to it?"

Kejak laughed unpleasantly, and kicked away some of the coals that had spilled near his feet. "I knew you were unsuitable to its tastes. That's why I chose you to attend me tonight."

"You knew?"

"Girl, everyone in the temple knows. The Father of Birds isn't the only one with eyes. Or ears." He paused for a moment. "Or a nose, for that matter. Peleps Danini doesn't bother to wash you off her fingers half the time before her next student arrives." Salashi sputtered, but Kejak swept on, ignoring her. "If I'd offered up someone useful, he'd have known that the matter really was important. If I'd admitted to knowing about your dalliances, I couldn't have flattered him into giving it away. And if you so much as breathe a word of this to anyone, even your esteemed calligraphy tutor, I will have your head on a pike and your hands cut off and tossed in the sea faster than you can even think about lying to me again. Am I understood, oh Acolyte whose silence buys her a continued place in the Temple?"

The girl nodded, unable to speak.





Kejak dusted his hands. "Good. I am glad we understand each other. Here, take this." In two strides, he walked over to her and handed her the feather. "Wear this. Consider it part of your penance. And tell your lover it came from me. She'll know what that means."

"Yes, Revered One." Salashi dropped to her knees, her head bowed. "I serve, in this as in all things."

"Yes, you do," Kejak agreed, and turned to go.

"Revered One?"

He turned. She looked up at him, confusion on her face. "Yes?" he said, impatient and unused to waiting on his lessers.

"If I may ask, who was Eliezer Wren? I've never heard of him."

"A dead man," Kejak said, and left her there.



## Chapter Four

"You should stand," the voice said. "The dead gods are waiting."

Ratcatcher opened his eyes. Before him was a vast and empty chamber, carved from black stone shot through with strands of turquoise and gray. The light was dim, but he could see perfectly as he glanced from side to side, taking in the massive pillars and titanic statues that held up the arched ceiling.

He could see perfectly...

"My eyes," he said, and sat up. "My eyes!" His hands—perfect, smooth-skinned hands—flew to his face in wonder. His skin was unmarred, his features his own as he remembered them. He looked down and saw his own form, naked and unscarred. The stone beneath him was pleasantly cool, and it was the pleasant sensation of temperature he felt, not pain.

For the first time in gods alone knew how long, there was no pain.

"Where am I?" he asked, knowing it was a foolish question but unable to help himself.

"You know where you are," the voice said, and its owner bounded into view. "But you can ask if it makes you feel better."

The creature was man-shaped, in much the same way that a scarecrow or a child's first doll might be. Ragged strips

of cloth hid its nakedness, and mingled with the ragged strips of flesh that hung from its rotting bones. One eye socket bulged with squirming maggots, which dripped and wriggled and fell onto the floor. The other eye was perfect and beautiful, bright blue in the gloom. Its chin was sharp, its features elongated, and its hair thin and long. It was male; the scraps of cloth failed to hide that much, though its voice was higher and thinner than one might expect. The figure moved with easy grace, though, and Ratcatcher could feel the sheer power the thing possessed. It was, he decided, consciously reining itself in, and for that he was thankful.

"I know better," he said cautiously, "than to ask who you are."

The thing nodded, smiling. "You've learned something, I see. Satisfy yourself with the knowledge that I am a messenger, and trouble yourself no more with questions. Now, get up, get up. You've rested long enough. Stand, Ratcatcher. You've business elsewhere."

Ratcatcher stood, slowly and awkwardly. He was expecting pain, he realized, expecting agony in the limbs that the Immaculate priest had shattered, or in his oft-abused eyes. But there was no pain, only strength and power that he'd been missing since a long-ago night in the rain when he'd first incurred his master's displeasure.

He laughed, then, and the sound chased its own echoes off the chamber walls. Experimentally, he tried a few mock thrusts and parries, his imaginary blade sharp and bright in his mind. Each move was smooth and effortless, the muscles of this body knowing every trick of the old. "Yes!" he exulted, and moved with more confidence. The guide watched him, bemused, and even applauded politely after one particularly convoluted mock passage.

Embarrassed, Ratcatcher stopped, turning his head and bringing his hands to his sides. "I apologize," he said. "You said we should be leaving..."

The creature nodded. "And so we should. But there was time for this, I think. It will help you choose, later."

"Later?" Ratcatcher echoed him.

"Later," it said, and led him from the chamber.



They walked for a long time, though Ratcatcher felt neither hunger nor thirst. The air, such as it was, was pleasantly cool on his bare skin, and he reveled in the sensation of each footfall on stone, or on soft earth, or on rusty and heated metal. They passed through corridors that had been built by industrious hands, and those that looked as if grubs had gnawed them out of the earth. Each was lit to a pleasant dimness, and each led gently but inevitably downwards.

Ratcatcher accepted this, even as he accepted that he was unlikely to tread the path upwards. Very little went up in this place. Very little at all.

Eventually, they came to a spit of weathered, gray stone that projected out over a vast, unlit abyss. Barely the width of a man, it arched impossibly over the blackness, and winds from the depths howled up and over it. Involuntarily, Ratcatcher shivered, and his guide smiled.

It walked to the base of the precipice, looked out over the edge, and then peered back at Ratcatcher where he stood, several paces away. "You're cold," he said.

"Yes."

"As well you should be. It's them you feel. If it were merely cold, you'd feel nothing. Not in this place, with you as you are. But they give you a different sort of chill, don't they?" The creature grinned, rotting gums bright red against its perfect teeth. "They're waiting for you down there, you know. Impatiently, but they are waiting."

"For me?" Ratcatcher found himself unable to look away from the pit. Was there light in the depths? Faintly, he thought he saw something glow, a faint white light like a band of stars cutting across the night sky. Fascinated, he looked on. The light had a shape, he was sure, one that he could almost discern. Just another moment, and he'd be able to see...

With a cry, he threw himself back from the precipice, his hands and feet scrabbling on the stone. The wind from the pit grew stronger, grew colder as he did so, and he found himself looking for handholds in the rock that he might cling to if the gusts might try to carry him away.

There were none. For a second, he felt unbridled panic, and then his guide's laughter brought him back to himself.

"Oh, you're a blessed one, Ratcatcher. You saw them, didn't you? That's not a boon they give to all their little ones." The thing's chuckles subsided into a rough cough, but amusement still glinted in its one good eye. "And you took it so *well*. They chose well with you."

Ratcatcher opened his mouth to reply, but the beast held up a hand to forestall him. "I know all of your questions, better than you do yourself. Permit me to speak for a bit, and to ask you. Then, perhaps, you'll know what you wish to know. Or need to. Perhaps even both. Is this agreeable?"

Slowly pulling himself to a squatting position, Ratcatcher nodded grimly. "It seems unlikely I have any other choice."

"Oh, there's always another choice," it replied, and gestured toward the pit. "But that, I suspect, is not what you meant. Am I correct? Excellent. Then let the interrogation commence. You, unless I have been misinformed, wish to know what is expected of you, and why you are here." A quick glance over its shoulder and a head cocked as if to listen gave ample evidence as to the source of its information.

"Yes." Ratcatcher bit his lip. "I should not be here. I should be..." He trailed off in a moment of wonder and pain.

"Dead? Yes. Well, you are dead." The creature's laugh was a dry wheeze. "But this is the wrong *kind* of death for you, is it not? That is what puzzles you."

"Yes," he said again. Gingerly, Ratcatcher knelt. He did not know why he did so. It simply seemed appropriate,



and it gratified him out of all proportion to see the being opposite him smile benignly at the sight. "I should be elsewhere. I've failed. Failed many times. I don't deserve—" he held up his hands and gazed at them "—this."

"And what is 'this?' Do you know all that is to befall you in this place? Do not be in too much of a hurry for pain, Ratcatcher." Its long tongue snaked out from between its lips nervously. "You think you should be punished, then? Punished for your failures? Whipped with scorpion stings and flayed with serpent's fangs? You poor, poor fool."

Ratcatcher lifted his head, uncomprehending. "I don't understand," he said. "When I failed the Prince of Shadows, I was punished. Surely I've failed those who dwell in darkness as well, and thus I shall be punished by them?"

Unexpectedly, Ratcatcher's guide grimaced. "Is that all you've learned? No wonder you're a poor tool," it said, and spat maggots onto the floor. "Do not presume to know the will of the dead gods, or to decide whether or not they are pleased with you. The servant who is lashed too often becomes timid, not obedient. The difference is important."

"I see."

"Perhaps you do. I do not think so. It does not matter, and will not, until you have servants of your own. If," it added hastily, "you ever do. That is not today's matter. What remains is the matter of your service. That is why you were cut down from the place of your torment and your soul brought here. You are here to be judged on your failures, and on your successes. Perhaps you will be required to make a sacrifice. Perhaps you will be rewarded. Perhaps you will be utterly destroyed. It is all the same to me. I am merely your guide and your tutor. The final decision lies with those in the pit."

"I am their servant."

"Yes, and they are well aware of this." It took his hand in its rotten one and pulled him to his feet. "Come with me."

It strode out to the base of the jutting stone tendril that leaned out over the dark. "You go," it whispered. "The place of judgment is at the very end. Go on."



† Numbly, Ratcatcher went. *Hold your eyes high*, he told himself. *Don't look down. Not again, anyway. Not yet.* He gingerly shuffled along the beam, his feet seeking purchase on the cold, slick stone.

‡ “A little further,” his guide called. There was no amusement in its voice anymore. Briefly, Ratcatcher considered the notion that if the guide had meant to do him harm, then surely he would have taken an opportunity before this one to do so. But the memory of games of sadism and pain played at the Prince of Shadows' knee reasserted themselves, and he found himself very nervous indeed. He took a slow step, and then another, and then suddenly his toes dangled over emptiness as he stood naked against the wind.

Below, the light grew stronger, its color shifting from white to bruised, angry violet. He could feel the pressure of it on his skin, and for an instant he thought it would lift him and carry him away. Then the light grew brighter, so bright he had to shut his eyes against it, and the force against his skin grew irresistible. He felt his feet slipping and screamed, then flung himself to the stone itself so that he might clutch it with both arms. A shuddering crack met his ears as he did so, and he knew that the stone promontory which he clung to so tightly was breaking. The light assaulted him, his closed eyes burning with the brightness of it, and then he was falling with an armful of cold stone and no expectation of ever reaching bottom.

*Forgive me, my prince*, he found himself thinking, and then he thought no more.

• • •  
He awoke, once again, to the ruined and smiling face of his guide. “Welcome back,” it said. “You kept them long in debate. Hours. Days, perhaps. Possibly years. Time here is not as it is elsewhere.”

Ratcatcher groaned. “I fell,” he said. “I remember falling....”

The guide nodded. “That you did. Though you did not fall in the same way a leaf falls from the tree. Rather, they



reached for you and brought you to them. They were curious, you see. Very curious."

He sat up, his head throbbing. "And?"

"And what?"

"Have I been judged?"

The thing looked at him quizzically. "Do you still exist?"

Ratcatcher looked down at his body. It remained as it had been before, still unmarred and pale, corded with muscle. "I would assume so, yes."

"Well then, you have been judged, and found at least partially worthy."

"I have?" He found it impossible to keep the relief out of his voice. It must have been on his face as well, for the guide smiled gruesomely back at him.

"You have. Hear the judgment of the dead gods. They say unto you, "You have served us poorly, and by doing so you have served us well."

Ratcatcher blinked, and bit his tongue to prevent himself from saying anything foolish. "How?" was all he could trust himself to ask. The messenger's face was twisted with pain, the voice issuing from its lips not its own.

"You have failed at every task you were set, and yet in your failures you have revealed our enemies' designs. You have laid your hand on the child who bears the hope of light, though you loosened your grasp upon him. You brought a blade to your master, but it was stolen by his most trusted servant—and yet this, too, is according to our wishes. You have fought with the chosen of the sun and you have lost, and yet by losing you have discovered the measure of your enemies. And you have shown us that we should hunt Raiton, whose sponsorship of the boy can no longer be denied. You have paid for all of these services, paid with your limbs, your flesh, your eyes. These we renew unto you. Go now, if you seek vengeance. Go with our blessing and make sacrifice of blood unto us. Make the rivers forget that water once flowed in their banks, and the sea paint the shores fresh crimson at every tide.

“Or, if you desire it, you may seek oblivion or torment, should either please you. We will grant this unto you, for your failures are our glory. Choose.”

Ratcatcher wet his lips nervously. To be reborn in his own body, to be given the mandate to slaughter—this was a reward! He could hear the screams now, smell the smoke and hot blood. No more fool’s errands for him, no more fetch and carry—he could render service and praise unto the dead gods without fear of being sent off to bring back a wandering priest or a whiny boy.

Oblivion would be sweet, he thought. Nothingness, an end to pain—perhaps when his labors were done. But now it was the hour of vengeance. He’d been made a fool of, humiliated, and beaten. Priests and boys and old women; they’d learn whom they’d trifled with. They’d learn before he killed them.

“I choose resurrection,” he said, in a voice shot through with excitement. “I choose blood and plunder to your greater glory, and I will make great sacrifices unto you when I am reborn.”

“So be it.” The guide splayed its hand against the ground and muttered a word which Ratcatcher could not hear, then stood back. Stairs sprouted from the ground, each hewed from black iron and blacker stone. A cruel, spiked railing grew out of the stairs, and the tines of the spikes were stained with rust.

“That way lies your path,” the messenger said, in its own voice once again. It sounded empty and hollow and sad, and for an instant Ratcatcher pitied it. “You will find a door at the stairway’s end, a door to a familiar place. It will be open for you. Your sword and armor will be waiting on the threshold, and there will be servants there to gird you for battle. Take up your former service, for this too is the will of the dead gods, and go to your prince. He is in need of you.”

Ratcatcher bowed, humbly. “I will do so, and with joy.” He set one foot on the stair and tested his weight upon it. It seemed solid enough, and he took another stride.

Something cold and clammy caught at his elbow. He turned, and the guide's hand had him. "And, Ratcatcher," it hissed, "Find Wren. Find Wren and kill him, and you will be richly rewarded."

He smiled. "Is this also a command from the dead gods?"

"No," the guide said. "This is my wish, and in this, they humor me."

"And who are you that the dead gods show you such favor?"

The guide bowed, mockingly. "I am called Idli. Give Wren my regards before you kill him. I'll do so afterwards."

"I understand," Ratcatcher said. "Count the hours until I send you his soul." And with that, he strode up into the darkness.

Idli watched him go with mild interest. The judgment had surprised him, as had the revelation of the dead gods' uses for the man. But now he seemed renewed. Transformed. Possibly even effectual.

He decided, after a moment's reflection, that he would have felt sorry for Eliezer Wren, if it were in his nature to feel sorry for anyone or anything at all. "I'll see you again, priest," he whispered to the air. "I'll see you very soon."





## Chapter Five

Yushuv left an hour before dawn. Dace was sleeping soundly under a pile of furs and blankets on the floor of the tent they shared, and Yushuv spared him a last, fond look before gently pushing the tent flap aside and stepping out into the cold night.

Winter had not yet arrived, but a cold wind through the trees served as a harbinger. Tattered brown leaves rattled on the branches that vainly clung to them, and more swirled along the ground with every gust and eddy. The stars were still bright in the heavens, peeking down through the lattice of bare boughs, and the full moon sat, sullen and yellow, just above the horizon. The camp's firepit sat a few feet from the tent mouth, its contents nothing but cold ashes. Animal hides hung, stretched, on a drying rack, and their faint but pungent aroma hung over the clearing. Trophies of war—plundered charms, pieces of armor, broken weapons—dangled from other branches, and a neat pile of bones marked the detritus of the last night's dinner.

Yushuv's bow and quiver lay resting on a flat stone next to the tent, alongside his knife and pack. Gingerly, he reached out for them, not daring to make a sound. The knife was cold and heavy in his hands, and he shoved it into his belt hurriedly. The pack, which he'd carefully stuffed with jerky, a blanket, and other traveling essentials, rested lightly on his



back, the tightness of the straps reminding him of how much he'd grown in even the short time he'd been here. His bow, now marked with thin strips of hide from all the types of prey he'd hunted down, he took last, the quiver fitting neatly against his pack.

A sudden urge took him, and he knelt down by the firepit. With two fingers, he dug deep into the ashes, then traced a series of lines down his arm and across his face. Then, confident that Dace was still sleeping, he turned his back on the encampment and headed east at an easy lope.

Dace would be able to catch him, he knew, but only if Dace knew which direction he'd gone in. That's why he'd spent the day laboriously preparing a false trail which led almost due west, under the guise of hunting. In truth he'd been able to bring down a stag almost immediately, and had stashed the carcass in a tree while he'd laid down the false trail. Dace, he hoped, would never suspect a thing.

Confident in his deception, he put his head down and ran.



"Going somewhere, Yushuv?"

Yushuv stopped and looked up. She was waiting for him, as he'd known she would be, and he was simply thankful she'd waiting until he'd gotten this far before stopping him. Two full hours had passed since he'd left the encampment, and he'd covered a fair bit of distance.

Enough distance, at least, that Dace probably wasn't within earshot.

A female figure swung down from the branch she'd been perched on and landed lightly on the path in front of him. She was tall and lithe, with intricate tattoos down her arms and legs. Her face was sharp and angular, and had more than a hint of the beast in it. Her feet were bare, as was much of her legs and arms, and a brace of javelins were strapped to her back.

It was his other teacher, Lilith. She was dressed, Yushuv realized, for hunting.

"Nothing to say?" Lilith took a step forward and, involuntarily, Yushuv took a step back. Almost involun-

tarily, his hand went for his knife, and he had to forcibly restrain himself. A knife in hand wasn't going to help him, not against her.

"Tell me, why are you in such a hurry to leave? And such bold markings." Faster than he could react, she reached out and traced a line along his arm. A streak of gray marked her fingertip, which she held up wonderingly to the light. "Ashes. Whom are you going to kill? Those are hunter's marks you have on, you know."

"You know why I'm leaving," he said.

She nodded. "I do. But I didn't know if you did. I was wondering if you'd tell me what you think your reasons are. If they're good enough, I won't sling you over my shoulder and carry you back to Dace."

Yushuv adjusted his posture, easing ever-so-slightly into a defensive stance that she herself had taught him. A smile quirked at the corner of her mouth when she saw this, the expression of a teacher proud of her pupil. "I don't think I'm as easy to carry off as I once was."

Lilith threw back her head and laughed, a sound that to Yushuv's ears was eerily close to a howl. "Really! Good, that means you learned something from me after all. Well, you almost sound as if you were challenging me to try." Suddenly she stopped laughing, and her face was a mask of serious intent once again. "But I asked you a question. Why are you leaving?"

Yushuv tensed for a second, then relaxed and sat down in the middle of the path. Carefully, he reached into his pack and pulled out a strip of jerky. "It's simple, really. Will you share breakfast with me while I explain?"

The woman grinned. "I brought my own," she said, and pointed to a brace of skinned rabbits hanging from a nearby tree. "But you go ahead and eat yours. I'll listen." So saying, she walked over to where the rabbits hung and cut one free. A few drops of blood fell from the corpse as she shifted it to her other hand, then she turned and sat on the path cross-legged, facing Yushuv. "Go ahead," she said, and took a bite of the rabbit. There was an audible crunch, and she smiled bloodily.

Yushuv blinked, once, then tore a strip of his jerky off with his teeth and began to chew. "The problem is," he said between bites, "that Dace is honorable. He said he'd been sent to find me and to teach me, and he did that. But I don't think he's ready to let me go."

Lilith nodded. "He went looking for you because I told him to. I'd gotten a number of signs—an emissary from a coalition of spirits, for one thing, very insistent—that I should send him to you. Well, not to you precisely, since I had no idea who you were, but," she waved aimlessly, "out there, to look for the one who'd been spoken of. Which turned out to be you. And you're right." She paused to lick her fingers, where were stained red. "He's got another twenty years' worth of things to teach you before he considers you possibly ready to go off on your own. And even then he'd tag along, just to make sure you didn't waste any of his teaching on street brawls or something else suitably unworthy."

Despite himself, Yushuv chuckled. "That's Dace, yes. He'd never let me go. All for the best reasons, of course; and he'd certainly be right about some of them. But not about me staying. It's time to go."

"So you've said. But all you've told me is that it was time to go because Dace wouldn't let you go. That's hardly a good reason to sneak off in the middle of the night."

Yushuv swallowed a mouthful of dried venison. "I know. It's hard to explain. I just know that it's time. It's not that Dace hasn't been a good teacher, or that you haven't, either. It's just that, well, it's time."

"You're not telling me something," Lilith announced, and delicately spat a bone onto the ground. "Dace didn't tell you how to lie."

"He's not very good at it himself."

"No, he's not. But that's beside the point."

"You're right. But he also didn't teach me how to explain this sort of thing."

She grinned determinedly. "Try. As a favor to your other teacher, try."





Yushuv licked his lips, nervously. "All right. But I don't think it will make you happy. Three weeks ago, I started having dreams."

"Dreams?" Lilith quirked an eyebrow inquisitively. "What sort of dreams?"

"Death dreams," he said simply. "Qut Toloc. The temple there. Bodies in the streets. I can still remember the flies, you know. They were so loud. That was the first week of dreams."

He leaned forward, voice low. "Then the dreams started changing. It wasn't just places I'd been, or people I knew. There were cities I'd never seen, and everyone in them was dead or dying. There was fire everywhere. Buildings falling down. Like what Dace and I saw in that city in the crater, but worse, because these cities had been alive."

"And you have the sense that somehow it's all your fault? That if you don't go, this will somehow happen?" Lilith leaned back. "We've all had those dreams, Yushuv. It comes with the Exaltation. It's a great deal of power, and not every one of us—particularly not every one of the sun-chosen—has used it wisely."

"You don't understand," Yushuv said quietly. "It wasn't that I failed to prevent all that by not going. It was that I caused it all by staying. The one thing alive in all those dreams was me."

"Ah."

He nodded. "I was much older, but it was me. There was a sense that you had been with me, and Dace, but that you were gone. And everything I was doing was because of that. I had a sword, too, though I don't remember much about it. I suppose it must have been important, though."

"And you feel that if you stayed, you'd learn enough to make all this come to pass?" Lilith's voice was quiet now, nearly drowned out by the myriad forest sounds.

"Something like that. So I'm leaving. I figure I'll find the man who killed my family and either kill him or die trying. Maybe I'll find that priest. Or I'll go hunting Fair Folk. There's a lot out there."

Lilith frowned. She tapped the ground twice with visible impatience, and shook her head. "That's not it. It's a good story, Yushuv, but that's not it. You're too smart to run off just to get yourself killed. And if you wanted to die, you would have done it already. What's really going on?"

Yushuv finished the last of his breakfast and stood. "All of that is true, actually. I promise. But there was one more dream I haven't told you about. It was a message."

"A message?"

He nodded. "From the Unconquered Sun. He told me that I have to go meet a man, the man who's carrying the sword from my dream. I don't know who he is or where he is now, but I know what he looks like, and I know pretty much where I have to go." He shrugged. "The rest is up to me. Or fate. Or the man carrying the sword."

Lilith stood, and stepped off the path. "I think you're mistaken, but I'm not going to stop you. You want to go, and I'm not going to spend the energy that it would take to keep you. Besides, I don't think you'd learn a damn thing anymore anyway." She gestured in the direction Yushuv had been running. "There's your path. Go."

"Goodbye," he said, and stopped. He turned, and looked intently into the seemingly empty forest to his right. "Goodbye," he said again, then started to walk off.

"Wait," Lilith said. "Before you go." She spat into her palm, and Yushuv stopped. "Something for you," she explained, and dipped a finger still red with the rabbit's blood into her hand. Then, she drew a single line across Yushuv's brow, and two more underneath each of his eyes. The red of the blood made a sharp contrast to the gray of the ash.

"For the hunter," she said. "Now go."

"Thank you," he replied. "For everything." Then, with a lighter heart, he ran.

Lilith watched him go, until he crested a sharp ridge that rose up out of the forest floor and vanished from sight. "You can come out now," she called without turning. "He's gone."



A section of the forest floor exploded upwards, leaves flying everywhere. A second later, Dace stood there, shaking bits of leaf matter and forest mold out of his greaves. "Took you long enough," he grumbled. "I had more grubs crawling on me than a dead man."

"Think of it as practice," Lilith said sweetly. "You heard it all?"

Dace shook his head. "I did. But I don't like it."

"Neither do I. But you can't keep him."

"He's not ready!" Dace stamped his foot for emphasis, and a flock of birds rose up out of the treetops in alarm. "The boy barely knows anything. If the Unconquered Sun is sending him out into the world, it's for no reason I can see. Damn it, I feel helpless."

"You are helpless," Lilith reminded him. "But you know he has to go. Otherwise, you would have tried to stop him yourself."

Dace looked down, refusing to meet her eyes. "I know. And you know. But I still smell disaster in all of this."

"Possibly. But I smell something else, too."

"What?" He looked up, startled.

"Breakfast. Do you want your rabbit cooked, or will you eat it sensibly, raw?"

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Some distance away, Yushuv heard a faint sound that might have been laughter. He turned and looked back, but all he saw was trees preparing themselves for winter's onslaught. He frowned, then inspiration struck him. He strung his bow, the nocked an arrow.

"Burn," he whispered to the shaft, one that Dace had made for him shortly after they'd first arrived at Lilith's camp. "Burn." He drew, aimed at a point in the gray sky near where the sun should be, and released.

Halfway up, the arrow cascaded into a flare of golden light, arcing across the heavens. It rose upward, going ever higher, until it looked like the clouds swallowed it. There

was a muffled blast, and then the light from behind the clouds faded.

Yushuv smiled, and unstrung his bow. *That, he decided, was a much more fitting goodbye, and proof to Dace that he might have learned something after all.* Still smiling, he turned and once again ran east, but his footsteps were lighter than they had been.





## Chapter Six

There were four hundred steps that led to an open door, and a single dim torch beyond it.

Ratcatcher found himself counting as he ascended into the dark, his left hand on the thorny rail beside him. Occasionally a barbed hook would catch in his flesh, but it would not tear, nor did he bleed. At first he wondered at this, then curiosity took over and he deliberately began to seek out the most jagged, vicious edges he could find. None would so much as scratch him, and he laughed. Even the pain this inflicted was slight, just a vague reminder that in a sane world, such wounds should render him gasping with agony.

"I wonder if this will hold true in the lands above," he asked himself, and looked at his hand again. Probably not, he decided, but he'd do well to test it before risking injury. Before presenting himself to the prince, he'd find some quiet chamber and a knife, and test its edge on his flesh. If it cut him, then he'd be cautious in his dealings. If it didn't, well, then perhaps the prince would learn a few lessons himself the next time he tried to exact some discipline.

He recognized the doorway, of course. It was the entrance to the Prince of Shadows' dungeons, a route he'd taken many times before. He did not recall there being quite so many stairs, but he shrugged this inconsistency off



after a moment. Things down here *changed*. That was the only constant; that and shadow.

The doorway itself was open, the door still on its hinges. The lintel was surmounted with sigils and runes, all glowing a soft, poisonous green. Ratcatcher read them with mild interest. They were warnings and guardians, an announcement of the prince's curse on any who'd dare trespass on his domain. There were threats of torment as well, detailed scripts of vengeance to be enacted, and a few other less interesting notations.

"Unusual," Ratcatcher said, and reached up with a bare hand to caress the runes. They snapped and crackled at his touch, and small goutts of energy splashed over his fingers. He felt an unpleasant warmth, but nothing else, and abruptly the glow faded. The signs were still there, but dull and dark. He sensed that they still had power, but instead of warning they would now ambush. Sooner or later something would come crawling up out of the dark, see the open doorway, and attempt to shamle through. Then the runes would strike, and the twisted remains of whatever made the attempt would serve as a better warning than any message the prince had left behind.

The thought made him smile, and he stepped through the door.

As he did so, a tremendous roar rose up behind him. He turned, hands instinctively curling into fists, but nothing was pursuing him. Instead, the stairs behind him were dropping away, growing jagged cracks and crumbling to dust even as he watched. Within seconds, nothing lay beyond the doorway save gloom, and the faint whisper of a cold wind somewhere off in the distance.

The meaning of this was clear, he thought. There was no turning back. With one hand he reached out for the heavy door, and swung it silently on its hinges. It slammed shut with a sound like a hammer on armor and stayed shut. After a moment's search in the dim light, Ratcatcher found the scarred and heavy bar that should lay across the door, and hefted it. It was lighter than he remembered, or

perhaps he was stronger. In either case, it slipped easily into the brackets made for it, and he slid it across the post. The stairs were gone and the sigils still waited, but something still might climb up out of the Labyrinth to pound on the prince's door, and where magic might fail honest timber and iron might still prevail on occasion.

Besides, he mused, it's always better to have a locked door at one's back. It tended to remove the temptation to retreat.

And with temptation thus excised, he strode forward in search of his armor and sword, and if the dead gods were kind, some boots as well.

The armor was waiting for him in the next chamber, a small room graced with a low stone table and nothing more. Two torches burned in brackets, filling the room with more smoke than light, and the doorways were so low that Ratcatcher had to stoop to enter.

The armor itself was laid out on the table, along with some leggings, a soft white shirt of some unknown fabric, and thick wool socks. There were also, he noted with relief, black leather boots adorned with trceries of silver. His adder-bladed sword lay to the armor's left, and a small round shield with a single gleaming spike in its boss sat at the foot of the table.

"This is new," Ratcatcher mumbled, and lifted the shield. It was made from heavy wood banded with steel, and the entire thing was lacquered over in black. The spike in the center looked to be pure silver, its point sharp enough to punch through most armor. He slipped his hand inside the leather straps, and was unsurprised to find that the grip fit him perfectly. Clearly, it had been made for him, and left for him to find. But by whom? The prince? The dead gods? The mysterious Idli?

There was a scraping sound on the stone behind him, and he turned to face it, shield first. His right hand reached back and closed around the grip of his sword, and as it flashed into his hand he knew that it was indeed *his* sword. Something like joy flooded through him, and he brought the blade up over his head into a striking position, the asp's head



pointed directly at whatever lurked beyond the torchlight. "Show yourself," he commanded, and took a step forward.

Two shapes came tumbling through the doorway, short and squat and dressed in shapeless gray robes. They were men, Ratcatcher realized after a moment, though men with pale skin and bulging eyes from years spent underground. They made no move to attack. Rather, they prostrated themselves before him, softly cooing his name in thick, wet voices. Momentarily confused, he took a step back. "Who are you?" he asked, his swordpoint never wavering.

The one on the left looked up, even as his companion continued his obeisance. "We are nothing," he said. "We are servants." Without waiting for a response, he pressed his face to the stone again.

Mildly revolted, Ratcatcher prodded the other with the flat of his sword. The servant looked up, horrified, and scuttled backwards in a whirlwind of pudgy feet and hands. Ratcatcher poked him again. "You. Slave. What is your name?"

Bulging, bloodshot eyes met Ratcatcher's. Fat, blubbery lips quivered. A thin line of drool spilled from one corner of the soft mouth. "I... we have no names, Lord Ratcatcher. We were told to forget them. We are merely here to serve." The last was a pleading whimper, a whine that rose in pitch until Ratcatcher found himself gritting his teeth.

"We have something in common, then," he said, more to cut off the whining than to admit any commonality with these pathetic specimens.

"You are here to serve me? Then tell me who sent you."

"Pelesh the Exchequer," said the first of the two, who by now had ceased his devotions. "He told us to wait here against your return, and to guard your armor against any who might seek to seize it. We have been waiting for you."

"We repaired your armor as well," the second chimed in. "Oh yes, made it better. Healed the gashes and cuts, reweave the straps, polished the buckles. Made the shield, too, down here in the dark. We have been," and there was a certain satisfaction in his voice, "*devoted.*"





"Ah," Ratcatcher said, his mind racing. Pelesh was the last man he expected to succor him or cherish his memory. The last time the two had shared time under the prince's roof, Pelesh had tried to have him poisoned, and Ratcatcher tended to look dimly on that sort of thing. This, then, was more than a little bit of a surprise. "Take me to Pelesh, then. He and I have some matters to discuss."

The two servants shrieked in horror, their pudgy hands waving in desperate gestures of denial. "No, no, no, we cannot do that," the first said. "You are not properly dressed," the second added, and the first nodded in almost comical agreement. "We cannot let you go into the citadel unclothed. It would be a most grievous insult to the prince, yes, and to Pelesh as well."

"And surely you would not slight our service by refusing to wear what we have tended for you so carefully, for so long." The two nodded back and forth and babbled, so much so that Ratcatcher could not tell which was speaking.

"Enough!" he said, and cast the shield aside so he could grip his sword with two hands. He lowered the blade so that it chucked the servant on the left under the chin. The fat man shuddered, but did not move.

Ratcatcher chuckled. "Excellent. You can serve after all, it seems. Very well, then. Garb me, then lead me to Pelesh. Rest assured, your labors will be rewarded."

The one on the right bobbed his head vigorously, then looked over at the blade against his partner's throat and swallowed. "We will dress you, yes Lord Ratcatcher. We will make you look so fine, so noble..." The blade flicked from his friend's throat to his own, and suddenly the bobbing and gushing ceased.

"And then Pelesh?" Ratcatcher asked.

"Dressing first. Pelesh later," the first servant said, and Ratcatcher could have sworn he heard the man suppress a chuckle.

The flabby little creatures had done a marvelous job, Ratcatcher had to admit. The armor fit him better than it

ever had before, the boots were supple and comfortable, and the shield (once one of the servants had cooingly dusted it off) rested lightly on his arm, almost weightless. They fussed and fidgeted over him, tightening an armor strap here and flicking away an imaginary dust fleck there. Ratcatcher benignly allowed them to do this, basking in their attention even if the touch of their soft, cool fingers was disquieting.

At last, all that remained was the helmet. It sat on the table, gleaming in the reddish torchlight. Ratcatcher had considered carrying it tucked under one arm, but the shield made that impractical. Instead, with a shake of his head, he reached for it.

"Lord Ratcatcher, no!" It was the first of the servants again. Ratcatcher had begun to think of him as "Mold," and his partner as "Mushroom," and their nervous antics made him think of court eunuchs he'd known in years past. "You mustn't put on your own helm. Besides, you are not ready for it." The last was stated firmly, so firmly that Ratcatcher felt his eyebrow raise involuntarily.

"I'm not?" he said pleasantly? "And why do you say that?"

"You're missing something," said Mushroom, who without another word scuttled off through the doorway.

Ratcatcher watched him go. Mold cowered before him, hands twitching in nervousness.

"Where did he go?" Ratcatcher demanded.

"To fetch, Lord Ratcatcher," was the reply. "To fetch what is yours."

Further discussion was cut off by Mushroom's return, a cloth-wrapped bundle gripped tightly in his soft hands. He was smiling broadly, which gave him an uncanny resemblance to a toad, and waddled forward as fast as he could. "This is yours, Lord Ratcatcher," he said, thrusting the package forward. "This we made for you."

Hesitantly, Ratcatcher set down his sword and took the bundle. "Why was it not here with the rest of my gear, then?" His fingers worked at the clever knots that held the cloth in place, and they parted.



“We were afraid,” whined Mold piteously. “Afraid others would see it and covet it.”

Ratcatcher looked up for an instant. “More so than the sword and armor?”

Mushroom and Mold nodded in unison. “Oh, yes, yes.” Ratcatcher opened his mouth to retort, but then the last of the shabby cloth fell away, and a weight of cold metal sat in his gauntleted hands.

“It’s marvelous,” Ratcatcher said softly, and meant what he said. What he held was a silvery half-mask, polished smooth and inlaid with tears of ruby and jet. The features of the mask were his, but subtly altered. They were fiercer, less human, and seeing them, Ratcatcher felt his lips curve back into a smile. “You made this?”

Mold nodded emphatically. “Oh yes. For you, Lord Ratcatcher, all for you. Pelesh gave us the metal, gave us the old mask, but we made it better. We made it for you.”

Ratcatcher nodded, then dropped the mask and grasped the squirming little man by the throat. “This is deathmetal, you little worm. Pelesh wouldn’t part with tin for the likes of me, let alone this. Who gave you this? Where did it come from?”

The fat creature gasped and choked, his soft fists beating ineffectually at Ratcatcher’s gauntlet as he was hoisted off the ground. Mushroom began wailing, and Ratcatcher backhand him across the chamber. “Answers! I want answers, now!”

“We tell! We tell! Only stop the hurting, Lord Ratcatcher! Please!” Mold’s face was red, shading to purple, and his efforts to free himself were growing more and more feeble. “Please,” he repeated, softly.

“Damnation,” Ratcatcher said, and dropped him to the floor. “Tell me. Quickly. Or next time I see if you have a neck to snap under all that fat.”

The fat man prostrated himself once again. “Great Lord Ratcatcher, you are merciful. You will understand. You will understand that Pelesh is not our only master, but that all we do is for you, yes, for you!”

Ratcatcher prodded him with a boot. "Who?"

By way of a reply, Mold lifted his head and pointed fearfully in the direction from which Ratcatcher had come. "Down there," he said. "Pelesh doesn't know *that*, but you do. Now please, Lord Ratcatcher, show mercy?"

Nodding, Ratcatcher stooped to pick up the mask. "I see," he said. "Mercy." Mushroom crawled back into the room, one foot twisted at an odd angle, and Ratcatcher spared him a half second's glance. "Arm me, then." He placed the mask on his face and reached for his helm.

"Oh, yes, lord. You are merciful, so merciful!" The two hefted the helmet and bade him kneel, which he did. With infinite care they placed the casque on his head, cooing and chirping at the nightmare visage he now presented. Then one brought his sword to him, the other his shield. He took both, sheathing the blade and strapping the shield to his left arm. He was, he decided, ready.

"Take me to Pelesh now," he said, and the sound issued forth from his helmet like a big cat's growl.

The two glanced at each other fearfully. Hesitantly, slowly, Mushroom spoke. "Great lord, we cannot do that now. Pelesh is gone, gone with the prince. They rode out many days ago, leaving us and other servants behind. Do not hurt us! We can lead you to them, we promise!"

A red haze crept over Ratcatcher's vision, and he bit his lip in order to stave off the frenzy he felt coming. Salty blood filled his mouth, and a distant part of his brain noted that he was not, in fact, invulnerable any longer. Good to know, he thought, not that either of these two could hurt him. Blinking, shuddering, he forced the rage back. "They've gone?" he said. "Where?"

"We can show you the path, if you let us. We have a horse for you, yes, something very much like a horse. You will like it. Let us journey with you, and we will bring you to the prince."

Ratcatcher considered. If the prince was indeed gone, then any help in finding him would be welcome. On the other



hand, a pair of guides he felt compelled to strangle within five minutes of setting out would do him little good. He thought for a moment, then stared down at the two little men.

“You may guide me,” he said. “But you will guide me in silence, unless I give you leave to speak.” An image flashed through his mind, that of the prince forbidding him to voice utterance, and he smiled grimly at the reminiscence. He’d been unable to restrain himself, and he’d been punished. He suspected these two would do no better than he.

“Oh, thank you! Thank you!” They bowed and scraped, one going so far as to kiss the toe of his boot. With a short kick, Ratcatcher flung him off.

“Go. Pack our provisions. Prepare for the journey, and meet me in the courtyard...” His voice trailed off, as he realized he had no idea what time, or indeed what season or year it was.

“Come fetch me when all is ready. We’ll spend the day here, and then leave at sunset.”

“Yes, Lord Ratcatcher,” said Mold. “Where shall we find you when all is prepared?”

“The chamber of the orrery,” Ratcatcher heard himself say, and strode off toward the stairs that led into the citadel proper. Behind him, the two plump little figures clucked and worried, and then scampered off after him.



# Chapter Seven



The camp was set in a dry valley between two low hills, and offered as much luxury as the country north and east of Reddust could provide. Pelesh had fretted long and loudly over the possibility that they had set up camp in a flood gully, and pointed hysterically to the heavens on no fewer than six occasions to point out clouds scudding low overhead.

The Prince of Shadows had found this amusing for a little while, and let Pelesh ramble on for a good hour before finally silencing the Exchequer with a single gesture.

Now, Pelesh sat at the top of one of those hills, ostensibly keeping watch against the return of the men the prince had sent out, and nervously glancing behind him as if silently expecting a wall of water any minute. This, too, the prince found irritating, but it simply wasn't worth the effort to do anything about it. Instead, he sat in the center of his camp, watching the hustle and bustle around him, and waited for results.

The camp itself was large enough to be mistaken for a small caravan. The prince had brought forty servants with him, equally divided between the living and the dead, and with them they had pack animals, a few small wagons, riding beasts and spare mounts. The wagons and pack horses were loaded with tents, foodstuffs, wine, and weapons, along with some of the prince's monies, and trade goods that Pelesh had insisted on bringing along.



The prince had not wanted to bring the wagons. He'd wanted to ride out with a few companions, set a few towns to the sword, and ride whither the spirit moved him. That seemed, he thought, the best way to reenergize himself, and that was what he'd thought Pelesh intended.

Pelesh, however, had argued strenuously for the wagons, and noted that without them, the prince would not be able to travel in the luxury which he preferred.

Pelesh was doing this more often, the prince realized with a start. Arguing with the prince, telling him what he really wanted, and worst of all, making *suggestions*. The prince hated suggestions. As far as he was concerned, they were a sign of cowardice, of a spirit that would not stand by its own convictions. He resolved to have a little talk with Pelesh when the man came down from the hill.

Around him, the camp lay sprawled across the valley. Guards trudged to and from positions on the heights, though they'd not been so much as threatened during the entire long journey. A makeshift blacksmith's station had been set up, and a burly slave wearing a leather apron and nothing more ran a nicked blade along a whetstone. The singing of metal on stone filled the air, while the sword's owner stood nearby and watched with visible impatience. A younger slave tended to the horses and horse-like things that the prince and his servants rode, feeding and watering them while warriors shouted encouragement, or laughed when one of the steeds nipped at her fingers. A cookfire blazed at the north end of the encampment, near the mouth of the would be valley, and the prince's personal chef had set up rough tables on which to work beside it. The wagons sat, their wheels blocked, at the camp's south end, and from where he sat, the prince could see sentries' legs dangling from the wagons' mouths as they watched for movement on the horizon.

It was, the prince decided, supremely boring. He roused himself and stood, then shooed away the slave who came to assist him.

The thought struck him that he didn't used to need slaves like that when he rode out. Perhaps he didn't need them still.

With easy steps, he climbed the hill on which Pelesh sat. He noted with some satisfaction that the man had seen him coming, and did not seem pleased at the prospect. Good, the prince decided. It was time Pelesh felt fear again.

The hill itself was nothing much, a low dome of red dirt and redder stone that jutted from the countryside. Some scrub plants clung to it determinedly, grasses and shrubs with the occasional optimistic sapling, but nothing more. There were burrows of small crawling things here, and the prince had heard big predators roaring in the distance at night, but now the only animal life he heard was a hawk, crying out as it circled overhead.

"My prince." Pelesh bowed deeply as the prince reached the crest of the hill. "You honor me with your presence."

"No," the prince corrected. "I terrify you, and you sincerely wish I were back in the camp. But the lie is of no concern, at least not at this moment." He looked the Exchequer up and down. The man seemed to have aged another decade since the journey had begun, no small feat for a man who'd been old when he'd first entered the prince's service. He wore nondescript clothes of brown and tan and a sad, small hat. His hands constantly brushed the reddish dust from his sleeves and trews, but ineffectually, and once the cook had caught him trying to steal water in which to wash his garments.

Pelesh flushed, and shuffled his feet. "As you say, my prince. How can I assist you?"

"In many ways, my trusted exchequer, in many ways." The prince yawned expansively, and Pelesh took an involuntary step back. "For one thing, when we finish here you can go down into the camp and decide what we really need from those damned wagons of yours. Keep that and burn the rest. I don't care how much it costs. Then, decide if any of the slaves are expendable, or likely to be unable to keep up. If so, kill them as well."

"My prince?"

"You heard me. This has turned into an old woman's holiday, not a hunting expedition. That ends now."





Pelesh shuddered, and cast his eyes at the ground." "As you say, my prince."

"That," said the prince, "is how it should be." He shaded his eyes against the late afternoon sun and gazed out over the endless rolling hills. "Any word from the men I sent out this morning to find your missing friend?"

"None, my liege." He pointed to the north. "That is the direction they rode off in, an hour before sunrise. It seemed, according to the signs and entrails, the most likely route to take. You could see their trail for several hours afterward, but there's been no word from them since." He shrugged slightly. "I am unsurprised, I confess. This is unkind and trackless territory, and we're looking for one man. We don't even know which face he wears any longer."

"Oh, they'll know him when they find him," the prince replied confidently. "All they have to do is follow the carrion birds."

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The pillar of flame from the first wagon reached higher than the surrounding hills, which gave the prince no small amount of satisfaction. He stood on the hillside, watching the destruction at a small remove, and a small smile creased his lips.

His men, the ones he wanted with him, were attacking the excess baggage with a will. There was a tremendous crash, and then a cheer as the second wagon was tipped over. Men swarmed over it with axes, hacking at it and reducing it to firewood. A cask of wine sat near the fire, its top bashed and half its contents on the ground. Nearby, the prince's cleaver-wielding chef was being forcibly restrained by two men as three others chopped his work tables to kindling.

