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I See the Horse

A THESIS

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

WITH A MAJOR IN CREATIVE WRITING

By

Charles "Kirk" Callaway

Edmond, Oklahoma

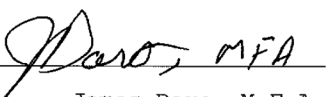
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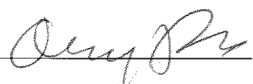
I See the Horse


A THESIS

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

AUTHOR: Charles "Kirk" Callaway

TITLE: I See the Horse

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I See the Horse is a fantasy novel that follows the adventures of Komar Voorhexees of Port Karpricius during a time of civil war within The Ten Kingdoms of the Enlibar Empire. The primary focus or super objective of the novel centers on the pursuit of a religious artifact, The Tear of Vashanka, and the delivery of documents important to the war cause.

The novel follows story telling lessons from Twain, Vonnegut, Robert Mckee, and Orson Scott Card. The novel also mixes elements from canonical masters such as Homer, Shakespeare, and Joyce with genre-champions such as J.R.R. Tolkien, R.E. Howard, and G.R.R. Martin, as well as components of heavy metal music. The result lies squarely between the subgenres of Sword and Sorcery and High (Epic)

Fantasy. The first six chapters fit into the Sword and Sorcery category; whereas, the second dives into Epic Fantasy as the protagonist slowly becomes part of the bigger milieu.

The novel was created to have an original, gritty, realistic world with an American feel and flavor and a fantasy city drenched in the culture of the American South. To create a fantasy novel with an American feel was the project's initial purpose and drive. This is accomplished by drawing heavily upon the author's life and experience.







- Reg Tuscan's Manor
- Sogut's Manor
- Swamp Wolves' Den
- Formasita's
- The Ellonian Haberdashery
- The Theibian Bath house
- The Theibian Temple of the Ram
- The Rankan Temples
- Temple of Krozious
- Temple of Lorik
- Mugs and Maidens
- Trigg's Shrimp and Beans
- The Taste of Tradition
- Boykin's Bar ---White circle
- Old Lady Blossom's Apartments-Thanantos and Kormar's place
- Sorb's pig sty
- Krosk's apartment
- Kormar's Parents'
- Kormar's Aunt's
- The Unchaste Lady
- The Iron Maiden
- Kormar's Uncle's
- Stilcho's Manor
- Navy Base
- Light Tower
- Le Sobarano's Beach Manor
- The Track
- Speech park
- The Old King's Theater
- The 1,000 Horse Stable
- Le Sobarano's Manor
- The Library

I See the Horse

I See the Horse

Chapter 1: The Beginning/ Two Moons

I close one eye to focus. The burning taste sticks in my throat. My head spins with corn liquor as I fail to keep it from swaying.

The round arches of the old, brown stucco tavern glow with the warm, orange light of oil lanterns and the fireplace. The smells of smoke and stale booze flare my nostrils, which catch the scent of the Sailor's Soup's gray roux warming over the fire.

Sweat drips from my brow. I switch eyes to regain focus. The room swirls with the rustles and squeaks of leather and chainmaille armor, the hollow clomps of boots on the wooden floor, and the endless chatter of liars. Some fool is trying to recite the *Bard's Lie* with the lines out of order. The cracked, smoke stained sign over the hearth reads *SAILORS SOUPE, ALL DAI, ALL NITE, FUR OVER 200 YEARES.*

A young, blonde bar-maiden blurs into my view. "Are you going to be alright, cutie?"

I do my best to sit up straight. "Never better, my dear."

"I think you should switch to coffee and bread—so you can come home with me, instead of ending up in an alley with your throat cut."

She leans over the table forcing her cleavage into my view, and looking at me with a wicked smile that forces me to return my own smirk of depravity.

"Hey, wench!" I hear, as the young barmaid spins and falls backwards onto my table. The room stops.

I hate a woman-hitting coward. A surge of life pulls me to my feet. As I help the young woman up, I can't believe who I see. Fuck! Wrak Tagnot, his tall skinny Ilsigg sidekick, and another of Stilcho's guild lackeys. They stand in front of the abused girl. The third member, a sandskin like Wrak, looks very young. They wear all black and the red mark of Stilcho's gang.

Wrak, a short, skinny, Enlibrite man, moves in a jittery manner and speaks in a hurry. His thin mustache and greasy, sloppy, short hair glow a dirty-mustard blond against his tanned white skin.

