

A. R. GEIGER

ALL MEN DIE.

A FEW LIKE TO  
WATCH IT HAPPEN...

SPIRE  
AND  
STONE

THE GHOST WALKER SAGA

THE GHOST WALKER SAGA  
BOOK 1

SPIRE  
AND  
STONE

A.R. GEIGER

Spire and Stone

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Written by A.R. Geiger

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**CONTENT WARNING:**

Contains suggestions of suicide and references to cutting.  
Reader discretion advised.

# Other books by A.R. Geiger

*The Birdwoman ...and other short stories*

*Of Mice and Fairies*

*Of Bullfrogs and Snapdragons*



*For Esther,*

*Because you happily read eight hundred million drafts of the  
same book and never complained once.*

*I would never have finished it without you.*

*Also, your favorite character lives.*

*So we're even. You're welcome.*

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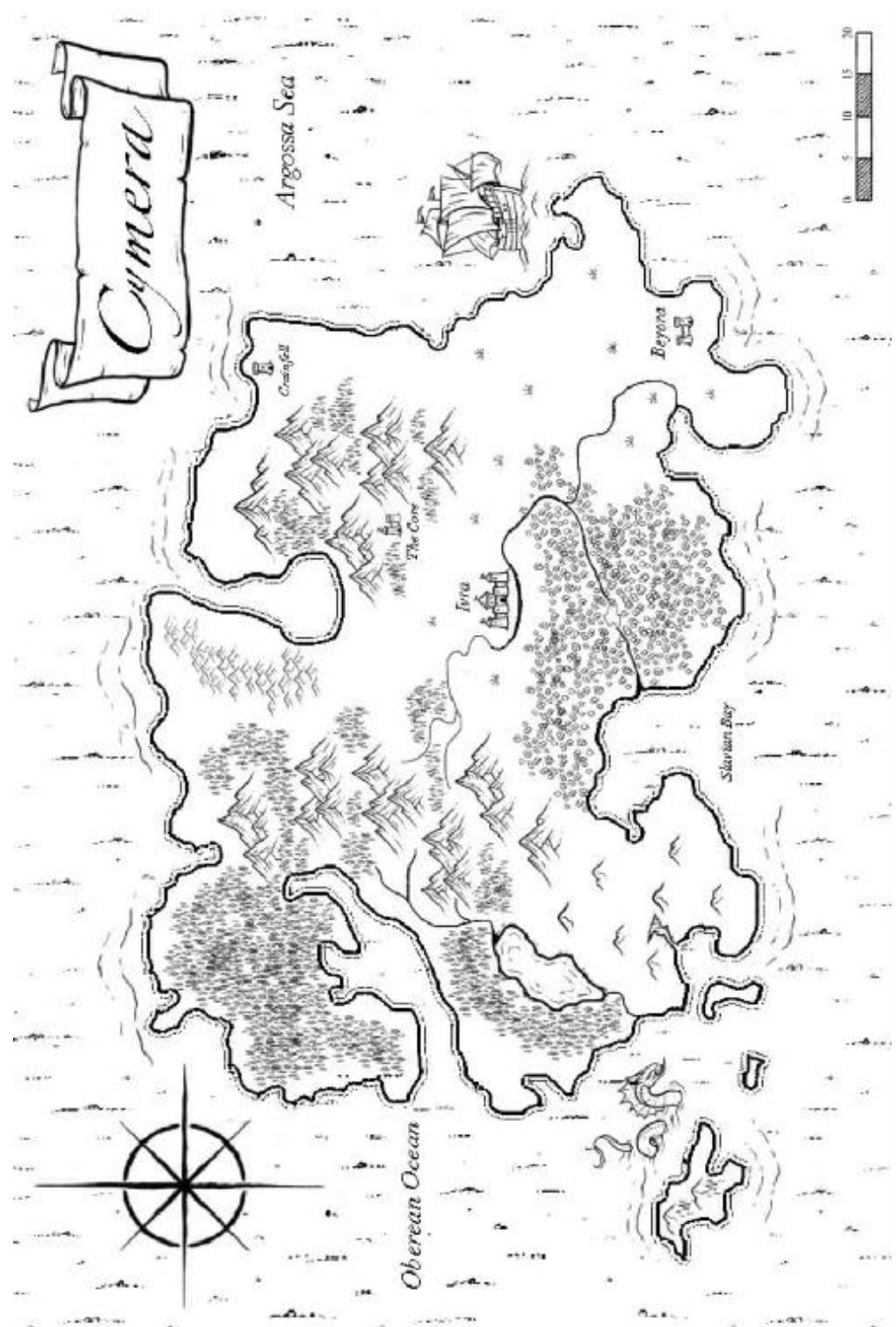
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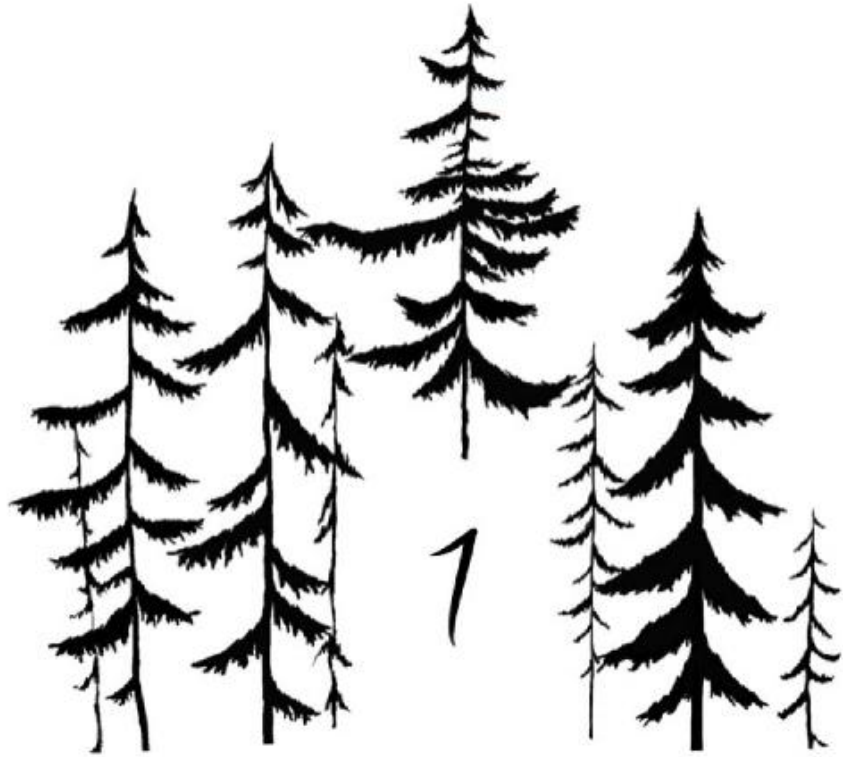
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From the east he came,  
With blazing soul,  
And a crest of fiery bone.  
Ghost Walker,  
Child of storms,  
Now stood twixt spire and stone.

*~ The Lay of the Ghost Walker*







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DREYEN-BRED

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**T**he trainers herded the men into the ring like sheep at an auction, urging them on with boots and blades. They came reluctantly, baring their teeth when a blade drew blood or a boot bruised deep.

Viggo Swifter leaned against the fence, waiting. Three of them were shoved in with him, soldiers captured from neighboring nations during wars and revolts. They were slaves now, Dreyen fodder the old tales named them. Men who could fight and kill, but more importantly, who could be killed.

Viggo could see the fear of such an outcome in their shadowed eyes. They were never told, these men, whether the predator waiting for them in the runs had been instructed to send their souls straight to the Pale Lady or to leave them alive.

Either way, they were meant to fight the same.

The men advanced, crossing the green sward as warily as if he—cursed-blood and Dreyen-bred as he was—were a wounded banshee rather than a youth of barely nineteen. Viggo stood his ground, his sword held loosely in his right hand, and watched them circle. Hunting. Probing. They split

off almost instinctively, as if knowing there would be little help or support from their companions in this fight. The two older men, more experienced in battles and war, moved to flank him and left the youngest to face him head on. Viggo flicked a glance over his pale face spattered with freckles, his hazel eyes. A Cymeran, he guessed. Probably a peasant's son sold to pay his debts, or a robber's brat. Was there any difference? He was a child, a child with a blade in his hands. He looked as afraid of his own sword as he did of Viggo, and his steel skullcap hid nothing, not his youth, and not his fear.

The other two were warriors. One, a short, bear-like Rekovian, wore a horned helm and carried a broadsword in his hands. A sheepskin vest bore the stains of his last defeat in this fenced run, and his weathered skin was marked with the scars of a thousand campaigns. Viggo could see the smoldering anger in his dark eyes, the bitterness of a slave marked into his face. He would be the first to attack. The man spat on the grass, growling to the other two in a heavily accented snarl, "This'n's weak on the left side. I seen him 'afore. Some'un take his legs."

Neither of his companions responded.

The trainers were waiting, and Viggo could feel their impatience from across the narrow run. He flexed his fingers and smiled at the Rekovian. Mockingly. Patronizingly. He could feel the wolf in his chest, fighting to get out, and he let it show in his eyes like the embers of a waking fire. “I don’t think they heard you. Maybe it’s the accent?”

The man screamed a guttural challenge in his own language and charged.

Viggo caught his first strike and swung it wide. Steel clashed, shrieking with a voice like shattering stone, and Viggo forgot everything else—the trainers, the cost of failure, and the needle of fear that always came when he toyed with the Pale Lady’s attention.

Now only the Rekovian mattered, only the blade in his hand and the murder in his eyes.

The man began to backpedal. Viggo advanced as the fight got into his blood, pounding with his pulse until he could taste it. The blade spun in his hands, and he felt, rather than saw, the Cymeran take his chance. The boy charged forward, raising his sword like a club. Viggo ducked beneath a stroke from the Rekovian and spun, striking aside the boy’s blade with contemptuous ease. The boy stumbled in the thick grass,



young and clumsy as he was, a farmer's son with more experience behind a plow than on a battlefield. His sword fell. Viggo caught his shoulder, kned him hard in the chest, and flipped him.

He hit the ground hard and didn't get up.

Viggo ducked instinctively and felt the Rekovian's blade sweep past his head again, burying itself into the turf. He sidestepped and pivoted, driving the hilt of his sword into the point of the man's jaw. He dropped like a stone. The horned helmet rolled to one side, out of its owner's reach.

Viggo stepped back, but before he could gather his wits or even draw a breath, the third man was on him.

Viggo had seen him before, practicing in the ring with the other slaves, but had never fought him. He was a Jamarick, a huge hulk of a man stolen from lands where the ground was hot and the wind was hotter. He'd been carrying no blade when the trainers had forced him into the run, and even now, with the Cymeran's sword in the grass a few mere feet from him, his hands were bare. He was stripped to the waist, coal black skin gleaming with oil and rippling with muscle, and the full-faced helmet he wore grinned with the face of a skull. No eyes could be seen behind the black sockets of the mask.

He slammed into Viggo with all the strength bound in his thick frame, and they both went down, wrestling in the wet grass until the wolf felt him losing ground and tore out of his chest like a demon straight from hell.

The old tales said that two spirits fought in a Dreyen's body. First a man's, and second to it the spirit of the animal that he claimed as his second skin. For the briefest moment before the man was gone and the beast had taken his place, those standing by the fences could see it in his eyes and hear its challenge in his throat. Shouting greeted its arrival, whistles and cheers from behind him, where his own people stood watching.

When the wolf fought, blood flowed freely. And fights with blood were always more interesting.

The wolf dragged the Jamarick down with him. The man began to scream, from pain or fear or both. It bore down on him, fangs tearing at his shoulder, snapping for his throat. Viggo tasted blood, and too quickly it was over. The trainers pulled him off, and the Jamarick scrambled backward, bleeding from his shoulder and spitting hate in his own language. The words, even without their meaning, stung the air. The Rekovian, too, was struggling to his feet, but the boy

—the peasant’s son—was still. Viggo shook the wolf off, rising to his feet. The men holding him didn’t let go, and Viggo bared his incisors at them, trying not to look at the limp form in the grass or the blood on the boy’s white face. He’d done this too many times. He knew better than to look.

Only this time, he couldn’t help it.

The child was breathing, at least. His breath was too shallow, but he was breathing. Still, he lay crumpled on the grass as if he would never move again. Viggo’s heart lurched, and he looked away before anyone could see his fear. Dreyens weren’t supposed to be afraid of death.

The tales said that they knew the Pale Lady too intimately for that.

*Get up.* Viggo picked up his blade, whispering the plea beneath his breath where no one else would see it. *Please get up.* Someone was checking him now, an orderly. Viggo could feel the trainers watching him. Another minute and Vladimer Hunt, Fydera Core’s head instructor, would notice his hesitation. If he thought that Viggo cared a whit about the Cymeran’s fate there would be no end to the trouble it would cause, both to himself and to the boy.

*Please get up.*

The boy did get up, slowly, painfully, with his hand pressed against his side. Viggo walked away. The boy would live. The herbwomen would take care of him. Maybe his ribs would be broken or his shoulder wrenched, and they'd let him earn the money to pay his debts another way.

Before he got himself killed.

\* \* \*

Viggo ducked out of the ring like a thief, dodging the attention of a trainer as he skirted the weapons shed and slipped into the trees beyond. A row of damp barrels lined the back of the shed, overshadowed by pines, and he knocked the lid off the first and plunged his head in. The searing cold of snowmelt cut through the heat and aggression of the fights. He came up gasping, shaking wet hair out of his eyes.

The blues and grays of the Fyderan mountain range greeted him. They rose up around the training ring like a row of giants, somber and sad. The pine forests on the lower slopes were flushed a deep green, softening the harsh, jutting cliffs of the mountains. The little valley where he stood—called the Core by the few who knew it—was nearly lost among the peaks.

Briefly, he allowed himself to wonder what would happen if he let the wolf have its way—just this once—and disappeared into the cliffs and trees for a few hours. He would have liked to climb up to the crags and find a quiet place, somewhere he could be alone. Or, better yet, he could slip down the gulch at the end of the valley and follow the birchwood trees to the river. He'd been down there a few times—and only been caught once.

He still wore the marks of that beating on his back.

With a sigh, he let the idea of skipping out go. He wouldn't get far, not so early in the day, and he'd had enough trouble with the trainers lately. From the whispers he'd been hearing from them around the fires after dark, he guessed they were under more pressure than usual. The masters accepted only the best from their bodyguards. They bred only the finest bloodlines, raised only the children with the most promise, and culled out the weaker links. With the task of protecting the kingdom's noblemen—men with the blood of kings in their veins—came a heavy responsibility.

The men who trained their charges impressed that on them firmly, sometimes with fists, more often with words that cut like knives.

No, he was better off staying in the run today. He'd been punished enough lately, and the retributions for mistakes were getting worse. The whole world seemed to be on edge.

The voice that interrupted him was icier than the snowmelt dripping down his back. "Taking in the sights?"

Viggo swore under his breath and turned quickly to face the man who'd come around the corner of the shed. Vladimer Hunt eyed him critically as he dipped a flask into one of the water barrels. "Your chin's bloody. Need an herbwoman?"

Viggo scrubbed at the blood smeared into the reddish-blond scruff on his jawline, irritation prickling his spine. The Core's head instructor had a way of getting under his skin. "It's not my blood."

Vladimer shrugged, leaning against the barrels as he took a long drink. His shaven head gleamed with sweat, and a broad scar slit his skin from his left ear to the base of his throat. Not many Dreyens held the kind of position and authority that he did here with men and slaves who followed his command. Then again, not many Dreyens lived through working as a king's bodyguard for more than two decades. Some men had the devil's mark on their souls, and who better to teach the

young then the men who survived what was generally known as a death sentence?

Vladimer drained the flask and looked at him sardonically, up and down, like one of the slaves he bought from the merchant caravans. “The Jamarick had you down back there.”

“Not really.”

“Looked like it from where I was.” Vladimer filled the flask again, stoppered it, and flicked water into the undergrowth. “I thought I was going to have to step in to make sure he didn’t damage one of my wolves.”

The mockery in his voice cut like a whip. Viggo bit his tongue hard, a curse stinging the back of his tongue. Seven years he’d held the title of First Unit Captain, seven years he’d proved again and again on blood and sweat and steel that there wasn’t a man in the Core—save Vladimer himself—who could best him.

But it wasn’t enough, and he doubted it ever would be.

“Dismissed, Instructor?” he spat at last, choking the words past the anger crushing his ribs.

Vladimer waved a hand. Viggo turned back to the run and the rest of his unit.

The man's voice followed him, low and cut with steel.  
"Swifter? Next time a slave puts you on the ground, I'll make you drink his blood. Keep that in mind."

Viggo bit his tongue, remembering the last time Vladimer had decided on that punishment, and said over his shoulder, "Yessir."





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DEATH'S DAUGHTER

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**T**he trainers had gone by the time Viggo returned to the run. Only his unit was left, ranged along the rail fence. They looked like children sitting there, swinging their feet and laughing. Children with swords hanging from their belts and blood on their hands from the fights.

Viggo vaulted over the fence, half tempted to join in the conversation rather than ending it, but he knew better. “I left for two minutes. No one’s planning on grappling today?”

Carver Laite, his unit second, stuck a grass stem between his teeth and grinned. “I thought about it. Sounded hard, though. With Billet, ‘specially.”

Viggo snatched at the grass stem. He missed, but barely. Carver lurched backward and nearly fell off the fence. “Lazy.”

“Exhausted, actually. Worn thin. Bone-tired.” Carver resettled himself with an air of injured dignity, sticking the grass stem back between his teeth. His hair was bone white, bleached by years in the sun, and he wore it long, nearly to his shoulders. “Besides,” he grimaced and spat something into the grass. A tick, probably. “We were worried about you. You looked sad.”

“I looked sad?” Viggo glanced at the girl sitting on the fence to his right and raised an eyebrow. “That’s his best excuse?”

She adopted a mock sympathetic look, one that would have convinced any man who didn’t know her well. He almost laughed. For all her graceful features and slender good looks, Dex Blade had the soul of a basilisk, and he couldn’t imagine her offering anyone real sympathy. “You did, though.”

Viggo sighed and leaned back against the fence. “You’re right. I am sad.”

She crooned soothingly and scooted over to run her fingers through his hair. “Why’re you sad?”

“He’s just,” Viggo gestured at Carver helplessly, “stupid. I can’t fix it.”

Howls of laughter greeted the words.

Carver squinted at him, looking pleased. “Life’s hard, isn’t it?”

Dex laughed. Viggo shook his head. Carver took everything lightly, as if the world were a magician’s tale that he’d made up to keep himself amused. The only time he was ever serious was during his fights in the run. He fought like a

demon on the hunt. The servants called him *bludhærk*, or blood hungry, and the men he fought swore they could see the madness in him. He'd branded a seven-pointed star into his wrist and carried charms around his neck like a superstitious warlock's son, but he spoke the Pale Lady's name like a curse and laughed when Viggo told him to shut up.

"Besides," Carver added. "You're in charge, so you'll get the blame for us not working."

"And the kick up my backside," Viggo said dryly. "But I'm here now, so it's too—"

"SWIFTER!" Vladimer's harsh bellow cut him off.

Viggo flinched, hearing the instructor's fury from all the way across the training run. Carver's face lit up, and his grin widened. "Someone's calling you."

The curse Viggo spat at him only made him laugh.

Vladimer was striding across the run toward them, his coarse features beet-red from the sun and his constant, vicious temper. A girl trotted in his wake, her slight form dwarfed by his massive frame. Viggo glanced at her, curiosity flaming in his chest as he studied her elfin features and honey-tinted hair. A servant, maybe, but if so, one he'd never seen before. More

likely she was a slave, come to work in the kitchens or shine the instructor's boots. Vladimer had several such girls at his beck and call. She'd been bought from the south or the coastline. She was tan from more sun and more heat than could be found in the mountains, but her eyes were as pale as a winter sky. He'd never seen such pale eyes.

He realized too late that he was staring. Carver kicked the back of his leg, and he jerked around to look at Vladimer, blurting, "Yessir, Instructor?"

Vladimer snapped his fingers in Viggo's face. "Something wrong with your hearing?"

"No, sir."

A mistake. Vladimer cuffed him, hard, and snapped, "Then don't ignore me."

"Yessir, Instructor."

Vladimer jerked his head at the girl. "Caitlyn Ashcliff. Arrived here last night. Higher ups figured she'd even out our numbers for the pairing in two weeks. Assess her, get her placed, get your unit out in the run for grappling. You have an hour, Swifter. Don't make me wait."

He turned away without waiting for a reply, already shouting instructions at another unit. Viggo stared after him. He could feel the girl's gaze on him, suddenly burning holes into his skin. Not a slave then. A Dreyen. He wouldn't have guessed that. Her fair hair and slight frame would have suited a pixie or a mountain elf better than a Dreyen.

She was looking at him as bluntly as he had stared at her, and the expression in her eyes was not friendly. No, not friendly or even curious. Guarded, he would call it. As if she expected him to resent her for breathing the same air as he did.

"Where are you from?" His voice sounded harsh, even harsher than he'd intended, but she didn't flinch. Only her eyes seemed to change, growing a little colder, a little more distant. They were gray, he realized. More gray than blue.

"Crainfell." Her voice was as chilly as her eyes.

Crainfell. Viggo looked down to her left forearm, almost hoping she was joking. But the tattoo was there, peeking out from beneath her sleeve, a black compass etched into her skin, symbolizing Crainfell Core's claim on her.

Carver was the first to laugh. Several others joined in, but Viggo didn't feel much like laughing. Fydera Core was one of

three main camps set apart to train bodyguards for Cymera's noblemen. Beneath these were four others, lesser camps that accepted lesser trainees, preparing them to guard lower-class politicians and a few of the richer merchants.

Crainfell didn't even fall among one of those. It was a fringe camp, a halfway house for castoffs who had nowhere else to go. Most of the graduates they produced were commissioned as scouts and trackers, bloodhounds for the king's armies. Not guardians.

He raised an eyebrow. "They couldn't have found someone better?"

She looked at him coolly, as if she couldn't hear the mockery the others were spitting at her. "They didn't need to."

He did laugh then, but not for the reason she would think. It was a good answer, a better one than he'd been expecting. She had some kick to her, for a bloodhound. "All right then." He crossed his arms over his chest, nodding to her. "Let's see what you've got."

The vague order confused her. She hesitated, glancing at the others behind him. "What?"

“Your soul first, stupid,” Viggo snapped impatiently. Too impatiently. He winced at the sound. Sometimes he thought he could hear Vladimer’s violent temper bleeding into his own words, cutting people aside the same way the man did to him. “Let’s see it.”

Color rose in her cheeks, but he couldn’t tell if it stemmed from embarrassment or anger. Most likely anger.

The blue came back into her eyes before the animal that breathed in her dreams at night and mixed its heartbeat with her own stole the color away. Green replaced it. Green as sea ice and gray as the winter storms that ripped the trees from the mountainsides.

The animal was gray. Gray and black and white, as only a snow leopard can be. Viggo would have expected something lesser, something that would have rated her fit to be left in Crainfell. But the ghost cat, Sphynx-like and worshiped as it was by mountain tribes in the north, was a powerful ally, and hardly one to overlook. Or dump in a nowhere training core like Crainfell.

Murmurs of approval ran through the rest of his unit, and Carver whistled at her appreciatively. “Not bad, gorgeous,” he called. “Got any other tricks up your sleeve for us?”



The leopard left her so fast that it tore the green from her eyes and left them gray as soot. She bared her incisors at Carver, not bothering to reply. He laughed.

Viggo intervened before Carver could continue. “That’ll do for now. They teach you how to fight?”

She was still looking at Carver. “I can fight.”

“Good.” Viggo winked at her. “I won’t make you fight him. You wouldn’t win.”

Carver flashed a vicious grin. “No one does.”

Dex uttered a snort of laughter. “I have.”

“We were six. And you didn’t ‘win’. You called me names until I cried.”

“Mmm, kinda still counts.”

“We’ll have a rematch later,” Viggo told them and turned to whistle sharply at a group of slaves repairing the fence a short way off. One of them, a short, solid-looking Cymeran, raised his head. Viggo motioned him over. He came, but reluctantly, shuffling his feet in the short grass, clearly wishing he’d pretended not to hear. He had gray in his hair and scars on his back that were older than Viggo was, scars from a bullwhip and a cat o’ nine tails. He’d been an oar slave

once. Viggo could see the marks of the shackles on his wrists and ankles.

He paused out of striking range, his gaze fastened on the stubble at his feet. “Yessir, Guardian?”

“Stay there. I need you.” Viggo looked back to the girl. She was looking at the slave, and he could tell that she was seeing the marks of the whip on his back and the gray in his hair instead of the six inches he stood above her and the extra fifty pounds he must have had on her. Her mistake. “There you go. Have at him. First blood.”

“First blood?” She frowned, as if she’d never heard the expression before. As if she were too naive even to be ashamed of her own ignorance.

“First blood. That means you keep fighting until he’s bleeding. Or you are.” He bared his incisors in a wolf’s smile. “Good luck.”

She looked at him for a long moment, as if trying to decide if he were really serious. Her hair was plaited back from her face, twisted into a thick braid down her back like a peasant woman. She looked too young to be dangerous. Too young to be here. He smiled at her again, half tempted to ask if she was afraid of blood, but before he could she had shrugged and

turned away. The slave looked at her, wariness written into the weathered lines in his face, and, almost unconsciously, he took a few steps back. Young and small as she was, he had good reason to fear her. Man or woman, Dreyens were knit with the Pale Lady, and death followed them like a shadow.

Viggo leaned against the fence. “First blood, *chara*,” he called cheerfully to the slave. “She’s barely a pup, so it won’t take you long. Then you can go back to your work.”

*Chara*. Cattle. The slur was intended to goad the man into the fight, and it worked, as Viggo had known it would. He was a slave, but his presence here showed a fighter’s heart. Good slaves who knew how to bow their heads were not wasted as Dreyen fodder.

The man’s fingers tightened into a fist, and he began to circle. The girl bared her teeth at him, feral as the cat that breathed in her soul. Carver leaned closer to Viggo, lowering his voice. “You don’t really think she’ll win, do you?”

“Of course not,” Viggo replied absently. “But I have to say I gave her a chance, don’t I?”

Carver laughed. “Cold.”

Viggo shrugged. It might be, but he didn't intend to lose any sleep over it. First blood would keep her from getting badly hurt, and the faster the man put her down the sooner he was done with this. If the girl had been left to Vladimer, she would have gotten considerably less consideration.

Distracted by Carver's whispering, he almost missed the first blow. It was the slave who started things, although most would have held off the fight as long as they could. Perhaps he really did believe what Viggo had told him, that the girl was hardly up to the task—that he might get off with an easy fight. If so, he was a fool. It was always the women who were the most vicious in the cores. Always the women who had more to prove, who studied pain as if it were an art. They were Death's daughters, rocked to sleep with the Pale Lady's frostbitten breath, and she passed her secrets on to them with the favor of a benevolent mother.

This girl, Crainfell trained, fringe-bred, and castoff as she was, was no exception. The first blow clipped her jaw, and Viggo saw the pain of it wake something in her. Anger. Or a lack of pity, a blindness to the man's scars that hadn't been there before.

She ducked the second blow, swift as the ghost cat that shared her soul, and caught his wrist, twisting it down and to the side. Something popped. His shoulder. She kicked him in the leg hard enough to buckle his knee, spun and drove her elbow into his nose with a strength that made even Viggo wince.

The man went down, sprawled in the grass, the blood streaming down his face ending the fight.

Viggo's unit erupted into a round of false cheers, whistling and catcalling raucously. The girl stepped back, away from the man who was swearing hate at her. Her eyes were very, very gray. Viggo straightened up and grinned. "Well done, Crainfeller. That wasn't half bad."

The girl gave him a look of such contempt that heat bristled beneath his skin, raising his hackles. What had Vladimer said her name was? Caitlyn? Whatever it was, she was good. Better than a bloodhound had any right to be. Viggo walked past her, dropped down on one knee beside the slave and felt his shoulder. Dislocated. The man spat at him, but Viggo ignored him as he jerked the joint back into place. The man uttered a yelp like a wounded animal, though it snapped back cleanly. Viggo jerked his head toward the

healing houses. “Go on. Tell them I said you’re off for the day.”

The man wiped blood from his face and stood. Viggo turned his back on him and nodded at the girl. “Come with me. We’ll get you a tattoo you don’t have to be ashamed of.”

Her lips tightened into a thin line. She didn’t like him. That was painfully obvious, and already he was finding resentment crawling up his skin when he looked at her. Death’s daughter or not, she didn’t belong.

Not in his unit, anyway.



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WARREN

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**D**awn arrived late. A watery, timid sun had slipped over the horizon only to be shrouded with mist. Dark, dripping pines wore the fog like a cloak around their bare branches, needles shivering in the wind. Cat could feel the cold in her lungs as she ran on the narrow path. Wet grass slapped against her legs and the thin air stabbed into her chest like a narrow-bladed knife, leaving her gasping. They'd been running for barely a quarter of an hour now—scarcely a mile and a half behind them—but she could feel every step in her pounding pulse, in her gasping lungs. Twelve others from Second Unit ran with her. She could feel them staring, waiting for her to fall behind. Or worse, to quit.

A girl was leading the group—a tall, slender sort with long legs and the grace of a deer on the steep trail. Cat could see her up ahead, running with her head up and her long black ponytail swaying. When she at last called a halt Cat stepped off the trail and leaned against the rough bole of a pine, working to swallow her humiliation as she waited for her lungs to adjust.

The others in the group left the trail as well, splitting off in twos and threes. Low chatter echoed among the pines,



dampened by the heavy fog. Cat shut her ears to their laughter, looking up at the craggy peaks that loomed overhead. The leopard liked the mountains. It felt at home here, and its contentment made it easier for her to forget the loneliness tugging at her. Maybe she could slip away later and explore. Get up past the tree line and find the hidden ledges, the narrow trails that only the leopard would be able to reach. Heights had always helped her distance herself, forget where she was, and who she was supposed to be. Heights and the rain.

The voice that startled her out of her thoughts sounded as if the mountains had spoken. Deep, craggy, rocky words that could have been uttered by the cliffs around her, rather than by a man's tongue. "Thirsty?"

Cat looked up, heat rising to her cheeks. One of the men from the unit had wandered over and was leaning against a boulder half-buried in the damp ground. She'd seen him during the run, a man a year or two older than she was and at least three or four stones heavier. His black eyes bored into her face with undisguised curiosity, and the smile on his face was twisted by a scar marring his skin from his temple to his jawline. He held up a waterskin when she looked at him,

saying with the same gravelly tone, “Gotta keep d—drinking this high up.”

He tossed it to her. Cat caught it, sizing him up as she took a long drink. His shirt was damp with sweat, his dark, close-cropped hair slick with it. Corded muscle stood out on his broad shoulders and pressed from beneath his tunic. Everything about him was big, built like a bull or a bear, broad and solid, and yet at the same time he was only a half a head taller than she was. Short, for a Dreyen. Especially a man.

He grinned at her, white teeth gleaming in stark contrast with his ebony skin. “All right?”

Cat bristled and bared her teeth at him. “Fine.”

“P—pretty tough coming up here from the coast.” His words had an odd way of stumbling off his tongue, as if they tripped over themselves every so often. It made him seem younger, somehow. “I g—got here when I was twelve. Couldn’t get a f—full breath for a week. It’ll pass.”

Cat hesitated, not sure whether he was mocking her or not. She took another drink and stoppered the skin. “Thanks.”

He nodded, his smile flashing again. It only ever seemed to last the briefest second, like a lightning strike, and it was gone, leaving her wondering if she'd seen it at all. "Heard you come f—from Crainfell."

Her jaw tightened. Word traveled fast in a Core like this. No one's secret was their own for very long. "So?"

"So, you put Mace Harden on his back y—yesterday in grappling. I f—figured I should meet you. See what kind of a person you a—are. I'm Warren. Warren Baxter."

"That's nice."

Warren raised an eyebrow at her, the friendly warmth in his eyes in no way diminished by her rudeness. "You d—don't tell people your name?"

"Cat."

"You l—like it here much?"

"About as much as anywhere else I've been. I like the mountains." A jay called from the branches somewhere above her. "Don't much care for anything else. Where did you come from?"

Warren shrugged, rolling a green pinecone in his fingers absently. His hands were big, too, big and callused. A

warrior's hands. "Nowhere s—special. Used to be in Madira, down south a w—ways. Trainer started beating on me one day, said I wasn't talking right. Wasn't the f—first time, but I decided it was going to be the last. Broke his arm, and four r—ribs before they could get me off h—him." He grinned. "Thought they'd shred my back for it. 'Stead, I got sent h—here."

A ghost of a smile touched the corner of Cat's mouth. She could see the pride the story gave him, even after all these years, as if he could still feel the blows landing, still hear the crack of bone, still taste the revenge for beatings he'd taken without fighting back. A disability in the Cores, even one as simple as a stutter, was most often a death sentence. It took a special kind of man to turn it to his advantage. "And they welcomed you with open arms when you arrived, of course."

Warren bared his incisors in a savage smile. "E—exactly."

"He charmed us all with his winning smiles and dashing good looks." A girl appeared out of the fog, the leader Cat had seen earlier. She brushed silky hair back behind her ear and smiled at Cat. "We couldn't resist him. I'm Bria, by the way."

“Cat.” Cat shifted, aware of how quickly jealousies flared up in the Cores. Friendships were deep, outsiders unwelcome.

Bria stole the pinecone out of Warren’s hands and peeled several of the scales off, flicking one at him when he tried to snatch it back. “You keep up well. I had to drag Warren up the hills when he first got here.”

Warren managed to retrieve the pinecone, and he held it out of her reach, winking at Cat. “I just d—didn’t want to run.”

A smile tugged at the corner of Cat’s mouth before she could catch it. She wasn’t used to friendliness. Men were brutal in the cores, women vicious and vindictive. They didn’t joke and tease.

Bria exchanged a knowing glance with Warren. She was darker than most of the women Cat knew, dark like burnt copper, or desert sand. “I heard Viggo welcomed you in.”

Cat’s stomach clenched, and the memory of the Core captain’s sharp contempt rose unbidden in her mind.

“I wouldn’t judge the rest of us by that group. They’re ...” Bria hesitated, searching for the right word.

Warren supplied it for her. “S—stupid.”

“I was going to say ‘unfriendly.’”

Warren shrugged. “Stupid’s b—better. Although if I’m a—allowed to curse—”

“You’re not.” Bria rolled her eyes and flashed Cat a smile. “We’re working on his language. He keeps getting us all punishment details for swearing at trainers.”

“Only Vladimer.”

“That’s exactly who you shouldn’t—” Bria cut herself off and took a deep breath, relaxing into a serene smile. “Warren, one day, I’m going to murder you.”

He cackled.

Cat bit back a laugh. “So ... I *shouldn’t* swear at the Head Instructor?”

“Not unless you want our whole unit scrubbing outhouses.” Bria tugged the tie out of her long ponytail and shook her hair out. “Warren hates us all, so he does it anyway.”

“That’s t—true.” Warren nodded sagely.

With a flush, Cat realized they were teasing back and forth in an attempt to put her at ease. It was a stark contrast from her reception with Viggo’s unit yesterday, and she wasn’t entirely sure how to respond.

Bria saved her the trouble. “We’d better finish the run now, or the trainers will have my head for being late.” She hesitated, tying her long hair up again thoughtfully, and looked at Cat. “We aren’t very formal in Second Unit. I wouldn’t worry much about pecking orders and all that. Most of us just help each other out when we need it. So don’t be afraid to ask if you want something.”

“Ask m—me if you’re having trouble with rules.” Warren shrugged, rolling a kink out of his shoulders. “I’m always a—around.”

Bria shut her eyes, that serene smile returning. “Please. Do not ask Warren about rules. I have enough trouble.”

Cat pushed hair out of her eyes, taking an awkward liking to the odd pair. Sincere or not, there was something she liked in both of them. “I’ll remember that.”



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COMPASS BRAT

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**D**usk fell reluctantly, as if the sun were hesitant to give up the skies it had claimed so late in the day. The snow still clinging to the higher peaks was tinted rose gold by the setting sun, and night's forerunners slipped among the pines, stealing the light and painting the trees black against the fading skies. Viggo ran a hand through his sweaty hair and watched the last of his unit struggle through the Core's obstacle course, a maze of narrow tight walks, mud pits, nets, and rope swings. They were late again, later than usual. A whippoorwill was already beginning to call in the hollows. Another answered it from the trees at the base of the cliffs. And another, further off this time.

Billet, the last boy in Viggo's unit still on the obstacle course, slipped on a narrow tight walk and fell.

Viggo swore under his breath, a sharp needle of anger lancing through his chest. Billet had already fallen three times on the difficult course. He was soaked, plastered with mud and worse things, and discouraged. The others in the unit weren't helping. They'd finished long since, but Core rules stipulated that no one could leave until the last team member had made it through. Most of them were lounging against the

fence near Viggo or lying on their backs on the short turf looking up at the emerging stars. They were tired and hungry, and Viggo could hear the resentful murmuring beginning. In a moment, he'd be forced to quell it, before it got ugly.

Billet crawled out of the mud pit, shaking himself off and wiping filth out of his eyes. Someone swore at him. Loudly. In the gathering dark, Viggo couldn't see who it was, but he had a rough guess. Dex never had any patience for Billet, especially when he was running the obstacle courses. She herself was light and balanced, and Viggo couldn't remember the last time he'd seen her fall. But Billet was different, larger and heavier than she was, and not as light on his feet. It never helped to swear at him.

However much they all wanted to.

"Try it again, Billet," he called, masking his own irritation with some difficulty. "Watch the chalk next time, all right?"

The boy nodded, not looking at him. His pallid, blotched face was flushed with humiliation. On another day Viggo might have felt sorry for him, but he was too tired and too hungry to care now. Besides, it was always Billet. Every night. The boy was built like an ox, broad and heavy and as clumsy as a newborn pup. He could outwrestle any slave in

the pens, and the things he managed to do with a war axe in his hands made even Viggo flinch. But the obstacle course always caught him. And it always would.

Even the animal that hunted with him and shared his stocky frame was no help. The desert wolf, some called it. Or the devil's hound. The tales said its laughter came straight from the Pale Lady's lips, and the power in its bone-crushing jaws kept most of the cursing and any retribution for his clumsiness at bay. But it was no leopard, and it fell on the tight walks as often as he did.

Carver came over and leaned on the fence next to Viggo, his lank frame slouched casually against the splintered railings. "Say the word, and I'll run it for him. No one has to know."

Viggo glanced at him. His hair was pulled back from his face, and he was fingering one of the amulets he wore around his throat as he watched Billet. A cougar's incisor, bound to a necklace of woven twine and leather. He claimed it warded off the ghosts that were said to wander the hollows. Viggo didn't think it did any such thing. If such ghosts were real, he doubted the broken tooth of a dead cat would keep his name from their lips. If the dead did still wander these mountains,

they would do as they liked, and no one would keep them from it.

He looked back at the training run, watching Billet traversing a net uneasily. “No. Vladimer would find out. You know how many snitches he has. Besides, Billet needs to get this.” He spat, lowering his voice, and added, “He’s had enough chances.”

Carver shrugged compliantly. “Whatever you say.”

Viggo grunted. Billet edged out on a tight walk, shuffling his feet along the chalked wood. Blast the boy, he was holding his breath again. How was he supposed to learn to balance properly if he couldn’t loosen up? Viggo opened his mouth to shout at him but thought better of it. If he startled him now he’d most likely fall again, and they’d be back where they had started.

Carver broke into his thoughts by saying low, “Trouble’s coming.”

Viggo looked up and flinched as he caught sight of Vladimer crossing the compound in their direction. He’d been waiting for the head instructor to notice that his unit was the only one not eating in the mess hall. If Billet didn’t hurry up,

they would all be on punishment detail tonight, and they could forget about dinner.

Unless Vladimer happened to be in a particularly good mood.

Which wasn't likely.

Viggo straightened up as the man drew closer. To his relief, he didn't look angry. More than likely he was headed to his cabin after mess and would be content with a few barbed words as he passed.

Too late, Viggo realized that he was smiling.

Carver spat a curse and retreated, putting the security of the fence between himself and the instructor. Viggo stood his ground, although he was tempted to follow suit and disappear. Vladimer's smile was more dangerous than his anger. Calm brutality was always more painful than wild rage. "Almost finished, sir," he said as Vladimer drew level with him. "Billet was just—"

"Being Billet," Vladimer finished for him. The man was still smiling. But the look in his eyes was colder than the fog that had rolled in over the mountains. He stepped closer,

closer than was necessary, closer than was comfortable. “No trouble. Take your time.”

Viggo’s breath froze, and he took a step back. Stupid, stupid mistake. Any other day it would have earned him a solid blow, but today Vladimer took no notice of it. The man shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. “I asked you to do a job for me, Swifter.”

Viggo clenched a fist, his heart thrumming too fast and too loud behind his ribs. He took another step back, and the wood rail of the fence dug into his back. “You did?” His voice sounded hoarse, as hoarse as if Vladimer’s fingers were already latched around his throat. He glanced over his shoulder, looking for Carver, but the other man had disappeared. Curse him. “I’m not sure—”

“The Crainfeller, remember?” Vladimer said slowly, enunciating his words with chilling mockery. The muscles in his broad jaw were working. “That little bloodhound. I asked you to assess her.”

Viggo’s temper flared, and he swallowed, trying hard to keep his tone respectful. “Sir, I did—”

Vladimer’s calm snapped. He hit Viggo across the face so hard his head snapped back. He stumbled sideways, a hand

clapped over his mouth and nose. “Oh, you did?” Vladimer hissed. “Then what the *bloody hell* is she doing over in Second Unit? Tell me that, Swifter!”

Hot blood slipped through his fingers, dripped down his wrist. His vision was blurred, stars and moonlight sliding in the darkness. He tripped on the uneven ground, his ankle twisted, and he nearly fell, but caught the fence to keep his balance.

“Was it that difficult, Swifter?” Vladimer was shouting now, and his coarse features were red with fury. He continued advancing, closing the gap between them as Viggo backed away along the fence. “Or are you just so *bloody* incompetent that you couldn’t see what was right in front of your eyes? I ask you to test her, she puts a slave on the ground in under a minute, *and you cast her off?* Did you really think you were so blessed with bloody talent that you couldn’t spare a bunk for her?”

The rest of his unit were on their feet by now. Even Carver, who’d been the first to back away, had reappeared. Viggo could see the fury burning in his green eyes, but none of them moved to intervene. They knew better. For his own sake, he was glad of that. “Sir, I only thought—”

“You thought you’d dump her somewhere where she wouldn’t bother you, is that it?” Vladimer’s fist snapped back. Viggo flinched, fighting the wolf down to keep it from tearing the man’s throat open when the blow landed, but Vladimer mastered himself and spat, “Did you think I wouldn’t notice her dominating that bloody unit, Swifter?”

“No, sir.” His voice sounded thick, thick with blood, thick with fury. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“Don’t tell me you’re sorry! Tell me you’re going to fix it!”

“I’ll fix it, sir.” Viggo wiped blood off his face and spat on the ground. “Tonight. Just as soon as I finish here.”

“You’d better.” Vladimer turned his back. “Or I’ll find someone who will. You’re not half as irreplaceable as you think you are.”

He walked away. Viggo crushed the fury raging through his breast, snarling under his breath, “Neither are you, *Ky’tsa*.”

If he’d been less of a coward, he would have said it aloud. But he’d always been yellow. Right through to his core.

\* \* \*



Full dark had fallen by the time Viggo and his unit made it to the mess hall. The moon was out, and the cold with it. Viggo glanced up at it once before he stepped inside. It hung over the trees like a silver coin lost in velvet darkness.

The fire roaring in the central fireplace was newly laid, pine logs popping and spitting sparks across the worn floor. Heat and noise washed over him as he entered, laughter and loud voices echoing along the vaulted ceiling. The broad hall was packed with trainees, long tables crowded and overflowing. Kitchen slaves flitted between the tables. The smell of the food they carried made Viggo's stomach pinch with hunger. He followed the rest of his unit to the table nearest the fireplace. A sheep's carcass hung over the flames, already half eaten and turning on a metal spit. The smell of the mutton mixed with the aroma of the burning pine made his stomach twist again.

He sat, and several slaves whisked around their table, setting down platters of crusty bread and bowls of oil and vinegar, plates and tumblers and jugs of milk and well water. Viggo tore off a chunk of bread and dipped it into the oil, looking up as Billet sat down opposite him. The boy was still plastered with mud and filth, although his hands and face had

been scrubbed clean hurriedly. Viggo grinned. “Shower tonight, Billet. I don’t fancy sleeping in the same cabin with you smelling like that.”

Billet shrugged self-consciously, his broad, rough features growing red. “I’ll clean up. Sorry to take so long, Viggo.” He gestured at the bruise smoldering beneath the skin on Viggo’s jaw. “And ... sorry about that. My fault.”

Viggo probed at the split in his lip with the tip of his tongue. “Not this time. If anyone was to blame, it was me. Doesn’t matter.” He barked a laugh. “Still, you fall six times in the same night again and I’ll have you running the trail until midnight.”

“With me on your back,” Carver added, leaning over to join the conversation.

Billet laughed. “I’d probably die.”

Viggo leaned back to let a slave reach past him with a platter of meat. “Mostly from the stench.” The wooden platter clunked awkwardly against a pitcher, slopping water across the table. Viggo caught it before it fell, a snap of irritation shooting through his bones and a sharp rebuke on the tip of his tongue as he looked up. It died unspoken.

The Cymeran boy.

His arm was bound to his chest with a sling of faded linen, and his face was as drawn and pinched as Viggo had last seen it, painted in blood in the training run. His eyes were as hollow as a dead man's. He flinched when Viggo looked at him and murmured quickly, "Sorry, Guardian."

Heat rose in Viggo's face, and he looked away before the boy could see the guilt in his eyes. A kitchen slave. They'd made him a kitchen slave. Even in that brief glance, he'd seen the shame of it in the boy's eyes. Kitchen slaves were given the worst jobs, the least food, and the most work. And if he owed debts, a few years in the runs as Dreyen fodder would have paid them. Kitchen slaves were slaves for life.

Viggo didn't look up again as the boy set down another platter and moved away. The freshly cooked mutton was still steaming, the aroma smoky and sharp with the flavor of the fat, but he wasn't hungry any longer.

Carver glanced at him and raised an eyebrow. "All right?"

"Yes." Viggo stood up. "I'm going to find the Crainfeller. Vladimer'll have my head if she leaves before I talk to her."

Carver raised his head, looking around the crowded room, and nodded toward one of the corners. “There she is. Next to Baxter, back corner.”

Viggo looked in the direction he’d indicated and swore under his breath. She and Baxter, and Second Unit’s captain, Bria Xinder, were all sitting together and looking remarkably friendly for it. He and Baxter had never gotten along, not since the other boy had been transferred here when they were twelve. The last time their paths had crossed there had been blood spilled, and not only Baxter’s either. Viggo still bore scars from it, although the other man’s were more prominent.

He had no wish to clash with him again.

“I’ll be right back,” he said over his shoulder. Carver grunted acknowledgement as Viggo left, winding his way through the tables toward the back corner where the three of them were sitting.

Slaves and other trainees stepped out of his way. Bria was the first to see him coming. The smile vanished from her face, and she nudged Warren gently. The man already had hostility written all over his face when he looked up, and Viggo felt his own temper rising at the sight. Warren leaned back in his seat, his black eyes sharp with animosity. “S—Swifter.”

“Hey, mute.” Viggo leaned against the table opposite theirs and crossed his arms over his chest. “Still acting the watchdog for your pretty mistress?”

Warren went to rise, but Bria caught his arm and pulled him back down into his seat. Her eyes were snapping with anger, but her voice was perfectly in control as she said softly, “What do you want, Viggo?”

Viggo smiled at her. Everyone knew that Warren could have taken her position if he’d wanted it. It wouldn’t have been difficult either, at least not for him. Bria’s skills lay more in diplomacy and languages rather than fighting. She held her own well enough, especially over the main group in her unit, but Warren was in a league of his own. Everyone had expected him to take her place the day he’d been assigned to Second Unit rather than First because of his stutter. But he hadn’t. He seemed to see himself more as Bria’s enforcer rather than her rival, and she’d held onto her title much longer than she might have because of it. Viggo seldom saw him with anyone else. “Came to see how our little bloodhound’s doing.” He looked over at the Crainfeller. She was watching the three of them silently, but even in the uncertain light Viggo could see the irritation in her eyes. They were blue

again, as blue as the first time he'd seen them. "Settling in all right?" he asked casually.

Her lips tightened, and he almost laughed. By the gods of war, she had a temper as quick as his own. Good for her. "Fine," she said flatly. Her tone was cold, as cold as the icelands where the ghost cat in her heart thrived.

Viggo studied her more closely, running his eyes over the healing tattoo on her shoulder. The scorpion, poised to strike, was as black as pitch and etched with gold lines. Gold for wealth, black for the darkness in a Dreyen's soul. "Healing up nicely?"

"Yes."

Bria was watching him, and he could see the confusion growing in her expression. Warren was as impassive as ever. Viggo tried not to remember the power behind Warren's punch. He could still hear the crunch of his own ribs breaking, although Warren's scream had been worse. He looked back at the Crainfeller. "Glad to hear it. Tomorrow's going to be a little different, though. You're going to join me and my unit in the run. We're over on the western side, near the obstacle course. Ask anyone, they'll show you the way."

The girl stiffened; her eyes darted to Bria. "Why?"

“Because I said so.”

That sparked her off. Anger, real anger, flamed in her eyes like a torch touched to oil. It would be interesting to see how far he had to push her before it came out.

And what would happen when it did.

“I’d really rather not,” she hissed. “Thanks anyway.”

Viggo straightened up and winked at her. “Didn’t ask you if you wanted to, compass brat.” He turned his back, saying over his shoulder, “Don’t be late. Believe me, it’ll be twice as humiliating if I have to come get you.”

She said nothing else, and he left her without another thought. Most of the tables had begun to empty by this time, with only his unit left in the center of the room. The slaves had begun to clear away the dishes, the scraps of meat, the crusts of the bread. Some of the food disappeared surreptitiously into apron pockets or sleeves, but Viggo pretended not to notice. That kind of thievery hardly mattered; the food would go to the hounds and sheepdogs anyway. He knew only too well what it was to be hungry enough to be desperate for scraps.

The Cymeran boy was with them, clearing a table in the corner. Viggo glanced at him and stayed his steps a moment. He could see the bruises on the boy's face. Maybe in a few minutes the hall would be empty, and he could slip him something more than scraps, something that might actually fill his belly. The boy might not take it from him, but it was worth a try.

His eyes caught the flash of steel in the boy's hand, and he turned away so quickly that he nearly tripped over a bench. One of the other slaves looked at him oddly, and he bared his teeth at her and left the mess hall in a rush. Still, quick as he went, the memory of the resolve in the boy's face and the dull sheen of the knife disappearing into his sleeve came after him, as haunted as the brush of a ghost's hand against his soul.





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*CAT*

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**D**awn slipped into the Core as stealthily as a fox after hens. Cat watched it arrive from her seat in the corner of the mess hall, first silver, then rosy pink, edging the eastern sky with the blush of the rising sun. The shutters clamped over the wide windows had been thrown open to let in the spring dawn. The chilled breeze stirred the fire in the center of the room and toyed with the smoke wafting up from the coals.

Cat watched the dawn come and tried to forget what lay in wait for her after it arrived.

They were watching her still. She could see them on the far side of the mess hall, clustered in their customary tight group. A group that all others, trainees and slaves alike, avoided as much as they could. Viggo was with them, right in the center, as if the rest had only gathered there because he'd sat down. He was leaning against the wall, a girl resting against his shoulder. Her hair was blacker than the ravens that nested in the cliffs, and she had a thin smile and a cruel laugh that could be heard even from across the mess hall.

“Aren't you going to eat?” Bria touched her elbow, bringing Cat's mind back to the table she sat at and the people she was with. The buzz of conversation and the laughter at

her table had flowed around her as indistinctly as voices in a dream since she'd sat down.

Cat forced a smile for the other girl's benefit, knowing she would want to see one. Bria was as protective of her unit as a mother bear with her cubs, and it had startled Cat to see how quickly she'd been adopted into the group. Even now, with orders to join First Unit after mess, the older girl still seemed concerned for her. Whether it was feigned or not, Cat still couldn't tell. "I'm not very hungry."

"You should e—eat." Warren slipped into the bench beside her and set his hunting knife down on the board. "S—starving yourself won't help."

Bria gave him a frigid look. "Where have you been?"

Warren grinned at her. "Sure you w—want to know?"

Bria rolled her eyes. "Forget I asked. But if anyone asks —"

"I take f—full credit," Warren told her cheerfully. He sliced an apple in two with his knife and handed half to Cat. "Here, eat that."

She shook her head. "No, really—"

“C’mon, Cat,” he said, lowering his voice. “They’re e—enjoying this.”

Cat bit her lip and took the apple he offered her. He nodded appreciatively and cut the core out of the other half, handing it to Bria. “Better. They’ll leave you alone i—in a few days.”

She doubted it, but he seemed so sure that it was hard not to believe him. The apple tasted dull in her mouth, as if the fear churning in her gut had sucked the flavor out of it. “Do you know them, Warren?” she asked quietly. Her voice at least sounded calm, calm and remote, as if her fear weren’t her own and belonged to somebody quite different. “What can you tell me about them?”

Warren shrugged, sliced another apple, and licked the juice off his blade. “The one in the center there, that’s V—Viggo. You know him already, or sort of. The girl he’s got his arm around is D—Dex Blade. She’s his girl, has been since before I g—got here. They’ll be partners when we’re all paired off. Both got wolves in their b—blood.”

Cat frowned and chanced a glance in their direction. The woman with the dark hair, Dex Blade, caught her looking. A smirk flashed across her face. Cat jerked her eyes away quickly. “They fit. Who else?”

Warren passed her a loaf still hot from the ovens. “Eat that. The m—man on Viggo’s other side in Carver Laite.” He gestured with the knife, indicating the man who’d whistled at her in the training run, the day she’d arrived. He had a raven’s feather in his hands and seemed more interested in toying with it than in the red-haired woman on his left. The ashen color of his eyes made Cat’s skin crawl. He looked as colorless and soulless as a ghost. “He’s Viggo’s second in c—command. Fights like a demon, but otherwise, h—he’s not so bad. Would be a good person to have on your s—side. If you can manage it.”

Bria’s face darkened. “I wouldn’t try. He’s not much better than Dex, if you ask me.”

Cat remembered the man’s mocking laughter and the whistle and shook her head. “Not my type. Who else?”

“Rylee Drake and Dakota Cray.” Warren indicated two others, the woman sitting next to Carver with striking hazel eyes and hair as red as a fox’s fur, and a man on the other side of her. “They’re better than the r—rest. Dakota’s pretty friendly, if he’s not around the o—others. I’ve talked with him a bit.”

Cat glanced at Bria. The older girl shrugged and pushed a strand of black hair behind her ear. “I tutor him in languages. He’s all right, when you can get him alone. Once he’s around Viggo and Carver he’s just as vicious as they are.” She looked at Cat anxiously, bit her lip and looked away, as if embarrassed by her own concern. “Leave the girls alone. Rylee and Dex. They’re worse than the men will be.”

Warren frowned at her. “She’ll be f—fine.” He looked at Cat. “Just don’t let them push you a—around. You’re as good as any of them. Better, m—maybe. You’ll do okay.”

Cat nodded. Her fear was cold now, cold in the pit of her stomach and cold in her hands. She clenched her fists under the table and looked out the window at the far end of the hall. The sun was rising, the sky blue behind the dark trees and soaring peaks. Of course she would be fine. She was always fine, no matter how many times she did this, how many times she joined a group that didn’t want her. She’d spat blood, endured taunts and beatings, and been called every name they could think of, and she’d always been fine. Today wouldn’t be any different.

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They were waiting for her when she entered the training run. Viggo Swifter. Dex Blade. Carver Laite. Cat whispered their names beneath her breath, feeling them sting like poison on her tongue. The sun was warm on her back and her shoulders, and heat rose from the thick grass beneath her feet, but she carried a chill with her. Even the clear skies and heady aroma of the wind from the pines couldn't soften her fear.

They ignored her when she walked up. Carver was leaning against the fence, still toying with the raven's feather he'd been playing with in lectures. He had a length of leather and twine with it now and was plaiting it into some kind of amulet or necklace. He had several others hanging around his neck already, and a few on his left wrist. Superstitious, probably. Cat knew a few of that sort in Crainfell, some who would have staked their lives on it and others who toyed with the idea, believing when it suited them. She couldn't guess which Viggo's second might be.

Viggo was sitting with his back against one of the posts sharpening a long broadsword with a whetstone. His sandy hair was dark with sweat already, the heat of the lecture hall stained into his tunic. He ran the whetstone down the keen edge of the blade before looking up at her. His dark eyes, the

color of scorched ironstone, screamed with disapproval as he studied her, as if looking for something to criticize. Cat stiffened, staring back. At last, he said, “Well, you aren’t late.”

Her hackles rose. No, he wasn’t the one who wanted her here. One of the trainers had made him take her on, or Vladimer. He hadn’t had the authority to stop it from happening, but he resented it.

No doubt she would pay the price for that.

She was spared from his scrutiny by the baying of hounds. The sound echoed off the valley walls, bounding along the cliffs and raising a flock of crows from the pines. Viggo frowned and rose to his feet, looking in the direction the sound was coming from. The others stood as well. Carver leaned over the fence and called to one of the trainers coming from the pens. “Ascot, what’s happened?”

The man glanced at him dismissively. “They’re loosing the hounds. None of your concern.”

Men were shouting now, the hounds’ handlers and a few others. Cat could see them struggling with the massive dogs, yanking on the harnesses, two men to each one of the frenzied



animals. Viggo moved closer to the fence, his frown deepening. “Why?”

“One of the slaves made a run for it last night,” the trainer said over his shoulder. “Only found out he was missing a quarter of an hour ago. They’re going after him. Back to training, Swifter. The handlers will take care of it.”

Cat was looking at Viggo, and she saw the color drain out of his face. He turned away before any of the others could see his reaction. His gaze met hers, and Cat knew immediately that she’d made a mistake. The color rushed back into his face as first humiliation, then anger scorched his features. He tossed aside his whetstone and spat into the grass. The look in his eyes was vicious as he smiled at her. “All ready, little bloodhound?”

Her stomach twisted, and suddenly every eye in the run was on her. She forced an indifferent shrug. “Ready for what?”

He nodded to Carver, and his second produced a sword wrapped in thin leather from his gear and held it out to her. Cat hesitated, glancing at Viggo, and he nodded brusquely. “Take it. I got it from the armory this morning.”

