

CURSE OF A DARK GOD

By

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Draft 3, Opening 12 chapters

For your reading pleasure, here is the current version of the first 12 chapters of book 2 in the Dark God Saga. (And there was much rejoicing, yea.) A lot of readers have expressed their desire to have book 2 come out sooner. Alas, that's in the editor's control. But even if I could release them sooner, I don't know that we would. We want to make sure they're quality product, and I'm not fulltime yet, nor am I a super speedy writer (although I am getting faster). However, we can offer you this preview of what's to come.

Read, enjoy, and rock on, Baby!

If you would like to be part of a test audience, please begin reading just as you would any book that you picked up because it looked interesting. Stop where you normally would. Then email me by clicking on the Contact John link under my photo on my website: <http://johndbrown.com>. I'll send you a couple of questions. Again, don't put any critique hat on. Just read as you normally would.

NOTE: these ARE draft chapters and may change in the final version. Heck, they might even have, horrors, a typo or two.

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Chapter 1

The Harvester

The young girl was beautiful. Dark hair. Stunning jade eyes. Clear skin the color of caramel. But her body was merely a husk now. Berosus killed it with a sharp twist to the neck then laid it down upon the dried autumn grass at his feet. She'd had good bone structure, even teeth. Her hair was healthy and clean. She was good stock. In regular circumstances, she would have grown up to bear many fine children and increase the herd. She would have provided many souls as meat for the Mothers. But her death had been necessary.

He picked up a pickled herring that lay in a cloth and took a bite. With his clean hand he smoothed the girl's dark hair behind one ear then traced her brow. She was so beautiful in her death. As graceful and sensuous as the rich petals of an iris in her repose.

He took another bite of herring and ran a handful of the girl's dark hair through his fingers. It was thick and luxurious, as smooth as glass. He disdained the Divines who sent others to do their work. They missed scenes such as these. Every day a banquet was spread; and they missed it.

He contemplated the girl a moment more, the breeze gently blowing waves through the dry meadow grass about her, the heads of the grass nodding to and fro, as if reaching out to touch her. Then he picked up the leather pouch that held the rough, black horn where the essential parts of the girl's soul still lived on, and put the strap over his neck.

The horn would be the weave he would use to destroy Shim's army. Or should he say Argoth's? He'd needed her soul to quicken it. He could have used anyone's soul, but it pleased him to think of her there. For every time he thought of the horn, he would also think of her, this hill, and the grass rippling in the breeze. Life was meant to be lived consciously. Deliberately. How poignant for something of such youth and beauty to bring forth such destruction.

He finished the herring and sucked his two fingers clean. Then he rose, standing upon a hill that gave him a view of Shim's fortress. He'd been watching Shim's army for five days now, and his orders were to harvest every last one of them, although there were special plans for the one that had been marked., the one they called Talen.

It was clear to him this army was sleth. They were using weaves of might, but none were in the pattern of any of the houses of Kains he knew. There were no Guardian Divines, no tethered skir, no Fire sacrifices. There simply were no signs that would indicate an enemy Mother was here, claiming this human herd. When he'd received his orders, he'd been informed by the glorious Mother of Mokad herself that this nest of sleth had killed two Divines and perhaps even one of her sisters. He saw now they were starting to build an army of dreadmen. It was all very impressive for sleth. But their time was at an end.

He looked down upon the girl. She would have been harvested anyway. This outbreak of slethery had to be stopped before it grew too large. A small sleth nest could be useful at times in managing the herd or in attacking another Mother's holdings. But an army of them would only cause problems. And you couldn't just kill the leaders. Ideas and knowledge spread like disease. In this situation, it was best to simply destroy the whole herd.

Berosus stroked one side of his long blond moustache and then the other. About him in the woods, his dreadmen kept watch. He'd received message via the weave that bound his chief general to him that the ships with the general, his troops, and the other Divines were making good progress. They expected to arrive in just a few days.

Harvesting humans was essentially the same as harvesting any animal. You gathered them together. Then you killed them. And even though this harvest would provide some challenges, he looked forward to them. Nothing worth having didn't involve some risk--it was risk that helped make life so interesting. The time had come for him to begin the round up. Time for him to personally get involved with this herd.

He thought it fitting: in one day's time the inhabitants of this land would celebrate the good gifts of the harvest with their annual apple dance feast. It was as if they were fattening themselves, celebrating the real harvest.

The day was brisk, the sky sunny and clear. He hoped the sunshine held. It was such fine weather for slaughter.

Chapter 2

Poison

Talen had already died once this season. It was not something he was planning on doing again anytime soon. Except there sat Thrush with her dark hair and lovely throat making eyes at him again from the other side of the grass area that served as a dance floor.

Normally this would pose no problem, but next to her stood the woodcutter from Gesh. He had arms the size of hams. Arms that had damaged many men. And with more than black eyes and broken noses--he'd crippled a big drover with those arms. Knocked something loose in his noggin so he couldn't stand up straight without the aid of a stout stick. More importantly, it was rumored he was soon to be betrothed to Thrush.

No, Talen didn't want to die, or be damaged, but death took many guises. When he'd died the first time, he'd been laid out on the dusty floor of the Mother's cave like a doll with all its straw scattering to the wind. He'd been floating above himself until the monster stuffed him back into his bones and made a request. A request which Talen had fulfilled. And now, having met death once, Talen did not want to go into that peril again loaded down with regrets, if-onlies, should-haves, and small cowardices.

Life was like the setting sun, shining in yellow and orange glory on the cliffs—the spectacle lasted but a few moments, and if you were too stupid or afraid to seize the moment, it would be gone. And Thrush was not something to be missed.

The festivities for Shim's army were being held in the outer bailey of the fortress called Rogum's Defense. It was a beautiful evening. The Swan's dance ended and the lute strummer called out the Mill dance. It got its name from the way the dancers moved like the vanes of a wind mill. Talen knew the steps well. Furthermore, the sun was setting, which meant this was probably one of the last dances of the evening for which you could choose a partner, one of the

last opportunities to dance with Thrush. He'd wanted to dance with her the whole evening. He supposed every male with eyes in his head had wanted the same thing. But, by the Six, while they dreamed and dithered, he would actually do it. He was going to have her in his arms out on that floor, even if it was only just this once.

Talen put down his mug of cider. He stood on the sides by a table laden with meat pies. Ke, his bull of a brother, shooed a few flies away and picked up another pie, a small thing no bigger than a plum. Talen had tried one of them earlier. They were nasty little wads of leek with a few miserly sand grains of unidentifiable meat hiding in the corners. He suspected the family of rat catchers from Lind had brought those.

Ke plopped the whole thing in his mouth, chewed, and let out a sigh of satisfaction. Then he picked up another.

Talen shook his head--there was no accounting for taste.

Ke's hair was cropped short. He wore a rust cloak. The gash on his face from the battle down in the bowels of the ancient Stone-wight warren had healed, but a scar remained. Scars remained on everyone that had been there, and not all of them were visible like this one. The cat gut stitching had only been removed a few days ago. The holes were still visible. It made Ke's head look like some brutish pin cushion. Surprisingly, that seemed to attract quite a number of women.

"I'm going to dance with Thrush," Talen announced. "Watch and learn."

Ke raised his eyebrows. "The one that's betrothed?"

"She's not," said Talen. "No yet. Not officially." Talen picked up his cider again and took another fortifying drink, thinking how he was going to deal with the woodcutter. Nothing really came to mind.

Ke looked down at Talen. "You're a brave one to stir that pot of trouble."

"She's been making eyes at me since before the hogs were carved."

"She makes eyes at everyone," said Ke. "They don't call her the widowmaker for nothing."

Talen flicked his hand in dismissal. "That's just mean-spirited gossip from jealous women."

"You've got a plan for the woodcutter, do you?"

"I'm fast," Talen said. Now that he was learning to use his Fire, the vitality that powered all life, he could muster quite a bit of speed. Increase the flow of Fire, and a man multiplied his abilities. It wasn't linear. When you doubled your flow, you didn't double your strength. Nor did it turn a worm of a man into a giant. But you only needed a little advantage in a fight.

Of course, only a few knew that he was learning the lore. Most people didn't understand it...yet. They thought only the human Divines that ruled the lands could wield the power. They'd been taught that anyone else was using the black lore of Regret, the dark Creator. This was the lie the Divines seeded in the minds of the people they herded. This was how they kept the truth hidden. And so people like Talen were labeled soul-eaters and hunted until they and their kin were exterminated.

But Lord Shim and Uncle Argoth were going to change that. Talen, his brother Ke, River, their sister—they were all going to change that. They'd learned the truth. The Divines were nothing more than overseers for beings of immense power that called themselves Mothers. But they were devourers. Creatures that harvested and fed on the souls of men. Creatures that bred a few select humans to wield special powers and manage the human herds. Bred people like Talen.

But Lord Shim was raising an army to defy the Divines and their terrible masters. Talen didn't know what his powers were or what he'd be when he matured. But whatever happened, he wouldn't serve the Devourers. He'd serve Shim. He'd serve his fellow man. A few more months and they'd have hundreds of dreadmen. Hundreds of those multiplied by weaves of might. Then Uncle Argoth would begin training them up to to be loremens, just as he was training Talen, to wield the powers without weaves. When Shim and Argoth were done, they would have an army the likes of which hadn't been seen for an age. Come spring, they'd be ready to face the Divines of Mokad.

And so what was a woodcutter when compared with that? Talen wasn't going to be buffaloed. He'd faced down a real monster in the cave. He could face down a broken-nosed mauler. Besides, if it came to it, he could always flee.

He took off his governor, the weave that kept his Fire flowing evenly. It was a thin wristband woven of withies. All those new to the lore wore a governor because Fire was tricky. Fire sometimes flared. Until you had the skill to control it, you risked being carried along into what was called the Firelust where you'd burn up days, weeks, months of your life all in a moment. The body couldn't handle such a surge and would break. At that point the Fire would

recede, but such people never recovered. They usually died within hours. So Talen put the governor in his pocket. If he needed it, he could immediately slip it back on.

“You’re determined,” said Ke, “aren’t you?”

“I am,” he said and began to build his Fire. Not by much. He hadn't learned yet how to double and triple himself. But what he could do would be enough to dodge that giant of a woodcutter.

Ke reached down and picked up a boiled crawfish a good five inches long. He cracked it with his hand and exposed the red tinged flesh inside. He brought it to his lips and fetched out a hunk of the meat. “Then you’d better move,” he said around the meat. He pointed with his chin past the crowd. “I think your competition has let his guard down.”

Talen looked where Ke had pointed and saw the woodcutter walking purposely towards uncle Argoth’s four-seater outhouse, affectionately called Old Redemption after the high-quality inn of the same name in Whitecliff. The line was a good ten people deep. What was more, Thrush was yet again looking directly at Talen with an inviting smile.

Goh, she was an earthy goddess. Her white dress, the scarlet sash, her long black hair up in a complicated braid so all could see that lovely throat—it was breathtaking.

“Right,” said Talen. He smoothed the front of his wheat-colored tunic then tucked back a stray lock of his long hair behind his ear.

“I’ve got your back,” said Ke. Then he picked up his mug, took a drink, and planted himself on the spot, obviously waiting for the entertainment to begin.

Talen ignored him. His black boots were a bit too tight. And he would have preferred to kick them off and go barefoot as he’d done all summer, but he’d spent an hour cleaning and polishing them and they made a good effect. He took a deep breath then set off, threading his way through a flock of people enjoying mugs of cider, walnut and raisin turnovers, and roasted mushrooms. What remained of the hogs and fowl roasted above half-a-dozen cook fires. The evening breeze wafted the aroma of the crackling fat across his path.

A few grandparents patrolled the fields about the festivities, guarding against youth who wanted to pair off and slip out into the woods. Soth the cheeseman was gesturing and angry, talking to one old man. It appeared Soth’s daughter, despite all the precautions, had slipped away.

Talen himself had been feeling a lust all night long. Every time he took a girl's hand, an edgy and reckless longing would run along his skin and down to the core of his gut. He'd been to dances before, but he'd never felt the likes of this. It was almost a hunger. As he weaved his way through the crowd, his hand brushed along the back of a woman and he felt it again. Except this time it was stronger. He realized he wasn't thinking only about curves and graces. He was thinking of the Fire he could sense underneath the fabric of her dress. It called to him.

The sensation shocked him. He'd never been able to sense Fire in someone else before. He certainly hadn't felt a desire to reach out and caress it. But he didn't have time to think about it because he was forced to dodge a little boy chasing after a dog, and when he turned around, he was approaching Thrush.

She had two friends standing with her. She gave them a look then turned to Talen. Her blue eyes were marvelous and not at all innocent. She looked bemused and calculating, and for a moment he felt like a worm about to be put on a hook. She smiled, showing the fact that she still had all her teeth. He wasn't ready for the power of such beauty up close. Nor had he expected the immediate fight he now had on his hands. Thrush's dress was cut so low he found himself having to concentrate on keeping his eyes from roving to places below her chin.

"One of the heroes comes at last," she said, referring to the group that had fought the monster down in the caves. Of course, only Talen and the others who had been there knew what really happened. But he wasn't thinking much about that. He wasn't thinking much at all. The way she had said that, the mischievousness in her eyes, the curl of sweat-damp hair caught in the moisture at the base of her pale throat—it stole nearly all thought from his mind.

He suddenly realized he was out of his depth here. He'd been used to frolicking in shallow waters, but this woman swam much farther out in a dark and mysterious sea. Nevertheless, Talen's brains hadn't been completely overwhelmed. He cleared his throat and offered her his arm. "I thought you might be weary of sitting on the sides," he said. The truth was the woodcutting brute was not much of a dancer and had been out on the floor only once this evening. "I've come to offer you the service of my boots."

"Thrush," her friend said in warning.

"Oh, fie," said Thrush, pointing at his boots. "Look at that shine. It shouldn't go to waste." The way she said it made Talen think for one brief moment that he was being used in some

scheme. Then she stood, and Talen could only marvel that the mere rising from one's seat could be accomplished with such grace.

By the Six, she was going to accept. He'd done it! He was going to dance with one of the greatest Shoka beauties around. And he was going to do it despite her bruising almost-betrothed. In fact, who was to say she was actually going to go through with the betrothal? Maybe the rumors were all one-sided, and she was already looking for a way out.

"She doesn't need your boots, half-breed."

Thrush's friends turned. At a small round table behind them sat a man who Talen recognized as the woodcutter's brother. Although not quite as large, he still had massive shoulders, huge hands, and a face that had withstood a battering. His lips and fingers shone with the fat of the roasted duck wing he held in his hand.

"I'll be the judge of that," said Thrush.

The brother ignored her. He leveled his gaze at Talen. "You want to dance? I'll give you a dance you won't forget." He set his duck wing down and pushed back from the table.

It took time to build your Fire, but Talen could already feel extra strength and liveliness seeping into his limbs. He decided he would not flee. He couldn't tell this small-minded Shoka, but it was half-breeds and Koramites that had saved the New Lands from the monster. His Koramite blood was every bit as noble as the Shoka that ran in his veins. Talen took a pleasant tone. "You are indeed a tempting specimen," he said, "but a little too large for my tastes. I think I'll go with the lady." He extended his elbow to Thrush.

She laughed with surprise, obviously not expecting him to stand up to the large brother. "There you go," she said to the brother. "You can't have all the lookers. Enjoy your duck." Then she took Talen's arm.

A woman who had been listening, giggled and then hid her amusement with her hand. The brother stood. He spread his arms out and shrugged as if to say, "have it your way, fool."

But Talen wasn't focusing on him. As soon as the skin of Thrush's arm touched his, such a longing rose in him that he couldn't think. Her skin was smooth as silk. Her hair smelled of mint. Her eyes filled his mind. And underneath it all was the Fire.

She nudged him toward the dance floor. He took two dazed steps. Those in front of him moved aside, then he felt a large hand clamp down on his shoulder. The brother spun him around and cocked his giant fist, a look of great satisfaction on his face.

Talen's mind was still fuzzy with shock, and he would have taken the sledgehammer blow from the brother full in the face, but at that moment shouts of alarm rose from the inner bailey. Those on guard upon the walls took up the call.

Talen blinked, saw his predicament, and used the distraction to release Thrush and wriggle out of the brother's grasp. As he did so, his mind cleared somewhat and he stepped back to defend himself.

"Saboteur!" One of the guards upon the wall shouted. "Get him!"

Talen risked a glance back toward the commotion in the inner fortress. There were enough of the apple dance guests sitting down so that Talen could see a man wearing the colors of the Mokaddian Shoka clan burst from the gates of the inner court. On the man's left was the crowd and festivities. On his right the ground ran open all the way to the outer wall. The man ran to the open ground. He ran with unnatural speed.

For a moment the crowd acted as if nothing had happened. The murmur of conversation continued. The musicians played practice notes. Somebody laughed. Then a war horn sounded. By the time the notes faded, the crowd had fallen silent. A handful of soldiers sprinted out of the gate. One shouted, "He tried to poison the well!" Two bowmen upon the inner wall drew arrows and released their shafts. The arrows sped down, but the runner had expected them. He wasn't running in a straight line anyway. He jagged to one side, and the arrows flew wide.

A number of guards upon the outer walls put down their mugs of cider. The women with them stood aside as the guards picked up their bows. In just a few moments, there would be dozens of bowmen upon both the outer and inner walls. The runner might be able to avoid two shafts, but the outer bailey had been designed as a killing field. He would soon face a rain of arrows.

He must have understood this, for he immediately changed direction again and ran toward the crowd, which was made up mostly of families--fathers, mothers, old women, and grandchildren. There were soldiers among them, but none of them wore armor or carried any weapons. Still, that didn't keep a number of men from turning to charge him. They were going to try to tackle and subdue him.

But Talen knew that wasn't going to work. The runner was a dreadman. Not a candidate dreadman like almost all those training in Shim's army. A full dreadman. He flew by the first two

men, sent the third reeling with a thundering blow to the head, and then he sped into the midst of the crowd. There were yelps and cries of alarm.

Talen's Fire had built. He would have more strength, more speed. But he knew it wouldn't be enough to contend with the a full dreadman.

At first, the runner moved at a slant to Talen's position, but then a group of men yelled out a challenge and rushed forward. The runner changed his direction, jumped over a cheese table, and headed in Talen's direction.

As the runner approached, the woodcutter's brother roared and charged. But the dreadman pulled a knife from his belt. The woodcutter's brother lunged. The dreadman dodged and slashed at the brother, cutting into his arm, and the brother fell back.

Talen looked around for a weapon. He spotted a chair, picked it up by its leg, then rushed forward. The dreadman turned to face him.

Every clan tattooed the wrists of its members. The dreadman's wrists bore no tattoo that Talen recognized, which meant his Shoka clothing was a disguise. This wasn't anyone from these lands.

Talen swung the chair. If nothing else, he could delay the dreadman. Surely Ke would be here soon. If anyone in Shim's army could match this intruder, it would be Ke.

The dreadman caught the chair in his hand and yanked it out of Talen's grip, pulling Talen off balance, exposing him. Talen flinched, expecting the knife, but Talen's wrist caught the dreadman's attention. The dreadman took a step back. "Holy One," he said.

Talen was taken back. The man spoke with an odd mainland Mokaddian accent. Had he heard him right?

The dreadman gave Talen a slight nod of respect.

Talen had heard him right--what did he mean by "Holy One"?

The dreadman looked beyond Talen. He shifted his weight, drew back the chair. Talen ducked, but the dreadman wasn't trying to hit him. Instead, he hurled the chair at something behind him. He gave Talen another meaningful look then spun away.