"This just got even better. Now, I get to slap around two bitches." Wrak snickers, squints his gray-blue eyes at me, and elbows his Ilsigg buddy in the ribs.

"You mean him," pops out of my mouth as I point to Wrak's friend. "I mean no one even knows his name, just Wrak's bitch. That's all I know him by." I raise my hands out to the side. "What? What are going to do?"

The Ilsigg man's long, straight, black hair covers his red-brown face as he lunges at me. I fade back and he stumbles forward over the table. I pull the thumb release, dumping a small dagger from my forearm into my left hand. Wrak slaps the girl and pulls her up as a shield in front of him.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Wrak? What are you going to do? Let the girl go. What did she do to you anyway?"

"She ran into me. What does it matter to you? Are you still looking for a whore with a pure soul? You're a sad song, Kormar. What was that Shou-Lung slut's name? Tamari was it? I can't remember every slave I ship to the North. As long as the skin is darker than sand, right Half-breed?"

The thoughts, I fuckin' hate you, and I'm going to cut you from ear-to-ear, bound through my mind.

As I say, "Come get some, you ass kissin', cock suckin', son of a sailor's whore." I motion him toward me

with a wave of my hand. Rage pumps my blood with a fierce thump. My eyes widen with focus.

Wrak throws the girl to his new lackey, and he and his Ilsigg buddy draw their daggers.

"Why don't you tell your boyfriend to stay out of this, Wrak? Unless you're too scared to fight me on your own?"

The two men begin to circle around the table from opposite sides to trap me. The Ilsigg man makes his move. I jump between them launching myself over the table, knocking it down, and falling on the other side with a roll and a stumble. I stagger to my feet.

The thud of a club against a cracking skull echoes into my ears. The dirty, plump owner of the bar stands over Wrak's young Enlibrite lackey who was holding the girl hostage. "She belongs to me!" he screams through his yellow teeth. He cases the room with wicked eyes.

Several men with batons corner Wrak's Ilsigg buddy, and an instant wave of chaos rolls throughout the bar. Wrak lunges toward me. I lock his arm and pull his shoulder into the edge of the spilled table. I reach to slice his throat,

but some member of the brawl pulls me back and I slice across his cheek.

Wrak stands, touches his wound, and looks at me with amazement. He picks his dagger off the floor, and charges my way. He swipes at me nicking my arm, as I free myself with an elbow low to the gut of whoever has hold of me.

We face off. Wrak signals his next lunge with a dip of his shoulder. Our daggers bang together with a loud clank. I kick at his guts, but he catches my foot. In my drunkenness, I easily fall. A cover of blackness flashes over my eyes as my head hits the floor. I drop my dagger. My foot comes free of Wrak's grasp. I roll to my right. Wrak's boot stomps down, barely missing my face. I pull myself up, stumbling back against the old knotty pine bar soaked and stained with cheap drink.

Wrak pokes at me again, but I catch his hand with both of mine. Another flash of black as Wrak gives me a left hook, catching me just above my ear. I slide to my left with the force of the blow, raising his captured arm over my head, spinning behind him.

I slam his dagger hand into the bar. I slide to my left toward the door, and put Wrak's back to the brawl. I

see the girl wiping her lip as she gets pushed my way. Someone grabs Wrak from behind.

I'm too drunk for this shit, now's my chance. I grab the girl and we plow toward the door. I look back to Wrak engulfed in the chaos. He points at me and yells over the crowd, "Kormar! You'll pay for this!"

I stop in the doorway, spit on the floor, giving him my dirtiest scowl. Then I wave to him like a lady with my fingers, smiling, giggling, and blowing him kisses.

The maiden pushes me onto the old dirt path of the bustling slum. "Come on, smart-ass. I think he hates you enough."

The crisp evening cools my sweat as we walk. The rush of the fight wears off and a wave hits my gut. The spit flows into my mouth. The water from my gut spills up, and sweat drips from my every pore as the unstoppable force of my vomit spills into the street.

A group of priests of the sun god Krozious stand across the street surrounded by their guards. They hum their chant of creation. An old white-haired bishop in gold and white robes spits through missing teeth to the passers-by on the street. "Fools and lost souls, turn from this

darkness, from this cloud of debauchery, and turn to the light of the creator."

I look up at my newest love. "Let's get out of here. He's going to make me sick again."

I look back to the bishop and I can see the rest of the group with him. It looks like another bishop and four arch-bishops. Hunched over, I search for focus. They're all Enlibrites. On their heads they dawn black camauros with red trim marking their status. They wear crimson and black robes, Arch-bishops.