One of the men glanced up at the prince, who met his eyes and nodded. His knife came out, and then the chef fell to the ground with a gout of hot blood jetting from his throat. Someone threw his body on the fire, and the smells of scorched meat and bubbling fat filled the air.

Pelesh ran here and there through the carnage, directing the men here and restraining them there. Not *all* of the foodstuffs should be immolated, he could hear the little man trying to explain, and there wasn't a need to burn *all* of the wood just yet. Oddly enough, the men seemed to listen.

The prince watched, amused. Pelesh was scared again, and that was a good thing. It made him more efficient, and the prince valued efficiency in his servants.

Idly, he wondered if the pillar of flame rising from the camp would attract any unwanted attention. *Let it come*, he decided. There was nothing in this wasteland that frightened him.

The sound of riders to the north suddenly caught his attention. He strode up to the top of the hill to get a better look, and even as he did so he noted with satisfaction that his men had left off plundering their own supplies to seal off both ends of the valley.

There were three riders, not the six the prince had set out, and they clung to their exhausted horses in obvious terror. Even as the prince watched, the hindmost steed stumbled and fell, throwing its rider to the ground. It tried to rise, whinnying piteously, but it was obvious that one of its forelegs was broken, and it sank back down to the ground. The rider, for his part, staggered to his feet and ran for all he was worth. He was, the prince noted, shrieking, and neither of the other two riders slowed or made any effort to return for him.

They reined up just in front of the camp's defensive perimeter, and now the prince could see that they were in fact his men, albeit shaken, pale and terrified. The ranks parted to let them through, and they dismounted with obvious relief. Pelesh sprinted over to them, demanding to know what had happened.

Out in the dark, there was another scream. The prince drifted forward along the line of the hilltop, his eyes searching the darkness until he once again located the fallen horse.

Something was standing over it, something huge and hungry. It was a black shape against the blackness, easily



the size of the horse it was feeding upon. The prince saw it tear great hunks of flesh out of the downed stallion's belly, and then it lifted its muzzle to the skies and howled.

In the camp, the reaction was immediate. The two riders bolted for the safety for the fireside, their lathered horses following them. The men in the line shifted uneasily, making signs against the darkness or looking to the prince for guidance. Pelesh, for his part, considered the situation, and then climbed into the one remaining wagon.

The shape was moving now, the prince saw, running easily and swiftly across the landscape. The downed horse's rider was perhaps a hundred yards outside the firelight now, the warriors holding the line shouting encouragement to him as he stumbled forward.

The prince put the doomed man's chances for survival at a hundred to one.

The black shape swept forward through the darkness, howling again. The man heard it and redoubled his speed. He was bleeding, the prince could see now. A makeshift bandage was tied crudely on his left arm, and even from his vantage point the prince could see the seeping red stains that had soaked it through.

He'd heard the howling, that much was obvious, and his response was to drop his sword in an effort to make more speed. The prince tsked. It still wouldn't be enough, he decided, and the sword might have lent the man's death some dignity.

Fifty yards outside the firelight now, barely forty from the line. Hope streaked across the man's features as he put on a final burst of speed. The shouting from the men in the line rose to a crescendo as he streaked forward.

Inevitably, the creature came out of the dark. It was wolf-like, in much the same way a lioness is akin to a small and pampered housecat. Fresh blood stained its muzzle and fur, and its eyes gleamed bright, angry red. One eye, the prince could see, was ringed around with scars, and he silently commended the bravery of anyone who got close enough to inflict that sort of wound.



The shouts of encouragement stopped. The beast leapt forward, and in three bounds it was on its prey. There was a shriek, a short one, and then the man's upper torso flew one way while his lower was going another, and a spray of blood and offal filled the air.

There was a second's shocked silence, then the men edged forward. The wolf, if wolf it was, looked back at them.

"Come between me and my prey and you'll all be next," it said, thickly but unmistakably. A shudder ran through the prince's troops. Sensing the indecisiveness, the wolf-thing bared its fangs in a grin and trotted closer. The front of the line bowed back away from him.

This, the prince decided, was quite enough. Summoning the power to him, he leapt into the air. His cloak of Essence flared out behind him, leaving a trail like an ill-omened comet behind him as he descended.

He landed before the line, between his men and the beast. Violet lightning slithered around him, and marked his footfalls as he strode forward.

"These men are mine," he said softly. "Do not presume to claim them in my presence."

The wolf-thing laughed. "Ah, a child of the Abyss. I would not dream of discomfiting so noble an ally. This creature, then" it said, and pointed with one gory paw to the torn cadaver, "was yours?"

"Was, yes, and will be again. They serve me in death as they served me in life. Some of them, in any case."

The wolf nodded. "I see. You should take better care of your things, child of shadow. I found six playing at being Sijanese in the hills north of here, and the stink of new death was on them. They shouldn't have wandered so far."

"They were about my business, dog," the prince replied, and was rewarded with a bristling of the thing's fur. "Do not presume to tell me what that business is."

"I'm no man's dog, and no Abyssal's either," the thing growled, its hackles raised. "Don't tempt fate too often, small one. I've still room in my belly."

“You’d do better to find a meal you could stomach better. What is your name, spirit, and what is your business here?”

“My business is hunting, and my name is mine to give.”

With a snarl, it hurled itself at the prince, who nimbly sidestepped and swatted the beast on its haunches. It gave a howl to freeze the blood and skidded to a halt, and the prince’s men rushed forward to engage it. “Fools!” it roared, “Come to your destruction!” One jabbed at it with a spear. Its great jaws closed on the shaft, and then tossed both spear and wielder aside. Other men were laid low by savage swipes from the beast’s massive paws. They hacked and hewed at it, but their blades caught in its thick fur or were turned aside by its claws. Meanwhile, the vicious jaws snapped and tore, and hot blood sprayed in the air.

The prince watched for a moment, then strode forward. His men had the spirit fenced in with sharp steel, but more men fell every minute, and the ring of blades grew thinner as each warrior went down.

A half dozen paces brought him to where the beast stood at bay. He concentrated for a moment, and his hands glowed with sullen light. “A good dog knows when to heel,” he said, and struck. There was a sharp, sizzling sound, and the smell of burnt hair and meat. Flashes of light erupted where his fists struck the wolf’s hide, and it gave a sound that was half howl, half whimper.

“You dare?” it said, and turned. Its jaws opened wide as it sought to snap the prince in half with a single bite. A soldier, braver or more foolish than his companions, leapt to stand before his prince but was knocked away effortlessly.

“I’ll send you back to hell!”

The prince said nothing, waiting until the last second before acting. Then, as the spirit’s lunge carried it forward, he dropped to the ground, turned and thrust straight up. His hands caught the beast’s fur over its heart, and a second’s thought was all it took to send searing pain through his fingertips.

The beast skidded to a stop and bent its head down between its legs in an effort to root out the figure that crouched there. In response, the prince swatted it on the nose. Again, there was a crackle of energy and the horrid scent of burnt dog.

With a yelp, it rolled onto its side and lay there, panting. "I yield," it said, weakly.

His face utterly without expression, the prince rose to his feet. "You don't have much choice," he said, and placed his foot on the beast's throat. It shuddered once, but did not move. "Now, tell me your name before I decide to dispose of you."

"Boncrack," it whimpered. "I am called Boncrack."

"I've heard of you, I think," said the prince. "The dead gods alone know where. But it's of no matter. Why are you out here, Boncrack? This land hosts lions, not wolves."

"I was hunting," it snarled bitterly. "I have prey bound to me by oath."

"Oh do you? That's fascinating. My men swore no oath to you, did they?"

The beast grinned, an ugly sight. "Your men were merely convenient." It chuckled, a sound that was abruptly cut off when the prince dug in his heel. "Them I claimed from hunger. The other, I claim by right."

The prince spat, deliberately, onto its muzzle. "You claim nothing that I do not grant you, dog. Do you understand me, Boncrack? I can destroy you whenever I please." Abruptly, he turned and walked off. "Give me a reason to keep you alive, and I may permit you to serve me. Don't, and your carcass will feed the worms."

"Mighty one," it said, and its voice was wheedling, "there's no need for us to work at cross-purposes, I think. You have the look of the hunter about you as well. Perhaps we can hunt together."

The prince rubbed his chin with one long, pale finger. "An interesting proposition. What are you hunting?"

With a snarl, the wolf said, "A boy."



“A boy?”

“A boy with the mark of the sun on him. I owe him pain, and he owes me his soul.”

“Ah.” The prince licked his lips. This was unexpected, though considering the way omens had run amok of late, perhaps not entirely so. Too many threads were converging now. It could not be coincidence. “Your suggestion has a certain merit to it.”

The beast chuckled. “I thought you might agree. Now, shall we seal the bargain?”

“My word is not good enough for you?”

“I’ve had problems with that sort of thing of late,” the wolf rumbled. “Here is what I propose: For the duration of the hunt, I shall be as a servant to you. I shall tell you what I know of the boy and his companion, of his adventures, nightmares and doom. I shall travel with you until such time as he is hunted down. His possessions and companions are yours, as is his corpse, and I shall swear an oath not to lift claw or fang against you unless you strike me first. In return, I get his soul, and perhaps a small offering of goodwill now to seal our bargain.”

“A small offering?”

“The two who fled from me. I want their flesh.” He adopted a wounded tone. “You hurt me sore, and I need sustenance if I am to heal.”

The prince considered the matter. Behind him, his surviving men shuffled uneasily. The beast would be an ally of uncommon power, and surely it had been brought here for a purpose. The prince did not trust chance meetings, did not believe they existed. Someone or something had called the wolf to this place.

“Swear now,” he said.

“Very well,” the beast said tiredly. “I, Bonecrack, seal a bargain with you to lift neither claw nor fang against you unless you strike at me. I will travel with you, aid you in your hunt and take no more than my share of the kill. So do I swear, and if I break my bargain you may bind me into

servitude for a hundred years and a day." It yawned. "Is that sufficient?"

"Seal it with blood."

"Of course." It lifted one massive paw to its mouth and bit down. Reddish-black blood flowed, spattering and hissing on the dry soil as the spirit repeated its oath. "Do you wish to drink from the wound?"

"That is not necessary, I think," the prince replied, and turned to his men. "Make a sleeping place for Bon crack in the camp. And send forth the two who rode before him. Our guest is hungry."







## Chapter Eight

The prince's citadel was mostly empty, and Ratcatcher found that surprising. While ghosts and other unliving functionaries still scurried along the halls, not speaking to any save their unliving brethren, most of the living servants—and all of the prince's most trusted ones—were gone. Their chambers were empty, though their possessions still remained. Even Pelesh had gone—the fat little men had told the truth on that score—and dust coated stacks of ancient coins on the wizened little man's unoccupied desk.

There was something new in the air, too, a sense of undirected, panicky fear. Ratcatcher felt it as never before. Always, when he had walked these halls previously, the only terror within these walls had been terror of the prince's wrath. Now, there was something else. He couldn't decide where it came from, nor would any of the swarming servants tell him, but it was as palpable and clammy as midnight fog.

Eventually, he gave up in disgust and walked to the prince's throne room. The great doors were barred and shuttered, but he unlocked them carefully. They protested, groaning, but swung wide open. A small eddy of dust followed them, dancing out into the corridor, and Ratcatcher finally entered the throne room sans summons.

It was not a wreck, as he had been half-expecting. All of the tapestries were there, though dim now with dust. The



throne still sat on a dais in the center of the room, its single red cushion looking oddly forlorn. There was no devastation, no damage. No enemy had sacked this place and hauled off the prince's treasure. Instead, it had the air of an abandoned bird's nest in autumn branches, a place that had served its purpose and been left empty through deliberate action.

He strode up the dais steps and examined the throne. The prince's mace was not in its accustomed place at the throne's side, nor was the prince's helm. He considered the absences to be a good sign. With a single finger, he reached out and traced a line through the dust on the throne's obsidian arms. It was thick, though not the thickness of years. Briefly, he considered seating himself on the throne, but decided against it. The prince had a way of knowing such things, he was quite certain, and even a symbolic usurpation of the prince's station probably would not make his renewed service an easier burden to bear. He did, however, lift the cushion and dust it, motivated by an urge to maintain some sort of propriety in the midst of abandonment.

He turned then, his heel squeaking on stone, and took two steps down away from the throne before he saw the marionette. It lay, legs smashed and half its strings cut, on the floor to the left of the great doors. It wore jester's clothes, crimson and yellow and green, and its face was a painted mask that reminded Ratcatcher uncomfortably of his own. In another few strides he was upon it, scooping it up off the floor so that he might examine it more closely.

This was no crude toy, he realized when he held it. The face and hands were carved from ivory, the cloth of its pantaloons and blouse woven from silk. The cut strings were silk as well, and the wood of the crosspiece was polished mahogany. The stuffing beneath the silk was soft, the body shaped delicately and in proportion. Whoever had made this had not wanted to abandon it, Ratcatcher realized. Here was another, smaller mystery within the larger one.

The puppet moved.



Ratcatcher dropped it in shock. The thing's head had turned toward him, he was certain, and it had winked. But now it lay, unmoving, on the floor, and surely a mere puppet couldn't have moved on its own? Not here, in any case, where things only moved at the Prince of Shadows' whim.

It twitched again, and stared up at him. One tiny hand reached out, clutching at his heel, and Ratcatcher took a step back. It crawled forward, its useless legs dangling behind and crosspiece scraping across the floor. It moved impossibly quickly, faster than it had any right to, and for a long moment Ratcatcher found himself dancing across the throne room floor to get away. Unreasoning fear clutched him, far out of proportion to any threat the marionette might represent. Even in the prince's throne room, *especially* in the prince's throne room, this thing simply should not be.

With an effort, Ratcatcher mastered himself. This was a puppet, he told himself, a toy that he could crush beneath his heel if necessary. He stared at it. Relentlessly, it advanced.

And crush it he did. His boot came down on the center of its back with a sickening crunch, and it cried out, the first sound he had heard it make. Again he brought his boot down, and again came the sound of splintering wood.

"You," said Ratcatcher in between savage blows, "don't... belong... here." It twitched and squealed, but to no avail. In seconds, it was a ruin, a shape of torn cloth and distended stuffing. Ratcatcher stared at it for a long moment after that, but whatever spirit had motivated it was gone now. Broken-backed and splintered, it lay still.

"I ought to find a fire to chuck you into," Ratcatcher growled, and stalked off. The puppet lay still behind him until the doors slammed shut and the light faded.

Then, slowly and deliberately, it began moving once again. Even in the dark, it knew where it was going.

Inch by inch, it pulled itself toward the prince's throne. On its face, the painted smile grew wider.



In the stables, two servants labored to load something that, to the untrained eye, looked like a gray gelding with gear and supplies. A closer observation would have revealed certain inconsistencies, such as the bright red of its eyes and ears, or perhaps the fact that it had cloven hooves, but to the casual observer it seemed to be a horse and nothing more, and that was good enough.

The older of the two, whom Ratcatcher called Mold and who had long since forgotten his own name, sighed. "He will not like what he finds, no."

The younger shook his head sadly. "No. And he will blame us." He squatted and rummaged in the darkness for a spare sword, which he strapped to the saddle with resignation.

"He will. But it is our lot. Are our mounts ready?"

Mushroom nodded.

"Yes, and the pack animals, too. We will be ready to leave when Lord Ratcatcher wishes. That should make him happier, at least."

Mold shrugged. "Perhaps. Very little makes dead men happy, except more death. He will kill us, you know."

"I know." Mushroom tightened a girth on the gray's saddle. "And then we will return to our other master, and we shall be rewarded."

"With pain?" Mold's voice was hopeful.

Mushroom nodded. "Yes. With pain." And with that, they returned to their tasks wordlessly.

By contrast with the throne room, the orrery chamber was a disaster.

Ratcatcher entered it slowly and cautiously, perhaps expecting some agent of Unforgiven Blossom's vengeance to have remained here. But there was nothing, only wreckage and sparse signs of the woman's presence.

All of her personal belongings were gone. Any furniture that remained was splintered and broken, mute evidence of the duel Ratcatcher had fought on the orrery that long-ago day. Broken porcelain crunched underfoot as



he walked, and here and there scorched and rusted bits of the prophetic device itself sat broken on the floor. The center of the orrery still stood, its wheels and gears now exposed for all to see. A few, he noted with astonishment, still whirred and clicked of their own accord. For a second they reminded him uncomfortably of the puppet in the throne room, but he shrugged the notion off and strode deeper into the room.

Mushroom and Mold had made no mention of Unforgiven Blossom during their squealing recitation, and her apartments were an empty ruin. That, Ratcatcher guessed, meant that she'd left of her own accord, and not due to the prince's wishes. That he found very interesting.

At the back of the chamber he found Unforgiven Blossom's workbenches. Some attempt to rebuild the orrery had been made here, he now saw. New globes sat half-fashioned on the bench, cast from precious metals and encrusted with gems. But the work seemed sloppy and disinterested, the craftsmanship shoddy. Springs and other, less identifiable elements of the device's construction lay scattered, mixed in with tools that had not seen use in many months.

At the end of the table was a series of scrolls, which Ratcatcher took from their cases and unrolled. The first was a blueprint for the orrery, much commented-on and worn. He put that down and took up the next, which proved to be a list of tea blends, along with a detailed catalog of spices and their potentially magical effects. The fourth scroll was more of the same, and the fifth was a personal diary that Ratcatcher read with alternating amusement and disgust.

The sixth, however, was nothing more than a portrait. Ratcatcher stared at it. The face it portrayed was fine-boned and dark, beardless and delicate. It was a man's face, one with lines around the eyes and evidence of too many frowns around the mouth. Ultimately, it was a mediocre portrait of an average face, a depiction of a man one might pass by and ignore a hundred times in the marketplace.



Except, Ratcatcher realized, that it was a portrait of the face he'd worn in Sijan.

With a curse, he tore it in two, then tore it again. Everywhere he went, the damned woman was one step ahead of him. Even in death, she'd found a way to fox him. No doubt she'd flummoxed the lumbering fool of a Sidereal to protect her knowing that he was on the way; no doubt she had other surprises waiting for him even now.

"I have a surprise for you, too, my unloved and unlovely blossom," he muttered, and swept the table clean. Metal clattered onto the floor; glass shattered. Delicate tools broke and heavier ones smashed the items they'd once been used to create.

Ratcatcher drew his sword. A black flame whipped around it now, and another cloak of blackness flared out behind him. This was somehow wrong, he knew, but he didn't care. The power flowed through him, and it felt sweeter than his first new breath of air.

"Everything of yours," he howled, and brought the sword down on the table. It broke with a crack, and the two halves collapsed thunderously onto the floor. Whirling, he hacked at the half-finished globes on the floor and left only twisted scraps of metal behind. The core of the orrery he butchered mercilessly, and the few other evidences of Unforgiven Blossom's presence were destroyed as well. With each stroke, he howled, and each howl echoed through the chamber to mix with the sounds of destruction.

When there was nothing left to destroy, he tried his blade on the walls, and it cut deeply. He tore great gashes out of the floor, then flung the rubble into the air and swung wildly at it. It shattered at the touch of his blade, the serpent head hissing and coiling even as he swung. "I'm going to kill your memory, you hag," he cried out, "and then I'm going to kill you. Can you see that, Unforgiven Blossom? Can you see me coming?"

In a final paroxysm of fury, he brought the sword down on the jagged stump of the orrery's base. A cloud of sparks burst up, and then suddenly, there was silence.



Ratcatcher's anima faded away, and suddenly he was very tired. He leaned on the sword and surveyed the damage around him. It was near-total. Wearily, he smiled. Soon, he promised himself. Soon it would be the woman herself. And her protector. And Wren, and the boy, and—

There was a timid knock at the door.

"Yes?" Ratcatcher said, alert again.

The door opened perhaps a hand's width. Mold, or perhaps Mushroom, peered in. "Lord Ratcatcher?" he said querulously.

"Yes?"

"All is in readiness, my lord."

"Good." He permitted himself a small smile.

"The sun will sink in four hours. You should sleep, Lord Ratcatcher. You should—"

"Enough." The servant fell silent. "I will retire to my chambers. You and your companion will meet me there, so that I may remove my armor and rest. When the sun sets, you will find me again, and we shall depart. Do not speak to me unless spoken to. Do you understand?"

Miserably and dumbly, the servant nodded.

"Good. You may go."

The door slammed, and Ratcatcher could dimly hear the receding sound of fat feet slapping against a stone floor. He looked down. There was an unbroken hemisphere of beaten brass by his foot. Mercury, he supposed, or something like it. Somehow, it had survived his rage.

"You're very lucky," he said to it, and picked it up. "Very lucky indeed. I'll use you to catch your mistress' blood when the time comes, and then we shall see what she prophesies. Not much, I suspect. Not much at all."



## Chapter Nine

When he stopped for the night, Eliezer Wren bought himself a hat. It was wide-brimmed and floppy, made from brown felt and banded with old, tough leather. Mendicant priests often wore hats like this one, Wren remembered, and the thought made him chuckle.

The man who sold it to him, a heavysset, clean-shaven shopkeeper with a barrel chest and barrel-shaped arms and legs to match, didn't see the humor in it. He charged Wren twice what the hat was worth, and called it a bargain without blinking.

Wren didn't argue. It was clear from the expression on the shopkeeper's face that he recognized the horses Wren rode in on, and just as clear that the extra cost of the hat was the price of his silence about it.

So, humbly and gratefully, Wren paid the cost of the hat, then paid more for stabling his horses, and took a room at the local inn. There was talk in the common room that night about the haunted town of Qut Toloc, with townsfolk and rare travelers trying to top each other with tall tales of the place's mysteries and treasures. Wren chose not to join in. Instead, he sat in the corner, slowly scooping dollops of stew onto hunks of rough bread and listening with amusement.

Some of the stories, he noted as he ate, were actually good, if highly improbable. There was one woman, an enormously fat farmer with a shaved head and earrings that



dangled to her shoulders, who swore that on the day the village had been destroyed, she'd seen a bird the size of a horse circling over the temple and singing prayers of mourning. When pressed, she admitted that she hadn't actually seen it, but had heard about it from a friend who had, and then the rest of her protestations were drowned in laughter.

Another woman, whom the rest of the locals addressed as "Grandmother," told in hushed tones of the ghosts who'd walked the streets of the town, rending the flesh from any living man who dared stay there overnight. Only the intervention of a priest, she said, had saved this town from the same fate. He'd gone riding in, she said, with a host of companions behind him, and fought the ghosts for a day and a night. When he'd finished, he burned every body in the place and put his sign on it, so that no one with half an ounce of sense would ever set foot in that place again.

Wren listened to that one with half an ear. It sounded vaguely as if a Wyld Hunt or some such had made a fast sweep of the place, burning the dead and proclaiming victory without doing any work. He snorted over his stew. It was typical, really, and the fact that the local peasants had made it into an epic worthy of the Five Dragons was typical, too.

It was hours later, when the stew was all gone and the majority of the tale-tellers were snoring under benches, when the hosteler finally lumbered out from behind the table at which he sat and pulled up a bench near the central fire. The others hushed, looking up at him expectantly, and despite himself, Wren felt his curiosity piqued.

The hosteler was not a large man, nor was he an attractive one. A spade beard hid what Wren suspected was a weak chin, but his shoulders were broad and his walk was that of a man used to long marches. His left arm ended in a stump just below the elbow, to which some enterprising smith had attached a long and wickedly sharp hook. A wad of clay sat on the hook's end at the moment, a preventative measure against accidents, but Wren had no illusions as to how useful it would be if the man decided his hook needed to come into play.

Scars ran up and down both of the man's arms, white against his heavily tanned skin. He'd clearly been a soldier at one point, and when he spoke his words had an Isle accent to them.

This, Wren decided, was very interesting indeed. He leaned forward and listened.

"I remember the night Qut Toloc died," the man said, and his voice was so low it could barely be heard over the flames. "I could see the carrion birds flying overhead. None of them were praying, though," he added, and shot a glance at the farmer's recumbent form. There was a ripple of laughter which quickly died, and the man continued.

"You don't get much traffic on the road from Qut Toloc. Never did, really. Every traveler who comes up from that way," and he turned his gaze on Wren, who met it, "stands out a bit. The one who came through the next day stood out more than most.

"He was a tall man, and thin. Black armor on him, and long sword. He looked like he should be guarding caravans down on the south side of the Inland Sea, maybe, on prancing around the Imperial Manse pretending to be a noble. Arrogant, he was, and almost handsome enough to make it stick."

There was a murmur from the crowd, and those who were still awake leaned in closer. Wren sensed that most of the stories told here tonight were old ones, well worn and comfortable, but this had the air of something new, and dangerous. He pulled his stool closer to the fire.

"He had a horse, a big black one. Mean. Didn't like being stabled with other horses, and they didn't like being stabled with it. Only the goats liked it, Dragons know why. Not much baggage on him, though, like he expected he'd be able to buy whatever he wanted, or maybe to take it. Pale skin, too, but he moved like a fighting man.

"In any case, he rode out from Qut Toloc way the next day, and showed up just after dawn. Now, the road between here and the town isn't much for danger, but still, it's not one



you'd ride all night if you had a choice. Wise men stopped in Qut Toloc back in those days, and started up again with the sunrise. Not him, though. I asked him why he hadn't stopped there, and he said "I generally stop at the first town I come to." I didn't ask any more questions after that.

"He asked a few questions himself, though, mostly about the roads to the east. I answered him, fed him, and set him up with a room. There were more birds in the sky that day, all headed in the direction from which he'd come. I got the feeling there wouldn't be much Qut Toloc traffic any more."

"And then what?" Wren surprised himself by asking. All heads turned to him, the hosteler's last of all.

"Since you came up that same road, maybe you know. He stayed till supper, then rode off into the dark. The next night, two things happened. All the dogs set to howling a couple of hours after moonrise, then cut off all at once, and a man came riding in with news of what he'd seen down the road. Had to pour wine down his throat till he was sensible. Took an awful lot of wine." There was an appreciative chuckle at that, a small one.

"Ah." Wren felt his cheeks burn with something akin to embarrassment. "And you didn't go after the man who stayed here?"

The hosteler shrugged. "Didn't see the reason in it. If he wasn't the cause, no sense chasing him. If he was, no sense in having him do to us what he did to them." He paused, took a swig from a heavy leather tankard, and wiped his mouth on the back of his arm. "I did charge him extra, though. He had enough jade for ten."

"I've got some jade," Wren said diffidently, and hefted the purse he'd lifted from Bright Crow's saddlebags.

"That's why I'm charging you the same I charged him," said the hosteler, to general laughter.

Wren waited for it to die down. "I have jade, and I have questions about this man."

"Why? He a friend of yours?"

The former priest snorted. "Hardly. He's tried to kill me once, if the man you saw is the one I'm thinking of."

A low murmur ran around the room, and Wren realized he'd made a mistake. He'd admitted to surviving an encounter with the fiend who'd wiped out an entire village. It was clear that the good folk sitting around the fire didn't quite know what that made him, but they did know it made him unusual. And unusual, in these parts, tended not to fare very well.

"It was in a brawl. In Stonebreak," he added quickly, knowing that few if any of these folk had traveled that far. "He was using loaded dice, and someone called him on it. Things got ugly, and he started laying about. It took a pair of priests to roust him, and there were a half dozen dead men on the floor by the time he was done. I got out with a cracked skull and a new appreciation for the evils of gambling." An approving murmur went around the room, and someone stuck a mug in Wren's hand. He looked into it, regretted doing so instantly, and forced a smile onto his face. Apparently, here as in every tavern on the Threshold, dice was a killing matter.

For his part, the hosteler took another swig of wine. The others sat silent, waiting for his reaction. "Well," he said, and Wren breathed a small sigh of relief. "A man who'd kill like he did at Qut Toloc would kill over dice. He was no friend to me, I tell you. Cut down my traffic, he did. Ask your questions."

Quickly, Wren described Ratcatcher. At each detail, the hosteler nodded. When Wren sought to test him and described a shield device Ratcatcher didn't carry, the man shook his head. Clearly, he'd seen the genuine article.

"What are you going to do to him?" the man asked, when Wren's questions finally wound down and jade had exchanged hands. "The trail's long cold, and a dice brawl's not a good reason to hunt a man."

"A dead village is," Wren said, surprising himself with his answer. "I've got promises to keep to a lot of people, and that's one of them. Some of the priests at that temple did me a good turn once." And that, he thought to himself, was close enough to be true that he could believe it when he said it.



The man nodded. Most of the others had departed, or drifted off to sleep. "Seems about as sensible as anything else I've heard tonight. He'll kill you, you know."

"Maybe. He couldn't before." Wren shrugged, and raised the mug of water he was drinking in an impromptu toast. The hosteler responded.

"I didn't catch your name," the man said.

"I didn't give it."

"Didn't think you had. Good luck hunting him."

"Thanks." Wren rose to go and set the mug down on his stool. He took a step, and felt a tugging at the sleeve of his robe. Turning, he saw the hosteler with a thoughtful expression on his face.

"I just remembered one more thing."

"Yes?"

"A couple—maybe three—nights after this friend of yours passed through, we got the first stories about the ghosts of Qut Toloc walking. All the women were fretting because something had come along and stolen bread from their ovens and clothes from their lines. Me, I didn't see any ghosts. I figured it for a survivor, heading the same direction as the killer. Struck me as a bit curious."

The ghosts had mentioned a boy, Wren realized. He imagined the child running, traveling by night, stealing what he needed to survive...

Shaking his head to clear the images, he pursed his lips. "Seems likely. Even the worst butcher might miss someone."

The hosteler nodded. "He might indeed." He stood, and lifted the heavy iron pot off the fire with his hook. "Can't let this cook all night. The bottom will scorch. Good night, friend. I expect you'll be off in the morning."

"Yes," Wren replied. "Good night."

He retired to his rented room, then, and stretched himself out on the rough straw mattress sitting on what passed for a bedframe. But sleep would not come, and all night he saw images of a small boy running, half-blinded by tears of grief and rage.



## Chapter Ten

He was awakened by the sound of wings.

Yushuv had been dreaming of his old village, of the days spent running the catacombs with his siblings and friends. Around each bend he found treasures, more than he could carry back with him. But the font of riches was never-ending, and all of the children laughed as they carried gold and jade and orichalcum back up into the light.

It had been a good dream, and he was sorry to lose it. But the flapping of wings was too loud and too insistent to ignore, and the dream flew away even as the sound got closer.

He opened his eyes and looked up. Above him, the branches of a tree cast a net to catch the bright stars in the dark sky. It was still late, perhaps an hour past midnight, and the waning moon gave enough light to tell him that he was alone on the ground.

Rubbing his eyes, he stood and stretched the stiffness from his limbs. Overhead, something large circled patiently.

He thought he knew what it was, and decided that it was best to go up to meet it.

The tree proved a relatively simple climb, with thick branches at regular intervals. Yushuv scampered up until the branches groaned under his weight, and then perched on the thickest one he could find. One hand rested against the trunk for balance. The other, he put to his lips as he whistled.

A heavy thump at the end of the branch he sat on told him that he'd been heard.

"Hello," he said, not bothering to turn. "I didn't think I'd see you again."

"You won't," said the huge black bird that scuttled down the branch until it sat next to Yushuv. "We will not speak again after this."

"You've said that before," Yushuv replied, not bothering to hide the pleasure he felt at seeing Raiton again. "When you told me who you were, and about my father. It seems like a very long time ago. I suppose it is." His tone grew wistful, before brightening again. "But here you are."

"I was not supposed to be here, Yushuv. For you, I have worked wonders. For you, I have paid a price." He lifted his wings, and in the moonlight Yushuv saw the dark blood that flowed, unceasing, from a wound on each.

"Who could do that to you?" Yushuv asked. "And why?"

"Why? Why? The boy-child wants to know why!" Raiton laughed, and there was a bitterness in his laughter that Yushuv had not heard before. "Oh, you know why!"

Yushuv bit his lip and thought. "Me?" he said suddenly. "This is because of me?"

"Of course it's because of you. I've done you favors, hidden you from the heavens, blinded your enemies' servants and guarded you while you slept. Did you not think your enemies had patrons as well, gods who were displeased with me for favoring you so? Oh, I have suffered for you, Yushuv, and I will be suffering long years after you're gone. They made sure of that. And I'm not allowed to speak to you any more. They're watching me, you know." He laughed again, and there was no joy in it. "Gods and spirits don't do well with pain, boy. We're not used to it."

"I'm sorry," Yushuv said. "I wish there were something I could do."

Raiton's head jerked up, his wickedly sharp beak narrowly missing Yushuv's face. "Do? Of course there's something you can do. It's to keep on, boy, or this is all for nothing."

Yushuv nodded. "I understand. This was all planned, wasn't it? My father's gifts to you—someone told him to do that, so you'd have a reason to be kind to me. Am I right?"

"Very clever, Yushuv." Raiton hopped from foot to foot, and spatters of his blood landed wetly on Yushuv's hand. "You've started to think about causes. It's a habit that will serve you well. Just don't look so hard after yesterday you forget today. It's all for naught if you make a mistake now."

"I'll take that for an admission," Yushuv said, and leaned back against the tree. "Dace said much the same thing, you know."

"That is why Dace was selected to be your teacher. One of many reasons." Less agitated now, the bird settled down against the branch. "Your path will be entirely your own sooner than you know. Follow it. That will make all the pain worth it. I trust in your teachers, and I trust in you."

"Thank you."

"And well you should thank me." The bird looked from side to side, then cocked its head. "They are looking for me. If I stay here much longer, they will find you as well. That is not something either of us wishes for." He leaned close to Yushuv, and whispered urgently. "There is a tomb in your future boy, an empty tomb. Something waits for you there, something from dreams. I cannot tell you more."

With a shocking suddenness, Raiton leapt into the air, his wings folded against his body. He plummeted as Yushuv watched, horrified, then at the last second gave a mighty flap against the air and soared upward.

"Goodbye, boy," was the last thing Yushuv heard him say, and then the great black bird was just another shape against the stars.



For a long while after Raiton's departure, Yushuv simply sat with his back against the trunk of the tree and his eyes on the forest floor below. Perhaps a quarter of an hour after the spirit's departure, a series of large shapes came snuffling out of the deeper forest and sniffed around the



base of the tree, paying extra attention to the hollow he'd been curled up in. Had it not been for Raiton's summons to the treetops, Yushuv knew, he could have had himself a much more rudes awakening.

Clearly, despite his words, Raiton wasn't quite finished doing favors for him yet.

He looked at his left hand, where the bird-spirit's blood had splashed him. It was an iridescent, oily black in the moonlight, and when he moved his hand he was surprised to discover it was still liquid. Real blood—mortals' blood—would have long since dried.

Gingerly, he reached for the small waterskin he'd taken from Dace's encampment as a backup. Using only his right hand, he unstoppered it and drank half its contents, then poured the rest onto the ground far below. Then, with the utmost care, he scraped the precious drops of blood into the skin.

Like quicksilver, they all slid in. None spilled, and nothing remained to stain his hand. With a sigh of relief, he sealed the skin again, and settled in for a few more hours' sleep.

With luck, he'd even dream, and that was something he hadn't wished for in a very long time.



## Chapter Eleven

The window was a good fifteen feet off the ground, but that bothered the thief not at all. She crouched on the ground in the dim moonlight, watching the shadows of tree branches dance across the inn's walls. Nothing stirred in the window, which lay open to the world. There was no light and, apart from the sound of some titanic snoring, no sound. It would be, she decided, an easy evening's work.

She called herself Vicious Whisper, and she was dressed in black. Such was her wont when she was working, swathed in it from head to toe. Black boots muffled with black cloth were on her feet, and black leather gloves covered the constantly twitching fingers of her hands. She crouched in a patch of shadow and waited, patiently.

Minutes passed. A stableboy hurried past, rushing to an assignation with a lover, and never noticed her. A snake wound its way lazily by where she squatted, flicked its tongue at her twice, and then moved on. Still she waited, until the sound of snoring became regular and drifted down gently through the open window.

It was time. She gathered herself, took a deep breath, and leapt.

The leap took her up into the air, her toes landing on the windowsill with barely a whisper. She balanced there for a second, then tumbled forward into the room. The soft

**A** black cloth muffled the sound of her hands and back striking the floor, and she rolled to her feet in front of a low, rough table next to the room's single door. A glance behind her revealed that the inhabitants of the room were both still asleep, the woman in bed, the man wrapped in blankets and sawing away on the floor.

Satisfied, she turned back to the work at hand. The table was covered in purple fabric, a drape that extended down to the floor. On it rested a dagger, a blade of exquisite craftsmanship that gleamed gold even in the weak light from outside.

She smiled to herself. It was indeed orichalcum. The information her contact at the inn had sold her was correct. Here was a treasure truly worth stealing, rather than the petty caches of jewels and jade she normally had to filch. Here was a challenge, and a prize worth having. What it was doing in a place like this was beyond comprehension, but that was the problem of the sleeping couple behind her. She, on the other hand, had business to attend to.

Dropping to a crouch, she inspected the table for traps. A few minutes' thorough observation convinced her that there were none. Once, the massive, bald man on the floor snorted in his sleep, and she froze in place until he resumed the rhythmic cacophony of his snoring. The woman in the bed, for her part, rested peacefully, a picture of fragility with her lined face surrounded by a halo of white hair.

Slowly, steadily, the thief extended her hand. It hovered over the dagger like a spider descending on a thread of silk. With each heartbeat it descended, until the blade was caged between her fingers. She waited a moment, then under the cover of a snore she grasped the dagger by the handle.

"I would not do that if I were you," said a woman's voice. It was full of pity.

The thief whirled around, her hand still clutching the dagger. The old woman, she saw, was sitting up in bed, her knees drawn up to her chest and her hands clasped in front of her. Her eyes were wide and open, and she had a look of sadness on her face. Impossibly, the man on the floor was still snoring.

The thief didn't waste time with words. Instead, she sprang for the window, clutching her prize to her chest.

She never made it. Halfway there, a sudden cloak of darkness descended on her and a heavy blow caught her on the side of the head. She spun to the ground, even as she realized that the thing covering her was nothing more than a blanket and that the hideous din of the snoring had stopped.

Hitting the floor hard, she rolled to the left and spun out of the blanket, a mere second ahead of a thunderous blow that hammered the floor behind her.

It had been a trap, she realized. Neither of them had been sleeping. What a fool she'd been, thinking she was the patient one while they waited for her, grinning in the darkness.

Rage flooded her limbs. It was almost a shame that they'd been so clever, she thought. The trap would have caught any normal thief. It would not, however, catch her.

She reversed her grip on the dagger and swung it on a wide arc as the bald man charged at her. A crackling trail of fire hung in the air behind it, and he barely managed to leap over the curve of her swing, and the blade's edge caught the trailing hem of his robe. He was barefoot and bearded, she saw in that instant, and in his eyes was an unmistakable glint of recognition.

"Dragons' asses, Blossom, we've got an Anathema in here!" The man was clearly startled, but not so startled as to refrain from launching a kick at her head. She snapped her head back out of the way, even as she caught his ankle with her left hand. Giving a shove, she toppled him backwards. He went over with a crash, and she surged forward.

A whisper of instinct told her to duck, and an instant later something sharp and metallic whistled overhead. A flash of light told her that there was a single sliver of metal quivering in the wall next to the window. A look over her shoulder showed her that the old woman was on her feet now, a wicked array of silver gleaming in her hands.

"You should have stayed in bed, grandmother," the thief sneered, and started a spinning kick.





“And you should talk less,” came a male voice from behind her, even as her other leg was swept out from underneath her. She broke her fall with her free hand, bounced, and spun in the air to see the man bearing down on her. With a curse, she flung the orichalcum dagger at him. It trailed fire as it flew, a purplish, bruised ribbon of flame leading back to her hand. Straight and true it went. She was too close to miss; he was too close to dodge, and she fully expected she’d be plucking the blade out of his chest in a minute before he hit the ground.

Instead, he caught it. His hands clapped together on either side of the blade, stopping it a hair’s breadth from his chest. A soft halo of light shimmered into existence behind him while the dagger sat, dwarfed, in his grip. “My,” he said. “That would have hurt.”

“You’re not a priest,” she hissed, eyes wide in shock.

“That’s open to debate,” he replied, and flipped the dagger around. “I am, however, very experienced at dealing with the likes of you.” The weapon waggled threateningly. “You really should pick your informants more carefully.”

“That is enough chatter, Holok,” the old woman said from behind the thief. “Do you intend to bore her to death?”

“I merely thought, oh radiant Unforgiven Blossom, to inquire whether she was here of her own accord, or she served another. Knowing that might make for fewer nights spent pretending to snore.”

“You do snore,” she retorted, while the thief looked from one to the other in increasing disbelief.

“You’re both insane,” Whisper announced, and threw herself at Holok. A haze of purplish light streamed out behind her, mixing with his glow and bathing the room in eerie radiance. She threw a punch and then another, and then lost herself in a flurry of blows. Holok caught each one on the flat of the dagger, deflecting every punch and sidestepping each kick. Sobs of fury rose in her throat as she threw everything she had at him, swinging and kicking faster than the eye could see. Her hands and feet were a blur, leaving

strange shadows to flicker on the walls. But Holok met every blow and turned it aside, a look of beatific bliss on his face.

"Fall, damn you, fall!" she screeched, and redoubled her efforts.

Wordlessly, Holok countered her. "You can surrender, you know," he said, the steady light from his anima as calm as his expression.

Instead, she flipped backwards. With a backhanded blow, she spun Unforgiven Blossom aside. The woman's head caught the side of the table with an audible crack, and she slumped toward the floor. Without looking back, Vicious Whisper reached for the door. If she could make it downstairs without Holok catching her, she'd be able to dodge him through the kitchens and then make her escape. He was good, but wasn't fast; not as fast as she was.

"Blossom!" he bellowed, and there was real rage in his voice. "Damn you, when I get my hands on you—"

Whisper didn't hear the rest of the sentence. She leapt through the doorway and slammed the door behind her, then vaulted over the railing of the walkway. Her feet hit the thick wood of a tabletop even as she heard the door splinter behind her, and Holok appeared in the doorway.

She bounded off the table and ran for the kitchens. Behind her, a heavy thud told her that her pursuer had followed her course. A crash an instant later told her of the fate of the table.

*This is fine*, she thought as she leapt over a drunk sleeping on the floor. *He can chase me but he can't catch me. He's too slow.*

She burst into the kitchen and leapt onto the slab that served as a preparation counter. Ducking to avoid the hanging cheeses, she sprinted down its length leaving wisps of purple light behind her. Sleeping figures on the floor stirred at her passage but she paid them no mind. Hopefully, they'd slow Holok.

Grinning at the thought, she reached the end of the table, then realized that one of the kitchen scuts hadn't



quite done his job. Her foot found a patch of fat that had not been scrubbed away, and she tumbled forward. Her head hit the wall and she lay there, crumpled, for a long instant. Behind her, Holok burst in the kitchen, his shout of "Where is she?" echoing off the walls. Terrified sleepers awakened, screaming, as he thundered through.

Whisper uncoiled and picked herself up off the floor. A shrieking woman grabbed her sleeve, and instinctively she landed an open-handed punch to the woman's face. She crumpled, blood jetting from what had been her nose, and Vicious Whisper ran.

The back door, she now saw, was only a few feet away, held shut by a simple wooden bar. Behind her, Holok pushed his way through the confusion of bodies, incoherent with rage.

With a single blow, she smashed the bar. A kick shoved the door open, and she burst into the night. She'd done it. She was free. She might have failed at her self-appointed task, but she'd escaped. She drew her anima into herself and sprinted forward into the darkness. There was no way Holok could catch her now.

The sudden, sharp pain at the back of her neck told Vicious Whisper just how wrong she was. She took another stride, then suddenly her legs ceased to obey her will, and she tumbled into the dirt and cornstalks of a field that had long since given up her harvest. So great was her speed that she flipped twice, spinning through the air like a rag doll hurled in anger.

Finally, she came to a stop, face down in the cracked soil of a furrow. She could feel the hot wet blood seeping from the back of her neck, but nothing more. Her arms and legs refused to obey her commands. She was very warm, though, she realized. She'd expected dying to hurt more.

Suddenly, Holok's face was beside her own. "You'd better pray she's all right, girl, or death's not going to be enough to keep you from me. Who sent you?"

Vicious Whisper laughed weakly. "No one sent me. I'm a thief, or I was. I worked for myself. I heard about the

dagger from one of the stable boys. He used to tell me about good targets. Used to." She found herself laughing again, but tears gathered at the corner of her eye.

Holok grunted. Up close, his face showed a few faint lines of age, a few strands of gray in the fiercely bushy beard. His eyes were so dark as to be nearly black. "If you'd said that earlier, you would have earned more mercy. What's your name?"

"Whisper. Vicious Whisper."

He nodded. "You're going to sleep now, Vicious Whisper. Tell the Unconquered Sun not to be in any hurry to send your soul back to earth again, and pray that Unforgiven Blossom's not waiting on the other side for you. I'm the gentle one." He said this and reached out with one of his massive, gnarled hands. His fingers found her throat, slick with her blood, and closed.

For an instant she felt one last spasm of pain, and then even the warmth went away. Her last thought was that her killer's hands were too gentle for the job, and then she knew nothing.

Holok rose, and slung the dead thief's corpse over his shoulder. A crowd had gathered at the back door to the inn, kitchen staff and scullery maids and freshly awakened guests rubbing their eyes and demanding explanations.