Moments later Ke ran past, the chair in his hand. He flung it aside and chased after the dreadman. But a grandfather and woman holding two children who were trying to get away from the scene obstructed his way.

Ke turned to miss them and tripped, slamming into a table and knocking it over. The dreadman changed direction again. The guards on the walls bellowed for the crowd to move away so they could have a clean shot. But the dreadman was too fast and the crowd and situation too confused.

By the time Ke was on his feet and running again, the dreadman was sprinting to the outer gate. A number of soldiers were in pursuit, but it was clear they did not have his speed.

In moments the dreadman reached the gate then disappeared from Talen's view. The guards on the walls yelled and shouted. One of them shot an arrow. Shouts of alarm rose outside the gate.

Behind Talen horse hooves thudded into the turf. Uncle Argoth sat upon a mount, three other riders galloping behind him. He yelled for the crowd to make space. But he still had to slow and weave around children and soldiers who hadn't heard him coming.

Talen wasn't going to be of any use chasing that dreadman. He looked about. If there was one poisoner, there might have been two.

The captain of the guard had the same idea. He shouted to shut up the fortress. When that was done, everyone made to stand in lines. But there wasn't another poisoner. No more saboteurs. Just honest folk who had come to celebrate the Creator's gifts with good food and cider.

An hour later when darkness had fallen and the watches were doubled, Uncle Argoth and Ke returned. The dreadman had escaped.

Uncle Argoth rode up to Talen who was helping move the barrels of cider back into the inner bailey. He nodded his head, indicating Talen should stop and talk. Uncle Argoth dismounted. Ke stood with him. When they were alone, Uncle Argoth said, "Did you get a good look at him?"

Talen said, "He got a good look at me."

"What do you mean?"

Talen held out his wrist. Like everyone else, he had a tattoo proclaiming his people. But Talen's had changed slightly down in the warrens with the creature that called itself the Mother. He'd thought the change was due to the fact that he'd died and been brought back by unnatural means. But now Talen wasn't so sure. Uncle Argoth suspected the tattoos were the way those

that ranched humans branded the individuals in their herds. Maybe they marked more than ownership.

"He was going to cut me," said Talen. "Then he saw my tattoo." Talen lowered his voice. "He called me Holy One."

Argoth put his hands on his hips and grunted. He looked at Ke.

"I can place his accent," said Talen. "He's a mainlander, from Mokad."

"He won't be alone," said Ke.

"No," Argoth agreed. "When the poisoners arrive, the rest of the army is not far behind. It appears our time has run out. We don't have until next spring. For better or worse, the moment for Shim's army is upon us."

"But how can we stand?" Talen asked. Shim's men were all just candidates. They didn't have more than two-dozen that could contend with true dreadmen, and that was counting Ke, River, and Uncle Argoth himself. "They will bring hundreds." And Talen would fall into their hands.

"You let me and Lord Shim worry about that. Your job is to keep your wits about you, and your eyes sharp."

Chapter 3

The Village of Plum

Sugar knew she was taking a great risk when she slipped away from the dancing, the roasting hogs, the lutes, and laughter of the festivities at Rogum's Defense to steal, alone and with nothing but a knife as a weapon, to the border that ran between the Shoka and Fir-Noy lands.

Sugar was a soldier in Shim's army. That alone made her a target for the enemy Mokaddian Fir-Noy clan. But there was a special bounty on her head to boot. She was, after all, the daughter of a soul-eater. And so she knew it was not only against regulations but probably also all good sense when she made her way over the thickly wooded ridge, rumored to be infested with adders, and slipped through the Fir-Noy pickets.

Her destination was the village of Plum, which lay deep in Fir-Noy territory. She was not going for blood, although it was her right. She was going to retrieve something that could not be lost.

Just before her mother had died down in the Devourer's cave, she'd told Sugar she'd been keeping something for her. Something she'd been hiding under the hearth. Sugar suspected it had to do with the lore. But even if it was nothing more than a piece of old cloth, she was going to have it. The murderous inhabitants of Plum had taken everything that was precious from her, leaving her nothing but a knife to remember her father and mother by. They had stolen her joys, they would not steal this. She was also going to have her father's skull, which they had erected on a pole at the south entrance of the village.

She'd asked Zu Argoth a number of times to help her retrieve the items, and each time he'd put her off. But this time it could not be put off. Tomorrow the villagers were going to begin excavating the burned ruin of her home. They were sure implements of sleth lore were buried

there. They feared the twisted bodies of man and beast, victims of sleth blackness, might be buried there as well, drawing souls full of ill will and wrath to the village. So it was tonight or never.

Sugar kept to the woods. The trees had begun to change color and filled the air with the crisp scent of autumn. A cool evening breeze blew, rustling the leaves and masking the sound of her passing. From time to time, distant laughter and music carried to her from a vale or across a mown field. Just as the Shoka at Rogum's Defense, the Fir-Noy were celebrating the good gifts of the Creators. They were dancing and drinking, roasting hogs, sitting around fires. They were playing games and telling stories. They were not thinking about who might be slipping through their midst.

Nevertheless, she still had to hide when a patrol of mounted men rode down the wooded trail she'd been following. She had to skirt a group of revelers drinking cider and trying to juggle lit torches. She had to avoid a couple who thought they were alone in a stray hay wain standing at the edge of a field of wheat.

She had two weaves—a governor and candidate's weave. She wore her candidate's weave, which multiplied her, increasing her strength and speed. Not by much, but enough to give her an edge. Candidate's weaves were used to awaken the body and gradually train it to its capacities, train it to a point where it could withstand the doubling and tripling of a true dreadman or fell-maiden. Sugar had begun to use the lore and could have tried to multiply herself without the weave, but she didn't have full control yet and didn't want to risk the Fire madness. It was against regulations for her to take the weave, but nobody would miss it. And whatever Fire she depleted, she would repay it when she was taught how to make a sacrifice.

And so it took less time that it normally would have to reach the village. However, it still required a number of hours. She arrived at the edge of the wood that gave way to village of Plum sometime after midnight. The half moon and bright stars shone above her, revealing the houses clustered along the winding lane and the fields that surrounded them. The light also revealed the fact that the villagers had not only posted a watch, but also recently erected a wooden tower on the knoll in the west field.

She cursed. There were two men crowding around a small fire at the base. She couldn't see anyone up top in the shadows of the tower roof, but she was sure someone was there. He'd have an excellent view of the surrounding area and her approach in the moonlight.

But Sugar wasn't turning back. She was going to get what she'd come for. She was going to follow in her mother's footsteps. And who knew, perhaps what Mother had hidded would be a key to doing just that. Besides, she knew every nook and cranny of these fields and this village, so she kept low, following a stone wall, then crawled along the belly of a ditch that wound around the west field. When it bent close to the village, she rose to circle round a few houses then creep forward until she stood next to the dark wall of the house across the lane from where her home had been.

The house was that of the fastidious farmer everyone called Liver. She looked out to see if her way was clear. Liver was in the house, snoring as loudly as ever. There had been quiet nights as a child when she'd been able to hear Liver's snore from her own bedroom across the way. She'd always wondered how his family slept. The family dog was inside. It barked twice, and Sugar tensed, worrying it would wake someone. But the dog fell silent, and Liver snored on.

Sugar's path was clear. The view from the tower would be obstructed by a small group of trees and another house. She dashed across the lane and into what used to be her yard. They'd burned everything completely to the ground—the home, barn, smithy, pheasant house and privy. She quietly moved to where the house had stood. It was all ash and charred timber with nothing but the hearth and a part of the chimney rising into the night sky.

The memories of the terrible morning when the mob had come filled her. She'd gone to the barn to feed the horses. She could hear her father's hammering. Smell the hay and horses. Then the mob had come with their blue and orange shields painted with a boar's head. She saw again the horror of her baby brother's body, the chick down growing where hair should have been. The mob fired the house. Mother had rushed out into the mob's lines with unnatural speed and grace. She killed three men before they had time to think. Da had followed her. The inferno of the burning house had roared about them, but she and Legs had escaped. When they were climbing the fence to the paddock behind their house, she had looked back to see the murderers shoot her mother with arrows. She'd looked back to see them spear her father and then hack his head from his body.

They had wounded her mother and taken her for questioning. But she'd been rescued by a creature of frightening powers and proportions. What her mother had to do with that rescue, Sugar would never know. They all suspected she'd simply been a target, just as all the lore users had been. But there was always a little snag of doubt that made Sugar wonder.

Whatever the truth, in one day her life had turned into a nightmare of running and hiding and secrets she didn't want to know. She'd lost everything of value that day. Everything except Legs, her blind little brother. It was as if she were dead and living in some strange world. But she wasn't dead.

She only hoped these whoresons hadn't already found what she'd come for. She moved to the hearth and realized it was in view of the tower. So she crouched down, knowing she would have to keep her movements small and slow.

Da had laid bricks around the hearth. Sugar guessed her mother had her cache underneath one of those bricks. The ash was thick. It didn't appear that anyone had been here because the remains of burned boards and logs lay jumbled over the bricks. Her hopes rose. She worked methodically, moving the char and ash away, prying at each brick with her knife. A breeze was blowing, picking up the ash she moved. It soon covered her. It powdered her face and arms. It itched in the sweat of her collar. It slid soft as silk between the toes of her bare feet. She'd worked most of the way around the hearth when she heard voices.

Sugar stopped and slowly peered over one of the charred logs that stuck out from the hearth. By the light of the half moon, she saw a trio of men coming her way. Their metal helmets and the tips of their spears glinted in the wan moonlight.

She ducked back down, wishing she'd brought at least one companion. Lacey maybe. Of all her quad mates, Lacey would have been eager to come. But it was too late for that.

The stones of the hearth rose next to her, standing between her and the men. She went back down on her hands and knees, prying, feeling, searching through the ash. She had to find the cache. She began to question herself, thinking she might have skipped bricks. And then one brick popped up from the pressure of her knife, as did its neighbor.

Oh, please, she thought. Please. She removed the bricks and found there was indeed a small cavity below them. Her spirits soared, and she reached in.

A dog barked in the distance. The breeze whistled around the chimney stones. One of the men said, "We should have hauled all of this out of here and secured it weeks ago." They were close now. They would have seen her, but the stone hearth, a number of feet of chimney, and a few boards from the wall yet stood. Just enough to hide her behind their charred remains.

Sugar grabbed a box and something that felt like a heavy necklace. She put both into the bag then reached back into the cavity to see if there was anything else. There was; something

wrapped in soft cloth. She put that in her sack as well and reached in one last time to feel very carefully in all the corners, but the cavity was empty.

She could hear the men's footsteps. She slowly cinched the mouth of the sack tight. She was just about to get off her knees when something crunched the gravel her mother had used as a path from the back door.

Sugar froze.

"I saw something," one of the men said.

"I've got my wife waiting for me in bed; if this turns out to be a dog--"

"No, there," the first man said. "Look." He sounded like one of the Galsons, the farmers that lived on the other side of the paddocks. The farmers that had hidden a part of the mob that had come that awful day. Wouldn't he be oh so pleased to catch her and collect the sleth bounty the Fir-Noy lords still had on her head.

But they wouldn't catch her. No Fir-Noy would ever take her alive.

"It's all moon shadow," the second said. "I don't see nothing."

But that was followed by a long pause. She heard the gravel crunch again and risked turning her head slightly. The men had fanned out a bit and were approaching her position. They held their spears at the ready in front of them. They'd obviously seen her.

She still wore her candidate's weave, which multiplied her strength and speed. But she'd been multiplied all night, and her body was tired. A bead of sweat ran down her back. There were three of them. One of her. She was training in the lore and battle. A year from now she might be able to kill them all.

"We see you there. Stand up and show yourself."

A year from now she might be a fell-maiden. But it wasn't a year from now. She wasn't anything close to being a fell-maiden. She might be able to injure one of them. If she were really lucky, maybe two. But the third changed everything.

"I'm giving you one more chance," the Galson said.

She recognized who that was now. It was Shard, the second son. He'd been part of the mob.

May Regret shrivel your heart, she thought. These three weren't going to have any satisfaction. She scooped up a large handful of ash and dirt and stood.

Chapter 4

Hue and Cry

One of the watchmen circled round the hearth in back of Sugar. He stepped into the ruin of the house maybe a dozen feet away, holding his spear. Luckily for Sugar, Shard and the other watchman stayed together.

The moon shadow from the chimney hid her features. She pitched her voice low like a man's. "I didn't mean any harm," she said. "Just a few slivers of wood."

"Who are you?" asked Shard.

Sugar stepped toward the two of them. "We can make a deal. Lot of people will pay for a sleth hex made out of this wood."

"You think we don't know that? Why do you think this place is off limits? Hand me the bag."

Sugar grabbed the strap of her shoulder sack and pulled it off. She continued to walk toward the two men. The moon was behind her. Her face in shadow. They raised their spears back up straight, obviously thinking she was nothing more than another petty thief from a neighboring village. She held her bag out to them, but when Shard reached for it, she pulled it back and hurled the ash and dirt into his eyes and those of his companion.

They cried out. And she realized if she'd been bent on killing them, she could have done it right then. Multiplied, she was fast enough, and the steel of her Da's knife was ever so sharp. But Sugar hadn't come for blood. And she hadn't retrieved all she'd come for either. Da's skull still hung from the post planted at the entrance to the village. She wasn't going to leave without it.

She dashed past the two men. The third shouted. Shard and his companion cursed, but by the time they'd cleared their eyes, she'd slipped around the corner of the neighbor's house and out

of their view. The lane that ran through the village lay before her. She turned on it, ran down past the next house and the next, then turned right and exited the lane to dash between two small homes. A normal thief would have continued to run straight through the field behind those two homes and try to make the wood line. But her object lay in a different direction.

Sugar circled back around, following the garden fence of one of the houses. She kept low and moved in the deep shadows. The three men were hollering now, raising a hue and cry, calling the village out to help them. She knew she didn't have much time.

Dogs began to bark, and Sugar slipped back toward the lane. She'd made a full circle and came out at the place just beyond where her family's home and smithy had stood. The lane shone in moonlight. There was enough light to make her a target for a Bowman. There was enough light for a horseman to run her down. When they raised her to become a fell-maiden, that wouldn't matter as much. But it did now. She felt the candidate's weave about her upper right arm, a thin copper braid.

She could run behind the houses, but that's where they'd be looking for her. Besides, the lane would be quickest. If she was lucky, she could sprint down to the south entrance before this part of the village could be wakened by all the commotion. She ran out into the lane, the dirt hard under her bare feet. The morning breeze was beginning to pick up. It brought her the smell of wood smoke and pigs.

Shouts rose behind her. More villagers had joined the three men. Doors opened. She thought she heard a horse. But the commotion was moving the other way. She thought she just might elude the chase when a door opened just ahead of her.

A boy stepped out. Sugar knew him, the son of Lavender and Brash. She flew past, hoping he didn't recognize her.

"Hoy," he said, thinking she was one of them. "What's on?"

Sugar ignored him. She realized she should have shouted out something to send him in the wrong direction, but it was too late. When she'd run some distance, she looked back. The boy's father had stepped out of the house to stand next to him. The boy was pointing at her, urgency on his face.

She flew down the crooked lane, past the last house and toward the entrance of the village. There had never been a wall around this village. But she saw they'd begun to plant

timbers and dig a trench to build one. They were fools. A wall would never keep out things like the creature that had killed here after the villagers had attacked her family.

Sugar immediately saw the pole they'd erected to display her father's skull. It must have been eleven feet high. It wasn't a pole as much as a thick timber. She pushed on it, but they'd planted it deep, and it didn't budge. There was a sign fastened to the front of it. She couldn't read many words, but she could read these for one was the name of her father. It said, "Sparrow's End."

She shook her head. They wanted to commemorate their brave deed and change the name of their village. But her father had not been part of the Order. He had been a simple blacksmith. Large and fearsome in battle, yes. But they'd killed an innocent man. The fools had killed a friend.

More shouts rose in the village, and then they seemed to change direction.

She took her sack off, put her knife in her teeth, and began to shinny up the timber. In moments she was at the top. Her father's skull had been attached to the timber with a leather strap and nail. She gripped the timber with her legs and cut the leather. She expected the skull to fall into her hand, but the leather had been baked hard by the sun. So she pulled the leather away and slid the skull out.

Da had been such a big man that she expected his skull to be heavy. But it wasn't. It was as light as an apple.

The shouts in the village grew. They were coming her way. A pack of dogs began to bark. She looked out over the village and saw the light of a lantern by Solem's house. Solem was a breeder and had a first-rate pack that he entered in all the hunting contests.

"Ho!" a man yelled. "There! She's stealing the skull!"

Sugar didn't have time to climb back down. She opened the mouth of her sack, dropped the skull in, and sprang to the ground below.

The candidates in Shim's army had been practicing jumps and falls at the fortress. If they were to be multiplied so they could scale heights, then they needed to know how to fall so they didn't break their necks. When she landed, Sugar fed her momentum into a roll that brought her back up into a crouch.

"Stop!" a man yelled.

Sugar paid him no mind. She turned and ran, knowing that even though she was multiplied by the candidate's weave, it wasn't going to be enough. The dogs would catch her.

She sped along the sunken lane away from the village. Parts of the dirt were rough under her bare feet. A number of wagons and horses must have come through after a rain, for there were ruts and tracks that had dried hard. If she wasn't careful, she would break a toe or twist an ankle, so she tried to keep away from them as best as she could. She scanned the mown fields that stretched out on both sides of her and saw nothing but a dark cluster of sheep in the distance.

She glanced back. Solem, the lantern swinging in one hand, was hustling out of the village, his dogs barking and straining at their leashes. There were dogs that hunted their prey mostly by scent and others that hunted them mostly by sight. Solem's were sight hounds, which meant they were fast.

Maybe Solem wouldn't loose his dogs and she'd be able to stay ahead of them all.

"There!" a man called out.

The barking rose in pitch. "Stu, boys!" Solem shouted. "Take her!"

Sugar knew those command words. She'd watched the dogs in competitions. She'd watched them run down deer, their teeth ripping into hamstrings and throats. She reached up and slipped the copper candidate's weave off her arm and put it in her sack. She needed speed. Blinding speed. If she lost control, she would kill herself. But what else could she do? She had to risk the Firelust.

As soon as she removed the weave, her Fire began to diminish. Moments later she found she couldn't muster the same speed as before. But this was to be expected. When the weave was on, it was controlling the flow. Now that it was off, she would have to manage it. She began to build her Fire in the way River had taught her: carefully, in increments, so that it didn't flare and run away with her.

About fifty yards behind her, Solem released his dogs.

A surge of power rushed into her, a flushing of life and vigor. But the dogs would close the distance. She knew she was dead if she kept at this pace.

Sugar let the power flow to her limbs. Felt it in her heart. Her breathing quickened. She measured her strides as she had practiced. She'd been warned that if you multiplied yourself too much you would overpower your breath. Breath was the thing. And then you'd fall to the ground panting or pass out completely. The lungs were the weak point.

But she'd never multiplied herself to that point. She didn't know her limit. And she wondered, not for the first time, how she would know when she was approaching it. How could you tell with the surge of joy she now felt? River had never been able to give a satisfactory answer.

She pumped her legs faster. Her Fire grew. She flew down the road, her strides lengthening to seven or eight feet. Down one swell she went and up another. The dogs barked, but she felt so good she wanted to laugh.