I raise up, wipe the sweat from my face, and focus back on the sun-worshipers. But I don't see any symbols of the sun, but instead they wear golden ladders. The Order of High Ascension, those that run the church and Empire, said to be holders of sacred powers and knowledge. What are they doing down here? A group of hungry beggar-boys follows them. I'm done with this. Who cares what they fuckin' want?

I grab the maiden's hand and we run south across Worker's Road toward the sea, laughing and yelling curses into the night.

I stretch my eyes open to see a tall ropy man standing over me as I feel the small, uncomfortable bed shake.

Through my haze, I realize it's my uncle kicking the old wooden frame. So, I roll over and put my back to him.

"Oh no you don't," I hear him say as his rough hands grab my bare ankles, and he begins to pull me from the bed.

I kick at his hands and rise up. "O.K. Fuck!"

"It's almost time for dinner, boy. Get out of my bed. The Winds of Fredor pushed us around today on our journey home, and beat me to a pile of corn dust." He tickles at my feet sticking out of the worn woolen blanket.

"Get up and make me something to eat. Since you've been using my bed while I've been gone, it's the least you could do," my uncle squawks from his bearded, sun-scorched, Ilsigg face.

I stand up and adjust my hard cock, which throbs and aches with last night's drink. My head spins and pounds. I stumble toward the pale blue door and say, "I thought you weren't coming back until tomorrow. Where's the girl?"

"What girl? Have you been fucking whores in my bed again?"

I wonder when she left. Oh well. "I gotta go fill the sea," pops out of my mouth.

"You look more like your father's side of the family every time I see you." I hear as I slip outside.

The salty air hits my nose as I stretch and the memories of a lifetime of summers in these waters pulls a smile across my face. "You mean like a white boy," I fire back as the door closes.

I walk down the sea weathered stairs and south across Fish Street to the edge of a crooked pier. The dewed planks chill my bare-feet and wet the cuffs of my brown leather pants.

Pulling myself free to piss, I look east and west. Nearly a hundred piers dart off of the floating boardwalk. I hear the roll of the waves underneath me, and the caw of gulls passing over my head. The green water harbor of the Kassian Sea rocks full of fishing and shrimp boats, Merchants' junks, Theibian triremes, Rankan long boats, and City frigates.

The setting red sun shimmers off the foamy tips of the waves and the white sugar sands of the grass dotted beaches. The tall palm trees bend with the heavy winds that carry the scent of fish from the buyer's market.

Resting on the point, in the distance to the west beyond the Beach district and the mouth of the mighty Smugglers' River, the flames of the huge light tower glimmer in my eyes. Ferries glide back and forth across the smooth water of the mouth. It's said that the river plunges so deep that cargo ships can be towed over 300 leagues north.

I sigh with relief as my water flows into the sea. The white structure of the light tower spirals up in the shape of an upside down spire shell, honoring Fredor's Shell of Waves. The city's naval piers and base-walls surround the massive tower. On the west side of the base, tucked safely away, rests the wealthy and Le Soberano's beach manors. Lucky fuckers.

I tuck myself back into my pants. Our beach sits between the river and Fish Street's piers, young wave-boarder's ride the evening's last rolling tide. I guess we're lucky they let us have any sand at all.

We've been enslaved and oppressed for generations, through the 100 year rule of Les Tierabeaux, to the 120 years of the Enlibrite Empire, the Rankan invasion, and even now as a territory free of slavery and the Empire's law; the lines between the haves and have-nots, the white

and brown grow even clearer. I can't stay here at my uncle's. I need to get some gold crowns from somewhere.

I turn north and begin to work my way back to my uncle's apartment. The street stacks east and west with stilted wooden marina buildings flaking with gray and white paint.

Reaching the top of the stairs I can see far enough north into the Pit I can almost see my parent's apartment from here. I can't stay there either, odd hours and drunken whoring makes sure of that.

I enter my uncle's modest flat. The fire lightly glows from his small fireplace. The cool nights of winter have past, and soon the evenings will be as hot as the days.

My uncle raises his curly, matted, black hair off the bed. "I started the fire. The grouper is on the table."

The worry of having no place to live comes over me as I prepare the fish and warm the pot of grits on the iron griddle over the coal fire. I know exactly how my uncle likes his meals from the three seasons I spent as his net-man, but there are no women out on the sea. The city suits me fine.