He stalked toward them, pausing only to pluck the silver pin of Blossom's that he'd borrowed out of the back of Vicious Whisper's neck. Carefully he wiped it clean against the thief's sleeve, and then trudged back across the field.

The questioning throng evaporated as he got close enough for them to see the look on his face. Soon there was only one figure by the door, that of a pale, slender old woman wrapped in a woolen cloak.

"You're well?" Holok said, dropping the body at Unforgiven Blossom's feet.

"I am," she said, sparing the corpse a single glance.

"She did me no real harm, and I thought that the possibility of an injury to myself might inspire you to stop playing."





“You... you allowed yourself to be struck?” he sputtered, his face reddening. She nodded.

“Of course. Otherwise, I would not have positioned myself between her and the door, and then waited.” She paused, as if considering the wisdom of her actions. “I suppose I could have interfered in your sparring session, but that struck me as being potentially more dangerous. She is dead now, yes?”

Holok gaped. “Yes, she’s dead. She claimed to be a simple thief, and she was stupid enough in her approach that I’m inclined to believe her. She heard about the dagger from one of the workers here. He’s been selling travelers out for some time, so we shouldn’t feel especially blessed by her attentions.” He nudged the corpse gently with one toe. “I haven’t searched the body. I doubt we’ll find anything interesting.”

Unforgiven Blossom nodded. “Then dispose of it. The orichalcum is safe. You dropped it when you leapt after her.” She bowed her head, ever so slightly. “I must confess I had not expected your response to be quite so... vehement.”

“I live to surprise, my lady,” he growled, and pressed the pin into her hand lengthwise. “This, incidentally, is yours. I borrowed it on my way out, and it did me great service. I see why you carry so many.”

“You begin to see,” she replied. “Should you do something with the body?”

“Only if you do something about getting us another room. I don’t think ours has a door any longer.”

• • •  
Ultimately, they settled for hanging Unforgiven Blossom’s cloak across the doorway, as the innkeeper barricaded himself in his room and would not come out despite Unforgiven Blossom’s most persuasive entreaties.

Rather than return to bed, Holok sat himself on the floor cross-legged. The dagger rested on the wooden floorboards in front of him, and he noticed a dried drop of blood along the edge. “I must be getting sloppy,” he told himself. He checked his hands for nicks and cuts, and, finding none,

decided that the blood must have been the thief's. The thought cheered him a little, but not much.

Unforgiven Blossom, too, was awake, swathed in blankets like a corpse prepared for burial. Her eyes gleamed in the dim light of the room as she looked down on him.

"It is beautiful, is it not?" she said.

Holok nodded. "Beautiful and dangerous. We need to do something with this, you know."

"So you have been saying since first I joined you," she replied, her tone gently mocking. "Yet we have done nothing for months but wander from hostel to inn and inn to hostel. You've managed to convince a quarter of the Threshold that you're a deviant priest with a taste for old women, and I've developed feet like a washerwoman's, but other than that, what have we done? And where would you take it, that it would not attract even more attention?"

He sighed. "The Isle," he said, knowing her response. "It needs to go to the Isle. If one of the sun's chosen—or worse yet, a servant of the Abyss—gets his hands on this, you'll see a small river of blood flow to the Inner Sea. Let me take it to the Isle and lock it away, so that it'll never be used. I'll see you get anything you want in exchange for it. A new orrery, a laboratory, jade, a country estate—anything you wish."

She pursed her lips delicately. "All I wish is not to go to the Isle. They'd kill me there. In your heart, you know this. The stain of my previous service is not so easily washed away."

"Then give me the dagger and wait for me! You know I'd come back."

She smiled sadly. "I know you would try. But I cannot allow that." She paused, and considered. "Let us sleep on it. Tomorrow, I will cast divinations as to what our best course should be. If the auguries say the Isle, then the Isle it is. I will abide by their omens if you will. Will you?"

"Of course," he grumbled, and took the weapon in his left hand. He rose to his feet and walked over to the table. With a single blow, he rammed it down, point-first. It sank half its length into the hard wood and sat there, quivering.



A low hum filled the room, and by the time the sound ceased, Holok had once again wrapped himself in his blankets on the floor.

"Tomorrow," he said, and closed his eyes.

"Tomorrow," she agreed, and watched him until sleep came, and years fell away from his face.

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She owed him a debt of her life, Unforgiven Blossom decided later that morning, when she was many miles from the inn and the sun rose at her back. That was why she had sprinkled a potion to ensure deathlike sleep on his lips, and then drawn the orichalcum dagger across the back of both of his ankles. The blood had flowed, but she was reasonably sure he would not bleed to death. He would not, however, be following her.

Indeed, it was highly unlikely he would ever walk again.

She withdrew the dagger from the jury-rigged sheath she'd made for it and gazed at it in the morning light. Somehow, it was still wet with his blood. She frowned, and wiped it on the ground. Some of the blood scraped off, while pale dust clung to the rest. With a grimace, she resheathed it and continued walking. Sometime soon, the friend she had crippled would be awakening, and she wanted to be far away when he did.



## Chapter Twelve

Six days after he bought the hat, Wren sold the horses.

It was a sensible decision. He had little use for most of the gear they carried, and felt vaguely uneasy about making such an obvious target of himself on the roads. In the eyes of roadside bandits, a lone man on foot was one thing; a lone man leading a pair of heavily laden horses was entirely another. While Wren had no doubt that he'd be able to deal with any bandit troop smaller than an Imperial Legion, he didn't necessarily want to have to do so. Besides, he'd have to hide the bodies after any attempt was made, and that would take time he didn't particularly want to spend.

Of course, he could leave the hypothetical bodies behind. Doing so would serve as an effective warning to the next generation of highwaymen, but it might raise questions. Travelers would come along and wonder, asking themselves things like "Who killed all of these bandits?" and "Why are there no marks of weapons on the corpses?" or possibly even "How did that one end up hanging from a tree branch twenty feet off the ground?" Those questions, Wren felt, would beget more questions, none of which had good answers. They would attract attention.

The last thing in the world Eliezer Wren wanted right now was more attention, from anyone.

Such were the thoughts he amused himself with in the days leading up to the sale of the horses, days of uneventful travel and slow progress. The horses were gentle enough—Wren suspected they were quite happy to get away from Bright Crow and his murderous companion—but they were not a mode of transportation he was comfortable with any longer.

Furthermore, he had a sneaking suspicion he'd make better time walking.

So better than a week from the corpse of Qut Toloc, he sold the horses and nine tenths of what they carried to a redheaded, tattooed horse merchant who was all teeth and no chin, and who spent more of the transaction talking to the horses than to their owner. She paid him jade almost desultorily, threw in a walking stick and a pack as part of the bargain, and vanished to her overcrowded stables to show off her new prizes. One of the horses cast a reproachful glance at Wren as it was led away, while the other made its opinion known in a more traditional manner.

Then they were gone, and Wren was alone in the horse trader's office. He hefted his pack so that it sat easily on the daiklave, and wriggled his shoulders until both sat comfortably. That done, he tested the weight of the staff, adjusted the brim of his hat, and lacking any further reason to delay his departure, set off.

An hour later, he finally admitted that he was surprised the horses hadn't run off after him.



# Chapter Thirteen

It wasn't the constant growth of brambles across the trail that disturbed Yushuv. It was the sense that something had hurriedly planted them there. Several times, he stopped and checked the offending stalks for signs of Fair Folk-induced modification, but none of the vines dripped blood, sprouted tumors or sang off key hymns to elemental chaos. They were annoying and omnipresent, but strictly mundane.

The latest incarnation of the annoyance sprouted directly in front of him, a six-foot tall wall of bramble that sat directly across the path. It at least had the decency, Yushuv noted, to look appropriately withered for the season, but the growth was impressively thick. He looked to the left and right, only to see that going around the obstacle was not an option. The path—more accurately a game trail—ran along a valley floor. The spot where the brambles sprouted was a natural bottleneck, formed by a place where the jutting rock faces on either side of the valley pressed toward each other. There was scarcely room on either side of the thorns for a squirrel to get through, much less a boy who'd put on twenty pounds of hard muscle under Dace and Lilith's tutelage.

Sighing, Yushuv drew his knife and started hacking away. The brush was surprisingly resistant and springy, and it took a good half hour before he'd cleared enough of an

aperture to be able to squeeze through. Even so, he still lost some skin doing so, and a series of scratches along the flesh of his left forearm bore evidence to the fact that he hadn't cleared out quite enough.

Yushuv examined the tears in his shirt and arm and looked up. The sun had already vanished behind one of the hills flanking his route, and he estimated that he had perhaps an hour left before it grew dark. It was time to find a campsite.

From where he stood, the path plunged precipitously down as the valley deepened. He could see ahead to where a small but energetic waterfall burst from the cliff face to his right, to tumble into a small pool on the valley floor. That, he decided, was a good enough spot, and he picked his way downhill with something approaching great care.

The pool, it turned out, was where the game trail ended. It opened to a grassy shelf overlooking the clear water, and a plethora of animal tracks were in evidence. Yushuv chose for himself a spot near the edge of the clearing, so as to avoid being trampled in the night, and set about gathering fuel for a fire. That task accomplished, he laid snares by the water's edge in hopes of catching a hare or two, then settled in to start the fire.

It took several tries to get the wood to catch. The spray from the falls made everything just damp enough to smolder, but not to burn, and he was finally forced to indulge in the use of a touch of power to kindle a flame. Once lit, it blazed merrily, and he sat by the fire listening to the rhythm of the falling water. Supper was a strip of jerky from his pack, augmented by some dried fruit, and then he let the sound of the falls lull him to sleep.

Yushuv awoke three hours later. The valley was dark, and his fire had burned down to embers. He looked frantically left and then right, searching for the disturbance that had roused him. There was none. No creatures blundered through the brush, no warriors held aloft shining blades, no eyes glowed redly in the darkness. Nothing seemed out of place.

His fingers found a pine cone from his kindling pile, which he jammed onto a stick and rolled in the embers until it caught. It burned fiercely, and he squinted in its glare as he searched for the cause of his unease. The light cast long shadows among the trees and reflected off the still waters of the pool, and then Yushuv realized why he had awakened.

For where there had been a steady torrent of water when he had made his camp there was now only dark gray stone, shot through with seams of white and gleaming in the torchlight. The waterfall itself was gone.

It had been the silence, Yushuv realized. That is what had disturbed his sleep. He walked down to the water's edge, the torch before him, and looked up to see if he could discover what had stopped the flow. Cautiously, he peered up to the edge of the firelight.

Suddenly, the waters rushed forth from the cliff face, redoubled. The roar cut through the night, and underneath it all, Yushuv thought he heard a voice, bellowing his name. He stared out at the water, but saw nothing.

After a moment, the water flowed normally once again, and the tormented voice—if voice there had been—faded to nothing. The night noises resumed, and Yushuv was left with the feeling that he had somehow missed something important.

He knelt to extinguish the torch in the water, then shambled off to bed.

It was nearly noon when Yushuv awoke again, this time to a far more pleasant sound. A rabbit had stumbled onto one of his snares, and was energetically thrashing about by the waterside. Yushuv roused himself, splashed some water on his face, and then took a moment to wring the creature's neck. With practiced skill he skinned it and impaled the carcass on a pointed twig, then set about rebuilding the fire. This accomplished, he roasted the rabbit and ate it with obvious delight. Lilith, he thought, would be scandalized at the wasted effort, but the sizzling





meat was exactly what he needed to restore himself. The strange events of the night before told him it was time to move on. He gnawed the last bit of meat off the rabbit's corpse, tossed the bones aside, and went to wash the grease from his fingers. He leaned over the water's edge and reached down toward the pool's smooth surface.

A watery hand reached up before he could do so, claspng his right wrist in a powerful, but gentle embrace. Yushuv had a moment of panic, and then a hulking figure rose up from the depths. A jagged split in its rough head passed for a mouth, and two dull orbs were its eyes.

"Shooth!" Yushuv said, and stopped struggling. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you," the spirit said, and released its grip. "Found you, too."

Yushuv felt himself grinning. The last time he'd seen Shooth, the water spirit had saved his life from the wolf spirit Bonecrack, and while that had been months ago, Yushuv had retained a certain fondness for it. "Yes," he said, "you found me. Good thing, too. I was just about to use you to wash my hands."

"Shooth will wash you," it said, and before Yushuv could protest he was doused by the spirit's attentions. A wave descended upon him, soaking both Yushuv himself and his bedroll, and putting out the last struggling bits of campfire. He staggered back, shaking his head and spraying water everywhere.

"That's not quite what I meant, Shooth," he said wryly, and shook both his arms in a vain effort to dry them. The spirit started to stammer an apology, but Yushuv waved him off. "No, no, it's no matter. It'll all dry soon. So why were you looking for me?"

"Dace asked," the spirit replied, and shuffled uncomfortably. "Dace said to find you."

"He doesn't want you to bring me back, does he?" Yushuv leapt back, his hands instinctively curling into fists. "I won't go, Shooth. Not even with you."



"No," the spirit said, shaking its head slowly. "With message."

"A message?" Yushuv asked, relaxing a little. "For me?"

The spirit's head nodded slowly. "Yes. From Dace."

Yushuv blinked. "Well, what is it?"

"Oh. Shooth tell now."

He chewed on the inside of his cheek in an effort to hide his annoyance. "Yes. Please tell me."

"You need to go."

"Go?"

"Out of the woods. Hurry."

"Hurry?" Yushuv's brow furrowed. "Why?"

"Danger." The spirit scratched its head ponderously. "Dace says you need to stop wandering though the woods. You'll be safer if you go west, where they don't have so much power." It shrugged, or at least gave the impression of doing so. "That is all Dace told me."

"Did Dace say what I was in danger from?" Yushuv was already packing up his meager campsite. He glanced up at the spirit, who had not moved from the center of the pool. "Why didn't he come himself?"

"He said he was busy fighting, Shooth thinks. Shooth does not know. Lilith said you would know."

"Fair Folk." Yushuv finished tying his pack shut and sprang to his feet. "I should go back and help them."

"No!" Shooth was surprisingly vehement. "Shooth was told to tell you to go. Shooth will not let you go back." It raised one arm and pointed, away to the south and west. "Go. Shooth will tell them you listened. They will be pleased."

Yushuv stared at the spirit. It looked back, implacable.

"Fine," he said. "I can't keep running away forever, you know."

"Shooth doesn't know much," was the reply, and then the water spirit sank back down into the pool.

Yushuv carefully buried the bones and the evidence of his camp. Satisfied, he refilled his waterskin, hoping he didn't catch any of Shooth's substance in it. His prepara-

† tions complete, he took one last look around the site.  
‡ Overhead, the sun had already started the second half of its  
§ daily trek. It was time to move. With a last look backward,  
¶ Yushuv put his head down and walked off. This time, there  
‡ were no thorns to bar his way.



# Chapter Fourteen

None of the prince's remaining servants paused to watch Ratcatcher go. He rode off in the gloom of a misty evening, his two companions and a pair of pack animals trailing behind him like rags tied to a tattered kite. No one emerged from the heavy wooden doors to shut the citadel gate behind them, so Mushroom and Mold dismounted and did so themselves while Ratcatcher watched. The gate clanged shut with the sound of a hammer on a cracked anvil, and then the two figures hurried to remount. Ratcatcher gazed back at the citadel one last time, and then rode off. The others, their eyes respectfully averted, followed.

Three days out from the prince's citadel, Ratcatcher finally admitted to himself that he had no idea where the expedition was going. Camped in a small but dry cave under a limestone overhang, he watched Mushroom (or was it Mold?) industriously turn a spit on which two unlucky rabbits had been impaled, while his companion hauled water to the cave from the nearby stream. The mounts were tethered to a bare-branched shrub by the water's edge, and from time to time one dipped its head to the stream and drank. A thin pillar of smoke spiraled up from the fire and crept along the cave ceiling, mercifully blowing out and away.

Ratcatcher squinted at it. "We should do something about that fire. Someone will see the smoke."

✠ Mushroom looked up from his labors, a look of horror on his soft, pudgy face. "Oh, no, we couldn't do that. There's no one here to see, and even if there were, surely no one would dare attack your campsite."

✠ "You haven't been paying attention to my personal history, have you?" Ratcatcher said sourly, but he restricted himself to poking restlessly at the flames with broken-tipped stick. A tiny geyser of sparks burst from one of the embers as it split under the relentless prodding, and Mushroom gave a frightened shriek.

"Please, Lord Ratcatcher, do not interfere with the fire. You'll scorch the dinner."

"Scorch the dinner?" Ratcatcher raised an eyebrow, slowly. "After all I've been through, you honestly think I give a damn about burning dinner?"

He pulled the stick from the fire, and the end glowed cherry red. Unsmiling, he leaned forward until the smoldering wood was directly under Mushroom's nose. "I don't care if I burn the dinner. Do you understand?" Mushroom opened his mouth, and Ratcatcher added quickly, "Don't speak. Just nod."

Slowly, carefully, Mushroom nodded. Ratcatcher smiled. "Good. Now that we understand my priorities, let's see if you have answers to a couple of other questions that have been troubling me. You will try to answer them, won't you?" Again, Mushroom nodded, his eyes wide with terror. "Good," Ratcatcher said softly. "This doesn't have to hurt if you don't want it to."

"I will answer anything you want, Lord Ratcatcher, anything." Mushroom's voice was a squeal so high pitched as to be nearly unintelligible.

"You say that," Ratcatcher replied, "but I wonder if you mean it. I suppose there's only one way to find out. Where are we going?"

Mushroom gulped, his Adam's apple bulging out obscenely as he did so. His protruding, bloodshot eyes blinked once, and he stammered an answer. "To find the Prince of Shadows, of course. Like we told you."



"That's not good enough, I'm afraid." The stick, now glowing faintly, inched closer to the fat little man's throat. "Where is the prince that you're taking me to meet him?"

"Ah." Mushroom swallowed again. "You may be angry with us when I tell you."

Ratcatcher's smile grew wider. "Oh, I'm angry now. Why don't you just tell me the truth before I get any angrier?"

"Very well. Hear me out, I beg you. We are not taking you to where the prince is, Lord Ratcatcher."

"Ah." Ratcatcher sat back and considered the confession for a moment, not coincidentally taking the opportunity to refresh the heat at the end of his makeshift prod. "I had suspected as much, actually. Now, until recently I would have taken that confession as a perfect excuse to spit you like one of your precious rabbits. I might even have roasted you as well. But I'm a different man these days, and I've learned not to act hastily. That's why I'm going to give you a minute to explain why you lied to me, and where you're actually taking me. If your explanation is good enough, I might even let you live." He yawned elaborately. "I doubt it, of course, but where there's life, there's hope, yes?"

Mushroom released his grip on the spit and prostrated himself. "If it pleases you, Lord Ratcatcher, we are not taking you to the place where the prince is, for it is a long journey and by the time you reached it, he would be long gone. Rather, we are taking you to where he will be." He peered out from between knotted fingers, looking up at Ratcatcher in supplication.

"And where might that be?" The makeshift tent of sticks in the middle of the fire collapsed, and Mushroom winced at the sound.

"A place you know," he said, his face pressed to the cave floor. "Do not ask for more. I cannot tell you."

"Are you sure about that?" Ratcatcher gently prodded his forearm with the butt end of the stick, and Mushroom whimpered as the smell of burned flesh filled the air. "Quite sure?"

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“He cannot tell you, gracious one.” The dead man looked up lazily to see Mold standing at the mouth of the cave, his arms filled with firewood. “We are not permitted to do so, no matter how much we might wish to.”

“And do you wish to?”

“Of course. But our wishes matter little.” He stepped into the cave and over his companion, then carefully began setting the wood down by the fire.

“It seems my wishes matter little as well.” Abruptly disgusted, Ratcatcher stood. The stick dropped from his hand and rolled toward the fire, only to be grabbed by the industrious Mold and stacked with the rest. He stalked off, muttering, and a minute later Mold heard the sound of splashing down by the water.

Mushroom slowly unknotted his fingers and looked up.

“It’s safe now,” his companion said. “He is gone for the moment, and while he is not satisfied, he is willing to trust us for a while longer. He will follow until we reach the Howe.”

“I wish I could kill him,” Mushroom replied, his voice quavering. “I will watch him when he sleeps, and dream of killing him.”

“We are not permitted. You know that. We must serve instead.” Mold’s voice was as even as if he had just commented on the weather.

“I know. And he will kill us.” Slowly Mushroom sat up, his eyes glancing fearfully toward the cave mouth. No ominous shadow filled it.

Mold looked at him reproachfully. “He is supposed to, remember?”

Mushroom cast his gaze at the floor. “I remember.”

“Then that is enough. See to the dinner. It is burning.”

“I shall,” Mushroom said, and bent to his task.

# Chapter Fifteen



The problem with the lands west of the forest and south of the ice, Unforgiven Blossom had long since decided, was that they were too damnably large.

She'd left Holok behind in a pool of his own blood six days prior, stealing a horse from the stables and taking with her nothing but a small pack, some food and water, and the dagger. It was by far the heaviest thing she carried, and not just because of its unnatural weight.

She'd begun to suspect the dagger months before. It seemed to find trouble, and to enjoy bloodshed. Where it went, ill luck had followed. Wren, Ratcatcher, the prince—all of them had suffered reversals after taking it into their possession. The Guild merchant who'd shown it to Wren? Dead as well, and sources told her that the factor who'd bought it from the boy (Wren had been most garrulous about its history in the moments before Ratcatcher interrupted their tea, long ago and far away) had met some misfortune, too.

Now, it seemed, it was her turn, though if there were a curse of some sort laid on it, it was too subtle for her meager arts to detect. And Holok, poor trusting Holok, had paid what seemed to be the heavier price this time around. Her regret was something she could at least carry away.

Six days of travel had yielded little in the way of excitement, however. The land over which she walked was,



if not dead, then at least in mourning. Low, rolling hills skirted flat plains, each covered with a variety of dry, gray grass that supported precious little life. Rare herds of deer bounded across her path, sometimes pursued by wolves, but she apparently had too little meat on her bones for any predators to bother her. She did not stop to hunt, nor were there any roots or berries worth pausing to gather. The food she'd brought with her had proved sufficient thus far, and she required little sustenance these days. At times, she imagined herself living on nothing more than air and darkness, then the fancy passed and she would tear off a small piece of jerky or dried fruit from her meager supplies. The horse, at least, seemed able to feed off the land.

She'd followed the road that curved past the tavern where she'd abandoned Holok for two days, until it became clear that it eventually curved west, to the sea. Frustrated, she took the next fork that led north, then struck out on her own a bit to the east when it showed promise of too much traffic. The thing she was looking for, she was quite certain, would not be found on a crowded thoroughfare.

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Toward the end of the sixth day, Unforgiven Blossom made for herself a more permanent camp than the one she had constructed in the recent past. Set in the lee of a limestone hill that rose up out of the plain like a breaching whale, it was little more than a rough tent, as she took her lone blanket and fastened it to both the stone wall and the ground before it. The horse she tethered some distance away, giving it some potent herbs to keep it quiet. She'd need all her concentration for what lay ahead, and being distracted by a nervous horse's hallucinations would not help matters in the slightest. It looked at her with woozy eyes, then sank onto its haunches in order to best contemplate the dried grass before it.

Satisfied, Unforgiven Blossom retreated to her tent. A small fire smoldered just outside it, and into this she sprinkled a fistful of dried leaves. The fire's scent immedi-

ately grew pungent, though the thick, heavy smoke crept along the ground rather than rising into the skies. One tendril of it poked at the horse, which whinnied blearily, and then lazily snaked past it and onto the plain.

She exhaled, realizing she'd been holding her breath. The first part of the augury was done. Now, it was time for the second. She'd have to accomplish it while the fire still burned, and without adding fuel to buy herself more time. That left her, by her experienced estimate, somewhere just over an hour. Damning the paucity of firewood available, she patted the sheath inside her robes to make sure the dagger was still there, then set off at a lope in search of prey.

It took Unforgiven Blossom nearly the full hour before her hunt was successful. She hurried back into camp, a brace of throat-slashed partridges tied together by their feet and slung over her shoulder. The tendrils of smoke were everywhere now, prying into her tent and crawling up over the hill. She stepped over them carefully, then lay the birds down by the fire. Squatting next to them, she gutted both and pulled out their vitals with a practiced hand.

The first one's liver was normal, and she cut it out before throwing it on the fire. The scudding tentacles of smoke reacted immediately, recoiling on themselves and shrinking back into the fire. Now only one remained, casting this way and that like a broken-backed snake. Rearing up, it struck dangerously close to where Unforgiven Blossom crouched, but she ignored it. It struck the ground again, and she made an impatient gesture. The smoke shrank away, and she glared after it. Cowed, it slunk off to the other side of the fire.

"Damnation," she muttered, and dug her hands into the belly of the other bird. A second later, they emerged, smeared with blood and offal. The bird's liver was clasped between her fingers, a diseased, mottled thing.

She studied for a moment, turning it over several times and making note of the markings. Then, satisfied that she had learned what she needed to know, she tossed it on the fire.

The pillar of smoke shot straight up toward the heavens. Tongues of flame licked through it, illuminating it from within and bathing Unforgiven Blossom in an eerie glow. Higher and higher it stretched until it was five times the height of a man.

Then, abruptly, there was a sharp crack, as if something precious had just been broken, and in a heartbeat the flames were snuffed out. The smoke collapsed to the ground. It lay, twitching helplessly and pointing to the east. Even as she watched, it shifted slightly to the south, then shifted again. Then, its work done, the smoke simply sank into the ground. A black trace on the dead grass remained behind, mute evidence of the augury's direction.

Disappointed, Unforgiven Blossom stood and stretched. The augury had spoken. There was no doubt about that. But daylight was fading, and the direction offered by the birds' livers had been vague in the extreme. It would be best, she decided, to camp until morning, and then to follow the smoke column's direction to her destination. In the meantime, she needed to gather more fuel for the fire. The night promised to be cold, and the thought of roast partridge for supper cheered her. Slipping off into the gathering gloom, she restored the dagger to its hiding place and went hunting a slightly different sort of prey.

The horse, she had noted before allowing herself to sleep, was still quiet. This was a pleasant surprise. She'd not named the animal under the assumption that she would soon have to either sell or kill it, and the constant noise it had made over the first week of travel had inclined her toward the latter. The herbs had worked magnificently, she told herself as she drifted off to sleep. Perhaps a lighter dose would be effective for when she traveled.

In the morning, the horse was gone. A series of footprints in the broken grass near where she'd tethered it told the story: a man, or men, had visited her campsite in

the middle of the night and made off with her horse. They'd gone off to the west, and there was no way she could catch them. She cursed her cleverness in having sedated the animal to excess. No doubt it would have given some warning of the theft had it not been too drugged to do so

A shiver ran through her as she realized that only luck had kept the horse thieves from creeping into her makeshift tent and dispatching her as well. Perhaps the thieves had thought an old woman alone on the grasslands would perish on her own soon enough, or perhaps they lacked the fortitude to do the deed. It did not matter. She was alone and on foot, with no way of turning back and only an omen-haunted marker before her.

"It was a good horse," she said to no one in particular, and began the process of breaking down her tent. It was likely to be a very long day.





## Chapter Sixteen

It was a grand Wyld Hunt that mustered on the quays of the Imperial City, one the likes of which had not been seen in years. Banners of all of the Great Houses snapped and cracked in the breeze, while the smaller, more humble pennons of less reputable bloodlines whipped madly alongside them. Dragon-Blooded warriors stood resplendent in their armor, surrounded by servants, family members and slaves. Baggage was hauled onto a full dozen ships with alacrity, teamsters and house servants working together with a will. Here and there someone's anima flared into life and then sank away to nothingness, while around them other Dragon-Blooded sniggered at the breach of protocol. Swords and axes were taken from scabbards and tested against one another—in friendly fashion, of course. Steeds snorted and whinnied and stamped their feet against the flagstones of the harbor, as grooms led them one by one onto the waiting ships.

Kejak watched the assemblage through a lace-shaded window and sighed, then let the curtain drop into place as he turned away. This was the flower of the Isle's youth, the ones he could pry away from boozing and whoring and their petty little plots long enough to make war on behalf of all Creation. The crowd outside on the quay wasn't a collection of second sons and rebellious daughters; it was bastards

and by-blows, hell-raisers and failures sent off on the Wyld Hunt by parents who frankly wished to be rid of them. A daughter who'd been ejected from the House of Bells for cowardice was a liability; that same daughter dead to an Anathema was a hero, and her memory could be used as another tiny piece on the board of the great game.



They didn't know what they were really after or whose ends they were truly serving, of course. Officially, this was a Wyld Hunt called to scour certain lands of the Threshold whose princes and satraps had been afflicted with Anathema of late. The host's presence had been requested by those noble potentates, the plea for assistance forwarded to the Mouth of Peace herself. She had issued the call, not Kejak, and the gathering outside was here at her command. The fact that those satrapies that had called for help were all blessed with advisors who owed their allegiance—and positions—to Kejak was surely a coincidence. To any observer, his hands were clean.

He paced the small chamber, unaccountably nervous. It was Spartan, as befitted a monk—nothing but a reed mat on the floor and a small writing desk of lacquered wood. A stool sat by the window, and a half-empty bowl of oil with a scorched wick in it rested near the doorway. The floors were wood and the walls plaster, and only the lace of the curtains bespoke any touch of luxury.

Kejak kept this apartment for times when his other dwellings grew intolerable. This was such a time. The decay of his divining chamber had not spread further, but it gave the sense of waiting for the right time to do so. Several acolytes in the temple had reported seeing either large rats or serpents in the corridors, and while the claims were patently ridiculous, they had set tempers among the postulantes on edge. Terrified shrieks, Kejak noted wryly, were not conducive to meditative exercises.

And so he had come here, and from this place he had given the orders that led to the muster outside his window. From the window he had watched the young ones arrive, the

nervous first-timers jostling for pride of place, the arrogant ones arriving in their own time with their worthless entou-  
rages, and the stragglers desperate not to miss the great  
adventure. He'd heard the arguments over which ship would  
carry which riders—this Peleps refused to share a vessel with  
that Iselsi, and so on and so forth until he swore the very stones  
creaked in protest. But now they were all here, and the time  
to loose them, all unsuspecting, upon the world had come.

There was a tentative knock on the doorframe. Kejak  
turned. Standing there was a priest, garbed in the robes and  
insignia that indicated that she was a Most Revered Pur-  
suer of the Ancient Enemy, a monk of the Fifth and highest  
coil. Her skin was tinged blue, and she carried with her the  
smell of fresh water running through farmland. It cut  
through the salt tang of the sea like a surgeon's knife, and  
shocked Kejak out of his reverie.

"All is in readiness, Revered Teacher," said the monk, and  
she bowed ever so slightly as she clasped her hands before her.

"Excellent." Kejak gestured her into the room. She  
bowed her head again and entered, leaving wet footprints  
behind as she did so. "I trust there were no problems?"

None whatsoever, Excellency. The ships are provi-  
sioned, the berthing assignments resolved, and the Mouth  
of Peace's blessing on the enterprise secured." She sat,  
cross-legged, on the floor, and nodded. "All that remains is  
the final address before departure, so that they might know  
what they hunt."

Kejak smiled.

"Ah. And you are to give that address, are you not?"

She nodded. "I am Nellens T'fillit, Most Revered Pur-  
suer of the Ancient Enemy. I have led the Wyld Hunt three  
dozen times, and I have taken the kill on fifteen occasions.  
While I care not for such things, my family has extensive  
holdings in several of the disturbed provinces, and it is my duty  
to both my ancestors and Creation to end their depredations."

"Ah. And that is what you will tell them?" Kejak sat  
across from her, his smile grown thinner.

"It is the truth." A faint frown crossed her face, and her flawless brow grew ever so slightly wrinkled. "And in enterprises like this, the truth is important."

Kejak threw back his head and laughed. "By the dragons, woman, you're perfect. The heavens knew what they were doing when they sent you to me."

The woman who called herself T'fillit permitted herself a small chuckle. "I am glad you think so, and that I play this part so well for you. I've spent fifty years in the Palace Sublime, and still no one suspects that I'm more than a simple priestess." She shook her head in mock disapproval. "Really, Kejak, is it necessary? You created the Order; it dances to your whims. Must you spy on it as well? Five decades of playing masquerade grows tiresome."

"Why should they suspect you are other than what they think you are? You look remarkable, the very soul of water. And yes, your labors are important. Sometimes a subtler guidance is necessary. They must think they are self-led, and we cannot allow them the luxury of straying from the path we have set. That way lies schism, and then tolerance of the foulest evils imaginable. We know what lies beyond that; the auguries have shown us as much. Destruction. Chaos. Oblivion. Be content in your service, and know that it is appreciated. I heed your counsel, which is not something many can say. And the Immaculates—they heed you, do they not?"

"They do. They heed me, they obey my teachings, and they listen to my counsel, for I am wise in the ways of the Elemental Dragons—and in the ways of killing Anathema." She coughed delicately into one bluish hand. "They appreciate the practical experience."

"I'll wager they do," said Kejak, and rose. He walked to the window. After a minute, his visitor joined him.

"You do know what this is all about," he asked, and waved vaguely at the gathering below.

"Besides the hunt?"

"It's a question of whom you're going to be hunting. There's Anathema out there, a little sun-boy who whipped





Holok and butchered the Hunt he led." He paused, and gauged her reaction. "Does that surprise you?"

"Frankly, yes." She stepped away from the window, shaking her head. "Holok's not an easy man to whip. There's some power behind this boy."

"There is," Kejak agreed. "Some of the others know of him, and there's been much debate over what to do. I sent Holok out to find him once, and Holok came back with the boy's knife in his gut. I sent Holok out again, and he vanished."

"Do you think he's dead?"

A slight ripple of his shoulders passed for a shrug. "I doubt it, but it's a possibility. Wren's dead, though, or so my sources tell me. The boy's still at large, the heavens are hidden from me, and there's been a rash of disturbances across the northeast corner of the Threshold."

"And that's where we're going," the woman said grimly.

Kejak nodded, twice. "That's where you're going. Officially, you're there to hunt the Anathema. You don't need to tell the children that they're hunting something that's already got a half dozen notches in his dagger. They're going to be enough trouble as is, each trying to outdo the next. Let them know that the boy's a prize, and they'll be tripping over one another to be first to be decapitated by him. No, just let them know there are monsters out there, and that they're to make a grand progress from province to province, satrapy to satrapy flushing them out."

He turned, his expression brooding. "The ones you trust—and I expect they'll be few and far between—you can tell that you're meeting up with an advance scout, namely, Holok. They may not believe you, but they'll at least be on the lookout for him, and won't do something foolish like play 'ride down the Itinerant.' Some of them have a less than respectful attitude toward the Immaculate order, you know."

She rolled her eyes. "That, with any luck, will be the least of my worries."

"I know. But I'd hate for any of them to pick a fight with Holok, thinking he was another district priest they could bat around at will. You'll need to instill some respect in that lot."

"I think I can do that," she said softly.

Kejak grunted something that might have been an agreement. "Are you thirsty?" he said suddenly, and when she nodded in the affirmative, he clapped twice. The sound of scurrying footsteps rose up from the first floor, servants rushing to heed their master's call. A face appeared in the doorway, round and plump and poorly shaved. The body attached to it was equally plump, and garbed in the robes of a postulant.

"How can I assist, Revered One?" he said, not daring to peer more than halfway across the threshold into the room.

"Tea," Kejak replied. "Bring tea."

"Yes, Revered One," the acolyte said with pathetic eagerness, and scurried off.

"You'll enjoy this," Kejak said when the acolyte was gone. "It's the finest tea on the entire Isle. Grown in the shadows of the towers of the Lap, if you please. The mountain air does it good."

"I look forward to trying it," the woman said. "I seem to recall, though, that Holok never liked the stuff. It was part of his adoption of the Immaculate creed, never mind his hand in its origins"

"You recall correctly." Kejak replied, an edge of impatience in his voice. "He preferred boiled acorns. Something about his rustic roots, and my having become soft after too many years of comfort in the Imperial City."

"Mmm. Perhaps that's what he's doing out there, you know—living in some hut somewhere boiling oak leaves and calling it finer than wine." She paused, reflective for a moment. "It's a pity I may have to drag him back to civilization."

"He doesn't have the luxury of his preferences, T'fillit," Kejak said brusquely. "None of us do, not the way the portents are looking these days. Find him. Bring him home."



K Kill the boy if you can. Kill anything else suspicious you find. And don't philosophize over whether Holok's earned the right to squat in a hovel on the shore of the River of Tears eating tubers and brewing nettles. Am I understood?"

H Her face was a frozen mask of duty. "Yes," she said softly. "I know. I understand."

"Good," Kejak said, his voice quiet but his eyes full of menace. A footfall thudded out from the stair. He smiled, then, but the smile did not reach his eyes. "The tea is coming. I insist you share a cup with me before you set sail. I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

•   •   •

The ships ended up not sailing until the following morning. A handful of servants wearing the colors of House Mnemon had gotten into a brawl with an equal number of sailors, and the scrap had escalated until a half dozen Dragon-Bloods were slugging it out in full battle regalia by the harborside. The rest of the huntsmen were no help, encircling the combatants, making wagers and hooting encouragement. The situation had only been resolved by the intervention of a handful of monks under T'fillit's leadership, who'd efficiently thrown all of the offenders off the quay and into the water. One nearly drowned, and the excitement dimmed after that, but by the time all the ruffled feathers were soothed, it was late in the day. The Dragon-Bloods and their servants repaired to family apartments or expensive hostels for the night, the sailors sighed and stowed gear, and Kejak watched impatiently out his window.

Come dawn, the renewed muster was surprisingly swift, though many of the would-be huntsmen seemed somewhat the worse for wear. Under the baleful eyes of Immaculate monks, they trooped on board, listened to T'fillit's exhortatory address, and prepared themselves for the voyage. Birds wheeled overhead as lines were cast off and winds bellied out the sails. Below decks, the beat of the oar-master's drum could be heard, its sound echoing from one ship to the next.

By the third hour after dawn, they were gone, their sails vanishing into the haze of distance out on the water. Kejak stood by his window and stared out after them, even after mist and distance hid them from his view. A cold cup of tea, untouched since yesterday, sat on the windowsill. He glanced at it now, and lifted it to his lips.

"Pfah," he said, after a single swallow. "Bitter." He put the cup back down and gazed into it. A few leaves floated in the dark green liquid, and he addressed them. "You've been steeped in your own squeezings for far too long. But then again, perhaps so have I."

He put the cup to his lips once again, and drank it to the dregs, then clapped his hands and called for more. Downstairs, the servants scurried to obey.

Satisfied with the sounds of their response, Kejak returned to the window. The empty teacup he let fall to the ground below, and it shattered on the stone of the quay. A few drops of bitter tea were no doubt scattered among the shards, and silently he commanded them to seek the sea, to make it as harsh to his enemies as the tea had been on his lips.

A messenger wearing the badge of the Deliberative hurried by the house, and her sandals crunched the pieces of broken porcelain. Without slowing, she continued on, leaving behind shards crushed to powder.

Kejak barked laughter at the sight. The spell was broken, and he turned to await the new day's offering from his servants.

This day, he promised himself even as he ordered the postulants to bring him honey with his tea, would not be bitter. T'fillit's hunters would succeed in at least one of their tasks, and this morning's labors would ultimately be sweet indeed.





## Chapter Seventeen

It was the sound of fighting that finally lured Yushuv out of the trees.

He'd been planning on coming down out of the woods for several days now, but ever-present fear had told him that as long as he could keep moving roughly southward, he was better off staying in the cover of the trees. Beyond them, where the last low hills surrendered to flatlands, was a broad, grassy plain that offered no cover whatsoever. In warmer seasons the grass would have likely stood tall enough to hide him from prying eyes, but now the desiccated stalks had been trampled down by wind and weather. Once he left the shelter of the forest, he'd be visible for miles in any direction, and the thought of distant Fair Folk archers sighting down their slender arrows at him made the skin between his shoulder blades itch. Dace and Shooth had told him to get out of the trees, but Dace and Shooth weren't here.

He'd seen no evidence of the pursuit Shooth had warned him about, but that didn't mean it wasn't there. He also saw nothing of Shooth, or indeed, of anything else larger than some oversized squirrels which he routinely caught for his supper. A nagging feeling of uneasiness, however, drove him on, and he made better time through the thinning woods than he thought possible.



It was not so much that he was being pursued, Yushuv realized after a few days. It was that he felt like he was being led.

For more than a week, he traveled like this, waking every morning with the anticipation that today would be the day when his destination would be revealed—or when the Fair Folk would come charging out of the brush and render all such hopes irrelevant.

And then, a little after noon on the ninth day, he heard the unmistakable sound of combatants trying to do grave injury unto one another. The noise traveled clearly through the thin scrim of trees separating him from bush-spangled plains, grunts and screams and once, the instantly recognizable snap of a thick bone breaking. There was no sound of weapons striking one another, but a second's listening provided him with the sound of something heavy and metallic hitting the ground.

The urge to run out and throw himself into the fray surged up, but Yushuv throttled it. *No sense getting involved if I don't know what I'm getting into—or who I should be fighting for*, he told himself. Instead, he contented himself with shimmying up one of the slender pines that marked the edge of the forest, and peering out into the plain for a look.

It took him a moment to locate the source of the disturbance, as it was further out from the trees than he'd anticipated. Sound, it seemed, traveled well here. But after an instant of searching, his eyes caught what he was looking for, and silently, he watched.

Perhaps thirty yards from where he perched, an unarmed old woman in a plain gray robe was beset by bandits. There were five of them, and they were circling her at a wary distance. One held his left wrist as if it were in great pain, and the others held wicked-looking knives. Even as he watched, a heavyset fellow with his greasy hair tied back, launched himself at his victim. His blade, poised on high for a killing blow, caught the afternoon sunlight.

The old woman turned and, without a single wasted motion, stepped inside the bandit's downward stroke. The

knife cut the air behind her, and even as it did so she ducked and struck a blow to the man's ample belly. The air went out of him in a whoosh, but before he had time to double over she threw another punch. This one took him in the groin, and he made a sound that spanned the distance between a scream and a whistle in no time at all. The knife dropped from his nerveless fingers, and he folded into himself like a piece of poorly made origami. Before he hit the ground, she had already turned to face her next opponent.

Yushuv had seen enough. He leapt from the tree and hit the ground running, his fingers already closing on the hilt of his knife. For a moment he'd considered using the bow to pick off the highwaymen from his perch, but dismissed it as unworthy. Besides, he admitted to himself as he ran, getting his hands dirty again might be fun.

Another bandit was down by the time he reached the rough circle. The man was on his hands and knees, puking his guts out onto the dead grass. His own knife stuck out of the back of his right hand.

The man with the bad wrist turned as Yushuv approached. He was dressed like a farmer's idea of a robber, a scarf tied around his head and dirty rags knotted around his fists. He was thin, but not skeletally so, and his hair was close-cropped to his skull. A ragged beard covered his chin, and his eyes were wild. "It's just a boy," he said, and set himself in position to receive Yushuv's charge. He'd found his knife somewhere, and it gleamed in his good fist. "I don't know where you came from, little one, but you'll be sorry you found this place."

Yushuv, for his part, said nothing. He feinted high, drawing the man's knife away from his belly, then thrust low. Amused derision turned to stunned surprise on the man's face, as he looked down to see the haft of Yushuv's knife sticking out of his belly.

"You should be more careful of your targets," Yushuv said, and then pulled the blade free. The man collapsed, clutching his leaking gut in an attempt to halt the bleeding

even as he fell. Yushuv pivoted, scooped up the man's knife, and turned back to the fray.

The fray, he soon saw, was nearly over. While he'd been dealing with the bandit with the bad wrist, the old woman had taken down another opponent. There was only one man still standing, and he held his knife out in front of himself like a talisman against evil spirits.

"Don't come any closer," he said, his gaze flicking back and forth between the two nervously. "If you take another step, you'll be sorry."

"If you say so," replied Yushuv, and threw the knife he'd taken from his opponent. It flew straight and true, catching the startled robber in the eye. His hands flew up to defend himself, but too late; the knife had already struck home. Staggering backwards a step, he said, "Not fair," weakly, and clutched at the knife's handle futilely. The blood made the grip slick, and his fingers slid off even as he collapsed. His one good eye stared blankly up at the sky; the other was a ruin of dark blood.

Yushuv turned to address the woman he'd rescued, but she'd already taken swift steps over to where the surviving bandits were huddled on the ground. She stood over them, her face dispassionate, and for the first time Yushuv could see she had a heavy dagger at her belt. Reaching for it with one slender hand, she drew it forth.

Where the other blades had caught the light, this amplified it. The gleam of sunlight on the blade made the dead grass seem vibrant and alive, made the rough clothes of the bandits seem to be lined in gold. The blade itself was marked with subtle animal patterns, and Yushuv could see that the hilt was carved into the shape of a roaring lion's head.

"This is yours," the old woman said, her eyes still on the crawling figures on the ground. "I expect you recognize it?"

"Yes," Yushuv breathed. "But how?"

"I stole it, just as you did. Now is not the time for foolish questions. Phrase for yourself some wise ones instead." She caught one of the moaning bandits behind the ear with a kick, and he thudded to the earth.





“We should do something about them,” Yushuv said, ignoring her challenge.

The woman nodded, and rendered another one of the survivors unconscious. “Yes, we should. What do you suggest?”