Cat accepted the weapon, discarded the leather, and inspected the blade. It was somewhat longer than she was used to, but better balanced and lighter in hand than the swords she had fought with in Crainfell. The smiths in Fydera Core were known throughout the kingdom for their craftsmanship. She could see the proof of their skill in the slight blued steel of the blade and feel it in the perfect balance and the graceful symmetry between hilt and blade.

It was a good sword. Better than any she'd ever been allowed to handle. Crainfellers weren't given quality weapons. They were the castoffs, the dregs, and the weapons they were given reflected that.

Viggo was watching her. She could still feel his anger over what she'd seen. There would be a price to pay for it eventually. It, and her general existence as a Crainfeller. Both seemed to offend him equally.

“Well? What do you think?”

“It's a good sword.”

“It's better than good.” He stepped away from her, out into the run. The blade in his hand glinted silver in the sharp sunlight. “A sword like that doesn't go to just anyone. Its owner has to earn the right to use it.”

The lead ball grew heavier in the pit of her stomach.

“So, let’s see you earn it.”

Cat’s fingers tightened on the hilt of the sword. So that was it. This was a test, a test for her, a show for him. A small flame rose in her breast, a half-formed hope that he might have his fun and send her back to Second Unit afterward.

“And then what? What happens if I pass?”

“You’ll start training here with us.”

The flame died, snuffed as if by an icy wind. “And if I fail?”

He smiled at her, baring his incisors like the predator that lived in his dreams. “Don’t.”

Fear pricked her skin and caught her breath. Stupid, stupid fear. Fear that made her heart numb. She flexed her fingers, gripped the hilt tighter, and began to circle.

The sun was in her eyes, reflected sharply off the bright blue of the clear sky and the new grass. Viggo held his sword loose in his hand, watching her with eyes that reminded her of a wolf as he circled. The casual way he held himself mocked her, as if he knew only too well that he would win this fight. That was always the way it was. Core Captains held their

titles through brute strength and raw skill. They were leaders, warriors, and more often than not, bullies. She'd crossed more than her share of them in her life and bore the scars from it too.

He had the same arrogance they did. She could see it in his eyes, in the smirk flitting at the corner of his mouth. Was he stupid enough to kill her for trying to join their unit? Maybe. He could always claim it was an accident later.

He started the fight. His sword flashed, steel bloodred in the sunlight. Cat gave ground, the blade thrumming in her hands with every stroke. The leopard was stirring in her chest, restless, agitated, fighting to get out. She pressed it down, although she could feel its spirit in her eyes, green as sea ice. The fight was to test how well she handled her sword, not to see how well the leopard fought for her.

Viggo came on, his strokes growing harder, growing faster. She warded him off, letting him take the offensive, watching his pattern, his footwork, letting his strength slide off her blade rather than trying to match it. He was fast. As fast as she was, although she doubted he could keep it up for very long. His sword was heavier, longer. He couldn't keep it up forever.

A stride hesitated. A stroke mistimed. She flicked it aside and began her own attack. Speed was her ally here, only speed. She couldn't match his strength with her darting blade, his power. But she could match his speed. And maybe, just maybe, surpass it.

Viggo was the one giving ground now. He backed away, meeting her attack with expert precision. Steel screamed, clashing in the silence. She ducked a blow from his broadsword and spun inside his reach, snapped a side-stroke at his unprotected shoulder. It took him off guard. He stumbled back, avoiding it. Even so, the tip of her blade grazed his cheek.

Anger sparked in his dark eyes. His sword spun, crashed down on hers. She had barely enough time to block the massive blow, let alone deflect it. The power in it nearly drove her to her knees. She stumbled, slipped in the grass. Another massive blow battered the sword from her hand, and he slammed into her bodily, knocking her to the ground and driving his own blade into the turf beside her head.

Silence fell. Cat lay still and held his eyes, breathing heavily, and choking on humiliation. His tunic was soaked with sweat, his hair dripping in his eyes. He withdrew his

sword, sheathed it, and held out one hand to help her up. “Not bad, Caitlyn.” His pupils were still dilated with the adrenaline of the fight, but his anger had faded. “Or was it Cat?”

*Not bad.* The words mocked her, although she could tell from his tone that it wasn't meant to. His hand was still there, outstretched. She swallowed hard and took it, allowing him to help her up. “Cat,” she said, her jaw so tight she had to work not to spit the word at him through clenched teeth.

Viggo nodded, studying her with narrowed eyes. She couldn't guess what he was thinking. At last, he bent down, picked up her sword, and handed it to her. “Cat it is.”



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COWARD

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Dusk was falling when they brought him back. Viggo watched them coming back into the valley, the dogs still pulling at their harnesses, the handlers staggering with the weariness of holding them in all day. The baying of the hounds echoed in the mountains.

Viggo cursed when he saw them. He hadn't expected the boy to escape. He'd seen slaves run before, many times. And he'd seen them brought back with a rope around their necks, sometimes living, sometimes not.

The boy, at least, was alive. Viggo could see the mark of the hounds' teeth on him, the blood of the chase on his torn shirt and his rough trousers. But the marks were on his arms and his shoulder instead of his throat and his face, and he was walking when they brought him in. That was something.

Whether he would still be able to walk after they finished with him was another matter entirely.

Teryn, the Core's swordmaster, caught his eye and frowned. The sun had fallen behind the peaks less than ten minutes since. Their lesson was over, or should have been. But the swordmaster had a habit of keeping his trainees in the run after hours, whether because he thought they needed the



practice or because he forgot the time himself, Viggo never knew.

Now he seemed to have more on his mind than just the fading light. “Something wrong, Swifter?”

Viggo shook his head, although he couldn't bring himself to meet his instructor's eyes. Stupid of him, really. Teryn would notice if he weren't careful. Then he would be in for a world of trouble. “Nothing. I think I might have jerked my shoulder a bit in that last match.”

The lie burned on his lips. Teryn shrugged, sheathed his sword, and said, more amiably than the falsehood warranted, “We're finished here. You can go to the herbwomen if you think it's bad enough.”

“No, it's all right.” The hounds were being pulled away, dragged back to their cages. The boy watched them go, swaying on his feet. He looked half dead already. “I'll stretch it a bit later.”

Teryn was still watching him. “Do that. You can dismiss your unit now.”

Viggo nodded. His unit was already drifting off, some to the mess hall, some to their cabins. Only the Crainfeller was

still left in the run. Caitlyn, or Cat, as she invariably preferred. From the look of it, she'd be there for a few hours still. Her tunic was soaked with sweat, her sword out and dancing in the dim light. Teryn walked away. Viggo, rather than leaving the run for the mess hall, went to join her. He could still see the boy out of the corner of his eye. He was kneeling now, outside Vladimar's cabin, and there was blood on his face.

Viggo looked away from him, and the Crainfeller caught his eye. She still had that air of belligerence, and he couldn't remember hearing her speak once today. "You're dropping your stroke on that last combination," he told her. He touched the hilt of his sword and clenched the pommel to hide the shaking in his fingers. "Change your grip. That may help."

Her lips tightened, but she did as she was told. Viggo watched her for a moment, barely seeing the swift strokes, the graceful footwork. They would be taking the boy down to the whipping posts now. He dared not look over his shoulder, but he could see it in his mind as clearly as if he were seeing it happen. He wanted to close his eyes to it, to stop his ears, to disappear into the pines and peaks so that he wouldn't hear the flogging. He bit his lip and said, louder than he'd meant

to, “You’re still dropping the last stroke. The sword’s too heavy?”

“No.” Her teeth were clenched, her voice hissed between them.

“Then don’t drop the stroke.” He sounded rougher than he should. He couldn’t help it. His jaw was tight, aching, every muscle knotted as he waited for the first crack, the first scream. He should leave now, go back to his cabin or up to the mess hall, somewhere he didn’t have to hear it happen, somewhere he didn’t have to care.

He should. But he wouldn’t. Not till after it was over, and the boy had stopped screaming.

“Guardian?”

The slave’s quiet voice nearly made him jump out of his skin, and he turned on the girl so viciously that she stumbled backward. Her arms came up to shield her face, and he swore under his breath when he saw the bruises on her skin. He took a step back, his heart pounding. “What is it?”

The girl lowered her hands. Her eyes were as wide as a startled deer’s. “I—” Her eyes flicked over to Cat, to the blade in her hands and the veiled interest in her face. “Head

Instructor's looking for you. Wants you down there," she pointed, "at the whipping posts."

Viggo went cold, as cold as if he could feel the Pale Lady's hands on his skin. "I'm busy."

For some reason, Cat's face went white with suppressed anger. "Don't stay on my account."

What the devil was she talking about? Viggo shot her a glare. The slave girl shifted uneasily, biting her lip. Her feet were bare, her long skirts bunched in her fist as if she were only waiting for a chance to run. "Please, Guardian," she whispered. "He said not to keep him waiting. Said he wants you right away."

Viggo swore vehemently, cursing Vladimer to whatever devil would be stupid enough to take him. The girl flinched as sharply as if he'd hit her. He waved her away. "All right. I'll be down as soon as I can."

She nodded and was gone, disappearing into the veil of darkness coming down through the trees from the mountains.

They were waiting for him when he arrived. Vladimer was leaning against one of the scarred whipping posts, his arms crossed over his chest. He was smiling again, looking as

patient as if he'd never been kept waiting in his life. Teryn was with him. Carver, too, and Dex and Dakota. Most of his unit, actually. Carver looked vaguely ashamed of himself and wouldn't meet Viggo's eyes, but Dex looked furious.

Typical of her. She never understood anything.

The boy was trussed between two trainers, his hands pinned behind his back as if they expected him to fight. Stupid of them. Despair had been carved into his face as if with the blade of a knife, and his soul was gone. Whatever happened now, whatever more they did to him, it would hardly matter. He was only waiting now—waiting for all of this to be over.

Every soul had its limits.

Anger rushed into Viggo's breast unexpectedly. Anger at the men holding the Cymeran, at the dogs who'd mauled him, and the trackers who hadn't let him go. Anger at the stupid boy for trying to run and bringing this all down on his head. One stupid, insignificant slave didn't warrant all this trouble. He swallowed it the best he could and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Looking for me, Instructor?" he asked lazily.

The disrespect in his voice would have earned him a solid beating any other day, but Vladimer was in good humor

tonight. Cheerful, almost, if Vladimer Hunt could ever be accused of cheerfulness. The man barked a laugh and straightened up. "Thought you'd gotten lost on the way." He ran a hand over his shorn head. "I've a job for you, Swifter. Won't take too long. You don't mind, do you?"

"No." Viggo looked at Teryn. The man held his gaze. "I don't mind. What is it?"

Vladimer nodded at the boy. "Caught him making a break for it this morning. He's caused quite a stir, that one. Even killed one of the dogs that went after him, if you can believe it by looking at him." He laughed.

Viggo glanced at the boy, although he knew he shouldn't. His head was down, his eyes closed. Gods. He looked so tired.

"They still want him in the kitchens, since the dogs didn't chew him too badly," Vladimer went on. "But he has to be taught a lesson first, or he'll be off again as soon as it's dark. So here," he took a blacksnake whip from one of his underlings and tossed it to Viggo, "have at him."

The boy's head jerked up, as if something of what was said had finally cut through his exhaustion. Viggo clenched his fist around the braided leather. "Why me?"

Vladimer's eyes went very black, and he smiled with all the viciousness of a predator. "Because I don't like it when one of my wolves takes a shine to a slave."

Viggo's jaw locked. They were all staring at him, every one of them, even the Crainfeller, who had come down from the training ring to watch. She'd seen the guilt in him in the beginning, he knew she had. If he denied it now, tried to protest any more, it would only admit what they all knew already. What would they do to the boy then? He didn't know. How many times had the man caught pity in him since he'd come to the Core? Three, four? Vladimer didn't like attachments. He didn't like the weakness that stayed a hand before a blow. He punished it ruthlessly, always the same way, always with someone else's screams and someone else's blood. He knew Viggo well enough to know he took pain far better than he dealt it.

Vladimer crossed his arms over his chest again, his snake-like gaze still fixed on Viggo. The smile was gone now, the accusation out in the open, the punishment waiting. "Well?"

Viggo shook the coil of the whip loose. His hands were slick with sweat, his blood frozen and sluggish in his veins. What would happen if this time, this one time, he refused?

What could Vladimer do, really, if he dropped the whip and walked away?

He could kill the boy. Snap his neck, like Viggo had seen him do to the dogs that bit him. Or worse. Vladimer had a mind for cruelty.

It had been a long time since Viggo had been willing to test it.

Viggo shrugged and looked at the boy as callously as if the mask he wore were really a part of him, as if the cruelty his instructors wanted to see ran in his veins as deeply as it did in Vladimer's. As if his hands weren't shaking like a child's. "Whatever you think, but I can't whip him there, can I?"

The trainers jerked the boy forward, dragging him toward the posts. He screamed at the men holding him, begging and cursing, struggling against them like a rabid dog. Viggo could see the desperation in his madness, the terror clawing at him as they pulled him forward and bound him to one of the posts. His apathy was gone now, his despair retreating in the face of fear. It was one thing for a slave to be beaten for running, another to be handed over to the beasts they served for punishment. Viggo knew the stories they told about him and the others at night. He'd heard them many times, spread

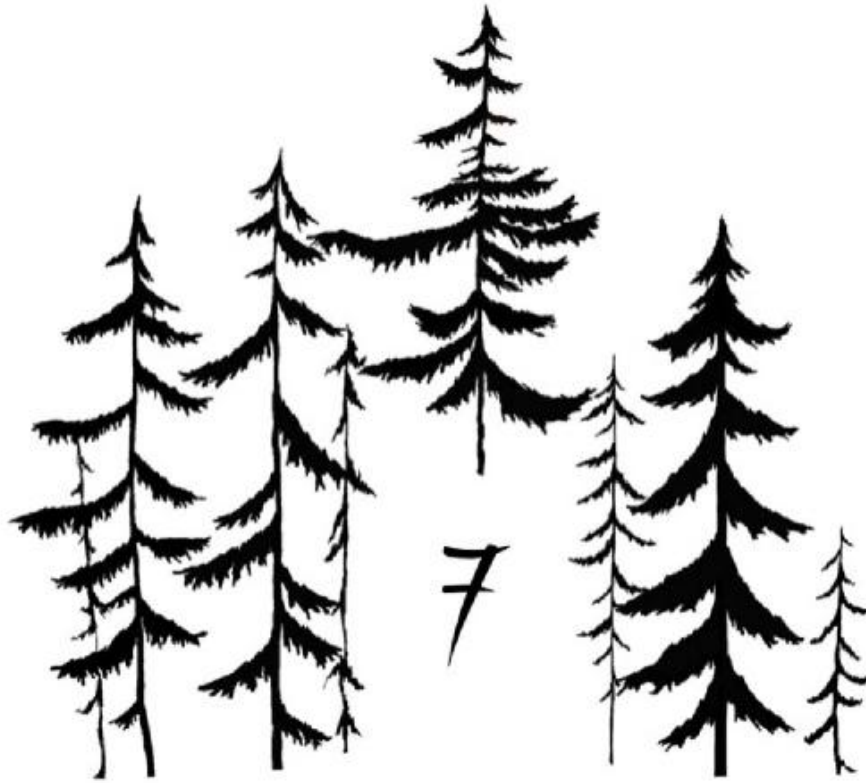


around the campfires after dark when their children were already asleep. Brutal, bloodthirsty stories. Stories that reminded him why Dreyens were called the devil's spawn.

Viggo spat his fear into the grass and flicked the whip experimentally. His hands were still shaking. He cursed them under his breath. He would never be able to control that part of himself properly. He could make his voice into stone and his eyes as unforgiving as the north winds, but he would never be able to keep himself from shaking. All he could do was hide it.

The first snap of the whip silenced the boy's pleading as sharply as if his tongue had been cut from his mouth. The second tore his thin tunic, elicited a cry of pain. The third drew blood. Viggo stopped counting then, shut out the boy's sobbing and the snap of the blacksnake until the only thing he could hear was the pounding of his own heart stamping out a rhythm he'd heard before and would again. A single beat and a single word, seared into his mind with every jerk of the whip.

*Coward.*



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*ONLY A FOOL*

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**T**he rain came at dusk, as if it had only been waiting for the sun to hide its face behind the mountains. Viggo lay in his bunk listening to it pound against the shuttered windows and dug the hilt of his hunting knife into his back to stay awake.

The roof was leaking. Water dripped through the ironstone slates, but the others were asleep already, well used to damp blankets and chilly floors. They wouldn't wake, not before first call came an hour after dawn.

Lightning struck outside, light flashing through the cracks in the shutters and beneath the door. The last of the sand slipped through the hourglass sitting on the table. Viggo rose silently, pulling his spare rucksack out from beneath the bed and wrapping it in the oilcloth he'd stolen from the supply huts the night before. There wasn't much inside. An old tunic, a flint and steel no one would miss. Enough food for a week.

He hadn't been able to get more, not without being noticed.

It would have to be enough.

The rain hit him like a slap in the face when he slipped outside. He coaxed the wolf out with the promise of darkness

and padded through the trees and down the slope toward the slave pens.

He'd seen the boy twice in the last week. The Cymeran. He was still limping, and the marks branded into his skin by the blacksnake were still red as fire. Maybe they always would be. Some scars didn't heal, and the whipping Viggo had given him had been a bad one.

Bad enough to break most men's spirits.

The less stupid ones, anyway.

The slave pens lay beneath the eaves of the forest, right at the bottom of the valley. Viggo slipped over the fence like a wraith, the wolf leaving him as he went. The pens were ankle deep in mud, and he couldn't help wondering if the wolf had fled from the smell of the refuse piled outside the first of the shanties instead of the chill of the rain. He would have.

He had to duck beneath the doorway to get inside. A low fire burned in a grate by the far wall. Red coals glowed and cast shadows onto the walls. Viggo wound his way through the huddled bodies and piles of rags on the floor, trying not to gag on the stench of unwashed bodies and fetid water.

A woman moaned, twisting in her sleep. She would scream if she woke and saw him. Terror, not force, kept the slaves here. They were mortally afraid of the beasts they served. What they saw in the training runs, combined with stories they told and tales they knew, were enough to discourage most of them from running.

Most, but not all.

The boy was in the far corner huddled by himself beneath a soaked rag. He was a troublemaker, after all. Marked now. The rest would give him a wide berth to avoid extra punishments, as if his bad luck were a disease that could spread. Viggo dropped to one knee on the soggy matting and pressed a hand over the boy's mouth.

He woke instantly.

For one brief second, he stared at Viggo, still groggy, still half asleep. Recognition dawned on his face. He jerked backward, his cry muffled by Viggo's fingers. Viggo pressed him down against the matting, struggling to keep him quiet. His own fear ignited the boy's, who fought like a cornered animal until Viggo hissed, "Quiet! Shut up, or we're both dead!"

The boy froze, whimpering through his fingers. The other slaves around them stirred. Dark dreams and thin bedding made for light sleepers.

“I haven’t hurt you yet,” Viggo whispered, his heart thudding. “Keep quiet, and I won’t. I swear it.”

He stopped whimpering. Viggo took his hand away from his mouth, ready to strike him down if he screamed. But he didn’t. His face was sheet white, as white as it had been the day they’d met in the training run, but his jaw was set determinedly, and there was defiance in his eyes. “What do you want?” he hissed. His words shook, and they were so loud, even in a whisper, that Viggo winced. “I haven’t done anything. Leave me alone!”

“Shut up!” Gods, did he sound as terrified as he felt? “Do you want the trainers to hear you?”

The boy shut his mouth. His chest jerked erratically, his breathing short and panicked. No, he didn’t want to be heard, whatever he thought Viggo might do. The trainers were almost as vicious as the animals they watched over.

“You’re going to run again,” Viggo said sharply. He didn’t have time to waste on preliminaries. “Aren’t you?”

The boy squirmed backward, and Viggo could see the guilt in his eyes. “Are you crazy? Why would I run again? They half killed me once already. Or you did.”

Guilt struck him in the face. “Don’t lie to me. I can see it when you do.” Gold traced through his eyes, and the boy flinched as hard as if he’d hit him. There were all sorts of stories men told about what happened when a Dreyen and its beast mixed in the same blood. Some said they could see lies, others, what men most feared. “You’re going to run again. And this time I’m going to help you.”

“You?” The boy stared at him, stunned. “Why?”

“Because,” Viggo said shortly, “you didn’t deserve any of this. If I help you, it has to be tonight. The rain will wash out our scent, and our tracks. If you say no, I won’t offer again.”

He could see it. The struggle in the boy’s eyes. The distrust, the fear, and stronger than that fear, behind it, the hope. At last, he rose to his knees and said low, “All right. What do I have to do?”

Viggo jerked the bundle out of his shirt and held it out. “There’s food in there, and a knife. Clothes too. Put them on and follow me.”

The boy scrambled to do as he was told. He didn't flinch at the blood staining the old tunic, just jerked it over his head and hissed, "There's two others. I've been talking to them, and they want to run, too. It'll only take a minute to wake them."

"You only have a minute. Hurry."

He disappeared into the darkness. Viggo leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. His heart was racing, pounding in his chest as if it wanted to break free of his ribs. He'd been stupid to come. Vladimer knew already, probably. He always knew. What would they do to him if he were caught? They'd break the boy's neck, certainly, or make him do it. But then what?

He wasn't meant to feel like this. Not for a slave. Vladimer wanted him to have a quick hand and a callus heart. Without them, he was a danger to his master and his partner.

But if he did nothing—if he let the boy run on his own—he wouldn't make it. Slaves didn't escape from the Core. They would find him, and when they did, Viggo would have to kill him. Vladimer would make sure of that. He took some kind of vindictive pleasure out of watching one of his wolves tear a slave to pieces.

He wasn't meant to care. What did it matter that the boy's soul would speak against him before the Pale Lady when she



finally came for him? What did it matter that the cruelty Vladimer wanted to see in his nature would set such a mark against his soul that even Death herself would look on him with disgust?

Dreyens were bred to live and die with a blackened soul.

He wasn't meant to be so afraid of it.

“Guardian?”

The boy's soft voice startled him nearly out of his skin. Two others were with him, both of them young. Younger than Viggo was, although he guessed they were both older than the Cymeran. Slaves had to be young to run. Young and stupid. He rose to his feet when they came closer, and one of them uttered a half cry in the darkness that was quickly muffled by the other two. “Gods a-mighty, Jeran,” he hissed, pushing away the hands covering his mouth. “Yuh weren't dreaming, then. What's it want with us?”

“Says it's going to help,” Jeran hissed. Viggo could see the purple welts branded into his neck from the blacksnake. “If you're yellow, you can stay behind. I'm going to follow it.”

“I'm not yellow!” The boy's voice rose with indignation. One of the older women sleeping nearby moaned and rolled

over.

Viggo bared his incisors, the wolf burning in his eyes, and snarled low, “Quiet.”

The color drained out of the boy’s face. He backed away. “Ain’t following that thing out on a night like this,” he whispered. “More’n likely it’s only taking us out so it can kill us somewhere else, private like. I’ve heard they like the taste of human flesh well enough when the moon is full.”

Jeran shrugged, tucking the bag with the food and knife beneath his tunic. “Moon ain’t full, stupid. Stay if yuh want. I’m going.”

Lightning ripped the sky in half overhead, illuminating their frightened faces, and Viggo waited until the rumble of thunder that followed it had died before he said, “Night’s wasting.”

Jeran looked at the others, his face defiant, and after a moment’s hesitation they both nodded. Viggo pushed wet hair out of his eyes and stepped past them, picking his way through the scatter of bodies to the door. They followed him. He could admire their courage, at least, even if their sense wasn’t worth a dagger’s edge.

Then again, neither was his own.

\* \* \*

He took them up into the cliffs, among the peaks that were black with the night and the rain. The lightning flashed, thunder rolled, and wind howled through the trees, but Viggo closed his mind to the voices the wolf could hear among their thick branches. He didn't want to know what was being said, although he could guess.

*Fool.*

Fool. The wind screamed it, the trees shrieked it to the sky, and the rain laughed at his stupidity. What were they worth? Three humans, kitchen slaves, vagabonds, sons of thieves and farmers. His life was bound to men who had built an empire, men who spoke with the gods and knew the future and the past. Was he really stupid enough to throw that away now, to risk it on the lives of three peasants?

Viggo looked back at them, wiping rain out of his eyes. Jeran was closest to him, struggling up the rocky slope with one hand clutched against his chest, holding the bag of supplies and shielding it from the storm. His face was shadowed with bruises but stamped with determination. He had spirit, this boy. A warrior's blood. Viggo had seen it in the run, despite his clumsiness and lack of skill with a blade. He could have been a

Dreyen if the fates had chosen his bloodline differently. He didn't deserve a life of nothing but scrubbing floors and cleaning outhouses. Neither did he deserve to have his throat slit and his carcass thrown to the dogs.

No one deserved that.

Lightning split the sky above, and in the half second of brilliance Viggo caught a glimpse of the pass ahead, cut through the rocks like a crack broken by the rumbling thunder. He increased his pace, scrambling over the rocky terrain as swiftly as the darkness would allow. It was narrow inside, so narrow that he had to turn sideways and squeeze through the jagged opening. Jeran followed him. He could hear the boy's rapid breathing, his gasp of pain as the rocks scraped his injured back.

Then they were inside, and the walls widened about them as if by the pressure of an invisible hand. Viggo wiped rain out of his face and breathed easier. They were sheltered here, the cacophony of the storm reduced to a dull roar. Jeran stopped beside him, still scrubbing water out of his eyes. "Where does this lead?"

"Out," Viggo said brusquely. The word sounded odd, hoarse somehow, as if the wolf were stealing his voice. "Into the

western peaks, beyond Cymera. Follow it until it ends, then go west along the gap. The cliffs will take you to the sea.”

“Us?” Jeran pushed dark hair out of his face and looked at him in confusion. “You aren’t coming along?”

Viggo laughed, despite the fear compressed in his chest. “No. Why should I come?”

“Well—” Jeran glanced at the other two and shrugged awkwardly. “Because you’re a slave, too, aren’t you? I thought —”

“You thought wrong,” Viggo snarled. His heart was pounding, thundering in his ears, drowning out the sounds of the rain outside, and suddenly he wanted to run. He wanted to be in his cabin with the door shut and bolted, with Carver sleeping above him and his hunting knife tucked beneath his pillow. “I only helped you, *boy*, so I don’t have to be the one to kill you when they drag you back the next time.”

Jeran flinched. Viggo pushed past him, hoping desperately that the boy wouldn’t smell the fear on him. “Go west. They’ll set the dogs on you again when they find out you’re gone. Best pray you’ve gone far enough by the time the rain stops to fool them.”

“Thank you, Guardian,” Jeran’s voice stopped him in his tracks, and made his stomach turn with shame when he looked back. The other two boys were already on their way up the pass, clambering up the stony rise, but Jeran didn’t go. “How can I repay you?”

*Forgive me*, Viggo wanted to say, but didn’t. He’d learned long ago that such things weren’t dealt so easily. Especially to his kind. He shrugged callously. “Reach the sea. Don’t waste what I gave you tonight. I’d hate to have climbed all this way in the rain only to have the dogs tear you to pieces.”

Jeran nodded and backed deeper into the pass. He looked as though he wanted to say more, to repeat his thanks, but Viggo interrupted him before he could humiliate them both with empty words. “Go, stupid. The rain won’t last forever.”

He went. Viggo watched him disappear into the darkness and turned away, slipping back through the crack out into the open air. The rain hit him in the face, the wind dragging at his tunic. *You’re a slave too, aren’t you?* His stomach turned over. He spat a laugh into the storm, wild and stupid with relief. “No, not a slave. Only a fool.”

The climb back down into the valley took longer than the journey up. The path was steep and slick. He slid more than

climbed down, and his palms and knees burned with grazes by the time he reached the trees. He wiped the blood on his fingers onto his trousers and left the path, following the tree line back to his own cabin. It was done now, all of it. Tomorrow they would find the boy and his friends gone, and no one would be the wiser. The rain would wash their tracks and their scent from the ground like a cloth wiping a table clean, and they would disappear as thoroughly as if they had never been.

And no one would know. Not Vladimer, not Carver, not Dex. Not the trainers. No one would know he'd helped them, that he'd shown them the way up to the pass and given them supplies. Only a few people even knew the pass was there, and the ones who did would never think of it. He was safe. And maybe—just maybe the Pale Lady would see his work tonight with some favor and wipe the boy's screams from his ledger. He had enough against him in her books, all of it written in blood.

He didn't see the Crainfeller until it was too late. It was dark under the trees, so dark that it seemed impossible that light could ever reach the carpet of needles under his feet, and she was leaning against a tree. Waiting for him, maybe. He couldn't think of any other reason she might be there. She

heard him coming, fool that he was. The wolf would have been quieter, it would have slipped past her without a sound, and she might never have seen him, but in his stupid relief, he'd forgotten it.

She straightened up, her eyes narrowed and wary. He bared his teeth at her to hide his fear. "You're supposed to be in your cabin."

"I was in my cabin."

"You're not."

Cat's hair was wet, her clothing soaked as if she'd been out nearly as long as he had. Had she been following him? How much had she seen? She crossed her arms over her chest and shrugged, defiance written into her eyes. "I only came out for a minute. I was hot."

"It's past curfew," Viggo snapped at her. The words leapt from his tongue far more savagely than he'd intended. "You aren't allowed out here."

"Sorry. I didn't think anyone would be awake to catch me." She hesitated just a breath too long, letting her words vanish into the chatter of the rain, and asked quietly, "What are you doing out here?"



The answer leapt to his tongue before he could think.  
“Looking for you.”

“You’re doing bed checks now?”

“Dex told me you didn’t move to their cabin. You’re still with Bria and the others in her unit.”

“So?”

“I told you to move your things two days ago.”

A mocking smile twitched at the corner of her mouth. Her eyes looked like the leopard’s in the dark. Cold as ice. “I didn’t want to inconvenience anyone.”

She knew. She knew he was blustering, and his stupid temper stung the back of his neck like a wasp. “And yet I’m out here in the rain in the middle of the night.”

“Why does it matter?”

Viggo almost snapped a curse at her. The kind Vladimer would have spat in his face for talking back. He worked his jaw, waiting until the vicious words withered in his mouth, and said, “You’re going to be paired with one of us, remember? Bodyguards have partners, Ashcliff. They don’t send you off on your own the way they do in Crainfell.”

She went very still. Had she known that? She must have, but if so, she'd been trying to forget it. "That doesn't mean I have to switch cabins. I won't be leaving here with Dex."

"You don't try during training either. Have you talked to anyone? Billet? You know, they're going to pair you with him."

Her eyes were gray again. Almost as if she were retreating, vanishing into the rain and the night and leaving nothing but her body behind for him to shout at. "So?"

He'd only meant to distract her, to move her attention away from his sudden appearance and keep her from questioning why he was out here, but the curt reply brought him up short. He studied her, realizing for the first time how much she really was a king's bloodhound. He'd heard stories about them, of course. About how they were isolated and set against each other, taught to rely on themselves and their own strength and their own wit and never another soul.

Bloodhounds were meant to be alone. They weren't meant to be bodyguards. Or to have partners.

"Billet's going to need you," Viggo said, working to soften his voice, to make it something other than argumentative. "At least give him a chance."

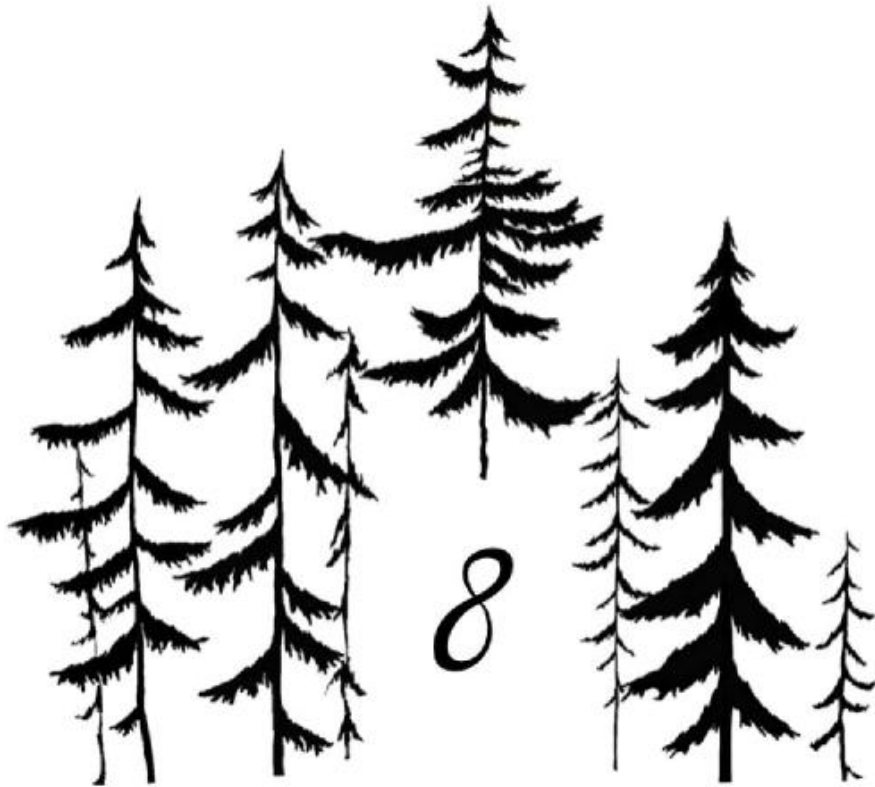
She said nothing, and the silence said more than any curse from her tongue would have.

Viggo shook his head. He'd lost, but he was too afraid of being caught here in the trees by one of the trainers to fight with her any longer. "Back to your cabin, Ashcliff."

She smiled at him and touched her forehead in mock salute. "Whatever you say, captain."

Then she was gone, melting into the darkness of the trees, and he was left to wonder how much she had seen and whether she really had been following him or not.

More than likely, he would find out tomorrow, when she went to Vladimer and the other trainers.



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*SPRING FAIR*

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**R**ight.” Viggo rattled the tumbler, shaking the wooden chips inside, and held it out to the group standing in the training run. “Everybody take one.”

His unit crowded forward, snatching for the little slips of cherry and oakwood. Two of them, Carver and Dakota, got into a shoving matching over a chip with a white streak in it. Cherrywood, Cat thought, or beech. Probably beech. Beech trees gave luck to whoever touched their wood, and Carver was the sort to want that kind of advantage, no matter what they were doing.

He was also the sort to start a fight over nothing, just for the hell of it.

Cat hung back, avoiding the scuffle, and waited until the last of them had retreated and Viggo, inevitably, noticed that she hadn't claimed hers. He held the tumbler out to her until she'd taken a slip and took the last one himself. “M for master, G for guardian, A for assassin,” he told her, glaring at Carver as he scrambled to his feet and shoved Dakota down again. “Don't say what you've got unless I ask.”

Cat nodded, trying to swallow the apprehension crowding into her throat. She hated these games that were pressed on

them to teach timing and teamwork, awareness and strategy. Drilling in the runs didn't require much interaction with the rest of her unit, and she could avoid most of them for the rest of the time. But these games were different. Everyone played, and Viggo was quick to bite the head off anyone standing in the background.

Especially her. And especially today. They weren't playing in the runs today, or in the woods. A spring fair, gathering farmers from villages from miles around, had sprung up in a valley a mile from the core. Apparently, the trainers used it every year as a way to introduce their trainees to the unpredictability of crowds.

And masters.

A hawk screamed in the cliffs behind them. Viggo glanced back at it, his tunic dark with sweat, and said casually, "Ten minutes. Then we'll head down."

The sun was above the trees, and already heat was rising in shimmering waves from the packed earth and trampled grass of the runs. Cat had had a headache since she woke up, but he'd notice if she went for water now.

Later. Once everything was over, she'd climb the cliffs to the falls and stay there until the stars came out.

She could last until then.

Viggo checked his slip and grimaced. “Who’s guardian this round?”

Cat looked down, feeling her stomach flip flop as she realized her slip had a clumsy ‘G’ carved into it. She swore under her breath, realizing she’d gotten herself right into the middle of the game without meaning to, and raised her hand.

Billet raised his as well, and Cat felt a flush of relief go through her chest. Better Billet than anyone else. He, at least, didn’t seem to have anything against her.

Viggo’s eyes narrowed. “Master?”

A wicked grin spread across Carver’s face, and the relief Cat had been feeling plunged into a sick resignation. She’d seen him play master before—he seemed to take a vindictive pleasure in making things as difficult as he could, and in making sure the guardians lost the game, which would mean punishment drills tonight instead of the falls.

The same thought seemed to be going through Viggo’s head. He held out a hand to Billet. “Swap me. I’ll take this one.”

Curse him. Cat's face reddened, and she would have protested if it hadn't been for the embarrassingly obvious relief on Billet's face as he handed over the slip. He wasn't glad to be rid of Carver. He was glad to be rid of her.

And, of course, Viggo was always happy for another chance to breathe down her neck during an assignment.

Carver frowned, looking more disappointed than Cat expected of him. "Isn't that cheating?"

Viggo looked at him. "Yes. So?"

The chill in his voice ended the argument before it began. Carver shrugged and subsided, and Viggo pocketed his slip, saying, "You can make plans on the way down. No trading."

To Cat's surprise, none of others pointed out how hypocritical that order was. They drifted off, and Viggo jerked his head at her, shouldering his backpack. "Come on. I'll talk you through it on the way."

Cat joined him, trying her best to shove away the resentment building between her ribs. He didn't look at her as he said it. His gaze passed through her, to the mountains, the path winding ahead of them, the smoky haze drifting through



the trees. Anywhere but her. As if he could pretend she didn't exist. "You've been in crowds before?"

"Yes." Cat jerked the lace out of her hair and combed her fingers through it, shaking the braid loose and working hard to pretend she didn't resent the way he hovered over her, protecting his unit from her tainted presence. "Plenty."

*"Human crowds."*

Cat bit her tongue, wondering how he managed to make every word sting with sarcasm. "No."

He nodded and led the way across the turf and down a winding path into the trees. "Stick close then. Carver's bad enough. I don't want to have to watch both of you."

"I'm not going to get lost."

Viggo ducked beneath a branch and pushed it out of the way for her. He had a bruise on his face, swelling darkly beneath the scruff on his jawline. A gift from Vladimer during their morning sessions. "Carver can lose anyone." He grimaced. "Believe me, he'll do his best."

"Billet could have done this with me." She said it before she was really sure if she should or not. The caustic accusation hung in the air, and she looked away, tugging her

fingers through her hair as she plaited it up again. “Didn’t you tell me to give him a chance?”

“Billet,” Viggo retorted, “has enough problems. He doesn’t need another black mark on his record.”

“You’re assuming we would have lost.”

He looked at her then, finally, and uttered a wry laugh. “With Carver as a master? Yes, we’re going to lose.”

\* \* \*

It took Cat less than an hour to discover that he was right. With Carver as their “master,” they had little chance of winning.

Almost none at all, really.

Sweat stung her eyes, soaking through her thin tunic as she trotted in his wake. Like Viggo, Carver was long-legged, and he had a jaunty, jerking way of moving that darted this way and that like a ferret, following whatever happened to catch his fancy in the moment.

And there was plenty at the fair to catch his fancy.

Huge wagons had been drawn into something resembling a small town in the bare glade, their wheels—as tall as her shoulders and bound in iron—crushing the fresh grass and

grinding the ground to mud. Cattle lowed in temporary fencing, bald-faced calves wriggling between their mothers' legs. Stalls had sprung up between the wagons selling early harvest cabbages, scallions, bushels of carrots ... anything their gardens could produce before the hottest months. Chickens squawked and fluttered in wooden cages, lambs and kids ran free, gamboling wildly and chased by laughing children.

“Look, sheep!” Carver shot a grin over his shoulder, his ashen eyes taunting her. “I love sheep.”

He jinked left, dodging into the path of a wagon, and disappeared down another lane in the maze of stalls. Viggo swore, knocking against Cat's shoulder to avoid being shoved aside by the slow-moving wagon or the oxen pulling it. His face was red with temper already, and he ducked around the rear of the cart, half-running to catch up.

Cat followed him. The driver was staring after them, resentment and curiosity imprinted into the deep tan lines in his weathered face. He knew what she was. They all did. Her clothes gave her away, the weapons—maybe even the smell of the leopard in her hair, although she wasn't sure if a human would notice that or not. They were, no doubt, used to

Dreyens here, but they resented it. Cat could feel it, the back of her neck prickling as if the man's gaze were boring into her skin.

Viggo was right. Human crowds were different.

They caught up to Carver in the main square. A bonfire was burning in the center, and men were milling between stalls, farmers and craftsmen, woodcutters and shepherds. Women turned spits of meat over glowing coals, and the air smelled like smoke and roasting meat.

Viggo swore at Carver when they reached him. "One more time, and I swear I'll put you on a leash."

Carver clicked his tongue. "Naughty. You can't talk to your master like that."

"You're making this hard on purpose."

Carver cackled. "Obviously. That's the point."

Cat tuned the two of them out. Her skin was crawling, the headache building in intensity in the back of her skull. Somewhere a child was crying, and an argument had broken out between two women over a broken pottery piece at one of the stalls. Laughter, shouting, dogs barking. A lamb slammed against the back of her leg, and she whipped around so fast

that the child chasing it stumbled and grabbed it by one leg, hauling it out of her reach as if he thought she would break its neck.

Viggo frowned at her. “What are you doing?”

Cat pressed the heel of her hand against her forehead, willing all of this to be over. “Where are we supposed to be going?”

Viggo glanced around and nodded at another lane on the far side of the square. “Should be a shop down that way selling trinkets. Carver’s got to buy something there, then bring it back to the trainers.”

“Without dying,” Carver reminded him cheerfully.

“Without dying.” Viggo glared at him. “You could try to stay alive, you know.”

“Can’t,” Carver said virtuously. “Wouldn’t be fair. Not supposed to defend myself.”

“Is that still the rule if I decide to kill you?” Viggo rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Just ... can we keep moving, please?”

Carver lingered a minute more, warming his hands at the bonfire, before wending his way through the crowd. Cat followed. They hadn’t seen anyone yet. The rest of Viggo’s

unit were scattered among the crowd somewhere. While some were playing assassins, others were meant to be distractions or possible threats. Once they began to show up, the guessing game started. If they killed a distraction, they lost the game, too.

She was beginning to feel that this whole stupid charade was weighed against them and they were meant to lose.

Once they entered the narrow lane, the crowd crushed in around them. Potters, woodworkers, tinkers, and weavers were trading here. Long bolts of gray cloth were piled in the stalls, bowls stacked within reach, pots and pans. Anything, really, that could be sold or traded. People moved aside to let them pass, but not enough, and Cat felt her throat closing with something like panic, as if all the air around them were being sucked away by the swarm of people.

Viggo bumped her shoulder. "Incoming."

Dex had emerged from behind a wagon on their left, sauntering toward them with a smile that made Cat's skin crawl with dislike. Viggo moved to intercept her, and Cat almost, almost went with him.

Something moved to their right, nearly behind them now. Billet was coming after them. Billet, who had Viggo's slip of

wood and was nothing but a distraction.

Or ... should have been.

Cat hesitated. Dex's attention was on Viggo. Not Carver, and not herself. Only Viggo.

Just in that breath, Cat realized what was happening.

A second later, Billet was on her. Cat ducked his rush, narrowly missing getting her head knocked off as he swung at her. He lunged for Carver. Cat slammed into him bodily, just barely able to knock him off balance, and hit him twice with the cloth ball the trainers had given them. No-casualty training, they called it. Powdered red dye, instead of blood.

Ribs, beneath his left arm. And in the back, hard enough to make him stumble and cough.

Carver cackled.

Billet pushed her off him and grimaced down at his ruined tunic, raising his hands. "I'm dead."

Viggo whipped around. "What?"

Billet shrugged. "She killed me."

Dex swore.

Cat wiped red powder off her fingers, feeling almost shaky with relief, and glanced in Viggo's direction. Her heart dropped. His face was set in stone, a muscle working in his jaw. "Ashcliff. You realize we lose if you kill a distraction, right?"

"He was—"

"A distraction." Viggo rubbed a hand over his face. He looked tired suddenly, his tanned face lined with frustration, as if her stupidity had aged him. "I gave him his slip. He was a distraction."

They were all looking at her, and she couldn't get her tongue to work enough to protest or curse him. Finally, she stammered lamely, "Dex wasn't going for Carver. She was going for you. Billet—"

"—had my slip," Viggo interrupted. He glanced at Dex with a frown, as if he were trying to remember if Cat was right or not. "I gave it to him."

Cat's face was burning. Billet waited a breath and grinned, holding up a slip of wood. "Had it earlier, anyway. Didn't keep it, though."

An 'A' had been burned into the wood, black as coal.





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*A JEALOUS WOLF*

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**T**he moon was rising before the trainers finally released them to walk back to the Core. The Crainfeller vanished immediately, disappearing in the direction of the cliffs with the ghost cat who shared her soul.

Viggo watched her go, frustration pounding in his chest. She was so stupidly stubborn. Everything was a fight with her, as if she took every word he said as offensive. They'd run through the game several more times, but he hadn't been able to force her into participating again, especially not with the trainers watching to be sure they didn't cheat or favor anyone. She'd had plenty of opportunity to hang about in the background, speaking to no one, and float through the rest of the day without trying, and she'd taken complete advantage of it.

He would talk to her. Later.

When he wasn't quite so angry.

Dex was watching him, and when he looked at her she smiled sarcastically. "Worried about your kitten?"

She could sound so biting. He wasn't sure what he'd done wrong this time, but she'd been after him most of the day, and

with the headache wrapping around his skull, he was losing his patience. “Annoyed with her. Mad you lost today?”

Her face went blank, and she blinked at him with an innocence that no one who really knew her would believe. “What?”

“Your plan. Carver told me it was your idea to switch around the wood slips.”

From further up the path, Carver shouted back to them, “Did not!”

She rolled her eyes and turned her back on him. “We were just playing around.”

“So why’re you mad?” He lengthened his stride to catch up with her. If he were smart, he would leave this alone and let her cool off before starting a fight. If he didn’t feel like leaving it alone, not tonight. “You’ve been cursing at me all afternoon.”

“I’m not mad.” Her voice was so calm. Stupidly, he wished she would get angry, as angry as he was, instead of making him feel like he were a small child having a tantrum. “And I always curse at you when you’re stupid.”

Another time, he would've laughed at the truth in the words. Dex had a sharp tongue, and she'd used it on him many times over the years, usually when he *was* being stupid.

He was better because of her vicious criticism. He was. But he preferred the other side of her. The way she ran her fingers through his hair in an absent kind of way when they were stuck waiting on a trainer in the evenings. The way her eyes looked for him first whenever she laughed, as if anything she found funny were meant to be shared with him. The way she'd stuck by him, even when he'd broken his ankle years ago and they hadn't known whether Vladimer would let him stay to recover or cast him off like a crippled dog.

He wouldn't see that side of her, not tonight, but he'd prefer it.

“So, it's that she beat you.”

“She did *not* beat me!” Dex whirled around, furious at last, her black eyes sparking with outrage. “It was a lucky shot!”

“It's not a contest, Dex.”

To his shock, tears welled up in her eyes, and she glared at him venomously. “Oh, of course it isn't,” she hissed. He could see the jealousy in her eyes now, the resentment she'd

been trying to hide. “Your precious little kitten is just trying to find her feet, that’s all. And, *of course*, you have to spend *all* your time helping her.”

Viggo stared at her, lost for words, stunned by how quickly she’d erupted. And how stupid he’d been not to see this coming. He knew how jealous she could get, how quickly she flared at any of the other girls that got anywhere near him. He’d never understood it, not really. He and Dex had known each other since they were children, and he’d known nearly as long that she was the one he’d be partnered with when they were Released. Dreyens were paired for life, two to a single master. Men for high-risk royalty, women for ambassadors and diplomatic positions. A man and a woman for nobles who had a need for both, for the mixed talents and the diverse skills.

Some cores were against pairing men and women. Indecent, they called it. Asking for trouble. Fydera had never held to those beliefs, but Viggo well knew the cost of allowing attachments to become romantic.

Or, at least, to let others see they were romantic.

He was too careful to let that happen. Vladimer didn’t care, not the way some Core instructors did. The trainers didn’t see

or were too afraid of him to make much of a fuss. He and Dex had been more than partners, more than friends, for a long time. But they were careful. They knew what lines they could—and couldn't—cross. No one had ever tried to stop them or accused them of anything. He was careful.

“Dex.” Viggo passed a hand over his face, trying to wipe away his own irritation. He *had* spent too much time with the Crainfeller, more than he'd meant to, but not for the reason Dex thought. “Come on. You can't seriously think—”

“Then why have you been spending so much time fawning over her?” she fired back, shoving hair out of her eyes. “You never did with anyone else—”

“Because she's useless!” Viggo burst out, losing his temper again. “She doesn't work as a team with *anyone!* Her partner's going to get killed, and she won't even care.”

“And that's your problem? All the sudden?”

Viggo bit back the retort that leapt to his tongue. He'd do better making up with her than trying to argue it out, especially now. He looked up at the sky, waiting for the cool air and the night wind to ease his temper. The stars were out now, as bright as moonlight. He drew a deep breath, breathing

in the smell of pine in the wind. “They’re going to pair her with Billet. She’ll make him look stupid.”

Dex’s lips twisted in a cruel smile. “Like she did with you today?”

She meant it to hurt. “Exactly.”

“So what? Billet is stupid.”

“And if his master sees it? Or it gets him killed? He’s not going to have anyone else who cares about him. If she doesn’t learn to care about her partner, his life is going to be hell.” Viggo glanced over his shoulder, searching for the boy’s shambling form on the dark trail behind them. He lowered his voice. “I don’t ... I don’t want things ruined for him because I didn’t get that through her skull.”

“Bully for him.”

“You don’t care about anyone, do you?” He snapped the words at her, more viciously than he should have. No one—*no one* could make him as angry as she could. “You are so self-centered! Billet matters, too, you know.”

The name she spat at him stung like poison, and then she was gone, racing up the path in the fading moonlight. Viggo

swore under his breath, knowing she wouldn't be speaking to him for at least a week.

Just now, he didn't think he cared. He had other things to worry about.

Like the Crainfeller and her stupid stubbornness.





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THE WRONG NAME

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**T**wo days after the trainers had declared the last of them fit to be Released, Viggo arrived at the mess hall early, his stomach twisting itself into knots over the day he knew was ahead of them.

Morning sun was leaking through the shuttered windows in the hall, and most of the units were still trickling in, tousle-headed and yawning. Viggo found a seat near the back where the sun didn't reach and leaned back against the wall, closing his eyes. He was tired this morning. More tired than usual. Carriages had been rolling into the Core for the last few days. Masters, coming to claim their guardians. They'd all been tense, especially the trainers. He'd nearly gotten his head knocked off only the night before for talking back. He had a dark bruise under his left eye still and a knot of smoldering resentment between his ribs for the unfairness of the blow. For years, he'd wondered how he would feel to be leaving the Core for good. Part of him had been afraid he'd miss the place.

Just now, he couldn't wait to get out.

Wherever he was going, it wouldn't be worse than here.

Billet came in and sat down at the table opposite him. Carver, too, a few minutes later. And the rest. They were all

quiet this morning, knowing what was coming. Most of them were dreading it.

Change, good or bad, was hard to swallow. Especially in the morning.

Dex arrived last, behind Rylee, and sat at the far end of the table from him. Typical. She hadn't spoken to him since their fight over the Crainfeller. He doubted she would for a long time still. She held grudges longer than anyone he knew, even Carver.

Still, he was better at soothing her ruffled feathers than most. Once they were on assignment, he'd fix things. They could start over once the Core was behind them.

To his surprise, she seemed to be thinking along the same lines. When he glanced her way along the table, she met his eyes, and a bare smile flitted across her features, just for a breath. Some of the tension wrapped around his ribs eased. If he could make it work with her, they would be all right. No matter where they were assigned.

Even with all the fights they'd had, all the hurt feelings and waspish words, he'd always managed to smooth things over with her. They worked, that was all. And between the fights, there was no one he'd rather have with him.

A trainer passed them, shuffling through several leather-bound packets, and tossed him one peremptorily. “Pass these out. First few leave today, the rest tomorrow.”

“That soon?”

“Report time is on the assignments. Don’t be late.”

The man walked away, and Viggo cursed him under his breath. He tore the packet open and began passing around assignments, checking the names as he went. “Billet, Carver, Rylee ...”

In a minute, they were all reading silently. Viggo flipped to the middle of his immediately, searching for where he’d be going before anything else.

Ivra.

A small glow of excitement began to kindle in his breast. Cymera’s capital city contained the palace, the king and his family, the highest nobles—everything and anyone that mattered politically. If he wanted a life that meant something, Ivra was the place to be.

Dex slipped into the seat next to him and leaned against his shoulder, reading the page he was on. He put an arm around her, murmuring, “Ivra. Not bad.”

“Mmm. Anyone important?”

“Probably not.” He flipped back to the first page, searching it for the name of their new master. “Not for a new team. But if we—”

He froze and the bottom dropped out of his stomach.

At the top of the page, inscribed in black, black ink, like the last line of an execution order, were two names. His own, and ...

Dex saw it too, the same time he did, and went still as stone. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think enough to comfort her, to explain there'd been a mistake.

There had been a mistake.

There had to have been. It couldn't be right.

He looked up, instinctively searching the room for the Crainfeller. She was there, sitting only a table away, staring down at her own copy of the assignment.

Gods.

She looked sick. As if seeing her name with his were every bit the death sentence it felt like to him.

Carver leaned over, frowning at him. “What's wrong?”

Viggo shook his head, not sure how to breathe enough to respond. Dex flipped open her assignment, reading the names at the top, and turned a poisonous glare on Carver. “You? I got stuck with you?”

His face went white.

Viggo tried to think. If he went to Vladimer now, he’d get more than the bruise under his left eye, and how would it look, really, if he began the assignment with his new master looking like a slave who’d just been to the whipping posts?

“This is your fault,” Dex said suddenly, breaking the silence. His heart dropped. He looked down at her, but she was glaring at Cat. Not at him. Not this time. “This is your fault, you—”

“Stop it, Dex.” The words lurched off his tongue before he could catch them, words that were so, so much sharper than he intended. They stung the air, piercing his chest with guilt.

Her eyes jerked up to his, still glaring. He struggled to soften his tone. “This isn’t anyone’s fault.”

She looked away, glaring at the window, and when he touched her shoulder again she jerked away. That was it, then. Now the blame had shifted to his shoulders. Someone always

had to carry it for her. Viggo bit his tongue and stole a glance at Cat, expecting the same strained anger. Nothing. Her face was utterly and perfectly empty, as if she'd left herself and gone someplace else. Her eyes had turned an odd shade of gray, the blue faded as if the fire behind them had been cut off. He looked away, his stomach twisting. He knew that look. He'd had it himself a few times when things had grown too hard, when he couldn't deal with the world around him anymore. It was a look that implied a retreat, that spoke of a person who had left himself to avoid being hurt by what was around him. A withdrawal, leaving nothing behind but a soulless corpse that could take whatever beating was meted out without crumbling beneath the pain.

He felt like taking that escape himself. It would have been easier. But only the two of them were left now, alone with an empty future stretching out before them.

One of them had to face it—and do something to fix the void between them. He would have to try, if she weren't willing.

The alternative was an entire life spent alone. Viggo didn't think he could stomach that.



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FOREBODING

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**D**usk fell, the light fading so gradually that Viggo didn't notice it slipping away until several servants entered the mess hall to light the lamps. He glanced up, the flickering shadows reminding him again how empty the room was. Only a few other teams were scattered among the tables, most of them choosing corners for privacy.

The soft whisper of parchment reminded him that he was supposed to be studying. His half of their assignment overview was scattered haphazardly on the table in front of him. He only had a page or two left. He bent over it again, glancing sideways at Cat out of the corner of his eye. She was sitting at the farthest corner of the table from him, flipping slowly through a neat stack of parchment. Her chin rested on one hand, and she twisted a strand of hair around her finger, her lips moving soundlessly as she read. She was focused, the way he was supposed to be. How, he couldn't guess, but whatever it was that fascinated her had kept her eyes glued to the page since they sat down. She hadn't looked his way or spoken in hours.

He looked back to his assignment and forced himself to pay attention as he skimmed through the last two pages,

finishing seconds before the horn calling for evening meal echoed through the camp.

He stood and stretched, rolling the stiffness from his back and shoulders. Cat flipped over her last page and stood as well, shuffling her parchments into a stack.

The tension between them had added to his exhaustion in the last few hours, but to his surprise she looked as drained as he did. He swore under his breath, willing himself to say something. Anything. “That took longer than I was expecting.” His own assignment was scattered over half the table. He raked them together, hissing as several pages fell on the floor. “Not the most interesting of subjects, I guess. How did you do?”

He was hoping for a response and was gratified to see a ghost of a smile twitch at the corner of her mouth.

“Lovely.” She still wasn’t looking at him, but she was at least making an effort to answer. “Landowners have *such* interesting lives. I was enthralled.”

Viggo forced a smile, the empty expression feeling worse than a ghoul’s grin on his face. “Exactly. It’s right up there with scrubbing floors and cleaning the outhouses.”

That tiny, almost invisible smile twitched again. She shoved her parchments into her rucksack and swung it over her shoulder as she turned toward the door. “Right. See you tomorrow, I guess.”

Viggo nodded, disappointment pressing on him again. She hesitated, as if second guessing herself. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, to make her stay a little longer. *Say something else*, he told himself fiercely. *Say you're sorry, that you want to start over. Anything. After tomorrow she'll be the only person you'll have left.* The memory of Dex's white face and red-rimmed eyes choked him. He could have laughed. Did it really matter? He'd already lost everything. Why bother trying to rebuild now? He looked down, shoving the last of his parchments into his rucksack, and when he looked up again, she was gone.

He closed his eyes, anger churning in his blood. He didn't want this. He didn't want to leave with her in the morning. He'd expected to be nervous when he left the Core for the first time, but he never expected to have to face it alone. Not without Dex. Caitlyn Ashcliff was stubborn and headstrong and impossible to understand. The thought of leaving with her in the morning ... he swallowed the anxiety clutching his

throat. He *would* leave with her, that was all there was to it. Dex's memory would fade. Tomorrow was the start of something new. A new season.

His unit was waiting for him at one of the tables nearest the crackling fire. Waif-like slaves flitted between the tables, the greasy smell of roasted meat rising from the platters they carried. Viggo's stomach twisted, reminding him that he hadn't eaten since dawn, and he was almost tempted to snag a portion off one of the plates passing him. But the girl who carried it had bruises beneath her sallow skin, and her dull, shadowed eyes knew enough about fear already. Better to leave her alone.