Then a small gust of wind blew across the fields, carrying bits of detritus with it. Straw from the fields, insects, dirt--she didn't know—one bit went up her nose, others flew into her eyes and cut like sand or glass. Sugar's steps faltered, slowed. She blinked furiously, rubbed. She could barely see. Her right eye ran like a river. She almost stumbled. And then the flecks moved. Her eyes cleared, even though the grit still hurt.

She glanced back. Only twenty or thirty yards behind her, the dark forms of the dogs sped along the sunken lane. They approached the bottom of a swell, sprinting in the half light, gaining on her, terrible and smooth, like pike shooting toward their prey in a river of shadow.

Sugar increased her pace. Lords, she thought, to be undone by a speck in the wind. She pushed herself faster. The edges of the fields flew by, but she dared not look back. She was running too fast now and needed to focus all her concentration on the road and her feet.

The thudding of a galloping horse carried to her from the field on her right. She realized she was not going to be able to return the way she'd come. Sugar built her Fire futher. Her limbs surged with joy, and she shot forth. This time should couldn't help herself: she felt the same giddiness rising in her chest as she did when jumping off the top of the Swan Creek waterfall to the pool below, and she yelled out her joy.

She realized this was probably what they had warned her about. This was the crazed mindlessness of the Firelust. She was panting, her lungs burning. But, lords of the sky, she didn't care. Riding this surge of life was like riding a wild and ferocious horse without saddle or stirrup. Perhaps if she just let it go. If she just flowed with it . . .

Her strides were huge, light as a feather, and quick. She was flying. She heard the sounds of her pursuit recede slightly behind her.

Could she go even faster?

No, she thought. No! And with a great effort she tried to reign in her flow. But it would not. She tried again. She focused. She bent all her might. Only then did it diminish, but not by much. She fought, and slowly, as if the Fire were fighting her, it shrunk back down to where it had been before.

In her mind she realized she had almost lost herself. But the joy still surged through her. The memory of that wild delight still ran along her skin like the electric caress of a lover. And she did not feel the fear and relief she knew she should. Slower, she thought. Slower. And she reduced the flow again.

She risked one glance back. The dogs were still only a few dozen yards behind her, flying over the road, the horse galloping behind. With that burst of Fire, she'd increased her lead, but not by much. She dared not increase her Fire. But she couldn't keep this pace. She edged her Fire up just a little.

You could run your body to death just as you could run a horse to death. Or to damage. Long-lasting damage. She had never multiplied herself to this point. She didn't know how long she could run like this. She didn't feel pain, but they'd warned her about that as well—the Firejoy buried the pain.

It didn't matter. She had to maintain this speed.

The fields raced past. The wind made her eyes water. More shouts rose from behind, but she focused on her breathing, on her steps. Then she realized she couldn't stay on this road. It would only lead to the next village. Someone racing a horse straight across the fields would get there before she did. He would rouse the inhabitants. He'd make sure they got their bows. And even though she was fast, she wasn't running fast enough to outrun arrows.

Ahead and to her left stood the beginning of the plum tree tangles the village was named for. Those thickets would stop a mounted rider, but they wouldn't stop the dogs. In fact, the dogs would probably gain the advantage there. She needed to terrain that would eliminate the advantages of both the horse and the dogs. She needed to get to moving water. The river Lion was close, just over a mile away. If she immediately cut through the woods at the edge of the fields on her left, she could slow the horses. Her path would take her to the trail that led to shacks of the river folk. She knew this area, and there wasn't a ford for a few miles in either direction. But she didn't want to cross the river. She wanted to slip into its shadows and go downstream.

The river was where she needed to go. She could only hope the river folks weren't already up and checking their nets because she was going to have to steal a skiff.

With her next step, Sugar changed her direction and flew up over the lip of the sunken lane and into the field. It had been cut, and the stubble was hard. Sugar rarely wore shoes, so the calluses on her bare feet were thick. But before she'd taken a dozen strides, the stubble cut her on the inside of her big toe where there wasn't any callus. Behind her, the dogs came closer.

The field was a few hundred yards wide. By the time she made it to the edge, the stubble had cut her again. With her first step into the wood, she tread upon a sharp rock and thought she'd broken something. Obviously, her calluses weren't sufficient for these speeds. But she didn't stop. She crashed through the woods towards the main trail leading to the river folk.

If the dogs were going to catch her, this is where it would happen. Fear rose in her, but she couldn't run flat out. This wasn't a thick wood. The villagers felled trees for firewood here, as they did in all the woods around the village. But there were still stray branches that could poke out her eyes. There were rocks and uneven parts.

The dogs entered the woods behind her. They were not barking now, just running, deadly and quick. Sugar kept to the clearest parts where the moon could give some illumination, but she could hear their galloping footfalls. She could hear their breathing. She risked another glance back and saw them, their dark forms surging. They rallied, seeing their prey so close and increased their speed. Panic rose in her.

She snapped her attention back to where she was running. Up ahead through the spaced trees she thought she saw a break, a lighter ribbon leading through the woods. It was the main trail. It had to be.

The dogs drew closer. She could hear their awful breaths coming louder and louder. She didn't look back. A thin dead branch hung down from one of the trees. She didn't see it until it was too late. It broke on her face, disoriented her for just a moment. On her next step she almost stumbled.

Up ahead the ribbon of light grew larger as she approached. It was the main trail. Just a few more strides, she told herself. Just a few more. But the dogs had closed the distance behind her. They ran only a few yards back. They had begun to growl deep and low, anticipating the first bite. And then Sugar broke from the wood, not directly onto the trail, but at an angle so she wouldn't have to slow as much to make the turn.

Now, she thought. Now! And she put on a burst of her own speed. Despite the risk, she let her Fire flare.

The ground was hard. The way clear. A dog snapped at her. Please, she thought. Please. One more moment's delay, and then she felt the surge of power in her limbs and lengthened her strides. The dogs snarled at her heels, wanting to rip and tear. She thought she felt her heel brush a wet muzzle, but in the next stride the dogs were behind her. Two more and she had put another few yards between her and those vicious mouths.

If she had to die tonight, she thought. She would rather die in the Firelust, with joy, than falling to the ground with a dog on her leg and another ripping her throat out. She flew down the trail. The sounds of the dogs receded.

She knew Solem's dogs were fast, but they couldn't sprint at top speeds forever. And sure enough, they slowed. They were still running fast, but she had put a few dozen yards between her and them. She kept her pace just a little longer, and then pulled her Fire back from the brink. And as she did so, she felt a twinge in her knee.

How long she could keep this up? Dreadmen and fell-maidens ate like they were starving and slept like cats. They had to in order to replenish the stores used in their times of action. She'd been eating and training, but her body wasn't ready for this. She knew the twinge was only the first sign of damage. However, the river was not far away. She knew where she was. She had run more than three-quarters of the way. Just a bit more.

She ran on, her lungs working like bellows, the main trail dark in the light of the half moon. She heard the sound of the men on horse behind her in the distance. And then the houses of the river folk rose ahead of her. Nothing was stirring. She sped through the habitations, setting a few dogs barking, but by then she was racing along the path leading down the long river bank.

The Lion was a wide river. Parts of it shone dully in the moonlight. Other parts were black as coal. She ran past a number of shacks where the fisher folk kept nets and other implements of their trade. She ran down the bank to the spot where she knew two families hid their skiffs.

By this time the men on horse that had been chasing her reached the houses of the fisher folk. As they raised a hue and cry, Sugar found one of the skiffs. She untied it, dragged it out into

the cold water, and jumped in. As she did, she heard Solem's dogs running down the bank of the river.

Sugar picked up a paddle and began to stroke for all she was worth, keeping as low as she could, and was soon slipping through the shadows of trees growing thickly along the bank, the river smell enveloping her. She moved out a little farther away from the bank, but didn't dare go into the light.

The barking of the dogs rose behind her. They ran to where she'd taken the skiff, but the end of her scent must have confused them. One or two splashed into the water, but they didn't pursue her along the bank.

Sugar silently paddled, the water of the river carrying her along. She could hear the river folk up at the top of the bank rousing, their dogs barking. She paddled on. After a few minutes lights appeared descending the river bank. But by the time she was moving into the bend in the river. In moments she was out of view of the river folk and paddled across the river into the light and the fast waters and shadows on the other side.

She watched behind her for pursuit for quite some time, but none came. She'd escaped! She couldn't quite believe it. Of course, it was only temporary. She still had to make it back to Rogum's Defense through Fir-Noy territory without being taken. And her murderous neighbors would be sure to wake the whole countryside to prevent that. But for now she was safe.

She put her candidate's weave back on, and felt relief as it took control of her Fire. In moments the surge of energy flowed out of her limbs. The crazy joy faded. She would have put on her governor, but that shut off all extra Fire, and she suspected she needed the healing a slightly elevated Fire would bring. In moments her breathing slowed and a huge weariness settled upon her. She sank onto her back in the bottom of the skiff and looked up at the stars and the scattered clouds shining in the moonlight.

Sugar was hungry and thirsty, but she didn't eat the food she'd brought with her or dip her hand to drink from the river. Instead, she clutched her sack to her, feeling her father's skull and her mother's secrets through the fabric. She clutched them and wept.

Chapter 5

Visitors

Argoth was worried about the comments the enemy dreadman made to Talen the previous night and the fact that Sugar had disappeared, but his attention was drawn to the naked man up ahead in the square outside the gates of Whitecliff.

At first Argoth thought the man was simply someone who had continued to revel long after all the apple dances had ended. The city of Whitecliff held apple dances in three locations. The one in the large square outside the south gate was usually attended by those who liked to celebrate in a more ribald manner. The naked man stood in the square, holding a small herring by its tail and calling out to a flock of gulls that were picking through the scraps left from the festivities. The only piece of clothing the man wore was a tattered blue scarf tied about his neck.

"That's a lovely sight," Shim said to Argoth. They both sat upon their horses. After the commotion with last night's saboteur trying to poison the fortress well, they had come to discuss their defense with the war council in Whitecliff.

"You think I might be able to use a scarf that way to impress the ladies?" Shim asked.

"They'll be astounded, I'm sure," said Argoth.

"I would place it a bit more strategically," said Shim. "A woman wants mystery, captain. A bit of the old hide and peek."

"Indeed," said Argoth. "I shall enscribe that into the annals of wisdom."

"You doubt me?"

"Never, Lord."

One of the gulls seemed interested in the naked man's herring. It lagged behind the others, giving the man the eye.

Shim's guards had taken positions ahead and behind. Shim turned to the new guard behind him. "Armsman, you're a middling to handsome man. Perhaps a bit more handsome than our Captain Argoth. So we're going to run a small test. On our next feast night I want to see you in that." He pointed at the naked man. "I'll have Captain Argoth show up in more strategic wear."

Shim was as hard a man as Argoth had ever met. He looked like he was made from boiled leather and revealed just as much in his expressions. And so when he said such things people who didn't know him had a difficult time determining whether he was serious or joking. This guard was new and looked at Shim with shock.

"What?" demanded Shim. "You don't fancy ladies?"

"I," the armsman stammered. "It will be done, Zu."

"Indeed it will," said Shim. Then he turned back around. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at Argoth, the smallest hint of a grin betraying his intent.

All of Shim's guards went through some hazing. Argoth had no doubt this new one had been prepared by the others to know that Shim was a hard and eccentric man who tested his men's loyalty with odd demands. Argoth was sure this armsman would show up at the next feast night wearing nothing but a blue scarf.

Argoth smiled. This was one thing he appreciated about Shim. Here they were facing possible destruction, but the old war horse didn't seem to let it get to him. In fact, he seemed to thrive in it.

All about the square and the lanes leading to it shop keepers were opening the wooden awnings of their houses, inviting customers to come buy. Out of a number of the windows of the upper levels, servants and housewives aired bedding and called to each other across the way.

The naked man cooed and stepped closer to the one gull, but two soldiers stationed at the gate had decided the man needed to move on. They called to him, but when he didn't respond, they decided a more direct action was required. They strode toward the man. When they got close to the gulls, a number of the birds startled, then, in a rush of flapping wings, the whole flock took flight, including the one brave bird the naked man had been courting.

The man cursed and watched in dismay as the birds wheeled around the square. Argoth couldn't see the man's wrist tattoos clearly from this distance, but knew they were not those of any Mokaddian or Koramite. This was a foreigner. Then Argoth saw his eyes: they were a brownish orange. What was a Mungonite doing here?

"You there," one of the soldiers said. "You're scaring the women and children. It's time to move on."

The man ignored them. He watched the birds, and when they settled upon the wooden roof the battlement on the top of the city wall, he began to follow. The soldiers tried to block his way, but the naked Mungonite was quick. A little too quick, and he dodged between the soldiers and ran toward the gate.

As the Mungonite drew close to the gates, one of the city guards stepped out with his poleaxe. But the naked Mungonite put on a burst of speed, and before the guard could react the Mungonite ran through the gate.

Shim sighed. "Mokad is coming, and we're going to face them with this kind of sloppiness? It's a good thing we've come to speak with the captains of the garrisons."

"That's not a simple drunken reveler," said Argoth. "I'm fairly certain we've got ourselves another visitor." That was his way of saying the man was sleth without proclaiming it for all to hear.

When Shim had indicated he wanted to raise a kingdom of loremmen on these shores, Argoth sent a call to all the Groves of Hismays, asking them to join with them. He also sent word to groups that were not part of the Order of Hismayas. The problem was that not all loremmen were as strict in their practice of the lore as others, especially those not of Hismayas. There were a number that crossed the line into abomination.

Argoth had known it would be a problem. And the issue had indeed raised its head as soon as the "visitors" had begun to trickle in. Not a week ago they'd had to hang one such when he was caught stealing Fire from children. And so it was important that all visitors be identified and brought to Shim before they caused a stir. Argoth had a man that was supposed to catch them as they came off the boats. Obviously, this one had slipped through. But that wasn't the only problem here. This was a Mungonite sleth, and Argoth had sent no message to any group in Mungo.

The naked man emerged from a door on the second level of the gate tower. He began to climb to the wooden roof of the battlement and disappeared from Argoth's view. In moments he reappeared on top of the peaked roof of the battlement. He took the herring he'd been clenching in his teeth and began to walk toward the gulls, cooing to them sweetly, holding the fish out to them as he had down in the square.

"He's mad," said Shim.

"Maybe," said Argoth.

As before, the main part of the flock edged away, but one gull seemed to listen. The man stepped carefully forward.

On the other side of the flock a large soldier climbed up through an access to the roof. He brought a poleaxe with him. As the soldier got to his feet, the gulls, seeing themselves boxed in, startled. With cries and another rush of wings, they launched themselves from the roof.

The naked man dove for the one brave gull but missed and the bird escaped. The flock cried out and wheeled away.

"We've had enough," the soldier said. "You're going to go down this hole."

The Mungonite ignored him.

"Don't make me come get you."

The Mungonite called after the bird. He made an imitation of a gull's cry, but the flock was wheeling away.

"Are you listening?"

The Mungonite was not. So the soldier lowered his poleaxe.

"No," said Argoth under his breath. This was going to end badly; those soldiers didn't know what they were facing. But before he could order the guards to back down, the soldier jabbed the poleaxe at the man.

The soldier was large, muscular. Any normal man would have found himself pricked by the jab. Not mortally, but enough to know the soldier meant business. But the Mungonite wasn't a normal man. He dodged like a snake and grabbed the staff of the poleaxe just below the blade.

The soldier tried to jerk it back. Again, such a move normally would have yanked the naked man off balance, but instead of stumbling, the naked man wrenched the poleaxe out of the soldier's grasp.

"Stop!" Argoth called.

With astonishing speed, the naked man struck the soldier with the butt end of the weapon in the gut, then the face. The soldier reeled back, stumbled, and fell. A few feet more and he would have tumbled off the roof entirely.

"You there!" Argoth shouted at the naked man, trying to draw his attention, "Mungonite!"

Another guard with a bow appeared in one of the embrasures of the gate tower that rose above the battlement roof. Before Argoth could say anything, the bowman released an arrow.

The naked man must have seen the bowman from the corner of his eye, for he turned and with blinding speed, knocked the arrow aside with the staff of the poleaxe.

The bowman nocked another arrow.

“Hold!” Shim called up. Another guard in the tower drew the bowman’s attention to Shim, and the bowman relaxed his draw. All about them the people in the square had stopped to watch.

Shim urged his horse forward until he was next to Argoth at the edge of the dry moat that ran around the city wall. He yelled up at the Mungonite. “I know Mungo worships the sun, but you can’t do it up there, friend. Come down.”

The naked man ignored him and turned to the gulls that were wheeling away over the houses outside the wall.

"Lord," cautioned Argoth. "Come away. I don't want him hurling that poleaxe at you."

"He's not an assassin," said Shim.

"Zu," a man said, using the honorific to address them.

Argoth turned to see a tall man with a large blond moustache walking toward him and Shim. He led a saddled horse. His hands were covered with tattoos. Those who wore their tattoos from the wrists up were said to wear their honors on their arms. This man wore his honors on his hands, as was the custom of many of the costal clans in Mokad. “Lord, you’ll not get him that way. I know. I sailed with the blighter, and he was murder to fetch out of the rigging.” The man was Mokaddian, a mainlander.

“And who might you be?” asked Shim.

“Flax from Lem,” he said.

“Lem,” said Shim thinking. "That's old country."

“Yes,” he said. “My cousin Silver wrote me about the wonders of this place. I’ve come to join him. Maybe see if one of the clans will let me open up new land.”

Argoth perked up his ears. That statement was part of the code he’d written in his call to the Groves. In order to make more land arable, the clans would sometimes make an offer to any who would do the work. If they cleared the land, they could get the tenure on land, and only owe

the clan lords rent. And so making such a claim wouldn't seem unusual. The part that marked him as someone from a Grove or order was the cousin named Silver.

Shim knew the code as well. He said, "There are a lot of Silvers here. Which one were you referring to?"

"A hayward with the Vargon clan," he said and made the first sign that identified a man as a user of the forbidden lore. The sign was made with the hand and arm and was used between the Groves and orders to identify a fellow loreman. Of course, that meant nothing. There were other tests the man would have to pass because the Divines had their spies and infiltrators as well. This Flax could just as easily be one of those. Then the blond made the sign that identified him as part of the Hand of Mayhan. The men of the Hand were killers. They hunted dreadmen and priests. In their long years as an order, they had even killed a handful of lesser Divines.

But Argoth had sent no message to any Flax of Lem. He had hoped the Hand would answer his call. But this was not regular. Argoth eyed him warily. "I don't know you, zu," he said.

"No, but there's one of yours who can vouch for me, even though he might not like to do so."

Argoth was going to ask who, but a shout pulled his attention back up to the roof. The naked man had dropped the poleaxe and was running along the roof in the direction the gulls had flown. He suddenly cut, and ran down the slope. When he got to the edge, he jumped, flying out over the dry moat. It was an amazing leap and nothing that a commoner could perform. This man was indeed sleth.

He landed at the edge of the dry moat, breaking his fall with a roll. The moat itself was dug with various traps that included caltrops and spikes. But he had landed past those and was up and running in the blink of an eye.

The city guards below yelled out and began to give chase.

"Even if they catch up to that Mungo priest," said Flax, "they're going to have a time roping him. Our naked friend has skills. It would be easiest if someone with equal skills went after him. Let me fetch him for you. We'll call it a gift of good intent"

A Mungo priest? If that were true, it would mean he wasn't sleth. But then Mungo would have sent a spy, not a lunatic.

Shim regarded Flax for a moment. “You bring him to me at the fortress called Rogum’s Defense, and we’ll talk.”