I just need some crowns or nobles from somewhere. Maybe I can cut a purse, get in a game, and scare up enough for a moon or two's worth of rent. Na, I always lose. Maybe I'll find a good house to rob, but that will take at least days or weeks. Maybe, I can stay with Krosk, cut a purse, and throw the coin to the sea by the way of whores and drink. YES! That one, I mischievously chuckle out loud as I easily sink into my own depravity. The food is ready.

I gather my things and dress, and I wake my uncle as I leave. "Your food is ready." He rolls up and on the edge of the small bed, scratches his head, and waves to me without a word or a glance.

I walk through the grime of the docks to the filth of the Pit, and twist my way to Krosk's apartment. Young poor kids of all colors play stickball and Here Piggy-Piggy in the narrow path.

Krosk's typical, old, brown stucco apartment sits off the street. I walk under the weathered pine stairs, kick past the rats, and knock on the old, arched, solid oak door. He peeks out with his brown eyes, as the sounds of children playing booms by my ears. Krosk slips his short, powerful frame out of the door and closes it behind him.

We exchange a shake of hands like brothers, with half a hug. "What's with all the noise?" I ask, standing eye to eye with him.

"My sister and her kids are here from Varisvaaria. They'll be here for the whole summer," Krosk answers, as the moonlight soaks into his dark red-brown skin.

"For the whole summer? Shit, Why so long?" I shrug.

"The Queens of Varisvaaria took their farm, and they are tired of living inside the Empire's rule—and her husband wanted to come here to shrimp. He will be in and out of here all season too." Krosk scratches his black, curly hair.

"Shit, Fuck! Greedy fuckin' lords. I was going to stow here a few days." I shake my long, wavy, sea streaked, sandy-blond hair in disappointment.

"Sorry brother, filled up. My cousin came here with her. He got his own place just a few streets away. Maybe you could stay with him. I think he already paid for the whole season, so, you could just throw him a few crowns here and there. He's a tramp of the night too." Krosk rubs his black goatee.

"What are we waiting for? Let's go." I wave toward the street.

"Let me grab my things." Krosk goes inside.

He comes out to the dirt street and walks with me through the muck of the Pit to his cousin's apartment. I see Stilcho's mark of his territory, an 'S' with a line running through the middle from top to bottom, carved through the alleys.

Krosk seems a little nervous as we slide past a group of shouting whores, the smell of frying shrimp, and beggars sleeping in the streets with drunks.

"His new place is just past *Trigg's* and next to *Boykin's Bar* in old lady Blossom's place, on the second floor. You guys will get along great. His name is Thanatos," he says like he's trying to convince us both.

We reach the old apartment building, go up the creaking stairs, and knock on the old gray door.

"Who is it?" a man's voice shouts through coughs from behind the door.

"Krosk." We wait as the coughing voice gets closer.

The door opens and a sweet, skunky cloud of holy flower smoke barrels out. Through the smokes steps out a shirtless, tall, lean but muscular, light skinned Ilsigg with long straight black hair. He has a long chiseled squared face, that's scarred and weathered, though his age seems close to my own. His deep black bloodshot eyes shine without reflection. He smiles. "Krosk! Come in cousin."

"Thanatos!" The two cousins exchange a shake of hands with a pat on the back.

"This is my friend I told you about on my visits, Kormar. We have been friends our whole lives—and as long as you don't wear a dress or have a heavy purse, he won't do you wrong," Krosk jokingly explains as he motions me in the doorway.

Thanatos and I exchange a handshake and a nod in each other's direction. I feel the calluses of a swordsman.

"I thought he would be darker," Thanatos says with a crooked smile as he looks me up and down.

He wears brown leather pants and wrist gauntlets. His muscles ripple as he turns and leads us into the family sized apartment. This apartment, like all others in the Pit, stands with brown stucco walls, arched, rotting,

wooden windows and doors, curved clay tile roof on leaky decking, and creaking flooring that bows under your feet. A small front entrance opens into the main room that holds seating and a fireplace. We sit in the main room around a grayed table.

Krosk gets straight to the point. "My brother here needs a place to stay. I would take him in, but you know my sister is there. You have an extra room—and I thought maybe you could use some extra crowns."

"I certainly don't want your sister and those kids here, ya know." Thanatos snickers through his teeth.

"Here, here. It is like being a prisoner in my own home." Krosk shakes his head with understanding.

How long do you want to stay, friend?" Thanatos lowers his empty eyes at me.

"A moon or two." I smile.

Thanatos turns to Krosk. "This is your running-mate, right?"