A few of them looked up when he approached. Most didn't. He swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth and slid onto one of the benches. "You're all pretty quiet. That bad?"

No one answered. He glanced at Carver, but the other man avoided his eyes. Viggo's jaw tightened, and he looked at Dex. "What happened?"

She wasn't looking at him. The firelight reflected harshly in her black eyes, and he could see the dance of the sparks in her pupils. "We leave in the morning."

Viggo winced. Pairing the two of them had been the obvious choice, of course. Their scores matched fairly well. The instructors didn't care how well people got along outside of the ring, after all. But Carver and Dex had never been close friends. Their fights had come to blows more than once in the past, and cruel words hung between them, words that had been spat with far too much sincerity to ever be fully forgotten. Viggo cleared his throat, looking down at the table. "Well ..." The words he was going to say caught in his throat. Nothing he could say would help. Not anymore.

Dakota Cray spun the hunting knife in his hand, toying with the heavy blade absently as he said, "Could be worse."

Viggo looked over at him. He sat at the far end of the table, his back against a wooden column and his wet hair in his eyes. He forced a thin smile in Viggo's direction, his fingers stroking the steel of his knife as if to reassure himself of its presence. "Could have gotten paired with someone from a lower unit."

Viggo looked away without responding. The fire spat sparks across the floor, burning dark marks into the old pine. He could hear its laughter, its chortling, snapping tongue whispering away as it devoured the pine logs. The rain was

pattering on the slatted roof, discernible even through the crackle of the fire and the laughter of the other trainees. They were celebrating tonight. Only a few had nothing at all to celebrate but an empty future with a person they couldn't stand.

Or didn't know.

Dex caught the look. Her lips tightened, and he saw the wolf spark in her eyes, bright as a blue flame. Then it was gone, and she smiled at him. "Don't worry, Viggo. There's still time for something to happen." She rose and touched his cheek with a kiss. "The fates will work it out."

Viggo's throat closed. There was poison on her breath. He knew her far, far too well to believe that she would leave anything to the fates. "Where are you going?" His voice sounded odd in his own ears. Stilted somehow, as if his tongue knew what his mind wasn't willing to believe. Yet.

Dex moved past him, brushing her fingertips down his arm before she walked away. "Back to my cabin. Not hungry tonight."

Rylee went with her. Viggo glanced at her as she passed, looking for the truth in her face. Rylee was useless at lying.

Her hazel eyes told the truth, even when her tongue didn't. She felt guilt too strongly to hold onto a lie for long.

Dex could lie a priest straight to hell's gates.

But Rylee wouldn't meet his eyes, and the two of them disappeared too fast for him to question them further. The damp and the night swallowed them into its darkness.

A lead ball formed in his stomach, and he swore under his breath, the curse so hot on his tongue that it could have come straight from the Pale Lady's lips. Carver glanced at him, a frown furrowing his brow, but Viggo didn't look at him. His heart was pounding, guilt and fear and anger thrumming in time with the beat. He closed his eyes, fighting with himself, fighting with his pride, fighting with his conscience.

Two people mattered to a Dreyen. Only two. Friendships died, love was a weakness, and pity beneath them. They were allowed two bonds. The bond between a master and his guardian, and the bond between a Dreyen and his partner. Anything else was a passing phase, a shred of cloud. Without a master, he was worthless. Without a partner, he was dead.

Viggo rose to follow them before he could think better of it. Bonds were stronger than just feelings.



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WARNINGS

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**T**he rain welcomed her outside, washing away the heat of the mess hall. Cat let the door shut behind her and lifted her face to the darkened sky, letting the cool rain wash all the heaviness in her soul away.

Spring's early chill still hung in the air, damp as wind from the sea. Cat drew in a deep breath, half expecting to smell the salty brine of the waves, the tang of fish and sand and good salt spray. Instead, the fresh, heady scent of the wild mountains filled her lungs and mixed with the perfume of the pines. The leopard stirred in her chest, awakened by the aroma, and she left the scant shelter of the buildings and followed the path up the valley, toward her cabin. Mud churned beneath her boots, thick as glue on the narrow path, and deep channels had already been cut into the earth on either side, rushing with brown water toward the lowest ground. Last year's grass hung low on either side of the path. Cat ran her fingers over the seeded heads, pricking her fingertips on their bristly surfaces until her hands dripped with the falling rain. Her shirt was soaked already. Her hair too. It felt so good to be out here, to hear the rain, to feel it on her face and have it cool her skin. The rules were not so harsh here as they were in

Crainfell. It would have cost her a week of scrubbing floors to leave a meal early there. But here, no one stood at the door to watch who came and left. She doubted anyone had even noticed her slip out.

It felt good to be invisible for once.

She left the path before it turned toward her cabin and took shelter beneath a group of pines a hundred yards off. The rain was whispering again, but this time there was no song, no sweet melody. The chattered words were garbled, and she could taste the dread in them. She leaned against one of the gnarled trunks and closed her eyes murmuring beneath her breath, “What’s wrong, then? What do you have to worry about?”

No answer came. Cat picked a handful of the sharp needles and chewed them absently. The lemony, bitter taste bit her tongue and hung in her breath. They were good. Better than anything she would have found by the sea. Everything tasted of salt there.

A voice broke through the whisper of the rain, shattering its rhythmic chatter. “Cat?”

Cat spun around. A woman emerged from the curtain of rain. She pushed black hair out of her eyes with pale fingers

and smiled at Cat. “I was hoping I would find you out here.”

Dex.

A chill rippled over Cat’s skin, raising goosebumps along her arms and up her shoulders. The other girl’s face was a blur in the darkness of the rain, the smile shadowed and her eyes hidden. But her voice hung in the air, clear and cold as the rain itself. Something in it sounded strange. Wrong. Her hackles rose, and she said nothing.

Dex waited, as if expecting her to respond. When the silence had stretched long enough to be uncomfortable, she smiled again and stepped beneath the shelter of the overhanging branches. “I just ... I wanted to talk to you. About today. Viggo and I have been together for a long time. He’s my oldest friend. I can’t—manage without him. You can understand that, can’t you?”

The rain was whispering again. Urgently, almost frantically. Cat could feel its panic in her own breast, and she struggled to block it out, forcing it to be silent. The other girl couldn’t hear it, she was sure, but the leopard could. Or maybe it was her own heart that could sense its disturbed murmuring. “I’m sorry.” The words clung to the roof of her mouth, pitifully useless and not half as empathetic as they should have been.

She'd never been able to master sounding friendlier than she felt. "I never meant to take anyone's partner. I can't imagine what it would be like to lose a friend like that."

"I'm sure you can't."

Dex was close now, too close. Cat took a step back, feeling behind her for the trunk of the tree. Her fingertips snagged on a broken branch, and the splintered wood jabbed into her skin, drawing blood.

"I can't lose him, Cat," Dex continued. She was still smiling, the words on her tongue disturbingly mismatched from her gentle, almost false tone. "I can't. Not after everything we've worked for, not after all we've been through together."

The rain was screaming now, screaming at her, screaming at the leopard. Cat shut it out with blunt dismissal and touched the hunting knife at her thigh. Her voice sounded distant now, callus when she compared it to Dex's friendly tone. "I'm sorry. I really am. I don't know how I could change anything that's happened—"

Dex laughed, and the vindictive sound froze the voices of the rain and struck them dumb. "Don't worry." Her smile went

feral. “You won’t have to do a thing. They’ll switch us back while you’re in recovery.”

Cat drew the hunting knife, concealing the shining blade behind her forearm. Her voice sounded oddly detached, separated from her tongue somehow. “Recovery?”

Dex stepped toward her, blue sparking in her dark, dark eyes. “Poor thing. Don’t you remember? You fell. Hit your head too ... pretty hard as I remember. Wasn’t it lucky that Rylee and I found you?”

“*Rylee and I ...*” Cat started to turn, but it was too late already. The other girl slammed into her side, and she fell. Her head cracked against the twisted trunk of the pine, and pain stole her voice and left her mute with blood on her tongue.



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*A SPOILED GOODBYE*

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**V**iggo began to run as soon as he left the shelter of the mess hall. The rain ran with him, and the wind. It whipped against his back and stung his legs, and he nearly missed the path to the girls 'cabin in the dark. The rain was coming down harder now, weeping from the blackened skies and thundering down the canyons with a roar that shook the trees.

The trail led him beneath the pines at the base of the cliffs, and the rain lessened there, the wind caught by the thick branches. The cabin rose out of the darkness, its windows black, and he knew, even before he bounded up the steps and threw open the door, what he would find.

Hollow emptiness greeted him. Lightning flashed, brilliant white light baring the rough bunks, the tousled bedding, and the empty fireplace. Viggo stepped back, his heart pounding, and turned around, looking back the way he'd come. Thunder rolled, breaking through the rain with the voice of the mountains. He ran a hand through his dripping hair, pushing it out of his eyes, and peered out into the gloom, completely at a loss. They could be anywhere by now. Anywhere. Dex knew these mountains as well as he did. Better even. She knew so many places where not even the trees would hear a scream.

Staying here would do him no good. Viggo left the path, skidding down the steep slope back toward the buildings. Maybe they'd gone to the runs. The Crainfeller had left the mess hall first, and Dex would have been following her. She wouldn't have gone up to the crags, not in the rain. Not by herself, not when she didn't know the territory.

He hoped.

It was the wolf who heard them. Viggo slipped in the deep loam beneath the trees, and the wolf tore loose from his chest before he could fall. He heard them then, fighting in the trees below him. He could smell the blood, too, even through the rain, even through the sharp scent of the pine and the rich fragrance of the loam. He ran.

He saw Dex first. She appeared out of the rain like a wraith, and there was a blade in her hands. The Crainfeller was on her feet struggling with Rylee. Blood stained her shirt as dark as if the rain had been weeping ink. He released the wolf before the smell of blood drove it mad. Dex heard him coming. He could never learn to move as silently as the wolf.

She spun around to face him, and Viggo plowed into her. They hit the ground together, and Viggo pinned the hand that held the knife before she could use it. Her fist slammed into



his collarbone. He gasped, remembering in an instant how badly Dex could hurt someone when she wanted to.

She recognized him then, whether because of his sharp cry or because she'd gotten her bearings quickly enough to see his face he didn't know. Her face went white, and she stopped struggling. "Viggo!"

Rylee froze, and the Crainfeller shook her off. Viggo jerked the knife out of Dex's hand and stood. She scrambled to her feet as well, backing away from him as if she expected him to use the blade in his hand. "Viggo Swifter, what the hell?" she spat, wiping mud off her face. "You scared me—"

"I scared you?" He was shouting, shaking too. He had to clench his fist to keep his fingers from betraying him. "What were you going to do, Dex? What were you doing with this?"

She looked at her knife in his hand and said nothing. Viggo swore and threw it with all his might at one of the trees. It buried itself into the wood and stayed there, quivering. "What were you thinking?" His voice sounded harsh, even to him. Too harsh. He was shaking still, and he couldn't stop shouting. "Do you have any idea what they would do to you if they caught you at this?"

Her jaw set stubbornly, and she glared at him. “Do you think I care? She’s ruined everything—”

“I CARE!” She flinched back a step, and he could have bitten his own tongue in two for his stupid, stupid temper and the way he could never control it. Not even for her. “Do you think this will fix anything? You can’t blame her for this any more than you can blame me!”

But she did blame him for it. That was the crux of the problem, he knew. It was his fault in her mind. His fault for not fighting back, his fault for not arguing with Vladimer, his fault for forcing himself to accept what she couldn’t. Her eyes went cold, and she spat into the pine needles at her feet. “Fine. If you want your stupid little bloodhound following you around for the rest of your life, who am I to say any differently?”

She jerked her knife out of the tree. He was choking on the anger that burned in his chest, but the rain was cold on his skin, and it managed to cool him enough for his voice to drop back to a reasonable level. “What am I supposed to do, Dex?” She turned to look at him, and he met her eyes helplessly, pleading for her to at least try to understand. “She’s my partner.”

He saw the hurt in her face before she could catch it, and when it was gone there was only ice to take its place. Only hate. “Well, I hope she’s good enough for you when you’ve got no one else.”

The rain swallowed her up before he could reply.

Rylee disappeared, too. When he looked up only the Crainfeller was left. Cat. He couldn’t even look her in the face now, and his voice sounded thick in his own ears as he said, “Are you all right?”

“Yes.”

She wasn’t all right. Her shirt was stained with blood, and there was blood in her hair and on her face. Viggo swallowed the taste of his own words and asked, “Do you want to go to the healers? I can take you there—”

“No.” Her voice sounded so empty, as chilly as the rains that came in the autumn.

His fingers were still shaking, and he could still feel his anger smoldering in his chest like a dormant fire. He clenched his hand and looked at the ground. “If you tell them—” His good sense caught up with his tongue, and he looked up at her, straight into her eyes. They were empty, as empty and vacant

as a sky without clouds, as if the spirit behind them had retreated into itself and left the body behind. He winced. “We’re leaving tomorrow. She won’t bother you anymore, I swear. But if you tell the instructors what happened they’ll strip the hide from her back. I—I’m sorry. I swear she’ll leave you alone. Just please don’t tell them.”

There was no pain in her face, although her hand was pressed against her side. She looked at him for a long time, and when she finally spoke her voice was as empty as her eyes. “It doesn’t matter. It isn’t the first time. Tell them whatever you want.”

The tight knot around his heart loosened, and she turned and walked away before he could decide whether to thank her or not. The rain threw its cloak around her, and only the smell of blood was left behind to hang in the air. Only the smell of blood, and the taste of his own anger. He left both behind him when he walked away.



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THE DRUNKEN FAERIE

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**L**ightning lit up the sky outside the Drunken Færie, and thunder rolled, rain lashing the windows of the little inn. The innkeeper tossed a log into the brick fireplace dominating the center of the taproom and glanced around. Several drunks slumped at the bar, a few miners huddled around mugs of ale at one of the tables, and one or two other locals were gathered in the corners. On a night like this, folks tended to stick close to their homes. He could count the paying customers on his right hand.

He muttered a curse under his breath at the foul weather and strode back behind the bar, wiping away imaginary spills with a stained cloth. Business was scarce tonight, money even scarcer. He'd done more than his share of tightening his belt this season.

The door blew open with a crash. Cold wind swirled through the room setting the fire dancing and bringing the howl of the storm with it. He looked up, an irritated remark already on his lips. It died unspoken. Two wraithlike figures emerged from the rain and the night, bringing a chill into the room with them. Fear ran down his spine with icy fingers. These were no miners. Even from behind the counter the

innkeeper could see the scorpions tattooed into their shoulders, as black as the coal dust from the mines and bound with veins of gold. Silver chased through the hilts of the weapons at their sides, gleaming in the glow of the fire.

Dreyens.

The room fell silent. Fear froze the soft buzz of conversation. This far north, folks had few dealings with Ivra, Cymera's capitol city. The strange beasts used by its nobles for protection were viewed with a heavy dose of distrust and dread. Most believed the beasts dabbled in black magic, mixing freely with things beyond the natural. The innkeeper wasn't so sure about that. He wasn't a superstitious man as a rule, but it paid to be wary.

Especially of beasts bred and trained to kill.

The larger of the two, a huge male with a broadsword at his side, approached the bar. He flipped his hood back, shaking rainwater from his shoulders. The knot in the innkeeper's stomach loosened. Light blond scruff shaded the lower half of the man's face, sparse as a boy's first beard, and his jaw still held traces of childhood. Younger, and therefore less dangerous, than he'd at first thought.

His courage restored, he picked up a mug, polishing it with the cloth as he said shortly, “If’n you’re looking for someone, ain’t no one here but locals. You’ll have better luck in the next town over.”

The Dreyen gave no sign of offense at the abrupt greeting. His eyes were fastened on the innkeeper’s face with disquieting composure. “Looking for a room. Do you have any open?” His deep voice sent a shiver of revulsion down the innkeeper’s back.

“Not for your sort.” The man set the mug down and tossed the rag in the general direction of the counter behind him. “I don’t house half-bloods without a handler. Where’s your master?”

Silence greeted the question. He looked around and met the Dreyen’s eyes for the first time, and fear wrapped thin fingers around his throat. The male’s face was eerily calm, almost expressionless as he said softly, “Outside ... waiting for me to find out if there are rooms available or not.”

Gold surged into the Dreyen’s dark eyes. The innkeeper jerked back involuntarily, pain roaring through his body as he backed into the counter, bruising his backside. He swore. The



Dreyen didn't move. Those dark eyes remained fastened on his face as he added impassively, "What shall I tell him?"

"Rooms, yes. I'll have one made ready," the innkeeper stammered. He continued backing away, discreetly making a sign to ward off evil as he left. Unnatural is what it was. Sorcery, or something like it.

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Viggo watched the innkeeper scurry off and allowed himself a bare smile. They were getting further from the Core now, and the towns they passed through were less and less familiar with Dreyens. Fewer stories, fewer rumors. It made them bolder ... for a little while.

Cat cleared her throat. Viggo shivered, reluctant to go back out into the rain that had been falling since dusk. Resignedly, he flipped up his hood and followed her out, catching his breath as a chill wind blew freezing rain into his face. The cold hurt like a slap. He ducked his head, wishing cloaks were a part of the standard issue for guardians, and tapped on the carriage door. When it swung open, he took a step back, saying with forced respect, "He has a room for you, my lord. It looks passably clean."

Fane Ravenstone rose and swept past him through the rain and into the inn. Viggo followed, cursing the cowardice that made him flinch back from a man nearly a head shorter than himself. Fane had a presence about him that Viggo wasn't used to, an aura of power that came not from his fist, but from a bloodline of mastery and ownership.

He'd been expecting a lord. He hadn't, however, expected to feel so exactly like a slave when he stood before him.

The innkeeper was waiting for them when they came in, bowing and scraping and wiping his hands on that stupid cloth, as if he felt the force of Fane's bloodline every bit as much as Viggo did. "Evening, my lord, evening. Terrible night to be out in, innit?"

Fane cast him a look of such disgust that the man fell silent, as though he'd swallowed his tongue. "You have a room ready?"

"Nearly ready, my lord. My girl's making it up now. My name's Tobias, in case you need anything. Supper for you and your," his eyes darted toward Viggo, and his lip curled, "guardians?"

Viggo's stomach curled in on itself. They hadn't eaten much today. The food they'd brought with them for their

noonday meal had been devoured much faster than he'd liked. But Fane's eyes were on the stained cloth, his dark brow furrowed, and Viggo could guess what he was thinking as clearly as if he could read it written onto the man's face.

"I'll take a table in the corner," Fane said at last, as if he, too, were hungry enough to risk whatever the kitchen had to offer. "Four meals. Put two on one plate for my male." He jerked his head at Viggo.

The innkeeper hurried off, and Viggo wound through the room, following Fane to a corner table. Eyes followed them as they went. The low hum of conversation that had silenced so abruptly when they'd entered began again, murmuring dully in tune with the thunder of the rain on the slate roof.

Fane settled himself at the table, his thin mouth twisting in a grimace as he flicked old food from the weathered boards. Viggo retreated to a respectful distance, taking advantage of the shadows in the room and the growing noise to lean surreptitiously against the wall and ease the ache growing between his shoulder blades. Cat moved to join him, her gaze wandering around the empty taproom and among the grim, bearded faces of its occupants.

The innkeeper came back, trailed by a waif-like servant girl in a dirty mop-cap and an apron that was two or three sizes too big for her. In a minute, they had crusty bread and oil set out on the table, bowls of steaming lamb stew and a pitcher of ale. The girl handed Viggo his bowl, her dark eyes latched with horrified fascination on the silver chasing through the hilt of his sword. How old was she? Seven, eight? Too young for the bruises shadowing her thin face, or the knowing, almost adult wariness in her eyes. Children of slaves grew up very fast in this world. Too fast.

When she was gone, Viggo was reminded immediately of the sharp hunger gnawing at his insides and dug into the stew.

After three bites, he realized Cat was watching him out of the corner of her eye. He glanced at her, raising an eyebrow, and she looked away just as quickly, murmuring, "Sorry."

Sorry. The first word she'd spoken to him in hours, almost since they'd left the Core that morning. She didn't speak, and he could think of nothing to say. Part of him was afraid the silence would last forever.

He'd go mad if it did.

He glanced at Fane, not wanting to get into trouble for whispering behind his back, and said low, "What?"

She glanced at him again, and, to his shock, there was something like amusement softening the gray in her eyes. Or ... the blue. They were blue again, finally. “You’re really that hungry?”

He would have laughed if he hadn’t known better. “Starved. Aren’t you?”

She shook her head, glancing at Fane as if to be sure he couldn’t hear their whispered voices amid the murmur of conversation and the drumming of the rain overhead. “I don’t think I’ll even finish this.”

“Well, so it doesn’t go to waste ...”

A slight smile flitted across her face. “Gods. No wonder I didn’t eat at your table.”

He meant to say something else, anything to keep her talking, but her eyes went back to her meal, and he almost felt the wall between them slip back into place. He shrugged, too hungry to care, and continued eating.

Fane wasn’t halfway through his own meal by the time they both finished. Viggo held out his hand for Cat’s plate, wincing as they clattered together, and set them on the board for the servant girl to collect. The room was clearing now,

drunks staggering out and calling their goodbyes to the innkeeper as they went. The miners on the far side of the room stood to leave, too, and Viggo caught the dirty looks they cast his master on their way, as if his presence had chased them out early.

Likely so. Drinking away one's common sense was a dangerous pastime in reach of someone who could have them killed for it.

Viggo rolled his shoulders, easing a kink out of his back, and glanced around the room once more, searching for something, anything, to hold his attention. The servant girl flitted between tables, scrubbing spills from the wood and gathering plateware to take to the kitchens. A tabby cat stretched luxuriously by the fireplace. Even Tobias had disappeared, probably to see to their room.

A shift of movement in the far corner of the room caught his attention. He narrowed his eyes, searching the shadowy nook. He could just make out the long, lean frame of a man slouched against the wall, ale in hand, looking out at the rest of the room.

No ... not at the room. At him.

The man's eyes were fastened on him with an intensity that sent a shiver rippling over his skin. Unlike the glances from the miners, his gaze held no fear. Only a kind of ... thoughtful absorption. As if he were looking straight through Viggo, sifting through his thoughts, and seeing right into his youth and inexperience.

A clatter of plateware distracted Viggo, and his eyes flickered back to the table, landing on the servant as she cleared away the dirty dishes. When he looked back, the man had gone and the corner was empty.

His skin prickled as if from the breath of a ghost, and he looked away.



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*JUDGE AND EXECUTIONER*

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**V**iggo woke. A sliver of moonlight filtered through the shuttered window, stretching across the scarred floor of their room. The hard floorboards dug into his side, and a chill skittered across the boards, ruffling Cat's fur. They were sleeping on the floor, the two of them, like dogs his master had brought along, and no matter how he shifted or squirmed, he couldn't get comfortable the way she could. Even the wolf was little help, although it made the cold leeching through the floor more bearable.

His ear twitched, and whatever it was that had woken him rippled down his back again, prickling his skin. The rain had stopped by this time, the silence it left behind echoing hollow in Viggo's ears. He waited a breath, still unsettled. A faint squeal pierced the darkness accompanied by a restless snort.

Horses.

His hackles rose. The stir came from the courtyard below. He hesitated a half second, considering ignoring it, but rose and shook himself. He needed a breath of fresh air anyway.

The sounds faded as the wolf left him. Cat raised her head as he stepped toward the door, her pale eyes fastening with disquieting intensity on his face. He shrugged awkwardly,

realizing he'd woken her. "Be right back," he whispered. "Need some air."

Her tail twitched in acknowledgement. He slipped from the room, hissing with annoyance as the leather hinges squeaked. The stairs creaked as he descended, his soft leather boots making barely a shuffle on the wood. The fire in the main room had died to rosy coals, and shadows spun black webs in the corners. He let himself out the door, easing it shut again behind him.

Cold air, sharply fresh and smelling sweetly of rain, bit his lungs as he shut the door behind him. Starlight lit the courtyard, the quarter moon hanging in the dark sky bleaching the cobbles white. Black shadows played in the corners, beneath the eaves of the inn and between the barrels lining the walls.

The stables were around back. He could hear the horses again, fainter now, but still restless. He strode around the corner, keeping to the shadows, and touched the hilt of his hunting knife as he slipped inside. A dark lantern hung beside the wide doors. Candlelight leaked from the slits in the metal casing, trembling along the walls and cobbled floor. The bulk of their coach filled the widest part of the aisle. The low

rafters and patched roof hung above it looking as if they might collapse at any moment. Stalls lined the walls, empty but for a mule in the corner and the matched bays.

A man was in the stall with them. At first glance, Viggo thought it was the driver, but a half step into the stable told him otherwise. A dark hood covered the man's face, crudely dyed and blackened with soot. The bays were snorting and pawing up straw, tossing their fine heads as if the man's scent had panicked them. He was trying to catch hold of their halters, swearing coarsely as they danced away from him.

Viggo hissed a curse under his breath and strode forward. Movement caught the corner of his eye. Three more men were crouched in the shadow of the carriage, two of them fiddling with the door and another bending over the limp form of the driver. They whipped around when he saw them as if his gaze had burned their skin. One of them spat angrily, "Stupid cur! I told you it'd hear th 'horses. Kill it, quick!"

The others straightened up, circling him. Viggo held his ground, sizing them up with a quick glance. Anger swelled in his chest, anger and a trace of fear.

One of the thieves, a thin, rat-like man clothed in dirty leather, had a knife. The other held a cudgel in his meaty fist,

a thick, clumsy weapon that seemed to match his stocky frame. Viggo flicked his eyes toward the man in the stall, but he hadn't moved. Waiting. Wise of him.

The rat-faced man hissed, light searing along the steel of his knife. A knife with a broken blade. He lunged forward, the blade sweeping for Viggo's midriff. Viggo jerked to the side, fear sharp on his tongue. He cursed it and caught the man's wrist, twisting sharply. The knife dropped. Viggo jerked him around, shoving him hard against the carriage. His shoulder dislocated with an ugly pop, and his scream tore the darkness.

A grunt from behind jerked Viggo's attention around. He released the man and dropped just as a cudgel whistled wickedly over his head.

Close.

Too close.

He spun. The cudgel swung again, thudded against the floor, clumsy with weight. He trapped it there with a foot and kned his assailant sharply in the ribs. Bone crunched. A grunt of pain, a wet cough. Viggo pivoted and drove his elbow into the man's temple, dropping him.

The third robber had run when the fight started. Viggo spun, catching the fourth by the collar as he clambered out of the stall. The man yelped with terror as Viggo drove him against the wall with a forearm across his throat and ripped the hood free. Viggo grinned, his eyes a flat, merciless black. “Evening, innkeeper. Find what you were looking for?”

“No, no!” Tobias stammered, his voice choked by Viggo’s remorseless hold. “I swear! I never—”

“Spare the excuses. I know what you were doing,” Viggo hissed. His eyes flared with molten gold. “Do you think I can’t see your lies?”

Tobias whimpered. The man was a coward. A good scare would keep him far away from Fane’s things tonight ... and possibly deter midnight visits in the future. Viggo dropped his voice to a deep growl. “I could kill you for this. Did you know that?”

He did. Viggo could see it in his eyes. If a bailiff had caught the thieves, the trial could take weeks to sort out, more if the bailiff or judge had been bribed, which was likely. But not so with a Dreyen. Dreyens were a law unto themselves, answering only to the word of their master and ultimately to the king. Cross a Dreyen, and he became the judge and jury,

bailiff and executioner. Not a question would be asked if Tobias were found dead tomorrow morning.

The innkeeper knew it. Viggo could see the terror in his eyes, the gray fear in his face. He smiled, baring his incisors. “Do you need a reminder, innkeeper, of why the lords keep Dreyens?”

Tobias ’eyes widened, and he squirmed as helplessly as if he could already feel Viggo’s blade tickling his flesh. “No, please!” he choked. “I swear, I swear—”

Viggo pressed his hand firmly over the man’s mouth, silencing him. “Did you think we were just decoration?”

Tobias shook his head, his wide eyes pleading mutely.

“Off you go then,” Viggo hissed, low. “And remember your place in the future. If you don’t ...” his eyes flared gold again, bright, terrible gold against the black, “I’ll know. And I’ll find you.”

Viggo released him. Tobias stumbled over his own feet, scrambled for the door, disappearing into the darkness. Viggo watched him go and turned back to the carriage. His two attackers had gone, crawling back to whatever hole they’d come from. He kicked aside the cudgel still lying in the straw

and knelt beside the driver's limp form. Blood trickled from a small cut just below his hairline and a lump was swelling on his head, but he would live. Viggo cast about until he found a scrap of cloth. He soaked it in the horses' trough and cleaned the blood from the man's face.

The water woke him. They'd hit him over his left eye, probably before he'd known they were there at all. He'd have a scar for a long time.

Better a scar than a bed in the Pale Lady's white halls, though.

The man's eyes flicked open, and Viggo helped him sit up and lean against the wheel of his carriage. He was younger than Viggo had realized, maybe three or four years older than himself. He stared at Viggo, struggling to remember his face, and glanced at the door of the carriage, as if expecting to see it thrown wide with the lock splintered and broken. "What happened?"

"They left." Viggo tossed the cloth aside and studied him with narrowed eyes. "Catch you sleeping?"

"I was," the man frowned as if calling up the memory were an effort, "I was ... checking the horses. Must have come up behind me."

“Do you need an herbwoman?”

The man shook his head and passed a hand over his face.  
“I’ll be all right.”

Viggo nodded and stood, striding for the door. Just as he reached it, the driver’s voice stopped him. “Thank you ... Guardian.”

Viggo paused and glanced over his shoulder, shock flitting through his chest. He didn’t know what to say to that, so he merely shrugged and slipped out, padding across the courtyard toward the main building.

\* \* \*

They left before dawn had touched the eastern sky the next morning. One of the maids served them a cold breakfast in the empty taproom, fluttering about them as nervously as a sparrow. The innkeeper didn’t dare show his face, and probably wouldn’t until they were gone. Viggo had told Fane everything that had happened the previous night, but the man had brushed it off without much interest. Thieves were expected on the road and at wayside inns. Why else would the masters need Dreyens?



Gray mist hung in the air, blanketing the grubby town in a drab shroud when they left the inn. A chilled breeze stirred in the courtyard, toying with the horses' manes and whisking dried leaves across the damp cobbles. Viggo shivered irritably as he climbed up onto the carriage, although he was grateful that they were allowed to ride on top instead of inside. He still hadn't flushed the stale air of their room out of his lungs.

Cat took her place opposite him on the carriage roof, and they started off with a jolt.

She didn't look at him. Her eyes were fastened on the empty streets, the vacant, dark windows of the houses they passed, at the gray in the sky and the mud in the cobbles. It surprised him, sometimes, how easy it was for her to ignore him. He might have been invisible.

His throat tightened until he thought he might choke. He looked away. If he were with Dex, it would be different. She would have hated getting up so early, of course; she always did. Fourteen years he'd known her, fourteen years they'd risen at sunrise together, and still she couldn't shake the sleep out of her eyes until the sun was high overhead. She'd be asleep now, if she were with him, curled up with her head in his lap. He couldn't remember how many times she'd fallen

asleep like that in the early mornings or late at night. Whenever they'd had to wait for anything.

He wanted her here. Badly. He hated the silence around them, he hated the chill in the air and his damp clothes, and he hated the bitterness between himself and the woman who was supposed to be his partner. He stole a glance in her direction. Did she blame him for what had happened, for getting paired with him when neither of them wanted it? He didn't know. Dex did. He knew that much. It made it worse, somehow, knowing she would hold this against him, however long he spent missing her. What could he have done? Gone to Vladimer? Begged? He could have tried. But he doubted it would have done anything but earn him a few bruises.

“Can I ask you something?”

Her quiet voice sounded ridiculously loud in the predawn stillness. Viggo swallowed his shock and the guilt of thinking about Dex and shrugged. “Sure. What?”

Cat looked at him, her pale eyes as clear as the gray in the sky, and asked low, “Why did you help them?”

He frowned. “Help who?”

She hugged her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them tightly as if to create a barrier between the two of them. “The boys. The slaves that ran. You helped them, didn’t you? That’s what you were doing outside that night. During the storm.”

Viggo stared at her stupidly. “I—what?” His voice sounded odd in his own ears, strangled somehow, as if he could already feel the Pale Lady’s fingers around his throat. He tried to swallow, tried to sound unconcerned, and failed. “Why would I do something like that?”

She shrugged. Her eyes flicked away again, following the wind in the stunted trees, the swirl of the early morning mist through the dry grass. They’d left the grubby town behind them now, the Drunken Færie and the ugly, low miners’ huts fading into the trees. “I don’t know. You don’t have to tell me. I was only wondering.”

Viggo bit his tongue and looked away from her. The question hung in the air between them, and he was suddenly afraid that if he left it there unanswered, it might hang between them forever. Why was she asking now? If she’d known all along what he’d done, why wait until it was too late to condemn him for it? It had been weeks since he’d

thought of the Cymeran boy. He'd been so caught up in being assigned and in preparing for the masters' arrival that it had been easy enough to drive the thought out of his mind. Why dig it up now when it mattered so little? "I was—" The words stumbled out, but he stopped them before they could become a stammered excuse. She looked at him with those clear, clear eyes, and he swallowed hard. "Because he didn't deserve what they gave him. Not for running. And not for losing that fight. It wasn't his fault. He shouldn't have been there at all."

Cat studied him for a long moment, and when she looked away again he could see she was satisfied with the answer. "Okay."

Viggo licked his lips, summoning his own courage. "If you knew, why didn't you tell them? You could have."

Cat didn't look at him. The wind from the plains tugged at stray wisps of her hair. "Wasn't my business. I just wondered why you did it, that's all."

"I just—" He looked away from her, searching for something else to hold his gaze. His face was burning. He didn't want her to know this about him, not this of all his secrets, all his backward, stupid flaws. He'd rather she saw something else in him, something harder, something ... more

in line with the wolf in his chest. “I just thought he deserved a chance. That’s all.”

She nodded, and silence lapsed between them again, cold as the mist hanging in the morning air.



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IVRA

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**V**iggo lay on his back, his training tunic over his head and his eyes closed. Even through the woven material, the glare of the late afternoon sun glowed red through his eyelids. Heat pounded against his bare arms and chest and soaked into the thick black fabric of his trousers.

The persistent jolt and rattle of the carriage, a constant jogging motion that he'd come to detest in the last five days, held back the relief of sleep. A fierce headache, fueled by the heat and lack of water, pounded behind his eyes. Every bump in the road reawakened the pain. They'd emptied their waterskins an hour since, the heat leeching the moisture from their bodies faster than they could replace it. Now they had to wait until Fane decided it was time to stop for the evening.

Cat's foot bumped against his leg. "Viggo." Her voice sounded dry and croaky from the dust hanging in the air.

He grunted. She nudged him again. "Viggo, look at this."

The whole carriage jolted, and a steel vice seemed to clamp around his forehead. He groaned and draped his forearm over his eyes. "Shh, Cat. Leave the dead in peace."

Silence. He winced, wondering if he'd sounded more biting than he'd intended. Five days of constant companionship on top of the jerking, bouncing carriage had managed to get them on speaking terms with each other, but Viggo still felt like he was walking on eggshells whenever they spoke. He couldn't help wondering how long the tentative peace would last. Or if he wanted it to.

He sat up and ran his fingers through his sweaty hair, standing it on end. "Sorry." His voice sounded stiff, even in his own ears, and he bit his lip until he could make it civil again. "What is it?"

Cat didn't look much better than he felt. Her nose was sunburned an angry red, and wisps of honey blonde hair had come loose from her braid and stuck to her neck and forehead. She'd removed the black leather breastplate as well, and her white undershirt was soaked with sweat and caked with red dust from the road. She looked exhausted, but her blue eyes were dancing with mischief as she raised an eyebrow at him. "Nothing. I was just going to warn the dead that there were vultures gathering."

Viggo hacked out a laugh, but instantly cradled his head in his hands as the steel vice tightened. "Cat, don't make me



laugh. It hurts.”

She smiled and nudged his leg again. “Are you going to look?”

Viggo turned around. Shock stole his breath away, and for a moment he forgot his pounding head as he struggled to his knees for a better view.

In the last five days, the landscape around them had changed dramatically, shifting from mountain passes and thick pine forests to open plains and endless swaying grass. Farms had appeared, their wind-worn buildings dotting the landscape on both sides of the empty, dusty road. Viggo had gotten used to the sight of the small towns they passed through. He hadn’t given much thought to the dark smudge that had appeared on the horizon that morning. It hadn’t looked very impressive then, barely more than an indistinct shadow wreathed by the morning mist. As the day had worn on, he’d forgotten it, too preoccupied with shielding himself from the heat to care any longer.

Now, it was more than a dark smudge.

Only a few miles ahead of them, surrounded by the green and gold waving grass, lay the massive walls and towers of Cymera’s capitol city—Ivra. It sprawled across the ground

like an enormous anthill, the interior rising above the walls on a steep slope, a muddle of gabled rooftops and twisting streets. Foreshortened soldiers patrolled along the battlements, tiny figures compared to the soaring heights of the city. Flocks of birds hovered over the ramparts with crows and ravens and other scavengers looking for a free meal.

The enormity of the architecture was staggering. Viggo had lived his entire life in a one-room cabin, and the sheer size and breadth of the city ahead took his breath away. He couldn't take his eyes off it as they drew closer, his headache and thirst forgotten as he soaked it all in.

The roar of the Flumen river reached him, filling his ears and cooling the hot wind. The rushing torrent that twisted through the plains on its way to the sea was the perfect barrier against attack. It coiled around two sides of the city and created a natural moat before the wide gates. As they drew closer the roar deepened, drowning out the screaming cries of the crows. Their carriage started over the narrow bridge stretched across the water, jolting over the cobbled stones. Although he knew he shouldn't, Viggo scooted over to the side of the carriage and chanced a glance down. His stomach turned.

A steep canyon dropped away beneath them. Roaring, raging water sped by in a tumultuous surge of power, twisting and seething as it tumbled on in its race for the flatlands. The Flumen was at its narrowest point here. Black cliffs, wet with spray, dropped thirty feet before they disappeared beneath the surface, the jagged rocks worn away by the constant destruction of the water.

Viggo's fist clamped onto the carriage railing. His vision blurred. He pulled back, staring straight ahead with both hands clenched firmly on the railing.

Cat gave him an odd look. "Okay?"

The carriage lurched and swayed. His stomach heaved. "Fine."

She raised one eyebrow and shrugged, leaning over the edge to get a better look at the river. His stomach jerked, and he only just managed to stop himself from yanking her back. At last, they rolled off the bridge and toward the wide gates. He relaxed, tension draining out of his chest. Cat looked away quickly, but he caught the tail end of the smile she was trying to hide. His hackles rose. "It isn't funny."

"I'm not laughing."

“Yes, you are.”

She looked over at him with a repentant expression belied by the laughter hiding behind her blue eyes. “Sorry. Scared of heights?”

Viggo shrugged and looked away, his jaw tight with irritation. “Sometimes.”

He was going to say more, but the words were stolen from his tongue as they passed beneath the massive stone arch and entered the city of Ivra.

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The soaring stone arch blotted out the sun as they passed beneath it. Viggo glanced up at the steel teeth of the portcullis hanging over their heads, the gleaming black spikes streaked with silver. The coach jolted over the steel gateway, jarring him, and they were inside.

The smell hit him first, like a slap in the face. The stench of sewage and worse things rotting in the hot sun hung in the air like a foul haze. He gagged. The driver glanced back at him, a slight grin touching his coarse features. “Even the empire of the known world reeks of sewage on a hot day. Best get used to it, Guardian.”

*The empire of the known world.* Viggo pressed his shirt to his mouth and nose and stared around him with wide eyes at the chaos that was Ivra.

He'd pictured it in his head, of course. Hundreds of times. He'd spent hours imagining the shelved roadways rising on a steep grade and cobbled with dark stone, picturing the crooked rooftops and sloping gables, the enormous buttresses bracing the outer wall, all of them pieced together from snippets of old stories and tales he'd heard of this place.

What he'd never expected was the crush of hundreds of humans packed into the streets, jostling for position on the narrow walkways on both sides of the road.

Men and women, lords and peasants, merchants and beggars. Viggo saw dark-skinned Jamarick jostling side by side with freckled Cymerans; burly Maraj mercenaries bulled their way through the packed streets, and thin-faced Islans hawked their wares on every street corner. Every race, every nation, every culture had a representative here slogging through the mud.

And not just people. Dogs ran in packs, slobber dripping from loose jowls, and gaunt ribs tearing from beneath flea-bitten coats. Mule trains filed past laden with boxes and

baggage, regarding the world with doleful faces. Pigs grunted in the alleys, chickens pecked in the mud and filth. Swallows dipped and flitted about the twisted gables of the double story houses, their huge, untidy nests clustered among the gutters like enormous beehives.

The noise deafened him. So many lives, so many voices, all packed into one surging flood of unfamiliar faces and strange eyes.

He didn't know where to look first. A housewife leaned out a window above him, tossing the contents of a chamber pot into the streets. Someone below shouted, spitting curses into the air. Mud from reeking puddles in the street clung to the iron wheels and stuck to the horses' hooves, and a stone channel on one side of the road was flowing with filthy water. Flies and gnats swarmed over it in black clouds. Dark alleys, barely wide enough for a single person to wiggle through, twisted between the buildings. Beggars and drunks with rags swathed around their emaciated frames slumped in corners and in the hollows beneath stairs.

It was overwhelming and exhilarating. He glanced at Cat, but she had her head buried in her arms, knees pulled tight to her chest as if to block out the rush of sights and sounds. This

was another trait she had that he doubted he would ever understand. He couldn't take his eyes off of the new world unfolding around them.

The crush of people slowed the horses, continually impeding their progress. The driver shouted himself nearly hoarse, flicking his whip occasionally to get people out of their way, but it was nearly three hours before they left the crowds and reached the city's second level.

At last, up ahead, a secondary bulwark, smaller than the massive outer wall, but still impressive in its own right, cut between the buildings as if it had been dropped carelessly among them. The driver reined in outside the gates and spoke to a soldier who approached. The man called something over his shoulder and, with a great, creaking groan, the gates swung wide to admit them. They drove through.

Beyond, the city changed dramatically. Weatherworn wood was replaced with carved stone, the buildings rising in height and spreading apart for the alleys between. Trees lined the widened road, broad, leafy branches spreading overhead and casting cool shade like pools on the whitened cobbles. No beggars lurked in dark corners here. Rich gentry strolled the

streets, some clattering by on horseback or rolling past in coaches.

Viggo's curiosity vanished, replaced by a flood of shame. He jerked on his shirt hurriedly, his fingers fumbling as he tugged at the ties of his breastplate. Cat seemed bitten by the same embarrassment. She slipped her breastplate on over her head and shook out her braid, combing dust from her hair with her fingers. Her face was white beneath the sunburn, her eyes wide.

The driver glanced over his shoulder at them, his face grim, and said low, "Best be keeping your eyes to yourself from here on, Guardians. Wouldn't do to be caught staring, not where your master could hear about it."

Viggo's face burned, and he looked away. He'd been stupid for staring around like a child, instead of remembering who—and what—he was meant to be. He was supposed to know better.

The streets were smoother now, the jolting of the coach less pronounced. They passed street after street branching out from each other in a twisting labyrinth of stone and trees, wealth and power. The basilica, the holy of holies dedicated to the worship of saints long dead and a god without a face,



came into sight, rearing above the other buildings in towering, twisted spires of gray stone. Viggo couldn't help but steal a glance up at it as they passed, craning his neck to see the chiseled steeples and stained-glass windows. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the driver bowing his head and crossing himself as they passed beneath its shadow. He barked a soft laugh. God belonged to the humans. His head bowed only to the deity of his master.

Then the walls of the castle appeared through the mesh of branches and stone arches, and he forgot everything else.

White marble blazed in the sun, gold shining like fire. Snowy battlements rose above the city as pinnacles topping an empire. Towers gleamed, spiraling so high that they seemed to touch the clouds; golden domes nestled between them, rosy with glinting light. Their coach rattled nearer and the other buildings fell away; a deep moat filled with black fluid circled the castle's walls. They rolled across the bridge, the horses snorting and tossing their heads as they pulled to a stop, as if aware of how close they were to home.

The massive, blackened gates were open. A silver portcullis groaned, hidden gears protesting as it began to rise, clearing the way for them to enter.



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*THE MASTER'S HOUSE*

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**T**he silver lattice trembled over Viggo's head as they passed beneath it and entered the keep. Soldiers raised their heads, staring with blunt curiosity at him as they rattled past. Bright mail peeked from beneath their red surcoats, silver thread emblazoning their chests with the crest of the king: a rearing stallion silhouetted by a rising flame.

Viggo got the barest glimpse of it, curiosity prickling in his chest. Then the coach passed beneath another arch, and they entered the inner court of the castle.

Fountains graced the center of the huge courtyard. Beyond them, the bulk of the palace blotted out the sky, but the reflected light from the domed roof nearly blinded him. Marbled steps, flanked with pillars, led up to the double doors, no doubt leading straight to the throne room. Guards with plumed helms stood at the entrance, armed with halberds and bearing the same crest as the soldiers in the keep.

On each side of the palace, perpendicular to it and creating a partial square around the fountains, were two more mansions built in the style of the palace, although smaller. Their broad steps shone with the mist from the fountains.

The courtyard was eerily silent except for the music of falling water and the rattle of the carriage wheels. Marble statues stood in alcoves about the court, their stone figures carved with such detail that Viggo looked away, his face coloring. The soldiers standing guard among the pillars were just as still. Squares of crimson silk were tacked to their helms to conceal all but their eyes. They could have been statues themselves.

Viggo had expected more people. Servants, slaves, groomsmen, knights and their ladies—anyone, really. Not this silence.

“The assignment didn’t say anything about him living in the palace,” Cat murmured. She’d moved nearer to him, and he would have killed rather than admit to sharing the nervous tension he could see in her eyes.

He shrugged. “He probably has a house in the inner circle, too. Apartments here are more convenient if he’s got business.”

As if he would know. He bit his tongue, hoping she wouldn’t look at him as sarcastically as he deserved, but she said nothing.

The coach jerked to a stop, and the driver glanced back at them. “You’ll be getting off here. Thank you again, Guardian, for—” he touched the healing scar on his forehead and grimaced. “If you ever need anything—well, I owe you. Just say the word.”

Viggo shrugged on his rucksack, not quite looking at the man. He’d told them his name days ago—Corey, Viggo thought it was. Or Corrin. He couldn’t remember. He wasn’t sure how to answer him, or if he should. In the end, he said nothing at all, only swung down from the coach with his heart pounding oddly between his ribs.

Cat came after him, giving him a strange look, and the coach door swung open. Fane emerged, sweeping by them without a glance. Viggo pushed down the apprehension tightening his chest and followed, climbing the stairs, and entering the building behind their master. A rich entryway greeted them, again, as silent as a tomb, and huge, curving staircases flanked the wide hall, swirling up to a higher level. Fane led them up one of these and down a long corridor to a set of oak doors at the far end.

Two boys stood by the doors, dressed in pages’ uniforms and looking bored and weary. They snapped to attention when

Fane came nearer, pushing the doors open to let him enter, but their eyes were on Viggo, wide with captivated horror. Servant, slave, or farmer's son, children had a fascination with death. And those who carried it.

Inside, a fire burned in a marble hearth, and Fane's servants were gathered in the warm afternoon light that fell through broad windows. They stood before the fireplace, heads bowed. Viggo's gaze skipped over them with a trace of interest, storing their features for future reference. Two women with maid caps covering dark hair, a boy with ruffled red hair and ears that looked too big for his scrawny frame, a pigeon-toed older man, and a middle-aged woman with fierce features and a ring of keys hanging from her belt.

She was the one to step forward to take Fane's cloak and gloves when he entered. Her dark eyes flitted over Viggo quickly, hard scrutiny in her glance as she murmured, "Welcome home, my lord."

Viggo's chest tightened. Her steely glare reminded him of several of the trainers in the Core, women who had made his life miserable on more than one occasion. He'd taken more than one riding crop across the face for an ill-chosen word.

She didn't carry any such weapon, but from the look of her, he doubted very much that she needed one.

Fane poured himself a goblet of red wine from a crystal decanter on the table and took a long draft. "Your room is there." He gestured to a small door in the opposite wall. "Someone will come to show you to the training court shortly. Be back before full dark."

He disappeared through another set of doors. Questions bit at Viggo's tongue, but he swallowed them to be answered later. The door clicked shut behind his master, and the woman turned to look at him with such hostility that he almost stepped back, as if she might really have a riding crop hidden somewhere in her voluminous skirts. "I'm Amelia Corke, Lord Ravenstone's housekeeper. You'll take your orders from me when he's not here to give them."

She paused, as if expecting him to protest or to laugh at her. Viggo would rather have bitten his own tongue in two.

"You'll keep to your rooms, when you're not with the master, or to the training courts. I won't have you traipsing through here as if you owned it." She was looking at him as she said it. Him, and not at Cat, as if he were the threat to whatever peace they'd delved for themselves in this place.

Her lips pressed into a thin line. “And you’ll leave the maids be when they come to light the fires or otherwise for you. Is that understood?”

Viggo held her eyes, his heart thundering against his ribs. He felt like a fool, like a child being scolded for something he couldn’t remember doing, and somehow he didn’t feel brave enough to argue with her. Not then, anyway. Not with a headache grinding into the base of his skull and weariness blurring the thoughts in his head. He shrugged. “As you like.”

The rigid set to her shoulders relaxed, and she nodded. “You’ll find a meal in your rooms when you return from the courts.”

Then she was gone, with a rustle of silken skirts. Ignoring the now blatant stares of the servants, Viggo pushed open the door to their room and ducked his head to enter. Cat followed, her boots whispering softly on the bare floor inside.

It wasn’t much. A table stood in the corner, a pitcher and basin on its scarred surface. Shadows shrouded the corners, faint light leaking through a slitted window, bare of glass and open to the elements. Two beds filled half the room, a thin sheet strung between them for privacy.



Viggo tossed his rucksack beneath one of them and fell full length across the straw-tick mattress, burying his face in the homespun sheets. The tight knot between his shoulder blades loosened, and he closed his eyes, relief flooding his chest.

Finally.

\* \* \*

A soft tap on the oak door shook Viggo out of a doze. He raised his head, drawing himself out of the haze of sleep with difficulty. The light had gone. Shadows flitted in the corners of the room as if they had bled from the stones. He guessed he'd been asleep for a quarter of an hour, maybe less. Exhaustion still ached in his core.

The knock echoed again. Reluctantly, he dragged himself away from the embrace of the sheets and stumbled toward the door. Cat had rolled off her bed and was lying on the floor, her arm draped over her eyes. A smile bit at his mouth. He wiped it away and tugged the door open quickly.

Too quickly. The servant boy outside flinched back a pace, the color fading from his face. The freckles on his nose and cheeks stood out in stark contrast. "Beggin 'yer pardon, Guardian," he stammered, his eyes wide with equal amounts of fear and fascination, probably bred from stories told around

the fire after dark. Stories about black magic and bloody rituals, hellfire and the breath that Dreyens stole for their own purposes. There was a reason the common folk feared his race the way they did. “I’m to take yuh to the training court. Yuh ready?”

Viggo dragged a hand over his face, trying to wipe away the blur of weariness still pulling at him. “Yes. In a moment.”

He glanced back over his shoulder. Cat was at the basin, scrubbing dust from her face and neck. He ran his hand through his hair, half tempted to do the same, but dismissed the notion. He could wait.

She moved to join him, her blue eyes haunted with weariness. He gestured roughly at the boy. “Lead on.”

The boy nodded and scurried off, leading them out the main doors, across the hall, and down a side staircase so narrow that Viggo’s shoulders brushed the stones on both sides. Cobwebs hung from the wooden beams overhead like silver threads. They caught in his hair, sticking to his skin till he brushed them aside irritably.

The door they came out of didn’t open into the main courtyard as he’d been expecting, but rather into a kind of back alley hidden behind the mansion. The outer wall reared

in front of them, already turning black in the dimming light. It was crowded back here, as crowded as the courtyard in front had been empty. Servants wended their way along the alley, carrying bags and baskets, and pushing carts and barrels ahead of them.

The boy led them through the confusion, threading between bodies with precision born from practice. Viggo followed more clumsily. The hurried servants didn't clear out of his way as he'd expected, but a path always seemed to appear just before he got frustrated. Only once or twice was he forced to shoulder his way through to make room for himself and Cat.

At last, they emerged from the jumble. The boy dodged around a corner and stopped so suddenly that Viggo nearly tripped over him. "There it be. If'n you have trouble gettin' back, just ask one of them to show you to Lord Ravenstone's apartments." He jerked a thumb at the mesh of servants. "They'll know the way."

He scampered away, disappearing into the shadows.

Viggo swallowed the apprehension in his throat and stepped into the training court, leaving the dusky shadows of the alley behind.

They were behind the palace now. Viggo could see the faint bulk of the great dome looming overhead, black against the twilight sky. The court was nearly fifty yards across, spanning the distance between the palace and the outer wall and reaching into the gloom along its length. Torches cast a red glow along the walls, their light pooling on the rough cobbles and flickering among the shadows. Flaming braziers stood in the corners casting elongated shadows onto the walls.

But the shadows weren't the only occupants. More than twoscore Dreyens were scattered about the court, some huddled around the braziers, some practicing sword drills together, others kicking around a leather ball in the corner. They covered a wide range of ages and cores, a wider range than Viggo had ever seen in one place before. He hadn't expected to feel so ... *outnumbered* here. It hadn't occurred to him that the constant competition he'd always felt in the Core would translate all the way to Ivra.

All too obviously, it had. The second he stepped beyond the gloom, he could feel a dozen pairs of eyes fastened on him, gauging, assessing, evaluating. His throat was dry. He moved toward an empty brazier, feeling their stares like a physical barrier in his path. Cat was so close to him that he

could feel the loose material of her tunic against his side, but when he glanced at her, her expression was carefully calm and as vacant as an empty sky.

Viggo stopped by the fire and held his hands over the flame. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed one of the men playing kickball watching him. The ball came bounding toward the man and he trapped it deftly between his feet. Still, his eyes never left Viggo's face, and the speculation in them sent a warning shiver down his spine like the hand of a ghost. After a breath, the man kicked the ball aside and came over.

“New graduates?” The tone that accompanied the words was friendly. The smile was not. Two other men broke off from the game behind him and drifted over to join him.

Viggo looked the man over. He was maybe ten years Viggo's senior, possibly twelve, squint-eyed and dark-haired. Viggo's eyes flicked automatically for the man's right shoulder and the wolf head tattooed there. Some of the anxiety curling around his ribs eased. The wolf head was the symbol for Madira, lowest of the three lesser camps that trained bodyguards for politicians without noble blood. Viggo looked away. “That's right.”

“You look a little lost. Need directions?”

“No.”

The man clicked his tongue. “Well, I tried. What’d you bring?”

Viggo frowned. “What?”

“There’s a toll, stupid. You want to use the training court, you have to pay up. You have any money?”

Viggo looked at him for a long, long breath, and said low, “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t *think* you have any money?”

“I don’t *think* I have to pay you anything.”

One of the man’s mates laughed. “Arrogant, isn’t he? Come on, let’s finish the game.”

The Madirian didn’t move. The smile had vanished, and he spat on the cobbles, saying low, “Should know how to talk to your betters by now, boy. They didn’t teach you that where you’re from?”

Anger churned in Viggo’s chest. Warning too. He could feel others in the court watching the confrontation, waiting to see how he would react. He kept his gaze fastened on the dancing flames, red light reflecting in his black eyes. “They taught me how to know my betters. I was lucky.” He looked

at the man, right in his face, and let his contempt show through. “Some don’t learn it.”

The man’s face turned red, as if Viggo had hit him. One of his friends laughed, an ugly sound, and the man’s hand drifted for the knife on his belt. “Got a lot of nerve for a pup. Maybe you need a few more lessons.”

“Maybe I do.” Viggo turned on him, allowing a flicker of his anger to show in his eyes as gold flame. “Are you going to teach me?”

Firelight glinted off the gold ink on his shoulder, etching out the jet black of the scorpion. The man took a step back, the color draining from his face as he got a clear look at the tattoo for the first time. One of his mates swore under his breath, and both of them started backing away, one hissing, “Bloody ‘ell, but you can pick ‘em, Latch. You’re on your own with this one.”

They both disappeared. Viggo turned his gaze back to the Madirian, his eyes dark with anger, his face impassive. “Still have a lesson for me?”

The man swallowed and averted his eyes, taking a step back. “No.”

Viggo watched him walk away and turned back to the fire. Only then did he realize that Cat's jaw had tightened, and she was watching the man fade into the shadows out of the corner of her eye. She glanced at him. "His 'betters'?" Her voice was cold, as cold as it had been the day he'd met her.

He bit his tongue to stay the anger he could feel rising in him, anger sparked by the Madirian's conduct and Cat's obvious annoyance. "There's such a thing as social order here, even among Dreyens. Servants don't challenge lords."

"Obviously." The words slipped off her tongue with sharp sarcasm, stinging the cooling air like nettles. "I'll have to remember to keep my compass tattoo covered up so you won't mind me following you around."

"Just because—" His jaw locked, and he stopped himself. The response that had leapt to his tongue would have started a fight he knew neither of them would win. He bit it back, struggling to soften his tone into something less aggressive. "Lay off, Cat. There are rules here too, you know. Didn't you learn anything in Crainfell? About ranking and higher blood? I'm doing this for you, same as for myself. Do you really want to be shoved around every time we come in here?"

She didn't respond.



He looked away, hating the silence. She didn't understand—or wouldn't. Dex would have, he knew that much. She had as much pride in the tattoo on her shoulder as he did. More, maybe. He would never have had to correct her here. His heart pinched in his chest, and he discarded the thought before it could sting him again.

He looked up as a dark-haired man broke off from one of the smaller groups and wandered over to their brazier. His eyes went straight to Viggo's tattoo, and he grinned. "Fydera, eh? Sorry about the mutt heads. Sometimes it's hard to avoid them. Ace." He stuck out his hand. "I'm with the welcoming committee. Heard a new team was coming in today. Hoped you would make it before curfew. Everybody's been pretty anxious to get a glimpse of what's coming out of Fydera nowadays."

Viggo glanced at the coiled cobra tattooed around Ace's upper arm and smiled. "Viggo." He took Ace's hand with a firm shake. "Good to know you."

"Likewise." Ace turned his attention to Cat, his grin widening as he raised his eyebrows in question. "Now, your name I am extremely interested in hearing."

To Viggo's surprise, a slight blush touched her cheeks, and she didn't seem to know quite where to look as she took his hand. "Caitlyn. Or Cat. Just Cat."