Yushuv chewed on his lower lip. “They don’t seem to be any danger now. Do you think it’s necessary to kill them?”

“I do not know. Is it?” The last of the surviving bandits saw her coming and tried to crawl off, but she easily outpaced him. He gave a whimper of terror, an instant before she brought the pommel of the dagger down on the back of his neck. Like his friends, he collapsed instantly. “There. Now we can talk freely.”

“We can?” Yushuv sidestepped warily, his own knife still out. “I don’t even know your name, or why those men were attacking you.”

Instead of responding immediately, the woman lowered herself to the ground and sat, cross-legged. She placed the dagger, hilt-first, on the ground in front of her, then folded her hands primly in her lap. “They were attacking me for this. I suppose I should not have been displaying it quite so prominently, but after several days it seemed the best way to lure you from your concealment.”

“To lure me?” Yushuv made no move to claim the dagger. “You’ve been following me?”

“Say, rather, that I have been anticipating you. The bandits, on the other hand, have been following me, and I was finally kind enough to slow down and permit them to catch me.” The woman paused, and cocked her head at a curious angle. “They may now wish they had not done so.”

“You could say that.” Yushuv scanned the horizon and frowned. “We should be getting away from here. All that blood’s going to bring predators.”

The old woman laughed, a delicate sound. “I do not think you or I have much to worry about from animals. You have been marked by the wolf and the carrion bird; it is your time. Any beasts who feast on the dead here should bow down to you.”

He took several steps back. "How do you know all of this about me?"

"I know what I have been told," she replied calmly. "No more, no less, and I do not understand all that I know. There are times when I wish I knew less, or that the auguries were less clear. Believe me, child, it brought me no pleasure to bring this trinket to you. Knowing what you may do with it brings me less."

"Then why?" Yushuv stopped backpedaling, but held his ground. In the distance, he could see some clouds scudding low along the horizon. They promised rain, if not worse.

"Explaining this would take longer than we have, unless you wish me to render my assailants unconscious at regular intervals throughout our conversation." She frowned, and smoothed a stray hair back into place. "Take the dagger. The rest is unimportant."

"If you tell me your name, I'll take the dagger," Yushuv blurted out. "If you don't, I won't."

"There is no time for games," she said angrily. "My name will mean nothing to you."

Yushuv folded his arms across his chest. "Nevertheless, I insist."

The old woman sighed. "I am called Unforgiven Blossom, for reasons that make themselves more apparent to me every day. Are you satisfied?"

Nodding, Yushuv darted in and grabbed the dagger. The weight was oddly familiar in his hand, the serpent-shaped grip oddly warm. He doubted the heat from her tiny fingers was responsible for the effect.

He thrust it through his belt, then paused and extended his hand to the old woman. Her eyes widened, and she clasped it with both of hers. "Come on," he said. "It's going to rain."

"What about them?" she asked, the sweep of her head indicating the men who lay unconscious on the ground. "Or are you not worried that wild animals will find *them*?"

"They've got a better chance than they might have had with just you," he said. "I think there are a lot of things you need to tell me."





"I think, rather, there are a lot of things you think you would like to hear." Unforgiven Blossom allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. "Under the trees, then, until the storm passes."



Yushuv looked south. The clouds were drawing closer. Up ahead, the forest beckoned invitingly. "Until the rain ends," he said, nodding. "Let's go."

# Chapter Eighteen



Eliezer Wren woke up surrounded and forty feet in the air. Below him, he could hear an unfamiliar voice shouting, "Hoy! Hoy up there!" and for a moment he wondered why the mice living under the flagstones of his chamber were so loud. Then he opened his eyes, and his unpleasant circumstances revealed themselves to him in full.

Wren lay wedged between two enormous branches of a massive, ancient oak tree. A woven mat of smaller branches and leaves was tucked neatly in beneath him, to provide support and a softer resting place, and further along the branch an enormous golden sword had been lashed to the bough with thongs of leather.

All of this Wren remembered. After all, he'd climbed the tree the night before in order to find a safe place to sleep, and he'd tied the daiklave to the branch with his own hands. One couldn't be too careful, he told himself, even in the relatively civilized lands near the Inner Sea. Even if one were a combat-trained Immaculate monk (*Former monk*, his conscience told him, and he shushed it) who'd been Exalted by the Unconquered Sun and filled with unholy power by one of the dead gods, one still had to nap occasionally. And as such, to prevent himself from being perforated as Anathema while he slumbered, he'd taken to sleeping in trees or other suitably inaccessible locations.

He'd also taken to letting his hair grow out beneath his hat and stealing clothes from isolated farmhouses, but that was a whole other matter. A common thief would not be remembered. An Immaculate might be. An Anathema most certainly would be, and Wren had long since deemed any notice at all to be extremely hazardous

Now, however, he looked down from his perch and saw that someone rather unpleasant had in fact noticed him. A quartet of armored riders was clustered around the base of the tree, looking up at him. The apparent leader wore heavy armor, lacquered in a pattern of green and blue swirls, and he was pointing with apparent unfriendly intent. His right hand held the reins of his steed, which looked vaguely horse-like underneath its barding, and a thunderously heavy mace was slung across his back. His helmet was off, and from where he lay Wren could see what looked to be pleasant enough features, slightly flushed with exertion.

*Dragon-Bloods*, he thought. *What the hell are they doing out here?* Instantly, his mind supplied the answer: *They're hunting me.*

"Hoy again! You, in the tree! Who are you?" Wren noticed that none of the other three had their helmets off, and indeed two of them had made not-so-subtle movements in the direction of their weapons. None, he saw, had bows, however, and that was a good thing.

They did, however, stand between him and the ground.

Grumbling at the ache in his back, he rose to a crouch. The branch he had slept on was wide enough for him to stand on, but he didn't feel like exposing himself quite that much. Running his hands over the stolen tunic and leggings he wore to smooth them, he shouted down "A simple traveler who was trying to get some sleep, thank you very much."

The leader of the quartet laughed, without much humor. "There's a hostel a half-hour's ride from here. Why didn't the weary traveler stay there instead?"

"The weary traveler is too poor for hostels, I must confess. Is that all?"



"I'm afraid not." The man in the enameled armor smiled affably, while his companions dismounted and moved to positions around the perimeter of the tree's foliage. "A man who climbs halfway to heaven to sleep is a man of rare talent. That sort of talent makes me curious. Who are you?"

Wren sighed. While he didn't know the Dragon-Blooded loudmouth below by name, he certainly knew him by type—young, officious and eager to let the world know how powerful and important he was. No doubt this idiot had been poking his nose into the business of everyone and everything around him since disembarking in the Threshold, with his three friends assisting. It was just Wren's bad luck to have caught the man's eye on a morning when he hadn't already been distracted by a fox or a peasant wench in a low-cut blouse, or a shiny trinket laying in the dust.

*Best to attempt something near the truth, then,* Wren decided, and hope for the young idiot to grow bored and go away.

"I'm an Immaculate monk on an itinerant mission of five years' duration," he shouted down, "and if you have any other questions, you're going to have to go ask my abbot. Satisfied?"

"I hate to doubt you, revered one, but you don't, ahhh, you don't *look* like a priest." The young Dragon-Blood scratched his head with due affectation. "'Care to explain the hair, for one thing?'"

"I lost my razor, and felt it would be presumptuous to buy another one, as I'd clearly proven unworthy to care for the last. Are you always this impertinent?"

By means of a response, the man reached to his belt for a leaf-bladed knife, then flung it underhand and straight up. It smacked into the bottom of the branch Wren stood on with a solid *thwock*, striking hard enough to make the entire bough shudder perceptibly. "Yes," he said. "And surely you could have gone to another temple to tend to your ablutions. And, for that matter, your robes." One of the other riders called out something, too low for Wren to

hear, but from the look on his inquisitor's face he knew it wasn't good.

"Priest!" the man said, "my friend here just found some chicken bones in the ashes of your fire. I thought itinerants weren't allowed to eat meat. Do you have an explanation, or have we just treed a common thief?"

Wren cursed. Not only was the idiot persistent, he was observant as well. "Look," he said wearily, "whether you believe it or not, I am a monk. I could tell you my rank and temple assignment, but most likely it would mean absolutely nothing to you, and the only people who can verify it are a fortnight away. There are very good reasons for my looking like I do, dressing like I do, and acting like I do, but they're between me and the man who gave me this assignment, and he'd be extremely cross if I shared them with you. It would emphatically defeat the purpose of the entire exercise, if you take my meaning. If you don't believe me, that's fine, but I'm up here and you're down there, and that's not going to change at any point in the near future. Get comfortable, if you can afford to wait. I'm not coming down any time soon."

"Is that so?" The man gestured to his companions, and one drew a massive double-bladed axe from a holster slung across her back. "You're not a wagering man, are you, priest? Because if you were, I'd say now would be a perfect time for us to make a bet."

The figure with the axe, a broad-hipped and broad-boned woman in black enameled armor that only emphasized her girth, stepped up to the tree. The axe head was black as well, its handle dyed a sullen blood red. She hefted the weapon for a moment, then swung. There was a deep groaning sound, and the ax-head bit deeply into the wood. The entire tree shuddered, and Wren found himself involuntarily grabbing the branch he stood on to steady himself. "It's a big tree," he called out. "This might take a while."

"We've got time," the Dragon-Blood called back, then gestured to the woman with the axe. "Again, Shelesh. Harder."



She obliged, swinging with a will. Again and again the tree shook under the blows. It wouldn't be too long, Wren realized, before either he was shaken out of the tree or the tree itself went over. He found himself hoping fervently for a second or two that it just might land on the young idiot's head, but dismissed the thought as unworthy. If something was going to happen to the loudmouthed fool, Wren was the one who was going to have to make it happen.

Stepping lightly, he ran to where he'd secured the daiklave the night before. Ignoring the constant stream of catcalls from below, he worked the leather thongs that held it to the branch loose, then quickly strapped it to his back. The improvised scabbard was good enough for travel, he'd found, but acrobatics and combat might be an entirely different matter. Frowning, he looked down, and estimated the distance to the ground.

"What's that you've got there? Something else you've got that you can't tell me about, priest?"

Wren looked down. There were more than enough branches between where he stood and the ground to make a leisurely, safe descent possible. At the end of that slow route, however, was likely to be an extremely unsafe reception. The tree quivered again, and Wren considered his options. Down was the only way to go, and now was the only time to do it.

But, he reasoned, there was no reason not to do it in style. He tested the slight breeze with a finger, then hitched his leggings and relieved himself. An outraged shout from below told him that he'd once again been precisely on target (*a skill they didn't teach you in the Order*, he thought with a smirk) and then flung himself into space.

His anima flared out behind him like ragged streamers as he fell, shouts of alarm from below letting him know that his display was all too visible. He'd have to kill them all now, he realized, or the survivors would send the Wyld Hunt on his track. His hands reached for another branch, catching it and sending him spinning earthward, even as



the strands of light around him began to coalesce into something greater and more terrible.

He landed just behind the woman with the axe, his hands already a blur of motion even as his feet sank into moss that surrounded the wounded tree's roots. She turned and swung at him, a bellow of rage ringing out from her featureless helm. Wren ducked and wove out from under the flurry of blows she threw, then landed a solid kick to her armored midsection. A hollow clang rang out, and the force of the impact drove her back a half step. The wicked curve the axe cut in the air dipped, and in that instant Wren stepped inside the arc of her swing.

"I don't think you're putting that axe to very good use," he said, and rammed two hooked fingers into the eyeslits of her helm. There was the sound of something wet popping, and she made a half gasp, half shriek before collapsing amidst a thunderous clatter.

"Anathema!" Wren heard the voice behind him, but didn't turn. Unbidden, the lessons he'd learned in the Labyrinth, the torturous uses of power that the dead god had burned into his brain, surged up from the dark recesses in which they'd been waiting. He understood, now, exactly what he was capable of, and why it was proper for the humble Dragon-Bloods to fear him.

He felt the impact across his shoulders, and turned. The leader of the Dragon-Blooded band was there, mace in hand and an expression of disbelief on his face. Wisps of greenish flame trailed off behind him, but their light was pale and wan compared to the glow that emanated from Wren's anima. "You... I struck... how?"

Wren reached out and tore the mace from his nerveless fingers. "You're young, aren't you? All you know about the chosen of the sun comes from tales to frighten the children. Well, little Dragon-Blood, you're a child. Be frightened." He brought the mace up on the backhand and connected with the man's chin. There was a sickening crack and he flew backwards, landing on the ground a



dozen feet away. His two remaining companions held to a safe distance, weapons out, circling warily.

"Stop," said Wren. His voice was quiet, his tone commanding. The mark on his brow glowed with something just short of hunger. His shadow stretched on the ground as his anima flared into new prominence, towering over the former priest.

Slowly, agonizingly, the two Dragon-Bloods obeyed. Wren could see the strain in every muscle. Their hands trembled, their legs quivered. Like leashed hounds, they yearned to be free so that they could leap to the attack, and his will was the only leash that held them.

"Kneel," he said. Slowly, cautiously, the two knelt. They still held their swords before them, but their hands were trembling. One's anima flickered behind him, a ragged series of red flares, while the other's had guttered out. Their eyes were on Wren, reverent and terrified, and both were sobbing softly.

Wren walked over to them. "Drop those," he said, almost conversationally, though he could see the men flinch at each word. First one, then the other did so. "Excellent. You had poor choice in friends, you know. Try to explain that in the afterlife." Without meeting either man's eyes, he struck. Seconds later, two bodies toppled to the ground.

Suddenly, Wren felt very tired. He let his anima dissipate, and started systematically stripping the corpses of anything he might find useful. There wasn't much—a few handfuls of jade, a waterskin, some rations and little more. The weapons and armor he left on the corpses, and he briefly considered a pyre. Expediency prevailed, however, and he settled for stacking bodies like cordwood behind the tree's massive trunk. One, the leader, was still alive, but resisted any attempts made to revive him. At first Wren considered simply dispatching him, but ultimately decided against it. He was curious as to what had sent such an inexperienced huntsman so far out into the Threshold, and the opportunity to have his curiosity satisfied was worth losing a few hours.

That decided, he still felt no obligation to treat the man gently, and slung him off to the side with the corpses of his companions.

The corpses' mounts he sent on their way, thankful they hadn't bothered to defend their riders. They went cantering off to the west, while Wren sat in the shade of the tree to wait, and practiced his skills at plucking unwary flies out of the air.

It took something on the order of three hours, while the sun climbed the sky and Wren took slow sips of water. Late-season flies buzzed around the corpses, and he shooed them away when it seemed worth the effort.

A single groan was the first evidence he had that his long wait was over. He smiled, stretched lazily to his feet, and walked over to the pile of bodies. There was another moan, and then a violent clatter as the pile shook and collapsed. Corpses fell to the left and the right as the leader of the troop of Dragon-Bloods crawled out, his handsome face covered in blood. Loose ribbons of flesh hung from his jaw where Wren's blow had connected, and flies crawled through his hair.

"You bastard," he said, and spat blood onto the ground. "The dishonor..."

"Honor is what comes out of the back end of a well-fed pig," Wren interrupted. "I don't want to hear about your precious honor. It only seems to matter to you when you need an excuse for a lost fight. Well, piss on that the way I pissed on you."

The man staggered to his feet and charged, but Wren simply kicked out his kneecap and down he went again, groaning. "Stay down. It's safer for you. Now, what's your name?"

"I won't tell you anything."

Wren squatted on the ground next to him. "Funny, that's what I said this morning, and you wouldn't leave me alone. I think it's time for me to return the favor." He grabbed the man's face with one hand, his fingers digging into the raw and torn flesh. "Listen, little Dragon-Blood,



the only reason you are alive is that I've got a use for you. It's not that important a use, however, so don't push your luck. Now, for the last time I ask you, what is your name?"

"Peleps. Peleps Tonot."

"There, that wasn't so hard." Wren released the man's face, and he fell into the dust. "Well, Peleps Tonot, tell me what you were doing out here. Four Dragon-Bloods, even young ones like yourself, riding out into the Threshold? It doesn't make sense. Your parents must be worried."

"We... we had a mission."

Wren nodded sagely. "I figured as much. Well, what was it?"

"I can't tell. I've been sworn to secrecy."

"Ah." Wren stood, pacing back and forth in the shade of the tree. "So you've been sworn to secrecy about this mission which you and your three friends—all dead, I might add—were supposed to undertake in the middle of nowhere, and if you tell someone, what might happen? Grandfather Peleps will dock your allowance of shiny jade? Your favorite whore might be taken away and given to your brother? You might even be—dare I say it—killed? Oh, they'll be very proud of you back home when, after a suitable number of weeks they decide you're dead in any case." He stooped down next to the Dragon-Blood's head and whispered, "Better to stay alive."

"They'll kill me," Tonot whimpered.

"I'll kill you now. Make your choice."

"Fine." The Dragon-Blood rolled over onto his back and stared up at the overhanging canopy of leaves. Tears glistened brightly in the corners of his eyes. "We were sent, along with others, officially on a Wyld Hunt. But there were secret orders. We were supposed to find a priest who's gone missing. We split off from the main Hunt six days back because we thought we'd have better luck that way. Left our servants behind with the main train." The man coughed congealed blood onto the ground. Dull red stained his lips. "The orders came directly from the Palace Sublime."

“A priest...” Wren’s voice trailed off, then exploded into fury. “Damn it all, can’t any of them leave me alone? You’d think all Creation would collapse if dear old Eliezer Wren weren’t there to pick up after it.” He whirled, so quickly that a shower of dirt landed on the prone man. “You listen to me, Peleps Tonot, and you listen well. I want you to go back to the Isle. I want you to go to the Palace, and I want you to demand an audience with Chejop Kejak. I don’t care that you don’t know who he is; most people don’t. But use my name and he’ll see you. And when he does see you, tell him that Eliezer Wren is done. Tell him not to send anyone else after me. Tell him to forget I ever existed. He and I are finished. What you do with your life after that is your business, but don’t cross my path. Do you understand?”

“But—”

Wren kicked him, hard, in the shoulder. “The next one is in the jaw. Do you understand me? It is a yes or no question.”

“Yes.”

“Good. Get up.” He stepped back and let Tonot drag himself to his feet. “You know, I should have killed you, but I think sending the message is a better idea. Start walking before I change my mind.”

Tonot stared at Wren, naked hatred in his eyes, then turned and stumbled off. Wren watched him until he vanished in the distance, then adjusted the daiklave at his back and rummaged among the waterskins. Carefully, he poured a little of the water of his hands and scrubbed away the blood. In the treetops, he could hear the carrion birds gathering, waiting. Graciously, he departed, and left them to their feast.

It might be worthwhile, he decided, to see where young Peleps actually went. It wasn’t too far off his intended route, anyway, and a couple of days’ delay wouldn’t matter much to Rhadanthos in any case. He rubbed his hands against his thighs and set off after the Dragon-Blood with no expression on his face.



## Chapter Nineteen

It took perhaps two days' travel for the Prince of Shadows to decide that Bonecrack was not, in fact, a wolf spirit. He may (and the prince could not help but think of the spirit as a "he," despite any evidence one way or the other—the beast's hunger and swagger seemed arrogantly masculine) have looked like a wolf, but that was simply the shape that he wore.

Rather, the prince decided, Bonecrack was a spirit of all the things that were associated with wolves. He was a spirit of ravenous cunning and night-born cleverness, a force of fear. The wolf's shape he wore was an expression of his true nature, a way to spread the terror he championed without a single word or action.

It also meant that Bonecrack's breath was exceptionally foul. Still, the prince reflected, there were compensations. Traveling with Bonecrack had taught him much. The spirit was garrulous in the extreme, and the stories he told of his encounters with the savage man-child Yushuv piqued the prince's interest. The boy's guardian interested him less. He'd heard of Dace and taken his measure from afar, and was not worried by him. The boy, on the other hand, was intriguing. Too many pieces of the puzzle *almost* fit together, and the sense of near-understanding was maddening.



He glanced to his left. A dozen yards from the main body of the prince's troupe, Bonecrack loped along, his red tongue lolling at the side of his mouth. His good eye caught the prince looking at him and he returned the gaze with a wolfish smile, then trotted ahead easily.

The prince, for his part, rode in the van of his party. A handful of hand-picked warriors rode around him, while the bulk of the survivors of the initial encounter with the spirit trailed uneasily behind. The whole party moved at a good pace, far faster than the pace they'd made moving north from the prince's citadel.

Behind them, the sun hovered just above the horizon, turning low bands of cloud into streamers of bright red and gold. Ahead, the first few timid stars had already made their appearance, and a sharp wedge of moon was visible in the deepening gloom.

"Sire?" The prince turned his head as Pelesh cantered up on his potbellied little steed, its hooves striking the ground seemingly twice as often as those of any other beast in the party.

He looked down his nose at the Exchequer, blinking in mild astonishment. "Pelesh, I do not recall speaking to you. Why, then, are you speaking to me?"

Pelesh gulped visibly. "My prince, I humbly beg your pardon, but—"

"You have my permission, then."

"To speak?" The crabbed little man was visibly relieved. "Sire, I wish to know if—"

"No," the prince interrupted. "To beg my pardon."

The Exchequer blinked. "My liege? I don't understand."

"My pardon," the prince said mildly, the reins held loosely in one hand. "You said you were going to beg it. You haven't, not yet, anyway. You do, however, have my permission to do so."

Pelesh opened his mouth, but no intelligible sounds came out. Sweat beaded on his brow and his eyes grew comically wide.

"That doesn't sound like begging, Pelesh. Of course, if you wish to renege on your offer, I can assure you that I would not be too terribly offended. After all, for your long years of service I think I can see clear to forgiving one little betrayal such as this..." He let his voice trail off speculatively and looked straight ahead, a half-smile playing at the corners of his mouth.



"No, no, my prince." Hastily, Pelesh reined in and slipped from the saddle. He prostrated himself, his face dangerously close to a ground-hugging thorned vine, and began babbling apologies. Pelesh's horse watched him with some curiosity. The rest of the column rode on, splitting around him if they were feeling generous, barely missing trampling him if they were not.

"When you are finished, Pelesh," the prince called back over his shoulder, "you may rejoin our company, and ask your question. I think another hour or so will prove sufficient. We are well pleased with your devotions." And with that he put the spurs to his horse's flank and cantered forward into the dying light.

Alone on the prairie, Pelesh looked up. The prince's party was already vanishing in the distance. For a moment, he considered faking his groveling, trusting in distance and disinterest to hide his lax performance from the prince. With a shudder, he decided against it, and again mouthed inane apologies.

It was no good lying to the prince. The prince knew. When it came to things like that, the prince *always* knew.

It was full dark by the time Pelesh finished, and his face was coated in pale reddish dust. He stood and stretched, wiping the dirt from his face as best he could, and stared off to the southeast. There was no sign of the prince's traveling party. Either they'd stopped beyond the range of his vision, or they were pressing on all night.

That, Pelesh thought bitterly, was all he'd wanted to ask the prince about in the first place. Since Boncrack's arrival, the prince had been both a better and a worse



master. He'd been more himself, more decisive and stronger. He'd also become more vicious, less solicitous of his servants and more likely to discard them on a whim. Pelesh in particular had suffered the brunt of the prince's new humor, a situation which left the Exchequer ruefully comparing his situation to that of his ancient rival, Ratcatcher.

Up ahead in the dark, a horse gave a terrified whinny. Pelesh recognized the sound. It was his own steed. It had stayed, more or less loyal, while he'd performed his obeisance, but now something hunted it.

Reaching to his belt for the stiletto he always carried when traveling, Pelesh hurried forward. The fact that anything that could hunt a horse could hunt him, too, was not lost on him, but without the animal he was doomed. Besides, he'd envenomed the dagger daily.

The horse cried out again, closer now, and something large growled behind it. Pelesh put on as much speed as he dared, feeling every one of his years as he ran.

He'd taken another dozen steps when the horse gave what sounded like a final, desperate moan that was cut off. A split second later, Pelesh heard the sound of something heavy hitting the ground, and a low, hungry growl.

He stopped, the dagger held before him. It seemed useless and tiny, but it was all that he had. If the beast that had taken his horse wanted him as well, it would feel his sting first.

"Little man, come here." The voice rolled out of the darkness like fog on a riverbank. Pelesh recognized it. It was the voice of Bonecrack.

"So you can gut me like you gutted my horse? Not likely. Come and get me, spirit," the Exchequer replied. He raised the stiletto so that it might catch whatever moonlight there was, and hoped the beast saw it.

"Your horse is fine," said Bonecrack, a tremor of irritation in his voice. "I have no need to feed tonight. My hunger is sated. Your prince feeds me well." There was just the slightest emphasis on the word "me," enough to let

Pelesh know that Bonecrack didn't think the prince took quite such good care of anyone else.

"I don't believe you."

"Believe me or not. Here is your proof." There was a meaty thwack, and the horse screamed, this time in shock and pain, not terror. "Your horse is as yet able to walk. Continue to try my patience and you may not be able to say the same."

Pelesh walked forward cautiously. His eyes were adjusting to the darkness, and he could see the hulking wolf-shape up ahead. One paw rested on a bulky, struggling shape against the ground: his horse. "Did the prince send you to look for me?"

Bonecrack chuckled. "The prince did not command me such, nor would he find me willing to play such a part. I am here because I will it, and because you and I have something to discuss."

"We have nothing to discuss, unless you wish to be paid for your service to the prince."

The spirit roared with laughter. Somewhere nearby, a covey of birds burst from cover at the sound, flapping away into the night sky. "Oh, little man, you should have been a jester. I'll take my payment when I chose, in the form I chose. Your jade does not interest me. It's the boy's soul I want."

Pelesh edged closer. "Then I do not know what we have to discuss."

Lazily, the wolf spirit ambled forward until it was face to face with Pelesh, its foul breath in his face. Behind him, the horse stayed down.

"Pelesh the Exchequer, you and I share one thing and one thing only: We both serve other masters besides the prince. Do I lie?"

Pelesh's thoughts raced. *How could Bonecrack have known? The messages from beyond the locked and barred door had been discreet, his own actions cautious and certainly not treasonous, and his intentions all for the prince's greater glory. Even the damned puppeteer that the voices in the dark had told him to summon had done nothing save amuse the prince on the rack. Surely the prince himself couldn't know...*



"I don't know what you're talking about," he finally said. "I serve the Prince of Shadows, and through him the greater darkness."

"Don't bother with denials. For a man of coin, you're a poor liar." Bonecrack growled deep in his throat, his muzzle bare inches away from Pelesh's face. "You serve other powers. So do I, though our masters are not the same."

"I serve the prince. Whom do you serve?" Pelesh said, perhaps a trifle too boldly.

Bonecrack roared and Pelesh stumbled back. "I do the will of the Fair Folk in this thing, for they have given me sweet dreams to gnaw on and nightmares on which to sup. They want the boy. So do I. Your prince wants something else, something connected to the child, and your other masters want both the boy removed and his treasure seized. I think there is room for an understanding between us. Do you agree?"

"What do you want?" Pelesh whispered. "I will not betray my prince."

"No one is asking you to. I simply wish for you to invoke your patrons to aid me in bringing down the boy, when the time comes. It will please them greatly to do so. In return, I will help your prince get what he thinks he wants. Do we have an understanding?"

"Yes," Pelesh said, looking into Bonecrack's eyes. "Lords of the Abyss help me, yes."

"I knew you were a sensible man," Bonecrack said, and licked Pelesh's face with his great, foul tongue. "Tend to your horse and come back to camp. The rest are about five hours ahead. You should make it easily, and have time to rest before sunrise." He laughed then, and turned to trot off.

"Wait!"

"Yes?" Bonecrack cocked his massive, scarred head. "Does the deal displease you?"

"No." Pelesh fell to his knees, his hands still on the stiletto. "If the prince discovers what you know, he'll have me killed. Worse."

"Oh, your secret is safe with me. You're little use to me dead. There's not enough meat on you."

"But how did you know?" Pelesh's words were a cry of despair.

"Silly man. Your kind always serves another master." With that, he loped off into the dark.

It was a long time before Pelesh rose from his knees. It was longer before he took the poisoned stiletto blade from his wrist and resheathed it. There was still life, after all. There was still hope, and the spirit's demands did not seem to demand that he betray either of his masters in any way.

The hollow feeling in his gut, however, told him that it was only a matter of time.

Pelesh rode into camp six hours later, not five. The gashes on his horse's flank had long since stopped bleeding, and the animal seemed almost calm by the time they rode past the sentries and into the circle of firelight.

The prince was sprawled out across a camp chair made of canvas and wood, just as Pelesh had known he would be. Various other members of the party were sprawled out around the fire, sleeping. A few tents had been pitched at the edge of the firelight, but not many.

Across the fire from the prince, Bon crack lay sprawled out, his massive head resting on his paws. A low rumble in his throat indicated that he, too was sleeping. Indeed, of all the company by the fire, only the prince seemed to be awake.

"Pelesh," he said airily as the Exchequer rode up. "You certainly took long enough."

"It was dark, my liege. I did not wish to have my horse stumble and break a leg, which would have delayed my rejoining you even longer. In all things, I am your prudent servant."

"In all things?" The prince raised one delicate, thin eyebrow. "Yes, I suppose you are. Consider your apologies accepted, and the quality of your service very much appreciated."

"I thank you, my prince." Bon crack growled in his sleep, and Pelesh barely resisted the urge to shoot a pan-

icked glance in the spirit's direction. "Do you wish me to attend you, or may I sleep?"

"Attend me for a moment, Pelesh. Get off the horse. Sit. Find some wine."

"Yes, my prince." One of the sentries led Pelesh's horse off an instant after he dismounted, and another pressed a skin of warm wine into his hands. He took a healthy swallow, then wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve and sat at the prince's feet. "How may I serve you?"

The prince leaned back languorously, looking incongruously catlike as he did so. "You can answer a question for me, Pelesh. Just one, and it's simple."

"Of course, my prince. Anything."

"Of course indeed." The prince leaned forward. "Tell me truthfully. Why were you really so eager to get me to leave my citadel and engage on this," he gestured away from the fire, "this ludicrous adventure?"

Pelesh looked up. His eyes met the prince's. "My liege," he said truthfully, "it was because I thought it best. And I am, in all things, devoted to your welfare."

"Ah." The prince sat back, apparently satisfied. "I appreciate your solicitous nature, then, though you should presume less in the future. It is a grand adventure. You chose well. Should things turn out as I hope, you will be suitably rewarded."

Pelesh's eyes dropped. "I thank you, my prince. My duty is its own reward."

"Mm." Long fingers reached down and tugged the wine-skin from Pelesh's nerveless grip. "I suppose it is, at that."

# Chapter Twenty



For a man whose lower jaw had just been splintered, the huntsman made good time. He set a steady, loping pace, occasionally looking back over his shoulder to see if he was being followed and cutting a zigzag trail intended to sow confusion about his real direction. He took advantage of the cover afforded by lone buildings and clumps of trees, and frequently spent several minutes at a time wading upstream through small creeks in an effort to cover his tracks.

Eliezer Wren, who had been forced to take similar measures himself on many occasions, followed at a safe distance and decided, after a few hours' observation, that he approved of the man's technique. Most of the Dragon-Blooded he'd met disdained the fine art of covering one's ass, relying instead on equal parts raw power and pure arrogance as their shields. Many, he'd discovered, couldn't even conceive of the need to run. That, he supposed, had partially been his fault. After all, the Immaculate Order had told the world for centuries that the Dragon-Blooded were the next best thing to gods. Who was to blame them for believing it?

Peleps Tonot, however, had just gotten a rather rude reminder of his own mortality, and he seemed to be taking the lesson well. As Wren watched from behind the cover of a dilapidated farmhouse, his quarry paused to lay a false

A trail leading to a patch of particularly boggy ground, then carefully backtracked and skirted the sump before heading off almost due east.

Wren waited until he'd vanished behind a low hedge of junipers before sliding out of his place of concealment. Moving silently, he located the beginning of the false trail, and cast it over with a critical eye.

It was good work, he thought, but amateurish. Tonot had emphasized the depth of the prints he had left here, making them a little too deep, a little too obvious. Most hunters probably wouldn't notice the difference, and would charge straight ahead into the boggy morass just ahead. Wren grimaced at the stench. Even if the bog proved to be no more than a minor annoyance, it would cost incautious pursuers plenty of time, and there was always the chance that the sump was more treacherous than it looked.

Even if he hadn't seen the ruse being created, though, Wren still wouldn't have been drawn in. He could see the lighter tracks that Tonot had made—*shoes reversed, clever boy*, he thought—on his true path, and set out to follow those instead. Fifty yards on, the prints reversed themselves and grew more widely separated. Tonot had picked up his pace here, apparently, and Wren imitated him, determined not to let the Dragon-Blood get too far ahead.

A fast trot brought him to the edge of the line of junipers, and there Wren halted. The row of trees was not quite thick enough to be called a wood, but dense enough to make blundering straight through an unappealing prospect. Tonot's tracks, of course, went straight into the thickest part of the vegetation.

"Perfect ambush ground," Wren grumbled to himself, and sidled to the left. The dry leaves showed prints poorly, but to Wren's eye there was no evidence here that Tonot had headed lengthwise through the thicket, at least not in this direction. Shifting to the other side of the obvious trail, he repeated the process and came to the same conclusion. With a deep breath and a sigh of resignation, he plunged in.

So intent was he on the faint traces of Tonot's passage that he almost didn't notice the trap. It was simple, a loop of twig bent back on itself and tied with a strip of cloth torn from Tonot's shirt. Another, larger branch was tied to the loop and bent down to the ground. Covered by dried leaves and pinned down only loosely, the trap was designed to seize an unwary traveler's ankle with malicious intent.

Wren's foot was halfway into the snare before he noticed it. Cursing at his own carelessness, he threw himself forward into a shoulder roll. His foot brushed the ground and caught on something even as his shoulder hit the carpet of dead leaves. The trap snapped up and away, but he was already past it, coming to rest on the ground beyond and turning to see what had just happened.

There, dangling in the makeshift noose, was his sandal. He looked down and discovered, to his mild surprise, that his right foot was bare. "Closer than I thought," he said, and gingerly stepped forward to examine the trap.

It was good work for something so hurried, and Wren found his respect for Tonot climbing a notch. The trap wouldn't have been fatal—Tonot had neither the tools nor the time for that—but it was clever, and would most likely have snapped the ankle of anyone caught in it.

*That's one way to slow down anyone following you,* Wren thought, and examined the trap for further surprises before retrieving his sandal. There were none. Grimly aware of how much time little misadventures like this were costing him, Wren took back his footwear and put it on. Another moment's work rebuilt the trap, and then Wren added another one a few paces on. That one would unleash a bent-back branch at eye level when tripped, hopefully blinding anyone who stumbled into it.

It was best to be cautious, the former priest decided. Just because he was following the huntsman didn't mean that there wasn't someone following *him*. With a final inspection of his handiwork and some artful mussing of the carpet of dead leaves, he moved on.





The chase, or at least the first leg of it, petered out at the end of the second day. Wren watched, crouching behind a massive, weathered tree stump, as Tonot jogged across what might have been a plowed field once. As he reached the far side, the sound of hoofbeats echoed in the air, and he stopped. A pair of riders, both with House Peleps banners affixed to their saddles, burst into view, galloping hell bent for leather.

Tonot immediately began waving both his arms frantically, and Wren could hear his faint shouts of desperation. They had an immediate effect. The riders abruptly changed course and closed on Tonot. He stood his ground, no longer waving now that he was sure that he had been seen.

The riders reined in when they reached him, and Wren could only guess at the content of the conversation that followed. Whatever was said was brief and to the point, as the smaller of the two riders reached down and hauled Tonot up into the saddle. The wounded man clasped his arms around his rescuer's waist, and the three rode off to the north and west. A trail of dust rose up after them, one which rapidly extended as they galloped for what Wren assumed was home.

Frowning, he tested the straps on his sandals. They seemed tight, which was good. He didn't want to lose them, not now. After all, it seemed like he had some running to do.

# Chapter Twenty-One

"So where did you get the knife?"

"Dagger," Unforgiven Blossom corrected him, and shifted infinitesimally so her back was against a tree trunk. "It is a dagger."

"If you say so." Yushuv shrugged. "That's the sort of thing Dace worried about." He was standing, looking out onto the plain at regular intervals to see if the rain was still coming down. It was, as the thunder of water on the canopy of leaves overhead attested. "You still haven't told me where you got it."

Unforgiven Blossom blinked, the only sign of her annoyance. "I have told you. I stole it."

"Who'd you steal it from?" The boy was, she noticed, keeping a reasonable distance from where she sat. He hopped from foot to foot unconsciously and circled from side to side, but never sat and never turned his back on her. *A sensible precaution, she thought, but one that makes conversation extremely difficult.*

"I stole it from the Prince of Shadows," she said evenly, "and since I can see from your face that you have no idea who that is, I will tell you that he is a servant of death and the things that come after. Stealing from him is not something you do lightly."

"Then why did you do it?"

She shrugged, delicately. "Because I had to. And because I thought it might be best if the weapon were not in his possession. It is better off in yours, I think."

Yushuv drew the dagger and looked at it. "I guess so. I found this, you know. It was in the tunnels underneath the village where I grew up."

"You have not yet finished growing up," she said reproachfully, and Yushuv's face turned bright red. He jammed the dagger back into his belt furiously and turned away.

"I'm old enough," he said. "Old enough to have killed a lot of... things. And people."

"But young enough that you still have much to learn."

He whirled around. "Don't tell me you want to teach me, too," he spat. "I've had about enough of teachers and messengers, all of them telling me what I have to do. All I have to do is to stay alive. Everything else seems to find me."

"I have no desire to teach you. You are a spoiled child, and I have no desire to aggravate myself to the extent that lengthy contact with you would entail. And as for fate finding you, that is exactly what is happening, my little rescuer. Set your mind to thinking about it. How many square miles of empty grassland are there out there, and yet we managed to stumble across each other. Aided, of course, by the efforts of those buffoons, whose racket drew you to me."

"I found you," he said sullenly.

"Either way. This is not coincidence. You were meant to have the dagger back, no doubt. That is the reason—the only reason— fate let us find one another. That is why teachers have discovered you, instructed you, and then allowed you to leave. That is why you are still alive." She sniffed, and her brow furrowed. "I am reasonably certain that my role in all this was not simply to serve as your courier, but the thought has cost me some sleepless nights."

"I think you're crazy," Yushuv said, his arms folded across his chest as he held himself tightly.

"That is fine. I think you are ignorant."

Yushuv shook his head. "It doesn't make sense. Everyone keeps on telling me that they're making tremendous sacrifices for me, that I have this incredible destiny. I've seen miracles, and all I ever expected to see was my village." He looked down at his hands. "I guess now I have to believe it, but... I still don't understand."

"Understanding would render you incapable of acting. Be who you are. Go where the spirit moves you. You will no doubt find yourself in the right place at the right time. Either that, or you'll miss your destiny and something catastrophic will happen, but I find that unlikely. You won't be permitted to do such a thing."

"You're very comforting," he said, frowning. "Who won't let me?"

"The Unconquered Sun, among others. You do bear his mark. That means your destiny would not be entirely your own regardless, even were you not marked for greater things." She ran her fingers through her immaculately groomed hair, then gazed at her fingertips. "You have the sun on your brow, in case you have forgotten. It does mean something."

Yushuv rubbed his forehead, as if finding the brand there for the first time. "I guess it does. So, are you going to go with me?"

She laughed, and laughed again at the startled look on his face. "Of course not. I have no desire to spend any more time with you than necessary. I despise children, and I doubly despise children who don't know their place. No, I will not be traveling with you, and with luck I will see neither you nor the Prince of Shadows again."

"Oh." Yushuv seemed almost hurt. "What will you do, then?"

"I do not know," she said, and was surprised to discover that she meant it. "I have thought of going to Nexus, and perhaps opening a shop there. I would tell fortunes and brew medicines, and young lovesick girls would come to me for philters that would make young foolish boys fall in love

with them. It would be a pleasant change from being caught up in the affairs of the great and mighty."

"You're making fun of me," Yushuv said accusingly.

"Yes, I am. It is a privilege afforded to those of us who do not have many years left to live, to make fun of those who do."

Yushuv's eyes narrowed. "You're not that old. You look it, but you're not."

Unforgiven Blossom blinked. "Most do not realize that. You're cleverer than you look."

"Everyone keeps saying that, too." He grinned, and his hands fell to his sides.

"As well they should. No, I am not that old, but in the end, it does not matter. My body thinks it is old, and so does Time, and they cast the deciding votes in such affairs." She unfolded herself from where she sat and climbed to his feet.

"I think the rain is slackening."

Yushuv cocked his head to listen. "Maybe. But it's going to be dark soon. You should at least stay here until morning."

She pursed her lips. "Perhaps. But no longer."

"No longer," he agreed, occupying himself with over-busy attempts to find some dry wood for a fire. She cooked, and when she saw he looked askance at what resulted, she carefully tasted each portion first. She fell asleep not long after, huddled in a wool cloak from the pack Yushuv retrieved for her; she'd dropped it when the bandits first became serious in their intentions. He, for his part, stayed awake most of the night, crouched over the fire and watching vigilantly for enemies of any sort. A few hours before dawn, he too finally fell asleep, curling up near the remnants of the fire.

And true to her word, when he awoke, she was gone.

•   •   •

Yushuv left later that day, after burying the ashes of his fire. With no idea of where he wanted to go, he left it to fate. Reaching for the dagger, he pulled it out and contemplated it for a moment.



It was as breathtaking as ever, showing no signs of ill wear despite its travels. Now that she was gone, Yushuv found himself wishing he'd asked other questions of Unforgiven Blossom. He wanted to know where the dagger had been, and how it had come into the possession of the Prince of Shadows. Surely there were stories to be told there.

He also found himself curious about Unforgiven Blossom herself, and what had happened to her. The woman had not liked him; that much had been obvious. But she fascinated him, as much for what she had not said as for what she had.

That, however, was work for another day. He hefted the dagger in his hand, then threw it straight up. It spun end over end as it flew, cutting through overhanging branches with frightening ease before reaching the apex of its flight and then descending once more. Yushuv took a hasty sidestep to ensure that he wasn't impaled on his own decision-making device, then watched as it hit the ground with a surprising amount of force.

It lay there, half its blade sunk into the cold earth. Carefully, Yushuv positioned himself behind it and judged the angle the point seemed to be seeking.

"South-southeast," he said, and yanked the dagger out of the ground. The dirt fell away from it of its own accord, but he took care to wipe it against his leggings in any case. Dace had taught him to show weapons proper respect.

He looked around. The rough camp had essentially been annihilated by his morning's labors. There was little sign that anyone had ever been there, and what evidence there was would soon be swallowed by the elements. Unforgiven Blossom had left no trail when she had gone, and there had been no sign of her in any direction when he'd searched for her. Out on the plain, scavengers had gotten to the dead bodies of the bandits. Of the survivors, there was no sign. Either they'd run off during the night, or something partial to killing its own meat had found them. It didn't matter; they weren't waiting in ambush for him so far as he could see, and that was the important thing.

One last time, he held the dagger up before his face. "South-southeast," he said. "Are you sure?"

With a gesture of resignation, he shoved the dagger back into its makeshift sheath and slipped his pack back on his shoulders. The bow he held in his left hand, strung and ready for use. Nodding to himself, Yushuv stepped out onto the plain, now slightly marshy from the previous night's storm. He looked back over his shoulder, at the last outpost of the forest that had sheltered him for so long.

"Thank you," he said, not knowing why he did so but feeling it was important. "I'll be back."

And with that, he turned his back on the verdant wood and strode off, following the direction that had been given to him by the dagger.

# Chapter Twenty-Two



Even Eliezer Wren had to admit that when the Wyld Hunt settled into an encampment, it did so in style.

Crouched just below the crest of a ridge some five hundred yards from the sentries the huntsmen had posted, Wren took in the site below him and whistled. What he saw was no field camp. Instead, it was a small city. Broad avenues separated the individual enclaves within the camp, which were marked with prominently posted banners. Dozens of small tents clustered around larger, more ornate ones, reminding Wren somehow of newborn piglets trying to suckle from their mother. Armed guards were posted at each intersection within the encampment. They were kept in constant motion, bowing to the endless parade of gaily clad and armored Dynasts who rode or strolled by. Runners dashed from one tent to another, bearing scroll cases, packages or sometimes just urgent tidings. Immaculate monks walked to and fro, some ducking into this tent or that while others conducted martial arts exercises in the campsite's central clearing. Beside them, pairs of armored fighters practiced and dueled. Occasionally, a geyser of light would surge into the air as one combatant or another lost his temper and unleashed a storm of pure power at his foe. The spectators generally found this amusing. Even from where he had situated himself, Wren could hear the cheering.



Just to the north of the central clearing was what passed for an administrative center, a large plain tent that had a constant stream of functionaries and monks scurrying in and out of it. There was no central mess, each of the Dragon-Bloods having apparently decided they preferred their own personal cooks, and each of the sub-encampments had its own small, rough corral.

Around the perimeter was a raised wall of earth. It was perhaps six feet tall, and in places surmounted with sharpened logs. At the cardinal points, breaches had been made in the barrier, and pairs of guards stood watchfully there. They looked considerably more alert than their peers inside the camp.