"He is my brother," Krosk says in a heartfelt manner, "and the second best thief in the Port."

Krosk and I have grown up together since before I can remember. Our friendship became unbreakable after he joined me and my mother as part of our street acrobat act. We have had it seems a thousand adventures together from braving the sea on our wave-boards to robbing our first house together.

"Perfect then, I will be leaving in two moons. I have another job north. Then you can have the place. I have something I will need your help on, in some time before I leave. You keep all your crowns and nobles. You'll have the front room until I leave. Stay to yourself, and I'll do the same. Your business is yours," Thanatos barks.

"You don't smoke, do ya?" he says much friendlier, and with a mischievous look on his face, as he picks up an elk bone pipe decorated with red and blue beads and a white feather off the table and puts it to his mouth.

"I do, and I wouldn't have it any other way." An uncontrollable smile comes over my face, as I anticipate my flower induced giddiness.

"Do you agree then, to do the job, to stay here?"
Thanatos hands me the pipe.

"Yes." I lock my green eyes with his black eyes, and take the pipe. The smoke fills my lungs and puffs my cheeks. I exhale with loud coughs that spin my head and bring an echoing buzz in my ears.

"If the job is in one moon, or two, or anywhere in between, or less, or more—you stay here until we get it done. Agreed?"

"Agreed." I place my fingers on my shaven, round, dimpled chin.

"I don't want to have to track someone down last moment, and the rent's free, right? So, I got your word?"

Krosk speaks up, "Kormar always does what he says, Thanatos. Don't worry about him."

I always try to do what I say. So, I look Thanatos in his empty eyes and swear, "I give you my word. It sounds like a great deal to me anyways. It is what we do."

"I'll give you a couple days' notice when and where. Until then we mind our own business, right?" Thanatos repeats himself looking at me to make sure I understand.

"Yes, I got it." I get a big toke that gives me a gagging cough. I hand Krosk the pipe.

"I like you." Thanatos points his pinkie at me. "Fair enough." He sticks out his hand.

"Fair Enough." I shake his hand.

"Ha! Ha! I told you he would like you." Krosk leaks with a chuckle as the holy flower takes him over and the thick, stinky-sweet smoke rolls from his mouth.

For the next few weeks I find a series of wealthy women who surrender more crowns to me than I can spend. I live free, and Thanatos and I become friends. He always has holy flower and food. We do a couple of simple one night jobs together. We spend many nights speaking of anything but ourselves, as we chase oblivion. But no matter what we do, he always wears the wrist gauntlets, and whenever I bring up the big-job, he changes the subject.

One moon and almost one week from another have passed since I moved in here. The morning eye of Krozious breaks, cascading its yellow rays from its blood red base on the horizon.

Before I go to bed I make the breakfast I bought on the way home. As I tend to the fire out of Thanatos' room walks a young Enlibrite girl probably not even sixteen years old. She is nude and walking straight at me. She has

red shoulder length hair and freckles everywhere. Her gray eyes sparkle in a naïve way. Her face simple and attractive, but not beautiful, glows in the morning light as she smiles at me. Her firm, hairless body moves with short slight jiggles.

She leans over me. "Mmmmm, eggs and shrimp chorizo—where do I get a drink?" I hand her a clay jug of fresh water. I see Thanatos exiting his room. He wears nothing but pants, no wrist gauntlets. He walks closer and grabs the jug of wine on the other side of the fireplace. His arms look fine. I guess he just likes the stupid things. I turn back and stir the eggs. CRASH! The girl drops the clay jug of water.

"I'm sorry. It slipped." She scrambles for rags around the fireplace.

"It's just water," Thanatos says in a calming voice, as he begins to pick up the shards of the clay jug.

As I help I notice a scar on the inside of Thanatos' left wrist, the size of a crown, and in the shape of a skull. It almost looks like a guild mark, but I have never seen this design, or any mark done as a brand. Guild tattoos, yes, but nothing like this. I act as if I see

nothing. The girl gathers the broken pieces in the wet rags. "I'm so sorry. I will take it to the street," she says embarrassed.

"I'll get your clothes," Thanatos says as he walks to gather her simple cotton dress. She slips her ragged garment on and grabs the bundle and heads outside.

The door closes. Thanatos looks at me with his arms crossed behind his back. "I'm glad you're here. I haven't seen you in a couple of days. Tonight, you pay your rent. Our patrons have been here for a few days. We will meet here tonight. We will talk more, later. Enjoy your breakfast and rest well."