"My pleasure, Caitlyn." He winked and looked back to Viggo. "Just get in today?"

"Only about an hour ago. Lord Ravenstone took us on. Know him?"

Ace nodded. "Know of him. We pass each other every so often." His smile flashed at Cat again. Viggo's jaw tightened. "Since you're new, I'll do you a favor. Shower rooms are through those doors." He pointed out two wooden doors set in the wall. "It's getting dark fast, so you'll want to go quick. It'll be your only chance to clean up before tomorrow night." He backed toward the brazier he'd left. "We're over here when you finish."

The shower rooms were small, nothing like the huge communal shower lodge at the Core. The tiny five-by-five room that Viggo entered had a drain in the floor and a pump and bucket in the corner. Rough towels hung on the wall, and a tub of soft soap sat on a shelf by the door. The only light came from a dim lantern hung overhead, its tin sides letting

out swaying pinpoints of light that danced along the rock walls. Damp steeped the room in chilly darkness.

Viggo washed hurriedly, sluicing water over his head and rinsing the dust from his skin and hair. The icy floor and freezing water sent shivers down his spine, cooling his burnt shoulders and neck. The headache that had been pounding at the base of his skull faded to a distant memory.

The sky was dark when he stepped out again, and white stars were beginning to pierce the dusky blue. Cat had finished before him. He could see her slender form outlined by the red firelight of a brazier, dwarfed next to Ace's tall frame. She looked like a child standing there, small enough to be a servant girl, instead of one of the guardians wandering the court. Misgiving shivered down his spine, and he jogged over to join them, hoping that wouldn't play against him here.

If it did, there was nothing he could do about it. He was stuck.

They both were.

"It's been a while since we've had a lady of your rank around," Ace was saying. "I hope you don't mind that it's mostly men around here. I'm always around to help if you have trouble."

Viggo bit his tongue to silence a bitter retort. She would go to the other man before she came to him, anyway. He shoved his hands into his pockets, trying to look casual as he joined them. Cat barely glanced at him. Her hair was wet and braided up again. The shower seemed to have rinsed away the exhaustion he'd seen in her face earlier. She raised an eyebrow at the other man. "What if you're the one causing the trouble?"

He laughed, taking the deflection good-naturedly. Her smile softened. "You're from Dunharrow. When did you graduate?"

Viggo warmed his hands over the fire. The blue in Cat's eyes sent irritation wriggling down his spine, and he found himself resenting how easily she could talk to anyone but him. It would never have been like this with Dex, he knew. He'd known her too well, known her habits, her coy, hollow flirting too fully to think she ever meant anything by it.

Ace tossed a pebble into the fire. "Five years ago. I was commissioned for His Lordship Archduke Thorne, head of Dreyen consignment. Not the most interesting sort of work, but it has its thrills."

"What kind of thrills?" Viggo looked up quickly.

“Nothing much. Occasional threats. Jilted lovers, crazy aunts, that kind of thing. I’ve caught a slap or two over the years.” He grinned, his eyes going back to Cat as if to see if she would laugh. “We do get excitement every once in a while. Drunk brawls and the like. Ravenstone will be good for that sort of thing, you’ll see. With his reputation, I’m surprised he managed to land the two of you. Bodyguards are expensive.”

Ace’s partner, a short, dark man with a heavy build, stifled a laugh. Viggo bristled, not liking the smirk on Ace’s face or his tone of voice. “I don’t see why that should be any trouble for him.”

Ace shot his partner a conspiratorial grin and shoved his hands in his pockets. “You’ll find out soon enough, I guess. Ravenstone is a man of ... expensive tastes. Rumor is he spends a good deal more time around the card table than is good for his pocket.”

Viggo looked back at the fire. “I didn’t realize bodyguards paid so much attention to rumors.”

Ace held up his hands in submission. “I’ll let you make your own opinions of him. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.

I'd keep out of his way when he's been drinking and losing at the tables. Nights like that make a man nasty."



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ARCHDUKE

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**T**he smell of woodsmoke and the faint click of flint on steel woke him.

Someone moved on the other side of the room, steps shuffling on the stone floor. Wood scraped on stone. His eyes flicked open. He sat up with a jerk, the hunting knife hidden beneath his pillow hissing as it left its sheath.

The woman crouching beside the small fireplace opposite him whirled around, dropping the flint and steel with a loud clack onto the hearth. Her hand flew to cover her mouth, wide eyes fastened on the knife in his hand. She stammered, "I'm sorry! I was only lightin' the fire up. Didn't mean to disturb yuh none."

Her voice had an odd, lilting melody about it, softer than the servant boy's rough brogue. Viggo tossed the knife onto his covers and ran a hand over his face, trying to push away the haze of sleep. "It's fine," he said gruffly, his voice harsh as sandstone.

She was on her feet now, edging for the door. Even half asleep, Viggo could feel her fear in the room like another soul. Her words tumbled out of her mouth just a fraction too fast. "I left food there, on the table. Master'll be up in an hour or so.



If'n yuh leave yur dirty clothes on the floor, I'll see that they're washed for yuh."

He tossed the covers aside and stood. Her face paled, and her hand dropped into the front pocket of her apron, clenching into a fist. Knife. "You won't need that."

Her eyes darted for the door, like prey trapped in a corner, and she straightened her back and moved toward it, her hand still clenching the knife in her apron pocket. He waited until the door shut behind her to pick up his hunting knife from the bed and sheath it.

Humans.

A husky laugh, still on the edge of sleep, floated through the curtain dividing the room. "You're scaring the natives."

"All I did was stand up."

He heard a thump as Cat rolled off her bed and landed on the floor. Her voice sounded boyish, like her throat had roughened in the night. "Very threatening. First prelude to an attack."

He laughed and jerked his tunic over his head, pushing hair out of his eyes as he moved to investigate the food the servant had left for them. "I won't stand up next time." The curtain

between their beds moved, and he froze, heat flushing into his face as he pulled back and asked awkwardly, “You decent?”

That low, husky laugh filtered through the curtain again. “Hold on. I don’t have my boots on yet.”

Viggo rolled his eyes and stepped beyond the curtain, helping himself to fresh bread and smoked pork. “Very funny.”

“I thought so.”

She was still lying on the floor beside her bed, half twisted in her blankets, with her forearm over her eyes. He quirked an eyebrow, speaking through a mouthful, “Are you going to get up?”

“It’s doubtful.”

“There’s food.”

“Dead people aren’t known for eating much. I’ll probably just lie here and waste away to bones. Thanks.”

He laughed. “Well, I’ll leave you some, just in case you decide to return to the land of the living.”

The water in the pitcher was cold. He sloshed a careful half of it into the basin, leaving the rest for her, and scrubbed his face and neck, glancing over his shoulder as she rose. Her hair was loose and tousled by her pillow, lines from the sheets

pressed into her cheek. He grinned. “Are you always so perky in the morning?”

She squinted at him sourly. “Yes. It’s a habit. Do you always chatter the moment you wake up?”

Viggo shrugged cheerfully, moving back to his side of the room. He pulled the rucksack out from beneath his bed. “It’s a habit.”

His spare uniform was at the very bottom, crumpled beneath his dress uniform and a few other odds and ends. He pulled it out, tugged his long-sleeved shirt off, and donned the clean tunic. As he reached for the leather vambraces lying where he’d dropped them, his eyes caught on the streaked flesh of his forearms, the marred skin usually so well concealed beneath the dark leather. His stomach twisted and, without invitation, the ghosts that clung to the marks began to whisper. Their soft voices hissed with malice, curling around his chest, caressing his skin with gentle fingers, penetrating his heart with addicting pain.

Cat moved on the other side of the curtain. His heart jerked. He yanked the vambraces over the streaks, silencing the voices instantly. His heart was pounding. But she hadn’t seen. There was a curtain between them. She hadn’t seen.

He pulled his breastplate on and stepped out from behind the partition, still tugging on the laces. “Ready?”

She turned away from him swiftly, but not before he caught the flash of bare shoulders. He jerked his head away, color rushing into his face as he pulled back behind the curtain. “Sorry,” he said quickly, his cheeks flaming.

She came out combing her fingers through her hair and plaiting it into a thick braid. One shoulder lifted in a shrug, and she forced an awkward smile. “S’okay. Not a big deal.”

He swore under his breath, cursing himself for embarrassment that he couldn’t laugh off, for the red in his face and the way he couldn’t meet her eyes. It wasn’t supposed to be like this, not this hard, not this uncomfortable. He was supposed to know his partner, to trust her, to be friends with her. If he’d done that to Dex, she’d have thrown something at him, her pillow or one of her boots, and he could have laughed it off and forgotten it. With Cat—he didn’t know what to do. Apologize again? Ignore it and pretend he wasn’t embarrassed?

In the end he did neither.

“Here.” He stripped a sheet from his bed and fastened one end to the pole holding up the partition between their beds. He hooked the other end on a nail in the opposite wall, enclosing

her bed. “There you are. Private chambers. Now I don’t have to check before I come out.”

She smiled and raised an eyebrow at him. “Is that for you or me?”

“Me. Definitely.” He forced a smile, hoping she wouldn’t notice how red his face still was, and buckled on his sword, moving for the door. “Ready?”

\* \* \*

The sun was still rising over the walls when Fane took them to the palace stables. Three men waited for him there, holding the halters of two prancing, shying mares whose coats shone in the morning light. Grooms hurried past bearing leather saddles and armloads of sweet hay, and stable boys swept loose straw and manure into steaming heaps.

One of the men, a groom with more gray in his hair than black, pressed a hand to his mare’s chest, moving her back a pace or two. “Best stock we’ve got, my lord. She’ll win plenty in the races. Has good blood.”

The mare’s eyes rolled, whites showing as she danced sideways. Viggo bit his tongue, hoping the groom and his master wouldn’t realize that the smell of the wolf was setting

her off. It was on him, on his clothes and in his hair, its soul stirring in his breast, and the horses could sense it. He'd drive half of them wild if he stayed here long, but he wasn't about to tell Fane that.

Fane caught one of the mares' halters, pulling her head down to look at her teeth. He grimaced. "Older than you told me."

The groom shook his head. "No more than two, my lord, that's all. She'll run for a long time yet."

Fane released her and moved around, running his hand down the other's flank. "Will they both run this week?"

"Both, my lord. And they'll win too, like as not."

Fane nodded, an inward, speculative look darkening his eyes. Viggo shifted uneasily, remembering Ace's comments about his master's expensive tastes. He hadn't expected Fane to be the gambling sort, not with the land he owned and the position he held.

It seemed even lords had their weaknesses.

"Placing bets, Ravenstone?" A man came out of the stables, wiping his hands on a cloth. "I didn't think you were back yet."

Fane turned and bowed, his face a mask of frozen courtesy as he said, “We returned last night, Your Highness.”

Your Highness. Viggo glanced at the man, a shock running through him. He didn’t look like royalty. If it hadn’t been for Fane’s grudging respect, Viggo would have taken him for a groom or one of the trainers who tamed the colts they brought in from the south. He was young. Younger than Fane, anyway, and as slim as boy, with light brown hair and an easy manner.

He noticed Viggo’s scrutiny. Amusement passed through his dark eyes, and he said easily, “Looks like you were successful.”

“Perfectly.” Fane’s tone had ice in it.

“Not an easy journey. You made good time.”

Something moved in the shadow of the stable behind him, and Ace and Brand appeared, moving to a discreet distance from their master. Ace flashed a quick grin in Cat’s direction.

Archduke Silas Thorne, then. Viggo had been expecting an old man, bloated and bejeweled, hidden away in an office in the palace with servants waiting on his every need. Not a young man who looked more soldier than lord. The only hint to the power he kept at his fingertips was a silver rose stitched

into the right breast of his tunic, so pale that it was barely visible.

Thorne leaned back against a hitching post, wincing slightly as his left leg took his full weight for a breath. His eyes were on Viggo again, as if Fane were no longer there. “Name?”

“Swifter, Your Highness.” Viggo bowed his head.

Thorne nodded, as if the name meant something to him. “Oh yes. Vladimer’s trophy child. He’s been bragging on you since you were eleven.”

Viggo’s face flushed.

“Vladimer is known for exaggerating his successes.” Thorne straightened up, wincing again. He moved with a limp, as if from an old wound, or the memory of one. “I’m interested to see if what he said holds up.” His gaze flicked over to Cat, and he frowned. “You’re the transfer I authorized.”

She inclined her head, her expression inscrutable. Watching her out of the corner of his eye, Viggo found himself impressed with her unflustered calm. She didn’t seem shaken by Thorne’s scrutiny.

Personally, he felt like a child who’d been caught stealing from the kitchens.



“Interesting pairing. I wouldn’t have chosen it myself, but Vladimer Hunt always did have an instinct for these things.”

Viggo would have laughed if he hadn’t known what it would cost him. He would have sworn on his own soul that Vladimer had made the decision over a bottle of wine in a spiteful mood. It was meant as a punishment, that was sure enough, and thus far, it had proved to be just that.

“You come from good stock, Ashcliff,” Thorne told her. “I took a gamble on you. Don’t disappoint me.”

Fane seemed to grow tired of being ignored and barked a harsh laugh. “You can’t pretend to be able to tell these creatures apart, Your Highness, surely? They’re pets. One dog is the same as another.”

A slight smile twitched at the corner of Thorne’s mouth, and there was mockery in his eyes when he looked at Fane. “I know my business. Maybe you should pay so much attention to yours.”

Fane went very still. “I can’t pretend to know what you mean, Your Highness.”

Viggo shifted, anxiety rising as the tension between the two men rose. Thorne shoved his hands in his pockets and

shrugged. “Rumors. Nothing serious. Oversights happen, and we’ve all been late with taxes before. I’m sure you’re busy.”

“That isn’t your business,” Fane hissed.

Ace moved a step closer, and the air seemed to snap with brittle anger. Thorne smiled again without humor, and said low, “I wouldn’t be so sure. A few more quarters like the last one, and it will be my business.” He nodded in Viggo’s direction. “Dreyens like these don’t come cheap.”



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INK AND MOLTEN WAX

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**I**t's been a wet year, Lordship." The man twisted his cap between his grimy hands, his eyes on the floor. "The crops we planted beginnin 'of this quarter rotted in th 'fields. We barely saved enough to feed our families."

His voice was coarse with the lilting accent of the southern plains. Viggo ran his eyes over the serf's patched clothing and thick, hobnailed boots. He was still mud-stained from his journey, his rough beard and draggled hair damp with rain. The musty stench of sheep and wool and manure clung to his clothing, overlaying the smell of wine and parchment, ink and wax that normally filled Fane's office. Viggo glanced sideways at Cat to see if she noticed it. From the way her nose was scrunched, he guessed she did. He looked away, biting back the sudden urge to smile.

Fane leaned back in his chair and picked up the crystal decanter, pouring red wine into his goblet. "This season it was too wet, last season it was too dry. You have a lot of excuses, Achard. That seems to be all you have."

The peasant's eyes darted furtively to the crystal decanter, and he swallowed, twisting the wool cap between his fingers more fervently. His hands were rough and scarred, dirt

embedded in his fingernails. Hunger had etched its scars into his face, biting deep into his skin and sharpening his cheekbones. Viggo could see it in his soul like a disease. “The flocks did well, Lordship,” he said, licking chapped lips. “Lambing season treated us right ’n proper. We didn’t lose but maybe four or five th ’whole year. Brought a hundredweight of wool with me to sell at market.”

Annoyance flickered through Fane’s face. He swore under his breath, his fingers tapping restlessly on the bound ledgers spread on the desk in front of him. “Taxes are twice the amount on wool as they are on grain. Half my revenue is going straight into the king’s coffers.”

The peasant lowered his eyes, mumbling a response. Viggo glanced down at the ledgers beneath Fane’s hand. Neat columns of numbers and figures gleamed on the parchment, and rich black ink glistened in the sunlight streaming through the windows. The accounts from Fane’s land holdings, no doubt. Viggo skimmed through them out of boredom, adding the figures in his head. A week. One week, and he already hated the hours spent standing at Fane’s shoulder listening to peasants drivel on about crops and watching his master write letters.

Fane picked up his silver-tipped quill and dipped it into the inkwell. “You said a hundredweight of wool?”

The man nodded. “A hundredweight, Lordship. We brought sixty head to market as well.” He pulled a leather pouch from his belt and placed it on the desk. The chink of coin sang softly as he pushed it toward Fane. “Ten silver a head. The king’s tax on stock—”

Fane barely glanced at it, waving it aside as if the sum were a pittance. “We won’t mind about that. Some stock are sold every quarter, good year or not. We don’t trade in stock.”

Viggo narrowed his eyes and glanced down once more, watching the quill dance across the fine parchment.

Baled wool, fiftyweight: half crown per weight ...

A wriggle of suspicion went through his chest. He glanced up at the serf. The man met his eyes, as if he’d been staring at him. Annoyance bit hard into Viggo’s chest. He bared his incisors in a ruthless smile, gold flickering through his dark irises. The man’s face paled beneath the dirt. He dropped his gaze quickly, making a discreet sign to ward off evil. A wry smile touched the corner of Viggo’s mouth.

He focused his eyes on the far wall and tried to relax, letting the dull time flow around him, but an itch in the back of his mind refused to leave him in peace.

Baled wool, fiftyweight ...

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When the last glow of sunlight faded behind the curtains, Fane snapped his ledgers shut and rose, looking older and wearier than he had that morning. Viggo took a step back out of the man's way as he pushed his chair back and picked up his wine glass, draining what was left in a long draft.

"I have business in the city tonight," Fane said peremptorily. The fatigue marked his face like the lines of a skull, and his eyes were very dark. "Be ready to leave in ten minutes."

No dinner then. Not until late, at least. Viggo cursed under his breath, and their master disappeared into his rooms without a backward glance. Cat vanished through their door immediately, eager for any kind of break, no matter how short. Viggo moved to follow her and hesitated, lingering in the empty office. A soft breeze stirred the curtains, shifting through them with a hissing sigh, and the light of the candle on the desk flickered.

Baled wool, fiftyweight ...

He'd known thieves in the Core. Slaves, mostly. Men who were there to pay the debts they'd incurred with their quick fingers and lying tongues. They were peasant-born, though. Low blood and lower souls.

Not lords.

Viggo glanced at the doors to Fane's room and crossed back to the desk, flicking open the heavy leather-bound ledger lying there. The candle on the desk sputtered, nearly going out. He moved it away from the breeze coming from the window, shielding it with his body as he skimmed through the columns of figures flowing across the parchment.

Baled wool, fiftyweight.

No stock sold.

His stomach twisted, and he remembered the mockery in Thorne's eyes when the man had looked at his master. The ugly, knowing laugh from Ace's partner when he learned who they bowed their heads to, and Ace's smirking grin. What happened to men—lords—who cheated the king out of his rightful share of their land's earnings? He couldn't remember that sort of theft ever being addressed in all his studying.



Peasants stole. Beggars too.

Not lords.

He flipped through several more pages, searching for something else, anything that might explain what he'd seen—or prove it beyond the doubt in his mind.

He didn't find anything. Probably wouldn't. Fane was too clever for that. No doubt the only people who would guess at the slights were the ones with him day in and day out.

Himself, really. He doubted Cat would notice or care much.

Which left him to ask if he really did care. The king's coffers weren't his business. Fane's safety was.

Although, he'd never counted debtor's prison as one of the more likely threats from which he'd have to protect his master.

The door to Fane's room opened, and his master emerged, wrapping a cloak edged in fur around his shoulders. Viggo snapped the ledger shut and took a quick step back, spilling the candle over as he did.

The wick hit the table and snuffed itself out. Wax pooled on the desk, dripping to the floor.

Fane froze. A taut silence stretched, and Viggo nearly choked on the garbled explanation he wanted to blurt out, as if there were actually something that he could say that would excuse him snooping in his master's private papers.

At last, Fane shrugged on his cloak and raised an eyebrow at him. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir," Viggo said hoarsely.

Fane nodded, pulling his gloves on, his face inscrutable. "Get your partner, then. Let's go."

Viggo turned away, cursing himself beneath his breath for the way he was trembling. Gods. He really was such a coward. Fane hadn't so much as shouted at him, but he felt like he always did after Vladimer Hunt had knocked half the senses out of his head. He swallowed, shoving open the door to their room, and tried to push the incident out of his head. Cat looked at him as strangely as if every thought in his head were scrawled across his face for her to read. "What happened?"

"Nothing," he snapped shortly, and winced as resentment flamed up in his breast, burning a hole between his ribs as he said it. He shouldn't have to deal with this alone, that was the trouble. He would have told Dex immediately, and she would,

just as quickly, have known what to do. She always did. She was quick and logical and always had an answer for him, no matter what the trouble. A ruthless one, usually. One without pity or compassion of any kind, but the right answer anyway. She thought like a Dreyen, like a bodyguard. Better than he did.

But Dex wasn't here, and he couldn't trust his partner. Not for something like this.

Not for anything, really. She cared about herself. Not Fane, and not him. And who could trust someone like that?



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*SHEPHERDS AND SHEEP*

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**T**hree days later, Viggo still carried the sting of guilt in the back of his mind, as if his master's theft were his own. Fane said nothing about his ledger or Viggo's blunder, and the matter passed uneasily.

On the morning of the fourth day, Fane took them with him when he went to visit his landholdings.

The village they were aiming for looked lost and out of place in the rugged plains, as if the wind had picked up the small collection of huts and tossed them there overnight. Viggo straightened in the saddle, watching it appear from among the blowing, waist-high grass. A few wizened, twisted trees dotted the landscape. The smoke rising above the huts was soon whisked away by the ever-blowing wind.

It looked more like a graveyard than a village.

Fane rode just ahead of him, cloaked in rich crimson and riding a heavy-footed bay. Silver gleamed on its breastcollar and studded the reins. Viggo traced his eyes down the fine lines of the bay, estimating the cost of such a beast, and hissed under his breath as his own mount tossed its head and danced sideways, shying at the wind. Stupid creature. He hated riding. After a full day in the saddle, he'd be struggling

to walk tomorrow. Besides that, the stupid animal had smelled the wolf on him almost from the moment he touched it. It had been uneasy and sweating since they left this morning. He could hear the three men-at-arms following them laughing about it.

Cat had been laughing, too, earlier. Viggo glanced at her. Her face was set now, and her eyes had emptied. The hot wind had torn apart her braid, and loose tendrils whipped around her cheeks, sticking to her lips. Her nose was sunburned again. She looked tired, as if the wind and sun had drained her. He opened his mouth to ask if she was all right but shrugged and looked away again.

He doubted anything he could say would make a difference.

Viggo could feel eyes on them as soon as they passed the first hut and rode into the village. Hungry, weary, wary eyes. Eyes that saw his sword before they saw him. The people fell silent as they passed. Women stepped out of the huts or emerged from fenced gardens to stare, and children hung back as if fear had been introduced to them far, far too early. Some of the youngest hid their faces in their mothers' skirts as if that could make the armed men disappear more quickly. Fear

hung in the air and stained their eyes dark. Hatred too. Hatred when they looked at his master, hatred when they bowed their heads to the men-at-arms, hatred when they stole glances in his direction. Hatred and fear. He'd seldom seen one without the other.

Fane rode right through the weathered village and into the square. A man came to meet him, bowing from the waist as Fane dismounted. Viggo swung down as well, cursing under his breath as his stiff muscles protested. The peasants had come into the square behind them, clustering in silent groups beside the huts. Viggo rolled his shoulders, easing the ache in his spine, and glanced around at them. They wilted beneath his gaze, looking away and pressing two fingers to their lips and hearts to ward off evil. The men-at-arms had come to ensure that Fane had no trouble on the roads, but here in the village the presence of the Dreyens would be enough to quell any sign of rebellion.

Men out here knew better than to challenge devil's brats. They lived close enough to hell as it was.

The man who had come to meet Fane was missing his left hand. Only the stump of his wrist remained, ugly scars stretching up his forearm. A poacher. Probably in his younger

days, by the look of the scar. His eyes were on the ground, servile and beaten, but Viggo could see the lines of hate in his face too. He was speaking, but Viggo had to strain to make out the words, as if they dropped from his tongue straight to the mud beneath his boots. “Bad time o’the year to be gettin’ so much rain, my lord. Hurts the crops, and more besides. Flocks have done well by it, leastways.”

Viggo tuned out the words. He’d heard the same in every village they’d passed through today. Not enough. Too much. It made his head ache. Instead, he glanced sideways at Cat. She wasn’t looking at him; her eyes were locked on a hut to their right.

A woman stood in the yard, her feet bare and a child in her arms. A girl, he thought, although from this distance it was hard to tell. Her thin hair was so pale it was almost more white than blonde.

Cat was staring at her. She’d gone stone white. Out of the corner of his eye, Viggo caught one of the men-at-arms staring at her, a frown darkening his brow. Viggo glared at him until he looked away and bumped Cat with his shoulder, hissing under his breath, “Stop.”



She jerked her gaze back to Fane, shaking off whatever kind of trance she'd been in. Color flooded into her face again, her lips tightening with anger. Odd. He tucked it away for later, resolving to ask what it was about the woman that had taken her interest.

Fane was talking. Viggo could hear the anger in his master's voice, anger fueled by frustration. "You had twice the head of sheep the last time I was here. What happened to the rest?"

Viggo's gaze snapped around to the peasant, waiting to hear his answer. The man stared at the ground. His face was haggard beneath the dirt, his dark hair streaked with premature gray. Hunger had stripped the bulk from his muscle and the youth from his features. "We sold some, lordship," he murmured. The fingers on his remaining hand were clenched, the knuckles white. Fear or anger? Probably both. "In th' spring. We lost some, too, to wolves. Packs ha 'been bad this year."

Viggo winced inwardly. Fane stepped back, his sharp features twisting with disdain. "It seems the only crop you manage to tend well here is children. Perhaps I should take a few to pay your debts."

A stone dropped into Viggo's stomach. He saw only them now, as if Fane's words had painted horrible red marks across their faces. Children. Boys with bare chests and bare feet, their scraggly hair cut short and ragged. Girls in threadbare dresses carrying naked babies on their hips. He saw them standing in doorways and clustered behind garden fences. Younglings barely able to walk, and elders with their hair tied up. Smudged faces, dirty feet. Huge eyes.

And he saw their fear. Fear clung to their little bodies like a disease.

Fane turned his back, nodding to the men-at-arms. Some of the women cried out. The woman Cat had been staring at fell to her knees, clutching her daughter to her chest, and let out a keening wail. One of the men-at-arms started toward her, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Wait!" The man that had been talking to Fane stumbled after him and fell to his knees, pressing his forehead to the ground. "Wait, lordship, please! We'll have it, I swear! Everything we owe by the end of the quarter. I swear it will be done! Please!"

Fane looked down at him as if he were a mongrel groveling in the dust. For one frozen moment no one moved. Viggo's

heart jerked in his chest. *Please*, he found himself thinking, as if it might help, *a few months. Give them a few months.* His blood was pounding, bile rising in his throat. The woman was sobbing, her cries cutting into his flesh like shards of glass. He didn't want to be a part of this.

At last Fane stepped around the man, moving to mount his horse. "Till the end of the quarter. No longer!"

Relief surged into Viggo's chest, and he moved to mount his horse as well, hating the way his knees were trembling. The animal shied under him. He hissed at it, trying to ignore the uncomfortable realization that Fane owned more than just land. He owned people as well.

And Viggo himself was one of those people.

The wind followed them home.

Viggo listened to it until it crept into his soul, keening like the wails of the woman dreading the loss of her child. Nausea roiled in his gut. He closed his eyes to the passing plains and tried to forget what he'd seen, tried to tuck it away or leave it behind in the blowing grasses.

It didn't work, it never did, but he tried anyway.

Fane rode ahead with the three men-at-arms in front of him. Thick clouds had begun to tumble overhead, driven south by the strengthening wind. Rain was coming. Viggo could smell it. Hopefully they'd be home before it hit.

Cat rode beside him as silent as if the wind had swallowed her voice, either today, or perhaps sometime in the past. She never spoke to him anyway. He glanced sideways at her a few times and said, more abruptly than he'd intended, "Who was the woman?"

"Nobody."

He frowned. "You were staring at her. She must have been somebody."

Cat didn't look at him. Anger was written into every line of her body, as if it had been there all along and he'd only just now noticed it. "I told you. She's nobody."

Irritation began to scratch at the back of his neck. "Then why were you—"

She wrenched her horse around, jerking it to a stop in front of him. "Get off my back!" she hissed. "I'm not your bloody subordinate!"

Viggo reined in as well, cursing as his horse laid its ears back and shied. “What are you talking about?” he spat back, his own anger rising. “All I did was ask—”

“You corrected me in front of everyone for *looking* at someone!” Cat flung the words at him in a heated whisper, pure fury blazing in her blue eyes. “You haven’t spoken to me *in two days* except to correct me! You talk to Ace and Brand and everyone in the entire bloody training court, but every time you look at me it’s nothing but ‘fix this, don’t do that!’”

Viggo stared at her, and shame rose to his cheeks. No, he was sure—

“I’m bloody sick of it!” Cat was shaking now, and he could hear the tears in her voice, although he doubted she wanted them there. “I’m not Dex, and I refuse to apologize to you for that! *It’s not my fault!* If you can’t live with that, at least have the decency to shut your mouth once in a while!”

She jerked the horse around and clapped her heels to its sides, riding on ahead to catch up with Fane. Viggo stayed where he was, stunned by the sudden onslaught, and desperately trying to remember having spoken to her in the last two days. He had ... hadn’t he? He must have. Of course he had.

Fane called to him. He nudged his horse forward, cursing himself and this entire blasted situation to the very blackest corner of hell where it belonged.



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*NOT DEX*

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**V**iggo lay on his bed staring up at the ceiling and listening to the silence—sharp, bitter silence that scarred the stones and bit into his soul. Dusk had fallen, and rain pattered against the wooden shutters outside, drumming like the murmur of a thousand voices. All accusing. All resentful. All angry.

Cat had disappeared behind her curtain the moment they returned home. Their evening meal sat cold and forgotten on the table. Viggo didn't have the stomach for it. The silence pressed into his chest, into his lungs. He still smelled of horse. Horse and sweat and dust. His lower back and legs ached from riding, and his heart ached from the silence. From the silence, and from his own guilt. He'd spent so much time lecturing others on how important partners were, how badly they needed each other, but now, in his own room with his own partner, he couldn't fathom how to make it work. The curtain between their beds might have been a stone wall.

The fire hissed and spat, sparks popping as the rain came down the chimney. Viggo swallowed, trying to find his tongue to speak. The words hung in his throat, angry words, rueful words, words that struggled between apologies and



pride, bitterness and remorse. At last, he swallowed them all and whispered, “Cat?”

His voice hung in the silence. The fire popped, yellow sparks scattering across the bare floor like a handful of stars. They burned red for a moment, lighting up the worn stone, and died away. He bit his lip, closed his eyes.

“What?” she said at last. Her voice sounded raw. Like she’d been crying.

His chest hurt. He pressed against the silence, feeling like he had to force the words off his tongue. “I know you aren’t Dex.”

“That’s painfully obvious.”

He winced. “No, I just meant,” he clenched a handful of his rough blanket, digging his fingers into the wool, “you don’t have to apologize for it. I don’t ... I wasn’t expecting that. I’m sorry.”

Silence. Silence so raw that it hurt to breathe, hurt to think, hurt to *be*. He closed his eyes, listening to the rain’s gentle encouragement. He wished he could open the shutters over the window and let it in, let it talk to him. Let it tell him how to fix this.

The rain whispered on. *I don't know you*, he told Cat silently, *I don't know how to apologize for this, or make it up to you, or even how to fight you without making this even worse*. He barely even knew how to talk to her. She was right, of course. He couldn't remember speaking to her at all in the last few days. His guilt over Fane's ledger had taken up everything, all his thoughts, and he'd been too preoccupied to realize that she would notice.

He cleared his throat. "Cat?"

Another long silence. The rain whispered.

"Yes?" Her voice was so soft he had to strain to hear it.

"What was Crainfell like? Did you like it there?"

A spider had taken up residence in the corner above his bed. Its web shone silver and red in the uncertain firelight, heavy with dust and gloom. He stared at it, tracing the slender lines with his eyes as he waited for her to answer.

"No," she said at last. "I didn't like it. People lied. They smiled in your face and drew a dagger when your back was turned. Everything was about power, about gaining an advantage over someone else. Everyone lied."

“Everyone?” He heard her stir on the other side of the room, her mat squeaking in the silence.

“Everyone.” Her voice sounded muffled now, as if her face were pressed into her pillow. “My unit leader accused me of stealing after I topped his score. He went to the instructors about it ... even planted things in my bunk. They didn’t believe him, but if they had ...” She trailed off.

Viggo winced, staring at the dark ceiling. The price for stealing, human or a Dreyen, was the thief’s right hand. The man’s lie was a serious one. Especially for something as stupid as a test score.

She fell silent for a long time, as if waiting for the murmur of the rain to give her voice strength. “I hated him. He was the worst type of leader.”

“Worse than me?”

A pause. “Yes. Worse than you.” The wind held its breath. The curtain shifted as if she’d brushed up against it. “I was the lone wolf. They didn’t know quite what to do with me.”

He held his breath, deciding to take a chance with the words on his tongue. He forced a light tone. “That’s a shame. Personally, I know quite a bit about wolves.”

She laughed. The tense knot in his chest relaxed. He rolled over on his stomach, propping himself up on his elbows. “What did you like there? Was there anything?”

A breeze stole through the cracks of the shutters, stirring the curtain between them. It smelled of rain, rain and wet earth. Cat’s voice floated through the light material. “I liked the rain. Crainfell was on the coastline. When it rained you could taste the salt from the ocean and smell the waves.”

A smile touched the corner of his mouth. He looked down. “I’ve never been to the coast. What’s it like?”

“Different.”

“Different how?”

He could almost hear the shrug accompanying her words. “I don’t know. There was a lot of sand. The trees were different. And you could always hear the waves wherever you went. The waves and the seagulls. And the sun was so hot that when you burned it turned into blisters on your shoulders.”

Viggo closed his eyes, trying to imagine the place she was describing.

“What did you like best about the Core?” she asked suddenly, breaking the silence. “Was there anything?”

He smiled to himself, remembering. “I liked the mountains. We used to go hiking on our day off. We’d leave before sunup and spend all day up there climbing the peaks, exploring the forest. Once, Carver and I sneaked out at midnight and hiked in the dark so we could watch the sunrise from the top.”

“*You* sneaked out?” He could hear the surprise in her voice.

He laughed. “Sure. We did it all the time. There were some cliffs outside the Core with natural clefts in the rock. Our whole unit would go up there after dark, light fires and watch the stars. Sometimes we stayed out all night and went back to our cabins at dawn. We never got caught.”

“I thought you were such a stickler for the rules.”

Viggo shrugged. “Not always. I used to get in all kinds of trouble.”

“What changed?”

He frowned, listening to the rain pattering against the closed shutters. “I don’t know. Guess I got older. Didn’t you ever do anything you weren’t supposed to?”

A sly tone crept into her voice. “Many, many times. I just didn’t expect it from you is all. You’re so ...”

“So what?”

“I don’t know. So,” he could hear her searching for the right word, “straight-laced. Uptight.”

Viggo barked a laugh. “I am not!”

“You are.”

Viggo rolled over onto his back. When had he stopped dodging rules? It hadn’t been so long ago, not if he remembered. Before Vladimer had begun suffocating him with punishments and expectations. “I wasn’t always.”

Cat’s voice drifted through the curtain. “Gods. I should have known you back then. I can’t imagine you being ... I don’t know ... relaxed about things.”

“I was fun.”

“You were not.”

“No, I swear. It’s true.”

She laughed. His chest loosened, and he grinned at the ceiling, feeling better than he had in a long time. He’d been the Core captain too long, that was all. Afraid to cross Vladimer, afraid to lose people from his unit when he cared so much about all of them. He’d taken more blows for Billet and Carver than he ever would have for himself.

But Vladimer wasn't here and neither were they. Cat was the only one left.

He could loosen up for her.

\* \* \*

Cat lay awake for a long time after he fell asleep, listening to the rain pattering against the wooden shutters. The night came through the cracks in the warped wood, cool and fresh and smelling faintly of wet earth.

Viggo's breathing mixed with the sound of the rain, foreign and misplaced, but at the same time stupidly comforting. Cat rolled over and pressed her face into her pillow, breathing in the scent of damp feathers.

She hadn't expected him to make amends for their fight—for *her* fight—on the plains. It hadn't really been a fight at all, only her shouting at him like a fool in front of their master and his soldiers. She hadn't expected an apology. He'd sounded vaguely ashamed of himself, as if he knew what she'd said was true and even admitted it to himself.

Most of the men she knew wouldn't have admitted they were at fault if they'd been threatened with burning at the stake.

Men or women, she corrected herself. She knew too many stubborn people, including herself. People who were blind to their own faults but saw plenty of everyone else's.

She hadn't expected anything different from him. So what else was she missing?





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*FIRE AND WINE*

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**T**he house lay on the southern edge of the city where the richest merchants kept their homes and the streets were cobbled gray instead of white. Dusk had fallen by the time Fane's driver pulled the horses to a halt outside the wide doors and sweeping veranda, and the air smelled thick and sweet, scented with the aroma of the morning glories climbing the stone walls and winding around the chiseled bannisters.

The maid who let them in was small and peaky, dressed in a neat gray frock and cap. She took Fane's cloak and cane and was out of sight in an instant. Viggo watched her go, something like unease stirring in his breast. The house gleamed, and beeswax and elmwood oil were rubbed into every surface as if to prove the wealth of the man who owned it, to prove his worth and his outstanding qualities.

Maybe the wolf was the only one who caught the bruises on the maid's thin arms or smelled the fear that tainted the air inside like a bitter perfume.

A manservant led them into the house, passing through halls paneled with gleaming oak. A fire was lit in the drawing room he brought them into, although the nights were so warm now that Viggo had taken to sleeping with the windows open.

Men stood clustered around the fireplace leaning against the mantle or seated in the straight-backed armchairs. Dogs lay sprawled at their feet, panting from the heat of the fire, and women fluttered around the edges of the group, silk skirts rustling, feathered fans waving busily.

The men were smoking. Viggo could smell the stale tobacco in the air. His heart fell. He'd been with Fane for a few weeks now, almost a month, but he still hadn't accustomed himself to the reek of it when the man lit his pipe. It stung his throat and itched in his eyes after only a few minutes, and the stench of it stayed with him for hours afterward, caught in his lungs.

One of the men, a merchant with silver embroidered into his tunic and with rings on his bloodless fingers, rose when Fane entered and grasped his forearm in welcome, clapping him cheerfully on the shoulder. "There you are! I was beginning to wonder if you were coming at all."

He drew Fane toward a table in the corner, their muted pleasantries melding with the other voices in the room. Two others came to join them, men dressed like lords with money in their pockets and common blood in their veins. Viggo stepped back as one of them brushed him, nearly knocking

against his shoulder. His hip hit a small table and the porcelain vase on it rattled and tipped over. He caught it before it fell. Fane turned quickly at the sound and shot him a withering glare. “By every saint in heaven, Swifter, can you not even cross a room without breaking something?”

Heat surged into Viggo’s face. He bowed his head, biting his tongue to suppress the dart of shock that went through him at the unveiled mockery in his own master’s voice. “I’m sorry, my lord.”

The maid brought the glasses in then, distracting his master and the other men from his mistake. She went to her master first, pouring him a glass of wine with hands that shook.

Viggo took his place at Fane’s shoulder and glanced her way. Something like pity stirred in his chest. He looked away, angry with himself. He had enough problems of his own without feeling sorry for every beaten woman and thrashed slave in Ivra.

Problems like his master’s sharp rebuke, the rising heat in the room, and the stale air trapped in his lungs.

Fane accepted the drink she gave him with a grunt and drained half of the amber contents in a single gulp. One of the men dealt a round of cards, and the game began. The others in

the room drew nearer the fire, their voices rising and falling, a hum that drifted over Viggo's dulled senses like the sound of a heavy rain.

An hour passed. An hour with nothing to distract him from the monotony of their conversation. Hunger gnawed at his insides. They hadn't eaten today. The maids had forgotten, maybe. Cat had sworn over it earlier, but even her body language was silent now, as if she had been swallowed up by the shadows growing in the corners of the room. He tried to catch her eye, but she stood as if carved from stone, her gaze on the far wall and her mind somewhere else entirely. He wished he could escape so easily.

Night fell outside, and the windows grew dark. The fire in the corner cast the only light in the room, although the maid offered three times to light the lamps. It cast an ugly, dark red light that pulled everything human from his master's face. Everything human, everything living. The cards in Fane's hands were trembling as he shuffled through them, whether from anger or intoxication Viggo couldn't guess. He hadn't expected his master to drink so much nor to gamble so wildly. Little as he understood the game the four men were playing, he could already see that Fane was a poor player. And a

reckless one. He'd gone through more silver in the last hour than Viggo had seen pass through his hands in the last few weeks. He lost all of it, every coin. Viggo could feel his master's anger rising, like the heat radiating from a coal fire.

The round ended, and Fane threw his cards down, swearing under his breath. A man with a thick coastal accent and a goatee dyed as crimson as blood leaned back. He stretched his hand to one of the hounds lying beneath his chair. The animal licked his fingers. "Thought you had it that time, Ravenstone," he said lightly. "I was sure you were going to steal it right out from under me."

Fane grunted. His eyes were on the dog, not its master, and he leaned forward, examining the slender head, the rough, gray fur, and lean frame. "New dog?"

The man smiled, stroking the animal's head. "Wolfhound. One of a pack I just bought. Got a good deal on them. Seventy a head." He glanced at Viggo, and his eyes narrowed. "I see you've got a couple of new dogs yourself. Or—are they wolves?"

The other men glanced up, and Viggo suddenly found himself and Cat the center of attention. The merchant leaned back, looking over the two of them speculatively. "I meant to

ask about that. Are they worth much? I've heard Fydera has gone downhill since Vladimer Hunt took over command."

The man with the crimson beard spat a laugh and began to deal cards again with quick fingers. "Did you expect anything else? The man's a halfwit."

Fane shrugged, sorting his cards. "They're not as stupid as I expected. The girl has some wit, I think."

Viggo clenched a fist behind his back. His fingers were slick with sweat, and they were shaking. Anger, hunger. Something between the two. He cursed this night beneath his breath and glanced at Cat. Her face was empty. Angry or not, he couldn't tell. He was already angry enough for both of them.

The maid brought another round of drinks, distracting the men. Viggo couldn't keep still any longer. He reached out, touched Cat's wrist. "All right?"

He felt stupid for asking. Dex would have flared at him instantly, lords or no, but Cat was different. Even that connection, small as it was, seemed to mean something to her. The touch kept them from drifting apart the way they had in the first few weeks, something he was finding was all too easy to slip into again. And again. And again. It was harder

than he'd ever thought possible to forge a connection between himself and his often-silent partner.

A little of the tension eased from her shoulders. "Fine."

"Sure?"

"Yes." The barest smile twitched at the corner of her mouth. "Considering murder, but fine."

He had to look away to smother a laugh. "I'll join you."

A shiver passed over his skin, and he looked back at the table, into the eyes of the fourth man. Eyes like glass, soulless and colorless as mountain mist. "And your male?" the man asked suddenly. He laid down a hand of cards, winning the match without drawing a card. His eyes remained fixed on Viggo. "What do you think of him?"

Fane shrugged, hesitating as if to choose his words. "He's your typical dumb ox. Nothing I can't handle."

"Not trained the way you like?"

"He's young. They're stupid when they're young."

Viggo bit his tongue until it hurt.

The man tapped his wine glass thoughtfully, still looking at him. "Still. He looks like he'd be worth something in a few



years.”

Again, Fane paused, and Viggo had the chilling impression that his master’s words were aimed over his shoulder, at him, instead of to the men around the table. “Maybe. Maybe not. There’re some things you can’t train out of them. Bad blood.”

Viggo had blood in his mouth. Cat was watching him out of the corner of her eye, and he kept his gaze fixed on the window opposite them, trying to remember how to breathe. Fane was drunk, that was all. He was drunk and angry and losing at the tables, and Viggo was nearby and convenient to take it out on. Vladimer had done the same many times.

He was used to it.

The merchant waved his maid over, holding up his empty glass. “That’s a shame. Maybe you should go to Thorne and have him do something about it. Surely, he can help you.” The maid filled his glass and began to move away, but he caught her by the skirt and pulled her back. “He’s got some authority with the beasts, doesn’t he?”

“He dotes on them enough.” The man with the crimson beard cast the others a sly smile. “I always wondered if that might be the reason he’s never married. Has a different sort of

taste, our Archduke. Not that I would be the one to say it. Publicly, anyway.”

Fane uttered a short laugh. “Maybe so. But I doubt he’d be able to do much for this one. Bad blood is bad blood. As long as I pay, Thorne’s not likely to care either way.”

The conversation moved on to other things, to the price of land, to the rains that ruined the crops, and the money the merchant was wasting on his flaming-haired mistress, but Viggo stopped listening. The night would end, eventually. They couldn’t play forever.

Fane, however, seemed determined to try. His betting became erratic, the sum rising as he began to grow increasingly desperate. Or drunk. In less than an hour more he was borrowing money from the man with the pale eyes, his own purse slack. Twice, Viggo considered pulling him out of the game by force and taking him home, but he doubted that he had either the courage or the authority for such a rash action. Stupid, that he’d never been taught what to do with a master who drank too much and gambled money he didn’t have away.

Or what to do with a master who stole.

Irritation itched beneath his skin, and he shut his eyes, wishing his master would win or give up. Whichever ended the night faster.

But Fane didn't win. Not once. Every lost hand drove his temper higher, and he began to lash out at Viggo for imagined infractions, for mistakes that were days old, for the noise he made when he moved and the smell of the wolf that clung to his clothing. Each rebuke, uttered with biting sarcasm, cut like a dull knife. Viggo tried to ignore him, hot fury burning in his chest, stoked to life by the cutting words.

His silence only made it worse, his master clearly resenting the calm way he took abuse. Viggo could have sworn the man was looking for a fight.

The maid brought in another round of drinks, pausing as she left to add wood to the dying fire. Viggo choked on the smell of smoke in the room, soot stirred up by the new wood. The air already smelled of sweat and spilled wine, and the smoke made it worse. Two minutes, and he was going to throw the windows open himself. Or smash them.

Cat began to cough. She covered her mouth with a hand, her fingers leaving marks on her skin, but the sound wasn't muffled. Not completely. Her face turned red. She turned

away quickly, nearly doubled over, fighting for breath. Concern seared through Viggo's chest, and instinctively he moved to help her. Fane snapped around, swearing, dark anger burned into his eyes. "To hell with you, Ashcliff!" he shouted. "Do I have to get a bloody muzzle before I get any peace from—"

Viggo turned on him, his teeth bared, a snarl that belonged wholly to the wolf caught in his throat.

The other men froze. Shame instantly curdled in Viggo's stomach when he saw their shocked stares. The anger pounding in time with his heartbeat silenced it, however, and he held Fane's gaze with piercing disrespect, almost wishing the man would strike him.

He didn't. Something like satisfaction, almost relief, tinged his drunken expression. He spat a laugh, a thin, bitter imitation that did nothing to quell the sharp anger breeding in his eyes. "Well, the wolf really does have teeth. Maybe I need two muzzles."

The other men laughed awkwardly, as if unsure if it was a joke or not. Fane didn't waver, his gaze locked on Viggo's face. Waiting. Viggo could see his eagerness now, poorly masked by a veil of drunken rage. Whatever he wanted,

whatever he was looking for, he was getting. Viggo bit his tongue, too angry to apologize or care.

Fane hesitated a brief moment, still as if hoping he would continue. When he didn't, the man threw his cards onto the table and stood. "I'm done. I'll pay you later, Brenner."

The other men murmured their farewells, looking back to their cards as if they'd forgotten the game until just now. Fane swept his cloak over his shoulders and shoved Cat toward the door. "Get out of here, you stupid cur. Choke outside."

Viggo followed him out, his lip bitten through and the taste of blood in his mouth.



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*BAD BLOOD*

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Cat drew in a deep breath when they entered Fane's apartments, relief settling in her breast and curling around her weary heart.

The servants had all gone to bed by this time. The fires were out, and a night breeze drifted through the open windows, stirring and stroking the curtains with cold hands. She could still taste the sweat and stale air of the drawing room they'd left, and her throat stung from the overpowering smoke, but the night ride through the city streets had silenced her cough. She could breathe again at least.

A lantern sat on the table, ready for Fane's return. He lit the wick from a taper lying in the still-smoldering remains of the fire. The moonlight that had crept into the room through the curtains fled, chased away by the stronger, harsher light of the flame.

Viggo brushed past her, already headed toward their room. Fane stopped him, laying down the smoking taper with his back to the two of them. "Stay."

He froze. Cat bit her tongue, cursing the night and the wine that had made their master like this. She hadn't thought him cruel, not until this game had begun. What sick pleasure Fane gleaned from tormenting her partner, she didn't know, but

he'd spent the evening toying with him. Like a cat with a mouse it didn't want to kill yet. Viggo had waved it off on the way home when she'd dared bring it up, saying it was because he was losing at cards and needed someone to take out his anger on. But she'd seen this game before, this match of wit and power. It stemmed from something worse than anger. Something darker.

And apparently, whatever aim the man had wasn't achieved yet.

Viggo returned reluctantly to stand beside her. His jaw was set, anger in every line of his body, but his eyes were as clear and cold as if he'd somehow managed to distance himself from whatever was coming next. Fane laid his cloak aside and drew his gloves off, lingering over the task as if to give himself time to think. Or them time to stew. "Ashcliff."

Cat flinched inwardly. "Yes, my lord?"

"Come here."

She went. Something flickered briefly in Viggo's stony gaze, concern or frustration or something like it, but he didn't try to stop her, as if he knew it would only cause more trouble for the two of them. "Yes, my lord?"



“Put your hand out.”

She knew then what he was doing, what he wanted and why. Anger flushed through her breast. She offered him her hand, hoping whatever he did would be done quickly.

But Viggo was faster. He snatched her hand away so fast that she stumbled and pushed her behind him. “What are you doing?”

Fane didn't look at him. He took a riding crop from a drawer and laid it on the desk, a silver studded thing that he used on the spotted bay he rode. And a few of the slower servants. “Swifter, go stand by the wall.”

“My lord, she didn't do anything, I swear it.” Viggo was doing his best to sound servile, which wasn't something he seemed particularly good at. His fingers were still digging into her wrist, slick with sweat. “I was the one—”

Fane sighed and slowed his speech, as if he were talking with someone intolerably stupid. “Swifter. Go stand by the wall.”

Viggo took no notice. Cat hissed at him, tried to break his grip on her wrist, but they both ignored her, as if she were a pawn in this game and not a player, here only to be pushed

and moved about and not to be heard. Her own temper began to rise.

“My lord, she couldn’t breathe, it wasn’t her fault. Please, you’re drunk, just—”

“How dare you,” Fane hissed, his own anger surfacing. Red began to flush into his bloodless cheeks. “Go stand by the wall now, or I’ll have her beaten for both of you.”

Cat jerked her hand out of Viggo’s grip and pushed him away. “Viggo, just go.”

Viggo’s face contorted, flushing red. Cat bit her tongue, silently willing him to leave, to keep his temper and stay out of this. He took a step back, shaking, his eyes on Fane. “As you wish, my lord.”

Fane’s jaw clenched, and whatever slim control he’d had over his wine-sodden temper snapped. Quick as a flash, he snatched the riding crop off the desk and whipped it across Cat’s face. Hard. She stumbled backward, bent over with her hands to her face, pain blinding her.

A strangled, feral snarl jerked out of Viggo’s throat. He hit Fane, hard and fast. The man fell. The leather crop skittered

across the rug and disappeared beneath the divan in the corner.

Time stopped. Everything froze, the wind in the curtains, the creeping shadows cast by the lantern light. Cat's heart. The taste of copper in her mouth stung, making her so dizzy that she felt as though the floor were moving beneath her.

Fane struggled to his feet, supporting himself against the desk. She retreated instinctively, waiting for the storm of curses, the shout for the guards still on duty outside the doors.

It didn't come. He pressed a hand to his mouth, grimaced, and looked down at his fingers.

His lip was bleeding.

"I think," he said softly, "that will be all, Swifter. You may both go now."

The triumph in his words stung like an adder's bite. Viggo stepped back, his face as pale as ivory. Whatever game they'd been playing, he'd just lost. "My lord, I—"

Fane took a silken handkerchief from his breast pocket, dabbing at the blood from his split lip, and looked down at the stain on the white cloth. "Now, Swifter. Both of you."

Cat caught Viggo's wrist, pulled him after her. Her heart was pounding so loud in her ears that she was sure they could both hear it. What had he done? She couldn't look at him, terror and shame beating like a second heart in her chest. She wanted to scream at him, but the words lodged in her throat. No one else, on any of the many times she'd been beaten, no one else had ever bothered to intervene.

Not even once.

The door closed behind them. Viggo made a sound, something between a growl and a sob. Cat ducked behind the curtain closing off her small room. Her hands were shaking, her face throbbing with such pain that she could feel it in her bones. What would they do to him now? Now that he'd attacked a human, a lord no less? Fear seared through her blood, more painful than the welt on her face, and she pressed her hands over her mouth to silence the sob that rose in her throat. They'd kill him, that was what. Like a dog that had bitten its master. They'd break his neck and leave her here.

Alone again.



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*A SNARED FOX*

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**G**loriam eius, gloriam eius, in laudem  
gloria ...”

Viggo closed his eyes, listening to the deep chant echo among the marble pillars and vaulted ceiling of the basilica. Sparrows flitted among the columns overhead, their sweet chatter mixing with the eerie praise. A chill hung in the air, and smoke from incense burners hung curled around the bishop’s scarlet robes and wisped among the pews in the nave.

Fane sat with his head bowed. The beads in his hands clacked against each other as he passed them through his fingers, murmuring pious prayers like a monk who still had the devil’s mark etched into his soul.

The bruise on his face stood out against his skin like a burn from hell. Viggo bit his tongue, trying not to look at it. The bruise, and Cat’s raw welt, were the only signs anything had happened at all. Nothing had been said yet, not to him or to Cat, although he’d been expecting soldiers at their door that morning instead of the maids. They hadn’t come, but he wasn’t stupid enough to think they wouldn’t.

Not after last night. Some mistakes couldn’t be forgiven.

The rhythmic chanting came to an end. The bishop intoned a deep, unintelligible prayer, and Fane rose. Instantly, Viggo's nausea returned. He followed Fane from the basilica, heat hitting him in the face as they stepped through the wide open doors. Outside, the court was nearly vacant. Doves rose from the cobbles with a rush of wings, their startled cooing loud in the stillness. Fane started down the steps, his brisk pace lengthening Viggo's stride.

As they neared the carriage, fear twisted Viggo's chest into a knot. Fane wouldn't forget. He had said nothing yet, but he would. The only hope he had left was in his master's judgement. Fane had a great deal of control over his punishment. If he happened to be feeling generous, Viggo might get off with nothing worse than a solid flogging.

If he wasn't ... Viggo clenched his jaw. If he wasn't, no amount of worrying or pleading would change his fate. He'd heard stories of Dreyens executed for less.

The journey back to the castle was made in bitter silence. Viggo sat on the roof of the jolting, lurching carriage and stared at the passing streets without seeing them. His chest hurt. Cat had her knees pulled up to her chest and her head buried in her arms against the glare of the sun. She hadn't

spoken to him yet. Her silence made it worse. He'd have felt better if she'd screamed at him, called him names, and thrown something. That's what he deserved. That's what Dex would have done.

But she wasn't Dex, and he had no idea what to say to her. With Dex he would have simply let her rage at him until she ran out of breath and anger. With Cat—he had no idea what to do.

They passed through the gates. He glanced up, running his eyes over the walls. *Say something, stupid*, he rebuked himself silently. *Now, before it's too late.*

“I'm sorry,” he choked, looking her way. “I'm sorry, Cat. I didn't mean—”

He bit back the words and swallowed them, the bitter taste on his tongue lingering. She raised her head, resting her chin on her folded arms without looking at him. Her eyes were gray. “I know you didn't,” she whispered after a minute. Her eyes closed wearily. “Everyone makes mistakes, Viggo. Just forget it.”

His throat tightened until it hurt. He doubted Fane would let him forget it. More words clustered on the tip of his tongue, more excuses, but he bit them back, not sure she



really meant what she said. Instinct told him to apologize again, to explain. Wisdom told him to shut up and leave it.

He clamped his mouth shut and looked away.

The driver pulled the carriage into a neat circle before the entrance. Viggo stood and dropped into a crouch on the cobbles, rising to his feet as Fane swept from the carriage and mounted the stairs. The man waved his hand at them as Viggo moved to flank him. “Dismissed.”

Viggo froze stupidly, almost not sure he’d heard right. As Fane disappeared inside, Cat caught his wrist and tugged him toward the side alley. He stumbled after her, his head spinning. Why ...

Cat didn’t speak until they were behind the palace and threading through the narrow alley toward the training court. “Do you think he knows?” Her voice sounded caught, as if the question on her tongue didn’t want to face the light of day.

“What?” Viggo frowned at her, struggling to understand the cryptic question.

“Do you think he remembers what happened last night?” she said, dropping her voice. “He was drunk. Very drunk. Maybe ...”

Hope rose in Viggo's chest—and dropped like a stone as he remembered the faint spark of satisfaction in Fane's eyes when he'd hit him. “No,” he said dully. “He knows. He wasn't half as drunk as he acted.”

Cat glanced at him with a frown flickering across her brow as she paused just inside the training court. “What? But why —”

“I don't know, Cat!”

Her lips tightened and she looked away. He cursed himself and opened his mouth to apologize, but she cut him off, turning her back. “I'm going to clean up.”

Viggo watched her leave, a confused whirl of emotions spinning in his chest, building up, pressing against his lungs until he could barely breathe. He bit his tongue and kicked a rock across the court, releasing a stream of foul language to make himself feel better.

It didn't help.

“Guardian Swifter?”

He jerked his head up, guilt flooding his face with crimson. A servant boy stood a few yards away, his grimy face white

beneath the dirt and his eyes wide with fascination. Viggo flushed deeper. “What?”

The boy flinched. He had dirty, straw-colored hair hanging over his eyes and freckles spattered like mud over his face and arms. His hands were clasped behind his back, and he stood on one bare foot awkwardly, rubbing the other on the back of his knee. “Beggin ’yer pardon, Guardian. Th’ Lordship wants to see yuh.”

Viggo felt the color drain from his face. He glanced over his shoulder. “My partner—”

“Lordship don’t want yer partner.” The boy shrugged apologetically. “Said to leave ‘er to train. Only wants yuh.”