All of this, Wren suspected, had been set up in the past few hours. It looked for all the world like a legion encampment on the frontier, which was in and of itself odd. Wyld huntsmen, on those occasions when their duties stretched for days or even weeks, were notoriously unfond of any sort of manual labor. They rode to hunt and they rode to kill, and generally they trusted to their reputations to keep their quarters safe.

What that told Wren was that a professional had been at work here. Anyone who could whip those on the Wyld Hunt into this sort of labor, and do so while keeping the peace—Wren had counted the banners of most of the Great Houses while he scanned the grounds—was a force to be reckoned with.

The sheer size of the Hunt also raised his hackles. He'd seen Wyld Hunts before; every Immaculate had, but never one on this scale. This was not a Hunt. It was a small army, a bandit kingdom turned loose upon the Threshold. There were dozens of Dragon-Bloods here, and their entourages might number in the hundreds.

Sneaking in, he decided with a sad shake of his head, was not going to be easy.

Finding the camp, on the other hand, had been easy enough. Wren had simply followed the dust trail left by the riders who'd picked up Peleps Tonot as they galloped back



to camp, and the course it indicated was as straight as an arrow's flight. Overly conscious of arrows, however, and what they could do to his unarmored person, he'd taken advantage of what cover he could, and made sure to avoid even sighting the riders ahead. Assuming his jaw still worked, Peleps Tonot had by now undoubtedly told his rescuers about the man who had assailed him, and they'd be wary.

And so Wren had followed at a considerable distance, moving as fast as he dared without letting the shape of his anima billow out behind him. The run had been surprisingly short, no more than half a day's labor before the dust trail suddenly stopped. Ever cautious, Wren had moved off the trail and sought cover, in case the riders had made an encampment. Slowly and patiently, he'd wormed his way to the top of the ridge and peered down at what looked to be the entire graduating class of the House of Bells.

As Wren watched, a pair of riders left the camp via the western gate and started a slow circuit around the perimeter, clucking to their mounts and calling playful obscenities back and forth as they rode. Both carried unsheathed swords and full armor, and as Wren observed them he saw just a trace of reddish light flicker into existence behind the larger of the two.

Dragon-Blooded sentries. Wren gave a low whistle. Whoever sat at the heart of that camp was indeed a power, if he could get the Dragon-Bloods to perform such a lowly duty. For a moment, Wren fought back panic at the thought that Kejak himself might be the one commanding the display below. Then reason reasserted itself. Kejak was not there; the young huntsman had not recognized his name.

A flurry of motion in the camp below caught his eye. It was Tonot, his armor unmistakable, being led into the command tent by his two saviors. They exited almost immediately, but Peleps Tonot stayed inside for several minutes. Meanwhile, the mounted sentries continued their leisurely canter around the perimeter of the camp, reminding Wren of how exposed his position on the ridge really was.

Wren had seen enough. Without waiting for Tonot to reemerge, he slid back down the minute slope of the ridge that concealed him. Picking a likely stand of bushes from the few nearby, he flowed from the exposed hill face to the relative safety of cover. A squint up at the sky told him that it was still several hours until nightfall, and nightfall was when he would make his move.

The glow of firelight merged with the fading glow of twilight, but it was the smell of smoke that woke Wren from a short nap he'd allowed himself once he'd made certain his hiding place was secure. Again he crawled to the top of the ridge, and nodded in approval at what he saw.

With the coming of night, the sentries had been pulled back within the palisade. Torches blazed at intervals around the earthen embankment, and more lit the makeshift streets of the encampment. Someone had started a massive fire toward the south end of the central clearing, and the firelight cast strange shadows of the figures who comported themselves around it. Other, smaller fires burned throughout the camp, each attracting their own crowds. The largest of the tents glowed from within like silk lanterns, and the sounds of merriment drifted out into the dark.

"There. Up on the ridge. Did you see it?"

The voice came from the direction of the camp, mixed with a sudden thunder of hoofbeats. Shocked at his carelessness, Wren threw himself to the earth and listened. Even as he did so, the hoofbeats stopped.

Another voice called out of the night.

"I didn't see anything. You're just trying to make this seem exciting, and it's not. It's dull!"

"Hush. Use your eyes, not your mouth." It was the first voice again, and Wren slowly began inching himself back down the hill before the faceless watcher got lucky. *Thank the Sun he didn't have a bow*, Wren thought, and slunk down into the shadows.

"I'm telling you, there's no need for us to go this far out." It was the second voice petulant and shrill. "Everyone

back at the camp is having a good time, and it's not fair that we have to be out here riding patrols instead."

Off to the right, Wren thought. *They're off to the right, which means along the crest of the ridge. They won't be silhouetted against the campfire as they approach, but if I keep retreating, they'll be framed by the light if they come at me. Better yet, they'll be blind.* He tensed himself against the necessity to flee, and listened again.

There was a long moment's pause, and Wren could almost convince himself he heard a sigh of exasperation. "We're out here because you got too drunk to stand nice, comfortable guard duty inside the perimeter yesterday, and the Most Revered Hunter of the Ancient Enemy T'fillit caught you. Pardon me; you're out here because of that; I'm out here because Mother would be very upset if you got yourself eaten by a wolf spider or some such and I don't trust you not to fall off your saddle and break your neck in the dark. Now stop complaining and ride with me. We're out here until midnight no matter what, so we might as well do this properly. Who knows, it might prevent us from ever having to do it again." This speaker's voice was deeper and more assured, and in him Wren recognized something of a kindred spirit.

The petulant rider muttered something of a reply. Wren didn't catch all of it, but what he heard sounded suspiciously like "My father has more land than your father," and then the whining was cut off by the sound of a hearty blow striking home.

He scurried to the right, and was rewarded with the sight of two armored and mounted figures. One was considerably burlier than the second, and the smaller shape was rubbing the back of its helmeted head.

"Ow! What did you have to do that for?" It was the first voice again, higher pitched and whinier than before, if that were possible.

"Because you're being an idiot," came the sensible reply. "Now ride with me."

"No." Wren could almost imagine the look of petulance on the face that could produce such a childish denial.



“Broken Serpent gave me a wineskin before we went out on patrol and I’m going to stay right here and drink it. And because you’ve been such a bastard to me, you don’t get any.”

“Suit yourself then.” The larger of the two flicked his reins, and his steed—a black shape against the darkness—started forward.—“I’ll check on you on each circuit. Try not to fall off the horse.”

With relief, Wren noted that his path would take him in front of the ridge, not behind it, and watched the man go. This, perhaps, was an opportunity, and a better and less risky one than sneaking into the camp would have been.

The name T’fillit was vaguely familiar to Wren from his days serving Chejop Kejak. She was an Immaculate, one of dozens he had met, and he’d gotten the impression that she was high up in Kejak’s councils. That meant that she was old, and powerful, and that younger priests were supposed to pretend not to notice when she dripped water on the temple floors they’d just painstakingly polished.

That she was out here, commanding this expedition, meant that Kejak was very concerned with finding him. Indeed, he was mildly startled that Tonot’s story hadn’t whipped the camp into a frenzy of activity. He could not imagine what they were waiting for.

Alone, he would have risked a confrontation with T’fillit, but he was not going to dare one when she was surrounded by a small and extraordinarily potent army, all of its members eager to shed his now-tainted blood. Fortunately, the reluctant sentries had given him a better and, he hoped, safer idea.

Pressed low against the earth, he crawled to his left, down the ridge lengthwise. A hundred yards further, it merged once again with the flat grassland the encampment rested on, and there he stopped. From where he crouched, he could see the path the sentry’s horse had made in the dead grass, and he judged it to be perhaps thirty feet from where he was. He frowned. Twenty would have been ideal,

but thirty it would have to be. He'd just rely on his new gifts and pray they made up the difference.

It was nearly half an hour before the sentry came around again, his route punctuated by another argument with his unruly sibling. Even from where he was, Wren could hear the latter's slurred words, and he grinned mirthlessly. Things were going well.

When the debate finally ended, Wren froze in position and watched as the man rode past. He did so shaking his head angrily, oblivious to the crouched figure lurking so close. As he passed, Wren nodded. It was possible. If the other sentry continued to drink, and the watchful one continued to be distracted by his foolish sibling, if the two of them were not relieved or joined by other guards, if the accursed run of bad luck that had been following Wren for years didn't rear its idiot-grinning head—then it was possible.

The alternatives, however, were less appealing. Wren had spent the bulk of the rider's first circuit analyzing and discarding them; he did the same with the second and third transits as well. Finally, on the fourth pass, Wren acted.

The recalcitrant sentry was completely drunk now, his shouts at his brother echoing loudly through the night. It was a pity, Wren thought, that his self-absorbed idiocy would actually work to save his life, at least for a little while. Moments later, the dutiful sentry rode out of the dark and past Wren's position. Both hands were on the reins, and the hook-bladed sword the man carried was sheathed against his back.

With a whispered prayer to the Unconquered Sun, and to anyone else who looked out for ex-priests on the run, Wren gathered himself and leapt noiselessly. He landed with a soft thump behind the sentry's saddle, and immediately pressed himself against the man's back.

"What?" was all the rider had time to say before Wren's left hand clamped itself over his mouth. He reached back to seize his attacker, but even as he did so, Wren's other hand found the dagger he carried at his belt. With brutal efficiency and inhuman speed, he turned it on its owner.





The first blow skidded off the armor protecting the man's gut; but the second found the seam between leg and hip and punched into flesh. The third and fourth followed, and in an eyeblink the man sagged weakly in the saddle.

Taking the reins from the corpse's dead fingers, Wren gently steered the horse around to the rear of the ridge that had served him so well. There he slid off of the hose and examined his handiwork.

The dead man still sat in the saddle, his feet secure in the stirrups. His body slumped forward over the horse's neck, and a slow trickle of blood ran down the horse's flank onto the ground. It snorted nervously and stamped the ground.

"Easy," Wren said to it, "you'll be free soon enough." It seemed reassured by his voice, but Wren put no faith in its goodwill. Carefully, he shoved the cadaver forward in the saddle, then removed the dead man's feet from the stirrups. Irritated by the necessity, he tore a strip from the hem of his own robe, and used it to tie the corpse into the saddle. One or two jolts would be enough to make the body tumble onto the ground, but Wren didn't need it to hold any longer.

Satisfied, the former monk swung himself into the saddle behind his victim, reaching around for the reins. At a walk, he guided the horse around behind the ridge, to come out on the opposite side of the last place he'd heard the other sentry's drunken bellows.

*With luck,* Wren thought, *the fellow wouldn't be unconscious quite yet.* Then the absurdity of the statement struck him, and he suppressed a snort of laughter. When was the last time he'd hoped a sentry would stay awake?

Still chortling to himself, he came out from behind the ridge, exactly where he'd hoped he'd be. One hand still held the reins, while the other was fixed behind the dead man's gorget to hold him upright.

The other rider was framed against the glow from the camp, a flaccid wineskin in one fist. He weaved in the saddle, and Wren thought he heard off-key singing. The



sounds of the camp's evening pleasures behind him had not abated, and the glow from the flames lent the figure an entirely undeserved sinister air.

Taking a deep breath, he urged the horse forward another six paces.

"Hey! Brother!" he shouted, molding his voice into the best approximation he could of the dead man's. "Come over here. I need your help!"

"Don' need anyone's help, an' I'm... *half* brother. Don' forget that." The reply was barely intelligible, and when the sentry shook a fist to emphasize a point he nearly launched himself out of the saddle.

"Please," Wren called back. "I've got some wine back in camp I've been saving. It's yours if you help me now."

The drunken figure straightened at that. "Wine?"

"Wine," Wren affirmed. "From the vineyards by the Lap."

"Damn good stuff." There was a pause, and then another cry, loaded with suspicion. "You don't have any in camp. You said you didn' bring wine! I know, I looked."

Oh shit, Wren thought. He's so stupid he's actually clever. His brain raced for a moment while he pondered a suitable response. "I had one of the Peleps hide it for me," he said with what he hoped was suitable confidence. "For a special occasion. It was supposed to be a surprise after we killed the Anathema."

"Which Peleps?"

Wren had a ready answer for that one. "Tonot."

"Hate him. Ab'slutely hate him. Glad he nearly died." There was the sound of exaggerated spitting, and the rider nearly pitched over again.

Wren gave a silent sigh of relief. If Tonot had died since returning, the deception would have evaporated in a heartbeat. "That's why I had him hold it. Now would you please hurry?" He grimaced. The saddle was sticky with cold, drying blood, and the scent of it was thick in his nostrils. The deception couldn't last much longer. With luck, though, it wouldn't have to.



The other rider considered the request for a moment, then lurched forward and clung to his horse's neck. "Good horse," he said. "Take me over there." The animal shook its head in distress, but after a few more drunken encouragements, finally started forward.

Wren released the reins, hoping to every god he'd ever worshipped that the horse didn't take advantage of the opportunity. With his free hand, he slowly eased the man's dagger out once again and hefted it to throw. He'd get one cast, he knew, and that was all. The weight was comfortable in his hand, the balance good. One throw was all he thought he'd need.

"S'dark," the drunken sentry said as he approached.

"Too dark to see anything." His horse snorted, smelling blood, and the man kicked its sides savagely to urge it forward.

*Another two steps, Wren prayed.*

*Just two more steps.*

The horse took another two steps forward. "Are you awright?" the drunk asked, peering forward. "You don't look good."

"No, he doesn't," Wren said in his own voice, and let the corpse drop forward.

"Wha?" said the drunk, even as the former monk let the dagger fly. It flew through the air hilt-first, catching the man between the eyes. He moaned softly, fell off the horse backwards, and landed in an awkward pile on the ground.

Wren wasted no time. Leaping from his commandeered horse, he snatched the reins of the second one before it had time to flee. The first just stood there and watched him, and he mentally revised his opinion of the entire species upwards, at least for the moment.

Still holding onto the reins, he bent down to examine the unconscious man on the ground. He was still breathing, though badly bruised, and there was a sizable puddle of vomit on the ground next to him. He was also emitting the faintest of snores.

Wren cursed the luck. He groped in the dark until he found the dagger, then used it to saw the reins of the drunkard's horse at one end. Tying the loose end to the other animal's tack as best he could, he stooped and caught the unconscious figure under the armpits. He was heavier than he looked, and it took Wren several tries before he could shove the figure back into the saddle.

Without hesitation, Wren cut another strip off his robe and used that to tie the second man more securely than the first. The horses looked at him, bemused, but he ignored them. The plan wasn't much, but it was almost ready. He twirled the dagger once, then ran down the remaining procedures in his head.

He was headed southeast, he knew. He was going to see Rhadanthos and then he was going to find the boy whom the daiklave supposedly belonged to, and then he was going to vanish. What he did not want was Kejak's latest catspaw riding herd on his adventures with a Wyld Hunt the size of the Imperial Deliberative. The further away from his destination the Dragon-Bloods were, the happier he'd be. That meant sending the notable and dangerous T'fillit off in another direction, and then running like hell.

With a few gentle nudges, he oriented the horses to face north. Both riders, the living and the dead, sagged in their saddles but did not fall. The dagger was a comfort in his hand, the only element of his plan he had faith in.

"Hopefully, the Unconquered Sun has a sense of humor," he muttered to himself, and then very deliberately jabbed the drunk man's horse in the buttocks with the tip of the dagger.

It reared up, whinnying, and as it did, he slapped the other one on the rump. It took off at a gallop, dragging its companion with it before it, too, caught the pace. The bodies bounced in the saddle as the two vanished into the darkness.

Wren coughed. The horses had certainly left a wide and obvious enough trail. With luck, the horses would keep running for some time yet. The dead man would fall off within a league, further enticing any who followed the



track, and if fate truly smiled on him, the entire Hunt would go chasing off after it. It was nothing he could count on, but it certainly was superior to the possibility that the entire Hunt would backtrack Tonot's route and find him.

**E** He shrugged. There was still a full night's journey ahead of him if he wanted the ruse to do any good. Throwing the dagger into the thicket that had sheltered him, he set off to the southeast at a careful trot. The sound of laughter from the camp hid his footfalls, and silently, he vanished into the night.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

"We found the other body, Revered One." Mnemon Palap reined in as she rode up to where T'fillit sat on her mount, waiting. "He's just over that hill, there. The trail continues on beyond it."

"Is he dead as well?" A sharp wind blew, whipping her robes around her. She fought the urge to shiver. To do so in front of the others would be to show weakness.

"No, Revered One. Badly hurt, though, and there's puke on his breath. The whole thing is a mystery to me."

T'fillit nodded. "Bring me to him."

"Of course."

They rode forward, the rest of the traveling party flowing out and around them. While the whole Hunt was not here, a significant fraction of it was, a display of power. Whatever Anathema had ambushed the sentries the night before—for surely nothing short of one of those monstrosities could have done so without raising an alarm—had left a clear trail to follow, and if this was a trap, T'fillit intended to overwhelm it by sheer force.

The slope they rode up was gentle, the other side of the hill less so. It was easy to see how the man had been thrown from the saddle. Many a skilled and sober rider would have had difficulty with the hill in daylight, let alone at full tilt in the dark.



The man himself, an annoying little Nellens whose name T'fillit could never remember, sat on the ground moaning loudly. One of the party's Immaculates hovered over him, offering suggestions and attempting to see to his health, but the small figure on the ground shooed him away. His helmet was gone, and his shaved head was covered in short black stubble. A massive welt rose from the center of his forehead, just above the bridge of his hooked and narrow nose. His complexion was pale and he was sweating, and somewhere along the way various bits of his armor had gone missing.

T'fillit felt an instant surge of revulsion at the sight. "You," she said brusquely. "Tell me what happened."

"I'll tell you what happened. We were ambushed. Attacked! We were riding our circuit when they came out of the dark at us!"

"They?"

The little man nodded. "At least four of them. Anathema. We fought them back to back, Sayas and I did, but they were too strong for him. Then I got angry, and scared them off. When they ran, I chased them, but they had a trap waiting for me." He rubbed his head. "Which is how I ended up here. I guess they were too frightened to finish me off."

Palap nudged his horse closer to T'fillit's. "We found evidence of only one steed on the circuit last night, and no evidence of any fighting outside the compound except for a small trail of blood that led behind a hill south of the camp to where this track started. It continued until we found Nellens Sayas' body this morning. The blood was his. The other sentries reported no struggle and no signs of any massive incursion, and there were no other footprints on the ground that we could see."

"In other words, he's lying?" A half-smile quirked at the corner of her mouth. "I could have told you that."

"Anyone who knew him could have," he replied.

T'fillit straightened up in the saddle. "Are you quite certain that is exactly how the last night's events happened? Are you sure you're not... missing a detail?"

"Quite certain, Revered One." His eyes shifted nervously back and forth. "I don't suppose you brought any wine with you, as a restorative?"

She sighed. "Flog him," she said to Palap, "and then bring him to me when he's ready to tell the truth. Something here stinks." She looked around. "Where exactly is here, anyway?"

"If I remember the maps at camp correctly, we're south and a lot west of Sijan. Not entirely friendly territory. We're too close to the River Province for my liking. There's a small town about two hours' ride west of here. It might be worth heading there to see if anyone's seen or heard anything."

T'fillit nodded. "An excellent suggestion. When you finish with Nellens, we'll go."

"Yes, Revered One." Palap nodded, and crooked a finger at the man on the ground. "This won't take long, I assure you."

And true to his word, once the screaming started, it didn't.

The collection of buildings which Palap had referred to as a town was barely worthy of the name. It was really a trading outpost with a ring of homes and a low wall around it, a place where homesteaders gathered for gossip and protection against the barbarians that occasionally swept over the plains.

There was an inn at the center of town, a crude one that doubled as a temple, a trader's den and a stables, and it was to this establishment that T'fillit and her companions went when they rode into town. Children peered at them from around corners or behind windows; adults either prostrated themselves or hurried inside and bolted their doors.

"Not friendly territory, you said?" T'fillit was amused.

"So it would seem." Palap did not share her smile. "I was expecting more than this."

"The Threshold is under attack," she gently reminded him. "That is why we are here. Now, let us conduct our business and go."

Palap nodded. "Of course, Revered One. May I have the pleasure of facilitating our departure?"

"If you wish. Don't hurt anyone," she said, and called the company to a halt. Palap dismounted and walked into the rough inn. His voice could be clearly heard in the street outside, mellifluously asking if there had been any incursions of the sort his companions might be equipped to deal with of late.

The response was low and lengthy, interrupted several times by expressions of disbelief. A moment later, the Dragon-Blood emerged from the inn's doorway, a thoughtful expression on his face and a scrap of dirty parchment in his hand.

"Well?" T'fillit's tone had the merest hint of impatience.

"It's very odd. They have seen something. Everyone has. They're all talking about it." He swung back into the saddle. "But not what you'd think."

"I think," she said, "you had better tell me what they saw."

"Apparently there was an Anathema in the vicinity, and not long ago. The story, if you believe it, is that it—sorry, she, it's supposed to have been a woman—fought an Immaculate priest at a tavern a few days' travel from here. The fight supposedly lasted all night, with doom raining down from the heavens and so forth. In the end, they say the priest killed her magically but was gravely wounded himself. The details are suspect, of course. Both of them were supposed to be nine feet tall and fart fire, but the core of it is something they all agree on, and I must say, if it's fiction, it's certainly an odd ending for it."

T'fillit pursed her lips. "Fascinating stuff. And the parchment you're holding?"

"A map, of course. Not a good one, but a map. It should be good enough to get us there, if you decide to investigate." Palap shrugged. "They all told the same story. They're quite excited about it, actually."

A sudden thought struck T'fillit. "The monk. Did the man describe him?"

Palap furrowed his brow. "Vaguely. Big, of course, and bald. He also said the man had a beard, which made me scratch my head. There aren't many monks with beards, are there?"

"Only one who matters," she said distantly. She shook her head, and her attention snapped back to the present. "Give me the map. Choose five others to go with me, and then take the rest back to the camp and wait. Reward the innkeeper and then move. Hurry!"

Palap blinked. "Revered One?"

"You heard me," she hissed. "Move!"

And then, more gently, "I think we've just found Holok."







## Chapter Twenty-Four

The stumps of the mountain laurel trees were still there when Wren picked his way down the path. The stream that they had flanked was not. Where once had been a muddy but sizable flow of water was now a flat, empty gully, paved in cracked mud and pockmarked with stones. Dry, yellowed rushes grew along where the waterline had been, and a few hardier weeds had pushed their way into the channel proper.

They looked, thought Wren, like the last scraps of flesh on a well-gnawed skeleton. Swiftly, he brushed through the reeds and dropped into the streambed. He knelt and pinched some dirt between his fingers. It was bone dry and crumbled easily at his touch. Parchment-pale dust shifted away on the breeze, and he frowned. Still frowning, he hopped over to a nearby rock and overturned it. The soil underneath was dry as well, and curiously devoid of the sorts of small crawling things one would naturally expect.

"This is odd," he muttered to himself, and cocked his head to listen. Overhead, the sun was high and the sky cloudless. A steady breeze blew from the west, rattling dried leaves and dead reeds as it went. But other than that, there was no sound. No insects buzzed in the bushes, no birds called from the trees upslope, no frogs complained from hollows beneath stones.

The stream, and all that had lived in it, was gone.

With a small sound of displeasure, Wren rose to his feet. He looked behind him, but there was nothing downstream except more dirt, baked hard by the weak winter sun.

It would be upstream, then, he decided. The answers he sought would be found there, and with luck, Rhadanthos would be, too.



An hour later, any watching eyes would have seen a slightly frustrated Eliezer Wren sitting on a rock in the middle of the empty stream bed, cursing in most un priestly fashion and rummaging in his pack for some dried fruit he'd bought a week earlier. The walk upstream had brought no answers, only an ever-deepening mystery set amidst rocks stained with dead algae. There was no sign of water anywhere, not even a trickle, and in Wren's rough estimation there hadn't been any in the channel for quite some time. Old erosion showed in the occasional patterns of sediment, but even the rare deeper pools showed no sign of moisture. Whatever had dried up the stream had done so thoroughly. Furthermore, it had done so some time ago. The water weeds and moss were long gone, as were the corpses of any fish that might have dwelt here. Empty shells filled with sand showed that freshwater shellfish and snails had lived here once, but not any more.

At sufficient intervals, Wren had stopped to test the soil. Everywhere, it was the same—fine, crumbly and dry. No answers magically revealed themselves, no voice whispered the story of what had happened here. There was only a dry streambed, and no sign of those—natural or unnatural—who had lived in it.

Frowning, Wren found the fruit and opened the leather pouch it was carried in. The dates were dry and leathery, the apple strips even worse, and after a few bites he found himself in the midst of a coughing fit. Spitting out a hunk of something that might once have been a stem, he found his waterskin and took a long pull from it.



It was nearly empty, he saw, and that was going to be a problem. He'd been counting on being able to refill it at the stream, and if he didn't find more water soon he'd be in serious trouble. A look at the sky reminded him that no help would be coming from that quarter; the few clouds that had masked it earlier had evaporated, leaving only the benignly smiling sun to dominate the heavens.

"Fat lot of help you are," Wren muttered, and took another pull from the skin. Another coughing fit took him, and a spray of water burst from his lips. It landed on the ground in dark trceries, and disgusted with himself, Wren sealed the skin and turned to pack it away.

Instead, something on the ground caught his eye.

The water he'd accidentally lost, those precious few drops, had not stayed where they'd landed. Instead, they'd crept together, pooling themselves into a tiny puddle and then stretching themselves into the shape of a single word.

It read, "Help."

Wren stared at the script on the ground for a long instant. Then, with a hiss, the water sank into the ground and was gone.

He slid to the ground and ran a finger along the place where the moisture had been seconds previously. It was, as he expected, utterly dry.

The nearly empty waterskin was still in his left hand. Looking at it, Wren estimated that he had perhaps another day's worth of water if he was careful, two if he was penurious. He looked at the ground again, and made his decision.

Unstopping the skin, he turned it upside down and let the last of his water trickle out onto the creekbed. It splashed against the dirt, gurgling away and swirling into the dust.

As the last few drops spattered out, Wren dropped to his hands and knees. "Where are you?" he whispered fiercely. "Tell me where you are or I can't help you."

The water shimmered, then spun. A miniature whirlpool formed in the tiny puddle.

"Tell me!"

Beneath the stones, the water spelled out one glyph after another. *You will find me beneath the stones.* Then the empty waterskin slipped from Wren's fingers, and the words vanished as if they had never been.



He found the stones, such as they were, a little further upstream, and gave a low whistle at the sight.

The last time he had been here, the stream had issued from a burbling, reasonably cheerful spring. Ice-cold and clear, the waters had welled up from within the mouth of a small cave. Now, the cave—and the spring—were gone.

Instead, someone had gone to great trouble to bury both the stream and its spirit. A massive pile of boulders had been erected on the site where the spring had once flowed, reaching nearly twenty feet into the air. Some of the stones, Wren saw, were easily the size of a full grown man, and bore signs of having been hacked ungently out of a cliff face. Smaller stones filled in the gaps between the large ones, and someone had begun an effort to cover the entire enterprise in loose soil. The attempt thus far had been unsuccessful, but it gave the impression that the earth itself was reaching up to take the impromptu monolith to its bosom.

The base of the mound, Wren noticed as he got closer, was less solid than the mound itself. The spring may have been buried, but it had not been entirely choked, as the area around the rough hill was marshy, wet and dank. Reeds poked up through intermittent puddles, and squelching noises accompanied Wren's every step. Here and there patches of incongruously dry land appeared, baked as hard and dry as the rest of the riverbed but sitting cheek by jowl with seemingly bottomless pools and massive puddles of unbroken mud. A will-o-the-wisp, more ambitious than its fellows, burned bright over the muck for a second, then winked out.

He paused to pull his left foot out of a particularly boggy patch, and regretted not having bought (or stolen) better footwear. Already the mud was caking on his lower legs and feet, and the slight itching it inspired was a

harbinger of far worse discomfort yet to come. There were flies here, too, and a loud croaking somewhere nearby told Wren that the local frogs were clearly not keeping their mind on their work.

In the distance, he could see the ominous shape of Talat's Howe. The top of the hill had been sheared off by some unknown catastrophe, but even so its brooding silhouette was unmistakable. No trees grew on that hill, indeed, from where he stood Wren could see no life at all. Then again, that was appropriate. It was a dead place, left to dead things, and Wren found himself devoutly hoping that he'd never have to set foot inside its confines again.

The last time he had done so, he'd earned the enmity of both Ratcatcher and Ratcatcher's master, the Prince of Shadows, and that had set his foot on the path that had taken him to the bowels of the Underworld and beyond.

Life would have been easier, he reflected, if he'd been able to refrain from trying to be clever. Instead, he'd laced the empty tomb—for his desecration of it had yielded but a single coin and the awareness that the entire construction was a massive joke played on would-be tomb robbers like himself—with traps of varying lethality. One had caught the prince's favorite, and the prince been displeased enough to have Ratcatcher hunt Wren down across the breadth of a continent.

What had followed, Wren reflected grimly, had not been pleasant. He finished pulling his foot out of the mud and, lacking a better idea of what to do, started climbing the cairn under which Rhadanthos was presumably buried. A few seconds' scrambling brought him to the top, and demonstrated to him precisely how difficult his task was likely to be. The stones he climbed over were massive, far too huge for him to move on his own. Even with the power he'd been granted, there was no way he'd be able to shove aside half the boulders that made up Rhadanthos' prison, and it struck him as unlikely that he'd get the inhabitants of any of the villages he'd passed through to help.



Temporarily baffled, he sat. The evening was pleasant enough, with a cool breeze washing down from the heights behind the Howe. The sun sank at a leisurely pace, and Wren found himself scanning the nearby woods for a good place to camp. He recalled wolves and less palatable things haunting the woods nearby from his last visit, and had no desire to make their acquaintance. The problem of Rhadanthos' entombment might be easier to tackle come morning, but not if he spent the night dodging ghosts and teaching wolves painful lessons.

It was the sudden silence of the frogs that snapped Wren out of his reverie. Something large was crashing through the underbrush in the woods off to his left. Whatever it was was slow-moving and clumsy, and Wren had no desire to be seen by it. He slithered down the pile of rocks, keeping its bulk between him and whatever was making the sound, and listened.

In a few seconds, the noise resolved itself into the tramp of heavy feet, many of them. The pace of the footfalls was slow but their frequency spoke of numbers, and over the din Wren could hear a man's voice shouting orders liberally sprinkled with Nexus dockside profanity.

Wren scrambled to his right and peered out around the edge of the hill. There was an instant when he could see nothing, and then the source of the noise emerged from the forest. It was a long column of shambling, shuffling figures in rags. The stench of the grave hung over them, and even at this distance Wren could see places where pale bone shone through holes in paler skin. Looking almost ghostly in the late evening light, each was weighed down with a heavy yoke linking two buckets. The buckets held overflowing loads of dirt, which trailed out behind each staggering figure and plopped into the soft mud a handful at a time.

"Walking dead," Wren said softly. "This is their doing?"

Another figure burst from the trees as he watched, one with considerable more animation than the shuffling cadavers he tended. The shape was armored in gleaming

black, a barrel-shaped figure marked by spikes and excrescences which gleamed with an oily shine. For a moment Wren thought he was staring at some sort of monstrous beetle, and then recognition dawned. He'd seen this figure before, once and long ago. From the cover of the woods on the south side of Rhadanthos' creek, he'd seen this man in the entourage of the Prince of Shadows.

A second look brought more details. The man was stocky. Friends would have called him burly; enemies would have called him fat. He moved slowly and ponderously, and the clack of the joints of his armor echoed over the marsh like the clacking of insect jaws.

It was not Ratcatcher, then, but one of his friends. Wren nodded. Heo 'd somehow been half-expecting to meet his former captor here, and it was a bit of a shock to discover one of the prince's other servants. Still, anyone in service to the Prince of Shadows was unlikely to be a weakling or a coward. The beetle-shaped figure, whoever he was, would no doubt be an enemy to be reckoned with.

Was the prince still here? Wren thought not. Piling stones was the sort of thing the prince entrusted to servants, and not particularly bright servants at that. This beetle-man had not struck Wren as the cleverest of the prince's servants, and so he was the perfect choice to remain behind and work the prince's will. That the prince's will had included the imprisonment of Rhadanthos was the bigger, and more worrisome, surprise.

The long column of figures emerging from the wood finally ended. Wren counted a dozen, plus the armored taskmaster, and noted with some alarm that they were clearly headed in his direction. Silently, Wren berated himself—of course that's what they were doing, what other reason would there be to have corpse tote heavy loads of earth? It was time for a retreat. Walking dead were less of a problem for him than they might be for some others, but the presence of the prince's henchman tipped the scales. Wren wanted nothing to do with him for now, not until he

had a surer idea of the man's capabilities. Nodding to himself, the former priest began a slow, quiet descent from the rockpile on which he was perched.

Behind him, he heard a low growl. He turned his head and then silently asked the heavens, "Why?"

A wolf sat at the base of the pile of stones, its ragged fur marked by scars. Its eyes were bright blue, and they stared into Wren's own with a look of more than animal cunning.

"Good dog," Wren said, desperately ransacking his memory as to whether or not he'd stored any dried meat among his provisions. He didn't think he had.

The wolf snarled deep in its throat, and bared an impressive palisade of teeth. Its eyes held Wren's, daring him to make a move.

With agonizing slowness, Wren turned his left hand so that the palm was flush against the rock face. The wolf, by itself, was no problem. The help that a howl might bring, on the other hand, was. And if he needed a reminder of this, the splashing of the approaching dead men was getting closer.

Carefully, he extended his fingers, searching for a stone that would fit neatly into his palm. His hand closed on a clump of dried mud that exploded in his grip, and then a loose agglomeration of pebbles. "Nice dog," he said, a bit more urgently. It padded forward a step. On the other side of the hill, the black-armored man bellowed something about moving faster.

Wren moved faster. He splayed his right hand out and found a fist-sized lump of schist, held fast in a matrix of dried mud and grass. The wolf loped forward, to the base of the hill and stared at him.

He pulled the rock free. It fit in his palm the way a child's ball might have, just heavy enough to throw. The wolf threw back its head and closed its eyes.

Wren hurled the stone. From his awkward position, he didn't get quite as much on it as he would have wished, but it took the wolf in the jaw, and turned what would have been a full-throated howl into a whimper of pain. The beast





shook itself as the stone splashed into the mud, and in that instant Wren leapt off the hill.

It barely had time to turn its head to face him as he descended, his foot connecting with the back of its neck and driving it down into the dirt. There was a sharp, vicious cracking sound, and the light went out of the wolf's eyes. Curiously, its tail wagged once, and then it was dead.

Carefully, Wren stepped off the carcass' neck, feeling rather pleased with himself. No other wolves leapt out of the reeds and scrubby brush to assault him and no alarm had been raised. Now, all that remained to do was to negotiate the tricky semi-swamp that surrounded Rhadanthos' resting place without attracting attention, and he could hide until morning and better options presented themselves. Gingerly, he stepped forward onto a tussock of firm-seeming ground.

Something in the grass moved. Wren saw a flash of green and then felt a sharp, stabbing pain in his heel. He lifted his foot and saw blood oozing from twin puncture wounds. A thin, ribbon-like tail vanished into the depths of the grass, and Wren felt his blood run cold with fear. Surely it was too late in the year for serpents, he thought, and carefully put his foot back on the ground. Nothing else struck at him, and hesitantly he put his weight on the wounded heel.

Despite himself, Wren screamed. It felt like his foot had been immersed in liquid flame, so intense was his agony. The pain crawled down the sole of his foot to his toes, and up his calf. He nearly stumbled, but caught himself and forced himself forward.

The sound of hurried footsteps through shallow swamp told him that his shout had not gone unnoticed. He took another step and gritted his teeth against the agony. The venom had flowed further now, the pain lancing higher up his leg.

A chorus of low moans came from around the hill, and the dead men shambled into view. They moved quickly for their kind, dropping their yokes and lurching forward with

their hands out, grasping. Behind them strode their beetle-armored master, who exhorted them on with shouts that seemed more for his benefit than for theirs.

Wren took another step, and nearly collapsed into the mud. Another couple of hopping half-steps convinced him that flight was no longer an option. Behind him, the corpses were getting closer. The stench of them overwhelmed his nostrils.

Face set in a grim mask, he hobbled to a small rise and knelt down on it. His bad leg he tucked beneath him, his good one he leaned on. Drawing the daiklave from his back, he bared his teeth in a grin the dead wolf would have envied and waited. Three of his pursuers, he noted with grim amusement, had dropped off the chase, and were busy tearing hunks from the dead animal's carcass with their rotting fingers. Their taskmaster strode among them, striking with the flat of his blade and urging them forward, but they paid him no heed.

"You need a better class of slave," Wren called, and swung the daiklave in a broad, flat arc. It took the first of the cadavers in the midsection, spinning it around as its half-rotted guts snaked out of its torn belly. It caught at them with slow fingers, staring in amazement as they poured onto the ground. Another shambled forward on the left, and Wren reversed his swing. There was a moment of agony as he put undue pressure on his wounded leg, but his blow struck true. It took the figure just above the knees, severing one leg and nearly taking the other. The corpse fell on its side like a child's suddenly forgotten toy, its arms still waving madly.

"Forward, damn the lot of you, forward!" the man bellowed. "He's one man, and he's hurt!" He stalked back and forth behind the line of his advancing minions, brandishing a heavy curved sword with a basket hilt, yet seemed oddly unwilling to engage Wren himself.

Wren, for his part, found himself unable to take the time to analyze this strange behavior, being too busy



**F**ighting for his life. One of the corpses reached below the surface of a puddle and brought out a dripping hunk of wood that would serve as a club. It raised the makeshift weapon, and Wren took its arm off at the elbow. Another one rushed him as he did so, and he was forced to butt it in the gut with the sword's pommel. Dirty claws raked his face even as it folded in something approximating pain, and then he brought the blade around and made an end of it. Two more converged on him, and as he held them at bay, a third crept around behind him and raised clasped hands over its head, intent on delivering a crushing blow. Wren reversed his grip on the blade and thrust straight back between his arm and torso. The daiklave caught on something that was probably a rib, and Wren gave it a sharp twist to the left. There was the sound of rotten bones breaking, and then he pulled the blade free before the two in front could take advantage.

In the end, they all fell. Wren stared at his opponent across a sea of torn body parts and severed limbs, not a few of which were still moving blindly and without guidance. His entire side was aflame, but thankfully his leg had gone numb. The first fingers of fire had crept past his shoulder into his arm, and he didn't know how much longer he could hold the daiklave.

With luck, he thought, his opponent didn't know, either.

"You can run now," he called out, trying to keep the pain out of his voice. His cheek bled from four parallel cuts inflicted by the nails of one of the walking dead and his legs were soaked up past the knee. Old, black blood dripped from the end of the daiklave, spattering into a puddle one drop at a time.

"I can. You can't," the man called out, and advanced. His sword made a blur in the late evening light, the hum of it cutting the air an insistent nagging in Wren's ears. "You've got a big sword for a little man."

"And you've got a big mouth for a man behind corpses." Wren made a first, probing thrust, and it clanged harm-

lessly off the man's breastplate. In response, the man brought his sword down in a savage two-handed stroke, one that nearly wrenched the daiklave out of Wren's hands.

"I'll cut you a second smile instead, and then we can compare," he gloated. "You can tell the other ghosts that Pandeimos sent you, and you'll have a lot of company." He struck again, and again Wren barely parried. The strength behind the blow was staggering. Another blow came at his head, and as Wren ducked, the man stomped one booted foot onto his wrist. Wren cried out at the blow and his wrist turned, and the daiklave lay flat on the ground. Before he could pull it away, the grinning Pandeimos brought his boot down again, this time on the sword itself. It sank deep into the mud under his weight, and Wren was unable to pull it free.

"Having a problem with your sword?" Pandeimos spun his blade once, theatrically, and then rammed it point-down into the mud as well. Laughing at his own joke, he lifted off his helm to reveal a broad face that might have been ruddy if it weren't suffering the first stages of decomposition. Black hair gone to gray framed the man's face, matted with moisture that might have been sweat. Most of his teeth, his grin attested, were still present.

"What's your name?" he asked. "I hate killing people I don't know. It makes for boring stories afterwards." He flexed his fingers, the metal of his gauntlets clacking softly.

Wren gave another surreptitious tug on the sword. It didn't move. The pain in his side made him feel like his muscles had turned to water. There was, he decided, only thing he could do.

"My name," he said, "is Eliezer Wren."

It had the desired effect. Pandeimos gasped "You?" and shifted his weight. Wren shifted his as well, throwing himself backwards and willing the power in him to do something, anything, to heal the terrible pain. The daiklave came with him, whipping up and into the air, narrowly missing the underside of Pandeimos' jaw as the man ducked out of the way.

Wren landed on his back and rolled. Warmth flooded through him, not the harsh burning power of the venom, but rather the gentle heat that came with healing. He came up, covered in mud but smiling, the daiklave held in good form in front of him. A tattered cloak of light trailed out behind him, catching and snapping on an invisible breeze.

To Pandeimos' credit, it didn't take him long to recover. "The prince will be very happy to hear I killed *you*," he snarled, and charged. His helm fell, unnoticed, into the mire.

Wren cut low, then when his opponent parried, brought the daiklave up in a slow swing at the man's head. Again, Pandeimos parried, and Wren took the opportunity to plant a solid, flatfooted kick in the center of his chest.

The bigger man went over backwards with a loud grunt, landing on his back on the low rise that Wren had defended against Pandeimos' servants. His sword came forward in a wild cut that would have taken Wren's ear had he not snapped his head to the left by instinct. Another swipe came, one-handed, as Pandeimos planted his left hand on the ground in an attempt to hoist himself upright.

Wren saw this, avoided the wild swing, and jabbed at the joint at the elbow of the man's armor. The point penetrated, and with a hiss Pandeimos sank back to the ground. Wren pulled the daiklave back, its tip bloodied, and brought it up to fend off another wild blow. This one clanged harmlessly away, and Wren riposted by planting a kick under his enemy's chin.

"Not so much fun when you're the one on the ground, is it?" he asked, even as the sword flew from Pandeimos' fingers. He leaned forward, and rested the point of the daiklave against the man's throat. "Now, I have a question."

Pandeimos laughed, a thick, choked sound. "I won't answer you."

"Oh? And why not?" Wren let the blade swing back and forth. It cut the skin, and blackened blood welled forth.

"Because all you can do is kill me, and that's nothing anymore. I'll be back for you, Wren, and I'll tell the prince, too. I'll see you in one of the hells."

With that, he threw himself forward, driving the point of Wren's blade into his windpipe and beyond. There was a sickening, brief crunch, and then nothing more.

It took three tries for Wren to pry the daiklave out of Pandeimos' throat. Somehow it had gotten wedged between a few of the neck vertebrae, and seemed almost unwilling to relinquish its hold. At the last, Wren had to plant one mud-encrusted foot on the corpse's face and then pull.

The sword he'd wiped carefully on the tallest reeds he could find, and then tucked away again. The bodies he gathered as best he could and dumped them a ways down the channel, the better to distract any wolves that might come along. As for fresh water, he found precious little. Most of the puddles and pools had been fouled, one way or another, by the afternoon's exertions, and with the sun going down there was no time to search. Finally, in desperation, he dug a hollow into the ground and lined it with strips of cloth torn from his trews, in hopes that they might serve as something of a filter. Then, exhausted beyond belief, his heel still throbbing from where the serpent had bitten him, Wren climbed to the top of the cairn that imprisoned Rhadanthos and lay down in hopes of finding a few hours' sleep.





## Chapter Twenty-Five

"It's not the sort of place you would expect to find anyone interesting," said one of the riders doubtfully, and four of the other five murmured their agreement.

The six sat, mounted, outside the grounds of a small inn. The main building was a cut above ramshackle, but the outbuildings were on the brink of teetering into disrepair. A sprawl of untidy fields surrounded the central building, and they in turn were surrounded by a low wooden fence. A few members of the staff bustled across the central courtyard, some leading animals to what looked to be the stables. A heavyset woman emerged from the rear door of the main building and spent several minutes pursuing an equally heavyset chicken, then seized her prize and stomped back inside. A pair of wagons sitting outside the stable had blocks placed before and behind their wheels, but there was no need. The ground here was flat, and there was no danger of anything rolling away under its own power.

T'fillit shot a glance filled with annoyance at the woman who'd spoken, and she—a girl, really—had flushed and turned away. The others muttered inanities and subsided, and all was silent except for the soft whickering of the animals they rode. There were seven of those, one for each rider and a saddled but riderless beast tethered to one of the junior riders' mounts. That particular animal, which some

foolish optimist had named "Thunderbolt of Wrath," was heavy and slow, which made it perfect for the task that lay ahead. It possessed a personality that kind riders called "gentle," which was another way of saying that it was exceptionally stupid even by the undemanding standards of beasts of burden, and that was precisely why T'fillit had called for it to be saddled and led out with her expedition. She was here to bring someone back, someone who might not be in the best condition to ride, and when it came to mounts for her esteemed guest, the gentler course seemed the wiser one.

T'fillit took in the panorama for another minute while the other riders sat silent and shamed behind her. Finally, one—a young noble of House Iselsi with a fraction more courage than most of his companions, spoke.

"Are we going in to get him?" he asked anxiously, his left hand on the reins while the right rubbed his exceedingly unpleasant-looking mount's neck. "It doesn't seem terribly well defended."