"I'll be ready. There's plenty of food for all. Let's smoke and eat. Then I'll rest very well." I wonder about the scar, but a guild mark from another city means nothing. Thanatos walks off and returns with his pipe. We begin to smoke.

I throw the question to Thanatos, "So where's the girl from?"

"Well I found her . . ." The girl enters through the front door.

"Good, breakfast. Are you guys smoking already?" she darts her words at us, shaking her head.

Smoke squeezes out of my puffing cheeks. "Already? I haven't been to bed yet. This is my bedtime toke."

We all eat breakfast and Thanatos and the young girl go back to his room. I try to go to bed, but through the cover of the pine shutters, black curtains, and wool blankets the sun imposes its will. Where did the mark on his wrist come from? What does it mean? What are we robbing? From where? What have I promised? My eyes feel heavy.

The damp night hangs heavy in the air. I sit in my favorite spot atop the Temple of Lorick. I step from the black outcrops of rock into the moonlight and slide down the backside of the temple. The wet stone slips from my hand. I reach out but my hands cannot grasp the tower. I fall. I don't want to die. I brace for impact. When I reach the ground I feel nothing. The dirt opens up and swallows me. I look around, a tomb. The catacomb stretches beyond what I can see. I begin to run. I have to find the end. I run, but the hall goes on and on. I turn to see what follows me, and rising in front of me towers a giant black horse with glowing red eyes. Thud! Thud! Thud!

I awake in a sweat to Thanatos' knocking on my door and his voice, "Get up. They'll be here in a turn of a glass. You got time to go down and shit, eat, and we need to talk before they get here."

I catch my breath. I've had worse dreams than that. I hate horses. "O.K. I'm up. I'll be out in a few."

When I get back up the creaking stairs Thanatos has prepared fish, grits, and his pipe. He motions me over. "Come eat, never beans before a job. Did you get it all out? It's always best to take a good shit before a job too."

I sit and eat in an old chair by the warm fireplace. Thanatos rolls out his ideas. "I got the plan worked out, and you need to know it before the other guys get here."

"Then why didn't you tell me before now?" I say with some shock and anger.

"You didn't need to know until now." He shrugs his shoulders and quickly continues, "It's simple. You got nothing to worry about."

Thanatos gets up and begins to pace a bit. "We have been hired by an associate of the Church of Vashanka to

'recover' one of their relics held underneath the Temple of Krozious."

I spit up some of my food and stand up. "I thought you said this is going to be simple?"

Thanatos smiles. "I said for you, it will be simple. I've collected everything we need to know. It is all I have done since I've been here—so listen and your part will be easy."

I look up at Thanatos. "I need to know the whole plan in case something goes wrong."

Thanatos fires back, "I like you, always thinking ahead. We'll walk through the scenarios with the other guys when they get here."

"Are they good?" I lower my eyes at him.

"Good? What do you mean? Are any of us really good? Or are we all just shades of gray being pulled back and forth between light and darkness?" Thanatos cracks a smile.

"Will you cut the shit, please?" My eyes roll in my head. "Thieves? Have you worked with them? Do you know them? Know of them?" I walk from the warmth of the fireplace toward Thanatos. "Just tell me what's going on."

Thanatos spills everything at once. "Next to the Avenue of the Gods, off Temple Street, the alley behind the temple, over the fence, there hides a cellar entrance to the temple. We all go in there. You take the other guys, with this map, to the catacombs below the church. The relic is there. They will know how to get it. Then you just leave."

"Where are you going?"

"I have to finish the job upstairs." He looks at me as if that was too much for him to say.

"Who are the other guys?" I light the pipe with a stick from the fire.

"This relic is supposed to only be removed through ceremony," Thanatos begins to explain.

"A priest, this just keeps getting better—I'm clunking around in the most powerful temple in the city, with some shitty map dragging along a priest. It's simple! Why didn't you take me, just one time, to watch the temple, in almost two moons?" I take the pipe again.

"Look, you don't even need the map and if things at all turn ugly—these guys will handle it." Thanatos gives me a crooked smile.

"What if we never see anybody and are killed by a trap. A priest? Who's the other guy, a knight?" I say sarcastically.

"Yes, a prince I think." Thanatos smiles. "Look, You're just crawling down the tomb of an old Temple, and helping some guys get their stuff back. Nobody is supposed to know it is here." He grabs the pipe from me. "But it has been here for a long time. They don't even guard it anymore. We'll go over everything when they get here. First names only. The loot is the Tear of Vashanka."