His stomach knotted. Dread rose like a black ghost in his heart, and he whispered hoarsely, “Coming.”

The boy jerked a nod and disappeared. Viggo hesitated a moment and leaned back against the wall, closing his eyes. The rough stone bit into his shoulder blades, echoing the fear biting into his soul. He wanted to find Cat, to tell her at least that he was going, but the guilt still burning in the back of his mind wouldn’t let him. This was his fault. And his fight. If possible, he would leave her out of it. He dragged in a breath

and straightened, turning back the way he'd come, and retraced his steps to Fane's apartments.

He took the back staircase into the building. Velvety darkness hung from the cobwebs, rough stone gritting under his boots. He'd felt this before, this plunging in his gut. The feeling that came just before he was punished. He'd felt it when Vladimer had called him to the whipping posts, only a few months ago now, to flay the skin off the boy's back.

Jehan. Viggo still wondered what had happened to him sometimes. Probably he was dead by now, of starvation or something worse.

He shook the thought away, cursing himself. The boy didn't matter. It was his own skin that was going to be flayed off his back soon.

Or worse. Probably worse.

Fane was waiting for him. The curtains had been drawn, blocking out the afternoon light, and his master was pouring a glass of wine by the fireplace.

His ledger lay open on the desk, a candle burning beside the ruffled pages.

Viggo hesitated just inside the door, fear weighing like a stone between his ribs. He'd been expecting soldiers—had been since the night before. He was getting jumpy, seeing them around every corner. Gods. He was such a coward.

Fane stoppered the bottle and glanced up at him, raising an eyebrow. "Come in."

Viggo shut the door behind him and moved farther into the room, bowing his head as Fane settled himself into a chair. The man swirled the wine in his glass, and the smell of it made Viggo's stomach turn over.

When Fane spoke at last, his words dropped into the stillness like the tolling of a death bell. "I could have you executed for what you did last night."

Viggo's chest tightened until he couldn't breathe, and the faint hope still hidden between his ribs withered and died. The words on his tongue released themselves of their own violation. "I know."

He could be proud of himself for his stony voice, at least. It gave no hint of his fear. The part of him that was afraid and vulnerable and weak had retreated, leaving nothing behind. Nothing but a shell, a body for Fane to destroy as he saw fit.

His master looked at him. “Is that what I should do?”

“As my lord sees fit,” Viggo murmured tonelessly. Even his heart felt leaden in his chest, obeying his command.

Irritation darkened Fane’s eyes, but only for a moment. It vanished like smoke on a breeze, and he was calm again, calm and emotionless as a judge offering a dead man his last meal. “Your partner too. She was part of it.”

Viggo jerked back into himself, pain and fear shortening his breath. His stupid, stupid heart betrayed him as it always did when he was the cause of someone else’s scream. He forced his words past an iron tongue. “She didn’t have anything to do with this.”

“That’s for me to decide, not you.”

A noose tightened around Viggo’s throat, strangling him. He wanted to curse the man and tell him it wasn’t fair to blame Cat for anything, but he knew it wouldn’t do him any good. Or her, for that matter. He bit his tongue, the bitter taste of blood spreading through his mouth as he said low, “As my lord sees fit.”

“You don’t agree?”

“It was a mistake.” The words stumbled off his tongue before he could catch them. A mistake. Viggo almost laughed or would have if his stomach hadn’t twisted itself into a knot. The bruise on Fane’s jaw had swollen and was as dark as a brand. It wasn’t a mistake. It was treason. If he was anything but a coward, he would go to Thorne himself for punishment.

He wouldn’t, of course. Viggo told himself he was holding back for Cat, to protect her from the kind of retribution she would get just for being linked to him.

A lie, of course, but he let himself believe it anyway.

“It was *my* mistake,” he said hoarsely. “Not hers. She shouldn’t be punished for ... for something I did.”

Fane swirled the wine in his glass, studying him thoughtfully. “I’d rather not punish either of you.”

Viggo’s heart jerked against his ribs, nearly knocking the breath out of him. Hope, stupid hope, surged through him, and he would have cursed himself for it if he could have uttered a word. If his tongue hadn’t felt like lead in his mouth.

“Last night was ...” Fane paused, hesitating over the words, “an indiscretion. You’re young. You made a mistake. If it happened again ...”

“It won’t,” Viggo croaked. “It wouldn’t. I swear it.”

“And my ledger?” Fane asked, his voice low and deadly. “I assume that won’t happen again either.”

A chill rippled down Viggo’s skin. The curtains stirred, a breeze that whispered of ghosts swirling across the stone floor. It made sense now, all of it. The meals they’d missed, the barbed words, the vicious anger, and, behind it, the satisfaction in his master’s eyes after Viggo had hit him.

Fane had meant for this to happen, and Viggo had been stupid enough to fall for it, like a fox in one of the snares they’d set among the rocks in the Core.

Fane was watching him, his black eyes as hard as a snake’s. “My business is my business, Swifter,” he said. “I don’t appreciate being spied on.”

Viggo almost cursed him. Almost. But Cat’s neck was on the line, same as his own, and he’d send the king’s coffers to blazes before he’d condemn her for his stupidity. A few slight thefts didn’t matter, not as long as she was safe and he still had the chance to make this up to her somehow.

Fane could do whatever he wanted with his money and his land.



Fane raised an eyebrow. “Well?”

“Your business is your business, my lord,” Viggo said thickly. “It doesn’t concern me.”

A thin smile flicked at the corner of his master’s mouth, and Fane rose, setting the goblet aside. “Last night never happened. You may go.”

Viggo stumbled out, his heart hammering against his ribs so hard that he thought they would shatter. The door shut, and relief poured over him until he felt weak at the knees.

Relief, tinted with just an edge of guilt.

\* \* \*

Cat was waiting when he got back to the training court. She was sitting alone in the corner, her knees pulled up to her chest and her head buried in her arms. Viggo bit his lip and jogged over.

She looked up, shoving wet hair out of her eyes. The blatant, almost painful relief in her expression surprised him. He hadn’t expected ... well, that she would care much. She rose to her feet hurriedly, and he could already see the questions on her tongue. The fear.

“I’m sorry,” he said quickly, before she could ask them. “I shouldn’t have snapped at you. That wasn’t fair.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Cat had her arms folded over her chest as if they were her armor against a world that had done nothing but throw stones at her. “What is he going to do? Send you to the whipping posts? Or ...”

She left the word to hang in the air, black with hidden meaning.

Or. Or was Fane going to hang him for being a stupid fool?

Viggo opened his mouth—and shut it again. Shame surged up into his blood, and suddenly he couldn’t quite look at her. What would she say when he told her about Fane’s ledgers and his own stupid oath to keep the man’s secret for him? That he was a thief himself for looking the other way while someone else stole?

He didn’t know her well enough to guess, and he didn’t want to find out. At last, he croaked awkwardly, “Neither. I think—I don’t think he remembers what happened. Or—I don’t think he remembers why it happened. He thinks it had something to do with the card game, or a brawl, or something. He told me not to interfere at the tables again, told me next time he’d whip the hide off my back, and sent me out.”

Cat stared at him. “That’s all?”

She didn’t believe him. Viggo uttered a shaky laugh and sat down hard against the wall. “That’s all.”

She sat down next to him. Stupidly, his arm almost went around her shoulders as if she were Dex. He stopped himself only just in time, shifted back against the wall instead, and closed his eyes.

Several seconds had passed in silence when he shook himself, pulling out of a hazy doze. “All right?” His voice sounded rough. Maybe he had been asleep.

A smile touched the corner of her mouth. Her eyes were closed. “Yes.”

A brief flurry of hope rose in his chest. Hope that she might eventually forgive him for this, that they could leave it behind them and keep going. He squirmed uncomfortably, cobbles biting into his thighs. “Cat, I—” He bit the inside of his cheek. “I’m really sorry. I swear. I don’t know how to make it up to you, but I swear, if you’d just tell me how ...” He looked away, frustration tearing apart his breath. “I really am sorry.”

The ensuing silence stung. At last Cat shrugged, and to his surprise, the faint smile reappeared. “I wish you wouldn’t be so sorry for keeping me from getting bashed in the face.”

Viggo froze, trying to make sense of that. He opened his mouth—and closed it again uncertainly. Silence slipped between them, such an awkward silence that he was afraid he’d say something utterly stupid just to break it.

At last, Cat shifted, her eyes on the far end of the court, on the stones and the sparrows and the men playing kickball near the outer wall, and whispered, “I didn’t think you cared. That’s all.” She hesitated, rubbing her hands together. “So ... thanks. I guess.”

Viggo stared at her. Her face reddened, and she stood up so fast that he didn’t have time to respond. “I’m going to find Ace. Coming?”

She was gone before he could even get to his feet, and all he could do was watch her go, confusion and relief tangling themselves together in a hopeless knot in his chest.



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WAIFLING

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**T**he evening's last rays of sunlight played across the cobbles in the training court and cast a weakened glow on the marble walls surrounding it. Dust and laughter mixed with the late breeze, echoing within the enclosed space. A game, a mix between kickball and wrestling with a dash of blood to make it interesting, kicked up straw and chaff in one corner. The players' shouting echoed sharply against the walls. Cat sat with her back to the sun-warmed stone, her eyes fixed on the tangle of legs and torsos fighting over the ball, and her mind fixed somewhere else entirely.

A deep voice interrupted her silence. "Not playing, Caitlyn?"

Cat looked up, forcing a smile onto her lips when she saw who it was. "Not this time."

Ace sat down next to her, resting his forearms on his knees as he glanced at the mix of players. Blood smudged the corner of his mouth, and a bruise was already forming on his strong jawline, dark beneath his black scruff. "Why not? It's fun."

Cat looked pointedly at the blood and raised an eyebrow. "It looks like it. Why aren't you playing anymore?"

He grinned at her, his gray eyes laughing with the kind of persistent cheer that he always seemed to carry around, as if he had a private joke with everyone he met. “Me? Well, let’s see. I could lie and say that I saw you sitting here and thought you looked lonely ...” Cat laughed. His grin widened. “Or I could tell the truth and admit that I’m not as young as I used to be, and I needed a breather.”

Cat rolled her eyes, looking back to the game. She could see Viggo in the middle of the group, his hair dark with sweat and hanging in his eyes. He was laughing. They were allowed to be themselves here, although they weren’t anywhere else. The “training courts” were rarely busy with actual sword drills or grappling. She’d learned very quickly that the men who came here came to breathe out of sight of their masters. “Well, catch your breath, grandpa. They’re losing without you.”

“Ah, they’ll survive,” Ace retorted cheerfully. He was looking at her instead of the game now, with that persistent grin that refused to leave her alone. “You should come play. It’s a good way to make friends.”

Cat shrugged. The remaining rays of the setting sun were fading into twilight, and dusk flooded the court, bringing a

chill with it. Goosebumps rippled across her skin. “I’d rather be left alone.”

The second the words were out of her mouth she regretted them. She liked Ace, better than most of the others here anyway. He was irritatingly cheerful, and she found herself enjoying his company against her better judgement. She hadn’t meant her words to include him, but they had, and now she cursed herself, waiting for him to get up and leave.

He didn’t. “I know what you mean. I’m the same way.”

The joke caught her off guard. Warmth flushed into her cheeks, and she laughed, again finding herself tongue-tied by his easy manner. His persistent grin returned, and he laughed with her. “What? I am.”

“I have never seen you alone, not even once.” Cat glared at him, trying to bite back the smile twitching at the corner of her mouth as she said accusingly, “You’re flirting with me again.”

“What? No!” He winked, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “Is it working?”

Cat laughed and looked back to the game. “Not any more than it did last time.”



“Ah, well.” He leaned back against the wall and stretched his legs out comfortably. “There’s always next time.”

Cat smiled absently, her eyes on the brawl across the court. Viggo and Brand were fighting over the leather ball, shoving against each other and trying to kick it out of the other’s reach. Viggo had blood trickling from the corner of his mouth, smudged in the sparse beard growing on his cheeks and chin. He looked ... happy. Carelessly happy in a way she’d never seen in the Core. Brand managed to whisk the ball out from between Viggo’s feet, and he looked up, laughing, and caught her gaze. His hair was in his eyes, almost over them. He hadn’t had it cut since the Core—

*What are you doing?* she asked herself savagely. Her face reddened.

He saw it before she could look away. A grin flashed across his face, and he left the game and came jogging over. She looked away hurriedly, cursing herself under her breath. She knew better than this.

“Having fun?” he asked cheerfully, tugging his sweat-soaked tunic over his head. He looked like he’d been on the ground more than once. Mud smeared his chest and neck, and he had straw stuck to his shoulder among indents left by the

sharp cobbles. He was going to have a lovely bruise in the morning.

She forced a smile, wrapping her arms around her knees. “Loads. You are planning to clean up before we head back, aren’t you?”

Viggo grinned. “Why? Do I stink?” She raised an eyebrow. He laughed and glanced at Ace. “Brand’s getting pummeled. He said to tell you to get over there and help him.”

Ace sighed and pushed himself up. “The story of my life. If I weren’t around, he’d be dead by now. Later, Caitlyn.”

Cat wiggled her fingers in farewell, distracted by the slight flash of jealousy she saw in Viggo’s eyes. It was gone too quickly to even be sure it had been there, but it burned in her mind as a question that she couldn’t bring herself to ask. Halfway across the court, Ace swung around, and called out, “I want to know more about K’vul though. If I promise not to flirt, will you tell me tomorrow?”

Cat froze, shame burning through her heart like a hot needle. For a breath, she didn’t know what to say, and the way Viggo was looking at her made her want to bolt for the alleyway. At last, she called back, “Sure. Tomorrow.”

Ace plunged into the knot of men fighting over the ball.

Viggo walked over to the water barrel, splashing his face and neck. “K’vul? What’s that?” he asked casually.

Cat couldn’t look at him. “Nothing,” she said, the word stiff with frost that she couldn’t thaw. “Just Ace being stupid.”

Viggo scrubbed the back of his neck with his filthy tunic and looked at her quizzically. “I only asked.”

“It’s not your business.”

“Oh, but it’s Ace’s.”

Cat rolled her eyes and stood. “I’m going to shower.”

Viggo looked away, disappointment and frustration written into his face and a quiet curse on his tongue. Cat hesitated, her jaw working and indecision tearing her ribs apart, making every breath hurt. Finally, she said all in a rush, “K’vul was the border post where I grew up. Ace wanted to know what it was like, that’s all.”

Viggo raked wet hair out of his eyes and frowned. “You grew up in a border post?”

Cat smiled at him mockingly, glad for once that it was so much easier to wear her armor than it was to strip it off. “You can say ‘bastard.’ It’s okay.”

His face reddened. “I didn’t—”

“Waifling works, too. I don’t mind that, either.” The slur stung even as she said it, as if to remind her that she could lie all she wanted, but the name would always hurt. No matter how many people spat it in her face.

Odd, how being born outside of the birth camps had somehow become her fault, as if her parents weren’t to blame and she had somehow arranged to be the mistake that she was.

Viggo stared at her, his face inscrutable. At last, he said quietly, “I wasn’t trying to start a fight.”

“Then don’t.” She turned away and yanked her spare tunic from her bag, her fingers shaking from adrenaline and shame. It would be dark in a half an hour. She could hide in the showers until then, and escape to her curtained off room after that.

At least until the humiliation stopped burning under her skin.

“We just can’t manage it, can we?” Viggo asked suddenly, breaking a silence that had become painful after even a few seconds.

Cat looked up at him. “Manage what?”

“Getting along.” He tossed his tunic toward his bag and looked at her, frustration written into the tan lines in his face. “Being partners. I think that was our longest run so far. What has it been? Three days since our last argument?”

“I didn’t start this.”

“All I did was ask. You told Ace about it, but I get my head bitten off for asking?”

“Ace?” Cat stared at him and choked on a laugh. “That’s what bothers you about this?”

“Every time I ask you a question, I get into trouble. You’ll barely tell me about Crainfell. But Ace asks—”

“He didn’t ask. I told him.”

Viggo uttered a hoarse laugh and turned away. “That makes me feel better.”

Cat bit her tongue, hating that she could see exactly how much she’d really hurt him. He was so transparent, so

stupidly transparent, as if every thought in his head were there for her to read. Had he always been like that? Even in the Core?

She couldn't remember.

"I was trying to make him leave me alone," she whispered. Viggo looked at her, and she forced a wry smile. "Usually I only have to mention it and they disappear. He's harder to discourage than most."

"But you didn't want me to know."

Cat shrugged and avoided his eyes. "Didn't want you to disappear."

Viggo sighed and sat down against the wall, passing a hand over his face. "Look. Can we just stop this?"

She frowned. "What?"

"We're both a mess. Can we just be honest about it? You're a Waifling transfer from Crainfell, and I'm a coward who still gets sick at the sight of blood." The words stumbled off his tongue awkwardly, red creeping up his neck. "Neither of us should have made it to where we are. Maybe we could get along here if we just admit that."

Cat stared at him, gooseflesh rippling down her arms. “Blood makes you sick?”

Viggo choked on a laugh and looked away, up at the fading light slipping over the walls. “I threw up the first time I used a knife on someone. Vladimer made me lick the blade clean afterward. I think it was supposed to get me used to it.” He dug the heel of his boot between the cobbles, prying one loose. “It did not help.”

Silence slipped between them. Cat pushed stray hair out of her eyes, trying to imagine Viggo as a child caught between his own conscience and Vladimer’s iron will.

What those years had been like, she couldn’t guess, but they must have been hell itself.

At last, he rose and picked up his bag, offering her a hand. “Ready to go back? I’m starving.”

“I thought you were going to shower.”

“I’ll do it tomorrow.”

Cat made a face, trying to ignore the glow warming her chest like a coal breathed to life. “Or you could do it now.”

He laughed and disappeared in the direction of the showers. Cat leaned against the wall and shut her eyes,

waiting for the trembling in her fingers to still. The glow pressed against her ribs, and she allowed herself to hope, just for a breath, that maybe this once it would last.

Maybe this once, she could trust what her stupid heart wanted.





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*A LIVING CORPSE*

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I've been patient, Fane." Joseph Brenner leaned forward, pouring himself another glass of wine from the decanter. The red liquid splashed into the crystal, dull crimson in the candlelight. Heavy velvet curtains were drawn over the windows, and shadows prowled in the corners of the apartment where the light from the chandeliers couldn't reach. "But this kind of debt, it doesn't look good. Especially if the Archduke were to find out about it."

Fane's jaw tightened, his dark eyes burning with fury. He swallowed to keep it in check and set his own goblet aside. "That won't be necessary."

"Then you have my money?"

"I will have it." Fane sat back, cursing the man beneath his breath. "Soon."

"Soon isn't good enough."

The door opened, and Swifter and his partner slipped in, soft as a pair of ghosts. Brenner raised his head, his flat eyes narrowing. Fane got the feeling he'd been waiting for the two of them, stalling even, although he hadn't bothered to object, or to ask why. The man was a commoner—albeit a rich one. It

didn't hurt to let him see what real power could buy every now and then.

“Guardian.” Brenner set his glass on the table. “Wait a moment.”

Swifter was already halfway across the room. He hesitated, looking back with guarded wariness. Brenner beckoned him over. Fane drew breath to ask, but instead shrugged and nodded for the Dreyen to obey. He came slowly, his eyes dark with distrust. Brenner studied him, his pale eyes running over the corded muscle in Swifter's shoulders and chest. “How old?” he asked Fane, his eyes still locked in calculated speculation on the Dreyen.

Fane shrugged again, irritation starting to itch beneath his skin at the interruption. “Nineteen, twenty. Something like that. Why?”

Brenner didn't answer. After a long minute, he sat back, nodding for the boy to go. Swifter disappeared. As the door to their room closed, Brenner picked up his goblet, swirling the crimson liquid within thoughtfully. At last he said, “How's his training been going?”

“Well enough.”

“Well enough to make him useful, or well enough to keep him from tearing your head off?”

Fane smiled thinly. “I can manage him. What about it?”

Brenner uttered a low laugh. His voice was softer than a woman’s, as if he’d never shouted enough to coarsen it. It made Fane’s skin crawl. “You’re drowning, that’s what. You need real money, not peasant pennies. He could make it for you.”

“Him?” Fane spat an ugly laugh. “You want him to juggle in the squares?”

“You ever been to a fight house?”

Fane hesitated. Although he didn’t like to admit it, the fight houses were an avenue that he’d never considered. Somehow, he wasn’t surprised to hear that Brenner was involved in the illegal practice. “Fighting Dreyens is worth a jail sentence,” he said slowly, stroking the scruff on his jawline with a thumb.

“If you get caught.”

Fane nodded absently, his mind racing. It had been years since he’d had any real money to speak of. His land holdings were dwindling in value, and living in Ivra was expensive. Another few months like the last one, and he’d be forced to

retreat to his family's estate, and by now the manor house was little more than a rotting hovel. It would take money to make it worth anything again.

Brenner was watching him. After a moment he stood, draining his glass of wine in a gulp, and swept his cloak around his shoulders. "I have to go. It's up to you, of course. It is your neck. But I know a place that'll be open after dark tomorrow night. Bring your boy along, and we'll see what he can do. What's the worst that could happen?"

"Prison comes to mind," Fane said icily.

Brenner laughed, turning for the door. "Well, what's one cell to another? Debtors 'prison isn't bound to be any better."



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*KNACKERS*

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**T**heir room was cold, the fire still not lit. Viggo shut the door, resisting the urge to slam it hard behind him. Brenner's ashen corpse eyes sent a chill down his spine, and he could still feel the man's scrutiny, even here with the wall between them and the door closed.

Their dinner hadn't been brought yet. Cat rubbed a hand down her arm, glancing at the shuttered window as if she half expected something to come drifting through the cracks in the wood, and whispered, "What did he want?"

Viggo dumped his gear onto a corner of his bed and resisted the urge to curse the man right to hell. Brenner had never done anything against him, certainly never anything that deserved the kind of hostility that he could feel burning in his chest at the moment, but he didn't like the man. Something about him was slimy and rotten like a devil dug from the ground. He wished Fane would find more savory people to spend his time with. "Nothing," he said bitterly. "Just enjoying the view, that was all."

His voice was harsher than he meant it to be, and he winced immediately, realizing that it sounded like hostility towards her rather than the man he meant it for.

But something like a smile flickered at the corner of her mouth, and she hitched her pack a little higher on her shoulder. “Gives you shivers too?”

“Like he was pulled out of a grave,” Viggo said shortly, suddenly feeling a little better. “Normally, I like to have a reason for loathing people, but he—”

She uttered a short laugh. “He’s a living corpse. That’s a reason.”

Viggo lit the candles on the table from a live coal still buried in the ash of the fire. “I knew I wasn’t making things up.”

Cat pushed aside her curtain, still smiling, but her eyes were on the shuttered window, and he could see she was already withdrawing into herself again. “So, we both hate him. Saints, is that the first thing we’ve *ever* agreed on?”

“Might be.” Viggo grinned. “Look at that. Maybe we should find more people to hate.”

She was in her room now, the curtain between them. He could still feel the tension from their earlier argument underlying the banter, and he doubted she would emerge again until the maid brought dinner. “Anything to keep the



peace,” she said through the curtain, with a kind of forced cheerfulness that he wished he could have ignored. “If hating people is what it takes to get along, I have a few ideas about who to start with.”

He laughed.

The silence that followed was meant to last. He knew it was. It happened nearly every night unless he forced a conversation. Or she did. And tonight, he didn’t really think either of them had the energy to come up with endless, mindless questions in an effort to keep the other talking.

He slumped down in one of the chairs, leaned back against the wall, and passed his fingers through one of the candle flames. Soot clung to his skin, blackening it where the flame had touched, and he almost, almost asked aloud if they’d ever had bonfires in Crainfell. What a ridiculous question. Was he really so desperate that he’d run out of anything else to ask or talk about?

What had they done in the Core when the evenings were dark and stretched out like this one? He tried to remember, thinking back to the winters when the passes were blocked with snow and even Vladimer wouldn’t leave his cabin after the sun went down because of the vicious cold. He and the

other men in his cabin had always found some way to occupy themselves, even when they'd spent days on end snowed into one room together. Carver had passed the time whittling amulets from the bones and antlers that he collected during the summer months. Billet had slept or tossed a leather ball around with one of the other boys until they broke something or hit Viggo and he made them stop. Dakota would sit on his bunk trying to convince Viggo or one of the others to play that stupid bone-shift game he'd made up—

Knackers.

Viggo sat up straight.

He had a full set of knacker bones in his bag. It was a good game, and they'd all played it at one time or another. Even Dex used to play with him sometimes when they were stuck waiting on Vladimer or one of the other trainers. Maybe—

He found the game first, just to be sure he still had it. The leather bag was crushed into the bottom of his rucksack, but it didn't feel as though any of the bones were broken. He shook a few out into his hand, just to be sure, and

summoned his courage, saying louder than he'd meant to, "Play you knackers?"

"What?"

"Knackers," he said again, feeling awkward and almost wishing he'd kept his mouth shut. But awkwardness was better than silence. "It's a game. I can teach you if you want."

He half expected her to say no, but the curtain moved to one side, and she came out, combing through her loose hair with her fingers and looking interested. "What kind of game?"

"Dakota made it up," Viggo said. He rose, shoving the chair back against the wall, and sat down cross-legged on the floor. "It's kind of stupid, since, you know, Dakota was the one who thought of it, but it's fun."

She sat down, tucking hair behind one ear. Something had shifted after their fight. Her feet were bare, and she looked open somehow, as if his story had broken through some of her walls. Still, she looked hesitant, as if she'd only agreed to play because she, too, was tired of the silence. He didn't care. Any excuse that pulled her out of her curtained-off bedroom and kept him from asking questions about

Crainfell that neither of them cared about was worth it. He emptied the leather bag onto the stone floor, sorting through the bones swiftly as he explained the rules. She listened, a slight smile playing on her lips, and when he'd finished stumbling through the explanation, he shrugged and said lamely, "If that makes sense."

It didn't make sense. He could already see that, but Cat shrugged, twisting a strand of hair around her finger. "Let's try it. I can learn along the way."

The bones were dyed either red or black with three or four left white as neutral pieces. The game was a quick one, only about three or four minutes, but it was addictive too. Lose or win, Viggo could never resist playing a whole string of matches whenever Dakota convinced him to play.

Cat was grinning by the time they'd finished five games. He'd won the first game quite easily since she was still learning the rules, and he'd meant to let her win the second, if only to keep her playing, but she'd beaten him to it. She had a quick eye and a quicker hand, and she won the next three games in rapid succession. He set the pieces out again, narrowing his eyes at her in mock suspicion. "Bria taught you this game, didn't she?"

She laughed, raking hair out of her face and twisting it around over one shoulder. “Swear on my honor, I’ve never heard of it.”

“Then how are you cheating?”

“I can’t cheat. I don’t know how to play, remember?”

He won the next game, and the next, but only just. His hand was stinging by the end of the last round from getting to a bone barely a half second before Cat slapped it. His ribs hurt from laughing so hard, and Cat had her face buried in her woolen wrap, her shoulders heaving as she fought to muffle her laughter. “I’m sorry,” she squeaked at last, breathless. “I’m sorry!”

“It’s broken.”

“It’s not broken!”

“It is broken.” Viggo flexed his hand, his fingers numb to the tips. “Completely ruined. I’ll never use this hand again. Fane is going to be furious at you for mangling his property. You’re going to prison forever.”

Cat doubled over, her face pressed hard into the woolen shawl as she shook with silent mirth. Someone tapped on the door to their room, and Viggo stumbled to his feet, trying—

unsuccessfully—to rearrange his expression into something like sobriety.

The housekeeper was outside holding their dinner tray. Amelia Corke. She frowned at Viggo, hesitating as she began to hand over the tray, and glanced past him into the room. Cat was still huddled on the floor, her face hidden in the wrap, and the bones they'd been playing with were scattered across the floor where they'd been tossed during a scuffle over the last white piece. The woman's lips tightened, her fierce countenance darkening. "What in the name of blessed saints do yuh be up to?"

Viggo choked on his breath, fighting with all his might to maintain the impassive exterior of a bodyguard. "Speaking to the dead. Why?"

Cat uttered a sound not unlike a whimper, her whole body shuddering with another spasm of laughter. The woman's eyebrows rose, and she looked again at Cat incredulously. Abruptly, she shoved the tray into his hands and shook her skirts, as if to shake the air of their room from the fabric. "Yuh just be careful what yuh be inviting into this house, boy," she said sharply, turning her back on him and making

a sign to ward off evil. “We be a good, religious household, and we ain’t want yur devilry here.”

Viggo made a face at her back and shut the door. Cat rolled over, drawing in a deep, shuddering breath as she whispered, “*Speaking to the dead?* What did you tell her *that* for?”

“I don’t know. I panicked.” Viggo set the tray on the table. “Blast. She didn’t light the fire.”

“Well, she’s not coming back *now!*”

“It’s not all my fault. You were the one writhing on the floor.”

“Saints.” Cat draped her arm over her face. “She’s going to avoid us like we’re carrying the plague.”

Viggo grinned and stuffed half a bun into his mouth. “You think so? Can we keep the shutters open now?”



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*ASHES IN A DEAD FIRE*

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**V**iggo knew something was wrong almost before he stepped through the door to the apartment the following night.

The light was wrong. Fane usually had candles scattered across the main room of his apartments after dinner, candles that smelled of wax and wilted roses. But tonight, although the dark spilled through the open windows and the night held the chill of rain, the candles stood lifeless. The air was wrong, too. A cool wind whispered through the apartment, stirring the curtains to life as if a ghost moved behind them. The chill that touched his face felt like a breath from the grave, as if he'd opened a tomb. No fire was lit in the grate. Ash lay damp among the coals.

Viggo took a half step into the room, his hand dropping instinctively for the hilt of his hunting knife, and motioned behind him for Cat to wait. She paused just inside the door, her boots making no noise on the thick carpet. Viggo glanced at her, hesitating uncertainly. Fane had a standing order that he wasn't to be disturbed after dinner, not even by the servants. Maybe he was writing letters in the other room. Maybe.

Viggo cleared his throat and called low, "My lord?"

The door to Fane's bedroom opened so suddenly that it startled them both. Viggo's hand jerked reflexively at his hunting knife, but relaxed as Fane strode out, sweeping a dull-colored cloak about his shoulders. He didn't seem to notice either of their reactions as he said peremptorily, "Ashcliff, dismissed. Swifter, I want to speak to you."

Cat's eyes narrowed briefly, but she obeyed, disappearing into their room. Viggo stepped farther into the room, unaccountable wariness trying to stay his steps. He bowed his head. "My lord?"

Fane unlocked one of the drawers of his desk and pulled out a leather pouch. The contents clinked metallically. "I'll need you tonight," Fane said flatly, his attention on the coins. "There's food in your room. Eat and be ready in ten minutes."

Viggo's throat tightened as if the noose he'd felt around his neck only days before had returned. He tried to swallow, but premonition leapt into his chest, spreading black wings as only fear can. "May I ask where we're going, my lord?" he whispered hoarsely.

Fane turned around. "If you must. Joseph Brenner invited me to a fight house that he frequents. He seems to think that you'll do well in the ring. I told him we'd try it out."

Shock stole Viggo's voice. The noose jerked, cutting off his breathing, and for a moment he couldn't think. Anger loosed his tongue. "Fighting King's Dreyens is against the law," he snarled.

Fane met his eyes, the bare light of the emerging moon outside leeching the warmth and color from his features and turning them to stone. "So is attacking your master."

The name that leapt to Viggo's tongue would have cost him a week in the training courts if he'd voiced it. He clamped his jaw shut to keep it between his teeth until it withered and died, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. "You said that was forgotten—"

"If you kept your mouth shut," Fane snapped, his eyes as black as coal, "about anything that I tell you to. Including this."

"You can't—"

"I ... can't?" Fane hissed. A breath of wind swished through the open window, stirring the curtains with mocking whispers and empty laughter. "What makes you think that I can't do anything? I own you. Nothing you have belongs to you. I own that sword you carry and the clothes you're

wearing. I own the breath in your lungs. And if you want it to stay there, boy, you'll do as I say.”

Viggo was shaking. He clenched his fingers into a fist to hide their trembling and stared at the floor, hatred rising in his breast. Cold, cold hatred that crept in and froze his veins. Cold like the ashes in the dead fire and the wind that danced along the stone floor.

Fane watched him, waiting for a sign of rebellion. When none came he turned his back. “Be ready to leave.”

Viggo backed away and slipped into his room without a sound. Cat gave him a concerned glance, a question visible on her tongue as she turned to greet him. He answered it before she said anything, his voice eerily calm despite the fury pounding in his chest. As if the hatred had frozen his words. “It’s nothing. He needs me tonight, that’s all. I’ll be leaving in a few minutes.”

“Just you? Where—”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Probably the bath houses.”

The lie burned his tongue and left ashes in his mouth. He wouldn’t eat tonight. He didn’t have the stomach for it. She was looking at him, staring at his face, and he could see her

concern as if it were written across her skin. He smiled at her, right into her eyes, and knew right then that he would never be able to make this up to her. “It’s nothing, Cat.” The second lie didn’t burn him, or perhaps it did, but in a different way. A way that made him glad to have it hurt. A way that made the pain feel like a drug in his veins. “I’ll be back in a few hours. Don’t wait up, okay?”



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THE DEVIL'S CATHEDRAL

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**J**oseph Brenner's coach was waiting when they stepped outside. The night smelled of rain, and the sky was as black with clouds as if it had forgotten the stars. Viggo moved to climb on top, as always, but Fane stopped him with a rough gesture. "Not there. Get inside."

Viggo glanced at the black pit within and hesitated. "Why?"

"Because I don't want anyone to see you. Get in."

His nerve rebelled, fear trying to claw into his throat. Somehow, that dark hole seemed worse to him than what was coming. Hatred won out. It slapped the fear down and quelled it with a word. One single word.

*Coward.*

It rang in his ears as he ducked into the coach, slid along the bench to sit by the wall. Pounding with the beat of his heart, it seared through the blood in his veins.

Coward.

Coward.

Coward.

Coward, because he hadn't told Cat the truth. Coward, because he could never, never rid himself of the conscience that had followed him since he was a child. Coward, because he sat there like a stone while Brenner's colorless eyes crawled over him, vacant as a dead man's smile. Coward, because he was fool enough let his master do this to him in the first place.

Coward.

Brenner tossed him a leather cuff, saying with his silky, reptilian voice, "Put that on. Over your tattoo."

Viggo took the cuff and wiped his hands on his trousers as if the man's voice still clung to his skin like slime. The leather slipped over his shoulder, tightening to hide his tattoo with a pair of laces. Viggo tied it securely using his teeth to pull the laces into a knot. He laid his head back and closed his eyes, cursing this stupid night and the chance that had led him here.

Cursing Fane and Brenner for the greed that clung to their filthy skin like a disease.

A quarter of an hour later, the coach jerked to a halt, and the door opened. Viggo climbed out after Fane, and the fresh



air greeted him like a friend, kissing the sweat from his face and drawing the clinging claustrophobia from his lungs. It smelled of rain. Rain and wet earth.

The sharp spires of a half-ruined cathedral rose above them, as empty of its soul as if the god worshipped within its black walls had abandoned it. Leering, twisted gargoyles stood sentry over the entrance, and the streets around them were empty and deserted, as if he and his master were the only ones cursed enough to come here.

He paused, half-wanting to turn back. An iron-wrought fence circled around to the back of the cathedral, caging in the graves that stood among the shadows, and red light spilled from the crack between the doors.

Fane raised an eyebrow at him. “Do you need someone to hold your hand?”

Viggo set his teeth and followed him inside.

The smell hit him first—the raw stench of sweat and blood, adrenaline and fear. It leapt at his face, clawing at his throat, and he gagged. People crushed around him. Men, women, people he didn’t recognize, and a few he wished he hadn’t. Strangers. Strange eyes, strange smiles, strange faces. They

swirled around him in the red torchlight, the shadowy gloom hollowing their features. His throat began to close.

Fane pulled him along, shoving through the crowd, following Brenner. Viggo stumbled behind him, fear tearing him apart. He'd never been in a crowd like this before, never had other bodies jostled up against his own with so little idea of who they were. Strangers, shoving him out of the way, pushing past, elbowing him aside.

A man pushed in front of him, shooting questions at him that made no sense in the struggle. Name. Weight. Height. Age. His tongue wouldn't answer. Fane was gone, disappeared into the crowd. The man snapped his fingers in Viggo's face, pulling his attention back. His tongue loosened. The words that stumbled out sounded strange, not like his own. He had no idea if he'd answered correctly or not. Apparently, it was enough to satisfy. Someone else grabbed his wrist and pulled him along, out of the red torchlight and down a black, narrow hallway. Another room. More torchlight. Heat. A fire burned in the corner spitting heat and red sparks across a wooden floor.

The man who'd brought him here slapped him hard across the face. "Stupid! Are you deaf? Take off your shirt!"

Numbly, he did as he was told. His cheek stung, and he could feel the outline of the man's fingers on his face. His hands were shaking. *Coward.*

His breastplate and shirt went into a bin, along with his weapons. The man jerked a cork from a small vial and poured something over his chest and shoulders. The smell of it stung his nostrils. Coal oil.

The man was gone. He was alone. He sat down hard on the floor, burying his head in his hands. The stench of coal oil filled his lungs. He gagged, retched on the taste of it. The crackling of the fire became laughter, burning his soul with mockery.



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KALEB

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**Y**ou all right, mate?"

Viggo raised his head. For the first time, he realized that he wasn't alone. Far from it. Shapes formed in the shadows as his eyes adjusted, Dreyens leaning against the walls or seated in the corners. Dull eyes met his as his gaze passed over them. Most looked away.

It took him a moment to remember that someone had spoken to him. He glanced around, staring at the man sitting nearby with his back against the leg of a table. Curly dark hair fell over brown eyes, and the sympathetic smile he flashed in Viggo's direction was marred by a scar across the right side of his mouth. Viggo's tongue felt wooden, words clumsy on his breath. "What?"

"You okay?"

"Yeah." Viggo glanced at the man's right shoulder. A leather cuff, similar to his own, covered his tattoo. Viggo looked away. "Sure."

The man nodded. His chest was bare, and coal oil gleamed on his corded shoulders, glinting red in the torchlight. "First time's always the worst. Don't worry, you'll get used to it. We all do. What's your name?"

“I—” Viggo glanced again at the cuff on the man’s arm, a tangle of words getting stuck in his throat. Without the black symbol etched into the man’s skin, he felt off balance. It was more than just a badge of rank. It was a guideline, a rulebook almost, telling him how to respond and treat others. Without it, he was lost.

The man laughed as if he guessed what was going through Viggo’s head. “Sets you off at first, don’t it?”

Viggo looked up at him, relief sweeping into his chest and easing the band of steel around his ribs. He managed a tight smile. “Does at that. My name’s Viggo.”

“Kaleb.” The man reached across and offered him a hand. “Kaleb Rainwood. Welcome to the chapel.”

Viggo shook his hand. The grip was strong, his palm callused and firm. A warrior’s grip. Viggo took a full breath. “Been doing this long?”

Kaleb laughed bitterly. “Five years. Sounds longer than it feels. Fresh out of training?”

“Barely a month.” Viggo looked down, hating himself for the admission. He barked a harsh laugh. “Didn’t take me long to get myself into trouble.”

Kaleb winked at him. “Best ones never wait long. Took me a week to end up here. Big mouth, you know.”

Another voice joined the conversation, harsh and cracked with bitterness. “Aye, we all know. Give it a rest, Rainwood.”

Viggo glanced around, looking for the source of the voice. Most of the shadows leaning against the walls hadn't raised their heads. He couldn't see their faces in the dim light, only the reflection of flames in their dull eyes. One of the men, closer to the two of them than the rest, met his gaze with a cynical sneer, and said, “Welcome to hell, boy. Enjoy your stay.”

The man's dark eyes sent a shiver down his spine, as if the soul behind them had been spirited away by the Pale Lady's white hands. Viggo looked away.

Kaleb shot the man a grin. “Ignore him. He's ...” he cocked his head and tapped a finger to his temple, “you know. Not all there.”

The man shot a stream of curses at him, and Kaleb laughed. “Exactly.”

Viggo ran his hand over the floor and glanced around, his nerves tingling with restless energy. “So what happens now?”

“Now?” Kaleb cocked his head and listened. Viggo became aware of the dull, muted roar of the crowd outside. One voice had risen up above it, shouting to be heard in the tumult. Kaleb smiled—a smile without a soul. “Now the fights start. In ten minutes, they’ll be howling for blood.”

Viggo’s stomach twisted. Ten minutes seemed like an eternally long time to wait. His fingers were trembling. He balled them into a fist and glanced up at the ceiling. Shadows bled from the walls, and dust trickled between the beams. They were in a storage room of some kind, with strange, silvery writing inscribed into the walls, winding and winding around the room in a repetitive script. Boxes stood stacked against the walls, higher than his head and caked with dust.

It took him a long, long minute to realize that they were coffins.

“Last rites,” Kaleb said, watching him as if he were enjoying the dawning comprehension in Viggo’s face. He nodded at the walls. “The writing? It’s what the priests used to chant over the dead when they prepared them for burial here.”

Viggo forgot to breathe.

The man grinned, as if guessing at his thoughts and the rising nausea in his stomach. He thumped a heel against the



floor, the sound echoing beneath them as if the ground fell away beneath the boards. “Hear that? Crypt’s down there, although the owners of the fight house boarded it up when they moved in. Guess they didn’t want the dead mingling with their business.”

The dead. Viggo laughed suddenly, the sound hoarse, and said, “Too late.”

Kaleb laughed.

A servant appeared, barking a name into the silence. One of the men rose, vacant as a marionette, and followed him out the door.

Viggo watched him go and asked low, “Anyone ever get caught bringing their team in here?”

Kaleb shrugged and leaned back against the table, closing his eyes. “Nah. Nobody cares. I suppose if someone actually confessed or got caught red handed, maybe. But they’re all nobles. Who’s going to accuse a nobleman of anything?”

Viggo looked away. He should have guessed as much.

Another of the fight house’s servants appeared in the doorway, calling roughly, “Swifter!”

Viggo raised his head. Kaleb opened one eye and said cheerfully, “Looks like you’re up early on. They like getting the fresh blood out first. Word of advice. We got three rules here. And one we have just for us Dreyens. Stay in the ring, don’t stop fighting till they make you, and if you’re going to die, make a show of it.”

Viggo stared at him, his stomach twisting into a sick knot. “What’s the last one? Just for us Dreyens?”

Kaleb winked at him. “First one to let the animal out is a coward. And everybody knows who the cowards are. Good luck.”

The steel band around his chest tightened. As he moved to join the servant, Kaleb called after him low, “Viggo?”

He turned around.

“Watch your back out there,” Kaleb whispered. His eyes darkened and for a second, Viggo saw a man gutted by fire, his soul burned away by hell itself. “Fights without blood aren’t very exciting.”

Fear punched him in the gut. He backed away, turning to follow the servant from the chapel and out into the corridor. The darkness there folded him in, flooding around him until he

felt like he was drowning in it. Instinctively he reached for the wall to steady himself and get his bearings back. The wood he touched was so sticky with tar that it felt as if the wall were bleeding. After that he kept his hands to himself.

The light hit him when he stepped from the narrow corridor into the massive hall beyond. The light and the smell. Pitch and tar, sweat and blood and fear. Red light. His heart dropped. Torches lit the hall, hanging on sconces and dripping flaming pitch on the marble floor. Heat fogged the air, making his head spin. The crowd was bigger now, louder. The shouting deafened him. Nausea poured through his gut, and his lungs screamed for something other than sweat and fear and smoke, but he couldn't get out. He wasn't even sure by this time which way *was* out.

Besides, where could he go? His master was here. Running wouldn't do any good.

They'd carved a path for him through the bodies, the crush held back by rope sidelines. He followed the servant through, wishing he could shut his ears to the coarse language, the laughter, the whistles. Slick fingers closed around his throat, fear and hatred dug their claws into his skin. Faces blurred, features melding together. He thought he saw Fane and

Brenner, but he wasn't sure, and before he could look again, he was in the arena.

Sand covered the floor. White, white sand, shocking in the red light of the torches. White sand to show the blood. It was fenced in with posts and rope. He stumbled as he slipped between, his breath catching. They were all staring at him. Strangers, watching his every move, shouting, laughing, screaming at him. He'd never had so many eyes fixated on him at one time, never been so overwhelmed by shrieks and stench and sweat.

Another man approached the arena from the other side, a Dreyen. Maybe ten, twelve years his senior. He seemed familiar with the crowd, used to the savage baying and vicious language. He ducked under the rope, spread his arms wide as if to embrace the attention, playing to the crowd and flexing his muscles. The screaming increased. Disgust rose in Viggo's throat. He swallowed bile.

Fane was there—watching him, waiting to see what he would do. Viggo stared at him, suddenly so dizzy that everything—the noise, the lights, the stench—swirled around him in a haze.

Only his master remained. A man with the blood of kings in his veins—who spoke with the gods and possessed him body and soul.

Viggo shut his eyes and cursed him.



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*WHITE SAND AND RED BLOOD*

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**A** gong rang, bronze vibrating above the roar. The screams fell silent as abruptly as if they'd been cut with a knife—viciously, brutally silent, yanking the air from Viggo's lungs.

His opponent was moving. Circling, baring sharpened incisors. Viggo backed away. The man was older, heavier than he was. Shorter, though. He would have less reach. Desperately his eyes flicked for the man's shoulder. Leather cuff. No tattoo. No strategy. The sand shifted, grating beneath his feet. His lungs weren't working. *Move.*

The man bull rushed. Viggo spun, ducked beneath his charge. His foot slipped. He scrambled sideways, scrabbling in the sand to regain his balance.

Laughter.

Taunting, mocking laughter that cut into his skin like shards of glass. Heat began to surge through his body. He ducked again and lunged forward, slamming into the other man's chest. The dull impact wrenched his shoulder and drove his opponent to the ground. They landed in a heap, rolling in the white sand, grappling for a hold.

His elbow clipped Viggo's jaw. Viggo's teeth snapped together, his ears ringing with renewed screams. The man punched him, hard. Brutal, animal fury finally roared up between his ribs, and the wolf tore out of him like a demon. No pain. Only blood. Hot, metallic blood in his mouth, on the sand. Red against white. The wolf's fear, fueled by the baying crowds, the screaming, and the blood, set it on fire, and it fought with a kind of horrible viciousness that even he couldn't tame.

Abruptly, it was over. Three men from the fight house dragged him off, pinning him in a corner. The wolf fled, leaving him branded a coward. Kaleb had said that, hadn't he?

Yes, a coward. Better they know now.

He had sand in his mouth. Blood stained his knuckles, his chest, his arms. Someone was helping his opponent try to shake off the daze of pain, talking to him. "Russell. Get up."

They pulled him to his feet, and he staggered out of the arena, still dripping blood. *Russell*. The three men holding Viggo released his arms. He stood. His knees felt weak, trembling underneath him. He turned in a slow circle, hearing



the screams of the crowd and seeing the unrestrained delight in their faces.

*Russell.*

Brenner was there, laughing, pounding Fane's shoulder in congratulations for the win. Viggo met his master's gaze. Triumph darkened the nobleman's eyes, and he nodded slightly, clapping along with the rest.

*Russell.*

Hatred seared through Viggo's body, deadening the heat of the fight. Cold, cold hatred that froze his veins until not even the warmth in the ruined nave could thaw him. He choked on it, nausea twisting in his stomach. He tore his arm away from the human trying to raise it to declare him the victor and ducked beneath the rope, shoving his way back to the narrow corridor.

The black shadows greeted him with open arms, flooding his senses with darkness. He found a corner where the gloom was deepest and was violently sick. He threw up until he couldn't stand on his own feet anymore, heaving until he had nothing in his stomach and only the taste of blood and bile in his mouth. He'd barely finished before someone came to lead him back to the arena for his next fight.

\* \* \*

Midnight had come and gone by the time Viggo slipped through the door leading to their room. Soft moonlight wafted across the floor, silver against the stone, and a breeze flitted through the open window, stirring the curtain blocking off Cat's bed. She was asleep. He could hear her soft, even breathing, whispering like a quiet song in the silence. He drank it in as he pulled off his gear and tossed it onto his bed.

His chest hurt. He'd have a bruise tomorrow—more than one, actually. Luckily, most of them would be easy to hide or explain away. More lies.

He sat down beside the worn table, leaning his head back against the wall. Cat had left food for him since he hadn't had the stomach to eat before they left. He didn't have it now, either. It would just go to waste. He ran his fingers over the scarred wood of the table, feeling the silken wear under his skin. His throat clogged. He took a deep breath and pulled off his vambraces, tossing them aside.

The scars shone white in the moonlight, pale and accusing, like marks against him in a judge's ledger. They patterned his skin from his wrists to his elbows, records to condemn him before whatever court convened after death. As he ran his

hands over them, touching them each in their turn, the memories awoke like silver ghosts brought to life. They danced across the room, replaying themselves on the stones and whispering their stories in his ears. Baying hounds, a dead servant. Blood on his hands, blood in his mouth. Warren Baxter's scream. Memories of past hurts, harsh words, and harsher silences. Memories that he would have given everything to forget, but the world to remember.

At last they whispered out, as they always did, and the ghosts disappeared. He took a deep breath, the pain in his chest twisting like a knife in his heart. His hunting knife sang softly as he pulled it from its sheath, the steel gleaming in the moonlight.

For a moment, he hesitated, torn with indecision. The steel tip played along the bare spot on his left forearm, marking a scratch next to the last scar without breaking the skin, tracing where the next was meant to go. Tonight certainly deserved it.

But his head was aching and so were his chest and his ribs and his soul, and he stood, placing the knife onto the tabletop carefully, and kicked off his boots. The softness of his thick blankets enveloped him in a warm cocoon as he climbed in, embracing his weakness and forgiving him for it without a

question. His throat tightened again, painfully, and he did something that he would have killed rather than admit to, something he hadn't done since he was twelve years old. He pulled the blankets over his head, curled into a ball, and cried himself to sleep beneath the covers.



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NIGHTMARES

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**R**ain fell nearly every night at dusk for the next two weeks, the darkness wearing the clouds like a cloak to hide the stars. Viggo lay on his stomach on the end of his bed, kicking his heels in the air, and listened to the rush and patter against their window's shutters. Dusky gloom whisked about the floor and walls, dancing with the light of a single candle. Viggo pressed his chin into the blankets and drew circles in the dust on the floor with his finger. His back ached, his legs too. Tonight was his first night off from the fight houses in days. He could see the addiction to the place growing in his master's eyes, greed sending them back night after night.

He was grateful for an evening away from it. Even if their room did stink of closed air. He wanted more than anything to throw the shutters wide and let the rain in to wash it away, but he didn't quite dare. The housekeeper had told him once already what she thought of windows open when it was raining, and she wasn't as easy to intimidate as the maids. Better to leave them shut and avoid trouble.

“Viggo?”

He raised his head. Cat was standing as awkwardly beside the curtain as if she didn't want to step beyond it and trespass

on his private space. Her face was pale. He sat up, a frown crossing his brow. “All right?”

Her chin lifted slightly, an attempt at a nod, but the tense look in her eyes belied the action. Her fists were clenched. “Can we ... will you come out to the training court with me?”

He stood. “Now?”

“Yes.” Her shoulders were tense too, and her eyes flitted away from his, traversing the walls as if looking for a way out. “I just—I need to. Please?”

Viggo opened his mouth to ask, but thought better of it and shrugged. “All right. If you want to.”

The relief on her face was so bare, so blatant, that he looked away immediately, embarrassed. “Come on, then.”

He led the way out of their room and into Fane’s apartments. Their master had gone to bed long ago, and the low fire in the grate had burned to rosy coals. He slipped out the door softly, his boots making no noise on the tiled floors. Cat followed like a ghost, so closely that he could feel the touch of her breath on his arm. Lightning flashed outside, shining bright white through the glazed windows and reflecting off the polished floor for the briefest of seconds.

The roll of thunder that followed coursed through Viggo's soul with a shudder of pleasure and sent goosebumps rippling down his bare arms. He grinned.

The back staircase smelled damp. Viggo felt his way down, sliding one hand along the stone wall. Cat was behind him still; he could hear her soft footsteps on the gritty stairs, but the pitched gloom defeated his eyes when he glanced back.

In minutes his hand brushed against the dank wood of the outside door. He stopped. Cat ran into his back and squeaked, like a mouse with its tail in the door. He bit back a laugh. Yes, it had been much too long since he'd skirted the rules about sneaking out. "Quiet, goose," he hissed over his shoulder. "Someone's going to hear you!"

"Who?" She was laughing, too, he could hear it in her voice. "Everyone's asleep. Go already!"

He pushed the door open and ducked outside, gasping as the deluge of rain hit him full in the face. Cat stumbled out behind him, and he ran with her through the pounding rain, over slick cobbles and along the empty, dim alley. He could hear water gushing from the overflowing gutters in cascading waterfalls, pooling in the cracked stone and running swiftly along the narrow sluiceway. Lightning flashed in the dark sky,



illuminating the narrow alleys, the walls streaming with water. Beside him, Cat slipped on the wet stone. Viggo caught her before she crashed to the cobbles, choking on his laughter as he checked his pace. He pulled her back onto her feet, clasping her chilled fingers in his warmer grip, and led her along the dark alley.

The training court was empty. Cat released his hand and spun around, lifting her face to the heavens and spreading her arms wide to embrace the weather. Lightning flashed again, and for a moment he caught sight of the bliss in her face. Her eyes were shut, and the tension in her shoulders and face had disappeared. He stood frozen, the rain driving against his back, and watched all the masks he'd ever seen on her melt away. The shell vanished, and it seemed to him that he'd seen right into her soul. Rudely, intrusively, as if this moment weren't incredibly private, as if the depth in it didn't take his breath away.

She caught him staring and laughed, the sound mixing with the music of the rain. "What?"

He flushed, suddenly embarrassed, and looked away. "Nothing." Rain soaked down the back of his shirt, and he glanced around the empty court and asked, before he could

catch himself, “What is it telling you, Cat? The rain. How does it—” He bit the words off, feeling stupid.

Cat looked at him questioningly.

“—fix everything,” he said finally, wishing he hadn’t said anything at all.

He wanted her to laugh again. He wanted to hear it make a melody of the wind and to stay in the moment forever. But she didn’t. An odd smile quirked the side of her mouth, and she shut her eyes, letting the rain patter against her face. “K’vul’s on the coastline. It used to rain there almost every night.”

Viggo shoved his hands in his pockets, his heart thudding against his ribs. He hadn’t asked her about the border post on purpose, still afraid of trespassing too far and ruining the shaky friendship they were trying so hard to build. Some things were hers, private and hidden away.

He hadn’t expected her to let him in to see them.

“My parents had checkpoints they walked along the border every day. They locked me in the cabin while they were gone to keep me safe.” Some of the tension from earlier spasmed through her face, just for a breath. “When they came back, my

father,” she uttered the word awkwardly, as if it were something fragile that she wasn’t comfortable using, “would take me for a walk in the rain. He said it washed away all the hours they were gone. All the bad thoughts.”

Viggo studied her, trying to imagine what she would have looked like then. A child with wispy blond hair and blue eyes, waiting behind a locked door for a chance to escape into the rain. “Did it?”

Cat nodded, not looking at him. “Yes.” Wind blew through the court and hissed along the cobbles. “He used to say that the rain washes everything clean, and only the wind lasts forever. We always went back to the cabin after, but I could pretend we wouldn’t while it was raining. It was ...” she paused, searching for the right word.

“An escape,” Viggo finished for her softly.

She smiled. “Exactly.”

Viggo nodded and looked up at the dark clouds and the falling rain. Water ran down his back, soaking into his boots now, and he shut his eyes, begging it silently to wash some of his own bad thoughts away. Thoughts of white sand and red torchlight, of blood and sweat and baying crowds.

It didn't help, not the way it seemed to for her, but he wanted it to ... badly. He needed an escape, more than anything in the world.

But this was hers, not his, and he doubted he would find one strong enough to free him from the burning claws of the fight house.

She came closer, touched his wrist, and slid her hand into his. Her fingers were trembling, wet with rain and clammy with cold. "It's freezing."

He looked down at her and uttered a hoarse laugh, the memories of the fight house retreating at the sight of her soaked hair and blue eyes. "How are we planning on explaining all the wet clothes to Mistress Corke?"

Cat screwed up her face, pretending to think about it. "I could tell her it was your fault."

"She's going to assume that anyway. Everything's my fault. It's very unfair."

She laughed. "We'll hang them up by the fire. She'll never know."

She was still holding his hand, her fingers laced through his, and he didn't dare move in case she pulled away. "She

always knows. She's going to find out, and then she's going to yell at me."

"Poor child."

"I don't want to get yelled at. She's mean."

Cat pulled away, patting him on the shoulder as she turned back toward the alley. "She's very mean. But think of it as your penance for picking on me all those weeks in the Core."

He laughed and followed her back toward the alley, wishing he could think of an excuse to stay out in the driving rain until the storm broke. Maybe the rain really did have a way of washing away bad thoughts.

At least for a little while.

\* \* \*

He dreamed that night of a black cell, buried beneath the stones so deep that the weight of the whole earth seemed to press down on it.

A cell, a grave. Something.

He had blood on his hands and a body in his arms, limp and empty of whatever soul was meant to give it life, and he was sobbing. Without voice. Without breath. He pushed the matted, bloody hair from its face, trying to see who it was—

Cold water splashed across his face. Viggo jerked upright, choking, and the dream fled like a thief. He rolled over and retched. His shirt was soaked, wet blurred his vision. Blood? No, only water. A sob jerked at the back of his throat.

Cat was standing by the curtain, clutching a pitcher to her chest. Her face was white, white as if a ghost had stolen her blood, and her eyes were wide. “You were dreaming,” she said, so quietly that the words barely held strength against the darkness flooding out of the stones. “You hit your hand against the wall.”

Viggo swore, realizing his hand was throbbing. He laid his head back against the wall, staring at the ceiling. “Hell. Bloody hell.”

She was staring at him. The fire had fallen to nothing, burning itself into ash and coals that smelled bitterly of old smoke. He took a deep breath, willing the fear to leave, but instead it rose into his throat, choking him with thin fingers. Another sob rose, and he closed his eyes. Blood flooded into his thoughts. *So much blood.*

“Are you all right?”

Viggo nodded, whispering hoarsely, “Yes.” Liar. “Yes, I’m fine. Go back to sleep.”