The naked man was racing away, heedless of the effect his speed was having on the people in the square.

Flax mounted his horse. Then he winked and Shim and rode off at a trot.

Shim watched the man for a moment then turned back to Argoth. “That Mungo has no sense of fashion, but, Regret’s arse, he can move. Did you see that?”

“It was hard to miss,” said Argoth.

“Scampering around like a squirrel, batting away arrows--I want him in our army.”

“No,” said Argoth. “A man like that won’t stand in line and face the enemy. He won’t obey orders. A man like that can’t be counted on.” There were indeed many that might bear the title of sleth that would be useful, but it was clear that the Mungonite was damaged. Argoth knew they risked exactly this when he put out his call for aid. And he wondered now if he’d made a mistake. Mokad was coming, and they weren’t ready. They didn’t have skir, which meant the enemy would own the skies. They didn’t have their dreadmen army. If Mokad attacked today, they would fall. He didn’t have time to be chasing madmen.

“I didn’t say put him up front,” said Shim. “I said we could use him.”

“You know what your opposition claims.” There were those of the Clans who feared Shim was controlled by dark masters. “Someone like that would only confirm their bad assessment.”

“Captain,” Shim said, “you fight lies with the truth. Our friend has skills. If we can learn them, we will. If he turns out to be unstable, then we’ll use him to remove some of the fears the people feel. We don’t want to hide him, don’t want to make him mysterious. That simply starts rumors and turns him into something to be feared. If we were Divines, that’s exactly what we’d want. But we’re not. I’m going to let the people get up close. I want them to see that he’s nothing more than a man. I want to make him common.”

Shim had no caution. And yet, hadn’t Hogan said the same of Argoth? He found it ironic that he had taken the role of the conservative now that Hogan was gone. But these were new times. Shim wanted to bring the Order out of the shadows into the light. “He’s from no group I know,” said Argoth. “We have no idea where he’s from, no idea of his purpose. We need to be careful.”

“Careful is my name,” said Shim.

“In your world,” said Argoth, “careful is nothing but a soggy flatulence.” He shook his head. This whole enterprise was reckless. But he'd signed on. He'd called sleth to these shores. He'd supported raising an army of loremens. But they didn't have dreadmen, much less those that could wield the lore on their own. They didn't have a skir master, which meant Mokad would own the skies. They didn't even truly know what they fought against. He thought of last night and what the dreadman had said to Talen. They didn't even know what that boy was. He felt like he was riding a boat down a river, no paddle, no oar, and was just now hearing the deafening rumble of a terrible fall just ahead.

Another commotion rose behind them. Argoth turned. A rider raced out into the square on a yellow nag, the hooves clopping on the cobblestones. He yelled for people to move out of the way. When he spotted Shim, he turned his animal.

Shim's guards moved to block him. But the man wasn't bent on any injury. His face was full of urgency and alarm. He was a common Clansman, wearing Shoka colors. Not a weapon on him. He reined in his horse in front of the guards, and Argoth thought for a moment the horse would slip on the stones. The animal was lathered from a long run. “Lord Shim,” the Clansman said, breathless. “The village Redthorn, it's been cursed.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Shim.

“I went there this morning to visit my sister. The people, the cattle, the dogs—they're all dead.”

Argoth blinked. Redthorn was the key to . . . nothing. Just a village of fruit farmers. He looked at the man's face and searched it for dishonesty. If this wasn't drunkenness, it was probably a trap.

Chapter 6

The Priest of Mungo

Berosus turned from Lord Shim and the sleth that rode with him and followed the naked Mungonite. The Creators had blessed his path. They had brought Lord Shim and his sleth to him and given him an opportunity to win their trust. Not that he wouldn't have done it otherwise, but it showed the Creator's favor. The Mungonite ran into the woods. Berosus followed. Not much later his dreadmen joined him when he was beyond the eyes of any upon the walls of Whitecliff.

The naked Mungonite was a priest, for Berosus had seen the markings upon his wrists. Some priests were nothing more than menial servants, running the temples, cleaning the living quarters, keeping records. But some were taught the lore and wielded the vitalities, helping with the sacrifices, working in the forges of the Kains, hunting sleth with the Seekers. It appeared Mungo had sent one of those with power. Berosus suspected a spy, but something must have gone wrong, for no spy or messenger would make a spectacle of himself as this man had.

Nobody in Mokad knew everything that had happened in the New Lands. But Berosus would know it soon enough. As Flax, he would worm his way into Lord Shim's nest of sleth. He would find out their strengths and weaknesses. And then, as he had done so many times before, he would lead them to the harvest. To those who threatened the Mother or her herd, he was Death. It was his calling.

When he succeeded here, the Mother's approbation would shine down upon him. She would bless him. She might even put him above the Glory himself. He could almost feel the bliss rising through his bones as he and his men chased the priest into the barn of a small farmstead in the woods near the beach.

The farmstead was small. Fishing nets lay spread out as if someone had been repairing them and had suddenly dropped their work. Movement in the small farmhouse drew his

attention. Berosus motioned for one of his men to deal with whoever was there; he assigned two others to search the perimeter for anyone else—they couldn't have witnesses. Then he turned to the barn.

Above them a flock of gulls wheeled and cried. "Friend," he called out. "You can't escape. This is not a mere dreadman's fist. And I not a mere dreadman. Come out and we'll talk."

Something knocked inside the barn. "Come," said Berosus, "Do not try my patience." Berosus had multiplied himself. He'd been multiplied for some time now. There were levels of dreadmen and Divines. Most breeds of men could not progress past the second or third level. There were a few individuals who could multiply themselves to the fifth. But Berosus went beyond even that. He was as different in his breed from those who were meat as a staghound is from a lapdog mutt. As different as a gummy-eyed barn cat and a lion. There were things that happened when you could multiply at this level. Things beyond strength. He knew exactly where the priest stood for he could hear his breathing.

Berosus signalled his men to stay back. Then he walked inside their line to the barn doors and opened both of them wide. The priest stood exactly where Berosus knew he would be, a two-tined pitchfork in his hands. He lunged forward and stabbed Berosus in the gut with it. Berosus let him. If you did not know the bitter, you could never taste the sweet. Pain blossomed inside him, and he savored the sensation. The pain would soon pass. His blood would soon clot. The wounds to his bowls would mend. When multiplied at this level, the healing process became miraculous. Yet another sign of the Creators' favor and his superior breeding.

"That won't do," said Berosus. "It really won't."

The priest pulled the pitchfork out and lunged again. He was fast, but Berosus caught the fork. He wrenched it out of the man's hands and cast it aside.

The priest picked up a fishing knife that lay on a table and slashed. It cut Berosus's forearm, but the cut wasn't deep. Just enough for a delicious sharp sting. He grabbed the priest's knife hand, twisted, and broke the man's wrist.

"Let the pain fill you," he said. "Enjoy your body while you may."

But the priest wrenched his hand free, staggered back.

"Who is your master?" asked Berosus stepping forward. "Who sent you?" The priest's eyes were wonderful, wild and orange with darker flecks.

With his good hand, the priest hurled a work hammer at Berosus's head. He was a strong man multiplied. The hammer would have crushed a normal man's face, for none of the lesser breeds would have been quick enough to avoid it. It would have struck a dreadman of the third. But to Berosus it was as if a child were tossing him a ball. He batted the hammer away and took another step forward.

Berosus held his hands out in front of himself. "I'm not here to hurt you," he said calmly. The priest was backed up against the wall of an animal stall, eyes darting. He was going to try to bolt past Berosus, but before the priest could move, Berosus reached out and snatched the man by the neck, then he twisted him around, hauled him off his feet and slammed him into the wall. Not to kill him, only to daze him a bit.

The priest tried to swing at Berosus, but Berosus knocked him into the wall again, then he dragged the man out of the barn and into the light. The priest might have been of a lesser breed, but he was strong. And he did not quail. Berosus had to give him credit. There was nothing but murder in his orange eyes. "Bind him," Berosus said and dropped him to the ground.

Three of his dreadmen converged on the man and trussed him, hands behind his back, ankles brought up behind the legs. When the dreadmen stood back, Berosus knelt down beside the priest and pulled down the blue scarf. He expected to see a thrall, but there was only a scar where a thrall had been.

The priest looked up with angry satisfaction in his orange eyes. "You can't hold me. There's no thrall that can catch me."

"We shall see," said Berosus. Thralls grew into a person. In some instances, depending on the type of thrall, the weave itself became unnecessary. He felt the man's neck, expecting to encounter the binding of master to servant, but none was there. This priest was suddenly more interesting than Berosus had first thought.

Once someone was accepted into the service of the priests, they never left. It was forbidden. They were thralls for life. But this priest had escaped his thrall, and this piqued Berosus's curiosity. It would take a strong man and some very special luck to do that.

He pulled a weave from his pocket. It looked like a thickly segmented necklace. When the priest saw it, he bucked, but the dreadmen held him down, and Berosus placed the weave about his neck and clasped it shut.

It was a king's collar, a weave that prevented its wearer from using many forms of the lore. It would cut the priest off from his ability to multiply his Fire. Berosus waited a few minutes for the weave to fully take hold. "I have always appreciated the Mungonese desire for beauty. But I would say you aren't quite as well-formed as some. However, your eyes are magnificent. The pale amber in the sun is quite amazing."

The priest stopped struggling, but it was clear from his expression he was waiting for his chance. Above them the gulls cried.

"You're sleth," said Berosus. "Did you also receive a call from Argoth?"

The priest shifted in his bonds.

"You are going to tell me everything. There's no using fighting. But if you're useful to me, I will let you live."

Berosus wore his honors on his hands. It was common enough, and wouldn't raise any questions. Many clans wore their honors there. However, he also wore the eye of Mokad in the palm of his left hand. It was a weave, grown into his skin, that allowed him to reach into the souls of those who'd been marked. It was not made with metal, but with a part of the Mother's own flesh. Anyone looking at his palm would see nothing more than common tattoos. But to those upon whom he laid his hand it would burn like a flaming red and orange eye.

Berosus placed his hand upon the priest's head and pushed through the bindings of flesh and soul. But he did not feel the normal initial wall of resistance. He pushed farther and suddenly there was nothing. It felt like he'd entered a broken and windswept room. Usually he would find an intelligence waiting for him. He would ride it, bring it to heel. There would be a struggle. But there was none of that here.

The priest began to laugh.

Berosus searched for the man's soul, but found gossamer tatters. Thoughts passed by him, but they were as elusive and insubstantial as dreams.

"Fish," the priest said, laughing. "The skin that shines, the belly that's soft and white. The small ones with the dark eyes and spines upon their backs. I am in the fish." He laughed again.

Interesting, Berosus thought. The mark of the Mothers was not merely a brand, it was a hook, grown into the soul. Just as a rancher could control a bull with a ring in its nose, so the mark gave the Mothers and their servants control over individuals in their herds. It was used primarily during the harvest, but it was still useful while the soul was bound to flesh. It wasn't a

full thrall, but an egress, a weakness. The priest still had his mark, so Berosus should have been able to find him, but he simply wasn't there.

"You won't have me, Seeker. You'll never have me."

Berosus sat back thinking. The gulls cried above them. Berosus looked up. One lone gull stood upon the peak of the house roof. Berosus looked back down at the priest, and it all became clear.

The priest had transferred the essential parts of his soul into the animal. It was a dangerous lore, but it explained his strange behavior back at Whitecliff. He had been trying to get his pieces back. Of course, the bird must have been at turns confused and terrified, fighting the soul that tried to inhabit its body. It would only get worse as time wore on. Such things could never be a long-term arrangement. But the priest must have known this. It was one of the first things you learned in the lore, which meant something had driven the priest to that risk. What was it?

"I could use a man like you," said Berosus. "Come back to the fold, live a good life in the service of your betters."

"Never," said the priest. The murder was still in his eyes.

"Never's a long time," said Berosus. He turned to one of the dreadmen. "Get that bird. I need it alive."

When the dreadmen moved to capture the bird, the priest bared his teeth in a snarl. His hands had been tied behind him, but his broken wrist must have prevented the knot from holding, for he suddenly worked himself out of his bonds. He kicked his feet loose, twisted and lunged to his knees, snatching the knife from the sheath of one of the dreadmen. The other dreadmen drew their weapons, but the priest didn't attack. Instead, he scuttled back up against the barn, knife held in front of himself in warning.

Berosus realized the king's collar, having no soul to constrain, wouldn't have worked on this man. The priest was still multiplied, anger burning in his marvelous eyes.

"Why did you slip souls?" Berosus asked.

"They'll come for you as well," said the priest. "You're not the only power in this land."

"Who will come?"

"I won't be taken."

"I'm reasonable."

"I'll never be someone's dog again," said the priest. At that moment the gull screamed and launched itself from the roof. The priest himself turned the knife and stabbed upwards just under the bottom of his ribcage towards his heart.

"No," said Berosus, and lunged, gripping the man's arm.

The priest gritted his teeth with the pain, but satisfaction shone in his orange and wild eyes. Blood began to flow like water from his wound.

One of the dreadmen picked up a stick and hurled it at the gull, but the bird was already too far away. It veered, beating its wings wildly, and passed behind a large tree.

They wouldn't catch the bird. And without that, he couldn't compel the priest.

"I am free," the priest said hoarsely. "I am free."

"You are meat," said Berosus, looking into his wonderful eyes, "and will be collected with the rest." Then he pushed the knife deeper, up and into the man's heart.

One of the dreadmen began to chase after the bird, but Berosus halted him. It didn't matter now. The priest had made his choice. Berosus watched the gull climb to join a flock high above. The birds rode the wind blowing in from the sea. They were small and pale against the blue sky. He soon lost track of the bird amongst its fellows, but it didn't matter. The priest was up there, trapped, having nowhere to which he might return. The bird he rode would soon go mad. It would die, and the priest would find out that you are never free.

Berosus looked down at the body. What other power could be on these shores besides the sleth? Or was it the sleth that had tried to bind him? These were questions he would learn answers to.

"Put him on a cart," he ordered. The priest would still serve as the promised gift to the traitorous Lord Shim. The fact that the priest was dead only meant Berosus would have to work a little harder to gain Shim's trust. But gain it he would. He knew sleth. He knew their ways. He'd ruled a number of sleth nests over the years, using them when the Mother of Mokad needed an incident to produce fear in her flocks. Berosus knew their tests. He'd devised some of them. He knew how to be quiet and still.

The dreadman who had gone to search the house came out, holding a small boy and girl by the backs of their necks. He brought them over to Berosus. "There's nobody else in the area," the dreadman said.

Berosus stroked the girl's arm. She was an ugly thing, hair cut short and curling. "Little ears and little eyes shouldn't be prying." Terror shone on her face. "But you won't tell, will you?"

Her fear had petrified her; she could barely shake her head to promise she wouldn't.

"No," he said. "I didn't think so." But he couldn't trust her. Lord Shim couldn't know what had been spoken and seen here. These children were loose ends. Argoth took her by the head and smiled upon her. Then with a sharp twist he broke her neck. Her eyes rolled and she went limp in his hands. He laid her on the ground and turned to the boy. "I believe your sister will not want to be alone in her new place."

He killed the boy in the same manner as he had the girl. His dreadmen would make it look like they'd fallen out of a tree. Then they'd clean up the priest's blood and leave the farmstead as they'd found it.

Berosus took in a bracing breath of the salty air blowing in from the sea and looked around at his men. He would be inside Shim's army today. And then he would secure the one marked for holiness, the fledgling Glory. He would be an excellent tool.

Chapter 7

Lust

Talen should have been celebrating, but he froze when Black Knee, the leader of Talen's fist, took him in his sweaty one-armed embrace. He froze because something was most definitely not right.

"You were a goat, boy," Black Knee said. "Lugging those stones from the crane to the top of the tower stairs, a veritable goat."

Black Knee was a large and hairy man. At that moment he was shirtless, slick with exertion, and stinking like anyone who had carried a few tons of rocks should. Talen would have welcomed this wet and salty celebration because he and his fistmates had just beaten the hawk fist in a race of unloading and then stowing upon the battlements three large wagons full of stones for the slingers and catapults. In this race the winner took the other fist's portion of hogtail sausages and raisin cakes for two days.

Hogtails were delicious, but Talen and the others of the hatchet fist would have burst their spleens to win anyway because the hawks didn't think the Koramites or pig-farmers of the hatchet fist should be in Shim's army. It was hawks that had scuffed dirt into hatchet food, hawks that had undone hatchet work to get them in trouble. It was hawks that that had almost killed a hatchet fistmate, "accidentally" knocking him down a steep cliff.

Talen should have been enjoying this win with the others, but he could not. Talen himself was shirtless, his torso and arms dirty with sweat and rock dust, and over every inch that Black Knee's bare skin touched his--from the big man's sweaty and hairy armpit and side to his meaty hand grasping Talen's shoulder--Talen felt a burning desire. It raced through him just as it had the night before when Thrush had placed her hand upon his arm. And just as he had the night before, he could feel the man's Fire. Goh, but Talen desired this man!

Talen faked a smile. "Anything for my fistmates," he said then extricated himself from Black Knee's grasp as quickly as he could.

Black Knee turned to the hawk fistmates who were still blowing from their exertions. He looked at the handful of twenty pounders still lay in their last wagon then said, "Here's to hogtails, Koramites, and pig farmers. We'll be seeing you ladies at dinner."

There was a round of laughter from the hatchets at that, then Black Knee turned back to his fist. "What do you say, boys? I think it's time for a soak in the hot pools." All the men, new and old, agreed, and as they picked up their tunics and filed past Talen to head for the pools, fed by a hot spring that lay down by the river, they congratulated him, patting him on the back and shoulder, taking him in wrist grips.

Talen had indeed run like a goat, carrying double the load of the other men at the end. In fact, if it weren't for him, he suspected the hatchets would have lost. But he could not enjoy their thanks because with every touch his desire and alarm flared.

"Are you coming?" asked Black Knee.

"I'll be there," said Talen. This passion wasn't natural; something was terribly wrong. He needed to talk to someone. "I've got to see my brother first."

Black Knee pointed at him. "I think you've earned yourself a new name today. I'll tell the others The Goat will be down shortly."

"Ha," Talen said. Not only were his passions running away with his buggy, but now he was going to be called The Goat? "What about 'Lugger' or 'Brawn'?" They at least had a manly sound to them.

"Goat," said Black Knee grinning. Then he turned and followed the rest of the fist heading for the fortress gate.

The Goat—now there was a name to make a man stand tall. Talen shook his head, picked up his tunic, and went looking for his brother.

Talen had done more than his share of the carrying because the candidate weaves multiplied him more than they did any of the others. It had felt as if the stones weighed only half as much as they actually did.

Candidate weaves were not meant to double a man like that, only increase speed and strength by fractions so the body could get used to the power. And that's how it had been when Talen had first donned a candidate weave. But not anymore. A few weeks ago he'd begun to feel

a change, but had discounted it. Now he knew. And this fact led him back to the comments the enemy dreadman made to him at the apple dance yesterday evening. Talen was different, maturing differently than others who had been awakened to their powers.

The problem was that nobody knew exactly what that meant. Talen didn't want to be some Divine's "Holy One" because nothing the Divines touched was holy. If a Divine considered something holy, then that was probably a sure sign that thing was, in reality, supremely wicked.

I will not become a villain, Talen told himself. I will not. But he'd felt the power of the Devourer down in her cave. She'd been stunning, an object he'd wanted to worship. He didn't want to become a villain, but what if he couldn't help himself?