"The Tear is a legend?" I start to gather my tools.

"Information is my specialty. The diamond is real. I don't know that is it has any powers, but I've seen the stone." He smiles and looks at me with his dead black eyes. "You know, what I think I like most about you?" He watches me get ready for the work.

"What's that?"

"You may moan a bit, but you either just don't care or you have no fear."

If he thinks his words build me up, he's wrong. I don't want to die, and fear runs through my entire body.

This plan is insane. But I gave him my word. I now understand that means less to him than ego.

The door shakes with a loud knock. Thanatos opens it and in walks two of the largest men I have ever seen. One seems as tall as a palm tree and the other as wide as the sea. These are the guys I have to sneak in?

"Staufan," the wide one says in the most gravelly voice I have ever heard, as he extends his hand. Staufan, not much taller than me, stands as wide as he is tall making the squarest lump of muscle ever created. His black hair falls to the middle of his back in a single thick braid. Scars scatter around his tanned, Enlibrite face. His brown eyes glow with a kindness unexpected of a priest of war, but the rest of him seems rocklike. He wears black pants and boots, a chainmaille shirt, a black hooded cloak, and a huge axe necklace.

We move toward the table and all take seats. The other giant extends his hand. "Sed."

He stretches almost as tall as me, after he takes his seat. His powerful build fills out his giant height. Sed has shifty pale blue eyes that glow against his white skin, long straight blond hair and beard, and the clean manicured

look of aristocracy about his bird like face. His clothes look like Staufan's, but newer and with a smaller necklace.

Staufan drops a battle axe from behind his back and Sed a bastard sword as they take their seats and we shake hands. I see why Thanatos said they would take care of any trouble, but how do I sneak anywhere with these guys and their illegal weapons?

I have to say something, "These are the guys I'm supposed to sneak in? No offense intended to you gentlemen, but you fellows don't really look like the sneaking type. And I don't even know what I am looking for. The Tear of Vashanka is a fable."

Thanatos looks at me with his lifeless eyes, as if I need to shut up. Sed relaxes back in his chair with a big smile. Staufan's eyes light up. I realize I have made a mistake giving the priest an opportunity to preach.

Staufan speaks up in an excited voice, "You do not know the truth of the tale of The Tears of Vashanka?"

I say with a smile on my face, "Yes, I know the story."

Staufan looks at me confused with some disbelief, stands and begins to preach, "Dolus, who had blinded

Kroziuous in one eye in the War for Paradise and been cast to the Realm of No Order for his crimes against the Ruler of the Gods. So, he tried to turn man against the Gods and lead man to the forest of forbidden knowledge. In the forest, men found Vashanks and he gave them the power of steel and the God's knowledge of war."

"Ya, I said I know the story, and you're starting a little early though. Don't you think?"

Staufan goes on and on talking over me. My focus drifts to plans for the job until the end of his story. ". . .Vashanka, overcome with the loss of his son, cries one tear from each eye, the only tears he ever cried. One tear fell to the earth as a beautiful blue diamond the size of man's hand, and the other grows larger and larger until it hits the world as a giant flood drowning many beast tribes, and forming the Great Western Sea."(*)

"Yes, what a fine rendition of the story," Thanatos chimes in with a pat on Staufan's shoulders. He then steps my way and says, "You're a cock. Don't get him started again."

Staufan sits and continues, "The diamond is real and was brought by our Ellonian ancestors to Enlibar City

before there was a city, before there was Enlibar, before there was Enlibrites."

The Tear of Vashanka, a rogue's legend, can it be real? Now I understand why Thanatos didn't tell me anything. Cheap-ass, he will owe at least a year's rent for this before he leaves.

The gravelly words of the priest continue, "The church of the sun god has always been the largest, but when Enlibar was born and they became part of the throne, they eventually became more powerful than the crown itself.

They have turned their back on us, Vashanka, and even the words of the sun-god himself for coin, for power, because they have the fickle hearts of men. That matters not now, lines have been drawn, and we need a warrior king not a puppet. The sun-god's cardinals weakened our churches by taking the diamond, and over time closing all our temples outside of Legion's walls with the power of the Empire. They claimed the people do not need to worship strife . . ."

Staufan slams his arm on the table raising the opposite end in the air. ". . . for the peace and settlement of the land!

"Now, it is my charge from the Council of Elders to find The Tear and raise my own order and parish to protect it for eternity. Oh, yes—and in the name of Vashanka destroy peace."