She didn't. The wind howled in the chimney, blowing fine ash over the floor, and she glanced at the empty fireplace, biting her lip. She set the pitcher on the floor with a hollow clunk and came over to sit on the edge of his bed tentatively, as if not at all sure she belonged there. Viggo scooted over a bit, giving her more room, and focused on the wailing squall outside. The rain had stopped, as if the wind had swept the clouds away, but the storm wasn't over. Out here on the flatlands, the wind was a living thing, so unlike the gentle breeze he was used to in the mountains. It screamed and howled, shrieking like a demon with only the grass to stand against it. The sound sent a shudder down his spine.

After a minute he stirred restlessly and murmured, "Sorry I woke you."

He felt her shrug. "It's okay. I have nightmares, too, sometimes." An eerie moan swirled down the chimney, scattering ash across the room and bringing the smell of smoke in with it. Cat set her teeth. "I hate that sound."

Viggo nodded.

"What were you dreaming about?"

Fear rose like a demon and pressed against him in the darkness. It laughed at him with the scream of the wind.

Nausea twisted in his middle. “Nothing. I don’t know,” he said quickly.

Too quickly. She looked over at him and said nothing. After a long pause he shrugged awkwardly and looked away. “I don’t really know. I think ... I think maybe I killed someone.” His breath hitched. “There was a lot of blood.”

She scooted closer to him, so close that her shoulder pressed against his side. It surprised him, how good it felt. Just to have her there, to feel her warmth and know that she wasn’t going away. To know that she wasn’t going to laugh at him for his stupid fear. “Old memories, or just a dream?”

“Just a dream.”

“That’s all right, then.”

Viggo nodded, but it really wasn’t. He could still feel the horrible grief wrapping around his chest like a steel band that would never loosen. It wasn’t all right. Grief didn’t feel like that unless it was real.

Cat seemed to sense what he was thinking. For a long time neither of them said anything, just sat together, lost in companionable silence. The wind died down gradually, as if fading into the stones of the castle, and the rain began again,



pattering against the shutters with a music he'd never paid so much attention to before.

Cat was asleep, her head against his shoulder. He glanced down at her, at the way she was curled against his side as if she'd forgotten who he was, how she felt about him, at the way her knees were tucked against her chest and her hair was in her face. He reached over, brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes and touched her shoulder. "Cat."

She jerked awake, drawing in a sharp breath. He smiled. "Go back to bed, Cat. I'm all right."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Swear?"

"Swear. Go back to sleep."

Cat hesitated briefly. At last, she shrugged and rose to her feet. "Call me if you need to."

Viggo nodded, although he knew he wouldn't. He didn't really have the right to keep her awake because of a nightmare. As she disappeared behind the curtain he laid his head back against the wall, staring at the darkness. The memory of her words in the rain earlier came back, floating into his thoughts with the patter of raindrops. " ... *the rain washes everything clean, and only the wind lasts forever.*"

He repeated it to himself under his breath, whispering it like a promise. Several minutes later he fell asleep, lulled by the melody of her laughter amid the pouring rain.



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*WHERE THE DEAD SLEEP*

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**T**he fights hadn't begun yet when Fane brought him to the cathedral the following night. The nave was hollow and empty, echoing with the sound of servants' footsteps and the murmurs of a few men who'd come to drink and gamble over the card games that inevitably started among the tables. Fane gravitated toward these. Viggo wound his way among the pillars toward the chapel.

The cathedral felt strange now that it was empty, as if there were still something holy about the arched ceilings, the carved pillars, the stained windows stretching up above him. A dove fluttered overhead, and for a breath he could pretend he was in the basilica near the palace where the priests burned incense and offered prayers to a god who was far holier than the demons who dwelt within these walls.

Only for a breath. After that, he saw nothing but the arena with its white sand, stretching out where the altar had once been, and the blood stains on the marble floors, too harsh to be washed out.

Kaleb was in the chapel alone, lying on his back with his feet propped on the table and his hands folded behind his head. He might have been asleep.

Viggo shucked off his breastplate, tossing it into a corner, and Kaleb said without opening his eyes, “Master here early, eh?”

“He needed more time to get drunk.”

Kaleb nodded. “We’re this early every night. Standing card game.”

“Gods.” Viggo kicked Kaleb’s feet off the table and sat on it. “Fane better not get in on that. I’m starving. No time to eat before we left.”

Kaleb lifted his head and raised an eyebrow. “Got any money?”

Viggo stared at him. “What?”

“Money, stupid. Do you have any?”

“Where would I get money?”

Kaleb scrambled to his feet. “Never mind. I have a little left. Come on, let’s get something to eat.”

He took one of the torches from the sconces in the wall and led the way to the back of the room where the shadows were darkest and the coffins were stacked three and four deep against the walls. He vanishing behind them as quickly as if he were a ghost himself. Viggo hesitated, and Kaleb uttered a

snorting laugh. “I found this a few weeks ago. You aren’t scared?”

He was, but he went anyway. Several coffins had been shoved away from the wall, and a trap door had been cut into the floor sometime in the distant past. Kaleb hauled on the iron ring, and Viggo covered his mouth and nose when the smell of the tombs rose up from the black pit beneath it. “You’re mad.”

Kaleb only grinned at him, as if in agreement, and slipped through the opening, dropping so suddenly into the dark that Viggo caught his breath. But the torch went with him, and when Kaleb’s voice echoed up through the floor, it was so near that his fears of a long drop into darkness faded. “Nothing to worry about. Hurry up.”

Viggo clambered down after him, swinging the trap door shut behind them. Dust clung to the stone floor of the crypt. Kaleb’s torch cast long shadows through the seemingly endless hall, and the walls echoed with their footsteps as if startled by the sound of living breath.

Tombs lined the walls of the passage. Stone flowers bloomed on the lids of the coffins and on the arched pillars reaching up overhead. Lilies, roses, whiteleaf blossoms, and

twining vines curved around the stone, as if to convince the dead who lay here that they'd been buried in a garden instead of beneath a crumbling church.

Kaleb held the torch up higher. "This is where the ghosts are. In case you were wondering."

Viggo ventured further into the long room and touched the tombs as he passed them. Dust clung to his fingers, and the names inscribed into the stone leapt from flags as if the dead were begging to be remembered.

*Morgan Newham.*

*Victoria Roseman.*

*Grace Hutchins.*

Their bones lay in dust and silence, asleep and waiting for whatever end the dead had in store, and suddenly he envied them. No blood stained the floors down here, no red light cast black shadows among the graves.

He could breathe down here better than he could anywhere else.

Kaleb caught his arm and pulled him past the tombs, as if his sense of ghoulish humor didn't extend so far as to risk being cursed for lingering in a graveyard. Viggo doubted any

of the souls buried here had enough malice to curse anyone. He'd been expecting bones and cobwebs, or worse, dead faces.

Not this. Not peace.

At the end of the hall, a stair led them out through a mausoleum and into the boneyard behind the church. Kaleb shook cobwebs out of his hair and grinned. "Right. Meat pie?"

Viggo squinted at him. "Where did you get money?"

Kaleb blinked at him, deadpan. "My master gave it to me."

"Liar."

He barked a laugh. "Do you want something to eat or not?"

Viggo wiped dust from the tombs onto his trousers, glancing back at the silent mausoleum. A crow had built its nest among the sculpted pillars. "Maybe. They won't notice we're gone?"

Kaleb shrugged. "Not if we hurry. I don't think anyone remembers there's a way into the crypt, or a way out. Best they don't. You're the only one I've ever told."

Viggo nodded absently, thinking of the names chiseled into the stone and the dust on the floor. "Better to leave the dead



in peace.”

Kaleb spat on a gravestone and vaulted over the wrought-iron fence. “They’re not at peace, believe me. The dead never are. There’s a vendor down that alley, doesn’t care much who gives him silver and doesn’t ask questions.”

“You’ve done this before?” Viggo glanced over his shoulder before they ducked into the alley, the back of his neck prickling as he stared back through the graves at the cathedral. “And you didn’t get caught?”

“Never.” Kaleb grinned back at him. “You can pay me back next time.”

“I’m not stealing from my master.”

“Why not? You earn all his money for him. Why shouldn’t you profit from it?”

Viggo bit his tongue and decided not to answer.

Why not, indeed.

\* \* \*

The man waiting for him in the arena had gray in his hair and in his beard. Viggo ducked beneath the rope, trying not to look at him, trying to block out the screaming of the

spectators, the numb feeling in his hands and his soul, and the guilt already crowding into his thoughts.

The gong sounded, and instinctively Viggo began to move. Circling, probing. Sand shifted under his feet. Someone over his left shoulder was taking bets, goading the onlookers into wagers he doubted very much they could pay.

The man didn't move.

His eyes were empty, weary of fights and blood and sorrow and living, and Viggo could see the defeat in his soul before they'd even begun. He'd lost already.

Really, they both had.

Someone shouted at him, cursing him like one of the stray dogs wandering the streets, and he began to move, shambling in a loose circle, playing the part for the crowd, albeit unconvincingly.

His eyes met Viggo's, and he bared a twisted grin, like something from the face of a corpse. "Let's get it over with, eh, lad?"

The fight lasted far less than ten minutes. A breath, really, although Viggo had done his best to slow it down, to make it look like the struggle it wasn't. He doubted anyone was

fooled. He wound his way back through the crowd toward the chapel where the others waited for their call and knew instinctively that he wouldn't see the man again. He'd seen others give up before, in the ring or in the chapel, although he'd only been there a week.

He didn't like to think about what their masters did to them later.

Or what Fane would do to him when he eventually did the same.

Kaleb was waiting, lying on his back on the floor with his boots propped up against a stack of coffins. He was flinging something in the air, catching it lazily and flinging it again. A wine cork. Viggo stepped over him and went to the water barrel in the corner, rinsing the blood off his hands and taking a long, long drink.

Kaleb glanced at him as he passed, seeing, more than likely, the thoughts churning in his head. "That bad, eh?"

Viggo spat on the floor and swore, cursing every stupid noble and gambler on the floor. His legs were trembling under him. He'd fought once too often tonight, and he was so tired he could barely stay on his feet. He'd been lucky with that last fight.

If he'd fought anyone else, he would have lost.

Kaleb barked a laugh. "Agreed. Did you lose?"

"No," Viggo snapped and ran a hand over his face. "He didn't even try."

Kaleb tossed the cork up and caught it again. "Ah, that kind. Poor sod. Bet his master flays his hide tonight."

"Please, make me feel better about it." Viggo sat down opposite him and stretched out his legs, wishing he could fall asleep right there. A few of the other men in the room were sleeping—so used to this place that they slept between sets as easily as they might in their own beds. "Maybe next time I'll join him. My master can pitch a fit about my first loss and we'll get it over with."

Kaleb frowned and raised his head. "You haven't lost yet?"

"I've been close." The crowd was screaming outside, more excited than they had been for his fight. They must have pulled men from one of the other back rooms, probably the kind that still had strength enough to keep people interested.

Kaleb swore and sat up. "Close isn't enough. You can't win all your fights, stupid."

Viggo stared at him, bewildered. “I thought that was the point?”

Kaleb rolled his eyes. “Gods. No, that’s not the point. The point is to make your master money. If you don’t lose, they start stacking your odds. Setting up fights you can’t win. You’re going to get your head kicked in.”

“I’m not following.”

One of the men seated against the far wall uttered a hacking laugh. “Don’t spoil it, Rainwood. He can take it better than the rest of us.”

Kaleb swore at him. The door opened, a servant calling one of the other men out into the ring, and Viggo waited until it had shut again to ask low, “I can take *what* better than the rest of you?”

Kaleb sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He looked tired tonight, too, although he’d had half the fights Viggo did, and his cheery, careless facade had slipped. Sometimes he looked older than he was, as if all the nights spent trapped in the chapel had aged his soul. “Look. Your master makes money by betting you against the house, and against anyone else who thinks you’ll lose. If you keep winning, they’ll start

betting more and pitting you against the ones who *don't* lose, or with two or three of them, to make sure you *do* go down.”

Viggo's throat closed, and the man from the arena was looking at him again, defeat in his gray eyes before they'd even begun. “Maybe that's better.”

“It's not. Your master wouldn't thank you for losing him half his estate in one night.” Kaleb leaned back against the table, his dark eyes hard as flint. “Try and imagine that conversation.”

Viggo's stomach turned over.

“Take it from me.” Kaleb pitched his cork into the fire, scattering sparks across the wooden floor. “Next time you have the chance to make it look real? Eat dust. It's better than having your master skin you alive for ruining him.”

Viggo rubbed a hand over his face and swore. “How am I supposed to know when he *hasn't* bet his whole life? He's stupid when it comes to gambling.”

Kaleb flashed a grin, some of his cheeriness coming back. “Aren't they all? You don't have to lose every time. Two or three times a week, take a dive. That's all. You fight enough. He'll keep up. Just don't lose a fight if they put you in the

ring with two or three others. That's a good sign he's bet everything on you, and he'll lose big."

Viggo nodded absently. "*Let's get it over with, eh, lad?*" The man's voice echoed through his head again, more weary than a gravedigger's.

He didn't want to walk into another fight like that one. It reminded him too much of how his own soul wanted to wither up, if only to escape the constant shame of everything he'd become.

Reluctantly, he stood, tugging on his tunic and buckling his sword on over it. "I'll think about it. It doesn't matter tonight. I'm finished anyway."

Kaleb narrowed his eyes, seeming to guess what he'd been thinking. He shrugged and sat back. "I warned you. It's your skin."

His skin or his soul. Right now, he wasn't sure which to choose above the other.



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HAUNTED

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**T**he fire went out an hour before midnight, the last of the coals collapsing into a rosy, glowing heap in the grate. Cat lay with her face buried in her pillow and shut her eyes, waiting for the door to creak, the night to end, or the walls to close in until they crushed her.

Fane and Viggo had left hours ago, yet again, too quickly even for her partner to eat before he went, and she was left here, shut in this empty room until he came back.

The silence pressed down on her, worse now that the fire had gone out and the cheerful crackle of flames devouring kindling had faded. Only the acrid smell of smoke remained, and the sound of her own heartbeat.

In K'vul, that steady beat had nearly driven her mad. She'd tried screaming a few times back then, if only to shatter the quiet before it smothered her. But screaming ignited the panic she'd had to work so hard to tame, and panic, when she was alone and the door was bolted, was unbearable.

She still remembered what it felt like to scream herself insensible.

When it happened, she'd always woken to her father's gentle hands and soothing murmur—and her mother's vicious scorn.

Sonya Ashcliff. Cat bit her tongue and sat up, kicking the sheets onto the floor and cursing aloud to break the silence. The woman haunted her even now, even here in Ivra. She'd seen her twice since coming here, once as they were driving into the city and once in the villages. Viggo had noticed the second time, and she'd tried more than once to find the words to explain why she'd been staring at a peasant woman instead of paying attention to Fane.

She'd come up empty, of course. She was haunted by a ghoul, that was all, and she wasn't likely to be shed of it anytime soon.

Not all mothers hated their daughters. The ones that did were hard to leave behind.

The latch clicked. Cat leaned back against the wall, listened to the door ease open and Viggo slip inside as quietly as if he were a ghost himself. The chair clattered, and he swore under his breath.

She still wasn't used to the way her heart settled at the sound of his voice.

He cursed again, and Cat uttered a soft laugh and whispered, “You can light a candle.”

Her voice startled him. Something clattered to the floor, and he snapped sharply, “Why are you awake?”

“Was I supposed to be sleeping?”

“No, I—” he tossed something onto his bed and said contritely, “You scared me. Did I wake you up?”

“I couldn’t sleep.” Cat raked a hand through her hair, wincing as her fingers caught in the tangles. “How was the bath house?”

“Boring and stupid. Was there anything left from dinner? I’m starving.”

“On the table, under the cloth. Fane didn’t feed you?”

He hesitated, and Cat had the sudden, shivery feeling that he was thinking over his answer carefully before he said, “I ate. Not enough, though.”

The words felt wrong, a jarring note that didn’t match the rest of his tone. Cat frowned, sat up straighter, and flipped her hair over one shoulder. “What did you do all night?”

“Not much.” His boots thumped against the door as he kicked them off and the chair squeaked. “He’s got a dice

game going. I think he's winning better than he does with cards. Maybe why he keeps going back. Are you decent?"

Cat bit back a smile, trying to ignore the way her skin prickled at the lie in his voice. "I haven't got my boots on."

He laughed. The curtain moved, and he came into her room as hesitantly as if he were afraid of trespassing on her space. He had the rest of their dinner with him, as if eating at midnight didn't make him half as sick as it would have her. "Can I sit in here?"

She scooted over to give him room, and he sat and stretched out his legs, wincing as he leaned against the wall. "Sorry I woke you."

"I told you, I couldn't sleep." Cat hugged her knees to her chest, a glow of warmth spreading through her chest. "It's too quiet."

Viggo grinned at her. "You missed me."

Cat rolled her eyes. "I didn't."

"You did. A little bit."

"You think I missed listening to you snore?"

He laughed and looked away. Cat rubbed a crease in her trousers, wishing she could ignore the tiny waver in her

breast, the wiggle of fear that stemmed from the haggard look in his eyes and the bruise on his shoulder, just barely visible beneath his collar. “So everything’s all right? With Fane?”

Viggo shrugged and stuffed half a roll into his mouth, his voice muffled as he spoke around it, “Seems like it. Why?”

“Just wondering. He’s had you out at night a lot.”

Viggo made a face. “I told you, he’s winning. As long as he’s making money, we’ll keep going back. Be glad you don’t have to watch.”

Cat frowned. “Why? What’s it like?”

Viggo barked a laugh. “Six old men wrapped in towels, sitting around a table screaming at dice and cursing at each other. While they sweat in a steam bath.”

“You’re right. I’m glad I’m not there.”

His smile faltered, just for a breath, and she caught a glimpse of how spent he was. He nodded, looking down at the roll in his hands. “It’s pretty awful.”

The words felt like stones in the silence, far heavier than they should have been. Cat looked again at the bruise on his neck and felt ice stealing into her heart, sharp as hoarfrost.

Nothing hurt like a lie. She'd learned that a long, long time ago.



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*STACKING THE ODDS*

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**H**e knew, almost before he'd gotten into the ring the following night, that Kaleb's advice had come too late. The crowd had a different feel to it, a kind of tingling anticipation, like the stillness before a lightning strike. They were waiting for him, waiting for more than just a swift fight and an easy finish.

Two men were waiting in the ring. A boy, younger and slighter than he was but with the restless, hungry energy of one of the few in the fight houses who enjoyed the cruelty and the adrenaline. A boy, and a bull. The second man was bigger than Viggo, heavier, taller. He wore a muzzle, the kind they used for the men they couldn't keep from tearing their opponents to pieces. The ones who'd gone so feral they were more animal than man.

He wasn't going to win this fight. He wasn't meant to.

Viggo froze, one hand on the rope. The attendant behind him shoved him forward. "Get in. Go on."

Viggo swore at him and ducked beneath the rope, trying to think. He'd fought like this before. Vladimer had always liked it that way, pitting his wolves against a pack. Forcing them to their limits. Seeing how far he could go before they broke.



Only Vladimer hadn't wanted him killed. He wasn't entirely sure Fane cared either way, and maybe it wouldn't matter if he did or not. The boy looked like he'd killed before, maybe even in the ring.

*Bludhærk*. Isn't that what they called it? Blood hungry.

Carver was that way. Viggo would have liked to pretend he was as well, but he knew better. He had too much soul, too much of the coward in him.

He was afraid of blood.

The gong rang out. The boy rushed him, headstrong, in a hurry. Viggo spun out of the way, cursing him, and shut out the noise of the crowds. He wasn't stupid. He knew how to fight like this, and hadn't he just been wishing for a fight that didn't leave him raw with guilt?

This was better. It had to be. At least if bones cracked, they would be his own.

He dodged the second man's rush as well, moving in a circle, keeping his distance, staying low, watching for patterns. The boy was too quick. All energy, all hunger. No skill. The other was slower, clumsy almost, like Billet.

And like Billet, if he got a blow in, the fight would be over right then. It would only take one hit.

The crowd was booing, disliking the way he was dancing out of reach, keeping his distance. They wanted him to fight and to lose.

That's what this fight was. He was meant to lose.

The two men split apart, forcing him to back away, trying to trap him against the rope. The boy lunged forward, snarling. Viggo caught his arm, snapped it in and down, and head-butted him in the face. Hard.

Bone crunched.

He went limp, and Viggo spun, shoving him into the second man and ducking just in time to avoid getting his head taken off. He fell, tore his back on one of the posts, and scrambled backward, sand in his mouth.

The second man slung the boy aside, snarling through the muzzle in his mouth, and came after him like a bear on the hunt. Viggo clambered to his feet, pain searing down his back, and backed away, stumbling in the sand.

One down. One down was good. The blood he felt trickling down his back wasn't good, but he didn't have time to think

about that now.

The man's breath rasped through the muzzle, wheezing, slobbering. He had blood in his mouth. Had the muzzle cut him? Viggo hadn't seen one up close, but he'd heard stories about them. About the iron plate pressing down the tongue, cutting into the sides of the mouth.

If he won tonight, he would have the muzzle to thank for it.

People were laughing now, laughing at him for running, for staying out of reach. Probably Fane would be furious about it later, but Viggo was past caring. This was different than Vladimer's fights, than the slaves he'd faced with a sword in his hand. Judging by the look in his opponent's eyes, the man would kill him if he got him on the floor. Or try to.

Viggo wasn't about to give him that chance.

He backed away, keeping his distance, dodging the man's short, fierce rushes, watching his fury build. Slobber and blood hung in swinging ropes from the man's muzzle. He was getting tired. A muzzle like that wouldn't let him breathe properly, not in the ring. No doubt he was used to finishing a fight almost before it had begun, seconds after he'd started.

Billet was the same way. If they could keep him moving, wear him out, they'd had a chance.

His back touched the rope. Someone in the crowd kicked his ankle, and he stumbled. With a roar, the man was on him. He slammed Viggo to the floor so hard that his vision blacked out for a breath. They rolled. Viggo struggled, trying to shove him off, trying to breathe. A blow clipped the side of his head, feeling as though it shattered every tooth in his jaw, and the wolf woke.

Raw, brutal fury blazed through him. Adrenaline tore through him in a way that only the wolf could summon. He twisted, only barely keeping the animal from stealing his shape, and caught the man's muzzle. Steel dug into his fingers, slick with saliva and blood, and he yanked it down, pressing the man's face into the sand. In a breath, he was on the man's back, an arm around his throat.

The man surged to his feet, twisting, struggling to get him off. Viggo hung on, crushing the man's windpipe until finally, finally he stumbled and went down.

Viggo let go and rolled off him, trembling in every limb and gulping for air. The crowd was screaming, and for once ... for once it didn't sound like the hellscape he'd been

trapped in. For once, it didn't clog his lungs with shame and make him want to bolt for the door.

For once, it felt like something he'd earned.

He rose, shrugging off the attendant's attempt to help him, and raised an arm for the crowd. Fane was watching him, nodding approval, clapping with the rest. Smiling, even. Viggo met his eyes for a long breath and backed away, allowing the attendant to lead him out, back through the crowd to wait for the next fight.

\* \* \*

His legs were shaking by the time the servant let him into the chapel. His back was a fire of pain, crusted sand stuck to his skin and grating on his nerves. The man helped him over to the table, let him lean against it, and walked away without a word.

Viggo sat down hard, too tired to go for the water barrel or find his tunic or think about what he would do when they called him again for another fight.

Kaleb appeared at his side, nudging his shoulder, and pressed a tumbler into his hand. "Easy. Drink that."

Viggo took a mouthful, swished and spat sand onto the floor, and then drank the rest of it down. Even his hands were shaking, and he cursed them, whispering, “Almost bloody died.”

“You win?”

He nodded and hacked a laugh, wiping the blood on his face with the back of his hand. Yes. Yes, he’d won. In more ways than just one. His whole body was on fire with pain and adrenaline, but his mind ... his mind was clear. No guilt. No shame. Only the satisfied relief of knowing he’d won. “Broke my nose though. Like you said.”

Kaleb uttered a humorless laugh. “I did try to warn you.”

Viggo leaned his head back against the table, closing his eyes. They’d be coming for him soon—for the next fight. He would lose that one probably. He didn’t have the strength for another. Not tonight anyway.

Kaleb was watching him, his eyes dark with worry. “Want me to tell them you broke a rib or something? They might let you off then.”

Viggo doubted it. He could easily imagine Fane insisting he continue the fights, broken rib or no. He shrugged. “I just

need a minute.”

The door opened, and a servant appeared. “Swifter?”

Viggo swore at him so vehemently that the man backed away.

“Easy,” he snapped. “Your master sent for you. He’s ready to leave.”

Relief flowed through Viggo’s aching limbs, and he hauled himself to his feet saying hoarsely, “Thank the saints for that.”



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*BATH HOUSES*

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**F**ane took him to the bath houses on the far western side of the city. Old, old stone paved the floors of the courtyard, natural springs bubbling up into wide pools that smelled of sulfur and steamed in the chilly night air.

Viggo followed his master inside. Brenner had come with them, with his pale corpse eyes and his silence, and Viggo had found it hard not to curse the man on their ride here. Something about him still stank of rot.

The bath houses were quiet, their stillness broken only by the soft splash of falling water and the low murmur of servants' voices. Lanterns hung from the stone archways, casting cool shadows and soft lamplight against the stone, and Viggo's footsteps echoed on the polished tiles.

A servant appeared from among the pillars, padding over to them with bare feet and a bowed head. Fane shrugged off his cloak, handing it to the man, and nodded at Viggo. "We're going to the steam rooms. Take care of him. Get him whatever he wants. He'll need an herbwoman too." He glanced at Viggo, something almost like approval in his dark eyes. "You did well."

A shock went through Viggo's breast. Fane and Brenner walked away, disappearing through a door into the interior of the bath house, and he was left alone. The servant bowed. "Come this way."

Viggo followed him. They went through another door, down a set of broad steps, and into a long room paved in marble. A shallow pool carved into the floor steamed gently on the far end of the room, and linen towels lay piled on a table beside a blazing brazier. The servant gestured to a doorway in the far wall. "Through there is a shower. You can rinse off before using the baths. I'll send for the herbwoman in the meantime ... do you want anything else?"

Viggo stared at him, tongue-tied, and said awkwardly, "Something to eat."

The man bowed again, naturally, as Viggo were something other than a stupid slave. "Of course."

He disappeared.

The shower stung. He'd scuffed the skin off his back when he'd hit the post, and there was sand and grit ground into the wound. Still, it felt better than he could have imagined to scrub the coal oil off his skin, to rinse the blood out of his hair, and the grit out of his eyes. He stayed longer than he

needed to, longer than he would have anywhere else, letting the hot steam and warm water soak some of the knots out of his tired muscles.

When he came out, the servant had left a tray of bread and soft cheese, fruit and hazelnuts crystallized in honey on the table. New wood had been laid on the brazier, and a basket of smooth stones hung beside it, absorbing the heat radiating from its sides.

He felt stupid standing in here, waited on like a lord instead of the slave he was. Whatever he'd won Fane tonight, it must have been substantial ... much more than a fight with a man who no longer cared enough to try.

*"You did well."*

He couldn't remember Fane showing any kind of approval before. Certainly not to him. He wasn't drunk tonight. No doubt that was the reason.

Or ... maybe these fights, the ones that made him real money, would be enough to please him. Maybe they would stabilize things, make them bearable. He'd thought the Core would kill him, too, in the beginning, but it hadn't. Being paired with Cat had felt like a curse as well, and that—he

shifted uncomfortably, thinking of the weight and warmth of her against his shoulder when she'd fallen asleep beside him.

No, that hadn't turned out nearly as badly as he'd feared.

Maybe he could adapt to the fight house the same way.

He ate quickly, well aware that his master could reappear at any moment. When he was finished, he poured water over the hot stones until steam billowed up and filled the room with a dense haze and eased into the pool. The tension in his shoulders loosened. He shut his eyes and lay back, resting his head on the edge and letting the rest of the pounding adrenaline from the fights dissolve.

He hadn't meant for any of this to happen. Not the fights, not Fane's hold over him, not anything. But it wasn't going away. He couldn't fix it, he couldn't change it.

Maybe ... just maybe, he could find his feet in it.

He stayed there a long time, half-dozing. Voices woke him. A woman was there, arguing with the servant in a low, urgent voice. Gray hair was twisted over one shoulder, and she was as slight as a child. Still, her voice was sharp as glass, and he caught the last of her words. “—told you I wouldn't do this anymore. I don't want anything to do with—”

The servant hissed at her, and they both turned to look at him as he stood. Viggo flushed, too dizzy and tired from the fight houses to muster up the will to argue with her. Or beg for anything else. “It’s all right, mother,” he said softly, avoiding her eyes and picking up his tunic. “I’ve no need of you.”

The woman cast a poisonous look at the servant and said, her tone softening, “It’s not you I’m objecting to, lad.”

The man left, and the herbwoman shrugged and nodded at the bench. “Sit down. Your back is hurt, they said?”

Viggo sat, not wanting to explain and hoping she wouldn’t ask. He was running out of lies lately. Lies for Cat, lies for the men in the training court, lies for the servants when they asked about his bruises.

He was sick of lying.

The woman inspected the scrape on his back and clicked her tongue, sounding so disapproving that he flinched. “Look at this. And they call it entertainment.”

His face reddened.

She sighed, probing his wound with gentle fingers. “Don’t mind me, child. It’s not your fault.”

He almost laughed. It was his fault. All of it. But he wasn't about to tell her that, not now.

He had enough shame on his head.

He was still, letting her work. Steam curled around him, smelling of whiteleaf oil and yarrow, crushed peppermint and binderweed. Whatever she did eased the sting and erased the throbbing down his leg and his side.

He was asleep when she finished, or nearly, and he almost fell off the bench when she touched his shoulder, saying softly, "Guardian?"

He caught himself, trying to shake off the fog of weariness. "Where—"

"Your master will meet you by the entrance." The woman tucked stray herbs and bandages into a basket. "I'm sure he'll be ready to leave by this time."

Viggo nodded and said awkwardly, "Thank you. Is that all?"

"Yes." She hesitated, glanced at the door, and looked at him fiercely. "No. The next time you have a chance, you go straight to Silas Thorne. Tell him about this, all of it. Do you hear me?"

Viggo stared at her, stunned. “What?”

She caught his arm, giving him a little shake. “I’m serious! I’ve treated enough of your kind from those fight houses, and I’ve watched enough of you die, too. I don’t know what your master did to keep you silent, but whatever it is, it’s not worth dying over.”

Viggo bit his tongue, shame searing through him like hot oil. *It’s not what he did*, he told her silently. *It’s what I did. I did this.*

The words stuck, and he couldn’t say them. Not to her, and definitely not to Silas Thorne.

Her fingers dug into his shoulder, sharp as claws. “Guardian, listen to me! It only gets worse from here. Do you think your master’s going to bring you to a place like this once you start losing him money?”

No. No, Fane wouldn’t. Viggo still could hardly believe the man had brought him here at all. Once he began losing—he’d rather not think about that just now. Not tonight.

He rose, suddenly wanting to be away from here, wanting to be back in the safety of his room where no one but himself knew how badly his life had spiraled out of control. “I will,”

he said thickly. She didn't understand. It was too late. Fane had laid his trap too well. "I swear."

He felt her gaze following him as he left, her jaw clenched and her eyes sharp with pity and frustration. He didn't know healers or humans enough to know if she believed him or not.

It didn't matter much either way. He was where he was.

Now it was time to make the best of it, the way he always had before.





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*STRANGERS*

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**F**ane didn't take him to the fight houses again, not for a whole week. Maybe the money Viggo had earned him lasted longer than it had before, or he felt that Viggo needed time to heal before he was likely to win again.

Either way, before the scrape on his back had healed over, Fane's chance to enter him again was gone, at least for a few days. On the seventh day of every third month, nobles and lords, politicians and priests gathered in the king's courts to drink, carouse, settle debts and grievances, and bow their heads to the man who owned their mortal souls.

Fane joined them, although Viggo could have sworn he didn't consider his soul owned by any man, king or not. The festival lasted three days, and he and Cat found themselves cut adrift almost from the moment the first coach rolled through the castle gates. Only the king kept his Dreyens by his side once court was underway, the rest setting theirs loose to roam as they would as a gesture of trust and respect to their monarch.

As soon as dusk fell on the first day, Cat dragged him out to the training courts. Three huge bonfires had been lit in the

center of the court, and Dreyens, more than Viggo had ever seen before in one place, milled about in the dancing light.

Viggo hesitated when they emerged from the alley, the red light and shifting crowd setting off a surge of anxiety beneath his skin. A sharp whistle pierced the confusion, and Ace waved at them from the far bonfire.

Cat started toward him. When Viggo didn't move, she glanced back, a frown flicking across her brow. "Coming?"

Viggo shrugged, glancing around the rest of the court in search of some excuse, somewhere else he could disappear until he could reasonably bow out and return to Fane's apartments. He'd been avoiding the training courts lately. He didn't want to have to answer questions about where he'd been, why his master kept him out so late, and where they went night after night.

He couldn't think of an excuse. Cat was still looking at him, her frown deepening, as if she could read his thoughts, and he shrugged and flashed a smile, saying, "Coming. Thought there might be a kickball game started."

Her face cleared, and she rolled her eyes. "Gods. We've been here ten seconds, and you're already trying to ditch me."

He grinned at her. "I've been stuck with you the whole day. Any longer and you're going to bite my head off. I'm just trying to spare us both the trouble."

She laughed, but he could still see something else behind it: a splinter of concern buried in her blue eyes when she looked at him, there when she smiled, worse when she didn't. As if all of his lies were catching up with him.

He stepped past her, moving toward the bonfire. "Come on. Or Ace will wonder why we're snubbing him."

They were roasting apples in the flames when Viggo joined them. He knew most of the men there, although he didn't see them often. Less, now that Fane had him in the fight houses so often. Even Ace and Brand felt like strangers lately.

Ace split an apple in two with his knife, handing half to Cat, and grinned at Viggo. "It's like seeing a ghost, you walking in here. I was beginning to think Caitlyn murdered you weeks ago."

Brand laughed. Viggo forced a smile, irritation crawling down his spine until he wanted to turn and walk out. "She tried."

Cat shoved him away, laughing, and he grinned at her. She was the only one he wanted to be around just now, he realized. He had three days of nothing, no Fane, no fight house, no late nights. He wanted to spend it with her, alone, somewhere he could enjoy her quiet companionship and sly sarcasm without Ace talking over her. He wanted to play knackers in their room until both their hands were stinging and their lungs hurt from laughing or slip out of the palace through the servants 'gate and explore the city. Hadn't he sworn to himself that he would loosen up, for her?

But she wanted to be in the training courts, and he couldn't tell her the truth about why he didn't.

Ace took a bite of apple, juice squirting from his mouth as he said, "Games are five to seven now. We need you to play again."

"Let someone else in. There's others who would play."

Ace rolled his eyes, looking at Cat as if they both already knew why that wouldn't work. "Not people who are *good*."

"I'll tell Fane that. I'm sure he'll let me off for a few nights. Since it's important." Viggo couldn't keep the sarcasm out of his voice. It bit his tongue as he let it out, and he immediately wished he'd kept his mouth shut.

Ace didn't notice. But Cat did. Viggo could feel her watching him out of the corner of her eye, even as the conversation moved on and finally turned away from him. He took an apple from one of the skewers, studiously ignoring her look. He didn't have to like Ace. The man was loud-mouthed and attention-seeking, and she would agree if he said it, although he knew she liked the man. Probably he was the one she spent most of her time in the training courts with, after Viggo had left with Fane for the fight house.

And, after all, why not? It wasn't as though he was able to do such a good job keeping her company. He kept her safe, that was what mattered. Safe from the reality of the fight house and the burden of Fane's anger.

Ace's stupidity was a small price to pay for that.

Cat jogged him with her elbow. He looked up, realizing he'd lost track of the conversation, and Ace barked a laugh. "Were you listening at all?"

"No." Viggo cut the core out of his apple and tossed it into the bonfire. "Sorry."

He didn't sound sorry. He'd tried, at least, but it hadn't come out that way, and he knew it. After an awkward breath, Ace shrugged and said, "We were planning on playing again

tomorrow. Are you coming? We've got all three days off, and \_\_\_”

“I doubt it. I—” Viggo hesitated, trying to work out how to explain away his injured back, “messed up my shoulder. Probably should let it rest.”

“You did?” Cat was staring at him. “How?”

He didn't look at her. “Just fell. Slipped on the steps at the bath house and landed wrong, that's all. It'll be fine.”

They were all looking at him now, and he couldn't tell if they believed him or not. Brand uttered a short laugh. “Bet master gave you hell for that.”

Viggo forced a grin. “He wasn't happy. You'd think he'd never tripped himself.”

They laughed, and some of the tension eased. Viggo toyed with his apple, trying to decide if he'd shown his face long enough to beg off. He could use his shoulder as an excuse ... except Cat was still looking at him oddly, and it was probably better to let them forget his story as quickly as possible.

He glanced around, looking for something else to hold his attention, some excuse to at least leave them to talk without

him, and froze as a familiar figure joined the group gathered around one of the other fires.

Kaleb.

Shame burned through him. He turned away so fast that Brand looked at him strangely, as if wondering what kind of demon had snapped at him out of the darkness.

When he glanced over his shoulder again, Kaleb was looking at him, a strange expression on his face. As if he, too, hadn't expected to see someone from the fight houses here. Stupid. They were both stupid. As if their masters would never cross paths anywhere but in hell itself. Only nobles and politicians favored by the king could own Dreyens, and they were all gathered here tonight.

It was Kaleb, that was the trouble. He wouldn't have recognized anyone else, not even the men he fought in the ring. Their faces were all blurred by adrenaline, and he hadn't cared enough to look closely at any of them. Kaleb was the only one he spoke to, ever.

Just for a second, he wondered what would happen if he left the group by the fire and went over to say hello. What could they do? He'd lied enough already. He could tell them



they'd met in the bath houses, at a horse race. Anything. They would believe him.

He didn't move. He wanted to, or wanted to want to. But he was too afraid of what would happen. The fight houses were neutral ground. Nothing mattered there. Not tattoos, not masters, not partners.

He didn't want that to change. Although from the look on Kaleb's face, it might already be too late.

Cat touched his wrist. "All right?"

"Yes." He tossed the apple into the fire, its flame flaring up and scattering sparks into the dark night. "Apple's bad. I'm going to find some water."

He walked away, not caring that she was staring after him, or that Ace looked annoyed and Brand amused. He didn't want to be here. They could enjoy themselves without him the way they always did.

He wanted to be alone.



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*THE GHOST WALKER*

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**V**iggo meant to go back through the dark alleys to Fane's apartment, but something stopped him. No doubt the servants would be there, lighting the fires and preparing for their master's return. He didn't want to see them, not any of them, or have them see him.

He was tired of inquiring stares.

Instead, he skirted the servants' entrance and plunged down another alley that he'd never been through before. Twilight had fallen, and dusky stars were appearing overhead. The alley was empty, although it was usually full of servants and peasants, delivery men and pages carrying messages. Tonight, the only movement came from the stray cats that darted along the walls like tiny shadows. Darkness folded him in, cool and forgiving, and the wolf stirred in his breast in a way it hadn't in far, far too long. As if it could feel the relief of being out from under so many eyes. He was never alone anymore, that was the trouble. Fane, the men at the fight house ... even Cat, although he tried not to think of that. He was never alone, and he wanted to be, more than anything else.

He turned a corner, stepping unexpectedly into a courtyard far smaller than the one he'd just left. Servants milled about, sitting around a fire, clustered in small groups talking, pouring ale from pitchers and roasting apples over the flames. Amelia Corke was seated beside a brazier with one of the maids and a few men from the stables, so close that Viggo could have reached out and touched her.

He stepped back into the shadows so fast that he hit his elbow on the stone wall and had to bite back a yelp. He stayed where he was for a breath, half sure they'd heard or seen him. No one stirred. He turned away, eager to be gone before they realized he was there, and froze when he realized they were talking about him.

“—out almost every night.” Amelia Corke leaned forward, cupping her hands around a mug of hot cider. “Won't tell us where he's gone or when he'll be back. And that beast of his, well. Eva's been washing blood out of his sheets, haven't you, lass?”

One of the grooms, a short, bearded man that smelled of horse and leather, frowned. “Blood?”

The maid, Eva, nodded. “Out of his clothes too. Not so you'd see it, of course. But it ain't hard to guess what it is

when the wash water's runnin' red."

"I wouldn't like to be the one saying it, and may the saints shut their ears to the words," Amelia Corke touched two fingers to her heart and her lips, "but he's doing something he oughtn't. And that poor stupid creature is paying the price for it. Wouldn't surprise me much if Lord Ravenstone brought him home dead one of these days—and I'll be the first to say, I'd be sorry for it."

"Not much trouble is he?"

"Not a bit." Amelia shook her head, her sharp voice belying the gentle words. "Polite as anything, although I wasn't expecting it. Keeps himself to himself and doesn't make much work for anyone."

Eva nodded. "Gentle, that's what I'd call it. Don't half mind lighting the fires in there anymore, despite his looks. Although," she paused. "Mistress Corke did walk in on them ... casting spells and the like."

Viggo swallowed a laugh and leaned back against the wall, glad for the darkness of the alley and the noise of the small court to keep him from being heard.

“Speaking to the dead, he called it,” Amelia said, her voice hushed, as if whatever curse he and Cat had been conjuring were likely to fall on her own head if she spoke it aloud. “I gave him a stern talking to, and I haven’t seen it happen since.”

The man lowered his voice, too, matching the hushed tones of the sort who were afraid to summon the Pale Lady when they spoke too familiarly of her arts. “Not surprised to hear it. Lots of strange goings on lately—maybe they just know of it better than we do.”

Eva leaned in. “What kind of things?”

The man glanced over his shoulder. “This’n that. Jack Fowley told me he seen the Ghost Walker out on Sorrow’s Heath, not two nights ago.”

Viggo’s skin prickled.

*The Ghost Walker.*

“Jack Fowley’s an old drunk,” Amelia said derisively, but Viggo caught a slight needle of fear in her voice. As if the mention of this Ghost Walker were enough to send a shiver down even her stiff spine. “He saw mist and rising fog, that’s all.”

“Not according to him. Said he was down toward the south end of the heath near where those marshes begin and that old huntsman’s cabin is. You remember?”

Eva, enthralled, nodded, and Amelia uttered a snort.

“Said he saw him striding through the mist, tall as kings, with a fire burning where his heart should be and the rest of him pale as ashes. Jack lit out for the huntsman’s cabin as fast as he could go, but he got there too late.”

“Too late?” Amelia was doing her best to sound indifferent.

The man nodded. “Huntsman was stone dead. Still warm, but not a soul in him to keep him that way. Jack calls it bad luck that he got there too late, but I told him he’s a fool. Once a man’s marked by the Ghost Walker, nothing can save him, and it’s best not to get in the way. The Pale Lady’s hound takes what he wants, pure of soul or not.”

“Pure of soul indeed.” Amelia stood, shaking out her skirts as if to rid herself of the story. “As if that dirty old huntsman had anything pure left in him. He probably drank himself to death or died of loneliness. Either way, it wasn’t this Ghost Walker who killed him. He’s naught but a child’s story.”

“But if Jack *saw* him ...” Eva began uncertainly.

“Come on, Eva,” Amelia snapped. “You’ve beds to make, and goodness knows, I’ve enough chores to do before the master comes back.”

Viggo rose and moved swiftly back the way he’d come, running his hand along the wall to guide him. The alley split, and he turned to the right, not eager to have Mistress Corke or her maid on his track. In a minute, he’d lost the glow of the fire behind him and the soft voices of the servants, and the darkness flooded in around him again.

Amelia’s voice, harsh even in memory, rose up around him. *“That poor stupid creature is paying the price for it. Wouldn’t surprise me much if Lord Ravenstone brought him home dead one of these days.”*

A window opened above him, and a maid leaned out, shaking dust from a thin carpet into the alley.

*“—brought him home dead ...”*

Yes, more than likely that was how things would end up. He’d take one fight too many, one risk, one mistake, and Fane would bring him back dead—if he brought him back at all.

He shook the thought from his head, quickening his pace, and emerged from the alleys into the main court. Above him



the lights of the palace blazed against the black sky, and the soft splash of the fountains echoed against the cobbles and marble walls, cooling the air and setting a lonely ache in his breast.

*“—brought him home dead ...”*

Without warning, the gates on the far end of the court swung wide. A chill that had nothing to do with the night air rippled over his skin, and instinctively he shrank back, deeper into the shadows.

Two horses came cantering across the courtyard. Lathered sweat gleamed on their hides. They reined in before the chateau, and the first of the riders, a broad-shouldered Dreyen, swung down, handing off his reins to the stable boy who appeared at his elbow. A massive war axe was strapped to the man's back and silver gleamed in the tattooed cobra on his shoulder. Viggo caught a glimpse of granite features and stony gray eyes before the man turned his back to unstrap the oddly shaped bundle draped behind his saddle. It fell to the ground awkwardly. Viggo's heart stopped as he realized it was a body. A body with enough life left in it to elicit a muffled grunt of pain when it hit the cobbles.

Assassins. Viggo's hackles rose. The Dreyen yanked his prisoner to his feet. The man stumbled, his head lolling back. Blood stained his clothing, matting his hair and streaking the glow of his skin in the moonlight. Pain had etched haggard scars into his features. He looked like a man who had been flirting with the Pale Lady for some time.

The second rider swung down, moving to help her partner. He left her with their quarry and mounted the steps, striding across the pillared veranda with the proud arrogance of a lord. The guards at the door moved to intercept him, and he paused, responding to their query with confidence and insolent eye contact. Viggo shifted, unconsciously inching forward to hear what was being said.

The man's head snapped around, as if the whisper of Viggo's boots on the cobbles had reached him. His gaze found Viggo in the shadows immediately, as if the animal in him could see straight through the shadows or could sense the heat in his blood.

For a long second, neither moved. The breath in Viggo's lungs compressed into an iron band as the man looked him over with blunt assessment, his dark eyes piercing Viggo to the bone.

In a flash, it was over. The man bared his incisors in a vicious smile, and he was gone, disappearing into the chateau with the guard. Viggo swallowed the fear in his throat and turned back to the alley, suddenly preferring the scrutiny of Amelia Corke and her maids to whatever hellhound had just returned to the palace with his prey.



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LANT CURTIS

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**T**he chill of that chance meeting clung to Viggo like the cold of a crypt in his bones. He could still feel it when he walked into the training court the next day, and even the summer heat still hanging in the air couldn't banish it.

Cat seemed to sense that something was wrong. She cast him one long, searching glance and disappeared in the direction of the showers. He watched her go. She'd find Ace after cleaning up, he knew. If it weren't for the whispers that stirred the silence in their little room after lights out—the long conversations before the two of them fell asleep—he'd find it much easier to be jealous. Viggo shrugged and went looking for Brand.

He found him in one of the far corners oiling his sword with a scrap of cloth. Viggo leaned against one of the braziers and watched him rub grease along the bright metal and polish the hilt and pommel of his sword. "Where'd Ace go?"

Brand shrugged. "Ditched me. I'll probably die of loneliness." He held the blade up, squinting as he peered down its length. "Get caught wandering around last night?"

Viggo flicked a cinder at him. It caught in the tightly woven braids knotted along his scalp. "No. Saw a few things,

though.” He paused, wondering how much to say, and added, “Couple of assassins came in, had a mark with them. Any idea who they were?”

“Ah. ” Brand grimaced and drew a seven pointed star on the dark skin of his forearm with the cinder. Viggo had seen it before scattered around the walls of the back alley. The servants used it to ward off evil spirits. “You saw Lant Curtis come in. Lucky you.”

Lant Curtis. Viggo thought back to the man’s vicious eyes and bared, animal smile and felt the cold creep into his soul again.

Brand glanced up at him and grinned. “Gave you a shiver, didn’t he? I swear, he’s got his smile straight from the Pale Lady.”

“You see him much?”

“More than most. He answers to Thorne, so it’s more often than I like.” Brand made a face. “He’s a bloody demon.”

As if in response to the words, the men around the entrance to the court stirred. Lant Curtis came striding into the training court with the same air he’d entered the chateau last night: like a lord into his own castle. His partner followed after him,

and the others already there, bodyguards for king and politician alike, cleared out of his way like minnows before a pike. Brand got to his feet. “Speaking of demons.”

Viggo’s throat had tightened again as it had the first time he’d seen Lant. He uttered a hoarse laugh. “Not very friendly, are they?”

Brand’s naked blade still hung in his hand. He looked as if he’d forgotten about it. “Not very. He and Reika keep themselves to themselves, and the rest of us stay out of their way. They’ll be gone in a day or two. Assassins like that don’t spend much time in Ivra.”

“He’s from Dunharrow. Your graduating set?”

Brand snorted. “As if. The one before me, more like. He’s been in the field fifteen years now, never been anything but an assassin. I swear, he’s made a deal with the devil for all the success he’s had.”

Viggo nodded, though he wasn’t so sure about a deal with the devil. From the look of the man, he might just *be* the devil.

When he looked up again, Lant Curtis was staring at him.

A hand wrapped around Viggo's throat, and he held the man's eyes, his heart pounding against his ribs. His soul felt suddenly raw, as if the other man could see straight through him, see the fight houses, see his fear, see all the stupid lies he'd told in the last weeks as if they were painted across his face for all the world to see.

The man said something to his partner and left her, moving to join the two of them.

Brand straightened up, wariness and dislike written into his face. Lant flashed a smile at him, baring his incisors the way the men in the fight houses did before they went for an opponent's throat. "Ah, the Lordship's pet. You're not with him?"

Brand didn't smile back. "No. Not today."

Lant nodded, his eyes flicking back to Viggo, calculating as a snake. He had a bleeding rose tattooed across his throat, so dark that it looked like a wound carved there with a knife. Thorne's crest, as if to stamp his ownership of the man where it couldn't be forgotten. "I didn't know we were expecting fresh meat so soon. Just get out of the cores, hatchling?"

Viggo met his gaze, not sure yet what to make of the man or the mockery in his tone. "Yes. A few months ago."



Lant clicked his tongue. “And I missed it. Shame. An exciting day, wasn’t it? Bit like letting go of mommy’s skirts for the first time.” He grinned. “How do you like kissing the floor for your master every morning?”

Viggo almost laughed. The taunt didn’t sting the way it would have three months ago, although he knew it was meant to. Whatever pride he’d had in his core and in being a King’s Dreyen had died in the fight houses. “Could be worse.”

“Could it?”

Viggo shrugged. “At least it’s something I’m good at.”

Lant’s eyes narrowed, just for a breath, as if the answer wasn’t the one he’d been expecting. Viggo held his gaze, waiting for the man to laugh or spit in his face and walk away. Whatever he wanted, whatever he was probing for, he could go to hell to find it.

The fight houses were enough trouble. Viggo didn’t need more.

“Any good with that sticker of yours?” Lant asked at last.

“Sometimes.”

“Sometimes isn’t an answer, hatchling. Sometimes gets people killed. You either know what you’re doing or you

don't—like him.” He nodded at Brand. “So which is it?”

Viggo hesitated. His eyes flicked from Lant to Reika, who was leaning against the wall in their corner. Something about the smile tugging at one side of her mouth sent a shiver down his back. “What’s it to you?”

“That’s a coward’s answer.”

“They taught me to fight.”

“Did they? That’s kind of them. Did they teach you anything real?”

Viggo stared at him trying to pretend he couldn’t already see where this was going. “I never thought so.” He shrugged again, forcing a self-effacing smile. “Not that it matters. I’m basically a glorified footman.”

“Funny. Just from looking, I would’ve said you were a man with blood on your hands.”

A shiver went down his back, and the red light of the fight houses flared in his mind. Red light. White sand. Blood. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he whispered.

“No? Been saying your prayers in the morning to keep the demons off?”

The words touched off the first spark of anger in Viggo's breast.

Brand was staring at Viggo, his face rigid with disapproval. Viggo couldn't look at him, feeling as though the blood from the fight houses were soaking through his clothes, there for all the world to see. Was it really as obvious as all that? Or was Lant Curtis just the kind of man to see things that others couldn't?

Lant bared another smile, looking as feral as the dogs that roamed the streets around the fight houses, the ones who sometimes dragged men off their horses or killed the sheep the peasants brought to the marketplace. "Shall we test that out, Your Holiness? See if you have more than prayers in you?"

Viggo stared at him, the wolf stirring in his breast. Something about Lant, his smile, his snake eyes, his mockery, set it off. It was already angry, already fueling him with adrenaline and hunger and pulsing, heated energy, the way it did in the rings. He swallowed, struggling to tame it, and said, "Let's not."

"Coward."

Viggo swore at him.

Quick as a snake, Lant hit him. Hard. The man moved like a viper, striking so fast and so hard that it seemed to come from nowhere. Viggo stumbled back, his vision blurred by pain, and before he could react, Lant was on him. They hit the cobbles and rolled, grappling for a hold. Lant hit him again, in the ribs, and knocked every ounce of breath from his lungs. Viggo grunted, and Lant flipped him over, pinning him down with an iron grip. The man grinned, baring his teeth, his eyes flecked with green. “That didn’t take much.”

Viggo’s vision went red. He snapped his head forward, head-butting Lant Curtis in the face, and felt the man’s nose snap. The taste of the fights got into his mouth, and the wolf flared up. It knew by now not to take his shape, but it surged through his body, taking his reason, his fear, his shame, and drowning them all in raw, maddening hunger. He pitched upward, going for the man’s throat with his teeth, and in a breath they were fighting the way he fought in the ring.

Blood-hungry and soulless.

Someone caught him by the collar of his tunic. Soldiers hauled him back, shoving him down. A rush of water hit him in the face. He gagged, gasping for breath, and a soldier with

a dark beard yanked his collar again. “Calm down, beast, or I’ll have you in the stocks for fighting! What is all this?”

Viggo coughed and spat. His pulse was thrumming in his ears, but the fury had drained away. He shook water out of his eyes. “Nothing. Just a fight.”

Lant laughed. The soldier swung around to face him, anger written red in his face, and snapped, “That’s enough—”

Lant bared a smile at him. The man’s face went stark white beneath his dark beard, and he took a half step back, as if suddenly realizing his mistake. “I said that’s enough,” he said, but with much less assurance.

Lant ignored him and swiped at his jaw, looking down at the blood in his hand. “By the gods of war.” He began to laugh. “Well, I knew if I pushed you around enough it would come out. I wasn’t expecting quite that much, but you get what you get.”

Viggo shook off the men holding him, trying to pretend the wolf wasn’t in his soul. “Shut up.”

Brand was staring at him. Half the training court too, and he could see Cat’s face among the others. Fane would kill him

for this if he heard of it. The soldier looked angry enough to report them both.

Lant glanced at the man, as if hearing Viggo's thoughts. "You're dismissed, Captain. Go on. Go shine your boots a bit."

The soldier's face turned red. For one frozen breath, no one moved. The man's jaw was working, and Viggo half expected him to throw Lant into the stocks then and there. But whatever hierarchy existed in the palace, Lant Curtis seemed to have his own place in it. After a long beat, the soldier turned his back and left, signaling his men to follow him. Brand backed away as well, going to join Ace and Cat on the far side of the training court.

Lant wiped blood on his sleeve and looked at Viggo. "So. His Holiness has a dark side. That's interesting."

"Maybe so." Viggo spat, baring his teeth. "So what?"

"So what? So you're dying in here." Lant dropped his voice low. "You know what happens to men like us when we're trapped in a place like this? We go mad, Holiness. And when that happens, people get hurt."

Viggo's stomach twisted with a nasty jolt. He knew. "I've got it under control."

"Do you? I wouldn't have bet on that."

Viggo clenched his jaw.

"Am I right?"

He was right. Viggo cursed him under his breath. "What am I supposed to do about it? I don't see any other choices lining up."

"Thorne's looking for assassins."

Viggo stared at him. "I'm not—"

"That kind? No, definitely not." Lant grinned. "Believe me, Your Holiness, whoever made you a bodyguard is soft in the head. You've got too much fire to be groveling to some fat sop."

"And an assassin would be so much better?" Viggo probed his split lip with his tongue and winced. "You still kiss the floor for the Archduke."

"I do, don't I." Lant bared his teeth in a grin and touched the rose on his throat. Its color bled down his his skin, into his collar. "Got the scars to prove it. But there's a difference between serving a man you can respect and bowing to a dolt."

A shiver skittered down Viggo's spine, and a faint memory stirred, nearly snuffed by the fight houses, of what it had felt like to take some pride in his place in the world. And in his master.

"Besides," Lant glanced over his shoulder at Reika, "I'm with my partner in the mountains or down in Beyora for months and here for three days. And when I'm out there? Nobody's telling me anything."

Viggo hesitated, allowing himself, just for a breath, to imagine what that would be like. Traveling from place to place with Cat. In the mountains, or alone, wending through the streets of a crowded city. No master, no lord. No fight house. Only the two of them.

Lant uttered a barking laugh, as if he could see the look in Viggo's eyes. "I'll let you sit with that. You decide you're interested? Come find me. I'll be around."





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*ASSASSINS*

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**D**awn had begun to lighten the eastern sky by the time Viggo entered the training court the next morning. The rain had washed the last stars from the sky, and gold rimmed the horizon.

Cat slipped from his side and disappeared among the shadows the moment they arrived. Probably heading for the showers. Viggo watched her go and hesitated. He could use a shower himself, if only to wake him up. He hadn't slept much the night before. Lant's words—and the heat of a fight without the exhaustion to go with it—had kept him awake, staring at the dark ceiling for hours on end. He'd meant to tell Cat about it, talk the idea over with her, but the way she'd looked at him when they were finally alone—no, she didn't need anything else to worry her. Not now. He'd wait until he had something real to tell her.

Viggo glanced again in the direction Cat had gone. She was out of sight by now, to his relief. He'd rather she didn't see what he was about to do.

He skirted the first of the early risers and went looking for Lant Curtis.

It didn't take long to find him. The two assassins were in the far back corner of the court, which was empty but for the two of them. Viggo approached warily, not sure yesterday's "friendliness" would be repeated. Or if he wanted it to be.

His boots made barely a whisper on the still-damp cobbles, but Lant heard him before he'd even gotten close enough to decide if he wanted to turn back or not. He looked up and grinned, his dark eyes hollowed by the uncertain light and the shadow of the bruises from their fight the day before. "Look who it is." He winked at Reika. "Didn't even take as long as I said."

She rolled her eyes. "So he's got more guts than I figured on." She gave Viggo a smile, baring incisors that had been sharpened to what looked like fangs. "Morning, Holiness."

A faint shiver rippled over Viggo's skin. Something about the older woman breathed of poison. "Hey."

Lant leaned back against the wall, folding his arms over his chest. "So, you think about what I said?"

"Some." Viggo shifted his gaze back to Lant. The man's shirt was dark with sweat. "I'm interested. But I have some questions."

Lant gestured invitingly. “Ask away.”