The priestess held up her hand. "Wait. Remember the story we heard—that there had been some kind of fight between a monk and an Anathema here, and that the monk had triumphed but been wounded. Does it sound like the situation demands that we ride in with fire, steel and naked power?"

"Well, no." The young Iselsi hung his head. "I just thought—"

"You thought what? Did the story not make our fearless monk out the hero? Why exactly do you think we would need to do anything more than ask where his chamber is, and then bring him home? We are here to eliminate Anathema. We are also here to make sure that the people know we are here to eliminate Anathema, so that they might remember their duty toward the Immaculate Dragons. Slaughtering innkeepers and stable boys for the crime of being bystanders when an ancient and venerable monk brought down this reborn evil, not to mention the heinous





act of caring for him while he recovered from his wounds, is not the sort of act calculated to further our goals."

"Oh. So what do we do, then?"

"You—and by you I mean all of you—will ride into the courtyard and attempt not to burn, kill or pillage anything. I will go into the inn and see if their guest is in any shape to travel. If he is not, you will stay here with him until he is. If he is, then we will leave, after rewarding the innkeeper and his family handsomely for their good deed. Understood?"

The young Dragon-Blood nodded, then his head came up and his brow furrowed. "Reward them? With what?"

T'fillit's lips curled back in something that only a kind man would call a smile. "You have a purse, yes?"

"Well, yes."

"Then you have answered your own question. Enough of this. Let us ride." So saying, she flicked the reins and her heavy, coal-black mount surged forward. With a whoop, the others followed, startling even the mild-mannered Thunderbolt of Wrath into motion. Behind them all came the foolish Iselsi, who rode with one hand on the reins and the other on his purse, wondering why he'd chosen to join the Hunt in the first place.

The inn's hostess, her apron stained with fresh chicken blood, had already scurried to the front door when T'fillit dismounted. She bowed as best she could, her smile showing a half-set of yellowing teeth, and gestured to the interior of the inn. As T'fillit strode up the three steps that led inside, the other riders circled the courtyard, scattering the few fowl that remained there and generally discomfiting the hired help.

"Your Reverence," the woman said as T'fillit reached her, and curtsayed. "To what do we owe the honor of this visit?" Her hands, T'fillit noted, were also still bloody.

"It is you who does us the honor," T'fillit replied, trying not to gag at the odor emanating from the figure before her. "I have heard tales of a great battle that was fought here in

recent nights against the forces of the ancient evil which we hunt, and we have come to praise you for your part in it.”

The woman blushed and fluttered, her hands knotting up in the stained apron. “Oh, you’re too kind,” she said. “We did nothing, really. Just a few swings here and there.” She demonstrated, and T’fillit was left with no doubt that a blow struck by this creature’s meaty arms would indeed lay anything short of an Anathema out on the ground. “It was the priest that did all of the real fighting, though. He and his lady friend.”

“Lady friend?” T’fillit did her best to control her curiosity.

“Oh, yes, yes. They took a single room together, and were here several days. Then one night the whole inn was awakened by a terrible clamor from their room. At first my husband and I—we own the place, we do—thought it was just the two of them squabbling, which we hear often enough, running an inn like we do. But then there was this tremendous crash, and a pretty young thing dressed all in black ran through the kitchen. Roused the staff, who set upon her. We could tell she was evil, you know, so we gave her what for.” The woman’s head nodded down into her wattled chins sagely.

T’fillit barely kept herself from laughing. *Of course* this woman could tell Anathema just by looking at them, she thought. She was also quite certain that the number of blows the staff had struck against the interloper had been exactly zero, in large part because there were no fresh graves to be seen. Scullery maids armed with skillets who fought sun-tainted monstrosities tended to turn into cadavers with alarming regularity. It seemed highly unlikely that the staff of this particular hostel was skilled enough at hand-to-hand combat for things to have gone otherwise.

All she said, however, was “You are very brave. Pray, tell, what happened next?”

“Ooh!” The fat woman threw her hands up in the air. “Well, this thief—for that’s what she was, a common thief—had just about fought her way through the kitchen when in



though the door from the common room burst the priest. He looked angry, I tell you, as angry as I've seen a man in many a year. The thief took one look back at him and ran like a rabbit who wakes up to find she's been cuddling up to a snake. She was out the back door like a stone from a sling, and that's no lie."

T'fillit nodded. "The priest—what did he look like?"

"Well, he looked a lot better then than he does now, begging your pardon. He was tall and broad and wore gray, and he had a great bushy beard like you don't see on too many priests. I'm glad it wasn't me he was angry with, let me tell you. There was some kind of light shining from him, too, though no one here seems able to agree on just what they saw. We just know it was some kind of light. A symbol of favor from the Elemental Dragons, no doubt."

Smiling benignly, T'fillit reached out and patted the woman on the shoulder. "Yes, that's exactly it. You are perspicacious as well as brave. Well done."

The hostess looked befuddled but pleased, and needed no further prompting to continue her story. "In any case, he chased her out the back door. We didn't swing at him, no not at all. You don't swing a kettle at a priest, I always say, on account of it being bad luck. So we held our ground and he ran out the back, and then the rest of us came to the door to watch."

"What did you see?" the priestess prompted with an inner sigh. The woman clearly wanted to bask in her moment of glory, and that necessitated a little bit of nudging.

"That's the curious thing, you see. She just fell down. Then the priest went out and whispered something to her, and carried her body back, and the priest's lady friend met him at the door. My husband and I felt it was none of our business any longer, so Wise Ox—that's my husband—went to try to fix the door on their room, and I shooed everyone else off to bed." She nodded, and added a prim, "It seemed proper," with the clear implication that while she was very thankful to the priest in question, she did not at all approve of his choice of traveling companions.

T'fillit ignored her moralizing. Something about the story—above and beyond the obvious bits of fiction the woman had injected to make herself look more important—bothered her. “The priest was not hurt when he brought the body back?”

“That was the *other* curious thing, now. He didn't look hurt, but come morning we could all hear him shouting bloody murder—and bloody murder it damn near well was. Blood all over the place, let me tell you, and his companion long gone. He must have been hurt and not known it, that's all I can say, but how he made it up the stairs with those cuts I'll never know.” T'fillit stared at her until she continued. “Across the back of the ankle, they were. The sort of thing a man shouldn't be able to walk on, even if he is a priest. My Wise Ox made him some crutches so he could get around, but the things he had to say, oh, they were terrible Just terrible!”

“I suspect I will be able to forgive him,” T'fillit said dryly. “I would like to speak to him, if I may.”

“Oh, of course. He's up the stairs.” The woman gestured authoritatively into the darkness behind her. Past the wave of the flabby arm, T'fillit could see a long common room with a stairwell at the end of it, leading up to a catwalk that ran the room's length. “First room on the left. It's the one with the new door. You can't miss it.”

“I am in your debt,” the priestess said. “Young Iselsi Harrah,” and she pointed at the sullen figure in the center of the courtyard, “has generously announced that you should be rewarded for your bravery. Go to him.”

“Of course, Revered One,” the heavyset woman said, and flounced out into the courtyard. Harrah saw her coming and blanched, but by then T'fillit had already gone inside. The hostess' shrieks of delight followed her, faintly, as she did so.

The stairs, like much of the construction on the inside, was surprisingly solid. A mended table sat just below the catwalk, while heavy, hand-carved furniture filled the room. None of it was decorative but all of it was functional.

T'fillit suspected the hand of the woman's Wise Ox in this. He was apparently a talented man. It was a pity, she thought, that he weren't wiser about his choice of a cow.

Two of the steps creaked loudly under her tread, a standard form of burglar alarm in the hinterlands of the far Threshold. So, too, did the dark wood of the catwalk, and T'fillit took care to step lightly as she came to the door the hostess had mentioned.

It was indeed new, pine wood that had not yet been subjected to the indignities of a constant cookfire smoke and thus was still light and unmarred. There was no peephole, nor was there a knocker of any sort. The handle was a simple knob, with a simpler lock below it. Both were cast from bronze.

She raised her hand as if to knock, but then thought better of it. Instead, she turned and put her ear against the door, to listen for any sound within. There was nothing, only silence. The floor underneath her creaked as she shifted her weight, her concern rapidly growing. The fat woman had said that the mysterious priest was here, and yet there was no hint of his presence. Frowning, she bent her head to the door again and shut her eyes, the better to concentrate on any noise she might hear.

What she heard this time sounded like a clap of thunder inside her skull, as something exploded against the door on the other side. With an involuntary shout, she turned, hands before her face, and prepared to kick down the door to do battle with whatever lay on the other side.

Instead, the door opened. Standing there was Holok, though a thinner, grimmer Holok than she remembered. He leaned heavily on a pair of rough crutches, and his expression was one of disdain. Burns in the shape of withered hands marked both his cheeks, and she suppressed a shocked gasp at the sight. "You shouldn't listen at doors, woman. It'll get you surprises you don't like."

"Holok?" T'fillit breathed. "Is that you?"

"Of course it's me. The question I have is, what are you doing out here, and how did you find me?" She started to

answer, but he held up a hand. "No, no, not out here. Come inside and tell me, and I've got a few things to tell you, too." He turned with surprising agility, leaving her to follow and close the door.

The room smelled faintly of antiseptic herbs and old blood, despite the fact that the window was open and a cold breeze swirled through the chamber at intervals. There was a bed, unmussed, in the corner, and a cot on the floor. One table stood next to the doorway, and a half-eaten bowl of rice sat on it next to an empty teacup. Two wooden stools were placed next to it, both obviously the innkeeper's handiwork. A bundle of rags that, on closer inspection, proved to be Holok's clothes sat in the corner, but otherwise the room was bare.

Holok threw himself onto the cot and folded the crutches across his lap. "So," he said, "tell me how you knew to look for me in the middle of all this splendor."

"You're famous," she replied, settling onto one of the stools. Something told her that the bed was not to be touched.

"I am?" He gave a snort of laughter. "That's a disappointment after all these centuries of anonymity."

"It's true. The story's everywhere now, the bold tale of a noble priest fighting off a three-headed Anathema at a tiny little inn."

Holok frowned and looked intently at her. "You're making that up."

"The part about the three heads, yes, but the rest is true. Everywhere you go, you hear another version if. Your landlady had her own, which involved whacking the Exalt over the head with a frying pan."

"No, the only one she would take a skillet to would be her husband. I hadn't realized the story had gotten so far." He cast his eyes down at the floor.

"It's everywhere, I assure you. We just followed it back to its source to find you." She didn't mention that the reason she'd been in position to hear the story had been that she'd been utterly fooled by the false trail that some-



one had laid for her. There was no sense confessing to Holok that her brilliant work in tracking him down had in fact been an utter accident. "If you hadn't fought the Exalt, I expect we never would have found you."

"I expect I wouldn't have let you find me, if I hadn't fought her." He coughed once. "Rather, if I hadn't been sloppy after the fight. She's buried beyond the fields on the north side of the inn, if you want to see what's left of the body. There was nothing on it of worth. She was a thief, nothing more."

T'fillit nodded. "But she led us here. Thank the heavens for happy accidents. I'm glad you were still here," she added after a short pause, and immediately wished she hadn't. Of course he was still here; his ravaged legs were not going to allow him to go anywhere under his own power any time soon.

He grunted by way of reply, then shook his head. "I'm sorry about the rap on the door," he said, "but I didn't know who was out there, and I don't like strangers listening at my door."

"How did you know I was there?" she asked.

"When Wise Ox put the new door in, I had him cut a section of the bottom an inch off the floor. He also hung a lamp in such a way for me that anyone standing in front of my door casts a little bit of a shadow. So when I saw the shape on the floor, I knew someone was at my door, and when it didn't move I knew that someone was listening." He patted the crutches. "That's where these came in. If you hit a pine door with one of them, they make a lot of noise."

"So they do," T'fillit said, wincing. "You'll have to try that one on Kejak some day."

"Kejak?" Holok snorted. "He turned me loose. Don't tell me he did the same to you. I thought you were snug as a tick on a hound at the Palace Sublime, playing Dragon-Blood for all the world to see. I can't think of another reason you'd be out here away from the comforts of home."

"I understand you were traveling with a female companion," she retorted. "Don't talk to me about comforts."



"Don't you talk about her!" Holok slammed his crutches down on the floor and lurched to his feet. His hands were balled into fists, and his face was red with anger. "I never laid a *finger* on her."

"I'm sorry," the priestess said softly. "I... misunderstood."

"So did I," Holok said, and collapsed back onto the cot. A thin line of red showed in the bandages wrapped around his ankles. "So why are you here, and who are the young idiots outside?"

"Wyld Hunt," she replied, answering the last question first. "The cover for the whole expedition is that we're following up on the events at Qut Toloc. It won't stand close examination, but it won't have to."

"And the real reason?"

She leaned forward. "To find you, and bring you home. He didn't trust anyone else to do it."

He snorted. "Poppycock. Kejak has other ways of finding a man than sending every lame-brained Iselsi by-blow who can ride off into the Threshold on a Hunt."

"Kejak hasn't quite been himself of late. Things are happening at home, odd things. You're needed there."

"That's funny," Holok mused. "I was told that I was needed out here. He never used to change his mind this often back in the old days."

"These aren't the old days, Holok."

"The way things are going, they might be the very old days," he said softly, so softly she barely heard.

"Dragons preserve us, I hope not." She lifted the teacup and sniffed it. "Still drinking sycamore leaf squeezings, Holok?"

"I drink honest workingman's tea," he replied, and bent to retrieve his crutches. "And don't swear by the Dragons if you don't mean it. It's unbecoming."

T'fillit nodded, feeling shamefaced despite herself. Holok's reputation had always been that of an honest man, regardless of his other quirks, and a devout one. While it was unusual, to say the least, for one of Kejak's cronies to



adopt the figures and strictures of the Immaculate Order, Holok had done so, and without any apparent irony. She'd met him a few times over the centuries and had always found him, if not dull, then at least straightforward. But the man who sat before her now spoke with an uncomfortably bitter edge to his words, and his massive hands flexed constantly as if he were looking for something to crush. There was a light in his eyes, too, one which she'd not seen before. It made her uncomfortable, and she found herself being almost thankful that he was crippled.

"I beg your pardon," she said as formally as she could, and put the cup back down on the table with a click. "So I've told you why I'm here. You tell me why you are. These aren't your usual haunts."

"I didn't intend to stay," he said with undisguised sarcasm. "Kejak sent me out here to find two things. The important one was the boy from Qut Toloc. I trust you've heard about him?" T'fillit nodded, and Holok continued. "No luck there. The other was to find Kejak's errand boy, Wren. I failed at that as well."

"That's odd. Wren is supposed to be dead. That's what Kejak told me before we set out."

"But?"

"But one of my huntsmen apparently ran into him not too long ago. He's changed, it would seem. Been touched by the Unconquered Sun."

"Ah." Holok accepted the news with equanimity. "I find that hard to believe. The Unconquered Sun doesn't Exalt those of Wren's age too often, and the idea of taking one of Kejak's servants smacks of bad epic poetry. More likely that your fresh-faced huntsman got himself into trouble and made something up. Wren had acquired something of a reputation. He makes a good bogeyman."

"It's possible," she said noncommittally. "He's certainly been roughed up by something, and his companions are dead."

"Hunh." Holok sat back. "Send him home to Kejak and let him interrogate the boy. If there's some truth to the



story, he'll find it, and he'll leave your huntsman mostly intact when he's done. All I know is that I didn't find Wren. I did find, however, some other interesting things. An orichalcum dagger, for one, of obscure provenance. For another, a very persistent Nemissary who gave me these," he pointed to the scars on his face, "before I knotted him into a tree. A few other things that I'm sure Kejak will find fascinating."

T'fillit whistled. "It sounds as if there's nothing he can find fault with there. You've had an interesting journey."

Holok waved her sympathy away. "He can always find fault. It's woven into him like green thread in a tapestry. That's not the issue."

"So where's the dagger?"

"Gone."

"Gone?" T'fillit blinked in surprise. "Stolen? From you?"

"I never really had it to begin with," he said heavily. "She took it when she left."

"And you let her." It came out sounding like an accusation.

"I couldn't exactly follow," was his answer, laced with a bitterness so pure that T'fillit found herself recoiling. "She made sure of that."

"Ah. I see."

"No, you don't. But it doesn't matter. You don't have to." Angrily, painfully, Holok roused himself to his feet. "Take me back to the Isle, T'fillit. And while we ride, I'll tell you everything I know about Unforgiven Blossom and the thing she carried, and maybe, just maybe, you can find her. I think it's best if I don't try ever again."



## Chapter Twenty-Six

"I've been here before."

Ratcatcher looked out over the low, rolling hills before him and squinted. The late afternoon sun turned the stream that wound its way across the landscape into a ribbon of molten fire, making it hard to see exactly what lay ahead. Still, he was struck by the nagging feeling that this place was familiar.

Behind him, Mushroom and Mold exchanged wordless glances fraught with meaning. One looked down at the ground, the other gazed off at a bank of thin, wispy clouds and offered a diffident, "You have been more places than most men, Lord Ratcatcher."

If he'd hoped that would be the end of the matter, Mushroom was disappointed. Ratcatcher half turned in the saddle and glared back at him. "I am well aware of that, thank you very much. I've got more decades of travel in my memory than you have chins. What I want right now, however, is an explanation for why this misbegotten stretch of earth tells me that I should know it."

Mushroom shrugged apologetically. "I do not know, noble one. There is certainly nothing here of note, nor within a few days' ride. There are a few villages here and there, some ruins that may once have been of interest—surely nothing that could command your attention. Perhaps you are just tired from the day's ride, and we should make camp?"



Ratcatcher's steed snorted impatiently, and its rider did the same. "I am not that tired," he said, "nor am I prone to imagining things. Don't patronize me. You're no damn good at it."

So saying, he dug his heels into his mount's flanks, and it trotted down the gentle slope toward the creek. Panicked expressions on their faces, Mushroom and Mold belatedly kicked their mules into motion. With much snorting and excitement they trotted after him.

They caught up at the edge of the creek, their mounts lathered with the exertion. Ratcatcher had already dismounted, and he stood, stroking his horse's mane with odd gentleness as it dipped its head to drink.

"So," he said without turning to look at them. "Do you have a better idea of why I might remember this place now? I thought perhaps a different angle might jog someone's memory. Maybe even mine."

Wheezing, Mold dismounted and led his exhausted mule forward.

"An excellent idea, Lord Ratcatcher. Perhaps other changes in perspective will offer more insight."

Mushroom, still seated on his mule, gave his partner a horrified look. Abruptly, Mold's eyes widened, and with a whistling intake of air he clapped both hands over his mouth. Mushroom shook his head as subtly as he dared, indicating that Mold should cease the display immediately, but it was too late. Ratcatcher stooped to pat his horse's head, then glanced back over his shoulder with a bemused expression.

"You really shouldn't do that sort of thing where I can see your reflection, my little friend. It's one of the more useful aspects of streams, I think. Now, do me the great and good favor of explaining that little performance. Please." He spoke the last word with an intonation that left no doubt that, if his polite request were not heeded, impolite ones would soon follow.

Mushroom slumped in the saddle. Mold scurried around behind his mule, risking a kick, and peered out over the

saddle with frightened eyes. "Milord, I can explain," he started, but trailed off as Mushroom raised a cautionary hand.

"My brother is right," he said, shaking his head. "Other changes might make this place more recognizable to you, Lord Ratcatcher."

Ratcatcher set his lips in a thin smile. His voice was brittle with false cheer. "Well then, let's play a game. Suppose, for argument's sake, you told me what those changes might be. Then I could imagine them, and we could see if I'm clever enough to figure out what you're trying to hide from me."

Mold whimpered. Mushroom spared him a pitiless glance, then slipped out of the saddle and calmly led his mule to the waterside. "If milord Ratcatcher wishes, we could do that."

"Your lord does," Ratcatcher replied pointedly. "Tell me. Now."

With a sigh, Mushroom pointed to the sky. "Do you see clouds there?"

Ratcatcher's gaze followed the direction of his servant's finger. "None worth mentioning, except off to the north. The creek's low. I doubt they've had rain here in a week."

"Certainly." Mushroom's tone was flat. It was as if the least Ratcatcher could do, having forced the secret out of him, would be to do him the courtesy of paying attention while it was revealed. "If, however, you imagine this place at night, and smothered in rain, it may seem more familiar to you." He shrugged his round shoulders, and slumped within his tunic. "Then again, it may not."

Ratcatcher frowned. Rising from the water's edge, he turned in place, taking in the whole vista as quickly as he could. His mind's eye painted it over with the colors of night and washed it clean with rain. *Spring rain*, his memory told him, and he wondered why. It had been cold rain, though. He remembered that much, and remembered being miserable and damp inside his armor. The others had been laughing at him the whole time, he was sure of it, especially the prince....

He shook his head to clear it. "Nothing," he said stubbornly. "I can't remember."

"Of course, Lord Ratcatcher," Mushroom replied smoothly, his tone showing every awareness of the lie. His mule having finished drinking, he led it away from the bank. "Perhaps we could discuss the matter further, if you wish."

"No, no." Ratcatcher waved him off, and stared into the water. "That won't be necessary. We should make camp here, though."

"Here?" Mushroom peeked around the side of his mule. "But milord... why? We're close to the water, and if it rains, we could be flooded."

"And if we are flooded, I'll be sure to cling to you and your brother, and thus be assured of floating away," Ratcatcher snapped. "Now do it."

"Yes, milord," the two replied in resigned unison, and scurried about their tasks. Ratcatcher watched them go with no small degree of irritation, then turned away and stalked along the creekside. Old reeds crunched underfoot as he went, dry and brittle beneath his boots. A few insects, bold survivors of the late season, buzzed over the water's surface, but he paid them no heed.


Why was this place so damnably familiar? His mind cast back over his recent travels, searching. He had not stopped here with Wren on the journey south, nor had he passed this way alone. No, it had been when he had ridden forth with the Prince of Shadows, and the rest of the prince's entourage had gone with him. But when? Which journey?

"Damnation!" he bellowed, and turned on his heel to return to camp. Downstream, he could see Mold and Mushroom industriously laboring away, one fetching water from the creek and nearly falling in as he did so.

*Nearly falling in...*

A memory leaped to mind, unbidden. Ratcatcher, off his horse and weary, leading it carefully along the muddy riverbank. He was bringing up the rear, of course, and had spent the last dozen leagues staring at the southern end of




 Pandeimos's northward-bound horse. The ground was slick and soft, and the progress of the column was slow. He'd argued with the prince that they should keep to the hilltops, but Sandheart, damn her eyes, had said something about lightning, and the prince had agreed with her. The prince had *always* agreed with her.

And so, her argument had won out, and they'd trudged along the creekside, when suddenly Ratcatcher felt the mud beneath his boots give way. The stream was not wide, but it was swollen with rain. In the dim light, it looked fast enough to carry him off. Desperately, he'd clutched at his horse's reins, hanging on for dear life as his feet slid off the bank and into the chilly water. The horse had snorted and shuffled its feet, straining against the sudden weight as it backed away from the stream.

Pandeimos had chosen precisely that moment to turn around. He'd seen Ratcatcher there, clinging with all his might to his horse's reins while his feet dragged in the swirling, muddy water, and he threw back his head and laughed. The others had stopped and turned, even as Ratcatcher found footing and extricated himself as quickly as he could from his predicament. The laughter had spread up the straggling chain of men and mounts as he'd stood there, shivering and defiant. Eventually the prince himself had come trotting back down the line to see Ratcatcher standing there, blinking in the rain.

"Why Ratcatcher," he had said mildly, "'are you delaying us *again*?" Pandeimos had bellowed anew with laughter at this, and the slap of the rebuke had twisted in Ratcatcher's gut like a hot iron knife. It had not been his fault, the other riders had worn away the bank he led his horse upon, he had not delayed anyone save by their damnable laughter... it was no use.

"No, my prince," was all he could say, and bowed his head.

"Good," the prince had noted with an approving nod. "'I'd be irritated with you if you had. We've still got many miles to go before the next town. Hopefully they'll have some news of Talat's Howe. It's like we're chasing a ghost."

He'd chuckled at that as he walked off, and the others had chuckled dutifully after him. But Ratcatcher had simply stood there, hands clenched into fists, and swore that someday he'd have revenge on them all, after they found Talat's Howe.

"That's it," he whispered to himself, equal parts elated at the discovery and furious with himself at having been fooled for so long. "Of course."

Careful of the water's edge, he sprinted back into the rude, half-finished camp. The two servants had looked up at him, surprise on their faces. "My lord?" said one, quizzically. "Is everything well?"

"Of course it's well, you idiot, now that I know where you're taking me." He kicked over the pot full of water that sat beside the carefully constructed campfire. The water doused the flame with a hiss. "Pack it up. Pack it all up. We're leaving."

"But night is coming on!" protested Mold, as Mushroom carefully set the pot upright. "We've started making camp."

"Night does not bother me, nor should it bother you, my fellow servants of the Abyss. Now do as I say, or I'll leave you and your camp behind. I know where I'm going now."

"Do you, lord Ratcatcher?" Mushroom's smile was patronizing.

Ratcatcher smiled back. "Talat's Howe," he said.

"Ah," said Mushroom, as Mold simply stared. "We should pack up the camp, then."

"Yes," Ratcatcher replied. "Yes, you should."







## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Every door in the village was shut, and every window barred. Yushuv passed through at dusk, when the bustle of suppertime should have had the village alight, and instead saw nothing. Even the animals were silent, herded into pens or tethered inside barns whose doors were tied shut with lengths of rope. The smoke from a few cookfires trailed from chimneys, but most of the houses were cheerless and quiet. Yushuv could not hear any children's voices raised in play; indeed, he could barely hear any voices at all. Those few whose tones carried beyond the heavy wooden doors were hushed and anxious.

Near the southern end of the village stood the ruins of a house, one which had been destroyed by fire. No effort had been made to finish the work the fire had begun, pulling down burned timbers or moving hearthstones. Instead, the few pieces of the home that still stood jutted up into the air like the teeth on a blackened skull. The houses around it had all been abandoned, and they showed the first signs of neglect. Here the doors gaped open, unafraid of the night.

Yushuv frowned. He remembered some new homes at the north end of the village when he'd entered, ones that had been built even more securely than the older ones that were still inhabited. Something had happened in the burned house, it seemed, something horrible enough that the entire



village had made a concerted effort to wipe it from their collective memory. But still the remnants of the burned house stood, waiting for time and weather to finish what fire had started, and until they did the village would be afraid.

Overhead, the sky was growing dark. Yushuv stopped, and looked back at the village. The land here was wild, steep hills and mountain laurel, and it promised to get worse if he kept going. The path to the village had been bad enough, and he didn't relish the thought of attempting anything beyond it in the dark.

"Here it is, then," he said, and scanned the village. The houses were short and squat, each built like a miniature fortress. It was almost surprising that there was no palisade around the central compound, and Yushuv wondered at that. What he didn't wonder at, however, was how all of the windows seemed to face in on the central square. It would make for a murderous field of fire on any interloper, assuming the residents of the village could handle bows. Out here, Yushuv decided, they most probably could.

Another look overhead revealed the speed at which daylight was fading. Yushuv looked from house to house, selected one at random, and scurried to its doorstep. Its door was heavy wood, painted with sigils, presumably intended to protect those who dwelt within against evil. A faint smell of cooking drifted out under the door with the light from the hearthfire; faint sounds of worried discussion drifted out as well.

Yushuv knocked. Instantly, the voices were stilled and he could hear the telltale rasp of a blade being unsheathed. There were no voices, though, only an urgent hiss and then the explosive release of a long-held breath.

He knocked again. "Can I buy some supper and sleep in your stable?" he called through the door. Again, there was silence, and a sense of expectation.

Somewhere in the distance, something howled. It sounded a bit like a wolf, but not much. Yushuv hammered on the door again. "Please," he said. "It's getting dark out."

There was the scraping sound of furniture moving across a stone floor, and then a voice very near the other side of the door. "We know, boy—if boy is what you are. Someone else in this village opened their door in the dark once. No more. You can sleep in one of the houses down at the south end. Stay out of the burned one, or the ghosts will take you. You'll get food in the morning, if you're still here." Then there was silence.

Yushuv turned his back on the still-closed door. He hadn't expected anything else, really. Selecting the abandoned building furthest from the burned wreck, he peered in through the doorway. Cobwebs and not much more greeted his eye in the failing light, and, praying that there would be something that would pass for kindling, he passed inside. The door he closed behind himself, and nailed shut with the orichalcum dagger.

The place was small, he saw, but dry. Some wrecked furniture on the floor would serve for firewood if he was careful, and he put it in the hearth. Drawing on a tiny bit of the power within him—the first he had used since meeting Unforgiven Blossom—he set the wood alight, and it burned merrily. Then, his back to the wall and his face to the fire, he settled in for the night.

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In the morning, when the cautious villager came, against his better judgment, bearing a bowl a gruel, Yushuv was long gone. "Good riddance," he muttered. "Things haven't been right around here since Bold Hare died." He walked back to his home, set down the gruel, and then set about rousing his neighbors. By sundown, the houses surrounding the burned wreck were gone, their timber hauled off to feed evening fires and their thatch scattered to the winds. The lone ruin, however, they left standing, as a reminder. Well satisfied with their labors, they went home to their own suppers and families, and thought no more of the stranger who'd passed through their midst. "The ghosts got him," some said, while others doubted he had existed at all.



# Chapter Twenty-Eight

Bonecrack did not wake Pelesh the Exchequer gently by anyone's standards save Bonecrack's own. With one swipe of his paw he tore asunder the tent the little man was sleeping in, the tearing of the fabric loud enough to rouse Pelesh from his slumbers.

"What?" he said groggily, sitting up from beneath the small mountain of blankets that served as his bed. He had no time to say anything else as the wolf spirit closed his jaws firmly over Pelesh's head and then, making some cursory effort to avoid doing undo damage, dragged him off into the night.

A few guards watched, their hands tight on their weapons, but they made no move to assist Pelesh, nor to threaten his abductor. "Do not interfere with his pleasures," the prince had warned them of Bonecrack, and they were only too happy to heed his words. Pelesh had never been popular among the prince's other servants in any case, and they were not necessarily sorry to see him go.

"We'll find what's left of him when we move out," the first guard said, sheathing her sword as she watched the spectacle.

"You will, maybe. I won't waste the effort looking," the second retorted. His partner snickered, and turned away.

“There’s going to be screaming now,” she said. “Just in case you were wondering.”

There was, in fact, already screaming, although muffled by the spirit’s huge maw. Pelesh had begun shrieking his panic the instant Bonecrack’s jaws closed over his head, and did not stop. He screamed as Bonecrack dragged him out of the wreck of his tent, screamed as the spirit hauled him beyond the borders of the prince’s encampment, and screamed more as he was bodily hauled off beyond any hint of firelight. He even screamed, briefly, as Bonecrack released him, and then backhanded him so that he went sprawling.

His mouth full of dust and his hands bloody from where they’d been dragged along the ground, Pelesh looked up. “Are you...” He paused and spat. “Are you going to kill me now?”

In response, Bonecrack batted him again, and again Pelesh went sprawling. “You’ve stopped screaming. That’s good, for the moment. You’re going to have to start again in a minute, though.”

Pelesh hauled himself up to his knees. “You won’t get the satisfaction from me.”

Bonecrack chuffed laughter. “Please. You’d scream from a hangnail, let alone what I could do with you. Now be quiet.”

“Fine.” Pelesh crossed his arms across his chest and huddled there. The wind that blew over the grassland was chill, and he found himself thinking for a moment as to how he’d be able to repair his tent. Then his eyes caught Bonecrack’s glowing red ones, and all thoughts save those concerned with immediate survival fled. “Just tell me what you want of me.”

“I require your help in preventing your prince from getting himself killed. Is that enough to know?”

“Of course.” Pelesh blinked. “But why not tell me back in the camp? Why...” He touched his neck gingerly. “Ah. The prince will not appreciate the help, I take it?”

"You're a clever little fellow." The wolf spirit sank down onto his haunches and regarded Pelesh through half-closed eyes. "And your prince is a bold one. Bold enough to get himself killed, perhaps, if he rushes in once we arrive at our destination."

"Where is that? You haven't told anyone where we're going."

Bonetrack growled with what Pelesh hoped was amusement. "Oh, your prince knows. He keeps his own council. He knows how dangerous the place is for his kind, and yet he's still willing to follow me there. It's fascinating."

Pelesh nodded. "So what do you want me to do?"

"When the time comes, delay him. A moment is all it will take, and it will save his life. And that, after all is what we humble servants wish, is it not?" The spirit's tone was mocking, and colder than the wind. Pelesh shivered.

"How will I know when to act?"

The great shaggy head nodded. "Oh, you will know. By all the spirits of river and field, you will know."

Pelesh nodded, and eased himself to his feet. Overhead, the thin crescent of a new moon gave him just enough light to see Bonetrack's bared yellow fangs, gleaming. His sleeping robe was tattered and dirty, and his legs and arms were marked with scrapes. A quick glance to the left and right told him that he had no idea where the ruins of his tent might be, though the trail the spirit had left dragging him offered a strong hint.

"What now?" he asked, afraid of the answer. "If you kill me, I can't delay the prince."

Bonetrack nodded, slowly. "True. But we can't have anyone back at the camp, least of all the prince, thinking you and I share a purpose. It would make things... awkward."

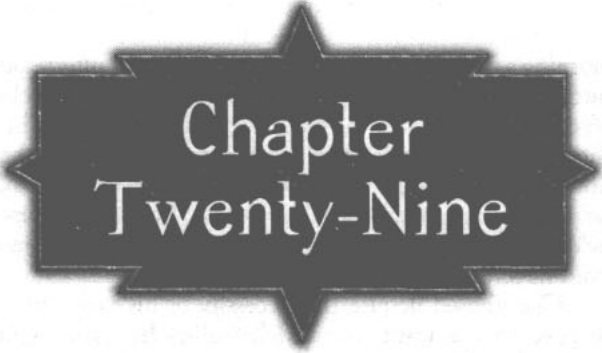
"There are other ways to do this, you know," Pelesh said, despairing.

"I know." Bonetrack smiled. "But this way will be more believable. And more fun."





With an elbow to the ribs, the first sentry jostled her companion. "Listen," she said, and pointed out in the direction in which Bonecrack had vanished. "Just like I told you."



# Chapter Twenty-Nine



The first beams of the rising sun woke Eliezer Wren from an unpleasant slumber, and for that he was most thankful. He'd been dreaming that he'd been trying to roll the rocks away from Rhadanthos's tomb, but that each time he removed one, another rumbled back onto the heap. He could hear the water spirit beneath the cairn bellowing at him to hurry, but no matter what he did, the stones piled themselves up faster than he could remove them. Eventually, in desperation he took to hacking the stones apart with the daiklave, while the heavens bellowed disappointment in him for using it so unworthily.

He sat up, blinking, and realized that his back was wet, the fabric of his traveling garb soaked through. "Curious," he muttered. "I've been sleeping on high ground. There's no way..." Understanding dawned on him and he nodded to himself, once. Somehow, Rhadanthos knew he was there. The water had been an attempt to make contact, though what the spirit had been trying to say was beyond him.

Yawning, Wren set off down the rough hill he'd spend the night upon and looked for a reasonably clean pool of water to wash in and drink from. Bits of decomposing bodies from the previous night's swordplay littered the landscape, and reluctantly he decided to do something about that. As unhappy as he was with the notion of hauling and stacking



the rotting flesh, the idea of drinking from water it had fouled was considerably less appealing. It would be a good morning's work, Wren decided, and then in the afternoon he could consider the question of how to start rolling rocks off of Rhadanthos's resting place. He glanced back over his shoulder, guiltily, at the daiklave, but shook his head at the notion. The warnings of dreams were not to be trifled with, he'd discovered, at least not that dream. The recent dreams he'd been having about women of his acquaintance, however, he felt he could safely discard.

Unenthused despite the necessity of his task, Wren stripped to the waist to avoid befouling his tunic with liquefying cadaver. He hung the shirt on a tree branch with the daiklave, then stooped down to the mud and retrieved the first few severed limbs that he could find. A hodgepodge of arms shorn off at the elbow and legs hacked off at the knee, they were dead weight in his arms. Staggering, he found the path they'd used while hauling dirt, and in a fit of inspiration dumped the pile in the middle of it. Grinning at his own cleverness, he turned around and repeated the process. The dead, for their part, didn't complain at the rough handling.

It took all of the morning, and a good portion of the afternoon, before Wren finished hauling the bodies to their resting place. He'd been forced to stop several times, either to cleanse himself of the foul muck that positively dripped from the bodies or to give his nostrils a rest from the up-close stench of decay. Pandeimos had proved problematic in the extreme, as well as time-consuming. He'd been forced to strip the man's armor off his weighty corpse, then haul the body off. He'd dumped most of the armor as well, though the helmet he'd kept. It looked as if it might make a useful makeshift shovel. The rest, however, was with its owner, and Wren felt that was good riddance. If he were particularly lucky, the local wolf population would feast on the dead bodies and drop dead of some rot-induced disease, but that was probably asking the Unconquered Sun for too much.

Sighing, he washed his hands in one of the puddles that rested where downstream ought to be, and considered his new problem. Much to his chagrin, the pile of stones had not gotten any smaller while he'd toiled around it.

Briefly, he tried digging out the mud around the pile, but quickly abandoned that approach. For one thing, anything he removed was quickly filled back in again, and for another, success would likely topple a significant portion of the pile on top of him. Neither outcome looked promising.

It would have to be, he decided wearily, done by hand. He'd pick at the smaller stones—the ones he could handle—and hope that the gaps he created would be enough to encourage the larger stones to tumble down on their own. It wasn't necessarily a good plan, but it was the best he could come up with at the moment.

He craned his neck back and looked up. The sun was already hurrying toward the horizon, and a rumble in Wren's belly reminded him that he hadn't eaten that day. He'd have to start trapping soon, he realized, if he didn't want to starve. There was enough food in his pack to last a few more days, however, and right now he had no great urge to wander far from Rhadanthos's mound. "Tomorrow," he muttered to himself, and made the weary climb to the top of the cairn. Selecting a rock the size of his head at random, he hefted it, and then threw it as far as he could, off to the east side of the hill. It hung in the air for a moment, then crashed into the mud with a satisfying thump. The crickets and frogs stopped their noise for a shocked instant when it hit, and then redoubled their efforts.

"Damn," Wren said. "I was hoping that would shut them up once and for all." He reached for another rock, grimly.

Wren had taken a good two feet off the top of the hill when he heard the child's voice behind him. "Why are you throwing rocks at the mud?" it said.

It was a boy's voice, high and clear, and it came from halfway up the side of the hill. Wren turned, a hunk of

white stone the size of a money coffer still in his hands, and peered down at the one who'd spoken.

It was a boy, that much was clear, unless the Hundred Gods had taken to disguising themselves as ragamuffins. He was slender but well muscled, with dark hair and dark eyes. His hair was short, and it gave the appearance of having been cut by the boy himself, and without the aid of a mirror. A bow was slung across his back, along with a makeshift quiver and a small pack. Both his hands were empty, but a short blade was belted at his waist, and he moved like he had another weapon hidden, uncomfortably, somewhere inside his shirt.

He also, Wren noticed, had a strip of cloth tied around his forehead, just above his eyes. Unconsciously, Wren tugged his hat down lower with one hand, and took a step forward.

"That's an impolite question," he said, hefting the rock awkwardly. "You're supposed to assume that I'm older and wiser than you, and thus undoubtedly have a brilliant and sensible reason for hurling rocks into the mud of a swamp that never should have existed. Show some respect, boy."

The boy laughed at that, and Wren caught himself nodding. *At least he didn't get offended*, he thought.

"I've known too many who were older who weren't wiser," the boy replied, and continued picking his way up the slope. "Do you need help? Or can I just watch?"

Wren tossed the rock aside. It hit a puddle with a loud splash and an equally loud comment from an outraged puddle-dweller. Dusting his hands, the ex-priest gave a noncommittal shrug. "It depends, I suppose. Let me know who you are and what you're doing here, and then we'll see. I've had bad luck with strangers lately."

The boy surged up the last few bit of hillside without apparent effort. "Me too," he said sadly, and took in the view. "What's that?" he said, pointing off to the east.

"Talat's Howe," Wren replied before he realized what he was doing. He shook his head.

"You're safer here, believe me."

The boy's eyes met his, and suddenly Wren felt extremely uncomfortable. "I guess you're right," the child said. "My name is Yushuv. I'm looking for someone."

*Unconquered Sun help me, not another one,* Wren beseeched the heavens wordlessly. They made no reply, and so the former Immaculate found himself looking at the boy's face for any signs of dishonesty or, worse yet, any tendency to make Wren out as a potential foster father. Seeing none, he nodded slowly.

"I'm Eliezer Wren. I'm trying not to be found by anybody. How do you feel about moving rocks?"

The boy shrugged. "It'll do for the time being. Do you have any food? Otherwise, I can go out and hunt while you move the rocks." He gazed critically at the massive tumulus they both stood on. "Some of them are a bit large for me."

Wren found himself resisting the sudden, appalling urge to tousle the boy's hair. "You do that," he said. "Tonight, we'll talk about how to move big rocks in the morning. Just be careful out there. There's a big pile of dead bodies in the woods over there, just inside the tree line, and I expect it's starting to attract scavengers."

"I don't have anything to worry about from carrion birds," Yushuv said, and skipped off down the hill. Wren watched him go. The grace with which the boy readied his bow even as he bounced from rock to rock was uncanny.

"Exalted," Wren said to himself. His mind was suddenly full of questions that he had somehow failed to think of before inviting the boy to share his labors and campsite. Angry with himself, he kicked at a large stone, which obligingly tumbled down the slope. Even as he watched, the boy faded into the foliage, not at all far from where Pandeimos's body was moldering.

Wren shook his head. The boy wouldn't be gone long, and he had all night to get answers. And until he got those answers, he decided, he wasn't going to allow himself to sleep. The boy was undoubtedly trouble. It just remained to be seen for whom.

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The meal was a good one, fat squirrels stuffed with some of the last of Wren's dried fruit and roasted over a small fire. Out of deference to Rhadanthos, Wren moved the campsite off the hill, just beyond where Pandeimos had dispatched himself. Fire, Wren felt, was not something the water spirit would appreciate.

Yushuv ate with fierce appetite, and Wren often caught himself simply watching the child as he attacked his portion. It was only after the boy had licked the grease from his fingers that Wren felt it was appropriate to ask his young guest some questions. Had he done so previously, he suspected he'd have gotten no answer but the gnashing of teeth and the sound of flesh being ripped off squirrely bones.

He tossed a neatly cleaned bone onto the fire, and was rewarded when the cloud of sparks that shot skywards drew Yushuv's attention. "So," he said, "I was wondering about a few things."

Yushuv nodded, his eyes enormous in the firelight. "I was, too. You don't often find a man rolling rocks down a hill in the middle of nowhere."

"You don't often find a boy, even a boy with a bow, wandering around that same wilderness either. I think I'm owed something of an explanation as to what you're doing out here."

Yushuv looked down and into the fire. "I'll tell you my story if you tell me yours," he said slowly.

Mentally, Wren ran down the list of all the things he'd have to edit out of any tale he told the boy. The list was surprisingly long, and he found himself wondering if the story would make any sense without them. Still, he'd withstood the interrogation of golems, dead gods, and Chejop Kejak. Hiding details from one small boy, even one touched by the Unconquered Sun, couldn't be that difficult a task.

"All right," he said, and nodded. "You first."



## Chapter Thirty

"There," Bonecrack said, pointing awkwardly with one paw. "Between those two hills is the pass we need to take. From there, our path should be easy."

The prince nodded. Pelesh nodded too, though more slowly. The respect for him among the soldiers had gone up a notch, but the wounds Bonecrack had given him were slow to heal. He shivered, and hugged himself tightly.

"What's through the pass," the prince asked languidly. "Any villages?"

"One, but it's barely worth mentioning." Bonecrack's voice was a snarl filled with recollection and hunger. "We could stop there if you like."

"No, no, unimportant." The prince waved the spirit off. "It's best that we get there fastest, don't you think?"

Bonecrack nodded, a string of drool dripping from his muzzle. "Oh, yes."

The prince waved and strode off. "I am so glad to see we agree," he said over his shoulder, then vanished into his tent. For the first time since the morning Bonecrack had awakened the exchequer, the two of them were alone.

"You're in a hurry, Bonecrack," Pelesh said mildly. The wolf spirit growled in reply.

"Yes. Look there. A track. One traveler." With a wolfish smile, he lowered his face to Pelesh's. "I smell the boy."

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Something stirred outside the door to Chejop Kejak's chamber. It was not a large thing; a large creature would have been noticed and dispatched with ruthless efficiency. But it was small and kept to the shadows. It had been seen, but those who had seen it were judged weak and foolish, and so it had survived. And now it crept, ever so slowly, into Kejak's bedchamber.

The man himself was asleep, it saw. It paused to stroke its long, ratlike whiskers before advancing. Its pink, fleshy tail coiled on the wood of the floor once, then twice, and then the creature was moving as its claws scraped along the floor.

It crept up to the edge of his bed. Ever so slowly it advanced, barely daring to breathe. It had been born for this moment, created to do just this task. Kejak's throat lay inches from where it crouched. It could see now the faint hints of age that were inevitably catching up to the man. The wrinkles, the sagging flesh, the muscles that had lost the first hint of their magnificent tone—all of the evidence was there to see.