That thought put a hurry to his steps. Ke was not where he thought he would be. But then Talen saw Scruff, River's new horse, tied up outside the smithy, probably waiting to be shod. He hurried over and heard River standing just inside the doorway chatting with one of the smiths.

Talen greeted Scruff on his way toward the open doors. The horse got its name from its gangly build and scruffy coat. However, despite its appearance, Scruff was a stellar animal, one of the few horses being made into a firesteed. Talen stroked Scruff's neck on his way to the door to the workshop and immediately jumped, for the same desire he'd felt at Black Knee's embrace flared when he touched the horse.

Talen snatched his hand back. By the Glory's arse, what was happening to him!

Ke walked out of the smithy and saw Talen standing there in shock. "Don't look so surprised, brother. That's a horse. You've seen them before."

"We need to talk," Talen said.

"I heard you beat the hawks."

"Ke, something's wrong."

Ke saw Talen meant business, so he nodded toward a spot away from the smithy where they could talk privately. When they had stepped aside, Ke folded his muscular arms. "So what's the big knot?"

"Lust," Talen said with disgust.

Ke looked down at him. "What?"

"My passions are running amok."

"Thrush," Ke said in disapproval. "I told you not to stir that pot."

"This isn't about her. It's Black Knee, Scruff."

Ke looked at Talen as if he hadn't quite heard him correctly.

"It's not natural," said Talen. "And don't look at me like that."

"Brother, you're a strange little man. If I were going to go that way, it wouldn't be with Black Knee. He's as ugly as they come."

"No," said Talen. "It's the Fire. I can feel it in every touch." And as soon as he said that he realized it was true. This wasn't normal lust. It couldn't be. There was none of Thrush's glamour in it. He knew what it was to desire someone physically, and this was different. "Here," he said and grasped Ke's big hand and felt the surge of hunger. "There, do you feel that?"

"I feel nothing."

"Exactly. You feel nothing. But I feel an appetite. It doesn't matter who or, apparently, what it is: Thrush, Black Knee, Scruff." Talen thought back and remembered he'd felt the same alarming desire when the woodcutter's brother had clamped down on his shoulder. "I'm not right."

"Well, that's not news," said Ke. "You've never been right."

"This isn't funny."

At that moment River exited the smithy and joined them. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Ke shrugged. "Our brother here fancies Black Knee."

Talen smacked Ke's arm in irritation. He turned to River. "Something's off inside me. I can feel the Fire in those I touch. And I want it. And that's not all--the candidate weave, it's doubling me."

"That's impossible," said Ke.

"How do you think hatchet fist beat the hawks? I'm telling you: I don't think the monster put all my pieces back in the right spots."

River considered him. "It's not uncommon to go through a period of confusion, although that usually occurs when you go from candidate to full dreadman. I told you the awakening triggers a second change in the body. That's probably all this is. You'll just have to ride it out."

A change like developing his manhood, except different. "Did you feel this when you awakened?" he asked. "Do you know anyone who has?"

River shook her head. "But I've only seen a handful. For all we know, this is right as rain."

"And if it's not?" He'd been changed, guided by the Devourer herself from conception to fit her terrible plans. His own mother had tried to fix the changes, but had died trying. He didn't know what he was or what he would become.

"We roll with it," said Ke. He put his strong hand on Talen's shoulder. Talen flinched at the desire, but Ke's eyes bore into him. "You're our blood, brother. River and I will look after you."

"Right," said Talen.

"And if you turn into something abominable, well, I suppose that means we'll have to cut your head off."

"Ke," River said.

"Ah, he knows I'm joking," Ke grinned, "mostly."

Chapter 8

Redthorn

Argoth suspected that what waited for them at Redthorn was either an ambush or a village full of uplanders who had passed out from too much drink and perhaps not a little of that wicked herb sinnis.

If it was a Fir-Noy ambush, it wouldn't be the first. Shortly after the battle with the Devourer and her monster, Shim had announced to the Clan Council that he was reclaiming his ancestral right to wield the lore of Divines. It was true he had a tenuous line back to a conquered Divine. But all knew Shim was usurping power. Of the nine clans in the New Lands, four had refused to accept him, calling it black treason. Of those, the Fir-Noy clan was the most adamant. They'd taken up arms and declared war against the Shoka. So Argoth detained the fruit farmer and sent scouts to verify the report.

A few hours later, the scouts returned, confirming the fruit farmer's tale and reporting there was no sign of ambush. So Argoth, Shim, and a small company of men mounted up. They had to verify whether or not this was the work of one of the clans or Mokad. If it was Mokad, then Shim and the Grove had been out maneuvered, robbed of their time to mature into a force that could stand against Divines, robbed of their dream of raising up a kingdom of loremens that were free from the Devourer's appetites. If Mokad was already here in force, Shim and the Grove would have to flee immediately or face certain destruction.

The road they followed cut through a thickly wooded swath of highland. Outriders rode through the woods on their flanks, behind them, and in front. At this elevation the fall frosts and winds had already stripped most of the leaves and scattered them in a thick carpet of yellows and pale reds onto the forest floor and the road. The leaves crunched underneath the horse hooves.

Argoth eyed the woods on either side of the road, looking past the bare branches for any sign of danger.

The first thing they met on the road as they approached the village was a mule hitched to a two-wheeled vegetable cart. It had caught one of the cart wheels in the wreck of an old fallen tree that lay to the side of the road. The mule was pulling, rocking the cart back and forth like an old man in a chair. There was no driver to be seen, and the reins hung down in the harness posts that stuck out of the front of the cart. The cart itself was empty. Nothing in it but a scattering of old, wrinkled cherries that had caught in the cracks between the weathered boards used for the bed.

"It appears not everything has died," said Shim.

"Death comes in many forms," said Argoth. There was something wrong in the mule's expression. It seemed not to recognize that men and horses were on the road. Argoth waved his hand in front of its eyes, snapped by one of its ears. The mule should have jerked its head, flicked an ear, done something. But it didn't respond. It just stood there pulling on the cart.

Shim dismounted. He took the mule by the reins, but even that didn't stop its rocking. He ran his hand along its flanks, down its legs. "I think it's mad."

"What are you looking for?" asked Argoth.

"A dart wound."

"You're thinking woodikin?" Argoth asked.

Shim shrugged. "They have many poisons."

The woodikin were creatures that lived in the Wilds beyond the borders of the land, half the size of a man, hairy. They made their homes mostly in groves of huge trees called tanglewoods. They'd fought many bloody battles with the early settlers. They were cunning and used insects and poisons, but in the end, they had lost. Their tanglewoods had been destroyed. The woodikin themselves had retreated into the Wilds. It was rare to see them within the borders of the land, even if in the last few weeks there had been a number of reports of woodikin sightings.

Shim stood and shook his head. "I can't find a mark on this animal."

Argoth scanned the woods. He began to build his Fire. "Get your bows ready," he said to the men. "Watch the trees." If this was a woodikin amush, as opposed to a Fir-Noy one, then his

scouts would probably have missed the signs. But why would woodikin attack now after all these years?

The village lay perhaps only a hundred or so more yards up the road. The column rode that last bit with their arrows nocked, their eyes on the trees. They saw nothing but a few squirrels. Eventually, the road opened onto the village. By this time Argoth could feel the strength of his Fire coursing through his limbs.

The village comprised about twenty wood and plaster houses strung out along two roads. The houses were surrounded by gardens, fields, and three large orchards. The first thing that Argoth noticed was the stillness. There should have been people hauling and stacking firewood for the coming winter, working in yards and barns. Wives should have been pickling the last of the vegetables over large fires in the yards. There should have been a dog or two come to greet them.

The upland villages grew apples and cherries far sweeter than anything that could be grown in the lowlands. Heaps of pruned branches stood in the orchards around Redthorn. But the pruning was not finished. Despite the apple dance festivities, crews of adults and children would have been in the orchards.

But all was silent. The only thing that moved was a thin ribbon of smoke rising from the chimney of a house down the road.

"I saw a village like this once," Shim said to Argoth. "Long before you arrived on the boat. Woodikin had slaughtered the inhabitants down to the last child."

Woodikin used poison darts and wasps in their battles. That might account for the fruit farmer's report that there hadn't been a scratch on the dead. Up ahead in the lane, lay the first body. It was a man still in his festival clothes.

Argoth dismounted. The man was middle-aged with a full beard. He wore a bright tunic and pants worked with embroidered animals and fruits. There was no sign of violence. No blood-darkened ground. No blemish on the skin. No woodikin darts. He looked to have simply fallen dead. Argoth examined his exposed skin for sting marks. Nothing. Argoth turned the man's head. The neck had begun to stiffen, but he was able to move the head enough to see what he was looking for. "He's got both ears," said Argoth. "I don't think we're dealing with woodikin."

"They don't always take ears," said Shim. "How many hours dead?"

Argoth sniffed the man. "Recent. I don't think this body has lain more than a day."

"Sometime in the night then," said Shim. "It was probably too cold for wasps."

A few yards farther up the lane lay a pale ox. The road here was sprinkled with small yellow leaves. The ox had fallen on top of them. Its dark eyes were open and had begun to dry. The cold prevented a quick bloating, so the animal hadn't begun to reek yet. Argoth examined the beast, but couldn't see any sign of struggle.

"Look there," said Shim, motioning with his chin at the corner of a fenced garden. A brindled bulldog lay in the leaves that had been heaped over the rows of carrots.

"Do a wide search," Argoth called to the men. "We're looking for survivors."

The other riders fanned out, some moving to ride behind the houses. Argoth led his horse over to the dog. The garden had been prepared for winter, its rows of beets and carrots covered with a thick layer of leaves and held down with a thin layer of dirt. A large set of wooden windpipes had been fastened onto a pole at the edge of the garden. When it blew the wooden pipes would play. These were uplanders, after all, and believed in giving the wind a voice.

Like the ox the dog lay dead. Its tongue hung out of its mouth, dried. However, in this case there were signs of a struggle. The dog had a puncture wound in its side. Someone had pierced it with the blade of a spear or sword. Cold blood splattered the leaves in a trail.

Argoth stood and examined the ground. "There's no woodikin track here," said Argoth. "Only human-sized boot prints."

Shim reached in his tunic and scratched his chest. One of the soldiers called out, having found a dead woman. Another sounded: two dead children. The calls did not stop. A family. More dogs. Dead pheasants. Dead goats and horse.

"This isn't the Fir-Noy clan," said Shim. "They would have killed the people and stolen everything else."

Argoth scanned the orchards and fields. He regarded the wooded tree line beyond. All was silent and still, except for that thinly smoking chimney. "Ready yourself," he said to Shim and pulled his horse toward the house.

Shim put on his candidate's weave. He was not yet a loreman, not even a full dreadman, but Argoth had been training him since the very day the monster had been defeated in the caves. When it came time to wean the current trainees off the weaves, Shim would be one of the first.

The house was a simple structure with a main room for living and cooking and another to the side. It was built in the fashion of all the rest with board and plaster and a thatched roof.

Painted on the door were two stalks of barley which announced this as the residence of an alewife. The door stood slightly ajar, revealing a glimpse into the dark room beyond.

Argoth tied his horse to a hitching post outside the home. He armed himself with his sword. Shim and one of the soldiers dismounted and followed. Shim held a war axe, his weapon of choice. The soldier stowed his bow and brought an axe as well.

Argoth walked through a drift of leaves that had collected along this side of the house. "Hoy," he called out. "Who is home?"

There was no reply. He walked up to the porch and listened, but heard nothing. He pushed the door inward with his foot. It glided silently on its hinges and then uttered one creak. The room had one window that stood unshuttered, allowing the light of the day to dimly illuminate what was inside.

Argoth called out again, but received no answer. He stepped inside, his sword ready. The floor in this main room appeared to have been replaced in the last month for the boards were unpainted and so newly cut he could still smell the wood. On his right was a bar. He turned to his left and found a young woman, clothed, lying across one of the two tables in the room. She was dead. When he stepped closer he found there was no cut, no odd angles that would tell him she'd been broken. She looked like a woman who had fallen onto a table and never gotten back up.

Shim and the soldier moved into the room and headed toward the back. Argoth looked more closely at the woman. There wasn't a strong odor of death. She'd stiffened, but wasn't yet bloated. He turned her. No blood. Not a mark on her.

Argoth had seen bodies lying like this before in a plague town. He raised her tunic and examined her belly and chest. He checked her armpits then turned her over to look at her back. There wasn't any sign of pestilence about her. She was clean. Her skin clear.

"Gods," said Shim. "Argoth!"

Argoth turned, ready to strike. Shim held the door of the back room with the tip of his sword. "They're like leeches."

Argoth moved to Shim's side and looked into the room. The first thing he saw was the dirty bare foot of a man lying on the floor. The man, probably the young woman's husband, was lying on his back. He was naked except for his small clothes. All about him, lined up like suckling pigs, were the grotesque bodies of a dozen frights. Some were the size of rats, others as long as his arm. All of them looked starved. They were knobby and twisted, the color of pale

driftwood. Their many fingers, as thin and spidery as the roots of a tree, grasped their prey. They were attached to his thighs, his stomach. One at his neck. The mass of them moved and undulated in the dim light, sucking the Fire from the man.

One of them turned and looked up at Argoth with one cancerous eye. Then the man on the floor opened his mouth and gasped.

“Godsweed,” Argoth said. “Fetch the godsweed!”

The soldier ran out and came back moments later with a braid of godsweed. He lit the braid in the embers of the dying fire then brought it to Argoth who took the smoking knot from him, walked into the room, and began to smoke the frights.

Frights were creatures not wholly of the world of flesh. They fed on Fire, and so it was common to find them lurking about the sick and dying. They haunted battlefields. For reasons unknown to Argoth, when they fed they became visible to the naked eye.

It took two knots of godsweed to disperse the horde of frights in the house. Never had Argoth seen so many together. The man was glassy-eyed and drooling. What ailed him, Argoth could not guess. But it was clear he wasn't long for this world.

Another soldier entered the house. “Lord Shim,” he said. “We've found the bulk of the villagers.”

Argoth and Shim followed the soldier out. A number of the villagers had been found dead in their houses or outside their barns, but the majority of them were lying at the edge of a cherry orchard. There were sixty three in all, men, women, and children. The bodies were cool, and there were no frights Argoth could see, but he ordered them smoked anyway.

Like the others, these villagers showed no marks that would indicated how they'd died. There had been a bonfire. There were a lot of footprints, but nothing special.

Then a soldier called out. He carried a girl and a boy in his arms. Another soldier carried a second boy. None of the children looked older than seven or eight years. Shock shown in their eyes.

“We found these three hiding between the rafters and thatch of a barn,” the soldier said. “And we wouldn't have seen them in the shadows, but one of the men threw open the hay door to let some light in and there they were, the three of them huddled up in their cubby, silent as owls and watching us with their sober eyes.”

Shim addressed the oldest boy. “What's your name, son?”

The boy did not speak, just looked at the dead bodies arrayed before them.

“It’s alright. I’m Lord Shim. These are my men. We’ll protect you.”

Argoth stroked the girl’s hair and touched his arm. “I’ve got a daughter about your age. What are you? Five?”

The little girl's face broke. She was going to cry. She leaned forward, holding her arms out for Argoth to take her. “Come here, darling,” he said. She clung to him, heavy and solid as a little stone. She put her face into his chest. He stroked her hair.

“Boys,” said Shim. “We need your help to stop whoever did this.”

The older boy closed his eyes, his face scrunching up in pain.

“The woods filled up with darkness,” the smaller boy said. “Da came running, and a man yelled, and the whole wood was breathing. And mother ran with us to the barn and told us to hide. But when we got to the cubby mother was gone.” His lip began to quiver and he stopped, the horror of that moment showing in his eyes. However, the older boy finished the tale. “They took her to the horned evil in the smoke.”

Chapter 9

Hammerman

Sugar was beyond exhaustion. She was nearing some kind of breaking. She thought she'd given the Fir-Noy the slip, but they'd raised the hue and cry throughout all the surrounding villages. They'd sent riders down stream. She'd tried to keep to the woods, but she'd accidentally run upon a group of woodsmen taking a late morning breather. They'd had dogs. They'd sent for help.

She stopped in a wood thick with pines and sat on the trunk of a fallen tree. The shadows of the wood were deep. The lovely scent of the pines was even deeper. And the thick trees and carpet of needles upon the ground muffled sound. Shafts of light filtered down, dust motes shining, to illuminate the forest floor. A moth flew into a fat shaft of light and then out again. Above her a breeze swept through the tops of the trees. It was so peaceful she almost wanted to make a bed here.

But she wouldn't give into that. Her thirst was raging. She felt twinges in her knees and other joints. She felt light-headed. She didn't know if she'd done permanent damage. She had almost lost herself to the firelust three times. The last time she had almost failed to put her candidate's weave back on. All she'd wanted to do was burn and burn. She now wore the weave, but something didn't feel right.

She'd pushed her body too far. Most living things were made up of three vitalities--body, soul, and a store of Fire, or Days, as some of the masters called it. Fire was consumed or burned like wood or grass. When a person used up all their Fire, the binding of the three vitalities broke. The body died. And so every time you increased the consumption of your store of Fire, you brought yourself that much closer to death.

This danger was compounded because when you built your Fire to multiply your might and speed, you couldn't do so in a linear fashion. If a man wanted to double his strength, he might have to burn three, eight, twelve times the Fire he normally would. Sugar couldn't gauge exactly how much Fire she'd burned. But she was sure she'd shortened her life by a number of days in the last twenty-four hours. And such a multiplying took a toll on the body, especially one that wasn't used to it. She needed to get back to Rogum's Defense. She needed to talk to River and make sure she hadn't done permanent damage.

She thought she heard shouts in the distance behind her and to her right. She sighed-- these rotted and stinking Fir-Noy weren't going to give up. They had followed her into Shoka territory, followed her to almost within two miles of Rogum's Defense. Not that the woods surrounding Rogum's Defense didn't already hide Fir-Noy scouts and assassins. But it was one thing to slip a few men in; it was quite another to bring a whole hunt. However, she didn't care. They could bring their whole army, but they weren't going to have her.

Of course, the Fir-Noy weren't her only problem. Shim's army patrolled these woods. She couldn't be seen, much less caught, by them either. If anyone knew she'd gone back to the village of Plum, she would surely be flogged. Maybe worse. She didn't know if she was going to be able to avoid that punishment anyway. She'd been seen, chased, and who else would go retrieve her Da's skull? Still, it was possible to say the villagers were making it all up, angry that some petty thief had stolen their relics. She just needed to make it look like she'd had too much hard cider and passed out in the woods. Later, she could go in secret to River and explain what had really happened.

Sugar tied her dark scout's scarf around her face so that nobody could recognize her from a distance. She had just a few miles to go. She could do this. With another sigh she heaved herself to her feet.

Something popped to her right. A branch, muffled by the pine needles. She froze then slowly turned her head. A small drop of sap fell onto her forehead just above her eyebrow. In the distance a squirrel chattered. She saw nothing in the shadows, heard nothing but the breeze in the tops of the pines. She took a breath and relaxed.

“Not another step,” a voice said.

Sugar began to turn but then stopped when she felt the thin edge of a sword blade at her throat. Her heart began to beat wildly. A man stood off to the side in the shadows. His dark gray

tunic blended in with the tree trunks and shadows. How long had he been there? How had she missed him? It must have been her weariness.

He whistled twice. That would be his signal to whoever else was with him.

“On the ground,” he said.

She felt a sting on her neck and knew the blade had cut her. But she wasn't going to kneel or lie down. She wasn't going to be taken. Despite her weariness, she still wore the candidate's weave. She still had strength and speed in her limbs.