“I’ve already got an assignment. How am I supposed to get out of it?”

“There are ways.” Lant shrugged, as if that was least of Viggo’s concerns. “Break your hand, get a knife in your flesh. I know someone who lost a finger to get out of an assignment. With what he was running from, I doubt he ever missed the finger.”

Viggo’s skin crawled. “Why would that get me out of my assignment?”

Lant laughed. “Hell. You really are fresh out of training, aren’t you? Getting hurt on assignment means you need recovery. Recovery means your master gets someone else to babysit him. A month, maybe two, depending on how bad your injury is, and you’re sent out on something new. Course, you have to be careful. If they think you hurt yourself on purpose, you’re in for a world of trouble to pay for it.”

Viggo’s chest tightened. Trouble was one thing he didn’t need more of right now. He swallowed and glanced over his shoulder. “Well ... what’s to say I won’t just get another bodyguard assignment? Maybe a worse one?”

Lant winked at him. “Sure it can get worse, Your Holiness?”

Viggo’s jaw clenched. Lant barked a harsh laugh. “For anyone else, that’s probably just what would happen. But I spoke with Thorne after training yesterday. Mentioned your name, said if you ever happened to get loose from your master, you might be a good person to have out on the field. With my record, he won’t forget it.”

A frown flickered across Viggo’s face. “Why would you do that for me?”

“Who says I need a reason?”

Viggo’s silence answered for him. Lant straightened up. “We need assassins right now. Real assassins, who have talent for this sort of work. You wouldn’t believe some of the trash Thorne sends out. Besides,” he grinned, baring his incisors, “I like you. You have a lot of guts. I don’t see that too often around here.”

Viggo nodded, his mind whirling. Hope tingled on his skin like sparks, but he brushed it off quickly, knowing how infectious it could be.

“One thing, though. That kitten?” Lant nodded in the direction of the alley he and Cat had come from. “The one you came in with? You’ll have to ditch her first chance you get.”

A shock went down Viggo’s spine, and he instinctively looked back the way he’d come, as if Cat could possibly be listening. “What? Why?”

“She’ll ruin your chance, Holiness. That’s why,” Reika said flatly, flipping her hair over one shoulder and fixing him with dark eyes. The rose on her throat gleamed in the morning light. “She doesn’t inspire fear. Fear is our business. No matter how good she is, people are always going to underestimate her. And you, because of her. That’s a bad place to put yourself as an assassin. Especially for nothing more than a partner you’ve been with for a month or two.”

“All you have to do is request a change in partners once you’ve managed to ditch your master. Thorne’ll understand,” Lant said. He bared his incisors in ruthless grin. “Believe me, once it’s over with, you’ll both be better off. Kittens like that don’t make it as assassins. They just get hurt.”

Guilt tore into Viggo’s chest. He looked down, Lant’s words piercing his skin like hot glass. One treacherous

thought crept into his mind before he could catch it, biting his tongue as it slipped between his teeth. “She never wanted me as a partner, anyway,” he said slowly, hating himself for the taste of the words. “It was a mistake.”

“Exactly. See? Everyone’s happy.” Lant slung a worn leather pack over his shoulder and picked up the war axe that was leaning against the wall. “We take off tomorrow on assignment. My recommendation is with Thorne. The rest is up to you, Your Holiness. See you in hell.”

\* \* \*

Cat bit her lip as she watched Lant Curtis and his partner disappear into the shadows. Viggo stayed where he was for a long time, leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets. He wasn’t looking at her, at her or anyone else, and she could see the argument warring behind his eyes. Whatever the assassin had told him, he was taking it seriously.

Very seriously.

A leather ball smacked against her hip, startling her out of her thoughts. Ace jogged over and flipped it up with the toe of his boot, winking at her as he caught it deftly. “I thought you promised me you would play this time?”

“I was—I am.” Cat pushed hair out of her eyes and glanced once more at Viggo. He was still looking at the ground, scuffing dirt with his toe as he thought. His brow was furrowed, a frown deepening between his eyes. “I just needed a break.”

“Oh.” Ace looked at Viggo, too, and when she glanced up at him she thought she caught a glimpse of something like disappointment in his face. He grinned, instantly teasing again. “Admiring the view?”

Her face went red. So red that he laughed. “Don’t worry. I promise not to tell him.”

“I wasn’t—”

“It’s all right, Cat.” He tossed the ball up and caught it again, winking at her roguishly. “I’m not judging, I swear. If you like what you see—”

She snatched the ball and threw it at him. “Gods. Stop talking.”

He ducked and laughed, moving to rejoin the game. “Whatever you say. Come on back when you’re finished with your *break*.”



Stupid. He was stupid, and she was stupid for letting him see what he had. She swore, willing her color to cool and her heart to turn to stone the way it had been before all this started. It wasn't stone now, hadn't been for a long time, and she hated that the warmth in it was so recognizable.

“Ace bothering you?”

Cat jumped and swung around. Viggo grinned at her. “I can tell on him if you want.”

She rolled her eyes. “You're going to tattle to Thorne?”

“Brand, actually.” Viggo shoved his hands in his pockets. He'd lost the brooding frown and looked almost, almost like himself again. As much as he ever did lately. “I'm sure he'd do something for you.”

She laughed. “He's not bothering me.” She looked away, hesitating over the next words, and said, as lightly as she knew how, “What did Lant Curtis want from you?”

Viggo snorted. “Nothing. He's an idiot.”

“Really?”

He nodded more definitely than she had been expecting. “Totally. Want to join the game?”

Her heart rose a fraction, and she shrugged. “If you’ll take me on your team so I don’t have to be with Ace. I’m tired of losing.”

His laugh lifted some of the dark cloud weighing her down, and she cursed herself for the way it eased her anxiety, just as if she didn’t know with everything in her soul that he was lying.



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TESSA

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**T**wo days later, Fane had him in the fight houses again.

It was raining when they arrived, a cold, weeping rain, and Viggo was wet through when he entered the chapel. He stripped off his gear, and allowed the servant to slop coal oil over his shoulders and chest.

Kaleb was sitting in the back near the fire. Viggo moved toward him still battling between the excuse and the apology that he'd been drafting in his mind since seeing the other man in the training courts. He wasn't sure which to use, too afraid to lose the only friendship—aside from Cat's—that he felt mattered anymore.

He'd been a coward to stay away. A coward then and a coward now because he couldn't make up his mind to truly apologize for it.

A woman was with him. Viggo froze when he saw her, although he was already halfway across the room. He'd never seen her before, he was sure of that, although several women had passed through the fight house already since he'd been here. Most of them had only lasted one night.

He backed away, turning to leave, but Kaleb looked up and saw him. The man's eyes were raw with pain and a horrible, brutal fury. Viggo flinched back, but the man motioned him over and said quietly, "You're late. I thought you weren't coming."

"Fane was drunk," Viggo said. He sat down against the wall. The woman smiled at him—or tried to. He could see the fear in her, worse even than his own fear the first time he'd sat here waiting for his first fight. He'd at least had some confidence that he could win. "I wasn't even sure we'd make it this far."

A smile flitted across Kaleb's face. Just for a moment. "Should've given him a few more minutes at the bottle. He would have passed out, and you could have had a night off."

Viggo uttered a short laugh. "Or took a drunken beating."

Silence stretched between them, taut with pain. More to ease it than because he felt it mattered anymore, Viggo said low, "I meant to say hello the other night."

Kaleb grinned, some of his cracked humor returning. "Better you didn't. I wouldn't like to be caught associating with a man who's got gold on his shoulder. Doesn't look good."

“Gods.” Viggo laid his head back, feeling some of the anxiety in his chest ease. “I was hoping you didn’t notice.”

“Little hard with it flashing at me in all the firelight. No wonder they’ve been stacking odds on you.”

“It’s not funny.”

“It’s like you’re bloody royalty. I should be doffing my hat to you. And your snobby friends.”

“You don’t have to rub it in. And ‘friends ’is a stretch.”

The woman nudged Kaleb with her elbow, and his face sobered. “This is my partner, Tessa. Master figured he’d give her a try tonight.”

Viggo froze, but he smiled as best he could at her. “Good to meet you.” His voice, his stupid, stupid voice cracked, and for one horrible moment he was looking at Cat.

She was small, even for a woman. Her head couldn’t have come up even to his shoulder, and she looked younger than himself, although she couldn’t have been less than five years his senior. Her mousey hair was wet from the rain outside. He watched her push thick bangs out of her eyes, saw the fear in her, the way her fingers were trembling. “Kaleb was telling me about you. I hope you’ve been keeping him in line here.”

Her eyes looked tired, tired and empty. Again, Viggo thought he caught a glimpse of Cat in her gaze, and his stomach turned over. “Been doing my best,” he said thickly, trying—and failing—to make it sound normal and friendly. “He’s a hard one to keep on top of.”

“Tessa’s real good with knives,” Kaleb said hoarsely. He wasn’t looking at either of them, and Viggo wasn’t sure if he’d even heard Tessa’s attempted teasing. “You should see her sometime, Viggo. She can hit the wings off a moth after dusk. Best I’ve ever seen.”

Tessa looked down at her hands, rubbing her fingers along the rough material of her trousers as if she could still feel the hilt of a knife between them. “Won’t help me much here, I guess.”

And in that moment, Viggo was afraid for her. It hit him suddenly, like a fist against his chest, and when he swallowed he could taste it on his tongue, thin and metallic and cold. Always cold. Fear was cold. “You never know,” he said, and cursed himself for his stupid tongue, his stupid, stupid tongue that always said the wrong thing. Of course, it wouldn’t help her here. Almost nothing would.

Tessa smiled again faintly. Viggo glanced at Kaleb. The man didn't return his gaze. His eyes were dark, dark with anger, and dark with shame, and the emotions that he'd been able to hide so well up to this point were painted across his face as clear as ink. Viggo looked away.

The rain was chattering against the roof. Viggo could hear it pattering against the tiles. The roof overhead was leaking, and the smell of damp and wet earth crept into the chapel. Viggo leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. His chest hurt for Kaleb, but he couldn't silence the tiny, selfish whisper in the back of his mind. *Thank the saints it isn't me. Thank every god in heaven or hell it isn't me.*

He couldn't find the words in his breath to tell Kaleb he was sorry. Sorry his partner was here, sorry that he'd been condemned to this place, sorry that there was nothing Viggo could do about it. That was really the crux of the problem, he knew. There was nothing he could do to help. Nothing anyone could do, really. Or would do. Who was going to care about a couple of bodyguards stuck in the fight houses?

No one. That was who. So Viggo kept silent, and the quiet stretched between them, too long to be awkward, too heavy to be relieved by teasing or banter. It hung from the rafters like a



curtain made from the Pale Lady's shroud, and when the roar and scream of the fights started outside Viggo almost welcomed them. Anything was better than this sort of quiet.

Kaleb looked up when the screaming started, and his hand clenched reflexively, tightening around her fingers until he left marks in her skin. "There's no rules here, Tess," he said, so quietly that even Viggo had to strain to hear him. "No one cares how you win, only that you do. So you fight him however you can, all right? Don't try to fight fair."

"Kaleb—" she began reluctantly.

He cut her off savagely. "No! Listen, all right? Throw sand in his eyes, draw blood when you hit him, go for his throat when he goes down. I mean it, Tessa! This isn't the place to play fair."

Tessa shrugged awkwardly and looked at Viggo as if hoping he would contradict her partner. Kaleb was shaking. Viggo clenched his own fist, feeling the man's fear as if it was his own. "Go for his throat and his eyes," he told her thickly. "Strike first if you can, while the crowd's still cheering. Some of them get pretty distracted with people yelling at them."

She nodded, but Viggo could see the hopelessness in her eyes. The defeat. She'd already lost in her mind.

They called for her a quarter of an hour later. Why was it always the newest few that had to fight first? Maybe the new blood made the crowds wilder and the money flow more easily. Kaleb watched her go, and when she was gone he said quietly, “She doesn’t have a chance. They’ll tear her apart.”

Viggo clenched his fingers, anger pounding in his veins. “I can’t believe they let her in here. What were they thinking? This isn’t what these people came to see—”

“Isn’t it?” Kaleb asked tonelessly. His voice sounded so lifeless, so very lifeless, as if something in his soul had broken. “This is what they want, Viggo. Where’s the fun in having nothing to lose?”

Viggo had no answer to that.

Her fight lasted barely ten minutes. It seemed to Viggo that the screaming and catcalling that accompanied every fight had barely started before the door slammed back on its hinges, cracking against the wall with brutal force. The man who entered was dressed in the finery of a lord, but his florid, angry face had the coarse features of a cattle driver. His fat fingers were adorned with rings, his bloodshot eyes, with hate. He dragged Tessa in by her hair and threw her at Kaleb’s feet,

screaming, “Worthless! You’re trash, do you hear me? Trash! Both of you! I’d have done better with a dog off the streets!”

She curled up on the floor, protecting her head with her arms. There was blood in her hair. Kaleb scrambled between them, and the lord hit him in the face. “You’d better make up for what she cost me tonight, Rainwood, or I swear you’ll both pay for it.”

He disappeared. The door slammed behind him, and the silence that fell took the breath from Viggo’s lungs. He hadn’t moved, frozen to the shadows lurking against the wall. His own heartbeat sounded ridiculously loud in his ears. Much too loud. He cursed it beneath his breath for betraying his fear.

Tessa was sobbing. Silently. Breathlessly. The blood on her face was black in the scant light, and her tunic was torn. Kaleb helped her cover up hurriedly, retrieving his own thin shirt from the pile the servants had made of his gear, and helped her put it on. Without a word, Viggo found his as well and soaked it in a bucket of water beside the door. Kaleb was holding her when he returned, and he relented wordlessly as Viggo knelt down beside him and helped Tessa clean the blood from her mouth and nose. His hands were shaking so badly he could

barely squeeze the blood out of the fabric. For a long time, none of them said anything.

At last, Viggo worked up the courage to look at Kaleb. The man was staring at the floor, his lips pressed into a thin line, and there was murder in his eyes. Viggo's throat constricted. "Kaleb?"

"Pompous, wine-sodden fool," the man hissed through clenched teeth. "I'll break every bone in his fat hands for this —"

Tessa put her hand over his mouth quickly. "Shh, Kaleb. Please. You'll only make it worse."

"Worse?" he spat. The words shook in his mouth, trembling with hatred. "How much worse can it get? What else can he do?"

"Kaleb, please." Tessa glanced at Viggo, as if pleading with him to help her quiet her partner. Viggo stayed silent, looking down at the bloodstained shirt in his hand. He twisted it between his fingers. Nausea roiled in his gut, and he wasn't entirely sure that Kaleb wasn't right. And another part of him, a very small part in the back of his mind, whispered that if it had been him—if it had been his partner being dragged in by

her hair—he might not have stopped at breaking the man's hands.



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*A WEB OF LIES*

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**M**idnight had come and gone by the time Viggo made it back home. The fire in the massive stone fireplace had fallen to embers long ago, and the glow of the red coals cast long shadows across the carpeted floor. Fane staggered off toward his room, his head heavy with wine and his purse heavy with gold. Viggo watched him go. It had been a good night for his master. He'd won more than he'd lost on his betting, and Viggo had won every one of his fights in the ring. The man had crowed about it all the way home, while Viggo had nearly gagged from the smell of the wine on his breath.

Yes, it had been a very good night. For his master.

Fane's bedroom door shut behind him, and Viggo allowed himself a deep breath. His hands were aching. He could feel the bruises on his knuckles from the fights. Always before he'd managed to keep his hands clear of bruises, but tonight the smell of Tessa's blood and the memory of the panic in Kaleb's eyes had nearly driven him wild. He'd hurt the men he fought, several badly, and he could still feel the blows on his knuckles, the crack of bone and the heat of blood on his skin. The bruises from it would smolder beneath his skin for weeks to come.

But the bruises he saw in Kaleb's eyes had been much worse. Bruises in his soul, some so deep he doubted they would ever heal. Tonight had been nothing, not for him. Kaleb had it so much worse.

At least his own partner was still safe.

Viggo ran his fingers through the dust on the mantle, half reluctant to go in. Cat would be asleep by now. She usually was. He was so careful not to wake her, to eat the food she left for him as quietly as he could and slip into his bed without disturbing her. Now, more than ever, he was determined to keep this from her, to hide the horror of the fight house behind his smile and mask it with whatever lies he was forced to tell her. She would never, never see it, not once, not on him, not in person. He would hide it. For her. What had happened to Tessa tonight would never happen to her.

Not while he could still prevent it.

The fire in their small room had died, the coals glowing softly and casting faint shadows on the walls. The window was open, and the room smelled of rain and wind, a perfume he would never be able to resist. Beneath it hung the faint stench of soot and old smoke, driven from the chimney by the rains. Gloom hung in the corners, darkness and the damp of



the rains clinging to the stones, and it wasn't until she moved that Viggo saw her.

She was waiting for him, curled up in a chair. A candle flared to life beside her. She shook out the taper she'd lit it with and looked up at him silently. His breath froze, and he stared at her, guilt tearing at his chest. Her eyes looked dark, dark as coal in the odd, flickering light of the candle, as if the light behind them had gone out.

She was the first to break the silence. "It's late."

Viggo choked on his reply, stumbling awkwardly, "What are you still doing up?"

She raised her chin and looked at him, just looked at him, for a long moment. Her feet were bare, her braid was loose and tousled, tumbling over one shoulder. At last she shrugged slightly, never taking her eyes off his face. "Waiting for you."

*She knows.* Panic clutched at his throat. "No reason to do that. I told you I'd be back late."

Saints, the way she was looking at him. As if all the lies he'd told her in the past weeks were written across his face, bare as bare, just for her to read. She bit her lip, whispering, "Where have you been?"

“The bath houses.” The lie sounded so weak on his tongue, so very, very weak. His voice dropped, guilt strangling the lies from his tongue. “I told you that, didn’t I? You didn’t have to wait up for me—“

“You have blood on your shirt.”

Tessa’s blood. He covered it with his hand quickly, cursing himself for not putting his breastplate back on. Stupid, stupid decision! What was he supposed to say now? “I—”

“Don’t.”

Viggo froze. “Don’t what?”

She stood, pushing hair out of her face. The soft light of the candle flickered across her features, dyed her hair gold and silver and pale, pale yellow. “Don’t lie. You don’t have to tell me, not tonight at least, but please don’t lie any more.”

His throat clogged, and he searched her face for the anger he was sure was coming. Dex would have been screaming at him by this time, screaming, cursing. Throwing things. How long had she known something was off? That he was lying to her?

Why hadn’t she said anything until now?

She approached and took one of his hands in hers, running her thumb over the bruises on his fingers, and sighed. “Take your shirt off.”

Numbly, Viggo did as he was told. Her eyes traced the bruising on his chest, his side and his shoulder, black already from the blood beneath his skin. Her jaw clenched, and she turned away as quickly as if fear were snapping at her soul too. He watched her slop water into the washbasin. She dipped her fingers in, flicked water into the fire, and handed him his training tunic. “Let me see your hands.”

Viggo pulled the tunic on over his head and allowed her to bathe his knuckles, wincing as she washed away the gore of the fights. Her touch was soft, much gentler than he deserved, but still the scrapes and cuts stung as if she’d poured hot lead over them instead of water. He hissed once, his stupid tongue betraying him yet again, but her eyes stayed latched on the bruises marking his hands. Candlelight rippled across the surface of the dark water.

At last, she finished, and Viggo carried the basin to the window and emptied it. The rain whispered to him, and he paused for a moment, leaning against the rough sill and

listening to its musical language, whispering and laughing and chattering until the unintelligible words became a lullaby.

When he came back, Cat was tearing up the bloodstained shirt.

Viggo raised an eyebrow at her. She shrugged and said, “Blood doesn’t wash out. Besides, it won’t kill Fane to buy you a new tunic. He certainly isn’t hurting for money,” she added, half under her breath. Viggo looked up at her sharply, but her eyes were as empty as a night without stars or a wind without its voice. “Come over here.”

He sat down on the edge of the table opposite her, and she took his hand, beginning to bandage the cuts and bruises with the slender strips of cloth. “Witch hazel wouldn’t do you any hurt,” she said softly, almost absently, as if she were talking to herself and not to him. “Yarrow wouldn’t either, if I had any. But this will have to do. How does that feel?”

“Fine.” His voice sounded odd in his own ears. Thick, as if he had blood on his tongue. “But I’ll have to take them off tomorrow ...”

“No one will notice. The bruises will attract more attention.”

She still wasn't looking at him. Viggo looked down at the rough bandages on his hands and picked at a callus on his thumb. "Thank you."

A long silence met his words, and he forced himself to look up at her, although he knew what he would see. The questions and the soft, almost dormant hurt in her eyes scratched his soul. She opened her mouth, to curse at him or question him he thought, but no words came out. Instead, she reached up and brushed the hair out of his eyes, her fingers lingering on his temple, on the scruff lining his jaw and the bruise on his cheek. "You look so tired."

He bit his lip, suddenly tempted to let go and tell her everything. But the memory of Tessa's blood stopped him, and at last she rose to her feet and touched his shoulder lightly in passing. "Goodnight, Viggo."

"Goodnight," he whispered hoarsely. The sheet that separated their sleeping spaces swished back into place, but he stayed where he was for a long time listening to the sound of the rain and waiting for the wind to come and take away the guilt blanketing his heart.



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PAID WITH BLOOD

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Cane Borseo had a face like a ferret: thin, sharp-eyed, and hungry. He had a shifting, sideways look to him, and Viggo disliked him immediately.

He was waiting in the stables when Viggo found him, leaning on the stall rail of a sleek bay who rolled her eyes and bared yellow teeth at him as if she could smell the horse blood on the whip he carried in his belt.

He looked up, his face darkening when he saw that Viggo was alone, and said, “Where’s your master?”

His voice cracked and grated like crumbling stone as if he’d taken a whip to his vocal cords. Viggo met his glare with one of his own. “Not coming.”

Cane swore at him. The man had a knife in his belt, and Viggo was willing to bet there was more than horse blood on his hands. He ran the races in the outer rim, taking bets and gambling on the flesh of the animals he stripped of hides and muscle after only a few years, and the men who owed him debts slept with a chair against the door and a knife under their pillows. It hadn’t taken Viggo long to guess that if anyone was going to slit Fane’s throat over money not paid, it would be Cane.

“He called me up here,” Cane spat at him. “I took half my morning, and now he’s not even going to pay?”

“Did I say that?”

“Then where is he? He owes me two payments this time, not one. He missed last month.”

The mare danced sideways, shying away from the anger in the man’s voice. A groom pitching hay on the far side of the stables glanced at them inquiringly, probably wondering what brought a commoner and a Dreyen to the king’s stables.

“He won’t be making payments any longer.” Viggo took a leather satchel from his pocket, letting the coins inside clink against each other. “I’m to bring proof that his debts are paid in full. In writing.”

Cane’s eyes widened, and he ran a tongue over thin lips. “I don’t believe you. Let’s see it.”

Viggo handed him the pouch. The man pawed through it, fingering the gold coins and counting under his breath until he seemed satisfied. He tucked the gold away into his belt, and took a slip of parchment from his pocket, leaning against the stall and writing laboriously for a long time. At last, he signed



it, using a mark instead of his name like a peasant, and nodded, handing it off to Viggo. “There’s proof. Good enough?”

Viggo glanced through it and nodded, tucking the note into his pocket to give to Fane. “Then his lordship’s business with you is finished. You can leave when you like.”

He turned away, and Cane’s harsh voice stopped him. “Quite a sum of money that was.”

Viggo looked back at him.

“Quite a sum,” the man said again. His ferret eyes were narrowed, and his fingers toyed restlessly with the knife on his belt. “Where’d he get it all, I wonder?”

“That’s not your business.”

“Haven’t seen him in the races in a few months now.” Cane straightened up, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Found a new pastime, has he? One he’s got more luck at?”

He had a dirty, knowing look in his eyes, as if the men who made their living off horseflesh knew at least something of the trade that sold Dreyen blood in the fights. Viggo bared his teeth at the man. “You’ve no ties to my master now, peasant. His debt is paid, and you’ve no reason to be here. I would leave.”

Cane’s face reddened. “Or what?”

The smile Viggo flashed at him belonged to the wolf, and there was gold burning in his eyes as he said low, “Or I won’t ask nicely.”

Cane hesitated, and a splinter of fear showed beneath the man’s hardened exterior. Peasant-born, son of a beggar or a farmer, he knew to fear Dreyens, even among the gambling houses and racetracks that had given him a callous disdain for noble blood who couldn’t pay their debts.

For a breath, he didn’t move. At last, he forced a thin smile and said low, “Tell your master I look forward to seeing him at our events again.”

Viggo didn’t bother to answer.

Outside, the sun was blazing down on the flagstones, and burning glints reflected off the gold domes overhead. Viggo crossed the court with a quick stride, ready to be back in Fane’s office and out of the glare of the sun. He didn’t like acting as Fane’s messenger boy, although he’d been doing it more and more lately as Fane’s trust in him—or at least, his trust in his hold over him—grew.

He was halfway up the steps when a voice called after him.

“Swifter!”

Viggo turned, half expecting one of the men from the training courts or one of Fane's servants, but his heart plunged in his chest as Archduke Silas Thorne swung down from his horse and motioned him over.

The man was pulling off his gloves as Viggo came to meet him, brushing horsehair and dust from his clothing. He still looked too young to have the kind of power he did, young and capable like a soldier, or a ship's captain. He smiled as Viggo bowed to him, waving aside the formality as if it were somehow unnecessary. "I thought that was you. Fane send you on an errand?"

"To the stables," Viggo said, trying to ignore the sudden flush of guilt in his chest. He felt as though the grime of the fight houses were smeared across his face, there for Thorne to see and understand immediately. "I was just on my way back."

Thorne nodded. "Ah. Paying one of his debts for him?"

Viggo's face colored.

Thorne smiled to himself and tucked his gloves into his belt, passing his mare's reins over her head. "Never mind. I won't make you speak against your master."

He glanced over his shoulder, watching Ace and Brand dismount. Neither were close enough to hear what was being said, but Viggo could feel their eyes on him. “He’s been paying a lot of them lately,” Thorne said suddenly. Viggo’s stomach turned over. “At least, from what I’ve heard.”

He looked at Viggo, raising an eyebrow. Viggo stared at him, his tongue wooden and useless in his mouth, and said stupidly, “Some of them. He’s had a winning streak, I think. At the card tables.”

Thorne laughed softly. “That’s a first. Still. That’s a pretty heavy winning streak.”

“I think he paid some in the slave markets,” Viggo said, a stone in his throat. A sudden image of the children in that windblown village went through his mind, their thin faces and bare feet. How many of them had he saved from the slave markets with his blood? More than he liked to think about, although he doubted it would last long. He would lose eventually.

Thorne grimaced. “Yes, no doubt he did.” He passed a hand over his face, as if ridding himself of the thought, and glanced at Viggo. “But it’s going well? You’re finding your feet all right?”

The lies were getting easier. Even to Thorne, as if lying to an Archduke were the same as lying to the men in the training courts or even Fane himself. Only Cat was hard to lie to anymore. “Yes. No trouble.”

“What happened to your hands?”

Viggo looked down, staring numbly at the bandages wrapped around his fingers, and choked, “I scuffed my knuckles up. In the training court.”

“Ah.” Thorne’s face cleared. “I heard you had a run-in with Lant Curtis.”

“Yes, sire.” Viggo hesitated, not sure if he could be punished for a fight like that one. “I was—”

Thorne uttered a short laugh. “You were lucky. Last time Lant fought with a guardian, he left him in the boneknitter’s hall for three months. It’s not your fault. Do you need an herbwoman?”

Viggo bowed his head to hide the relief in his eyes. “My partner took care of it, Your Highness. Thank you.”

Thorne nodded, and suddenly, Viggo wanted to tell him the truth. All of it. About striking his master, the fight houses, Joseph Brenner and his flat, corpse eyes. Tessa, Kaleb.

Everything. Stupidly, he almost felt the man would understand, that it wouldn't be Viggo he'd blame, that he would help instead of condemning him the way anyone else would. He could almost feel the relief it would be, the weight off his chest if everything came spilling out, nothing held back. No sin. No pain. He could pour it all out and sit, empty, while Thorne sent for his soldiers and decided his fate.

Stupid. Stupid, stupid fool that he was, he almost broke. But still, even after all the nights in the fight house, he still had too much to lose. Cat would be gone. Faster than he could breathe, probably, and he would never see her again.

He wasn't ready to risk that. Not yet.

He was still stupid enough to hope that he could have some kind of life, even with the fight houses hanging over him.

"If that's all, Your Highness?" he asked hoarsely, and Thorne waved him off, letting him go. Back up the steps, back to Fane's office and the noose that was wrapping tighter and tighter around his neck with every passing day.

It hadn't choked him yet. He could still hope, however vainly, that it wouldn't.



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*QUIET MADNESS*

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**K**aleb came to the fight houses alone two nights later, an angry welt branded across his face and nothing in his eyes.

Viggo moved over, giving him space by the fire. Wind was wailing outside, colder than it should have been at this time of year, and the flames jerked and twisted in on themselves, half snuffed by the whirl of ash stirred up by the draft in the chimney.

Kaleb laid his head back against the wall and shut his eyes, his face drawn and as hollow as a skull's. "They started calling people yet?"

"Not yet." Viggo wiped soot from the floor, rubbing it between his fingers. The room was black with soot. Soot and shadows. Even the air tasted like ash. "You all right?"

"I'll manage. I've had worse."

Viggo nodded. He wanted to ask, to be sure that Tessa was all right and she hadn't taken worse than what he could already see on Kaleb's face, but he choked on the words. He was afraid of the answer, and anyway, the man had a right to his own pain. Some things weren't meant to be shared.



Red light danced across the floor, more shadow than anything else, and the moaning of the wind outside blotted out the murmur of voices in the nave. A door slammed on the far end of the hall, and Kaleb sat up, passing a hand over his face. “Tessa said to thank you,” he said, not looking at Viggo. Red light played with the darkness in his eyes. “For your advice. And for helping her clean up. She was worried you stained your tunic.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Viggo said hoarsely. Something in the man’s face chilled his heart, a kind of calm that felt like quiet madness. “Really.”

Kaleb nodded. He had soot on his hands and in the cut on his face. In his soul, too, it looked like. The wind hissed in the chimney, scattering sparks across the floor, and he said in a hoarse, conversational kind of way, “I’m going to kill him.”

Viggo’s heart dropped like a stone.

“Tonight, I think.” Kaleb rubbed soot off his callused palm with a thumb, staring at his hands as if he could already see the blood on them. “Maybe tomorrow. I haven’t decided yet.”

Viggo’s breath felt heavy in his lungs, as if all the soot and the shadows and the red light were pressing down on his chest to suffocate him. He leaned forward, saying low, “Kaleb.

They'll hang you. They will. They won't even give you a trial  
—”

Kaleb laughed at him as if he were a child who was too young and too stupid to understand any of this. “I know. I want them to.”

Viggo bit his tongue so hard that he tasted blood in his mouth. “Think about Tessa.”

“Tessa's gone,” Kaleb said in a flat voice. The fire snapped, casting shadows against the far wall. “They took her this morning. He went to Thorne, said we were fighting. Said I was—” The words cracked in his mouth. “Said I was hurting her.”

Another door slammed. The roar of the crowd was getting louder, rising to a chant that seemed to pound up through the floor.

Viggo stared at the floor trying to imagine what it would be like in the chapel with Kaleb gone and the image of him swinging from a rope seared into his brain. His stomach twisted.

The door opened, and an attendant stepped inside. “Rainwood. You're up.”

Kaleb stood, brushing soot off his hands, and smiled at Viggo with death in his eyes. “It doesn’t matter. I made it five years. That’s a long time.”

He disappeared out into the corridor, and the door shut behind him. Viggo shut his eyes, choking on the ash in his throat, and swore until his tongue felt blacker than the soot hanging in the air.

Kaleb was right. Five years was a long, long time to live in hell.

\* \* \*

The fire had died out, snuffed with ash and cold wind, by the time the door opened again.

Kaleb stumbled in, swearing at the attendant trying to help him, blood on his face and blood on his hands. Viggo scrambled to his feet and caught the man’s arm, helping him to lean against the table and take the weight off his legs.

The attendant’s face was bone white. As if even his indifferent soul was rattled by the blood dripping on the floor from Kaleb’s shattered lip and broken nose. “Herbwoman’s coming,” he said quietly. “Master put double bets on him. He didn’t stand a chance.”

Double bets. Stacking the odds. Viggo's heart jerked against his ribs, and he tried not to think of what that fight would have been like.

It must have taken the fight house's servants a long time to drag them off him.

Kaleb shoved the man's hand away, slurring a curse at him. "I'm fine. Get off me."

He wasn't fine. Viggo found the man's tunic in one of the corners and soaked it in the water barrel by the door, helping him to clean the blood off his face. One of his hands was broken. His fingers were shaking like leaves in a gale, but he shrugged when Viggo showed it to him. "Doesn't hurt. Nothing hurts."

A cold, cold stone began to form in the pit of Viggo's stomach.

The attendant left, and no herbwoman came. Wind howled in the chimney, and Kaleb's breath rattled in his chest, grating as an old man's. Viggo lit the fire again, cleaned the blood from Kaleb's face and hands as best he could, pressing the wet cloth over his swelling bruises. He didn't know what to do about the man's hand. He was no boneknitter, no healer, and he was afraid to make it worse. What would happen to

him if they couldn't save the hand? What did they do to Dreyens who had been crippled by their master's stupidity?

Twice, the door opened, summoning one of the other men to a fight in the ring. Viggo watched them go, half tempted to follow them out and find an herbwoman for himself. But he didn't know where to go or even if one would come back with him. And he didn't want to leave Kaleb alone.

Not like this.

Kaleb's face had lost all of its color. He was gray now, gray like the ashes in the grate, and a deep, ugly bruise was spreading on his temple beneath his hair. Pain was written into every line of his gaunt face. He flashed a lopsided grin at the anxious look in Viggo's eyes, "Don't think anyone's coming."

Viggo looked again at the door, as if willing them to come would be enough, and swore. "I'll go find someone—"

Kaleb shook his head, his gaze fixed on the fire in a kind of dazed stupor as he mumbled past swollen lips, "Not worth it. I'd take some water, though."

Viggo went to get it although he didn't think water would help the man much. Whiteleaf oil, powdered yarrow, elm

bark, or calendula might. But herbs cost money, and Viggo doubted Kaleb's master would waste the coin on a slave who'd already lost him so much.

Water would have to do.

He'd taken two steps when a sound like a wet cough nearly stopped his heart. He spun, a breath too late to catch Kaleb as he dropped. The man's whole body seized up, convulsing in spasmodic jerks. Viggo scrambled to hold him down, trying desperately to keep him from whipping his broken hand against the table leg or slamming it down on the floor.

The fit lasted less than minute. A breath later, his body went limp. He was dead when Viggo turned him over, his eyes fixed on nothing, his soul already gone as if the Pale Lady had snatched it from him with a gust of wind as it came down the chimney.

The bruise on his temple gleamed darkly in the red light of the fire, black as a devil's handprint and still spreading.

Viggo pressed the back of his hand to his mouth, his breath sobbing in his throat. His hands were shaking. He sat back and tried to breathe, tried to think past the numb shock crowding into his brain. Kaleb's dead eyes stared at him,

sightless and empty, and he choked on the taste of ash in his mouth.

It was too fast. Too quick. Death moved like a snake, and he hadn't even had time to realize it was happening before it was done and over.

One of the men seated against the wall spoke, his husky voice grating against the stillness as he said softly, "Let 'im lie, lad. He's had the Ghost Walker's mark on him for a long time. Some men are just meant to die young."

The Ghost Walker again. Viggo almost laughed, feeling so sick that he was afraid he was going to throw up right there with the body beside him. The Ghost Walker was a stupid story, that was all. The fight houses had killed Kaleb. The fight houses and his stupid, stupid master.

The door opened, and the attendant came in accompanied by a man with a crooked back and a healer's bag. Numbly, Viggo moved back and got to his feet, collecting his things. The attendant swore and said something he couldn't make out, but he wasn't listening. He pulled on his tunic and left, shutting the door behind him.

Another fight was already underway in the ring, light and noise and crushing heat swirling around him as he wended

through the crowd in search of Fane. He found him on the far end, at a table between the arching stone pillars. Brenner and a few of his drunk friends were with him, a bottle of wine between them and a servant hovering nearby.

Fane looked up as Viggo pushed through the crowd to join them, and his face darkened. “What are you doing?”

Noise pounded around him, voices and laughter and the shouting of the men taking the bets around the ring. It seemed distant, somehow, misplaced, as if the silence of the chapel had followed him out and Kaleb were still staring at him with his dead eyes. “I’m leaving,” he said simply. The words felt numb in his mouth. “I’m not fighting tonight.”

Brenner’s eyebrows rose. One of the men laughed as if he were joking. The look Fane gave him had murder in it. “What makes you think you can decide that?”

Viggo looked at him, right in his eyes, and said low, “You can’t stop me. I’ll lose if I fight tonight. I’ll lose everything you have. I’ll fight tomorrow and the day after and every day after that, but if you try to make me tonight, I won’t even try.”

Something—the numbness, the cold spreading through his limbs, maybe the death Viggo could still smell on his hands—cut through Fane’s anger. The man held his eyes, studying



him as if to decide whether to punish him here or wait, and murmured, “Well, we’d better leave, then. Hadn’t we?”

The way he said it promised a beating later, or worse, but Viggo was past caring. He turned away, pushing through the crowd toward the exit.

The memory of Kaleb’s empty eyes followed him out.



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*GOD AND MASTER*

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**T**he apartment was cold when they returned to it, moonlight and chill air falling through the curtains and pooling on the floor. Fane swept the cloak off his shoulders and left it draped over a chair, moving to light the lamp waiting on his desk. Shadows leapt to the walls as it flared to life.

Viggo made for the door to his room, wanting nothing more than the soft comfort of his bed. The numb ache had spread through his ribs and down his back.

“Stay.”

Viggo paused, his fist clenched, and almost, almost ignored it. Fane would kill him for tonight or whip the hide from his back. They did that sometimes to Dreyens that fought in the training courts or cursed their masters with too sharp a tongue. Even Thorne allowed it, although Viggo doubted he beat his own slaves.

He shut his eyes, cursing himself and Fane and this black, black night, and said, “My lord?”

Fane shook out the taper he’d used to light the lamp and placed it on the table. Thin smoke curled up from the wick, writhing in on itself. “Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“I almost took you to the boneknitters.” Fane looked at him, shadows playing along the hollow of his jaw, sucking the life out of his eyes. “Should I still?”

Viggo stared at him, the first tendrils of fear beginning to curl around his ribs. He could smell the wine on the man, see it in his eyes, but the drunken temper Viggo had grown used to managing was nowhere to be seen. The detachment in its place sent a shiver down his spine. “I don’t need a boneknitter.”

Fane nodded. “Then please,” he hissed. “Explain.”

A breath of wind stirred the curtains, setting off new shadows dancing among their folds. Somewhere off in the darkness, a soldier called the hour, his voice drifting faintly to them through the window.

Viggo held Fane’s eyes and said nothing. Any explanation he gave would be cut down immediately, he knew. Why should it matter that another man had died in the fight houses? Men died every day. Men, women. Children. It wouldn’t matter and Fane wouldn’t care, and Viggo wasn’t about to let him spit on Kaleb’s death as if it meant nothing compared to the money he’d lost.

Fane waited. At last, when the silence had stretched until it cut like a knife, he said, “Well, then. Maybe I’ve been pushing you too hard. Your partner can take your place for a while.”

The blood drained from Viggo’s face. “What?”

“I doubt she’ll last long, but I’m willing to try.”

“You can’t—”

“I ... can’t?” Fane’s voice, low as it was, cut like a whip. The man took a step toward him and unconsciously, Viggo began to back away. “I can’t what, Swifter?”

Viggo backed into a table. His mouth went dry, panic wrapping around his throat until he choked on it.

“When are you going to get this through your skull? I own you,” Fane snarled. “Both of you. To you, I am god and master, and if I don’t get my money’s worth out of you, I’ll get it out of her.”

“My lord—”

“You think because you’ve won a few stupid fights, you’ve earned the right to threaten me?”

“No, I wasn’t—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Keeping your partner out of the fight houses is a *privilege*, boy. Having her here, where you can see her every day, is a *privilege*. One you just lost.”

Stupid. He'd been stupid. Did he really think he himself was safe from Kaleb's fate? That his own master wasn't every bit as greedy and senseless as Kaleb's had been? The dead man's eyes stared at him out of the shadows, and Viggo choked on a sob, trying to shut his mind to them, trying to shut his mind to the blood in Tessa's hair and the image of Cat standing in the ring, surrounded by white sand and red light.

He should have gone to Thorne. He should have told him everything that day in the courts.

“It won't happen again,” he whispered. His voice, curse it to hell, broke. He was so stupid. “I swear. I'll make up for it. I will. Please don't—”

The contempt in Fane's face cut like a knife. The man spat in his face and stepped back, his eyes black in the flicker of the lamp. “Get out of here, you stupid cur. You're dismissed.”

Viggo turned and stumbled into his room. The door clicked shut behind him, and he wiped spittle off his face and retched. His hands still smelled of death. Death and blood. He shut his

eyes, blessing every god and saint in heaven that Cat was still asleep, and retched again.

Fane's words replayed themselves in his mind, burning into his thoughts like a hot brand.

*"To you, I am god and master."*

God and master. Yes, very likely that was true. Fane seemed like the kind of god who would be given to a coward.

He didn't deserve any other kind. Not after tonight.



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*BLACK GRIEF*

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Cat woke. Moonlight trickled through the seams of the wooden shutters, quivering about her bed like the frozen breath of a ghost. The wind had died away.

Steel clacked against stone, loud in the stillness.

She sat up and kicked off the thin sheets, drawing the knife she kept sheathed under her pillow. “Viggo?”

A muffled curse drifted through the gap in her curtain. She frowned and pushed the thin screen to one side, stepping out into the main room. “Viggo—”

Fear slapped through her, stealing the words from her tongue.

Viggo sat at the table, his head resting on the scarred wood. His arm hung limp at his side, and blood dripped from his fingertips to the floor like molten silver. Shadow curled around his face. His eyes were closed.

Cat stumbled forward and fell to her knees beside him. “Viggo! Oh hell.” Hot blood slipped over her fingers. The cut was on his forearm. She pressed her hand over it, instinctively trying to stop the bleeding. “Viggo, are you all right?”

He jerked beneath her touch, swearing, and lurched to his feet. The chair cracked loudly as it hit the floor. “What are you doing?” His voice cut like a blade, and he stumbled back against the wall. His face was strained, his eyes hollowed like a skull’s by the shadows and pain. “Leave me alone!”

“No, I’m not going to leave you alone! You’re bleeding!”  
Cat scrambled to her feet. “Let me—”

Moonlight glinted off the scars patterned across his forearms, as white as if the Pale Lady had left her fingerprints on his skin. Cat froze. His hunting knife was in his other hand, the steel of the blade stained with blood. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing.” Viggo glared at her. “Go back to bed.”

“No! You did that to yourself?” Her hands were shaking. She wanted to snatch the knife away, to scream at him, but her voice and her body betrayed her. “Why?”

Viggo spat on the floor, his voice ugly with bitterness. “It’s none of your business. Leave me alone!”

He was shaking. He was shaking, and pain was etched into his face like cracks in a clay mask. She couldn’t breathe, and it occurred to her—not for the first time—that she didn’t

really know Viggo. How could she know a person until she'd seen them break, seen them broken? And now he was breaking, and it hurt her worse than she could ever have imagined hurting for someone else. "Viggo." His name bit her tongue, and she could feel tears gathering. "Viggo, please let me help."

For just a moment she thought he was going to give in. He stared at her, pain flickering through his eyes—pain so deep it could have been a knife wound in his soul. Before she could be sure it was there, it was gone, and he laughed at her. "What makes you think I need you for anything?"

His words hit her in the face. She took a step back, bitter, bitter fury tearing at her lungs. Fury and fear of the darkness she saw in his eyes. The way he looked at her, as if she were a very small child and too stupid to understand this, terrified her. She spun around and slapped aside the curtain, ducking back inside her room. The silence followed her. She closed her eyes, a scream tearing at the back of her throat. A silent, bitter scream that refused to be voiced. His pain refused it.

Pain like that fed on silence.

\* \* \*

The curtain swished back into place, and she was gone. Viggo shut his eyes. He still had blood on his hands. On the floor, too, and the knife.

She'd seen everything. All his scars. All his stupid weakness.

His head lolled back against the wall. By the saints, he was tired. So very, very tired. He'd fallen asleep, that was it, although he'd meant to have things cleaned up before she woke.

Still, it was fitting. Fitting that she should see everything tonight, that he should lose her on top of everything else. Kaleb was dead, Tessa was gone, and Fane would probably sell Cat to the highest bidder for his disobedience tonight.

Yes, it was fitting she should see everything he was before Fane tore her away. At least then she wouldn't miss him.

A breeze drifted along the floor, scattering the loose ash in the fireplace. Ash in the grate, ash in his mouth. Why did grief taste like this? Like burnt paper, or cinders. He'd tasted it in the fight houses, too, as if his whole life were burning up around him.

The cold stone of the wall bit into his shoulders. He pushed himself off of it and moved over to sit on his bed. The blood on his wrist, on his fingers, was darker now. Drying. He touched the cotton sheets, staring at his fingerprints on the bleached cloth. The blood was black in this light. Black fingerprints. Black grief. Black future. He tried to find it in himself to be angry, to draw on the fury that had always protected him in the past. Anger was his only weapon here, his only defense. Anger would give him the will to fight.

But the fire in his chest had died, and he had no anger. No anger, no hope, no life. Only numbing pain.

Maybe it didn't matter. Maybe he didn't need anger anymore. Maybe hatred was enough.

He had plenty of hatred.

More than he needed, in fact. More than he knew how to manage. He could taste it in his mouth, feel it pounding in his veins with every beat of his heart, feel it like ice in his hands. No anger. Only hatred. He had nothing to live for, but he would die to see Fane in as much pain as he'd caused.

Ironic, really. Fane, with all his enemies, all his unpaid debts, all the peasants who hated him, murdered by his own guardian.

Viggo laughed and the sound drove fear into his veins.  
Definitely fitting.

Except ...

He glanced up, watching the curtain between himself and his partner sway. She wouldn't forgive him this time. Not for the way he'd spoken to her. Not for the lies he'd told. Not for anything. Tonight would ruin everything, burn the last bridge.

Tonight, or tomorrow.

He wouldn't live much longer than Fane. That much was clear. The soldiers would come, and he would fight. He'd never wanted to die on the end of a rope.

But Cat ... Cat would live to take the punishment for him. His last gift to her, after all the lies, all the slurs and misunderstandings. After all the pain he'd caused her. He could already see how much it would hurt her, how she would feel when he abandoned her like this. Selfish to the very end.

No revenge was worth that. Better to die now and leave her out of it.

Viggo looked down, watching the knife trace the throbbing vein in his wrist. Lightly. Ever, ever so lightly, as if he were

only toying with the idea. As if he hadn't made up his mind the moment that Kaleb's soul had left his body.

Another breeze flitted through the window, seeping through the cracks, and rustling the curtain. It smelled of rain. He drew in a deep breath, tasting it on his tongue. *Only the wind lasts forever.* "Cat?" he whispered. The silence stole the word almost before it slipped past his lips. Not even the shadows heard it.

The knife pressed against his skin. Could he still stop if he wanted to?

No. Not any longer. He was already gone. He'd been gone for a long time.

A sudden, horrible picture of what his partner would wake up to in the morning passed through his mind. A sob jerked into his throat. "Cat?" The word choked him as it left his tongue, but he heard it this time.

And so did she.

The sheet swished to one side. He looked up, straight into her eyes. His mask shattered, raw pain etched into his face like scars in his soul. His voice tore out of his chest, half a sob already as he whispered, "I need help."

She'd been crying. Tears gleamed wetly on her cheeks. She brushed hair out of her face and whispered, "I'm here."

Shame assaulted him. He dropped his gaze, choking on his breath, and the knife pressed deeper.

Her hand touched his forearm, slid down his wrist. "I'm here, Viggo." She was looking at him, and he could see her soul again, like the night in the rain. She took his hand, peeling his fingers from around the hilt of the knife. "Let go, okay? Let me have it."

"I—" Words wouldn't come. He let her have the knife. "I'm sorry. I didn't—"

Cat tossed the knife away, holding his gaze. "It's okay. I forgive you."

Something broke. He thought it might have been himself. Grief tore into his blood, and he began to sob. Stupidly. Pathetically, like a child, like he would never breathe again. Cat put her arms around him, pressed her face into his neck, and he crumpled like a broken doll.

Or a burnt piece of paper.

He cried until he could taste the tears in his mouth, and only then did he realize that she was crying too, and that the



tears weren't all his own.



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*SCARS AND GHOSTS*

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**S**teel clicked, sharp as a knife against the dull silence. Sparks scattered in the darkness, spitting into the hearth, and new flames leapt up. Sweet pine and burning sap filled the air like perfume.

Viggo laid his head against the cool wall, watching the light spill from the hearth and across the floor banishing the gloom beneath the beds. His throat was dry and rough as sandstone, and his fingers were trembling, whether from cold or something else he didn't know. The new warmth from the fire flooded into the room and kissed the bitterness from the air.

Cat straightened up, dusting off her hands, and turned to look at him. Her face was pale, but the fear was gone. "All right?"

He nodded, not quite meeting her eyes. She had a shawl wrapped around her shoulders, woven loosely of soft wool, and he could see his blood on her skin beneath it, dark like ink in the uncertain light.

"Do you want anything?" she asked quietly. The way she was looking at him sent shame shivering up and down his spine, as if he might break apart at any moment.

He almost laughed. How stupid. He was already broken. He'd broken a long time ago. "No. I'm all right."

She didn't believe him, but there wasn't anything he could do to convince her when he didn't believe it himself. She came to sit on the bed beside him, setting a basin on the blankets. "Let me see your arm."

Viggo let her, past resisting anything she said or wanted. She soaked a rag in the cool water and pressed it to his cut. Water slipped down his wrist. "What are the scars?"

Shadows stirred to life, ghosts rising from the floor. He'd sworn on his own life never to tell a living soul about any of this, but she'd seen them already. And if anyone had the right to know, she did.

"Memories," he whispered at last. A shiver rippled over his skin, and he uttered a bitter laugh. "All my sins."

She said nothing. Sparks spat from the grate, skipping across the stone floor. He swallowed, searching the dark ceiling as if the words to explain this to her were caught up like flies among the cobwebs. "I have to remember. If I forget —" He choked. "If I forget, I can't ... atone. I can't fix it, not ever."

Water dripped from his wrist, staining the sheets. She took his hand, turning it over to reach the rest of the crusted blood. He couldn't look at her face, too terribly afraid of what he would see in her eyes. He kept his eyes on her slender fingers. "I got my first one when I was twelve. They made me ... I had to ..." Viggo paused, struggling to breathe, remembering the scream. His fingernails dug into his skin. She caught his hand. He looked down, staring in a daze at the indents his fingers had made on his wrist. "There was a girl about my age. One of Vladimer's servants. She ran away, and they sent me after her. I brought her back thinking they would put her in the stocks or make her work in the kitchens. But she'd run before, and Vladimer wanted me to—I was supposed to kill her. He told me to, right there in front of everyone." He swallowed. "I said I wouldn't. I thought—I was so stupid. I thought it would help. Instead, Vladimer threw her in the kennels and left her to starve. It took two weeks of begging before he let me end it for her."

The basin clunked hollowly as she set it on the floor. She bandaged his wrist, and he ran his fingers over the cloth, over his skin, over the knotted flesh of the scars. Cold, cold whispering raced over the stones and wrapped around his throat, pulling him away—

“Viggo.” Cat touched his fingers, folded his hand in both of hers and squeezed gently. “Stay with me.”

Viggo’s heart jerked in his chest. Fear bit into his soul, and he couldn’t help himself. He looked up, right into her eyes, searching for the revulsion that he knew would be there. The blue in her eyes had turned dusky in the moonlight, and she smiled at him with tears on her lashes. “Stay here,” she murmured.

The whispering faded.

He swallowed. “I never told him no again. After it was over, Freya, one of the instructors, showed me her scars ... helped me make my first. She said it would—help. I think she knew I would never cope the way Vladimer wanted me to.” He looked down at his hands. “I don’t usually let it bleed like that. Usually, it’s much quicker. It barely even hurts.”

The fire spat more sparks onto the floor.

Cat watched him. He kept his eyes on the sparks as the last of their fire faded, waiting for the question that hung in the air, waiting for her to voice it. Waiting for the condemnation. If it had been Dex here—he shut his eyes, clenched a fist until his fingernails dug into his palm. He didn’t want to think about that, about what he would have done instead. He would

be dead already, dead with Fane's blood on his soul. He wouldn't have waited.

At last, she whispered, "And tonight?"

"Fane's had me in the fight houses."

She closed her eyes and nodded, and a spasm of fear rippled through her fingertips. He looked down, realizing that she was still holding his hand. He covered her fingers with his and squeezed gently, half amazed when she didn't pull away. "It started the night I hit him. It was a trap, how he was acting, and I fell for it. He was stealing and didn't want me to report him." He closed his eyes, hating what he had to say, hating himself for allowing this situation to get as bad as it had. "Brenner introduced him to the fight houses after that, and I couldn't say no. I've been paying his debts."

He dragged a forearm across his eyes. Her face was stone white, and her eyes seemed too large in her drawn face. "You should have told me," she whispered. Pain wrote itself into her features. He wanted to reach up and wipe it away with his thumb, like wiping soot off her skin. "We could have gone to Thorne, or—Viggo, people die in those rings."

He uttered a hoarse laugh. "I know."

She knew what he meant immediately, quicker than if he'd found the words to say it.

"I had a friend there," Viggo whispered. His wrist was throbbing again. "Kaleb. He—I knew he was in trouble. His master was losing money, and he didn't win often. I think ..." he looked down, rubbing his palm with a thumb. "I think he was from Madira. I don't think he was very good. But—they brought his partner in, and she lost, and his master was stacking his odds to try to win back the money, and—" his breath hitched, "they killed him."

Pain tore through his chest, like a knife in his breast, and he choked on a sob, stumbling on the words he'd felt like barbs in his throat for the last hour. "It was my fault. I had the chance to end things. If I'd told Thorne what I knew, the fight house would've been raided, and Kaleb would be alive."

The words broke in his mouth, and he spat them into the silence as if they cut his tongue. It felt better, somehow, to say it at last. To admit the only thing that had held him back was pure cowardice.

They were all cowards, really. All the men in the fight house who would rather tear the men they faced in the rings to pieces than stand up to their own masters.



Cowards, maybe. But he was likely the only one there who'd had any real opportunity to stop it. He'd looked Thorne in the face, right in the eyes, and lied to him, and now Kaleb was dead.

His hands were shaking, and he cursed himself, cursed this night, cursed the dark and the wind and the chains that held him here. Just then, he would have given his heartbeat to run. To be out on the plains, away from this city, and to run until his lungs burst and his heart stopped and the wolves came for him.

Cat seemed to understand. She closed her eyes and leaned against him, with her head on his chest. He put his arm around her shoulders and held her close, as if she were the only anchor that was capable of keeping him here ... keeping him sane.

She was asleep when the fire finally died. He stayed awake to hold her, watching the moon bleach the stones and whisper to him about his shattered soul. He could feel the shards in his ribcage, already beginning to sort themselves out into some kind of repair. So easily. So quickly. As if they'd already begun to forget Kaleb's last breath. He cursed himself.

Cat stirred against him.

He looked down at her, saw his mistake in the tear stains on her face. They'd broken together tonight. His soul had shattered, and hers as well, in an attempt to hold his together, and now it was as if they'd sorted out the shattered pieces wrong. He could feel her heartbeat in his chest and his blood in her veins, and something told him they'd never be able to sort the pieces out right again.

Right now, though, he didn't much care because her heartbeat was the only thing that made his want to continue.



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TO PRAY FOR MY SOUL

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**T**he basilica stood out black against a sky burning with stars. Viggo stood in the shadows of an elm tree, shivering a little in the chill wind, and tried to convince himself to turn back. Nothing waited for him in the silent mausoleum. He could swear to that. God belonged to the humans—to his master.

Not to him.

Never to him.

He glanced over his shoulder scanning the shadows beneath the palace walls. He'd slipped out without being seen, but they would miss him eventually. Cat, or his master. He'd meant to stay, to go on holding her while she slept until dawn broke in the east and he was forced into another day, but staying there alone in the dark had been torture to his tattered mind.

So, he'd come here. On the slight chance that God himself wouldn't strike him down for setting foot in a holy place.

He slipped across the street like a ghost. The door creaked when he pushed it open, and the air was still and cool inside. Like a tomb. His very breath seemed to disturb the peace.

Candles burned on ornate wheels high overhead, dim and smoky and scented with incense. Wax dripped on the polished

floors. Saints and angels stared down at him with stone eyes as he padded up the aisle, his hands damp with sweat and fear. He didn't belong here, but the promises bound to the gilded altar were too tempting to resist. He knelt on the steps, shivering as the stone leeched the last warmth from his limbs. He had blood on his fingers still, under his nails.

Blood on his hands, and he couldn't remember a single one of the prayers he'd heard the humans chanting here.

He almost laughed. If God struck him dead, would his soul burn forever? He thought he'd heard a story about that once. A long time ago.

Stillness settled around him. The basilica echoed with ancient hymns, the hush of a thousand whispered prayers, the shuffle of forgotten worshipers. The walls were steeped in memory.

Maybe they didn't mind him here after all. Gods or saints or ghosts of the kindly dead. Maybe they were used to broken souls seeking refuge beneath the altar. He sat back on his heels, rubbing his hands on his trousers as he looked up at the gilded, painted ceiling. "I can leave if you like."

Nothing but the silence answered. Somewhere off in the darkness, a mourning dove cooed.

Its mate answered.

“I didn’t mean for it to come to this,” Viggo said hoarsely. His voice sounded strangely lost in the vast emptiness of the basilica. “I meant to stop it. Do you believe that?”

Wax dripped to the stone floor. A scented candle planted at the foot of the altar sputtered and went out. The last breath of some peasant’s offering. Did their prayers die, too, or did the saints remember them even without the flame as a reminder?

“What do I do?” he whispered at last. The words vanished into the silence, swallowed up by echoing emptiness and swaying shadows. “Please. Tell me what to do.”

“Would you like a candle?”

The voice nearly stopped his heart. He spun around, falling awkwardly on the steps. A woman moved among the pews and pillars, slight as a girl, shrouded and veiled in black like the mourners who gathered in the crypts beneath the basilica.