The creature's lips curled back, exposing sharp, yellowed teeth. Its red eyes gleamed with willful madness. For an instant it considered not going forward with its appointed duty. Time would soon enough render anything done or not done here today moot. But it was dutiful, after a fashion, and crept forward once again. Its first foot sank softly into the pillow by Kejak's head, and for a long moment it waited, terrified that the man would awaken. But Kejak did not awaken. His eyes stayed closed and his breathing remained regular, and after a dozen heartbeats that felt like a thousand, the creature took another step forward.

It was a single step too far. Like lightning, Kejak's hand closed around the beast. It squealed in terror and flailed frantically with its claws, but to no avail. Craning its neck as far as it could, it sank its fangs into the fleshy part of Kejak's thumb. Blood flowed, but Kejak neither loosened his grip nor dropped his prisoner.



"Well, well," he said, sitting up. "What have we here?" His grip tightened fractionally. "Another assassin? An omen? Or just another vermin trying to take a bite out of a sleepy old man?"

In response, the creature went limp. Kejak was not fooled. "I can feel your heart beating, you know," he said. "If you can speak, tell me who sent you. If not, prepare to have your brains dashed against the wall. The choice is yours." He stood, and in three strides was at the doorframe. "Last chance, little creature."

"Wait!" it squealed.

"Ah. You can talk. I thought you might. Excellent." Kejak peered into its eyes, and for the first time, it knew fear.

"I was not sent to kill you." The creature's voice was high and thin, grating like a flute played by an untalented child.

"You weren't, now, but you thought you might take the opportunity? I had wondered what was creeping around and frightening my acolytes, and I am very disappointed to find it's just a miserable little sending like you. Who sent you?" To punctuate his question, Kejak squeezed. The beast hissed explosively as he did so.

"Please! I cannot tell you!"

"Then I'll take the pleasure of feeling your ribs crack between my fingers." He paused for a moment, and thoughtfully added, "Prepare yourself."

"Wait!"

"Yes?" Kejak paused, arm in mid-swing. "Do you have something to say?"

"Only a warning." The creature could feel its ribs cracking. Forming words was a struggle now, and a red haze rimmed its vision. "I come... from the heavens. Many are... displeased... with you. Prepare to be judged for your works."

"Oh." said Kejak. "That." He clenched his fist convulsively, and the creature's back snapped in a half dozen places. Dropping the lifeless corpse to the floor, he examined the bite marks in his thumb. Painful, he finally decided, but not serious. It could wait.



He rang for his attendants. A slender acolyte with startling green eyes stood at his doorway almost instantly. "Yes, Excellency?"

"Dispose of this," Kejak said, and dropped the dead rath in the boy's hands. The acolyte did not flinch, and Kejak noted this. *Good, very good*, he thought. This one may have a use. "And when you are finished with that, have my scrying chamber sealed."

"But Excellency," the boy said, shocked. "After all the effort to maintain it?"

"That's been rendered rather pointless now, trust me." He shook his hand absently, and drops of blood sprayed the room. "Do it. And bring me a bandage. It would seem that I am bleeding."



It was the carrion birds that finally lured her south. The day after she'd sent Holok by litter back toward the Isle, she'd seen the cloud, dozens of raitons and other flying vermin wheeling off in the distance. Too many for a single corpse, she'd thought, and sent a rider out to investigate. He'd found dead men in the livery of a servant of the Abyss, their bodies gnawed on by more than just crows.

The rider had also found clear evidence of a track leading away to the south and east, and offered his humble suggestion to T'fillit that they follow it. A chance, the man argued, to ambush one of the Prince of Shadows' patrols was a rare opportunity that must be seized.

T'fillit found herself agreeing. The Hunt had been exceptionally fruitless thus far, apart from the discovery of Holok, and her troops were becoming fractious. The chance to hunt down the servants of darkness was tempting, and it would give the seventh and eight sons gathered under her banner something to brag about back home.

Besides, she thought, killing that sort was always a good idea.

"South!" she called out to her heralds. "South!" they relayed the order to the rest of the camp. Tents came down.

Steeds were saddled. Servants ran too and fro, packing up goods or abandoning them in the hurry. "South!" went the cry from one end of the camp to another

T'fillit watched it all through narrowed eyes. "South," she whispered, "and to the end of that trail, no matter where it goes. We *will* find you, my friends. Rest assured, we will."





## Chapter Thirty-One

"I believe I have something that belongs to you," Eliezer Wren had said when Yushuv finished his story. Originally he'd been planning to edit his adventures heavily, but the boy's tale caught him by surprise. It filled in gaps in what he had heard, made sense of many of the mysteries he'd experienced. And so, when it came his turn, he told Yushuv everything—about the Guild and the Order, about Talat's Howe and his capture by Ratcatcher, and even what happened beyond the door to the Underworld. Through it all, the boy sat there, occasionally offering a nod or an encouraging word, but never giving the slightest expression of disbelief.

For that, oddly enough, Wren found himself grateful.

When he finally finished, the former priest looked at his companion across the fire. "What do you think?" he said, not really expecting a response.

"I think you've done very well," Yushuv replied.

Wren laughed. "I've done very well. That's one way to put it, I suppose." Abruptly, his laughter died. "Wait here," he said, rising to his feet. Without another word, he walked off into the dark. Yushuv squatted by the fire, motionless, his eyes on the patch of darkness into which Wren had vanished.

When the former Immaculate returned, he was bearing the daiklave, which he set carefully on the ground in

front of him. "It's a bit big for you, I think, but it never suited me. I'm glad to be rid of it, to be honest."

Reverently, Yushuv lifted it. "Is this...?" he asked, raising his eyes to meet Wren's. The man nodded.

"It is," he said. "I've been carrying it for you for a long time. It's seen some hard use, but I think none that was dishonorable." He blinked twice, then frowned. "I almost got the feeling it was glad for the work."

"I'm not surprised," Yushuv said softly. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Wren said, and settled back onto his haunches. "I must confess, I had no idea how I was going to find you. My thought was to come here first and keep my word to Rhadanthos, then ask him for help."

Yushuv laughed. "And instead it's going to be the other way around."

"Hmm?" Wren looked up in surprise.

Nodding, Yushuv held the blade up so the firelight could play off it. "I think it's only right I help you free him. A water spirit helped me, after all. I think it's important somehow to keep the balance."

"Is that really it?" Wren's eyes held the boy's, and this time Yushuv looked away.

"It's part of it," he said. "It's most of it. Dace taught me to honor that sort of debt."

"What else did he teach you, Yushuv?" Wren eased himself to his feet. He'd felt something out beyond the firelight, something that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. "Tell me quickly."

"Swordplay, the arts of war, hunting, honor, tactics—as much as I could learn." Then, more quietly, "And how to draw out my enemy by aiding those whom he has made war upon."

Wren, distracted, nodded. "I thought so."

"You feel it too." It was not a question.

"Yes. I don't know what it is, but it's in the trees near the bodies, and then again to the west a bit. Have you ever felt anything like this before?"



“I have,” Yushuv said, putting an arrow to the string of his bow. “It’s the Fair Folk.”

They stayed like that through the night, backs to the fire and eyes on the darkness while the fey moved through the trees. They made no move to attack, nor did they retreat. Instead, they were a constant presence just beyond the firelight, daring Yushuv and Wren to come hunt them but offering no aggression themselves. For their part, the two Exalted stayed close by the fire, aware that they were silhouetting themselves but unwilling to offer battle in the darkness.

Just before dawn, the uneasy feeling vanished. A few mocking calls issued from the forest—calls of birds that Wren remembered from his youth, ones that had no business singing here—and then there was silence.

“They’re gone,” Yushuv said, and let the arrow slide from his bowstring. “I’m sure of it.”

Wren yawned hugely. “Good. Get some sleep. I’ll sit up and watch while you do.”

“I can stay up,” Yushuv protested. He started to add something, but a huge yawn overtook him, and he sat down, hard, on the dirt near the dying fire.

Wren chuckled. “I think you need it more than I do. One of the first tricks they teach you in the Immaculate Order is the art of staying awake for several days straight. You’re supposed to do it in order to meditate upon one’s insignificance in relation to the Elemental Dragons, but I’ve always found it more useful in avoiding being ambushed. So you go on and sleep. I’ll be fine. Yushuv?” He looked down.

The boy was asleep, wrapped around his bow and snoring gently. Smiling, Wren took a blanket and draped it over the child’s frame, then settled in to watch. “Apologies, my friend,” he whispered to Rhadanthos, and then, with one eye on the sleeping boy, waited.



## Chapter Thirty-Two

"I wonder where, in all these trees, Wren hid." Ratcatcher rode, slowly, through thick stands of pine and mountain laurel. Mold and Mushroom rode behind him, glancing uneasily from side to side as they went. Exposed tree roots here and there threatened to catch at the ankles of their mounts and slowed their progress to a crawl. More than once, Ratcatcher had been forced to hew down particularly persistent greenery that barred their way, and when he did so it felt like the whole forest shuddered.

"We could have gone around the wood, gracious one," Mold offered tentatively, but Ratcatcher waved him off.

"We're almost there," he said. "I can feel it." He urged his mount forward, carefully. It picked its way up a gentle slope and then, suddenly, broke through the treeline. Blinking, Ratcatcher reined it in and waited for his followers to catch up. He could hear them, huffing and puffing in the trees, and a momentary surge of disgust swelled up in his gut. What had he done, how far had he fallen to have servants like *these*?

The feeling passed, as it had the innumerable other times he'd felt it twist at his gut. To distract himself, he averted his eyes from the forest and instead looked out over the scene of his first humiliation at Wren's hands.

It had changed, he saw. The stream that had run through here was nothing more than a memory, and its sandy bed was slowly being colonized by grasses and weeds. But the path he and the others had taken was still there, and the route to Talat's Howe still led upstream. He could see it from where he was, a narrow track winding parallel to the empty creek, and he imagined what it must have been like for Wren to see the long column of armored figures go thundering by in the dark.

"Idiot." Ratcatcher pounded his fist onto his thigh. "Stop daydreaming. He was glad to see you go, and gladder you were walking into his little nest of traps. He probably stood here laughing himself sick." Irritated with himself, he turned back to see the two pudgy figures astride mules breaking out of the woods. "About damned time, you two!"

"My apologies, noble one," Mushroom wheezed, and Mold nodded agreement. "Shall we stop here?"

"No!" The answer came out sharper than Ratcatcher had intended, and the two servants shared a troubled look. "We're almost at the Howe. We'll stop there."

"As you say, lord Ratcatcher," Mold said doubtfully. Mushroom just nodded.

Ratcatcher didn't spare them another word. With a shout, he spurred his mount down towards the creekbed, and what lay beyond.

Mold and Mushroom watched him go. "It ends here, does it not?" Mold's tone was neutral, but his voice was leavened with despair.

"For some, brother. For some." Mushroom reached over and patted Mold's hand. "We have served our purpose. Take comfort in that."

"Every night, brother," Mold replied, but his voice cracked with fear. "We will die without his even knowing our names. This... bothers me."

Mushroom nodded sagely. "It is all part of the bargain. Now, let us ride. We cannot allow him to get too far ahead of us." A faint smile touched his flabby lips. "Without us, he might get hurt."

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“Someone’s coming.”

Wren looked up from his labors, sweat pouring off him despite the chill of the day. He stood, once again stripped to the waist, and his hands rested on a massive boulder he was trying to roll down the side of the hill. With Yushuv’s help, he’d made what he hoped was significant progress toward destroying the tumulus over Rhadanthos’ prison. In their three days of work together, they’d settled into an unconscious rhythm. Wren would move the stones and tend to the camp, while Yushuv would hunt, assist and keep watch. Every night since he’d arrived Wren had felt the Fair Folk’s presence, but they had made no attempt to come closer. “They’re waiting for something,” Yushuv had said, and Wren was inclined to agree.

Yushuv, for his part, sat on what was left of the slope, his bow on his knees and the remnants of a bored expression on his face. “Horses,” he said. “Can you hear them?”

“Not with you talking,” Wren snorted, but he ceased pushing at the rock and listened. “One horse,” he corrected, “or something very much like it. Get on the other side of the hill.”

“I can shoot better from here,” Yushuv objected as he rose to his feet.

“We still don’t know what you might be shooting at,” Wren replied. “Come on.”

Without waiting to see if he was followed, Wren dropped down behind the crest of the hill. Reluctantly, Yushuv followed, and hunkered down next to him. “He’s getting close,” the boy said.

“Or she,” Wren corrected. “And he’s got someone following him.”

“Two someones,” Yushuv said, a little stiffly.

“You’re right.” Wren nodded. “Good thing sound carries so well up the stream bed, otherwise, we’d never have heard them coming.”

“Maybe *you* wouldn’t.” Yushuv sounded unconvinced. Wren opened his mouth to rebut his young companion, but Yushuv hushed him. “Here he comes.”





✠ Moving silently, Wren eased himself forward, his eyes barely cresting the top of the hill. The sound of hoofbeats was loud now, and getting closer. "Any second now," Wren whispered to himself, and found himself wishing for Yushuv's bow. "Any second."

✠ And then the figure rode into view, and suddenly Eliezer Wren found himself wishing for something entirely different.

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The smell struck Ratcatcher before the sound did. It was the scent of rotting plants and stagnant water, and considering the utterly dry state of the creekbed, it was something of a surprise. "What in all of the hells..." he said, and then nearly tumbled out of the saddle as his mount's front hooves sank into soft, wet mud. Barely catching himself, he dismounted under his own power and strode carefully forward. He sank in up to his ankles, the weight of his armor serving to press him a little deeper into the mud with each step.

Another half step convinced Ratcatcher that if he continued toward the strange mound in the center of the swamp, he'd sink long before he got there. As he didn't trust Mold and Mushroom to arrive in time to rescue him if he did, he carefully began backtracking toward where his mount waited, patiently. The shape of the Howe loomed off in the distance, reminding him of his real destination, and he suddenly wanted to be far away from this miserable, mysterious swamp. Glancing up at that odd central hill, he took a step back, and then another. Behind him, he could hear the sound of the servants' mules clomping along the path. In another moment, they would be here, he would be free of the swamp, and they could continue on their way. He thought about their arrival, red-faced and shifty eyed, and decided that he'd had enough. Enough of their sly glances, enough of their half-truths, enough of the game they were trying to play with him. It was over, and it was time they knew that.

Taking a deep breath so he could greet them with an appropriate bellow, he turned. He could see them, Mold looking pensive and Mushroom worried, and he relished the thought of the terrified looks that would soon be on their fat faces.

And then he saw Wren's shirt, hanging from the branch of a tree.

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"Shoot, boy, shoot!" Wren hissed the command as he threw himself backwards. "Don't ask questions, just shoot!"

"Who is it?" Yushuv asked.

"It's your friend from the catacombs. Damn, damn, damn, where did I put Pandeimos' sword?" Wren looked at his hands helplessly, then reached down and picked up a fist-sized rock.

Yushuv's face curled into a mask of hatred. "He killed my father, you know," he said, and rose up, bow already drawn. Over the crest of the hill he saw the armored figure of Ratcatcher, recognizing instantly the man's arrogant carriage. A half second to aim was all it took, and then Yushuv loosed the arrow. Even as it sped through the air, his fingers were already closing on the fletching of the next one, pulling it from the quiver and aligning it on the bowstring.

"One arrow would almost be too fast," Yushuv said, and loosed again.

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Perhaps it was the hum of a single loose feather in the fletching that alerted Ratcatcher. Then again, it may have been the whisper of the arrowhead slicing through the air, or the faint thrum of Yushuv's bowstring, or perhaps all three. Ratcatcher himself did not know, nor did he spend any time wondering.

Instead, in a single fluid motion he reached across his back and drew his sword, then whipped the blade down in front before his face. There was a split second where he could see his eyes reflected in the black sheen of the flat of the blade, and then it shuddered as the arrow hit. There was a sound like

**A** temple chime, and splinters of wood exploded through the air. Wasting no time on surprise, Ratcatcher dropped the blade a handspan, and felt the shock of another arrow.

**M**ilord!" Mushroom shouted, riding hell for leather up the dried creekbed behind him. Mold followed a half-length behind, uttering a weird ululating cry. "Up there, on the hill!"

Ratcatcher grunted a reply, swinging to knock yet another arrow out of the air. "I see," he said, then paused as he watched an arrow arc over his head. Lifting his sword in challenge, he prepared to charge the rough hill when the sudden *thwok* of an arrow hitting its target filled the air. He turned.

Mushroom sat there, a gray-feathered arrow protruding from his throat. He clutched at it frantically for a second, eyes bulging, then toppled slowly out of the saddle. "For... give... me..." he gurgled, and lay still.

For an instant, time seemed to stand still. All of the colors were too bright—the red fountain gushing from Mushroom's mouth, the defiant green of the plants low to the ground, the iridescent black of the mud. Sounds were too loud—Mold's anguished scream, the sound of his footfalls as he stumbled from his mule, the whirring of the arrow that even now flew towards its target. Ratcatcher blinked, and it took an eternity. Until this moment, none of it had seemed real. His unholy resurrection, the bumbling efforts of his two guides to lead him—all had seemed like a game. For the first time, he realized that he had not honestly expected the quest to lead anywhere, and that in an odd way he'd been content simply to meander without dead gods or live masters looking over his shoulder. But that was all gone now, and the battle was in deadly earnest.

All of this took less than a heartbeat, and then he was flinging himself sideways out of the saddle. He tumbled in midair and landed heavily on his feet, the sound of the impact masked by the heavy thumps of a trio of arrows plunging into his horse's flank. It screamed once, a horrible, thin sound, and then collapsed to the ground. Even

as it fell, Ratcatcher was moving again, leaping high into the air as a series of shafts sped underneath him to impact in the mud.

For the first time, he could see his opponent. The figure that crouched on the top of the hill with drawn bow was tiny, fine boned and grim faced. Either a woman or a boy, it seemed; garbed in leather and furs, dark-haired and dark-eyed. *A boy*, he decided as he began his descent, sword held high for an overhand slash.

The boy looked up, eyes locking with Ratcatcher's. Naked hatred was there, and so was a terrible recognition.


Not a boy. *The boy.*

Ratcatcher felt his lips curling back in a savage grin. The wind whistled past his ears as he swooped down, a messenger of death from the heavens. The boy, the same boy he'd left for dead in the tunnels under Qut Toloc, stared up at him. The child's hand fumbled in his quiver for an arrow, but both he and Ratcatcher saw it would be too late. The first hint of fear blossomed in the boy's eyes and Ratcatcher began his swing.


And Eliezer Wren threw himself between sword and child, and knocked the boy away.

Yushuv hit the ground, arrows spilling out as he did so. He rolled down the slope, hands scrabbling for something to hang onto. Behind him, Wren twisted desperately in midair as Ratcatcher's blade came down. It missed him by a handbreadth, continuing down and cutting deep into the rock Yushuv had been standing on even as the man wielding it landed with a thunderous clatter. Wren's hands hit the ground first, and he tucked himself into a roll that somehow ended with him on his feet downslope, brow blazing with light and anima streaming out behind him.

Ratcatcher pulled his sword from the stone effortlessly and turned. Below him, the boy lay sprawled out on a pile of talus, his hands bloodied and his weapons scattered. A shirtless figure stood over him, crackling with light and his hands raised in one of the basic stances of the Immaculate


 martial arts. The figure's hair was ragged and his face drawn, but the silhouette he made was unmistakable.

"Eliezer Wren?" he whispered softly.


 "Both of you in one place? Oh, this is going to be a good day after all."

"I wish I could say I was surprised," the former priest said grimly. To the boy, he added, "Yushuv, get the sword. Defend yourself if necessary, but leave him to me."

"He killed my father!" Yushuv's face was a mask of anguish as he climbed to his feet.

"He'll kill you, too. Get the damned sword. Defend yourself if he kills me, but otherwise, stay out of this. I owe him as much as you do."

"I can kill him," Yushuv insisted, clutching a bloody fistful of arrows.

"I know," Wren said softly. "It's what I'm afraid of."

Eyes downcast, Yushuv ran. Ratcatcher watched him go. "Very touching, Wren. I didn't know you knew the boy."

"You have a way of bringing people together," Wren replied, and shifted his feet infinitesimally. "Are you going to stay up there all night?"

"I thought I might make you come to me," the dead man, said, and twirled his blade. "I've learned a few things since the last time we faced each other, and this time Unforgiven Blossom's not here to save you."

Wren stooped, and took a pebble between two fingers. "You remember that fight differently than I do," he said lightly, and tossed the stone in the air. It tumbled, and came down in his palm. "I seem to recall Unforgiven Blossom not laying a finger on you while I was there, though I'm not surprised to hear she was unhappy with you for what you did to her orrery." He flipped the stone again and assumed a waiting pose.

"You're trying to buy time for the boy," Ratcatcher said flatly. "It won't work."

He raised the sword and, rather than charging, kicked at the stone his sword had sunk into. It split in half, and a chunk



easily twice the size of a man rolled downhill at Wren. Smaller stones tumbled after, rattling and clattering down the slope.

Wren dodged to the left, laughing. "That's the best you can do? Pandeimos put up more of a fight."

Ratcatcher's pale face reddened. "Never compare me to him. Never!" He kicked another stone, and Wren leapt over it, advancing up the hill.

"Earn it," Wren replied.

Ratcatcher gave a wordless howl of rage and dove forward, his sword seemingly drawing in the late afternoon light as it sliced through the air. Wren waited until the last minute, then slung the pebble in his hand sidearm at Ratcatcher's eyes. Involuntarily, the dead man's hands came up to block it, drawing the sword with it, and in that instant Wren launched himself, low. His shoulder hit Ratcatcher's knee, and then they were both falling.

Yushuv dashed into the woods, looking for the cache where he'd left the sword. The dagger was in his hand, and he followed it along the rough path that Pandeimos and his minions had hacked out of the trees. It was not far, he knew, just a couple of dozen feet back. He'd lashed it to a low tree branch with a bundle of sticks and leaves woven around it as camouflage. Wearing it while helping Wren had proven impractical, but he didn't want to simply toss it on the ground, so this had served as a compromise. Each night, well before sunset and the return of the watching Fair Folk, he'd retrieved it. Now, he cursed himself for having hidden it so well.

He came around the last curve before the tree he'd chosen as that day's hiding place, a lightning-scarred cedar with a trunk twice as thick as Wren's torso and a tangle of exposed roots surrounding it. The sword was bound with leather thongs to a broken-ended branch, high enough off the ground to be safe from animals but low enough that Yushuv could reach it.

Panting with exertion, he could see the tree now. Ducking inside its cloak of leaves, he took three fast steps

clockwise around the trunk and looked up. The branch was there. The sword wasn't.

Yushuv gaped for a second, then leapt straight up in the air. He landed on the branch even as the sword whistled through the air where his head had been a second earlier. Looking down, he saw a sight that was almost comical. A fat little man stood there, sides heaving with exertion and the sword wobbling in his hands. His face was red, but there was implacable purpose in his small, pig-like eyes.

"You're looking for this, I think," the man said, and swung again, awkwardly and overhand. Yushuv sidestepped along the branch, but realized too late that he wasn't the man's target. Instead, the sword hewed through the thick wood itself, sending both tree limb and Yushuv tumbling to the ground. Somehow, Yushuv hit first and the branch landed on him, its weight knocking the wind out of him and pinning him to the ground.

The man looked down at him and nodded sadly. "You should stay there," he said. "You won't get hurt that way." Then he turned and ran off as fast as his thick legs could carry him, back toward where Wren and Ratcatcher were doing battle.

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Ratcatcher's momentum carried him forward when Wren hit his knees, sending him airborne and down the hill. He landed hard on his right shoulder, and the shock of impact nearly tore his sword from his grip. Resisting the urge to tuck and roll, he instead spun so that he'd land on his belly, his sword slamming into the ground beside him. With a snarl he leapt to his feet, only to discover that Wren had flung himself back downhill, feet-first. Both of Wren's heels slammed into Ratcatcher's chest, and he went over backwards. His sword struck sparks from the stones as he slid downhill, even as Wren bounded after him.

He came to a stop at the bottom of the hill, feet in the air and sword firmly in his grasp. With a shout of rage, he forced himself into a flip, and came up five feet from the crumbling



hill. Wren stood before him, hands weaving in an intricate dance of light. They regarded each other for a moment.

"We really should finish this in the Howe," Wren said lightly.

"So I could end up like that bitch Sandheart? Not likely," Ratcatcher sneered in return. "You killed Pandeimos, too, I see. Piling stones was about right for his talents. The prince should thank you for purging the fools from his retinue."

"Then he'll thank me even more when I've taken you down." Grinning, Wren feinted high and launched a short kick at Ratcatcher's knee. Ratcatcher avoided it easily and brought his sword up in a whistling arc that, had it connected, would have sheared off the top half of Wren's skull. Wren, however, was no longer there to receive Ratcatcher's benediction, having already dropped to a crouch as the sword screamed overhead.

"I'll be sure to remind your ghost you said that." With a grunt, Ratcatcher reversed his swing and brought the hilt down on top of Wren's head. The former priest saw it coming and tried to slide out of the way, but the pommel still caught him a glancing blow on the side of the head. He staggered back, helped along when Ratcatcher planted his foot in the man's chest and shoved.

Wren fell back against the base of the hill, blood trickling down his forehead. Ratcatcher reared up before him like a titan, sword held over his head. "Goodbye, Eliezer Wren," he said, and brought the sword down.

Wren tucked and rolled forward, somehow passing between Ratcatcher's legs. The sword came down behind him, biting deeply into stone and staying there. Ratcatcher cursed and tugged at it, but even as he did so Wren came to his feet and struck him a spinning blow to the back of the head. Ratcatcher sagged forward, only to be struck again, and stumbled. His fingers loosened their grip on his sword, and it slipped from his grasp. He half turned in an attempt to defend himself and Wren struck again, catching Ratcatcher on the jaw with a savage kick.



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 Ratcatcher retreated, shaking his head to clear it. Wren did not follow. Instead, he stopped and placed his hands on the hilt of Ratcatcher's sword. With only the barest visible effort, he tugged it from the rock. Ratcatcher lunged forward, but pulled up short when the tip of his own blade suddenly lined up with his throat.

"I think the advantage," Wren said, "is mine."

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To say that Yushuv flung the branch aside would be inappropriate. Rather, it seemed to explode upwards, disintegrating into splinters as it flew. Tiny daggers of wood pierced trees and shredded leaves as they flew before settling back to earth as a haze of sawdust. Of the branch itself, there was no sign.

By the time the dust settled, Yushuv was gone. A few stray cracklings of energy marked his passage, lost bits of lightning flaring along tree trunks or snaking along the ground before finally guttering out. The sound of his footsteps faded as he sprinted towards the fray, his anima twisting and dancing behind him as the mark on his brow flared into new life.

Up ahead, a fat little man carrying a stolen sword heard the thunder of Yushuv's passage. For an instant, he looked back over his shoulder. Then, with new determination, he put his head down and ran like he had never run before.

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"I think the fight will be fairer without this," Wren said as he tossed aside Ratcatcher's sword. The asp-headed blade clanged to rest among the rocks, point down. It quivered there for a moment, and Wren dusted his hands.

"I don't need that to kill you," Ratcatcher snarled. "Try more of your tricks; I've seen them all. I've seen things in the depths of the Underworld that you can't imagine."

Wren smiled without mirth. "Try me," he said, and leapt to the attack. Ratcatcher dodged his first leaping kick, ducking to the side and landing a solid blow from an armored fist to Wren's side. The former priest spun to earth, landing on



the balls of his feet and bounding away even as Ratcatcher sought to press his advantage. Instead, the dead man's fist struck cold stone, splintering it into a thousand sharp-edged fragments. They rained against his armor, and as he turned away Wren landed an open-fisted punch to the side of his head. Ratcatcher stumbled back as Wren sought to press the advantage, raining blow after blow down on his opponent. Somehow, blindly, Ratcatcher parried them all, catching them on his bracers or taking the punishment on his forearms.

"You only... have to slip... once," Wren grunted as he struck again and again, each strike coming faster than the last.

"So do you." Abruptly, Ratcatcher let himself fall backwards, gambling his head wouldn't find a rock. Wren saw the maneuver too late, but he had already committed to the next blow and overbalanced for just an instant.

It was all the time Ratcatcher needed. With both legs, he kicked straight up. The impact caught Wren in the gut and flung him backwards. Even as Wren was landing, Ratcatcher sprang to his feet. "Armor's a useful thing at moments like these, Wren," he said, and stalked forward. A half dozen paces ahead, Wren hit the ground with a heavy thump.

Ratcatcher heard a low growl, and was surprised to discover that it came from his own throat. In two steps he reached Wren, and raised his fists for a crushing blow.

At the last instant, Wren rolled to the left. Ratcatcher's fists came down on the stone behind him, crushing it to powder even as Wren scissored the dead man's legs out from beneath him. Ratcatcher fell thunderously, arms flailing. More stones split as he landed, facedown, and Wren scrambled to his feet.

Before Ratcatcher could react, Wren brought his left heel down on his enemy's splayed hand. There was a sickening crunch, even through the metal of the gauntlet he wore, and Ratcatcher howled.

"Like that, Ratcatcher?" Wren's tone was grim as he raised his heel for another strike. "I thought you might like learning about pain for a change."

**T**he student should not presume to instruct the teacher." With his good hand, Ratcatcher dug a stone out of the muddy hillside and hurled it at Wren. The lapsed Immaculate ducked away from the throw, but Ratcatcher took the opportunity to roll downhill in an attempt to cut the legs out from under his opponent. Wren leapt straight up and over the tumbling Ratcatcher, but realized too late that his enemy's action had destabilized the entire hillside. He landed amidst a swarm of tumbling stones and sliding mud. For an instant he kept his balance, then slipped and fell.

Ratcatcher looked up as he rolled, giving a triumphant laugh as he saw Wren fall amidst the tumbling stones. Then his shoulder hit soft mud—*Wasn't this hill taller than this?* he wondered fleetingly—and the stones that had claimed Wren's footing also tumbled over him.

Mold ran. Behind him came death, implacable as a child's hatred, and so he ran. The daiklave was too long and too heavy for him to carry comfortably, so he had tucked it under his left arm as he went. His arms ached from the weight and his breath was short, but the sound of footsteps behind him banished any thoughts of rest from his mind.

At first he'd thought to steal the sword and bring it to Ratcatcher, but he'd somehow gotten turned around in the mazy windings of the wood. Now he found himself lost, scrambling along a path that vanished and reappeared at its own whim.

Up ahead, the path forked at a fat cedar stump that had been blasted by lightning. The stump was familiar—he was certain he'd passed it before—but he was just as certain that he'd not come to any forks in the path. "There must be a great many cedars in this forest," he wheezed, and chose the left fork at random. It was the darker of the two paths, and scarcely any sunlight punched through the leafy canopy to illuminate it.

Two steps past the dead cedar, and the light vanished. Mold found himself in almost total darkness. He stumbled,

barely catching himself in time against a tree branch and nearly dropping the daiklave in the process. He stopped, hands clutching his precious burden and his sides heaving.

"Easy there," he told himself. "Give yourself but a moment, and your eyes will adjust. Just a moment."

An arrow tore through the leaves just over his head, trailing a streamer of almost pure white flame. It thudded into a tree trunk less than a foot from where Mold stood and quivered before the flames consumed it. Smoldering bits of detritus dropped to the forest floor, where they sent up thin spirals of pungent smoke.

Mold stared at the spot where the arrow had impacted, his mouth open in a catfish look of surprise. "Oh," he said, and then screamed.

Another arrow whirred past, this one so close that he could feel the heat of its passage before it zipped off into the underbrush. Mold bit his tongue, then, to keep from screaming again. He could taste the odd, metallic flavor of blood in his mouth, could feel his muscles begging for permission to stiffen so that he couldn't move. The animal instinct to freeze in hopes that danger would ignore him was almost overwhelming.

Instead, he ran. Spotting the path dimly in the dark, he sprinted forward as best he could. His first footfall hit leaves, the second the dirt of the path, and the third hooked under a jutting tree root. With a high shriek, he fell forward, hands out to protect himself. The daiklave clattered to the ground as he pitched forward.

And as he fell, a dozen arrows screamed through the place where he had been.

The sudden realization struck Mold that had he not fallen, he would have been punctured in six different places, and he nearly sobbed with fear. Wide-eyed, he crawled forward, one hand at a time stretched out to reclaim the precious sword, while overhead a veritable storm of arrows whipped past.

"You can't hide from me forever!" The voice that called out those words was high pitched and young, yet



steeped in menace. The last word coincided with another arrow, this one merely wickedly sharp, slamming into the bole of a tree a half dozen feet from where Mold huddled against the ground.

Oh yes I can, little boy, if I have to, Mold thought. His hand found the grip of the daiklave, and slowly, carefully, he lifted it up. "Don't shine," he whispered to it, "not here, don't shine." Much to his relief, no stray sunbeam peeked through the forest canopy to reflect from the weapon's golden blade. With infinite caution, he rose to a crouch and, tucking the daiklave back under his arm, slipped off the trail into the brush. The arrows came less frequently now, and Mold speculated that he was running out. That cheered him a little, and he pressed forward, even as the shouts of rage and frustration behind him grew louder. Up ahead, the forest was surprisingly lush for so late in the year, the shockingly green leaves of the shrubs and plants inviting him to take cover behind them. With a fearful glance back at the path, he stumbled into their embrace.

All around him was impossible greenery, so thick that light could scarcely penetrate. Trees rose up to impossible heights, heights he had not seen from the outside. Flowers bloomed at his feet, and climbing vines rendered everything ludicrously, unbelievably green.

"This can't be...." he said, letting the daiklave's point droop to the ground.

"You're right," said a voice, and a figure separated itself from the greenery. "It's not."

Mold did not have enough time to bring the daiklave up before the figure was upon him, but quite enough time to scream.

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Yushuv stood, knee deep in dying ferns, and frowned. He'd found the fat little thief's trail easily enough. The man had taken a dozen steps toward the place where Yushuv had left Wren, then abruptly reversed field and plunged into the thickest part of the forest. He ran full tilt through

brambles and old, desiccated briars, his headlong careening so cocksure that Yushuv for an instant thought the man had found a long lost path. But no, there was only greenery both living and dead, and the thief had burst through it like a stone from a siege engine.

Behind him, Yushuv heard the sounds of combat grow fainter. He'd stopped here, in large part because he didn't want to get too far away from Wren, and in part because he thought he'd seen the gleam of his daiklave up ahead. He'd loosed arrow after arrow in an attempt to bring down the thief, but the sound he longed for, the solid thwack of a shaft hitting flesh, never came. Warily, he let the bow drop the slightest bit, and scanned the woods from left to right. The trail ahead seemed obvious enough. There was no woodcraft to the fellow—a blind man could have followed the trace he left behind—but Yushuv found himself suddenly, unaccountably wary. The forest was dark and quiet, and Yushuv realized he'd been holding his breath. He let it out explosively, and stepped forward.

Then came the scream. It was brief, cut off after a second and replaced with a strangled, gurgling cry. A thunder of birds took flight from the branches above, startled into fleeing by the sound. Yushuv brought his bow back up, his arrow aimed straight for the clump of trees from which the sound had issued and the rest of him stock still. He waited.

After a few interminable seconds, the bushes rustled. "Come out," Yushuv said, and took a step forward. "Come out where I can see you."

The bushes a hundred feet ahead exploded outwards. It was the fat man, Yushuv saw, with the daiklave raised high over his head. Even at this distance, Yushuv could see that his eyes were mad.

The boy loosed his arrow. It took the thief in the chest, just below the breastbone. He staggered, looked down, and then charged again. Yushuv nodded, drew and fired. Another hit, and the fat man barely stumbled. Alarmed, Yushuv stepped back and fired again, hitting his target in



**A** the thigh. The man howled, tripped and fell, then rose again. Blood pumped from his wounds but still he came on. He was within thirty feet now, and still coming.

**Y**ushuv reached back to his quiver and counted the arrows by feel. Six were left, and he had time to fire one before the staggering figure was on him. He could recover a few, perhaps, from the wood, but that was time spent away from Wren. There was nothing for it. He would have to end this now. Feeling the surge of his anima behind him, he drew an arrow and poured his energies into it. Crackling with power, it leapt from the bow, even as a shout of primal bloodlust tore itself from Yushuv's throat.

The arrow caught Mold in the throat with such force that it flung him backwards. He went down in the low brush, somehow still clutching the daiklave. His legs kicked, feebly, in the air as he struggled to right himself, struggled against the pain of the arrows that pierced him.

Yushuv drew his dagger and sprinted over to where his foe had fallen. The man lay on his back, hands clutching the sword possessively even as red foam flecked his lips. He looked up, and his eyes focused on Yushuv.

"Not for you," he whispered. "It was not supposed to be for you."

"Mine," said Yushuv, and took it from him.

A cry of loss rang out over the wood, and in the bushes and dark places, the Fair Folk echoed it with laughter.



## Chapter Thirty-Three

Stones geysered upwards as Ratcatcher freed himself from the rubble. Of Wren, there was no sign. Warily, he strode to the top of what was left of the hill and marveled at it. The peak from which Yushuv had fired on him was nearly gone, its boulders tumbled down and its earth scattered. It now was perhaps four feet high and twice that across.

A splashing sound caught his attention. He looked down, and was surprised to see a small spring bubbling from the top of the mound. A small pool had formed at the center of the tumulus, and from there a small rivulet tricked into the marsh. "Hunh," he said, and waggled one wet-soled boot. Drops of cold water flew from it.

"What in the name of the Abyss is water doing flowing uphill?" he wondered, and kicked at the pool. Water splashed out, but was almost instantly replaced. If anything the flow was faster now.

A shrill scream cut short Ratcatcher's ruminations. The sound came from the woods on the west bank of the river, the same woods into which he'd seen the boy disappear while he was engaged in dueling with Wren. A look of satisfaction crossed Ratcatcher's face. With luck, he thought, the sound meant that the boy was dealt with as well. Presenting the Prince of Shadows with one more trophy would simply be a matter of finding the body.



With a shrug, he went looking for both Wren and his sword. Of the former he could find no sign amidst the scattered stones and rapidly swelling pools, but the sword he could see. Miraculously, he could see it resting on its side in the mud, a few yards downstream. With a last cautious look around for Wren, he covered the distance to his blade in a few short strides.

Carefully, he lifted it out of the mud and wiped both sides of the blade on the grass. Already, he could feel cold water pooling around his ankles. A quick look told him that a small stream had formed, and was inching its way down the dry creekbed. A quick hop moved him onto marshy, if not dry, land, and from there he scanned the area. The mounts, at least, had demonstrated the good sense to get out of the way of the rising waters; he could see them grazing further downstream. Mushroom's body lay right in the course of the waters, and a cloud of mud swirled around him as he lay there. Even as he watched, Ratcatcher saw the waters slowly lift the corpse up and gently carry it downstream.

"My gracious lord."

The sound of Mold's voice was weak, barely carrying across the increasing gurgle of the waters. It took a moment's search and a repeated cry for Ratcatcher to locate his servant, and another moment to recognize him.

Mold stood across the shallow stream, at the entrance to the forest path. Broken arrows of various lengths protruded from his torso and legs, making him look like a poor and bloody hedgehog. Dried blood caked his lips and stained his garments, and thorns and brambles had torn his face. "My lord," he said again, weakly. "Please."

With a single leap, Ratcatcher bounded across the stream. "What happened?" he asked, sword drawn and eyes wary.

"I have failed you." Mold sank to his knees. "I just wanted to find you... to tell you..."

"Tell me what?" With quick strides, Ratcatcher was upon him. His hand found the garments at the man's throat and lifted him into the air. "How did you fail me?"



Mold's legs swung weakly. "Lord Ratcatcher... I am in such pain..."

"Then speak quickly, and I'll end it."

Mold looked into Ratcatcher's eyes with an expression comprised of equal parts pity and terror. "I took... the boy's sword. Took it from him. Tried to bring it to you."

Ratcatcher was taken aback. The boy's sword must be orichalcum, the companion piece to the dagger that had begun this so long ago. To think that it had nearly been in his grasp...

He shook his head. Nearly in his grasp meant that it was in someone else's. "What happened to it? How did you fail?" he demanded.

The dying man's face showed genuine confusion. "Lost... in the woods. Then he found me... took the sword from me. I am sorry. I am so sorry."

"He took it from you?" Furious, Ratcatcher flung his servant aside in disgust. Limp as a sack of flour, the man flew through the air, only to crash heavily against the ground. "Idiot! You had it in your grasp, and you got lost? I should have killed you and your brother when I first met you. You *lost* it, like it was a trinket for a fat man's whore." Still raging, he strode over to where Mold lay.

"Lord Ratcatcher," the man whispered, his voice a ruined croak. "There is... one more thing."

"Yes," Ratcatcher hissed, leaning in. "What *else*?"

Mold grinned, revealing his blood-caked and misaligned teeth. "We both... hated you," he said, and with that, he died.

With a wordless roar, Ratcatcher brought his sword up over his head, then hewed down at Mold's corpse. It cut through flesh, fat and bone, sending a fountain of blood in the air. Still the dead man grinned up at him, though, and so he brought the sword down again. With a wet tearing sound, Mold's head half-severed from his neck, lolling gruesomely to one side as the thickening blood flowed down over the rocks. Again and again, the sword came up and swung down, until the corpse was unrecognizable.



Spatters of crimson marked the ground for yards around, mingled with gobbets of flesh and splinters of bone.

"You were supposed to fear me," Ratcatcher said sadly. "It's what good servants do."

Yushuv watched Ratcatcher from the cover of the trees. What the relationship had been between the dead man who'd stolen his sword and the rather more animated one currently defiling the first one's corpse was still unclear to him, but it was nothing he desired to learn more about. Reaching back, he felt the reassuring weight of the daiklave. His bow was in his hands, an arrow on the string, and he wondered if he should let it fly.

He was losing the light, he knew, and the possibility of fighting Ratcatcher in the dark was not one he relished. On the other hand, he knew that he might not ever have a better chance. The man was clearly exhausted and hurt, his energy at a low ebb. He leaned forward on his sword as if it were a staff now, and looked unlikely to be able to repeat the arrow-deflecting feats of earlier in the day.

But the memory of fear from the tunnels beneath Qut Toloc was still strong. Yushuv remembered being trapped there beneath the bones, remembered Ratcatcher's voice echoing through the tunnels. If he missed...

*Not yet*, he finally decided. Not until he knew what had happened to Wren. Certain that it was going to be a long vigil, he settled in, bow drawn, to watch.

The trickle of water in the streambed swirled around the feet of the Prince of Shadows' mount, then continued on its way. The prince himself leaned over in the saddle and looked down with some displeasure.

"This stream is no longer supposed to exist," he announced to the world with an air of general annoyance. "If Pandeimos has failed in the task I have set him, then he'll be buried alongside Wren's pet water spirit as a lesson in obedience. It shouldn't take him that long to rot away

completely, I think, assuming the spirit doesn't deal with him first."

"Of course, my liege," Pelesh said reassuringly. "Though I think he would not dare to fail you."

"You're being sycophantic again. Stop it!" The prince yawned hugely. "Go find out what the wolf is up to, and tell him we are getting impatient."

Obediently, Pelesh nodded and rode toward the front of the column. Bonecrack was there, ears flattened and fur bristling.

"The prince would like—" the Exchequer said, but got no further as the spirit turned its baleful gaze on him.

"I am well aware of what the prince would like. More so, perhaps, than he is himself. Go tell your master that what he seeks is very, very near. I smell the boy."

Pelesh nodded. "Is there anything else I should tell him? Should I ask him to alert the men?"

"The men won't matter," Bonecrack said brusquely. "But you can tell him that he may want to put on his armor. I smell blood here, too, and the death of dead men."

"Pandeimos?" Pelesh ventured. "Do you smell him?"

"I don't know what he'd smell like, but there's old rot in the air." Bonecrack paused. "And fresh meat. Now is the time, Pelesh. Delay him. Delay him as long as you can."

Pelesh stared at the wolf spirit, eyes wide. "Now?"

"Now!" Bonecrack roared, and swatted at Pelesh with one paw. The Exchequer scurried off, and Bonecrack watched him go. "Just delay him a minute, old man," the spirit said, "that's all I ask. And then the boy will be mine."

• • •

"Well?" T'fillit demanded. "How close are we?"

"Much closer, Revered Hunter of the Enemy," the tracker said from where he knelt on the ground. "These are a few hours old, no more. If you get off your horse, mind where you step. It's that fresh."

"They're moving more slowly than we are, then. Good." T'fillit's face showed grim satisfaction and little else.



“And they don’t know they’re being followed.”

“They’re making a good pace, but ours is better,” the tracker agreed. He was fair-haired and young, and wore only some well-seasoned leathers for clothes. The hunters mocked him, but T’fillit had discovered that no one among here company—least of all the arrogant noble children of the Isle—could be trusted to find a trail better than he could. “There are some strange prints mixed in there. Maybe that’s slowing them down.”

“What kind of tracks?”

“All sorts.” The tracker shrugged. “Most are horses, or things like horses. There are a few with claws, one round set of prints I don’t recognize at all, and something that looks like a wolf but can’t be.”

“Can’t be?” T’fillit inquired softly. “And why, pray tell, is that?”