Sugar wheeled away from the blade, catching a glimpse of the man. He was dark-haired, wearing a scout's scarf as well. He cursed and thrust at her with the sword. When he did, she glimpsed the tattoo of on his wrist. It was not Shoka. Fir-Noy, she thought. She dodged back, and he missed her. He lunged forward again, but Sugar had already turned and was sprinting away.

She'd tried to be so evasive. She'd lost them. She knew she had. How had they caught up to her? Then she realized they hadn't caught up. The Fir-Noy must have sent word to their spies and patrols that watched Rogum's Defense. They knew she was one of Shim's candidates--how could they not know after her display of speed? And they would have guessed she'd come here because where else would she have to go? They'd harried her like any game, one group beating the brush, the other waiting for the prey to run into their trap.

She cursed her lack of foresight, but they didn't have her yet. She yelled in distress, hoping a patrol of Shimsmen were in earshot. Maybe she could call their attention, bring them down upon the Fir-Noy.

She leapt over the trunk of a fallen tree, sped along the animal trail she'd been following, brushing branches aside. She grabbed her weave, not wanting to remove it yet again, but she didn't have a choice. Not only did she have the bounty on her head for the crime of being the daughter of a woman who practiced the lore, but she knew more about the Order than most. She knew passwords and signs. She knew where the Grove's weaves were kept.

She slipped the weave off her arm. She only nudged her Fire, and the sweet invigoration began to fill her, overriding the exhaustion of her body. She scanned woods ahead expecting another Fir-Noy to jump out at her. Then she burned a burst of Fire, flew over a swale, and found herself speeding toward a naked branch sticking out of the trunk of a fat pine like a spear. At the last moment, she chopped at the branch and barely avoided impaling herself.

There were too many trees in this wood with branches just like that. At this speed she was sure one of them would gore her, but she didn't dare slow. She ran through four or five invisible strands of spider web that clung to her face. She pulled them away and saw a sunlit gully up ahead.

She realized she knew this place. She was closer to Rogum's Defense than she thought. She raced toward the gully. It was a good fifteen feet across with a rocky face on this side and a steep bank on the other. When she reached it, she lept from the edge and flew over the gap, landing at the top of the bank on the other side

Her Fire flared and she fought to push it down, keep it in control. Keep away from the firelust, but it called to her. The feeling was so comfortable, so delicious it reminded her of the joy her body felt some mornings when she woke and her limbs wanted to do nothing more than luxuriate in bed. And just as she did when she woke that way, she paused.

Why not just give into it just a little? Surely a little couldn't hurt. She knew it was wrong to step into that forbidden joy. She knew it, but didn't care. Just a little, she thought.

At that moment a second man plowed into her from the side, knocking her down the gully's slope. He fell with her, crushing her with his weight when they landed. Her thoughts turned from the Firelust, but before she could scramble away, the man wrapped his arm around her neck in a choke hold.

Sugar twisted, slammed her elbow back into his face. He grunted and for the tiniest moment loosened his grip. The small opening was enough for Sugar to break free and scramble away. But she didn't get far. He grabbed her foot and yanked her back, yanked her as if she was nothing more than a straw doll. His power unnerved her, filled her with fear.

He wasn't just a common soldier. This was a dreadman. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the blue and yellow sash marking him a Shimsman. But any Fir-Noy could wear that to disguise himself.

Her panic rose. She tried to jerk her foot free, but his grip was iron. She remembered the knife at her waist. She snatched it out of its scabbard and slashed at the hand that held her foot. The dreadman caught her knife hand, blinding fast. He was like a snake.

And then she got a good look at his face. His scout's scarf had slipped down. He wasn't Fir-Noy. He was Shoka. It was Oaks, a hammerman in Shim's army, one of those who oversaw

the training of Shim's candidates. He was, in fact, the one who trained her and the other handful of female candidates.

Lords, she thought. Not him. The fear of being taken by the Fir-Noy turned into the fear of being flogged and being put out of the army, for Oaks had made it clear he thought using weaves on women at this point was a stupid waste of resources. He would only use this as fodder for his arguments.

Her Fire flared. She tried to wrench out of his grasp and almost succeeded in doing so. But Oaks was strong. She would have to multiply herself four or five times to match his strength. Such an increase in power was impossible for all but the mightiest of dreadmen.

In a flash, he changed his position and struck her in the gut so hard she thought he'd put a hole right through her. She was paralyzed. She couldn't breathe.

Oaks snatched the knife out of her hand and turned it on her. He didn't know who she was. He was going to stab her. "Scum," he said.

She caught her breath. "Stop!" she shouted. "It's me!"

He paused, the knife poised above her leg. He was ready to stab the flesh there, ready to do just as he'd trained the fist of women candidates to do, which was to disable the captive but leave him perfectly fit for questioning.

He pulled down her scarf. "You," he said.

"I was running from a Fir-Noy scout," she said.

Oaks narrowed his eyes, but turned to face the danger.

Maybe she could still lie her way out of this, say she had been drunk and awakened by Fir-Noy. She could say she had decided it was more important to spy upon them than come in.

Just then the Fir-Noy who had put his sword to her throat arrived. Except he wasn't Fir-Noy either. He was one of those that had answered Argoth's call. A sleth named Urban with eyes that had all the women talking. Sugar realized she'd run into a picket of Shimsmen.

Oaks turned back to her. "Fir-Noy?" he asked.

"I saw his tattoo," she said in dismay, "I . . ."

Oaks got to his feet then tossed her knife point first into the ground next to her in obvious disgust.

When Sugar had slipped away from the apple dance, she'd slipped away while under Oaks's supervision. Normally River, being her fist leader, would have been responsible. But

River had gone to another apple dance and asked Oaks to cover for her. Her slipping away would reflect poorly on him. However, she knew Oaks. Saying sorry wasn't going to help. He wasn't a harsh or unfair man. In fact, many of the women in Sugar's fist fancied him. However, he was demanding. He drove his hammer harder and expected more than anyone Sugar had met, and he had no patience for idlers or fools.

Sugar scrambled to her feet. She was feeling light-headed, woozy, and oddly chill, almost brittle. His blow had shaken her, but she knew it was the Fire. She thought back on the moment she had decided to give herself to the Firelust and cringed. She quickly slipped her weave back on.

Oaks noted the weave. He knew she wasn't supposed to take it off. "You've caused me quite a bit of trouble. What have you been doing?" he demanded.

He was not much older than she. In fact, had she not been Koramite and he Mokaddian, they might have met at a dance. They might have been friends. She might have, on occasion, teased him. But he'd been raised to the office of a dreadman one year ago, just before Lumen, the Divine of the New Lands, had disappeared. And so they walked in different circles, even if he wasn't a full dreadman yet.

There were levels to dreadmen, marking their power and ability to multiply themselves. A new dreadman, one that had only been recently raised from status of candidate, was of the first level. Full dreadmen were usually of the second or third. The most elite and mighty were of the fourth or fifth, but few could multiply their powers that much. Oaks was a dreadman of the first.

That alone wouldn't have given him authority over her in Shim's army. But being her hammerman did. Dreadmen and dreadmen candidates were grouped into fists, hammers, and terrors. Ten to fifteen soldiers made a fist. Two to five fists made a hammer. Hammers were then combined into dreadmen terrors. The numbers and combinations, Sugar had learned, were never consistent because you didn't want the enemy to be able to count your standards and know the exact size of your army. The leader of a hammer was called a hammerman. Oaks was her superior, and she had to answer him.

"Zu," she said. "I drank too much cider. I must have passed out in the woods." Her lie rang hollow, nevertheless she watched Oaks to see if he bought it.

"Lookie here," Urban said, holding open the mouth of her sack.

Sugar groaned inside. So much for her lie.

Oaks peered in the sack. He reached in and pulled out the skull. He considered it a moment with a look of puzzlement. She'd tried to wash off the sleth marking the villagers had painted on its forehead, but she hadn't been able to get it all. Realization of whose skull it was dawned on Oaks's face. "You went to Plum?" he asked. He didn't raise his voice, but she could hear in his tone his anger rising.

She couldn't lie her way out of this one. She sighed, defeated. "Yes," she said. "I made a visit, to prevent important things from falling into Fir-Noy hands."

He fished around and brought up the other things—a necklace, a box, and the cloth. He tried to open the box, but couldn't. She'd tried it herself. It was locked. He shook it. There was a number of small things in it that sounded like dried peas. The necklace and box he handed to Urban. Then he unfolded the cloth to reveal a small flower carved out of wood. Oaks held this up to the light. When he'd finished examining it, he motioned at the items and said, "You went after a bunch of worthless keepsakes?"

"I," she faltered. "My father's skull is not worthless." She was very aware of how people viewed her, the daughter of a sleth. She didn't know how much Oaks knew of Shim's ultimate plans. But even if Oaks knew everything, Urban didn't. It wouldn't do for him to tell everybody he met that she'd gone back to fetch her mother's sleth work. As far as these two were concerned these were nothing more than personal items. "It was my duty to retrieve what I could to honor the dead."

"You had no orders."

"I saw a need and addressed it," she said.

Urban was holding the necklace, fingering its segments. He looked up at her as if she knew something she wasn't telling. He was sleth. He would know things. Was that actually some piece of lore? He glanced over at Oaks and back at her and said nothing.

Oaks wrapped the flower back up and put it back in the sack. The he held the sack open for Urban to deposit the skull and the other items. "You're brave," Oaks said. "I'll give you that. And you're hard as nails, for a woman. But you're a worthless soldier. A soldier is like an arm or leg. Can you imagine a leg that thinks for itself, an arm that decides what it will and won't do?"

"Zu," Sugar said, "No harm was done. We can chalk it up to too much cider."

"No harm?" he asked. "We chased a company of Fir-Noy out of our territory. The Fir-Noy were after you, weren't they?"

Her heart sank. If someone had been injured or killed, the blame would be laid at her feet. "I don't know," she said hesitantly. "It would depend on the group of Fir-Noy."

He shook his head. "I know your type. You don't learn except through hard experience. We walk a knife's edge. One push and Shim's army falls. I'm not going to lie for you. It would be a disservice to everyone else in this army."

"My good man," Urban said with the hint of a smile on his face, "It looks like she's already done a bit of disservicing." Then he pointed at Oaks's eye.

Oaks felt where she'd hit him with her elbow. The flesh above his eye was swelling and had the first hints of blue that would turn quickly into a pretty black. Oaks cinched up her sack. "Hard experience," he said. "Nothing but hard experience."

Chapter 10

The Price

Sugar had never been whipped, but she'd seen others take the lash. One flogging in particular filled her mind. There had been a Fir-Noy farmer who had tried to rape another man's wife. The village masters had beat his back raw. The flesh oozed and quivered. It was a terrible sight, especially because she'd seen his face, she'd watched the pain in his eyes, lash after lash. He'd died, not there at the whipping post, but later when his wounds ran to corruption.

Sugar swallowed and marched across the field toward the fortress of Rogum's Defense, Oaks and Urban at her sides. Lord Shim was an exacting man. She did not think he would go easy. On the other hand, her candidate's weaves would help heal her. Surely, in a few weeks, she'd be working in River's fist as if the whipping had never occurred. And even if the whipping left scars, she would count it a cheap price for having been able to retrieve these last scraps of her mother and father.

Mother had been part of a righteous cause. Sugar was going to pick up where Mother had left off. She was going to learn every bit of lore and continue this fight. She was confident the hidden items were weaves and that they would help.

She didn't know how Mother had kept the secrets. But maybe she had found it easy, knowing that she would teach them all in time to Sugar. Except that joy had been stolen from her. But Sugar would learn nevertheless. In time, she would become a name that her enemies would fear. And if that required a few scars, then so be it.

The fortress of Rogum's Defense sat at the edge of a plain that dropped down to the Sourwood river on the north and the sea on the east. When the original Koramite settlers had first come to these lands, their primary threats came from the woodikin and other creatures already

here. So the settlers had built a string of forts ten to twenty miles apart, depending on the terrain. Some guarded ports, others fords or settlements, and still others entrances to valleys.

Rogum's Defense was build of stone in the shape of two squares, one inside the other. There was an outer wall about fifteen feet high. Behind it lay a bailey where she and the other candidates practiced. Beyond that rose the inner wall to a height of about thirty feet. It was not as tall or as large as the fortress in Whitecliff, but it was formidable enough with its thick walls of stone. Besides, it was more defensible, which is exactly why Shim's army did not train in Whitecliff.

A shallow stream wound its way through the field. At this time of year it was at most a few inches deep. At a bend farther down a small flock of migrating geese bravely rested in the water. If they stayed much longer, however, she suspected they would become this evening's dinner, for Shim's army had an enormous appetite.

Sugar crossed the bridge that spanned the stream. The water glittered in the sun as it bubbled over the river stones. Downstream a group of washer women boiled water in huge tubs set close to the water. Behind the women a cart stood full of dirty laundry. The sun-warmed planks in the bridge felt good under Sugar's bare feet, but she could not enjoy it, knowing what was ahead of her.

One of the guards standing atop the outer gate pointed her out to his fellows. A number of the soldiers there turned to watch her. But Sugar didn't focus on them. She considered the gutted and rotting body of a man that hung from the felon's pole that stood outside the gate. A few crows sat on his shoulders and pecked at the dried flesh. He was one of the first sleth to answer Argoth's call. He'd demonstrated much skill with his bow from the back of his horse and had impressed Lord Shim. But they had caught him stealing Fire.

Sugar wondered: she had used a candidate's weave without authorization; what if Shim saw that as theft? A trembling of fear flashed through her. But then she put the thought out of her mind. The sleth had ripping Fire from his victims, and therefore bits of soul. She had merely broken regulations. The two things weren't the same. Surely, Lord Shim would see that. He was a fair man. Hard, but fair.

"Skirt Master," one of the older soldiers called out, "do you need some help? I've got a good hand for spanking."

Oaks bristled at the nickname.

"I'd be careful of what you wish for," Urban shouted back. "She already blacked the hammerman's eye."

That brought a few hoots and hollers, which Sugar knew would only raise Oaks's ire.

"I'm sure two or three of us would be willing to help with the sassy ones," the soldier called out.

"If a spanking is ordered," said Urban, "You'll be the first we call. Although I suspect the first to lay hands on her will be the warlord's daughter."

"Quiet," said Oaks.

The warlord's daughter was Lord's Shim's whip. She knew they'd strip her to the waist to deliver the blows.

"We'll be front and center," the soldier said. "Indeed we will."

It was a half jest, but only half. Sugar squared her shoulders and refused to give these soldiers the satisfaction of her glance. She walked through the gates, head held high, and ignored the rest of their goadings. She also decided that the more time she spent with Urban the less she liked him.

They crossed the outer bailey, passing fists of candidates practicing close combat with wooden swords. The smell of frying fish grew as she approached the inner fortress, and she realized she was starving. And that wasn't much of an overstatement. She'd multiplied her body, which meant she would have multiplied its need for food. No wonder she felt brittle—her body was probably in the state it would be if she had fasted for two or three days.

They walked past the cook fires with fish spitted and roasting above them. She almost broke away from Oaks and Urban to beg for a half-cooked fish. But Oaks grabbed her by the arm and kept her moving. They passed the carpenters hammering iron nails into an extension of the barracks then walked through the door that led to the ante-chamber of Lord Shim's quarters.

One of Lord Shim's clerks sat at a desk with a pile of tally sticks at one end, scratching something down on a piece of vellum. He looked up as they walked in then pointed to a bench set against the wall. "She can wait there. Lord Shim and Argoth will be out soon."

Reading and writing were skills members of the Grove were supposed to learn. Sugar didn't know how to read much yet, but she looked forward to the time she could read the lore texts. She tried to peer at the clerk's work, but he gave her an annoyed look, and she took her seat. The clerk looked at Sugar once more then went back to his tallying and scribing.

Oaks and Urban sat beside her. They waited for at least a quarter of an hour listening to the clerk scratching out his words and the work going on in the bailey. Then Eresh the Kish stomped in. The Kish were lighter-skinned than Mokaddians or Koramites. His coloring intrigued Sugar as did the fact that he was one of the first sleth from abroad to answer Argoth's call.

“Where’s that sluggard Argoth?” Eresh demanded.

“Zu,” the clerk said. “He’s in conference with Lord Shim.”

“Get him out here.”

The clerk hesitated.

“Go,” Eresh said. “Be quick.”

The clerk rose uncertainly then opened a door and shut it. The Kish turned around. He looked like an old bear. He was muscled, but much had gone to fat. His face was grizzled and jowled. His nose had a slight bump as if it had once been broken. One of his eyes was milked over, but the other flamed with intelligence. He licked his lower lip, turned to Oaks, and nodded at Sugar. “That one’s our runaway?”

"We found her in the woods," said Oaks.

"She's well-turned, I'll say that. But there are better uses for pretty things than putting them in front of a great mass of brutes."

"Aye," said Oaks.

At that moment Argoth emerged from the hallway, and both Oaks and Sugar stood. When Argoth saw Sugar, he shook his head in disapproval and sighed.

“Your operations,” Eresh said, “are flabby. Undisciplined. Full of maggots and worms.”

Sugar expected Argoth to bridle at the foreigner's offence, but he laughed instead.

“Coming from you I’d say that’s a compliment.”

“The one bright spot is your armory. You tell that leather bag Shim he can keep his smithing crew.”

“I’m sure the war lord will be happy to know you’ve given your permission.”

“Look, you haven’t got time for coddling. If Mokad is already under sail, you’re dead. I would recommend a few virginal sacrifices.” He pointed at Sugar. “I suggest we begin with that one over there.”

Sugar took a step back. She'd heard brutal things about the Kish.

“No, old friend,” said Argoth. “There will be no sacrifices.”

Eresh licked his bottom lip again, playing with a flake of skin there. “Pity,” he said.

“Zu,” Oaks said to Argoth. “Would a report be better at another time?”

“No,” said Eresh. “You can report to me now.”

Oaks looked at Argoth in confusion.

“It's all right, hammerman,” said Argoth. He put a hand on Eresh's shoulder. “Eresh left his tidy den of aged iniquity at my request. He's going to be working with us.”

“And a fine den it was,” Eresh said.

“But not finer than being able to strike such a blow that the enemy may never recover. Eh?”

“I told you I wouldn't commit until I'd seen what I needed to see. You're no match for Mokaddian terrors. Not yet. But that can change. Especially if we can grow the ranks as that Shim thinks he can.”

“So you accept?”

“You will provide me a cook and a woman. The cook will be mine and mine alone. The woman will need a little bit of brain about her, but not too much.”

“We can provide the cook,” said Argoth. “As for the woman, you'll have to hunt down a willing victim on your own.”

“Mokaddians,” Eresh said with disgust. “I'll do it without the woman then. But I tell you this: the cook had better rotting well be able to serve up the stars and moon every morning, midday, and night.”

“You'll have lark tongues for breakfast,” said Argoth.

“I don't like lark,” said Eresh.

“Then you'll be served worms. Isn't that what you Kish eat?”

“Only when it's time for love making.”

“Mokaddians don't need worms to enhance their virility,” said Argoth.

“That's because Mokaddians have nothing to enhance, which is why your women are so unsatisfied.”

Argoth groaned. “Ah, yes, I had forgotten your dizzying intellect. May the Six save us.”

“I can assure you,” Eresh said, “the Six will have nothing to do with it.”

Argoth turned to Oaks. "Hammerman, meet your new commander. This is Eresh the Horlomite—dreadman, terrorman, and wizard's bane. He's as bloody a man as you can find."