Viggo stood, silently cursing her and this black night and every ill omen that had brought him here. “No. I’m sorry, I’m not supposed to be here.”

“What are you doing?”

He forced a bitter laugh. “I came to pray for my soul.”

She came toward him, her tatted skirts sweeping the dust from the floor. Her voice sounded raw, as if she really had been weeping among the tombs. “Then you should stay.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Have I disturbed you?” She touched the altar, laid a sparrow’s skull and bones beside the red cloth. The skeletal wings still had feathers attached. “You needn’t be afraid to finish your prayers.”

A swift shudder passed through his breast. “No one can hear them, lady. My words don’t reach heaven.”

She looked at him, and he caught a glimpse, beneath the black veil, of a furrowed brow and the tense line of her jaw. “Do they not?”

He bowed to her, ready to be out of this place, away from the smell of burning incense and dripping wax and empty, empty prayers. “My master is god to me, lady. And he’s sold my soul already. If you’ll excuse me.”

He turned to go, and she said softly, “The fight houses trade in flesh, Guardian. Not souls.”

Viggo froze.

She knelt and touched a taper to one of the flames, lighting her own candle. The flame trembled in a draft from the open doors. “Gold doesn’t buy a soul.”

“Who are you?” He stared at her trying to remember if he’d seen her in the fight houses before, in the crush of people. The veil defeated him. “What do you want?”

“I came for the same reason you did.” She touched her forehead and her breast in homage and bowed her head. “To pray for your soul.”

His skin prickled.

Silence slipped between them, and the arched ceilings echoed with the sound of his breathing and her murmured prayers. At last, she raised her head again. “No prayers of your own?”

“No prayers,” Viggo said thickly. His wrist was throbbing beneath the linen bandages Cat had bound over the cut, and he was suddenly tired—more tired than he could ever remember being before. The walk back to Fane’s apartments seemed impossibly long. “Maybe whatever god they worship here will hear yours.”



“No god lives here.” She looked up at the marble arches overhead and the silken hangings and the doves roosting on the beams. “They’ve barred the doors against one.”

“Then why come?”

She looked at him, her face only a shadowed outline behind the black veil. “I came for you.”

A chill shivered down his back.

“You have blood on your hands, Guardian.”

“Who are you?” Viggo whispered hoarsely. “Are you a witch? How do you know all this?”

“Am I right?”

He would have cursed her if the words hadn’t turned to stone on his tongue. He looked away.

She rose to her feet and shook ash from her sooty skirts. She wore thin gloves of woven lace, so black against her skin that it looked as though the fire had burned the patterns into her fingers. “The fight houses have more dead men to hand you if you stay. It’s time to leave.”

He knew what she meant, even before she went on, and his heart stilled.

“Go to Silas Thorne. Tell him everything. Then take your partner and go north. Follow the slave you set free.”

Viggo let himself imagine it just for a breath. What it would feel like to leave Ivra, to leave the featureless, windblown plains behind and go north again until the flatlands were replaced by rolling hills and rising cliffs and the damp, still forests swallowed him up.

Gods. He would give his right hand for that. Even for just one day among the trees. Cat would go with him if he asked her. Or, at least, he thought she would.

If he asked.

“I can’t,” he said hoarsely, and the words fell like chains into the silence. “I can still fix this. All this—being a Guardian, swearing an oath—it was supposed to mean something. It does mean something. I’m not ready to give it up yet.”

A candle sputtered, wax spitting across the stone floor. The flame died. She tilted her head thoughtfully, studying him as if to see right through him, and said, her voice soft with disappointment, “Are you willing to pay the price of that choice, child of blood?”

His skin prickled. “Yes.”

“So be it.” She moved past him, fading into the shadows. “I leave you to your prayers, then.”

The echo of her passing bounding among the pillars. A sparrow flitted into the darkness in her wake.

Viggo shut his eyes and cursed her. Witch or ghost or mournful dead that she was, she didn't understand. If he left now, nothing would ever be right again. He could never fix it, and the fight houses and Kaleb's dead eyes would haunt him forever.

He still had a chance. One stupid chance left behind by Lant Curtis.

All he had to do was rid himself of Fane. And if he was right, there might be someone willing to help him do it.

Provided he still remembered the oath he'd made.



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*A TIGHTENING NOOSE*

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Fane kept his promise before the sun had risen past the walls the next morning.

Soldiers woke them. Viggo was asleep in her bed, like a fool, like the stupid, stupid fool that he was, when the door was kicked in.

It cracked against the wall so loud that it seemed to shake the dust from the ceiling. Viggo woke with a jerk and rolled to one side, falling awkwardly off the bed. Someone tore the curtains from their hooks. Men streamed into the room, yanking him to his feet, hauling him toward the door. Cat was cursing. The chair crashed against the wall and broke.

They pulled him out, out into the main room where Fane was waiting, and one of the men kicked the back of his knee so hard that he fell.

Brenner was there, too, standing by the mantelpiece, a thin smile playing across his lips. Viggo swore at them both and tried to rise. A knife pressed against the back of his neck, the blade pricking into his flesh. He froze.

They drove Cat to her knees beside him. Her braid had come loose in the night, and he could see the fear in her gray, gray eyes.

The men weren't palace guards. They were roughly dressed and roughly armed, and he recognized several of them as the mercenaries and cutthroats who lingered in Brenner's shadow, leeching a living from the gold he won in the fight houses. Soldiers didn't work for hire in Ivra, but highwaymen did. Bandits, thieves, brigands. Men like that weren't trained to use a sword or a lance like the soldiers in the palace, but they were quick with a knife.

Quicker than he would be.

Viggo shut his eyes trying to sort through his scattered thoughts, and said low, "My lord—"

"I just can't get through to you, can I, Swifter?" Fane's voice was calm, and the contempt in it stung, as if he were talking to a stupid dog. "Where were you last night?"

Viggo's mouth went dry. "I—we ran out of water. I went to get some from the alley—"

Fane gestured to the man behind him, and he hit Viggo in the face so hard that the room spun. Cat snarled, already halfway to her feet, and another of the soldiers grabbed her by her hair and jerked her down.

Fane shook his head. “You see? Every time I think we’re making progress, you make it difficult again. You don’t seem to learn.”

Viggo licked blood from his chin, his heart pounding too hard and too fast against his ribs. “I was going for water, my lord. I’m sorry. I should have waited. That’s all it was.”

The lie was so obvious, so stupidly obvious, that it tasted bitter as he said it. Fane looked at him for a long time, as if searching for the truth in his face. Probably, he was afraid that Viggo had been to see Thorne, to warn him about the fight house and the money that was being made off of the king’s flesh. Viggo shut his eyes, trying to imagine what it would be like to see Fane rotting in a cell, his stupid precious bloodline dwindling to nothing but a convict’s filth.

The man sighed, as if he could somehow read the thoughts running through Viggo’s head. He turned away, nodding as he did to the man standing over Cat. “Take her out.”

Viggo lunged for him. A noose snapped around his throat, thin wire digging into his flesh, cutting off his air. He choked, jerked backward. Cat was on her feet, being pulled toward the door. He tried to rise again, and the noose yanked tight, strangling him.

The door slammed shut.

Cat was gone.

“Let him up.”

The wire loosened. Viggo gulped, clawing for breath, and swore, “Bastard.”

“Be careful, Swifter.”

“Where are they taking her?”

The noose jerked against his throat again so hard that he gagged. Brenner’s pale, corpse eyes narrowed, his smile returning. He was enjoying this, all of it, like a vulture circling a body. Viggo spat bile, hate rising up in him like black smoke.

Fane sat, pouring himself a glass of wine from the decanter on the table. He had his dogs with him, the wolfhounds he’d bought with the money Viggo had earned in the fight houses. One of them rested its head in his lap. “Do you want to see her again?”

Viggo’s heart faltered, as if his soul were half ready to simply give up and be done with all this. He bit his tongue, forcing his hoarse, raw voice to some level of servility. “Yes.”

“I don’t think you do.” Fane watched him, as if he were judging how best to make every word he said, every single



word, sting. Like powdered glass rubbed into Viggo's skin. "Between your tantrum last night and your attitude this morning, you seem determined to cause as much trouble for her as you can."

"Where are they taking her?"

He didn't expect an answer, but obviously Fane liked his choices well enough to brag about them. The man smiled. "Brenner's got a place for her. He'll keep her safe until we clear this up."

Brenner.

"How long?" he asked hoarsely. He'd never, in all his life, wanted to kill someone as badly as he did Brenner. He could already feel the man's blood on his hands. Hot as fire.

"Until I say."

"She has friends here. In the training courts. They'll ask questions."

"So what?"

"They're Thorne's men. He'll hear about it if she doesn't come back."

He expected Fane to pause, to see a flicker of doubt in his eyes, but the man only shrugged. "Then you'd better think of

something to tell them. People get sick. Or injure themselves. You're clever, you'll think of something."

"And if I don't?"

"If you don't, I'll have a story of my own to tell Thorne. One you won't like." Fane set his wine glass down on the table. One of the dogs snuffled at his hand, nudging him until he scratched its ears. "I don't think you'd want it spread around that I sent her away to keep her safe from an abusive partner."

Viggo felt the blood drain from his face.

"You can think of something better than that, can't you?"

"Yes," Viggo said thickly and felt the last thread of hope in his mind snap and take his reason with it. He'd been stupid. The woman—witch or ghost or whatever she was—had been right.

He should have left.

It was too late now, but he should have left. They could have gone to the mountains, found a place for themselves in the cliffs and trees, maybe even built themselves a cabin before winter came and the snows grew too deep. The wolf would have liked that. The leopard, too.

What would it have been like to be alone with Cat like that? With no one and nothing to disturb them. No threats, no fear.

Only the two of them, and the high peaks and deep forests of the far north.

It was too late to find out now. Cat was gone. He licked blood from his lip and said low, “I can’t see her at all?”

Fane shrugged carelessly. “I imagine you’ll see her in the fight houses.”

Stupid. He’d been so stupid. Viggo shut his eyes, cursing the arrogance that had made him think he still had a chance to make all of this right. He’d gambled both their lives away, betting on his own cleverness, and where had it gotten him? Nowhere. Nowhere he wanted to be, anyway.

This would end in blood now. Brenner’s. Fane’s.

His own.

Some debts had to be paid in blood.



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COREY WICKER

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**C**orey Wicker never left the stables before dark.

He was always the last one to go, the one to blow out the lamps and lock the doors. The others—grooms, stableboys, even the men who boarded their horses here—left at dusk for the taverns and racetracks by the city gates.

They were all gone now, and shadows were gathering in the stalls and the lofts. Corey pitched hay into the last of the stalls and murmured softly to the animal inside. A bay, and one of the finer mares he'd seen come through. She belonged to a lord who sat on his horses like an awkward child and was as afraid of them as sheep were of wolves. Her spirit would break his, and she would be sold. In a month or less, he would guess.

His own horses were stabled at the far end beneath the hay racks. He attended to them last, as he always did. They didn't really belong to him. They belonged to the king, one of several teams attached to the palace for the use of anyone who had need of them.

He was only their driver. The man who tended to them. Who knew when they were lame or off their feed. Who brushed and curried their dark coats until they shone and took

more pride in their strong lines and proud heads than any of the lords who'd used them over the years.

They were his. They knew it, and he knew it. If the king didn't agree ... well, royalty didn't always understand these things.

He ducked into their stall, checking that their water was fresh and that the grain in their feeders wasn't the cheap, dusty stuff they gave to the soldiers' mounts. One of the stable boys had made that mistake once. Corey had boxed both his ears for it and given him a good shake besides.

The door opened at the far end of the stable. Opened and shut again softly, as if a ghost had slipped in among the shadows. The horses stirred, moving restlessly in their stalls. The bay mare tossed her head and snorted.

Corey straightened up, leaning out over the gate to see who'd entered. The long hallway was vacant, shadows moving restlessly as the lamp hanging overhead swayed in a warm draft. "Hello?"

His skin prickled. He unlatched the stall, slipping out, and picked up one of the pitchforks the stable boys had left behind. "Who's there?"

A shadow emerged from behind the hay racks, and a deep voice said quietly, “You won’t need that.”

Corey swung around so fast that the bay reared in her stall, his heart leaping nearly out of his chest. “What are you doing back there?”

The man moved into the light, glancing at the plunging bay in its stall. Gold flickered in his dark eyes. “Looking for you.”

A Dreyen. A chill shivered down Corey’s spine, cold as the breath of a ghost. “I’ve not done anything.”

“Didn’t say you had.”

“Then why—” he paused, studying the man closer. He looked older, certainly, his face hollowed and sharpened by despair and pain, but Corey recognized him all the same. He let out a breath and lowered the pitchfork. “Gods in heaven, Guardian. You startled me.”

The man looked at him strangely. “You remember me?”

Corey uttered a hoarse laugh and touched the scar on his forehead. It was healed now, but not a day went by that he wasn’t reminded of how close he’d come to having an unmarked grave in a village without a name. “I remember. Ravenstone’s Guardian.”

A spasm of pain flickered through the man's face, just for a breath. What was his name? Viggo? He looked like a man who was being hunted by the devil himself. "Yes. I'm meant to be in the training courts, but ..." he looked over his shoulder as if someone might be standing in the shadows, watching them, "you almost got killed bringing us back here. You said ..." he hesitated awkwardly, as if he'd rather be anywhere but here. As if he were ashamed to finish the sentence. "You said you owed me."

Corey choked on a laugh. The scar still hurt sometimes, when the weather changed or he'd had too long a day driving in the sun. He could still remember the look on his wife's face when he'd come home with it still healing. She acted as though she'd seen him lying in his grave already. "I've got two young uns, Guardian. One so small she can't hardly walk, and I go home to them every night. I'll give you the shirt off my back if you want it."

The man nodded, such a look of relief crossing his face that Corey couldn't help wondering what kind of devil he had on his track. "I can't use your shirt. But I—" he hesitated, fighting with himself, and said finally, "I wonder if you could deliver a message for me."





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*DEAD EYES*

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**T**he chapel in the fight houses hadn't changed, although Viggo had somehow been expecting it to, as if it had been gutted by fire or poisoned by a dead man's last breath.

It hadn't, of course. These walls had seen many dead men, and there were more buried beneath it, their souls trapped here as if they'd been condemned to hell with him. What was one more? Even the silver letters embedded in the walls, scarred so deep into the wood that they would have had to tear them down to get it out, spoke of nothing but death.

Last rites. If he'd known anything about the language they were written in, he could have read them over Kaleb before they'd taken him away. It would probably have been the only courtesy offered to his body. Men didn't honor dogs when they buried them.

The chapel was mostly empty when he arrived. He sat far in the back, away from the others, away from the fire, and tried to think of nothing, nothing at all, while he waited for them to call him for his first fight.

Trouble would start when they did. Tonight would end in blood, and if everything went according to plan, it wouldn't

be his alone.

If it did.

He shut his eyes praying to whatever god or saint would hear him that Corey Wicker had made it.

Maybe. Maybe he had.

Maybe, just for once, Viggo could get lucky and things would go his way instead of Fane's.

When he opened his eyes again, Kaleb was looking at him. The firelight flickered, a draft whispering along the floorboards, and the man smiled at him with dead eyes.

No doubt he would have approved of the thoughts in the younger man's head. Viggo rubbed a hand over his face, trying not to look at him. Outside, the noise of the crowds was beginning to escalate, and the fights were starting.

Kaleb's dead eyes haunted him. Dark and empty and soulless.

The door opened, and one of the attendants came in. "Swifter."

Viggo didn't move.

The man frowned, searching for him among the silent huddle along the far wall, then among the shadows by the fire. “Swifter!”

“I’m not going,” Viggo said low. His skin prickled. Gods, it felt good to say it aloud and not just to wish he had the courage for it.

The man twisted around, finding him in the shadows, and glared at him. “Get up. Come on, they’re waiting on you.”

Viggo laid his head back against the wall and looked up at the dark ceiling, at the soot hanging in the cobwebs and the blackened wood from the fire. “Let them wait.”

The man swore at him and took a step in his direction. “Get up, you stupid cur, or I’ll—”

Viggo bared his teeth at him, gold burning in his eyes, and snarled. The man’s face went white, and he backed away, suddenly uncertain. “I’ll get your master,” he snapped, as if he could bluster his way back to whatever authority he’d thought he had. “Do you want him back here?”

Viggo smiled. A smile that was all the wolf. “That’s the idea.”



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*A CAGED LEOPARD*

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**J**oseph Brenner lived in the shadow of the city walls beneath the hangman's nooses by the east gate. The servants whispered that he'd bought the house with a dead man's money, collected from his widow's hands for the gambling debt that had driven him to his grave. Cat could smell the gallows when they arrived, although most of the nooses were all loose today and swinging in the breeze. The air stank of death, but she had the feeling Brenner liked it that way.

What better way to cover his own rotting stench?

The air inside did not smell of death. They'd covered it with perfumed floors and scented fountains, but all the same, Cat felt it around her. As if the halls were filled with pattering ghosts.

Brenner left her in a room without a window and with a lock on the door, and Cat leaned against the wall and covered her face with her hands. A band of iron had begun to tighten around her chest the moment the door had shut behind him. She could feel the madness coming on, her mind beginning to spiral away from her the way it always did when she was shut in, locked up, and left alone.

She'd been lying that night she told Viggo the rain had washed away all those long, long hours of being locked in that cabin, waiting for her parents. It hadn't. Nothing could.

She'd gone mad, trapped behind those doors. Sometimes, she felt as though she still was.

Now she was here, locked up again, this time by a man with corpse eyes and a dead mind, and Viggo—

She slapped the thought down. Viggo was gone. He wasn't here, and she couldn't help him, and she wouldn't let that, at least, pick apart her mind.

The darkness would. And the locked doors, and the walls that were already closing in. They would pick and pick at her mind until she was screaming, but she wouldn't let the thought of Viggo make it worse.

She knew better than to make him her weakness.

Hours later, the door opened. She was sitting with her back to the wall, her head buried in her arms when Brenner entered. Two men came with him, as if even he had the sense to realize that a caged leopard was a dangerous thing. Cat raised her head, meeting his gaze with all the insolence her shattering mind allowed. She'd shut it out now, all of it. The

locked door, the walls, the darkness. Viggo. It was all gone, and only her shell was left behind. Her bitter, impenetrable shell that protected her from everyone and everything and left no room in it for her soul to feel. She smiled mockingly at him. “Don’t I get a bed?”

Brenner laughed. His voice flowed like silk, and even the sound of it made her sick. “You won’t be here long enough to need one.”

Her younger heart would have leapt at the words, still fueled with enough hope to believe that he might be sending her back to Fane so soon.

She wasn’t so stupid now. Experience taught better than anything else that hope was a lie for the weak. “Should I guess where we’re going?”

“Beyora.” Brenner came further into the room and set something down on the table. A muzzle with a leather strap and steel plates. “There’s a market there for your kind. I have a good friend who pays very well for Dreyens who’ve ... left their master.”

Cat almost laughed. Poor, stupid Fane. Had he any idea the kind of man who’d befriended him? Probably not. “I take it that wasn’t what Fane intended.”



“Not particularly. But I imagine he’ll survive.”

“He’ll come looking.”

“He can try.” Brenner gestured at the muzzle. “What do you think? Will I need this?”

Cat bit her tongue. She’d been muzzled before. Twice, in fact. A long, long time ago. “I doubt it. I don’t care much either way.”

A lie, although she would have preferred it to be the truth. If it hadn’t been for Viggo, she wouldn’t have cared. What was one master to another?

If it hadn’t been for Viggo.

Brenner nodded, that thin smile still playing at the corner of his mouth. “You see? I knew you were the better target. Your partner wasn’t the type, too idealistic. He would have fought. But not you. You understand self-preservation, don’t you?” He tossed the muzzle to one of his men and came closer, studying her hungrily. “Let’s see it.”

Cat stared at him, hatred curling around her ribs until it seemed her heart was on fire, and let the leopard out. It surged into her eyes and took her frame, just for a breath, a flicker, before she shoved it down again.

The man's pale eyes glittered. "Good girl. Wait here till I come get you. We'll leave as soon as it's dark."

He left her then, left her with the dark stones and the locked door and her shattered mind.



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*BAD BLOOD*

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**T**he servant cleared the others from the room before he went to call Fane, as if he felt Viggo's madness might spread among them like a breath of plague.

Ten minutes later, the door cracked back against the wall, and Fane swept in, his face dark red with fury. He spat on the soot-covered floor and hissed, "You really are more stupid than you look, aren't you, Swifter?"

Viggo got to his feet. Gods, he was tired. The fire flickered, casting ugly shadows on the walls and the silver lettering scribed there, and all he could think about was Kaleb's dead eyes.

It had been a long time since he'd thought about anything else.

"Where is she?" The words were so heavy when he let them out. As heavy as darkness and a broken man's dead eyes.

Fane glared at him. "Perhaps I wasn't clear."

Viggo didn't let him finish. He caught the man by his brocaded tunic and slammed him bodily against the wall,

baring his teeth in his face. “No. I wasn’t clear. *Where is she?*”

Fane stared at him in shock, and for one glorious moment, Viggo caught a glimpse of real fear in his master’s eyes.

The look was gone before he could enjoy it. Fane laughed at him. “What are you going to do if I don’t tell you? Kill me? How will you find her then?”

He was right, of course. If this didn’t work, if Corey hadn’t made it and his entire plan came to nothing, he wouldn’t find her again. No doubt Brenner knew exactly what he was doing when he’d taken her away.

But at least he would have tried. At least he would have had this moment.

Fane’s blood would be enough if fate would give him nothing else.

Fane saw the doubt in his eyes and smiled. “It really is amazing, watching you trying to think. I told you, Swifter, I’ll let you see her again. If you don’t ruin it now.”

Viggo let him go and stepped back. Hatred wrapped around his throat, sharp as the wire they’d choked him with earlier. “Bastard.”

Fane's eyes darkened with anger. "I told you—"

Viggo hit him in the face. Hard. As hard as he had that first night, the night that had ruined everything and caused all this trouble. Fane's head snapped back, hitting the wall. He stumbled away with blood in his mouth.

Viggo shook his bruised knuckles. "Where is she?"

Fane cursed him.

The noise outside in the nave rose, a babble of voices, strangely discordant, strangely foreign. Very different from the baying that usually accompanied the fights.

Fane heard the change in pitch. He glanced at the door, his brow furrowed.

Viggo shrugged and said low, "Well. I'll let Thorne be the one to ask you next. I'm sure he'll find her."

Fane's face went deadly white.

Outside, in the nave, the screaming began.



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*BONES OF A DEAD MAN*

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**T**he sky was dark when two of Brenner's men came to get her from the cellar. They took her through the house and up the stairs to Brenner's office. Lights blazed in the courtyard outside, firelight and torchlight, and Cat could see the nooses swaying on the other side of the wall. One of them was still weighted down with the bones of a dead man as if they'd forgotten to take him down again.

Brenner was sitting at his desk writing a letter. He smiled when he saw her reaction to the swaying corpse, a thin, satisfied smile. As if he knew what the sight of death outside his window did to people.

"A juggler, I believe," he said. "They say he seduced a merchant's daughter and tried to slip away with her. Not a very nice story."

Cat held his gaze, revulsion crushing against her lungs until she couldn't breathe. He liked this house and the view from his window. Everything about him felt like a roach crawling on dead flesh.

Brenner signed the letter with a flourish and folded it, slipping it into a waiting envelope. "Take this." He held it out to one of his men. "And make sure the coach is ready."



The man disappeared. Brenner picked up an envelope and slit the parchment with a letter opener. “You can take the girl down now, too.”

The second man took her arm. Cat didn’t move. “They’ll hang you for this.”

Brenner uttered a soft laugh. “They haven’t yet.”

“Give it time.”

“Oh, I have. This, my dear girl,” Brenner smiled at her, “is my profession. A man can make a great deal of money off of Dreyen flesh. I wouldn’t flatter yourself by thinking you’re the first. Or that you’ll be the last.” He nodded at the man behind her. “Take her out.”

The door slammed back on its hinges, and one of Brenner’s men stumbled in, his face white. “They’re raiding the basilica. Thorne and his men. It’s surrounded, and they’re arresting everybody.”

Cat’s stomach dropped like a stone.

Viggo.

Brenner stood, his face flushed. “Curse the man. Someone must have tipped him off. Get the coach ready, they’ll be coming here next.”

They both left, hurrying down the stairs as if the dead man still swinging on the noose outside was calling to them.

Brenner cursed them both and picked up several sheets of parchment, moving to feed them into the blaze flickering in the marble fireplace. Cat backed away, her heart thudding, and glanced toward the door.

*“They’re raiding the basilica.”*

Had Fane taken Viggo to the fight house tonight? Were they there now, trapped with the rest by Thorne’s soldiers?

Probably. More than likely Viggo would be dead before she had the chance to see him again. And Fane would be in prison, although she wouldn’t weep to see his corpse swaying in the breeze beneath a hangman’s gallows.

When she looked up, Brenner was staring at her. He straightened up, moving toward her, and said softly, “Your partner did this. Didn’t he?”

Cat backed away from him. Her flesh crawled, as if the stench of dead men really did cling to his skin. Her leg hit the corner of the desk, pain lancing through her thigh.

Brenner caught her chin, his fingers digging into her jaw. His hands were cold. Cold like a reptile’s skin, cold like a

corpse's touch. "That's it, isn't it? He's stupid enough to think it would solve things. And your master doesn't have half the hold on him that he thinks he does."

Cat bit her lip, forcing herself to meet his eyes as she said softly, "I don't know."

His grip tightened until it hurt. She'd never been so afraid of anyone before. Not Fane, or Lant Curtis, or anyone else. Even his touch made her shudder, and she wanted to slap his hand away and run. But where could she go? There was nowhere to go.

Not anymore.

He saw it in her eyes and smiled. "That's right. He's brought all this down on your head, too, hasn't he? You must hate him for that."

Cat's throat constricted. She didn't. She didn't, but something in her wanted to. He'd made her a pawn in all of this—or Fane had. From the very beginning, she'd been swept to the outside of it all. She was the bait, the pawn Fane had threatened Viggo with ... and she still was.

Even Brenner knew it.

He released her chin and stroked a finger down her throat. “I wouldn’t worry. He’ll be swinging from one of those nooses soon enough.”

Quicker than thought, Cat snatched the letter opener from the desk and slit Brenner’s throat. He fell with a gurgle, and blood poured down his white shirt. Blood as red as wine.



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*LESS TO LOSE*

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W

hat have you done?” Fane swore at him, backing away from the door as if it might burst open at any moment.

“What did you do?”

The soldiers were in the nave now. Viggo could hear their rough voices, the shouting that mingled with the screams. They wouldn't catch everyone. The men who came here were clever and quick, and the basilica had many doors. But a few would find themselves in a cell tonight, and maybe, just maybe, Thorne would see fit to burn the building to the ground. Whatever god had used it once had abandoned it, and maybe he would feel it was better to see it in ashes rather than allow it to stand empty.

Such places, hollow as they were, invited evil.

Fane made a lunge for the door. Viggo caught him and slammed him against the wall, pinning him there again and snarling, “They'll be here in a minute. Why don't we wait?”

Fane struggled, his eyes wild with fear. “You're mad!”

“Maybe so.” Viggo uttered a dark laugh. “Thorne will be surprised to see you. Do you think he'll have mercy for an old friend?”

“Idiot!” Fane’s voice was too high, on the edge of hysteria. Viggo could see the shadow of the prison cells in his eyes, as if he were already counting the many, many days he would be shut in for his stupidity. “They’ll take you, too! You and your partner.”

Viggo bared his teeth in a smile. “So they will. Perhaps I just had less to lose than you do.”

Fane cursed him.

A thundering crash shook the building as if the pillars had collapsed. Maybe they really were burning it. And outside, in the corridor, Viggo could hear the tramp of soldiers’ feet.

Fane heard it too. A sob escaped him, and he went limp. Viggo shoved him away, let him fall to the floor, and crossed the room in two strides, jamming a chair beneath the door handle. It stuck fast, and he whipped around, hissing, “You want to get out of here? Send Cat and me back to Thorne.”

Fane stared at him, uncomprehending. Viggo wrenched him to his feet. “Thorne doesn’t know who tipped him off,” he snarled. “You still have a chance if I help you. But if I do, then Cat and I go back to Thorne, and you stay the hell away from us.”

Fane glared at him, some of the old arrogance returning, “What makes you think—”

The door handle rattled. Once, twice. Something heavy slammed against the wood, so hard that it shuddered.

“Fine!” Fane shoved him away. “Fine! Get me out of here!”

“Swear it,” Viggo spat. The door shuddered again.

Fane glared at him, his face ugly and twisted with hatred. “I swear it.”

Viggo caught his sleeve and hauled him across the room, behind the rows of coffins, and yanked open the trap door. Fane swore, drawing back at the smell of the graves that drifted up through the black opening. The door shuddered again, one hinge shattering. The chair scooted half a foot.

Viggo caught Fane’s wrist, helping him scramble through the opening, lowering him to the stone flags below. He dropped in after, swinging the trap door shut behind him, and heard the door burst open.

Heavy footsteps echoed above them so loud that Viggo almost expected them to come through the floor. They came halfway across the room, stopped, and turned back again.

What was left of the door slammed shut.



Viggo closed his eyes and collapsed back against the stone wall, his heart thudding so loudly against his ribs that he was certain Fane could hear it. He was shaking. Shaking like a child and a coward, but he didn't care.

For the moment, all he could think to do was breathe. Breathe, and bless every god and saint he'd ever heard of for coffins, this crypt, the silence ...

And for Corey Wicker.

\* \* \*

It wasn't easy to get out of the crypt. The air was black as ink, and only the wolf could see the way through the tombs lining the walls like silent sentinels.

It lent him its sight, but the rest of it stayed hidden, locked away inside of him as if to hide from all of the darkness. It had been a long time since he'd felt it stir in his breast.

Not since Kaleb had died. Did the wolf mourn for him too? Or was it only afraid that he would be the next to die?

He wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer to that.

Fane followed after him, as close as if he could hear the ghosts whispering in their tombs. He could hear the man's panicked breathing, loud in the stillness. He was afraid of

death, afraid of the dead, as if they might reach pale fingers up through the stone lids and catch him by the throat.

The sounds of the raid died away behind them. Viggo wound through the tombs as quickly as he could, stumbling over the flagstones, and prayed beneath his breath that no one would be waiting for them at the other end of the passage. He had no doubt that Thorne's men had surrounded the basilica before they'd begun.

Many men would escape tonight, most with their Dreyens and their money, but he was sure Thorne had wanted to catch as many as he could.

Fane tripped, and Viggo turned back to haul him up.

And froze.

A woman stood by one of the tombs, her head bowed, a thin veil draped over her head and swathed around her slender form.

The widow from the basilica.

He stayed where he was, stunned, his heart suddenly stilled in his chest. She touched the stone, tracing her fingers through the dust as if to inscribe there the name of the dead man they'd buried under it.

Fane swore, still trying to find his feet in the dark.

Her head turned toward them, veil rippling in the still air. Viggo stumbled backward, caught Fane's arm, and dragged him away through the passage, past the last of the tombs, and up the stairs to the door that let them out at the far end of the empty graveyard.

His heart was pounding again, worse than when they'd escaped Thorne and his men, and he followed Fane through the streets as fast as he could, trying to shake the vision of her from his head.

Goddess or witch or haunted soul, he got the feeling that she didn't like or approve of what he'd done here tonight.

Or what he was going to do.



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*DESPERATION*

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**C**at was ready when the doors to Brenner's house opened and she heard the sounds of footsteps on the marble floors below. His men had all gone. Hours ago. One of them had stumbled in on her standing over his body and had run off as if she were the Pale Lady herself, come to steal their souls.

The others had gone with him. All of them at once. How stupid for so many men to be afraid.

But they had no loyalty to the man lying dead in his study. Only to his gold, and there would be no more of that.

Not anymore.

The moon had risen over the city walls, shining through the swaying nooses outside Brenner's window. His body lay where he'd fallen, his blood soaking into the carpet. So much blood. It was on her hands, too, and on the knife in her lap.

She hadn't expected so much blood.

She was sitting on the desk when the door opened, swinging her legs like a child, waiting for Thorne and his soldiers to come and take her away. She would hang, of course. She meant to. She was so tired now, so very, very tired.

But it was Viggo, not Thorne or his men, who came in with Fane close behind him. They both flinched back at the sight of the body on the floor, and Fane stared at her as if he'd never really seen her before.

He hadn't. Not really. She was a pawn to him, nothing but a pawn, and the idea of her taking any thought into her head that didn't match what he himself wanted was inconceivable.

Viggo touched her wrist, pulled her off the desk and away from the blood. The letter opener in her lap fell to the floor, and she picked it up absently. The handle was inlaid with mother of pearl. It seemed to glow in the moonlight, like liquid silver. She'd never seen a more beautiful knife.

He was talking to her, murmuring softly the way he might to a frightened child. "It's all right. It's all right, Cat. Everything's all right."

It wasn't all right. But he wouldn't understand that. He never did. She pushed hair out of her face, forgetting that she had blood on her fingers, and looked at Fane. "The fight houses. Thorne knew about them ..."

Viggo squeezed her hand. "We got out all right." He looked at Fane, his face set like steel, and said, "It's over."

Fane laughed harshly, although he still avoided looking at Brenner's body. "You can't think it's as simple as that. Not anymore."

Viggo's face turned red. "I can still go to Thorne—"

"I can't cover up murder," Fane snapped sarcastically. "How do you think it would look if I sent you back now? With one of my most trusted friends dead in his home? And witnesses? She'd be at the gallows in an hour."

"Not if you told the truth."

Fane laughed, an ugly, ugly laugh. "Why would I do that?"

"You don't have to tell them about the fight houses—"

"I don't have to tell them anything."

Cat shut her eyes, feeling it begin again. The back and forth between them, the power play that shunted her off to one side and became a battle between them for the upper hand. She was so tired. So tired of this fight, so tired of feeling powerless.

Viggo looked at her helplessly, as if he knew Fane was telling the truth. Fane saw it too. She caught a glimpse of ugly triumph darkened his eyes, there for only a breath. He made a

placating gesture. “I’m sure we can work something out. But not if we’re caught here. Come on.”

Viggo gave in. She saw him do it, saw it in his eyes, and knew he would agree to whatever it was that Fane offered them once they were safely back in his apartments. The fight house was gone, Brenner was dead, and she was by his side again. That would be enough for him.

Cat looked down, stroking the mother of pearl handle with her thumb. She still had blood on her hands. She would for a long, long time. Such things didn’t wash off easily, off her hands or off her heart.

She didn’t need Viggo’s death on her soul as well. He wouldn’t live long under Fane, and neither would she, not if he went before her.

They’d broken together, after all. And there were still splinters of his shattered soul pieced together with hers.

Viggo touched her wrist, trying to move her toward the door. She looked up at him, into his eyes, and smiled. “He’s lying.”

Fane’s face turned red.



“Brenner was trafficking Dreyens,” Cat told Viggo. She looked out the window at the swinging nooses. The dead man’s bones had been bleached almost white by the light of the moon. “He told me. He wanted you in the fight houses, but it was me he was after. When Thorne investigates, he’ll find proof.”

“There won’t be an investigation,” Fane hissed at her.

Cat looked at him numbly, knowing he meant it. He would smooth it over, he and Viggo together, and there would be nothing left but one more secret to bind the three of them together.

She couldn’t force Fane’s hand.

But she could convince Viggo.

She smiled thinly at Fane, ice shivering through her flesh. “I wasn’t planning on giving you a choice about that.”

Viggo knew what she meant, what she was doing, even before she’d begun to move. But she was faster than he was, and she plunged the letter opener into her thigh before he could stop her. She gasped, pain searing through her whole body. Hot blood drenched her trousers. So much blood.

She hadn’t expected so much blood.



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*BONEKNITTERS*

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**T**he healing houses in Ivra smelled of whiteleaf oil and silver birch, of lacelock and bindweed and yarrow, of every herb and remedy that could stave off death and coax the injured and the sick into life again.

Viggo crouched in the corner of the long, long room, his back to one of the pillars. A low murmur pervaded the long halls where the boneknitters and herbwomen slept and lived and worked. Pillars lined the hall, windows lacing the walls, and the soft steps of the herbwomen echoed against the tiled roofs.

Two men stood over Cat's bed. Two men, three women. They had their backs to him, their heads bent and their hands busy, and it had been a long time since he'd been able to see what they were doing.

At least they hadn't thrown him out.

That was something.

One of the men turned away from the bed, washing his hands in a shallow basin nearby. The water glinted, candlelight and the glow from a half-dozen lanterns dancing in the red water. Viggo looked up at him, praying for a word,

something, anything he could grasp at just now. The man's face was grave, his hair gray, his weathered skin lined as if with long years. He smiled gently at Viggo, just for a second, before turning back, but the smile did nothing to warm his heart or ease the aching cold in his breast and in his soul.

It was this house, this stupid, empty, echoing house. The floors, the walls. The stones. Everything was cold.

Like a tomb.

A door opened at the end of the hall and Silas Thorne came striding in, closely followed by his bodyguards and by Fane. Ace's eyes found Viggo's immediately, a desperate question written there, but Viggo couldn't look at him. Not at him, not at the Archduke, not at anyone. He stared at the floor, at the blood on his hands and beneath his fingernails, and wished the ground would shatter beneath him and bury him in rubble.

He'd failed. Miserably. Only one thing had ever mattered in his stupid life, although he'd been too dense and too blind to see it, and he'd failed her when it really meant something.

"Swifter?" The man was looking at him. Silas Thorne. Had he already guessed most of what had happened to them that night? He seemed like the sort of man who would, as if he understood men and their souls so well that he would know

they'd escaped his raid at the fight house only a few hours before. Only to end up here now.

When he didn't answer, Thorne hesitated, looking at him as pensively as if he could see the thoughts running through Viggo's head. Then one of the healers turned away from the table, wiping her hands on a thin cloth, and Thorne turned his attention to her, asking, "Well?"

"She'll live, lordship," the woman told him gently. Her eyes found Viggo's as she said it, as if she meant the answer for him as much as the Archduke. "She's young an 'strong, and her partner there stopped the bleedin 'quick."

"That's something." Thorne almost sounded relieved. His expression hardened, and he looked at Fane. "So ... what happened?"

Viggo froze.

Fane hesitated, seeming not to know how to answer. His face reddened.

"I didn't watch out for her." Viggo looked up at them both. His hands were shaking, and he clenched them into fists. "I should have come to you weeks ago. I didn't."

They were staring at him, all of them.

“One of Lord Ravenstone’s friends was helping him with his debts. Joseph Brenner.”

Thorne’s eyes narrowed with recognition.

“I knew something was wrong. He was too—” Viggo hesitated, trying to sort through his thoughts, “quick to help. But I left it alone. I think—I think he was after her from the beginning, and I didn’t realize it.”

Fane looked ready to wring his neck. Viggo met his eyes, daring the man to contradict him. “He was trafficking Dreyens—said he had buyers in Beyora. He tried to take her, and she killed him, but—” he choked.

Thorne’s gaze softened. “I see. We’ll look into it.” He looked at Fane, his jaw tightening. “Interesting friends.”

“I wouldn’t call him a friend,” Fane snarled. “He owed me money, and, no, I didn’t get it.”

“You have your life,” Thorne reminded him. “That should be a sufficient reward.”

“But she’ll need to recover,” Fane snapped. “For, what, a month? And all on my silver, too.”

Viggo bit his tongue, and for a moment, he could only think of what it would feel like to put his hands around Fane’s

throat and wring the life from him. From the sour glance the Archduke shot at his master, he guessed he wasn't the only one with such thoughts.

The herbwoman, still standing respectfully to one side, pressed her lips together in a thin line and said, less gently, "More like three or four months, lord. If you want her walking properly again."

Fane's face flushed as red as if he'd drunk another bottle of wine.

"I shouldn't worry about it, Ravenstone," Thorne broke in smoothly. He looked weary, easing the weight from his bad leg and passing a hand over his face as if to wipe away the long hours without sleep, but his eyes were still young. Still like a boy's. "Naturally it's too much to ask that you pay for her care and wait while she recovers."

Viggo choked on the hate constricting his throat.

"So I'll take them both off your hands. I have several teams in reserve. We can look them over tonight, and you can have your pick."

"No." Fane said it so quickly that Viggo didn't have time to hope. "No, I'd rather not. Not after—I mean, she did save

my life. Or, he did. At the very least, I'd like to keep the male with me."

Viggo stared at the ground and tried to feel something other than emptiness. Anger, fear, pain. Loss. Something. But no, his soul had frozen, his fear had died with his hope, and he had nothing now. Nothing to live for, nothing to fight with against Fane's stupid schemes.

"You could give the girl a new partner," Fane said, his voice so indifferent, as if he didn't really care either way. "Send another home with me and the male. They never got along particularly well anyway. He certainly didn't care much for her—as you can see."

The words cut like knives, like razors in his skin. Ace was looking at him. Brand too. As if they suddenly weren't sure whether to believe his master or not. He and Cat had certainly never spent much time together in the courtyards. Their moments—the ones that had mattered—had all been in private. In the rain. Over knackers in their room. Talking together after the candles had been blown out.

They couldn't know, none of them, how much she really meant to him. Stupid as he was, he doubted even she knew.



Thorne was looking at him again, as thoughtfully as before, as if he'd already begun to guess that something was going on beneath the surface. "I don't usually like to separate teams," he said slowly. "But ... I could easily make an exception. Swifter?"

Viggo rose to his feet, feeling slightly dizzy. "My lord?"

"I assume you'll agree to the new arrangement?" Thorne nodded at Fane. "You'll return home with your master, and tomorrow morning a new partner will be assigned to each of you. Perhaps I'll give her someone a little older." He glanced back at Cat's sleeping figure, at the blood-stained bandages on her leg and her pale face. "Yes, I think that might be wise."

Viggo couldn't speak. Fane looked pleased with himself, like a cat who'd gotten its claws into a sparrow, and even Ace was nodding. No doubt he'd felt all along that Viggo wasn't a proper fit for Cat.

It was all decided without him. Just as it always had been before. Just as it had been when they'd sent Cat with him to Ivra instead of Dex. Or when they'd sold his soul to Fane Ravenstone, who in turn had sold it to the men in the fight houses.

Now he was being sold again. Without Cat, without any hope left. They would go home tonight, back to Fane's apartments and his own stone cell, and he would be alone.

"Swifter?" Thorne raised an eyebrow at him, wanting some kind of answer, a sign that he'd been heard.

Viggo swallowed the lump in his throat and looked up at the man, right into his eyes. "No."



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*A FINAL WISH*

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No?”  
Thorne stared at him. Fane’s face reddened, and he hissed, “Swifter, I’m warning you—”

“I saved his life.” The words seemed to stick to his tongue. Such dangerous words. Like knives. “We both did. She’s hurt because of *his* friend’s gambling loans, not because I—”

But he couldn’t finish that sentence. It hurt too much, and it wasn’t true. Not really.

He had failed her. Fane was still alive, wasn’t he? That, in itself, was a failure.

“She’s earned her rest. And I’ve done enough to stay with her, at the very least.”

Fane had murder in his eyes. Pure murder. Viggo had never seen him so angry. If he lost tonight—if they went back to the apartment together, it would end badly. Viggo tried not to look at him, keeping his gaze squarely on Thorne’s face. The man held the balance now. Life and death, hope and despair. He still looked startled by Viggo’s outright defiance, but he wasn’t angry. Not yet, anyway. He glanced at Cat again and said, almost to himself, “I wouldn’t argue with that ...”

Viggo bit his tongue, desperation forcing the words from his mouth. “Lant Curtis spoke to you about me.”

Thorne looked at him, frowning. “He did?”

“He recommended me. As an assassin.”

Thorne’s eyes cleared, and he nodded. “Oh yes. I remember.” He considered Viggo’s words for a minute, stroking the rough stubble growing along his jaw, then shook his head. “I don’t think so. You’re very young—”

“How many men does Lant Curtis recommend to you?” Viggo felt his shirt clinging to his back, sticky with sweat. The air in the healing houses was very cold. “Has he ever offered an opinion on anyone, in all his years? I think that’s credentials enough.”

The words stung his mouth as he uttered them, like wasps. He’d never spoken to a human like this—never even to Vladimer, Dreyen that he was. They were all looking at him as if he’d lost his mind, Ace and Brand included. Fane’s eyes bulged with fury, and Thorne—

Thorne was studying him. As if he were really, truly considering what Viggo was saying. At last, he uttered a soft laugh and leaned back against a table, taking the weight off

his bad leg and folding his arms over his chest. “You’re right. He never has. I thought pretty seriously about hauling you out then, but—well, your age did play against you. Still does, in fact. I need experienced men out in the field, not children.”

“You need men with years ahead of them.” How could his voice sound so steady, so very steady, when really his fingers were trembling and his heart pounding like a frightened rabbit’s? “What’s the use of training an assassin only to retire him in five years?”

The ghost of a smile flitted across Thorne’s face. “I doubt I’ll have to retire Lant in five years.”

“He’s only one man.”

Fane broke in, his voice shaking as he tried to disguise his rage as amusement. “You’ll have to forgive me, my lord. Apparently, I haven’t taught *him*,” he shot Viggo a look loaded with hate, “manners as well as I thought. He should know better.”

Thorne shrugged, his eyes still on Viggo. “It’s a good trait,” he said, then corrected himself. “Not in a bodyguard, naturally, but an assassin does have to be able to think for himself on the field and make decisions without waiting for

orders.” He smiled ruefully. “It’s one of the reasons Lant Curtis has proved himself so valuable.”

Fane forced a laugh. “Surely you aren’t thinking of taking him seriously?”

Thorne frowned at him. “Why not?”

“He’s hardly stable enough—” Fane stopped, confused. “Besides that, he’s my property. You can’t just—”

“Actually,” Thorne said, very, very softly. “He’s the king’s property. Loaned to you, as long as you pay your debts. As the king’s administrator, I can choose to take him whenever I like. And whether or not to issue another pair.”

Fane shut his mouth. His face was very red.

Thorne looked back at Viggo, considering him for a long minute, then said, “You’d need a partner.”

Viggo nearly stopped breathing. “I have one.”

Thorne shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. She’s not really the type. Lant mentioned that particularly.”

Viggo stared at him, trying to breathe, trying to think, and for one, horrible moment, he could hear his own voice echoing back to him, lost in the past. “*She never really wanted me as a partner, anyway. It was a mistake.*”

He had a second, one breath, to make the decision. Not enough time even to wonder if she would hate him forever for what he was about to say.

“I’ll stay here then,” he whispered. As hoarsely as if he’d slit his own throat just by saying it. “With—with Lord Ravenstone. I can guard him alone until she’s well enough to join me.”

Thorne’s eyes narrowed. “You think that much of her?”

“She’s my partner, my lord.” Even as he said the words, he felt Fane’s chains clamp around his wrists again, cold links winding around his throat. He forced a wry smile. “I can’t very well leave her behind.”

Silence stilled the air in the hall until not even a breath of wind stirred the curtains.

Fane was the one to break it, saying heartily, “Well, that’s settled then. I’ll pay for the girl’s recovery and keep them both. If he’s so attached to her, I’d hate to part them. I’ll file a report with you in the morning, Silas. Good night.”

Thorne didn’t take his eyes off Viggo’s face. “You’re sure?” he asked very quietly.



Viggo tried not to think of the bare fireplace and empty bed he was returning to, or the fluttering curtain without Cat's warm voice behind it and the bare table where he'd be eating alone for the next few months. Or that this, this one moment, was his last chance.

He forced a smile. "Yes, my lord. I apologize for wasting your time."

Thorne uttered a quiet laugh. "You've hardly done that. Lant told me you were wasted as a bodyguard. I'm beginning to think I agree with him."

Fane's jaw clenched.

Thorne straightened up, brushing a crease from his tunic. "Stay here tonight. In the morning, they'll give you both a room. When she's well enough, we'll discuss the kind of tasks I'll have for you." He glanced dismissively at Fane. "If you come by in the morning, I'll assign you a new team."

He walked away, and Fane could do nothing but follow him, shooting Viggo one last murderous glare before he went.

\* \* \*

When they were gone, Viggo sat down hard on the floor, too weak at the knees to stay upright any longer. The pillars

and windows spun around him, moonlight and shadow blending strangely, and it took him a breath to realize he was crying.

“Lawd, what a time you must have had tonight.” An herbwoman touched his shoulder, drawing him back to himself. “Tis a shame, but there’s no help for it. Up you get. There’s blankets under that table. Best thing for you now is a little sleep.”

Viggo stumbled to his feet, wiping his eyes self-consciously, and she gave him one last concerned look before she disappeared into the shadows. He went to sit on the floor by Cat’s bed, steadying himself against the rough frame until the world stopped spinning and he felt like himself again. Her face was very white, but the hand lying on the thin coverlet was warm, and he pressed her fingers to his lips, whispering, “We did it, Cat. We’re going to be all right now.”

The words were a lie, of course. He wasn’t sure why. They felt wrong, somehow, with her face as white as it was and the panic in the fight house still fresh in his mind.

The widow had been right. There was a price to pay for tonight. Cat’s pain, certainly, but he had an awful feeling in

the pit of his stomach, a premonition that there would be a greater price to pay for all this than he realized.

Some debts had to be paid in blood.

Cat stirred, murmuring something in her sleep. Viggo touched her brow, stroked her cheek, and she relaxed, as if his touch were enough to calm her now. A soft glow warmed his breast, and he laid his head down on the bed and shut his eyes, breathing a prayer of thanks to whatever god had heard him in that basilica.

Whatever price he paid later didn't matter. She was here, and Fane was gone. They could start over.

Anything was worth that.

Read an excerpt from

## Timber and Tomb

The stunning sequel to Spire and  
Stone, coming Fall 2024!



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*BONESMITH*

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W

ater dripped from the stones, echoing from slimy walls to vaulted ceilings.

When Colin Burke looked up the light of his torch was lost in the soaring darkness. Only the blackened stone of the walls was visible, the walls and a few of the cages hanging from the ceiling on rusted chains. Their bars gleamed in the uncertain light, and he tried not to look too hard at the shadows clustered inside for fear of seeing something that would feed his nightmares. Somewhere off in the darkness a scream pierced the silence. He flinched, hurrying to catch up with the guard who had brought him to this evil place.

Avrena Dul. City of a Thousand Screams. So the tales had named the dungeons beneath the coastal city of Naveres. The common folk skirted the paths outside its entrance, whispering its name as if they were afraid a plague would be summoned with the words. It was left alone, nearly abandoned except for the skeletal force of soldiers left to guard it. A symbol of fear amid a city of spice and trade.

No light lived along these narrow passages. Night nested among the cells, breeding in the tunnels and caverns like black mold, spreading and swelling with the force of the tides. Night

ruled here. Night and fear. They slept in the stones, and the stench of their excrement turned his stomach.

The guard didn't seem to notice the smells or the screams. He splashed through the ankle-deep bilge water heedlessly, the light of his lantern reflecting in a thousand fragments across the water's surface. Colin could smell the filth in it, the disease it carried, but he'd been lucky enough to arrive at low tide. High tide brought the water up past a man's knees, sometimes deeper.

Colin drew a linen kerchief from his sleeve, pressing it to his mouth and nose. "Are we nearly there?"

The guard glanced back at him and grinned. One of his front teeth was broken to a crooked stump, and several others were as black as the slime growing on the walls. "Losin 'your stomach for this place already, Burke?"

Colin frowned. "No. And it's Chancellor Burke to you, Gerwik. I'm on official business for his Lordship the Archduke. Try to remember that."

Gerwik laughed harshly and hung his lantern on a spike in the wall. "Official business my arse. You ain't no more official than I am, Burke. Just a stooge for the higher ups, you are. Just like any of us."

A sharp reply leapt to Colin's lips, but he bit it back, resolving not to argue with the stupid fool. Gerwik snorted and drew a ring of keys from his belt, sifting through them with impatient fingers. Colin watched, passing his hand nervously over his thinning hair. "Are you sure you shouldn't have brought more men? I could wait while you call a detail—"

Gerwik spat into the dark water and laughed at his fear. "I thought you were in such an almighty hurry? Don't worry, we won't have no trouble with this'n. He's half broke already."

He inserted the key into one of the reinforced doors and twisted, shoving it open with a creaking groan. Colin swallowed hard, feeling for the pouch of sparrow bones tucked inside his shirt. His heart was pounding in his chest, too loud and too fast. Not for the first time, he cursed this assignment, wishing the Archduke had given it to someone else. He had no desire to question a demon.

Gerwik retrieved his lantern and gestured for Colin to enter the cell ahead of him. "There you are, *Chancellor* Burke. Your prisoner. Don't worry none, I doubt he's in any shape to take on a man of your stature."

Colin's lips tightened, and he approached the cell with assumed courage, choosing to ignore the slur against his thin



waist and hunched shoulders. Gerwik winked at him, whispering, “Just don’t get too close.”

Colin froze. “Why not?”

“Well, you know the tales about this’n, don’t you?” Gerwik lowered his voice, grinning maliciously. “The Bonesmith, they called ‘im. He used to collect the dead. Took ‘em from churchyards, sometimes. Or just stole ‘em from their homes before they knew they was dead.”

Colin’s fingers tightened convulsively around the pouch of sparrow bones. “That’s ridiculous.”

Gerwik cackled. “So ’tis. But that’s what they say. Had some black art he was practicing in that forest, ‘fore they took ‘im. But they never found all the dead he took. All the bones.”

Colin almost left then. Almost. But Gerwik’s smile was too provoking. He pushed past him into the cell, squeezing the amulet around his neck as if it were his only anchor to the world outside. Gerwik came in behind him, leaving the door open.

The cell was awash with the swill of the tides. The dark water shone red as Colin entered, his torchlight dyeing the black ink-like water to blood. A brick shelf was built against

one wall, providing some relief from the wet during low tide. Tales said that high tide sometimes rose up to the prisoner's necks. Or higher. Colin shuddered at the thought of what it would be like to die in these cells, drowned like a rat when the sea came in.

The creature he'd come to see was lying huddled on the shelf. Its emaciated form looked like a bundle of picked bones, bound together by rags and cast aside to be cleared away later. Colin hesitated, half wondering if the beast had died before he'd come, thus saving him the trouble of questioning it. But Gerwik pushed past him, hanging the lantern from a hook on the wall. "Wake up, slime," he spat, slapping the beast's shoulder. "Get up and bow your head for his lordship."

His lordship. A moment ago, he'd been nothing but a stooge. Colin stepped back as the figure rose to its feet slowly and the full light of the lantern shone on its face. Without meaning to, he uttered a choked curse, half sob, half prayer.

The Dreyen looked at him, and a twisted smile bared its incisors. Lank black hair hung to its shoulders, stringy with the filth of the tides. Its face was as white as a corpse's, and its dark eyes were hollow and as ancient as the Pale Lady's whisper, as if she'd told it secrets that no man had any right to

carry. It held Colin's eyes like a snake holds a bird with its gaze, and Colin felt the strength leave his limbs, his fingers growing numb with terror. In his fear, he could almost feel his soul slipping away, tearing from his chest as if the creature drew it forth with the strength in its gaze.

Gerwik hit the creature in the face. "Bow your head, stupid," he snarled.

The Dreyen bowed its head, blood dripping from its nose. Colin studied it with horror, unsure the creature was rational enough to understand speech. He'd heard of Dreyens gone feral, but this was the first time he'd ever seen one. He licked his lips and looked at Gerwik. "Can it answer my questions?"

"Aye, it'll answer them." Gerwik tugged at the glove on his left hand. The steel studding his knuckles was crimson with blood. "Whatever you want. Isn't that right, half-blood?"

The Dreyen shrugged its shoulders. Gerwik hit it again, so hard that it staggered beneath the blow. "Answer proper!"

The Dreyen licked blood from its chin and looked up at him. "Yes ... lord."

Its voice was soft, modulated and deep with an accent that came from the mountains. Colin shuddered again, finding it

difficult to link the rich voice to the emaciated demon standing before him. “Your name?”

“Tomas.”

“Tomas what?”

“Tomas Fleck.”

Colin swallowed, growing bolder. The creature was still looking at him, looking through him with those old, hollow eyes, but his soul was still firmly nestled in his chest. “Tomas Fleck, you are charged with murder and high treason against the crown. Do you understand that?”

The Dreyen’s eyes never wavered. “I do.”

“Do you admit your guilt?”

Again, no reaction. No fear, no shame. The animal was uncanny. “Yes.”

“Will you plead for mercy?”

“Not from you.”

Colin flushed. “You’re destined to hang. I’m here to oversee that. You still have information that the Archduke wants. Badly. I suggest you use it to your advantage now, before the hangman comes for you.”

The Dreyen bared its teeth. "I'd rather have my conscience clean when the Pale Lady takes me."

Gerwik hit it again. Colin flinched at the blow, glancing at him with a shiver of fear. "You shouldn't do that. It's bad luck."

Gerwik laughed. "You're an old woman, Burke. What, you think he's linked with the devil?"

"No, he's right," the Dreyen said, so quietly that at first Colin didn't realize that it was the creature that had spoken. It looked up, straight into Gerwik's face, and its eyes went jet black. "It is bad luck."

Steel flashed. A knife, jerked from the folds of the Dreyen's torn clothing. The beast killed him so fast that Gerwik had no time to scream, no time to beg. His body fell, splashing into the water sloshing over the flagstones. Fear took Colin's breath as the Dreyen turned to look at him.

Blood stained its white hands. It bared its teeth, and Colin stumbled back against the wall, dropping the torch into the water. It hissed and went out, and the shadows loomed, night drawing nearer. Everlasting night.

His lips were numb with terror. He choked on a cry as it came closer. But who would hear one cry here? What was one scream to a thousand others?

The creature pressed a hand over his mouth, leaning in close until he could feel its breath on his face. Its eyes were still black, black with the soul of the animal that lived in its chest and whispered in its dreams. “Shh.” The knife was still in its other hand. A shard of steel wrapped in rag to protect its fingers. “Don’t scream. Don’t speak. Just nod or shake your head. Did he bring others with him?”

Colin whimpered, shook his head. The beast leaned in closer. “Are you sure?”

He nodded. The Dreyen released him, stepping back, and said quietly, “Tell the hangman I’m sorry that I missed him.”

The animal, sleek and black, took his shape and vanished into the water. The door slammed shut behind it and a draft blew the lantern out. Night rushed in, cold and damp and dark. Colin fainted.

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A.R. Geiger is a Jesus-loving story addict with a passion for mythology, fantasy, and stories that ring true no matter the genre. Her bookshelves are always overcrowded. She believes that all books have something to teach us, whether they are truth or fiction, history or myth. When she's not buried in her books, she works as a scriptwriter and director for an international radio program, farms her family's thirty-five acres, and enjoys spending time with her husband and son in the mountains of Colorado.

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