“Because they’d belong to a wolf the size of a beef cow, if not bigger, that’s why.” He stood and bowed, stiffly. “Do you want me to go on ahead?”

T’fillit pursed her lips. “No,” she decided. “The way seems clear enough. Take point, but the Hunt rides now. All of the Hunt rides.”



## Chapter Thirty-Four

Another stone went tumbling into the water, and still there was no sign of Eliezer Wren. Ratcatcher spat in disgust, dusted his muddy hands ineffectively, and stared at the scattered mounds of stone. "If you're dead, you miserable bastard, you could at least have the decency to let me know where your corpse was. Better that I find it than the dogs."

There was no answer, not that he'd expected any. Muttering imprecations against Wren's ancestry and hypothetical descendants, he leaned his shoulder into a particularly hefty stone and pushed. It rocked forward, then stuck in the mud and stopped. Grunting with exertion, Ratcatcher shoved again, and again the stone rolled forward just enough to provide a hint of hope before grinding to a halt. He held it there for a minute, and was rewarded with the sensation of cold mud seeping into his boots.

"Blast!" Ratcatcher evaluated his position for a moment. All things considered, the rockfall had not been that large. There weren't too many places for Wren's body to be hidden, if it were still here. That being said, it made sense to leave no stone unturned, literally or figuratively. With a growl, Ratcatcher pushed again.

Something caught at his ankle and tugged. Ratcatcher had just enough time to look down and see the pale white

arm reaching from underneath the stone. Then, with a shout, he was falling.

Yushuv heard Ratcatcher's cry and saw the man fall. *Wren's alive*, he thought, and a surge of relief washed over him. He eased to his feet, his muscles tensing to leap into the fray.

"Wait," a voice whispered, its words barely distinguishable from the wind.

Yushuv looked around in a panic. He could see no one, only the trees. Nothing moved in the forest save the breeze-stirred branches. No figures advanced, no shadows loomed.

"Wait," said the voice again, echoed by a dozen others.

Yushuv blinked. Suddenly, he could see shapes among the trees, shapes that terrified him. They could be misshapen branches, moved by the wind. They could be deadfalls and shadows, cloaks of leaves and bushes warped by the lack of sunlight.

Yushuv's blood ran cold. "The Fair Folk," he said softly.

"Yes," the voice said. "Wait, and we will wait with you."

"My prince!" Pelesh hurried toward the Prince of Shadows, who sat leisurely in the saddle. He wore his riding clothes, his armor having been stowed on one of the pack animals against the day's mild heat. His mace sat in his hand, and it caught the light as he hefted it this way and that.

"Yes?" The prince drew out the word, to make sure the full impact of his annoyance registered. "What did our friend have to say?"

"He suggested that you take the time to put on your armor, as there is some sort of conflict up ahead." Pelesh paused to pant a little bit. "He also said that he smelled blood."

"He did, did he? That's very interesting." The prince drummed his fingers against his saddle. "Alert the others. We go forward, now."

"But my liege, your armor!" Pelesh was shocked. "The chance of you getting hurt—"

"Is minimal," the prince responded. "Who can stand before me and my troops? And with our new ally, surely there is nothing in this place that can cause us harm. Ride!" He kicked his mount's flanks, and the beast reared up before dashing forward. Around him, the other men charged, chanting "The prince! The prince!" as they rode. A whirlwind of dust and spray rose up as they did, choking Pelesh and obscuring his vision. "My prince," he called out one last time, despairing, and then there was nothing but the sound of hooves clattering into the distance.

Shaking his head, Pelesh slid out of the saddle. "Go, boy," he whispered in his mount's ear. "Go far away." It took a few tentative steps, then trotted leisurely off downstream. Pelesh watched it go until it faded into the distance, then turned.

Snarling, Bonecrack stood in the thinning cloud. "I am not happy with you," the spirit said. "I am not happy at all."

Bonecrack faced Pelesh, who stood, shivering and defiant. A thin blade was in his fist, and he held it before him like a charm against evil. The others were long gone, having surged forward toward the sound of the fighting. Only the two of them remained.


"You did not delay him long enough," Bonecrack growled. "I am displeased."

"Of course you are," snapped Pelesh. "While I, personally, am ecstatic that he rushed into battle against an unknown foe without bothering to armor himself. It could be an ambush. It could be a—"

"Silence."

"No." Pelesh glared at the wolf spirit. "You be silent. The servants of the dead gods asked me to protect the prince. To see to his welfare. To make him ready for greatness. This," and he waved his hands, "is not greatness. This is a mistake. This needs to be corrected as soon as the prince deals with whatever ruckus is up ahead. And you, you should be thankful I'm here and not at the citadel. I have sources, you know, and powers that I can turn to.




 We'd soon see who your real masters are. I do serve the prince, you know."

The spirit regarded him through narrowed eyes. "You are clever," Bonecrack said, "but you are not clever enough to say these things from a position of strength. You are not at the Prince of Shadows' citadel. You have no friends or allies here, no powers to call upon. And for my part, I am in league with the Fair Folk, who promised me a pretty toy in exchange for a young boy's heart. Your prince, fool that he is, is just a convenience. I allied myself with him so that he might feed me, and so that his surviving servants would eliminate any defenders the boy might have. I do not fear him. And you, my friend, you are now useless."

"The blade is poisoned," Pelesh warned.

"So's my heart," Bonecrack replied, and pounced.



Wren pulled Ratcatcher down, and then immediately wished he hadn't. The dead man was stronger than he was, and in the confined space under the rockfall brute strength was all that mattered. Once Ratcatcher stopped struggling and started trying to grapple him, the fight got very serious indeed.

What Wren did have, however, was cunning. Coated in mud, he slid from Ratcatcher's grasp and emerged from under the stone. Ratcatcher's face appeared behind him, and he gave it a swift kick before staggering off into the gathering dark. Behind him he could hear Ratcatcher scrabbling up from the hollow, and Wren found himself hoping that Yushuv had shown the sense to flee.

"Damn you, Wren!" the dead man called, and lurched forward. "You can't get away from me that easily!"

Rather than reply, Wren saved his breath for running. He'd been unconscious for some time, and had no idea what had transpired while he'd been under the pile of stones. What he did know, however, was that Ratcatcher was still apparently well enough to try to kill him, and that was enough.

He loped around behind the mound, cursing the softness of the mud. Water was everywhere now, and the



ground sucked at his feet as he ran. *So much for moving silently*, he thought as he pulled one foot after another from the mire. *But at least Ratcatcher can't sneak up on me, either.*

Wren sighed. He felt drained, empty of power and strength. Hopefully, Ratcatcher was weakened as well, but that was nothing to wager on. He took a few more steps, then ducked behind a large boulder on his right. It would be, he decided, the best ambush point he'd find, and to spend too much more time searching for another one was just to invite trouble. He took up his position and tried to recall the Immaculate breathing techniques that had served him so well at moments like this. What he needed now was calm, and calm was the one thing that was escaping him.

Footsteps squelched on the mud nearby. Wren froze into a crouch. The footsteps slowed as Ratcatcher approached, perhaps scenting the trap. Wren bit his lip and willed himself to be still. *Another step*, he found himself mentally pleading Ratcatcher. *Just one more step.*

Ratcatcher strode forward. His sword was out, his helm was off and his armor was muddy. He stood there for a moment, then slowly turned to the left, scanning the marsh for his enemy.

Never in his life had Wren wished so devoutly for a rock in his hand. None was within reach, however, so he contented himself with leaping down upon his foe, silently.

At the last moment, Ratcatcher, warned by some whisper of sound, half turned. Unable to get his blade around in time, he still managed to bring up his elbow, and what Wren had planned as an elegant attack became an ugly collision of bodies. The two tumbled down onto the ground, Wren pummeling Ratcatcher's face even as the dead man struggled to bring his sword to bear. They rolled together in the muck, each striking at the other as best he could, and then Ratcatcher slammed the two of them against the rock Wren had used for concealment. A resounding clang rang out as Ratcatcher's armor hit the stone, but Wren's shoulder had no such protection. At the shock of the impact, his entire arm went numb.

With a sinking feeling, Wren realized it was dislocated. Fighting a rising panic, he dropped his good elbow onto his enemy's throat as hard as he could, then tore himself from Ratcatcher's grasp. The two foes separated and slowly rose to their feet.

"This is where it ends," Ratcatcher said, his sword cutting the air in intricate shapes.

"Yes," replied Wren, and prepared himself for the final assault.

Bonecrack bounded past the prince, his muzzle bloody. He easily overtook the prince's riders, even the swiftest, and he howled as he ran. "Mine!" he called out, "mine!"

"Damned fool," the prince muttered, and whipped his mount's flank with the flat of his hand. "Let's see what he's so interested in keeping for himself, shall we, Pelesh?" he called.

There was no response. "Pelesh!" the prince shouted, more urgently, and looked both left and right. Again there was no response, and a nagging worry rose in the prince's mind.

*There was blood on Bonecrack's lips, he realized. And the rest is no doubt on the ground.*

Suddenly, irrationally, he felt the desire for vengeance. "I did not give *him* to you," the prince shouted. "Bonecrack! A price will be paid!"

And with his men bellowing war cries behind him, the Prince of Shadows rode into the marsh that marked Rhadanthos's tomb, and found nothing.

Ignoring anything else, Bonecrack charged up the stream. He pounded through the rapidly shrinking marsh, sniffed the air once, and then turned to face the forest. "There you are," he said, and sprang forward once again.

The spirit burst through the screen of trees and leapt straight for Yushuv. "I have you, boy," he bellowed, heavy branches crashing to earth before him.

Yushuv raised his aim and fired as Bonecrack leapt towards him. The arrow sped through the air and took the wolf in the throat. Bonecrack's threats turned to a long howl, but he kept coming, crashing through the underbrush and leaping forward. Even as Yushuv fell back, he was firing again.

The wolf spirit roared, and Yushuv's arrow flew straight into his open mouth. "Talk less and fight more," Yushuv catcalled. Bonecrack waggled his head back and forth in an effort to dislodge the arrow stuck in his palate, then abandoned the idea and closed his jaws with an arrow-splintering snap.

"You should run more and fight less," the spirit retorted. "It might keep you alive longer." Even as Bonecrack spoke, he pounced. Yushuv dove forward, going underneath the massive wolf, but even as he came to his feet Bonecrack had landed and turned. "You can't pull that stunt too many more times, boy," Bonecrack growled. "Old dogs learn better than you'd think."

"You should have learned to stop following me, then," Yushuv replied, and drew another arrow. Bonecrack's fur bristled and he snarled, coiling himself for another leap.

"Enough." The voice came from everywhere and nowhere, and it echoed from every tree.

Yushuv and Bonecrack both froze. "Who said that?" the spirit asked, his head swaying from side to side and his eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"You know who," Yushuv replied, his hands steady and his arrow still sighted on Bonecrack's good eye. "You told me you worked for them."

"Them? Here?" Bonecrack's ears flattened against his skull. "Show yourselves!" he demanded.

"We are here," the voice replied, and abruptly the wood was full of shapes. They were green or brown or dying-leaf gold, and bent like old, weathered wood. Their eyes were yellow and their fingers were long, and it was impossible for Yushuv to tell where their skins ended and their garments—if they wore garments at all—began. "Enough," one of them—or perhaps all of them—said again.





"The boy is mine," Bonecrack snarled. "You cannot gainsay me this!"

"We do what we please," came the reply. "There is no point to your hunt any longer."

"No point?" The spirit's voice rose to an ear-splitting shriek. "He is here! He is mine!"

"He can destroy you," the Fair Folk replied sadly, "and you him. You are evenly matched, now. You've taken too long, Bonecrack. He is too powerful, and suits our purposes better alive than dead. Attempting to destroy him would rid us of two useful servants."

"I'm not your servant," Yushuv spat.

"You will be," came the unperturbed response. "As our brother told you, one way or another you will be."

"No," Yushuv said. "I'll die first."

"Life is sweet, Yushuv. You know that already. And this is the last you will see of us, unless you wish it." One of the figures looked over at Bonecrack with a look of something approaching affection. "Help him, Bonecrack. For the moment. Then you are free for a hundred years."

Bonecrack looked back and forth from the elf to Yushuv, hatred in his eyes. "You cannot be serious," he hissed. "I want his blood."

"The Prince of Shadows will have yours unless you help him. The choice is yours." And with that, the Fair Folk faded back into the forest. In seconds, it was as if they had never been there.

Yushuv looked at Bonecrack. Bonecrack looked back at him. "Someday, boy, I'll have your heart."

"Perhaps. But not today."

The wolf shook his head. "No. Not today." He cocked his head to one side. "Listen. Do you hear hooves?"



They leapt out of the wood together, the spirit and the boy. Yushuv emptied his quiver within seconds, the arrows trailing streaks of light as they took one after another of the prince's men out of the saddle. Bonecrack's approach was



more direct, as he leapt upon the nearest rider in the prince's livery and tore the man limb from limb. He turned and leapt for another one, but found the prince in his way.

"I thought you were better trained," the prince said mildly, and swung his mace. Bonecrack dodged, only just, and the prince caught him with a savage backhanded blow. Where the prince's mace struck Bonecrack felt his flesh sear with cold, and he backed away with new respect for his opponent.

"You don't want to play?" The prince brought his weapon up over his head. "And here I thought you were such a *bad* spirit. Idiot. I've been waiting for this."

"And I've been waiting for this!" Bonecrack hurled himself at the prince, who brought the mace down on the top of the wolf spirit's skull. Bonecrack crashed to earth, his eyes unfocused and his fur matted with blood. He attempted to rise, but the prince struck again, and the crunch of bone could be heard even over the din of the battle.

"The boy... is still mine," Bonecrack said, and sank down into darkness.

Yushuv heard Bonecrack's last, despairing howl, and knew what it meant. He was heavily outnumbered and out of arrows, and now the Prince of Shadows was riding towards him with blood in his eye.

The prudent course, Yushuv decided, was to run. Concentrating for a moment, he filled the daiklave with something that was half Essence, half hope, and flung it at his foes. Then, before it could strike even one of them, he turned and ran.

The blade sailed into the nearest of the prince's soldiers and took an arm from him, then boomeranged to the next and then the next. Men dove from their saddles as the blade whirred through the air, and panicked mounts fled in terror. When a half dozen men had been struck down, the blade sailed off after the boy, and left a rain of crimson behind as it did.

The prince watched it all impassively, then let himself down from his saddle. "I am going after the boy," he said. "None of you should do so. You're too much trouble to replace." He looked around. "Defend this place against any who try to take it. I shall be back shortly, with a new sword."

So saying, he sprinted after Yushuv.

It was not lost on the prince, as he followed the trail, that Yushuv had instinctively headed for higher ground. Here, higher ground meant Talat's Howe.

"It comes full circle, then," the prince told the uncaring wind. "And this time, one of the Unconquered Sun's children dies."



Bonecrack roused himself to find a circle of the Prince of Shadows' men staring at him, weapons drawn. "You did not attempt anything foolish," he growled, hoping he could keep the dizziness that afflicted him out of his voice. "That was wise. Stand aside." He pushed himself to his feet.

One of the prince's men, bolder or perhaps more foolish than the rest, stepped forward. "We should kill it here and now," he exhorted his comrades. "It attacked the prince."

"I attacked the prince and lived," Bonecrack corrected. "Do any of the rest of you feel like making another attempt?"

There was silence, as the men looked from one to the other, or down at the ground. Then, majestically, an opening appeared in the circle. "Go," the ringleader said bitterly. "Go now, before I can make them change their minds."

Bonecrack said nothing. He merely chuckled wolfishly as he strolled out of the circle of his captors, then trotted leisurely across the stream and into the woods on the far side. He howled, once, and then he was gone.

Most of the prince's men agreed that this was a very good thing.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

The prince caught him at the top of the hill.

They faced each other across the field of broken stone that marked the top of Talat's Howe.

The prince's mace was in his hand, and he twirled it as easily as he might spin a child's toy. His stance was loose and limber, and he was smiling. "You don't know what you're facing, little sun child," he called mockingly. "Go away. Train for a few decades. Learn what hate really means. Then you can come see me, and perhaps we'll have a duel."

"I've learned enough," Yushuv replied, his voice even. The daiklave was light in his hands, and it reflected the pale starlight as if it were the noonday sun. He advanced, cautiously.

"Idiot boy," the prince said. "Someone trained you poorly." He flung his left hand forward and dark light flared out behind him. A bolt of violet lightning leaped from the palm of his hand and struck the stones at Yushuv's feet, exploding them up in a blizzard of sharp fragments. Yushuv cried out as the slivers scored his face and hands, his left arm flying up to cover his eyes.

"You should have been expecting that," the prince continued, and struck again. The ground in front of Yushuv blossomed upwards with a sound like thunder, and the boy took a staggering step back. "You can't do anything to me,



you know. This little charade goes on as long as I want it to, and then it ends." The prince laughed then, and raised his hand for another strike.

Anticipating the shock, Yushuv threw himself to his left. His hand found the dagger at his waist, even as another explosion kicked up dirt and stone where he'd been standing seconds before. He flung the dagger forward in desperation, then leapt forward after it. The cloak of his anima rose up behind him, making him appear as a phoenix swooping in upon its prey.

It may have been the sight of Yushuv's power revealed that distracted the prince, or perhaps the sound of his battle cry. In either case, for an instant the prince's eyes flicked upward, and in that moment the dagger caught him in the belly.

It was a weak cast, and the wound was not deep, but the pain of it shocked the prince. He stumbled back, one hand dropping to his gut as the other raised the mace before him.

Yushuv's daiklave came down like thunder, all the force the boy could muster behind it. The blade met the mace with a sound like the collapse of a mountain. Metal ground against metal for a long instant, then the prince went over backwards. Light exploded from his fingertips, and then suddenly he was falling backwards, down into the dark of a cavern that had not been there a second before.

Yushuv stared for a second, his gaze on the ragged hole that had appeared where the prince's blasting fire had touched the Howe. A dim light, the color of the power that served the prince as a cloak, emanated from the pit and filled the twilight. No sound could be heard from the pit, and the air that flowed from it was as stale and as cold as death.

Behind him, in the distance, Yushuv could hear horns blowing. They were loud and raucous, the horns of hunters who have found their prey. Faintly, the sounds of battle filled the air.

"Wren told me this was a tomb," he muttered, and leapt down. In the darkness, the Prince of Shadows was waiting for him.



Water splashed around the hooves of the Wyld Hunt's mounts as they charged up the stream. Battle-horns were blown, one after another in a cacophony of bloodlust and joy. The Prince of Shadows had left two sentries behind him to guard his rear; these were swept away like chaff as the Hunt rode upon them. T'fillit herself beheaded one; a grim Peleps Totonot took the other with a sword to the eye. Before the bodies slumped to the ground, the Hunt rode past them, and turned the final bend toward the place where Rhadanthos rested.

The prince's men were not fools. At the first sound of the horns, they had fallen back into the depths of the unnatural marsh, the better to take away the enemy's advantage of cavalry. They peered out from behind positions among the rocks Ratcatcher's wrath had shattered. Here and there, some glowed with power as they marshaled their Essence for the coming fight; arrowheads and spearpoints caught the colors of the approaching riders' animas and reflected them back like a rainbow of steel. Behind them, the remnants of the mound loomed up, and they chanted their lord and master's name as if it were a talisman against the light.

T'fillit saw this as she led the charge around the bend, and for an instant the Hunt faltered. The charge slowed, the cries of the horns grew less certain. She could feel the momentum ebbing away, could see the cost in blood of the coming fight.

Her face set into a grim smile. "Kill them," she said softly. "Kill them," she repeated louder, her voice a commander's once again. "Kill them all!"

Like a single hound held too long at the leash, the Wyld Hunt charged forward.

The impact of the Wyld Hunt's crash into the defenders' position was enough to shake the earth, but Ratcatcher didn't care. He stood, blade out and face bloody, halfway between the hill and the Howe, and Eliezer Wren stood before him.

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"You're not going to help him," Wren said grimly. His lips were bloody, Ratcatcher could see, and his left arm hung useless at his side. A gash crossed Wren's forehead, nearly obliterating the pulsing sunmark that rested there. "I'm not going to let you."

"You don't have much choice in the matter any more." Ratcatcher's blade flicked out, and Wren barely spun away from it. "You're hurt. Tired. Slow." He tried a quick thrust, and Wren dodged it clumsily.

"Alive, which is more than I can say for you," Wren replied. He tried a leaping kick, but Ratcatcher swatted him out of the air with the flat of his blade, then drove the point down at Wren's head. Wren rolled to the side just in time.

"Not for much longer," Ratcatcher laughed. "Idli's waiting for you, you know. I don't intend to disappoint him." Another overhand swipe cut the mud where Wren had been an instant before, and it stuck fast.

Wren saw his opportunity. He threw himself forward, inside Ratcatcher's guard. Even as the blade came up out of the muck, Wren was on his opponent, his fist drawn back for a blow at Ratcatcher's unprotected throat. Ratcatcher's eyes widened, and Wren saw fear there. He yelled in triumph, a wild, wordless cry.

Too late, he realized that Ratcatcher was smiling. He slammed into the dead man, and a sudden, tearing pain ripped through his gut. Looking down, he realized that only one hand was on the serpent-bladed sword. The other was on a short parrying dagger, which Ratcatcher held blade-out at his belt. The hilt was plain and lacquered black, Wren noticed; the blade was sunk into his belly.

"Miscalculated, didn't you, Wren?" Ratcatcher asked, and gave the dagger a twist. Wren gasped in pain and tried to pull himself free, but Ratcatcher dropped the sword and held his enemy to him. "You're not going anywhere."

"Bastard," Wren gasped, and shuddered. "I'll still kill you."

"I don't think so," Ratcatcher replied. "I, however, am going to kill you, and I'm going to take my time finishing

the job." He yanked the dagger upwards and felt the hot gout of blood that spouted from Wren's torn gut. "That was for escaping the prince's dungeon." Wren could only whimper wordlessly. Ratcatcher tugged the blade left until it scraped against bone. "And that is for our little duel on the orrery. It hurts, doesn't it? Let's see how many more humiliations I can remember."

Wren tried to scream, but his throat was flooded with blood and bile. All he could see was Ratcatcher's face, rimmed in a red haze. The pain was unbelievable, as if someone had stuffed his belly with hot coals and then stoked the flames.

*Flames...*

An image of fire filled his mind, of tongues of flame as hot as the sun, and he took refuge among them. The flames would keep him safe. The flames would shelter him. The flames would give him vengeance.

Somehow, he found the strength to move his right hand. Weakly, he raised it to Ratcatcher's throat. The dead man felt his touch and laughed. "You can't choke a dead man, Wren," he said. "Don't waste your strength trying."

"I won't," Wren gasped, and shut his eyes. He saw nothing but flames now, and in the middle of them he imagined Ratcatcher's face. In his mind's eye, he saw the handsome features running and melting like wax, the flesh underneath crisping like pork on the spit. The heat built up inside him, the pain from his ruined belly spreading to every inch of his being.

"Burn," he whispered, and let the power go.

Ratcatcher's face exploded into flames. With a shriek, he staggered back, his head wreathed in incandescent tongues of fire the color of the sun. He howled his agony and dropped to his knees, even as the proud shape of his armor melted away. His arms were burning now, too, and through the scent of his own blood Wren could smell the nightmarish odor of burning flesh.

"No more," Wren said softly, and toppled forward. His cheek rested in a puddle of cool water, and it was somehow

soothing. All of the pain had gone away, and he suddenly lacked the strength to hold his eyes open. A sudden warmth spread through him, as if he were resting in a meadow beneath the summer sun, and with his last strength he smiled.

*So this is dying,* he thought. No more errands for Eliezer Wren. And then, *I'm sorry, Rhadanthos. One debt left unpaid.* And with that thought, Eliezer Wren died.

Ratcatcher did not see Eliezer Wren fall. His eyes blinded by flame, he pounded the ground in his agony. Mud baked to clay at his touch, and puddles steamed away at his glance. "Water," he howled. "For the love of the Abyss, fetch me water!"

A shadow fell across him. He turned, but could see nothing other than a blurry shape. "You seek water?" a deep voice said.

"Dead gods, yes," Ratcatcher begged. "Please."

"You'll have water enough, I think," said Rhadanthos, and brought his fists down.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

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The darkness turned to day as Yushuv fell, and the inside of Talat's Howe was lit by the colors of flame.

He landed on the stone floor and immediately threw himself forward. Behind him, he heard the whistle of the Prince of Shadows' mace cutting the air, and then the sickening crunch of it shattering the flagstones. "You can't run in here!" the prince roared, and raised the mace as he leapt after Yushuv.

The Howe was larger inside than he expected, Yushuv noted with a start. He could see a pair of corridors leading off from the pillared chamber in which he stood, and he guessed that an equal number lay behind him. The stonework was simple but elegantly done, and the pale stone seemed to drink in the light from his anima. But the floor was littered with wreckage, and great hunks of stone torn from the walls littered the floor.

All this he saw in only a second, and then Yushuv was in motion again. The prince's mace hummed past his ear, and he dodged forward. Wrapping one hand around a pillar, he swung around until he was facing the prince dead on.

He stood there for a moment, his weapon halfway through a swing and his shadow monstrous behind him. His fist was bunched in his stomach, Yushuv's dagger turned and clenched between his fingers. Slow drops of

blood fell to the floor, one at a time. "Come to me, boy," he hissed. "No fair hiding among the pillars."

"I think I like where I stand right now," the boy replied. "Or are you afraid to face me?"

"Stupid boy. Before this ends, I'll teach you what it means to be afraid." He feinted forward, and Yushuv flinched back. A delighted snicker burst from the prince's lips. "Oh, that was very good, very brave. Shall we try again?" Again he feigned a swing, and again Yushuv took a half step back.

A tiny click registered at the edge of his consciousness, and Yushuv threw himself to the floor. A dart whirred overhead, its tip smeared with a vicious-looking unguent. It slammed against the wall behind where Yushuv had been standing and fell to the floor, even as the boy slid away from it.

"Oh, did I forget to mention that?" The prince advanced now, all playfulness gone. "Your friend Eliezer Wren thought it might be amusing to litter this place with booby traps the last time he came here. They're all lethal, as someone very dear to me found out. You might want to watch out for them. I thought I'd gotten them all the last time I was here, but it seems I was mistaken." He swung, and the impact of his blow cracked a pillar in half. A shower of pebbles rained down from the ceiling, and with a dying man's groan, the pillar collapsed.

Yushuv spun out of the way, putting another pillar between himself and the prince. He made a thrust past the pillar at the prince's knee, but the mace swatted it aside with ease. Yushuv gasped at the stinging in his hands and fell back again. *'Think, boy, think,* he told himself. *What would Dace do?*

"This place is too small for you to hide for long," the prince said as he reduced another pillar to powder. "You'd do better to surrender the sword and let me make your death painless."

"I think not." Yushuv darted past the remains of a statue, the head and torso of which were long gone, and hacked with both hands at the prince's ankle. The angle of



the swing forced the prince to divert his mace, and when he did Yushuv jammed the tip of the daiklave into the ground. Even as the mace swooped back up, Yushuv pushed down against the floor and used the daiklave to lift himself into the air. His feet caught the prince on the chin, and the man reeled from the blow. His arms flailed as Yushuv landed, pulling the blade behind him and spinning into a savage cut at the prince's midsection. The prince retreated, the tip of the daiklave tearing the fabric of his shirt.

"There's no place for you to run, either," Yushuv said, and pressed the attack. He jabbed forward, and the prince pirouetted away with astonishing grace. Again he tried, and this time the prince riposted with a blow from the mace that made the daiklave's blade ring like a bell.

"That's for your arrogance, boy," the prince said, and stepped inside Yushuv's guard. Before Yushuv could react, the prince's boot took him in the chest, and he tumbled backwards onto the ground. "And that's for your technique, which is piss-poor. Who trained you, the village idiot? A drooling priest with one good eye and a wooden leg?"

The mace came down and struck Yushuv a glancing blow on the side. He rolled with it, but the breath exploded out of him in a rush, and his side felt like it had been struck with a hammer.

"Not so fast," the prince called, and hammered the floor again. Yushuv barely caught himself from rolling into the blow. He raised the daiklave before him, but the prince swatted it out of his hands with arrogant ease. It skittered across the floor and off into the shadows. Yushuv tried to rise, but the tip of the mace pressed down against his breastbone. "No, don't move," the prince said. "I like you right where you are."

Yushuv froze, his mind racing. *What would Dace do now? Fight, obviously. Not surrender. Take the battle to the enemy.*

"You're not the first one to try to kill me," he said, trying to sound braver than he felt.





The prince smiled nastily. "No, but I trust I will be the first to succeed. It's a pity you had to find the sword so soon. A few more years, and you might have presented something of a challenge. I meant what I said about your teachers, by the way. They way you fought, I'm surprised you lasted this long."

"Dace is an excellent teacher," Yushuv yelled, surprised by his vehemence. "If he were here..."

"He's not." The prince jabbed downwards with the mace for emphasis. "Now tell me, how did you get the sword? It doesn't matter, really, but I'm curious. The dagger I'm familiar with. Unforgiven Blossom took it from me, but I'll be taking it back now." He prodded Yushuv again, but the boy kept his lips sealed.

*He's armed, Yushuv thought. I'm not. That has to change.*

"Ah." The prince's smile vanished. "You've learned discretion. Too late, though. On your feet." Slowly, Yushuv stood. "Good, good. Give my regards to the Unconquered Sun when you try to explain to him why you failed.

The prince's words seemed very far away suddenly. Dace's voice came into his mind, a lesson the man had taught him one day while they were fishing.

"Souls like ours don't go away, Yushuv," he had said. "Even when you and I die, whether it's tomorrow or a thousand years from now, our souls will live on. And they'll come back. They belonged to others before us, and that's part of what we're doing. Our souls have unfinished business. Fortunately," and he had glanced in the direction of the camp where Lilith was cleaning hides, "they also have friends and remembrances. Sometimes a sword or a helm sits for centuries in a rubbish heap, waiting for the right soul to come back for it. And it will. Never doubt that the soul will."

Dace had given him an odd look then, but before Yushuv could ask any questions Lilith had called them back into camp, and the subject never came up again. Now, though, Yushuv finally understood what Dace had been trying to tell him.



*The sword.* Yushuv focused on the blade, imagining it laying somewhere nearby.

*My sword. Come to me. You waited for me. We were meant for one another.* He imagined the way the sword felt in his hands, the gentle weight of it and the perfect balance. *Come to me,* he commanded it. *Come to me.*

"No irritatingly clever last words then," the prince said. "Fair enough. It marks you as wiser than your elders. Goodbye, boy." He raised the mace for the final blow, and started his swing.

"Come to me!" Yushuv shouted. As the prince paused for an instant, confused, the daiklave leapt into the air. Spinning, it flew forward. There was a wet slicing sound, like the meat of a roast pig coming off the bone, and then suddenly Yushuv stood with the daiklave in his hands.

The prince stood opposite him, staring in shock and disbelief at the stump of his arm. His hand lay on the floor of the tomb, still clutching the dented mace. Shockingly, he began to laugh.

"I must apologize to your teacher, when next I see him. Oh, that's a good joke to play on me, boy, a good joke indeed."

Yushuv lowered the daiklave until the point hovered just before the prince's eyes. "No more talking." He heard a dull clank, but ignored it. "Step back, against the wall."

"Anything you command, oh fearless warrior of the Sun." The prince jammed the bleeding stump against his side, and took a single stride backwards. "Is this sufficient?"

"Further," Yushuv ordered. "Against the wall."

"I fear that wall is booby-trapped," the prince said. "I'd prefer to stand here, if I may."

"No games," Yushuv growled. "Step back, and I might let you live."

"That's very generous of you," the prince replied. "It's also not enough."

Something caught Yushuv's ankle then, squeezing with hideous strength. Shocked, he looked down and saw the

prince's detached hand clutching at him, blood still oozing from the wrist. Reflexively, he hacked at it with the daiklave, and in that moment the prince lunged forward with the dagger.

Yushuv tried to dodge. Instead, his foot caught on some debris and he tumbled backwards, his defensive swing turning into a wild, arcing swipe that sliced through the remaining columns on that side as if they were butter. The Prince of Shadows roared his defiance as he ducked beneath the blow, but even as he did so the ceiling over his head crumbled. He took a step backwards, then a heavy stone caught him from above and spun him into the wall.

In the midst of the roar of the collapsing ceiling, Yushuv heard a tiny click. Then the thunder of the rain of stones drowned out everything.

It took less than a minute for the roof of the Howe to finish falling in on itself, but to Yushuv it seemed like a great deal longer. When the last pebble had come to rest, he forced himself to sit and listen, though he was shaking like a twig in a stern breeze.

Nothing. There was nothing. No cries for help, no curses, not even a trail of blood from beneath the stones. The Prince of Shadows was gone and buried, vanished from the face of Creation as if he had never been.

"And he got to keep the dagger," Yushuv said, and sheathed his sword. Then, more tired than he had ever been, he began the long slow task of climbing out.

In the belly of the Howe, the Prince of Shadows felt the crushing weight of stone upon him and cursed Eliezer Wren. The stump of his arm throbbed, but the flow of blood had stopped enough that he didn't think he would die. *Not immediately, at least* came the unbidden thought, and he swatted it aside. He was the Prince of Shadows. He was Death's favored servant, and he would persevere.

He closed his eyes to preserve his strength. *Dead gods and masters, he prayed, lend me strength. Find me. Help me.*

WAIT.

The thought came to him faintly, as if from a long way away. The power of it was undeniable, but the force of the message was curiously muted. He remembered the oddities he'd noted on the Howe when Sandheart had died and shuddered. Even *they* would be weak here.

WAIT, the voice came again, stronger now. *THAT IS ALL. Then, weaker, SUCH WONDERFUL DREAMS OF DESTRUCTION HAD BEEN DREAMED FOR YOU.* After that was only silence.

"I will wait," he whispered, and smiled.





## Chapter Thirty-Seven

"They're all dead, I think," said the blood-spattered youth in the colors of the Iselsi. "And the ones that were dead to start with are hacked up enough so that they won't be causing any more trouble." His right arm was in a sling, and T'fillit could see blood seeping through the white cloth at several points. Still, his expression was positively cheerful, and he held the reins of his mount with the loose assurance of a man who had learned, once and for all, that he could hold his own on the field of battle.

"Excellent," she replied. "How many losses did we take?"

"They're still counting bodies," the Iselsi said, using a curt nod to gesture back over his shoulder. "Nine was the last I heard, though two of those were inflicted by our own side. A couple of the stupider hotheads decided to rekindle some kind of argument from their training at the House of Bells. They ended up taking each other out, and a fair number of the enemy with them." He paused, and looked from side to side to see if anyone besides T'fillit could hear him. "If you ask me, it was an acceptable trade."

T'fillit nodded slowly, a great weariness filling her limbs. Around her, healers tended to the wounded and servants stripped the bodies of the dead. A trio of Immaculate priests wandered the battlefield, blessing those who



had fallen in battle against the Abyss and singing solemn chants of praise. At the edge of the wood, trees were being felled for the sake of a pyre, and weary warriors were helped from their saddles.

It was, T'fillit decided, a satisfactory conclusion. "Discover the names of the dead and bring that list to me," she said. "We'll camp here tonight, so make sure the bodies are disposed of. I want a pyre—this place wants for wholesome light. Am I understood?"

"Of course, Revered One." He nodded quickly. "And may I say that I am deeply honored to have served under you."

"You may," she said, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "But not more than once, and not loudly."

"Yes, Revered One," he said with a grin, and walked off. As he went, she noted with approval the fact that he did not run. *Good material, that one*, she thought. *The Empire could use more like him.*

A hullabaloo at the north end of the battlefield caught her attention, and she looked up. A single figure stood atop a small pile of tumbled rocks, a figure that was not at all human. It bore the rough proportions of a man, but its entire form shimmered with watery light, and a great beard of duckweed and moss hung down from its chin. Vines and reeds cloaked its limbs, and its torso was wrapped in strangling vines. In its massive arms, it cradled a body, and T'fillit found herself struck by a wave of sadness that seemed to radiate outward from where it stood.

Below it, swords and bows were raised, and those few huntsmen who had power remaining to them summoned it to themselves. "Stand and declare yourself," she heard a familiar voice call, and once again silently blessed the young Iselsi. "Another step, spirit, and we'll show you how small a god you really are."

"I come in peace," the figure rumbled. "I bring you my friend. I wish for you to take him home."

So saying, he knelt and laid the body down. Then, it slowly raised its hands in the air and backed away a few

steps. Silently it waited, and its gaze moved over the crowd of huntsmen and their servants.

T'fillit spurred her mount forward. It splashed into the stream, struggling for footing on the bottom, but she urged it on. The hunters parted for her, and she thought she saw respect in the spirit's eyes as she approached.

"Do you command here?" it asked.

"I do," she replied.

"Who is your friend, and what do you offer us to take his body home?"

"His name was Eliezer Wren, and bearing his body should be its own reward. He did you great service this day, priestess, you and your dragons' children." The spirit's tone left no doubt that he was aware of T'fillit's true nature, and that he was contemptuous of the charade.

"Wren?" she breathed instead.

"Here? How?"

"Paying a debt," the spirit said with dignity.

"He has done much that is praiseworthy. Take him home, and have poets write songs to his memory."

"We shall," T'fillit said. "Prepare a stretcher!" she called out, "and have the healers preserve the body. Move!" Obediently, a swarm of servants scurried up the low hill and carried the corpse away. They bore it with reverence, and Rhadanthos nodded his approval.

"Excellent," he said. "And for that, you may drink of my waters freely."

"I thank you, spirit," she answered, "and we will burn the corpses of your enemies, so that their touch will not foul your stream."

"You are gracious." Rhadanthos settled into a sitting position.

"And also curious. What lies beyond this hill?"

"A wild place, full of wolves and not much else. Wren's slayer is dead, his corpse fed to the carrion beasts. You may continue past this place if you wish, but you will find the journey singularly uninteresting."

"I do not think that will be necessary," T'fillit said. "We will stay here tonight, and then disturb you no more."

"A wise decision." The great head nodded up and down. "I wish you restful dreams, and a safe and pleasant journey. For myself, I will sit here and watch the waters flow. It has been too long."

"As you wish," said T'fillit, and rode back down among her people.

True to T'fillit's word, the Hunt was gone within an hour of dawn the next morning. The pyre and the victory celebration had raged all night, and thus it was a subdued band of huntsmen who saddled up in the gray light. They left, horns at their saddles and songs unsung, and within minutes only a pile of charred bones hinted that they'd ever been there at all.

The day promised to be clear but chilly, and Rhadanthos could feel the first hints of ice coming on. He sat, cross-legged, on the mound that had once been his prison, and observed his domain. Below him, the waters of his stream flowed clear and cold, and already the marsh mud was being carried away in double handfuls. Rhadanthos had no doubt that within days, the stream would be stronger than it had been in years, and the valley around it would be renewed.

"Blood always did make the reeds grow better," he said to the morning air, and waited. Eventually he heard the sound he had been expecting, and without turning said, "It is done. They're gone."

"I know," said Yushuv. "I followed them through the woods a little bit. The Fair Folk are gone, too."

"That's a good thing," said Rhadanthos. "And soon you'll be leaving as well." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes." He paused, and adjusted the rough scabbard that held the sword at his back. "Thank you for hiding me from them."

"Wren would have wanted me to." The massive shoulders shrugged. "Do not ask me how I know that, but I do."



I also know that the battle that would have ensued had they found you would have done great damage to this place, and enough has been done already.”

“Still,” the boy said, “I thank you.”

“Where will you go now?” Rhadanthos asked, after the silence had grown uncomfortably long.

“I don’t know,” Yushuv said truthfully. “I don’t think my work is done yet.”

“You are very, very young to be pondering that sort of thing. A man’s labors take decades, not hours.”

Yushuv nodded. “But the Prince of Shadows is trapped, and the Fair Folk have been turned aside. It certainly seems like I’ve done enough.”

“The only way to be certain that you have done enough for one life is to die, child. Never forget that.” Rhadanthos chuckled to himself, a sound like water running fast over rough stones. “If you wish my advice, and I am quite certain you do not, I would tell you to hide yourself. Paint your sword black. Grow your hair long so that it covers your brow, and find yourself a hat. Practice, and teach yourself to sleep without dreams. Then, maybe, if the Unconquered Sun still needs you in ten years or a hundred, you’ll live long enough to answer the call. Or have you grown too addicted to the thrill of danger to think of a quiet life ever again? If so, head east. There’s challenge enough for you there, though I don’t think you’ll find it all to your liking among the trees.”

“No,” Yushuv said, shaking his head. “Wren and I talked a lot in the last few days. He told me what he’d done, and the people he’d done it for, and he said that the thing he wanted most in the world was for this all to be over so he could go home. But it’s never really over, is it?”

“No,” said Rhadanthos. “But it can pause for a while.”

“I hope so,” said Yushuv. “I think I’m going to go south, and then west. I’ll get away from the trees for a while. If the Sun wants me, it will know where to find me. If not, I’ll be just as happy.” He paused for a moment, and looked thoughtful. “I’ll come back some day, if you like.”

"Someday," the spirit agreed. "But not too soon. I have labors to attend to."

"All right." Yushuv skipped down the low hill and splashed across the stream. "Someday it is," he said, and then walked off. At the bend in the stream, he turned and waved, and then with quick and quiet steps, he vanished.



In the depths of the citadel of the Prince of Shadows, a marionette slumped on a throne that was not its own. A tiny spark of light faded from its eyes, and it became, once more, a simple toy. With a vicious clatter, it fell to the floor.

Anyone looking closely at the puppet would have been appalled to know that when it had fallen, its right arm had broken off, just below the elbow. That piece lay on the ground, several feet from the rest of the marionette. The rest of the object, however, was quite intact, and all of its strings were still attached very tightly indeed.





## Chapter Thirty-Eight

The wagon rolled to a dusty stop and the driver, a stocky man with an absurd shock of brown hair and a thin mustache, spat expertly from the side of his mouth as it did so. He leaned out, one hand shading his eyes against the noonday sun, and squinted back at the woman who stood by the side of the road.

She was old, he saw, but not frail. Her clothes were coated with road dust, and her shoes were worn. There was a staff in her hand that had seen hard use, though incongruously, it had a single green bud sprouting from it. Hair pulled back in a simple, severe bun, she trudged forward, head held high.

"Ho, Grandmother," the wagoner called. "You're a long way from home."

The woman stopped and her eyes met his. "Longer than you think," she said.

The man coughed. "Err, yes. Probably. There's no villages within a day's walk. You must have come a long way. Got a long way to go, too."

"Indeed." She leaned upon her staff. In the long moments as she did so, silence grew.

"I'm called Dreaming Tortoise," he said awkwardly. He reached down between his legs and scooped up a wineskin from the wagon's floorboards. "Can I offer you some wine, Grandmother?"

She smiled, and shook her head slightly. "I thank you, for your name and your courtesy. My name is Unforgiven Blossom, and I do not drink wine."

"Ah. I've got some water in the wagon as well, if you'd like." Abruptly, he smacked his forehead. "What am I thinking? Hop up on the wagon, Grandmother. I can take you at least as far as Stonebreak, if you're going that far." He slapped the wooden seat beside himself for emphasis.

"I do not hop," Unforgiven Blossom said, but the faintest hint of a smile creased her lips. "Will you give an old woman a hand?"

"Of course." Dreaming Tortoise reached out with one callused hand and hauled her up into the wagon. "Upsy-daisy, there you go."

With practiced ease, she settled in beside him and folded her hands demurely in her lap. "Where are you going, anyway, Grandmother Blossom?" he asked as he flicked the reins.

"Nexus, I think," she replied. "I am told that fortune-tellers do well there."

"Oh, certainly," he agreed, head nodding emphatically.

"A good fortune-teller can swim in jade in that town, they say. I'm going to Nexus myself, you know. Got a cargo of furs in back. If you want, I'd be happy for another pair of eyes on the trip. I've been told there are bandits on the road here."

"Bandits? I do not think you have to worry about bandits any longer," said Unforgiven Blossom. Her laughter trailed behind the wagon as it rolled on to the west, and after a minute, Dreaming Tortoise's joined hers.

"To Nexus," he said, toasting the journey from the wineskin.

"To Nexus," she agreed. "At least for a little while."

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This novel would not have seen the light of day (or the dark of night) without the contributions of the following folks: Zach Bush, who cast his gimlet eyes upon it when it was still in 2000 word chunks; Philippe Boule, who did a bang-up job editing it; Geoffrey Grabowski, who kept the continuity on track; Genevieve Cogman, for endless enthusiasm (in the form of constant questions as to what was going to happen next); the noble fellows of the Red Storm Entertainment Design Department, who helped keep the author sane and grounded (usually by suggesting that all of the characters get grenade launchers and use them on one another); and most of all, Melinda Thielbar, for constant support, suggestions, and an astonishing tolerance for one particular lunatic author.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Dansky is a game designer and in-house writer for Red Storm Entertainment. He has worked on well over a hundred books for White Wolf, including **Wraith: The Oblivion (Second Edition)**, **Guide to the Camarilla** and **Charnel Houses of Europe: The Shoah**. Richard lives near Raleigh, North Carolina, in an apartment he shares with a great many cooking utensils, worthless baseball cards, and books. For the record, they're not all books he worked on. Honest.





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