"Zu," Oaks said and bowed his head. "I have heard many things about the Kish. Were you in the Eastern wars under the Red Lord?"

Eresh spat. "The Red Lord Sudun was a ferret. We murdered the Eastern hordes despite him."

Sugar's heart sunk, and she began to fear. The Red Lord had been savage. He'd expanded the holdings of the Kish, but only with extreme blood and terror. It was said he beheaded two-thousand men, women, and children in one day with his own sword. His troops had shown no mercy. Nor were they shown mercy by their commanders. She'd heard of soldiers being hung up by skewers through their chests. Of eyes being put out.

Voices rose in the hallway behind the clerk's table. Soon Lord Shim, the Creek Widow, River, and three children emerged.

The children were barefoot and clothed in an upland Shoka pattern. "Come on," River said to them. "You'll see what it's like to take a hot bath."

Sugar caught her glance, but River said nothing, just gave her a look that let her know she was in deep trouble.

"We have our commander," said Argoth.

"Good," said Shim.

"I don't know yet if I agree," said the Creek Widow. She put her hands on her hips and appraised Eresh. The Creek Widow's proper name was Matiga, but Sugar had learned her name as the Creek Widow and used it ever since. The Creek Widow was middle-aged and had never been married. Her face was slightly weathered with age, but her eyes were beautiful as cold pale stone. Sugar had heard some of the soldiers talk about her, but the Creek Widow seemed to be more interested in moss than she was in men.

"Come to my quarters tonight," Eresh said to the Creek Widow. "And I'll convince you."

"Zu," said the Creek Widow, "The only reason I would visit your quarters at night would be in order to slit your throat."

Eresh glanced at Argoth, and Sugar thought she saw a look of delighted surprise forming in his one intelligent eye. "Are you going to let this woman stand in your way?"

“Give him a chance,” said Argoth to the Creek Widow.

She folded her arms. “A chance,” she finally said. “I’ll be watching you.”

“Indeed you will,” said Eresh. He turned to Argoth. “I might need those worms sooner than you think.”

The Creek Widow furrowed her brow, not understanding the reference, but she didn't ask. Instead, she addressed Oaks. “Where did you find her?”

“In the west wood.” He held out Sugar’s bag. “She was carrying this.”

The Creek Widow took the bag, opened its mouth, and looked in. She passed it to Argoth who set it on the clerk’s table and pulled out the skull and the other items and laid them out on the table.

Oaks gave his report. When he finished, Argoth nodded and asked him and Urban to step back out into the bailey and wait. When they were gone and the door shut, Argoth sighed. “Out with the story,” he said. “The whole story.”

It was hard to look Argoth in the eyes. It was almost impossible to look at Lord Shim with his leathern face. But she faced them squarely and told her tale. She ended by saying, “I thought these might have some value.”

“You used your weave without permission,” said the Creek Widow. “Without supervision.”

“I did,” said Sugar. “But even River said that I was learning fast.”

“You should have talked to us,” said the Creek Widow.

“I did,” said Sugar. “Two weeks ago.”

“And we told you the time wasn't right,” said Argoth.

“This,” Eresh said and pointed a thick finger at Sugar, “this is just what I was talking about. Such an astonishing lack of discipline in your ranks. This is going to change. She's the blackest kind of thief. She deserves a thief's punishment.”

“Zun,” said Argoth, using the honorific that signalled an equal in rank.

“Do you want an army to shake the glorydoms? You can't have that and waste sacred Fire. I've seen your weaves--you don't have one minute of Fire to waste. She should be strung up. But I'll settle for her hand.”

Nobody spoke in Sugar's defense. True fear began to fill her. It was one thing to get a flogging. It was quite another to lose a hand. “Zu,” she said. “I retrieved items of great worth. We

did not want them to be discovered by the Fir-Noy. I'm sure their value will repay that which was lost."

"You took my days and squandered them," Eresh said, pinning her with his one eye.

"That is something I will not tolerate. Not even from a monster slayer."

"They were not your Days," said the Creek Widow.

"Not directly," said Eresh. "But somebody sacrificed for that candidate's weave. And the portion of Fire she wasted will have to be replaced. Who is it that will gift Fire next? Me. And so my days, of which I have so very few left, will go to cover her profligate ways."

"I will repay four-fold," said Sugar.

"Easy for you to say now," said Eresh. "But not all can handle the lore. You might never learn how to gift Fire. Furthermore, even if you are one of the elect, not all are going to survive my training. For all I know you could be dead tomorrow."

Sugar did not know how to respond.

"You've stolen from me," said Eresh. "You've stolen from us all. You put, in fact, the whole weave at risk. How many days worth of Fire are in there? Five? Ten? Maybe you think that's small."

"No, Zu."

"No is correct. A Divine would discount such a thing. But that is what makes us different. We value life. We do not piss away the Days of someone else's life."

"You're not going to take her hand," said the Creek Widow.

"I will."

The Creek Widow put her fists on her hips. "You will not."

Eresh looked at Argoth and Shim.

"She is a root," said Argoth. Each community of the Order was called a Grove. There were three members who made up the root, those that controlled the Grove. While Shim was the public and political face of the army, it was the root that controlled things, and so the Creek Widow had authority over this Kish.

"I do not want to meddle in your affairs," said the Creek Widow. "But this is a first offense. The next time she steals, you may take her hand."

"There won't be a next time," said Eresh. "She'll receive a flogging. Thirty stripes. Then she'll be stripped of her candidacy. It is a privilege to wear the dreadman's belt." He turned to her. "You have shown you are not ready for that honor."

Again, no one spoke. Sugar looked to the Creek Widow, who stood considering Eresh's pronouncement. The silence stretched long. At last the Creek Widow spoke. "He's right, my dear. I think we should suspend your time with River as well."

They were taking away her chance to learn the lore. A sick feeling knotted in her gut. It was true, she had used her weaves without permission for personal reasons. But she would repay. Besides, none of them had lost what she had to the recent events. Were they so stingy they couldn't even honor her mother and father in this small way? If it hadn't been for Sugar, Talen would have never been there to defeat the devourer and her monster. Surely they could make an allowance for one mistake.

"I want her candidate's belt," said Eresh. "And I don't want to see her in the fortress unless she's coming to clean the pisspots."

"I will take care of it," said the Creek Widow. "I think we can find a place for you with the washer women."

Sugar removed her candidate's belt and handed it over. She hesitated when taking off the candidate's weave. "I don't dare take it off."

"You may keep your governor," said the Creek Widow. "A may the Six help you if you remove it."

Sugar handed over her candidate's weave. She didn't realize until now the pride she had in wearing it. She slipped the governor arm band on and felt the door to her Fire slam shut.

Argoth motioned at the items on the table. "We'll keep these where they will be safe."

She knew she should trust Argoth and the Creek Widow, but for some reason she did not want to part with any of these items. Would they appropriate them for the Grove? If they were indeed weaves, who knew what the Kish would do with them? He might take them as payment. She began to think she wouldn't see any of them again. However, she looked at the faces of her superiors and knew now was not the time to protest.

"Zu," she asked. "May I at least keep what's left of my Da's bones?"

Argoth glanced at Matiga and Shim. "Take it. But don't let anyone know." Then he called Oaks and Urban back in. When the two stood before the others, Argoth said, "You will tell no

one of the items you saw on the table. You will say that she went to retrieve her father's skull. You will say it is kept here, to honor the dead. I don't want the Fir-Noy hunting her down to get it back. Do both of you understand me?"

"Yes, Zu," Both men said.

"Urban?"

"Yes," the man repeated.

"Good," said Argoth. "If I find otherwise, I shall not spare you."

"So vague," said Eresh. "He's saying your tongues will be carved out. I've found this army lax. I will happily make an example of you. As for the girl, she has been cast out. She will be flogged." He turned to Oaks. "And her hammerman will help administer that punishment."

"Zu," said Oaks in acceptance.

"I also understand you were covering for her fist leader on the night of the apple dance?"

"Yes, Zu," Oaks said.

"Seven stripes for your negligence. But before that you will report to the cess diggers. The smell in the north east corner is offensive to me. You will clean that out before nightfall."

"Zu," said Oaks. He looked down at Sugar, but she could not read his expression. Urban stood at attention beside him, the picture of the perfect soldier, but she knew he was soaking every word in. Oaks would say nothing of this meeting. She didn't know Urban, but she suspected he'd be the type to tell the tale the first chance he got.

They were dismissed and walked out of Lord Shim's quarters in silence. Urban was the first to break the silence. "I don't know that I want to be ordered about by a one-eyed Kish. Did you see how he abused Argoth?"

"They're old friends."

"Which raises other questions," said Urban.

Oaks did not reply.

Sugar turned to Oaks, "I'm sorry, Zu. I never thought this would come back to you."

A group of three candidates walked by. They were older soldiers, men who had seen battle. One gave Oaks the thumbs up. "We're behind you, Skirt Master."

"Rot you," Oaks replied.

The three men laughed and went on their way. Oaks had told the fist women what some of the other candidates said about them, how it was foolish to spend Fire on women. He told

them he agreed, but that he'd been given a task. And it was his job to fulfill that task, no matter his personal opinions. Oaks had not gone easy on them just because they were women. Because any enemy they faced most assuredly wouldn't. She'd taken to his training, wanting to prove him and the others wrong. She realized she'd done just the opposite and brought shame upon him.

"I'm sorry," Sugar said.

Oaks grunted.

"I'll dig the cesspits."

"Have you learned nothing?" he asked. "A soldier's role is not to think he knows better than his commander. If I was ordered to dig the cess, then, burst me, I will dig it."

They walked back across the inner bailey. They passed the whipping wall and a Sugar's mouth went dry. She told herself she could withstand it. But then as walked through the inner gate to the bailey where the candidates were still practicing with their wooden swords she realized she wouldn't have her candidate's weave to help her heal.

She didn't pay any attention to the men guarding the outer gates because she was thinking about her flogging. Thrity stripes wasn't a lark. They would cut flesh. And where would she get balm for those wounds?

Oaks ordered Urban to return to picket in the woods. As Urban departed, a tall yellow-haired man with long moustache and pants with yellow and black checkers walked up the road leading a horse that drew a cart. Sugar had not seen him before. On the cart behind him lay a dead man, bound with lashings. The dead man was naked except for a blue scarf tied about his neck. But it was his dead eyes that drew Sugar's attention—they were the orange of a Mungonite.

"Where would I find Lord Shim?" the man asked in an odd accent.

"The guards at the gate will help you," said Oaks. Then he nodded for Sugar to follow him. They walked across the short grass to the women by the stream doing the wash. Oaks addressed the mistress of this crew. "Here is another pair of arms, per Shim's orders."

The mistress stood over a washtub of soapy water, stirring the clothes in it. She was a large-boned woman with hands as big as a man's. She stopped and adjusted the hair up she'd pulled up off her neck into a bun. "Hammerman," she said warmly, "why don't you stay a while and stir my pot?"

Oaks cleared his throat. "Work her hard," he said then turned and walked back toward the fortress.

The mistress put her hands on her hips and looked longingly after Oaks. "So what's it like being manhandled by that honeyed stallion?"

Sugar was thinking about her flogging and the fact that she'd shamed her hammerman, so she didn't think about her words. "It was a fight. I gave him that black eye."

"Hoo," two of the other women said in delight.

"I hope not too quickly," said the mistress.

"I thought he was Fir-Noy," said Sugar.

Another one of the women, a fat one said, "That one could be a Bone Face coming with his pinky knife, and it wouldn't matter to me."

"You're the one that disappeared, aren't you?" asked the mistress. She clucked. "Next time you run off, you take me with you. And I will deal with his loveliness."

"No fair," another said.

"You've got your onion man," the mistress said. The women laughed at that, but Sugar could not see what was so funny.

"Now," the Mistress said and pointed at a large tub of soapy water full of tunics. "Put your sack down. You can start there."

Sugar laid the sack that held her father's skull out of the way. Then she rolled up her sleeves and plunged her hands into the hot water. She grabbed the first garment and began to scrub it on the wash board in the tub. As she scrubbed she could not help but wonder how many lashes it would take before her skin broke.

Chapter 11

Plans

After dismissing Sugar and Oaks, Argoth led Eresh and Matiga back to the stairs that ascended to Shim's chambers. He'd been able to find out enough from the three children they'd found in Redthorn to know Shim's army had even less time than he first thought. In fact, they might not have any time at all.

Argoth gestured up the stairs for Matiga to proceed. Eresh followed her up. As they reached the top, Eresh said to Matiga, "Lords, that was sight coming up those stairs." He let his eyes slide down Matiga's figure. "You are more glorious every time I see you."

"And you are not," Matiga replied.

Shim stood at the window looking out over the inner bailey of the fortress. The sound of hammering, men and horses carried up from below. Shim turned to face them. He addressed Eresh. "So, Master Kish, are you with us?"

"Almost."

"What do you need?"

Eresh nodded at Matiga. "That woman."

Matiga rolled her eyes and groaned.

"Good luck," said Shim.

"Oh, I'm already halfway there," said Eresh with a grin.

"Can we please talk about something important," said Matiga. "I'm sure our new commander will want to hear about Redthorn. And we need to know about his skir."

Argoth said to Eresh, "Mokad's Fire Wizards are already here."

"We don't know that they were Mokaddian," said Matiga.

Eresh raised his hand for them to hold off. "Let's start with Redthorn."

Argoth told Eresh about what they'd found in the village. Then he told him what they had been able to gather from the children. The whole village as well as some neighbors had turned out for the apple dance festivities. It had been a celebration like all the others that had been held with dance and food and laughter. But just at dusk that all changed. The heart of the cherry orchard had turned black. Nobody had noticed until the pained cry of a hound that had run into the orchard drew their attention. They thought the darkness was a trick of the evening shadows, so a man went into the orchard, calling for his hound. He disappeared into the blackness and never came out.

Just as they were about to send more men in, long ragged arms of black vapor began to stretch out between the trees and down the rows. The arms of black vapor reached out to the grassy spot where the villagers were celebrating. Snakes of it curled up and around people's limbs. At first nothing happened, and then one of the old farmers cried out and fell. At that the whole village had turned to run, but as they tried to leave the village, they found it surrounded by men who stood silently with their weapons, their faces painted white as Bone.

The children's mother had turned back to hide them in the upper reaches of their barn. She herself was going to try to escape on foot or draw the attention away from her children. But she wasn't able to close the barn doors because by this time the mists had moved into the village.

The children saw the mists wrap a few loops around their mother. They saw some of it slither into her mouth as she cried out and fell to her knees. She tried to crawl, but couldn't. The second boy had wanted to go to her aid, but the mists flowed into the barn below them, searching. And then it was too late, for a pair of Bone Faces came along, hauled their mother to her feet, and led her away. The mists did not bother the Bone Faces, but the children didn't trust it for it lay along the dirt at the bottom of the barn, moving when there was no wind.

The children peered through a knot hole to see where the men were taking their mother. They saw something come out of the orchard, something tall with horns. There were odd lavender flames flashing in the vapor around the thing, but they never could get a good look at it.

From their peephole they caught glimpses of the horned thing, the apple dance bonfire, and the Bone Faces as they lined the people up. The children stopped watching after their mother fell in the clutches of the horned thing. They pressed deep into the hay and they plugged their ears with their fingers. But it didn't block out the cries of fear and pain that rose throughout the

village. Sometime later the cries ceased. Then the Bone Faces slipped away and the village fell silent.

Through the whole tale Eresh had listened attentively to Argoth, his one eye burning with calculation. When Argoth finished, Eresh said:

There's a black wind, my love, that comes from the other side.

Comes to gather soldiers to the place where souls abide.

Gathering sons to fathers, daughters to mothers of men.

Oh listen as it shrills. Listen to it whine.

The black wind is coming. It's coming in the night.

The black wind, my love, that feeds upon the mind

"What is that?" asked Shim.

"Just a bit of Kish lullaby. I used to think it was simply about death. But maybe there's more to it."

"That's how you sing your children to bed?" asked Matiga. "No wonder you Kish grow up into monsters."

"Another pet name," Eresh said to Argoth. "I think she likes me."

"I'm beginning to wonder if the Bone Face paint was a disguise," said Shim.

"It's still a good time for raiding, but the Bone Faces have been scarce this year," said Argoth. "Mokad will want to fill their war weaves before they attack. I don't understand the horned creature and mists, but Mokad might be using a deception."

"I've heard of horned Divines among the Bone Faces," said Matiga. "Maybe they're in league with Mokad. After all, we're a threat to both."

"Bone Face or Mokad," said Shim, "there's no way we can protect every hamlet and village. The people need to gather to their defenses."

"Agreed," said Argoth.

"And our Master Kish needs to provide his skir." Shim walked over to his table. Upon it lay a number of weaves, some made of metal and others of withies. He picked up a round disc. It was gold, woven into a strong pattern. "Here is Lumen's skir catch. You must regain his skir. Mokad is coming with her ships. I want to catch them at sea. I want to burn them with our seafire lances down to the waves. But if you do not have the skir when they come, we will have missed our best chance."

Shim was right. Mokad would bring two or three skir masters and at least a dozen skir. With them and their winds, they could wreck ships and blow arrows off course. They could blind his army. Shim needed to counter that threat. This is the very reason why Argoth had sent word to Eresh before anyone else.

Eresh took the weave from Shim and felt it as if appraising its quality. "This will do nicely. You'll have your skir; don't you worry about that. But that isn't our only problem. I may clear the skies, but we will still need dreadmen. You cannot send candidates to contend with the terrors of Mokad."

"We have what we have," said Shim.

"Not quite," said Argoth. There was another way. He looked at Matiga who nodded her approval. "There is a method for forcing candidates," he continued. "We can give you dreadmen of the first within a few days."

"Why didn't you speak of this before?" asked Shim.

"Because it's risky. It will break many of them. I didn't bring it up earlier because I thought we had time. I don't want to waste men."

"How many loremen?" Shim asked.

"Of the five hundred candidates, I think we can raise four hundred. Maybe more. Maybe a less."

"Maybe a lot less," said Eresh. "But some is better than none."

Shim considered this for a moment. "Let's say we get our four hundred. That's four terrors." He turned to Eresh. "We don't know the size of the force they're sending. So I can't tell if that will be enough. But they're bogged down with Nilliam. So they won't be able to throw everything at us."

"Unless they put aside their differences to fight a common foe," said Argoth.

"Even if they send a relatively small force," said Eresh, "four will be a narrow thing. Your dreadmen are new. Theirs are hard with experienced. And I'll wager my eye they will send more than dreadmen of the first. But even if four is enough, they will require prodigious amounts of Fire. Weaves have huge appetites." He pointed at the withy weaves of might stacked on Shim's table. "I've looked at your weaves. I've seen your candidates. Your weaves are starting to run dry. I don't think you have a week's worth of Fire for four hundred men. I don't think you have enough for two days."

"Then I will make another sacrifice," said Shim. "These soldiers follow me. They risked everything trusting my word. If I have to sacrifice all my Days in their service, I will do it."

"Noble," said Eresh, "But then you'll be dead. And who will lead them to victory?"

"If this fails," said Shim, "we're all dead anyway."

"What about our visitors?" asked Matiga. "There is almost a hammer of friends who can gift Fire."

"Some of them are polluted," said Argoth. He'd seen the sleth that had answered his call. Some of them had not taken on bits of animal soul. But many had. And you did not want Fire from such a person. You did not want to risk getting some of those bits of loose soul. "I think we have only a handful that I trust can give clean."

"Then we have that handful, Shim, me, and this lout," she said and pointed at Eresh. "It will have to be enough."

"Did you hear that?" Eresh said with delight, "She called me lout."

"She's liable to call you a lot of things," said Shim. "I know."

"Lout is grand," said Eresh. "And I'm honored to be included in the list of donors. But why isn't Argoth giving? Not to disagree with the lady, but we need all the Fire we can get."

"He does not give because he gutters low," said Matiga.

A man could never know with exactness how much Fire he had left. You couldn't measure your Days like you could pints of olive oil. Argoth had already given much in secret as a captain of the Shoka. He'd been compelled to give to the Skir Master Rubaloth when he was his thrall. He had very little left. He did have a store of Fire from his son, Nettle. But that was sacred. He had stolen Nettle's Fire. The boy had been willing, but it had been stealing nevertheless, and that Fire would not be used.

Eresh looked at Argoth. "You'd better not die before the fun begins."

"Oh, I'll be there," said Argoth. "Someone is going to have to protect your backside."

"Fire wouldn't be an issue," said Eresh, "if we just stole it from the Fir-Noy clan. They've declared you their enemies. And they are holding back on any principles. Mokad has already sacrificed a number of your people. Those were Shoka in Redthorn, correct?"

"We will not become our enemies," said Matiga. "We will not steal."

Eresh said, "You'll steal their lives, but not their Fire?"

"We will not steal," said Matiga. "Do not suggest it again. And if you decide you cannot abide by that law, then you will face the wrath of your own oath."

Eresh considered her. "I think I would rather face you. But I will tell you this: your oaths will mean less than a pile of sand without dreadmen."

"You let us worry about the Fire and dreadmen. You get the skir. Once these candidates recover from the forcing, we can begin to teach them the lore. When they know how to gift, they can repay us and fill weaves for a new crop of candidates. We just need a little time."

"If Mokad had only waited a season," said Shim. "If we'd just had a few more months, we could have fielded an army of dozens of terrors. More terrors than any three of the Western Glorydoms combined. But wishful thinking will get us nowhere." He shook his head and turned to them. "I think our course is clear. We will evacuate as many in our hamlets and villages as will go to the two Shoka fortresses in roots of the mountains. Eresh will catch Lumen's pack. Matiga and Argoth will begin this process for forcing dreadmen."

"They may land elsewhere and march on the fortress," said Argoth.

Shim shook his head. "There aren't enough good spots to land. And even if they did, they'd be crossing through the outer peaks, stringing out their lines and exposing their flanks. Such a strategy might work for a small Bone Face raid, but not for Mokad's army. No, they will come into the bay. And we will be waiting for them."

"How much time do we have?" asked Matiga.

Shim said, "The reports from my spies among the Fir-Noy are still saying Mokad won't be here until next season. Which tells me my spies have been turned. Mokad is already gathering Fire for their weaves. Their first ships have landed, no doubt in Fir-Noy lands under the cover of night. I think we might have only a couple of days for the main force."

In normal circumstances, Argoth knew Shim might consider retreat. But they all knew that wasn't an option now. The whole of the Shoka, Vargon, and Burund clans were at risk. Without skir any of their ships would be caught at sea. And while the men, women, and children might flee overland to the wild lands of the south or into the interior, winter was coming. They wouldn't get far. Mokad would hunt them down. And those that escaped Mokad would face the Woodikin. Like it or not, this would be Shim's stand. Within a week they would know whether his people would stand or fall.

Eresh looked over at Matiga. He winked his blind eye. "In a day or two, when you're facing death's cold stare, you come to me, and we'll laugh at him together."

"You go ahead and laugh," said Matiga. "I'm going to raise an army of dreadmen."

Chapter 12

Attack

Sugar was given only a short break from the washing to eat. She needed food. Her use of the weave had put a wolf in her belly and made her light-headed. But she also wanted to talk to her brother Legs before her flogging and she didn't know that she'd have time later. So she got her mash from the cooks as quickly as possible then hurried to the smithy.

Despite his blindness, Legs had helped Da in their own smithy and had naturally taken to helping the fortress smiths in theirs. She found Legs alone, the others having gone to get their own meals. She talked quickly, standing next to forge to warm herself. Legs sat on a bench, soot smeared on his face, and listened to her tale, asking questions now and again. She'd brought Da's skull with her, and the whole time Legs ran his fingers over it, exploring it until he must have know every bump.

When she finished, he said, "One of these days I'm going to pluck the eyes out of a goat to see if they won't grow in my own head. Then the next time you won't have to go alone."

"Yes, and both of us would then be getting the flogging."

Legs shook his head. "No, if I had eyes, then when that rotted watch of Plum came, it would have been the two of us against their three. We would have taken them together. I never liked Shard anyway, always stank of fish."

"Well, it's done now," she said, thinking of the approaching flogging, and looked out the smithy doors across the bailey. The barracks stood opposite the smithy. Upon the walkway of the second level Talen strode along toward his fist's room. He had his tunic off. These last few weeks the weaves and lorework had changed him. She could see it in his walk and the hardening of his limbs and chest. He didn't have the size and strength of his brother Ke, but he was quick.

Quick with the lore. She and Talen had started out a few weeks ago at the same place in their slethery, competing against each other, but he had outdistanced her.

He glanced down into the bailey, saw her watching him, and pointed at her. She waved a two-fingered hello, then he disappeared into his rooms. She envied him. He would be learning the lore when she was not. All that had been taken from her.

"How can they cast you out?" asked Legs. "You were down in that cave."

"One good deed doesn't make a man now, does it?"

He shook his head in disgust. "One of these days, I'll have my goat eyes, and you won't have to shoulder everything alone."

"If you want eyes, why don't you take them from a hawk?"

"A hawk? Too small. Can you imagine? They'd be rolling around in my sockets."

"Well I don't know what you want with a goat," she said. But before Legs could answer, a Shoka battle horn sounded in the distance.

"Where's that coming from?" asked Legs.

"It sounds like the river."

The horn sounded again. "There was no drill announced today," he said. Outside and upon the walls, men began rushing to their posts.

"I'd better get up on the wall with the other women," she said.

"Yes, the fearsome washer woman brigade."

"Hush," she said. Despite Eresh casting her out of the army proper, the washer women had still been given posts as slingers upon the wall, although they would probably lend support to candidates who could sling farther and harder. But it didn't matter to Sugar. If they were being attacked, she was going to be standing on that wall, and nobody would gainsay her.

Sugar rushed out of the smithy doors, leaving Legs behind. Being blind, he had no post. She hastened to the tower to which the washer women were assigned. Soldiers, cooks, and masons hurried up stairs and across battlements. As she ran across the bailey, she passed a hooded man walking purposefully, not toward the walls, but the smithy.

She'd seen him before when she'd been ordered to come get her mash. He was the one who had brought in the cart of cabbages. His clothes were those of a commoner. But his boots were not.

He glanced around furtively, then pulled a long knife out of its sheath at his waist and held it close to his side, as if hiding it. Da had been a blacksmith and had taught her how to handle a knife. He's also taught her how to judge a blade. The knife's hilt was worked with ivory. You didn't put ivory on just any blade. And even if he was a fabulously rich cabbager, he wouldn't carry such a fine blade to work.

A group of candidates rushed past the cabbager, not a one of them giving him a second glance.

Then it dawned on her what he was doing. They'd been warned. Every member of Shim's new army was a target of the Fir-Noy clan and the others that had sided with them. It was said the Fir-Noy were paying for the ear and belt of dead candidates. Who knew—they might pay a double reward for catching any who had been down in the Devourer's cave. Whatever the pay rate, of all the candidates, Legs's would be the easiest to kill.

“Legs!” she shouted. “Beware!” She drew her own knife and charged after the man.

The man did not turn at her shout. In fact, there was so much noise, shouting, and commotion upon the battlements, she wondered if Legs had heard her.

The man began to run straight for Legs standing in the open doors of the smithy.

“Legs!” Sugar yelled. “Shut the doors! He's got a knife!”

Legs turned his head towards her, then he must have heard the footsteps of the cabbager, for he stepped back into the smithy and began to close the doors. But he wasn't fast enough. The man was too close. Legs must have heard this as well, for he scrambled back from the doors and reached for something that lay on one of the work tables.

Legs could wrestle. Da, a large blacksmith whom many traveled miles to test, had seen to that. But Legs was still a boy. And blind. He wasn't of a size to wrestle a man. But it would never come to that. The cabbager would have that knife in him before Legs could so much as shout.

Sugar sprinted as hard as she could, but the cabbager had too much of a lead on her. In a flash she withdrew her knife.

The man was only a few strides from the smithy.

She hurled her knife as hard as she could at the cabbager. It turned, end over end. It was sharp. And if he'd been a stationary target she would have had a better chance of sticking him. But the knife hit him hilt first just to the left of one shoulder blade and bounced to the ground.

The cabbager rushed into the smithy no longer hiding his long knife.

Legs squared himself to the cabbager holding a long rod of iron in his hands. He didn't hold it like a sword, but a club, and swung it back and forth in front of him as if trying to bat at wasps. Legs wore a candidate's weave. It didn't make him into a fell warrior—multiply a boy and you just get a stronger boy—but there was enough strength and speed in those swings to make the cabbager pause.

The cabbager waited for Legs to swing, then lunged.

Legs batted at him, striking his arm.

The cabbager backed away, fury upon his face, and moved to the side. Sugar could see what was going to happen next. Legs didn't know exactly where the cabbager was. A few more swings and Legs would expose his side. Then the cabbager would plunge his long knife in.

But Legs swinging his rod had given her enough time. She didn't have another weapon. Didn't dare slow down to pick the knife up off the ground as she ran past it. Instead, she yelled and jumped, hoping to kick the man hard enough in the head to daze him.

If she'd been wearing her candidate's weave, that is what would have happened. But she didn't have the speed, grace, and power the weave gave. In fact, it had all happened so fast, she hadn't even thought to take off her governor, which she would have done despite the risks. But even if she had, it took time to build Fire. It wasn't like when she was in the woods already burning at an elevated level.

The cabbager saw her and twisted out of the way so that she dealt him only a glancing blow in the chest with her knee. He slashed at her, missed, but she was off balance and slammed into one of the upright beams that supported the roof. The collision disoriented her, and she fell to the ground.

Legs swung his rod, missed, and struck the stone forge instead.

The cabbager moved back to a table stacked with small ingots of iron from twenty to forty pounds.

Sugar snatched a smith's hammer from the wall and charged at the man again, but by that time he had one of the ingots and heaved it at her head. When she ducked, he kicked her in the side of the face. Her vision went black for a moment. She stumbled, dropped the hammer.

Moments later she could see again. The man had grabbed another ingot and hurled it at Legs. It struck him in the shoulder, and knocked him back. Knocked the rod out of his hands. Legs cried out and clutched his shoulder.

Sugar tried to get up. She had a massive headache and her world was spinning. "Run, Legs," she slurred.

The man picked up another ingot, murder on his face, preparing to heave the hard iron with all his might upon Legs who had dropped to the ground and was frantically feeling about the dusty brick floor with his good arm for his rod.

#

Talen was in his room lying on his bunk when he heard the battle horn. He had decided to forgo the hot pools, where he'd surely be slapped and touched by the other men, and instead quickly rinsed himself by the stream that ran in front of the fortress and then retreated back to his room. There were two rooms to each fist's quarters. The backroom held twelve bunks, three to each wall. The front room was smaller and was where the men kept their weapons and gear.

He rushed out of the back room, taking off his governor and putting on his candidate weave. By the time the horn sounded again, he had his tunic on and had picked up his armor bundle, quiver, and bow and was running out the door and onto the walkway. He turned to sprint to the nearest stairway and saw Sugar, out of the corner of his eye, down in the bailey running for the smithy. She yelled for help and threw her knife.

Talen stopped and turned. From this vantage he could see through the open double doors and into the smithy. A bearded man he didn't recognize stood there, menacing someone with a long knife. Talen couldn't see who it was, but he knew it was Legs; he'd seen him talking to Sugar earlier.

Talen released his armor bundle and quiver. He didn't have time to run down a stairwell, so he hopped the wooden railing of the walkway and dropped the one storey to the ground. He rolled when he landed and came up running, his bow stave in his hand. It was not much of a weapon.

He flew across the bailey, his weave multiplying him. All about the walls men shouted and ran to their posts. Talen sprinted the last few yards and saw the situation clearly. The

bearded attacker held an ingot of iron above his head. Legs was on his knees, feeling about for something on the floor. Sugar was trying to stand.

Talen hurled his bow stave and shouted. The man glanced to see the new threat. The bow stave struck him in the side and bounced off, but it was just enough delay, for Talen was already rushing through the smithy doors.

The man heaved the ingot at Talen, but Talen deflected it and charged into him, grabbing at his knife wrist. The two of them crashed backwards, into a table, knocking a box of arrow points to the ground.

The man was larger than Talen, but he wasn't multiplied. Talen punched the man in the gut. Then he raised his fist and slammed it into the side of the man's neck. He'd wanted to strike his adam's apple, but the man had turned. Nevertheless, the blow did some damage, for the man slackened.

Talen twisted the attacker's wrist and in a moment held the long knife. He didn't pause, but reversed the knife and brought it back hard, stabbing the man between the ribs. He drew back for a killing blow, but Sugar cried out.

"No!" she said. "They'll want him for questioning!"

Talen paused. The battle fury was upon him and wanted to kill the man. But more than that, he wanted the man's Fire. His desire wasn't the beginnings of lust he'd felt before. It raged, shouting to be slaked.

Talen pulled back, alarmed. The attacker grabbed a half forged sword blade from a work table. But the weave had been building Talen. In a flash, Talen seized the man's and stabbed it. He stabbed it again. The man roared in pain and Talen slammed his fist into the man's face. It was a solid blow and the man fell to the floor.

Talen heard someone coming. He turned and saw another stranger, a big blond with yellow and black checkered pants. Talen turned to face the man, but the blond stopped and held up his tattooed hands. "I'm a friend. I heard a shout for help."

Behind Talen the first attacker growled and tried to rise. Talen turned, but Legs had already come around behind with an iron rod. He swung one-handed, a little out of position, and hit the man with glancing blow to the head. The man toppled to the ground.

Talen turned back to the big blond who had his hands on his hips looking very pleased. He pointed at Sugar. "I think she needs some help."

"Tie his feet," Sugar said. She was holding the side of her face, leaning against the forge for support.

"I don't think he's getting up," said Talen. But Legs scrambled, feeling his way to a bin of cord and then bringing back a good length to bind the man's feet. Talen kept his knife out in front of him at the blond. "Back away," he demanded.

The man raised his tattooed hands again. "You've no threat from me." Then he turned and called to the soldiers at the gate saying they'd captured an attacker in the smithy.

"You'll kill us all," the attacker said. He coughed wetly, blood spattering his tongue, blood flowing from his wounds.

Talen looked down at him. His tattoos were those of a Shoka.

"Who sent you?" Sugar asked.

"Bloody sleth," the man said with hate. "You bloody Koramite sleth." Then the expression on his face changed to one of fear. His breaths became more ragged. Then his eyes rolled up in his head. Legs's blow must have done more damage than he thought. That or Talen had punctured a lung with the stab between the ribs.

"That one isn't going to be doing a lot of talking," said the blond. "But sometimes you don't have the luxury of merely wounding your enemy."

Beyond the blond Talen could see a group of soldiers coming their way. The battle horn call to posts had stopped.

The blond pointed at Legs's wrist and said, "You two have clan markings I haven't seen before. Is that Koramite?"

Talen looked at Legs's wrist. Then he looked again. He hadn't noticed, but Legs's tattoo had changed. It looked like the beginning of Talen's own, the one that had drawn the attention of the enemy dreadman.

"Yeah," said Talen. "Koramite. He's full-blooded. I'm a half-breed."

The blond nodded. "Myself, I've never held with those that say Koramite blood has rot in it. One of my best men was a Koramite. And it looks like you're of the same mold."

"Who are you?" asked Talen.

#

Berosus smiled at the young Koramite man. Two, he thought. They have two who have been marked. This was news, although neither of the markings looked quite right. Still, this was why he always wanted someone on the inside. And why he loved to do it himself. He wondered what other surprises this nest of sleth would bring.

He replied to the Holy One's request. "I'm Flax of Lem, just in from the docks. And I will say, while we've only just met, I have a strong feeling over the next few days you and I will be seeing more of each other."

The truth of the matter was, in less than twentyfour hours, he would be seeing much more of him. And then he and this unfortunate corruption would have an honest man's chat.

#

Sugar looked at the man on the floor wondering if she might be able to figure out anything about who had just attempted to kill her brother.

"He's not long for this world," said the blond stranger.

The cabbage's blood was pooling along the floor bricks. She suspected the blond was right—the cabbage wouldn't come to again before he'd lost far too much blood.

"What's this?" asked Argoth.

Sugar turned. Argoth, the Kish, Matiga, and Shim all darkened the doorway. Argoth moved into the smithy and looked down on the cabbage.

"He was after Legs," Talen said. "But it was Legs who delivered the final blow."

"Not without help," said Legs.

"Give a report," said Shim. And Sugar did, avoiding Eresh and his one-eyed stare. When Talen finished his part, Argoth squatted down beside the cabbage who looked to have expired.

The cabbage was balding. He wore a simple tunic, but the stitching at the seams was tight and even, a quality piece of work. His leather belt had been carved, not with a landscape or scene of people, but an intricate square pattern, studded with pewter. It was a Shoka pattern. As she'd noted before, his knife had an ivory handle. That would have been expensive. Combined with the boots, it meant he wasn't poor. There was nothing else distinctive about him. He was just a Shoka. Someone looking for the candidate bounty. And if there was one in the fortress willing to try for it, there would be another.

Argoth said, "He's one of those louts from Bain."

"We'll round them up," said Shim. He pointed at Sugar and Talen. "You two get Legs to my quarters. He turned and looked over at the blond. "I'm assuming you have my present?"

"I do indeed, lord."

"Very good," said Shim. "We'll talk later." Then he and the others hurried to the stairs leading up to the battlement.

As they exited, Sugar turned to Legs who held his arm. He'd almost died. He'd been only a second away from death. She trembled inside. She'd felt such a trembling before--it was the trembling that came in the wake of danger. If Talen hadn't been in the area and come to the rescue, Legs would be dead.

Her rash behavior last night had almost cost Legs his life. "I'm sorry," she said to Legs. "If I'd had a weave, that cabbager never would have never gotten close."

"If you'd had a weave, it would have meant you wouldn't have been disciplined. Which means you would have been with your fist practicing. You probably wouldn't have even been in the inner bailey. You certainly wouldn't have been eating lunch with me. If you'd had a weave, you wouldn't have been able to slow him down at all."

Sugar realized it was true. But it was beside the point. The cabbager, or whatever he actually was, had easily overcome her. And what if he hadn't been a commoner? What if he'd been a candidate? Legs should not have been left alone. He needed protection. And when she was with him, she needed to be able to fight, not serve as a target dummy.

She'd almost been knocked out. Her head still ached massively. It made her want to take her governor off, to figure out the lore on her own. But she knew that was folly.

Legs rolled his shoulder and winced.

"Is it okay?"

"Nothing's broken," he said. "It will be fine."

Sugar turned to Talen and grabbed his arm. "Thank you," she said.

He flinched and pulled his arm away. He must have injured it somehow. "Anything for you and your thug brother. We're blood now, remember?"

She looked up at him, his open, honest face. It was a fine face. He was not his brother Ke, but she'd begun to think that didn't matter.