Sed speaks as he points to Thanatos. "Thanatos found where the diamond lay shrouded for over a generation."

Did he say destroy peace? Who am I helping? "Are you a priest too?" I ask Sed.

Sed chuckles and leans back in his chair, as he points to his own chest. "Me no, I thought when we first arrived our mission rested in the honor of the cause, to escort an envoy, which arrives tomorrow, back north as the end of the week falls."

Staufan growls, "It is but without the Tear, the cause will die."

Sed continues, "This man raised me inside the legion walls of my father's keep, and his honor and the fate of our victory are at stake—and for that I will complete any mission. Even running with thieves."

Sed looks at me with look of contempt. The look reminds me of how wealthy white men would look at my

parents of different races when we would wonder north of Merchants' Road. I wonder what the fuck is his problem?

Chapter 2: The Job/ I Feel the Horse

Thanatos takes over the conversation and spits out his plan that took no imagination of "Let's go in the back door."

When he finishes I speak up again. "I think this is a great plan, but we need to figure on someone seeing us. We should cover our faces when we get close. You two giants should probably split up when we leave. I'll take Sed with me through the Pit and back around to wherever you guys are staying."

Sed speaks up, "The Swamp-Wolves' Den. Do you know where that is?"

"Many sides of this city only allow their own, and I know them all. Yes, I know where it is. In fact, it lies not far from the temple. Staufan you should just go straight there with Thanatos and the jewel."

A look comes across Thanatos' face as he remembers why he has kept me around. He puts his hands behind his head and leans back.

Even though the Cloak of Lorick's stars have hung in the sky for three turns of a glass, Krozious' eye will not break dawn for at least six more. And so, we pass the time

flooding the conversation with many scenarios and planning around a temple model of beer mugs.

Amidst the planning I pull Thanatos to the side and ask him, "How much is this thing worth? I mean a giant diamond—they must be paying you well?"

"How much do you want?" Thanatos shoots my way before I can ask.

"How about a year's rent, and 200 crowns."

"Fair enough." Thanatos answers calmly. Maybe I should have asked for more? He walks out to Sed and points to me. "I know we are going to settle up when we get north, but my associate needs three hundred crowns for his work and expertise."

"Three hundred? Robbery! That's more than 16 moons of a soldier's pay! I don't just walk around weighted with that much coin. I only carried one hundred, and that I thought would be plenty."

"Well you thought wrong, but he'll take that for now, and we are robbers, not soldiers. So take it as you will, you need us."

Sed hands over a large purse to Thanatos. "This mission is becoming very costly, fitting your bills and paying your friends."

Thanatos takes the purse and with a bow and a grin says, "For the Cause, my friend. War and freedom are priceless."

"He'll pay you the rest when you take him to The Den," Thanatos explains as he hands me the purse. I take it to my room and stow it in strongbox hidden in the floor under the bed.

"It is time to go," Thanatos barks at some time after mid-night.

"Destroy peace!" Staufan pumps his fist in the air.

We finally head out. We stay close as we rise from the desperation of the Pit. Entering the Temple district we separate ourselves, but stay within sight of one another. Thanatos leads and I bring up the rear with Sed in front of me, and Staufan behind Thanatos.

The late hour haunts the empty cobblestone streets, as a thick fog from the east bog rolls over the city walls. We glide by the Theibian's temple of their one god. It rises with white, fluted, concrete pillars holding up a gleaming

white pyramid top. A large gold carving of their sacred ram sits at the point.

Then we pass the Rakan temple built by their fishermen that live in the city. The large timbered hall sits circled with massive granite slates carved with their runes.

The god of sailors and thieves, the god of the night and stars, Lorick's black tower rests at the Pit end of the district.

Respectable Enlibrites, Tierabeaux, and Balla Ch'luveson all share the same Gods. Their white stucco temples with clay tile roofs of their minor gods pile on either side of the Temple of Krozious. The 200 year old temple dominates the horizon, and now it looms over us. Tons of white marble stack taller than anything else in the Port but the light-tower. The huge gold suns atop the three, rising, greened-copper steeples shimmer in the blue moonlight of Krozious' blind eye, and follow my steps.

I feel the horse from my dream breathing down on me. I shake it off.

We step off the stone street and slide through the dark, dirt packed alleys looping around. The two giants lumber into position and no one seems to notice us. We work

our way carefully to the unlit east alley behind the temple.

Carved glories of the Harvests of Krozious cover all sides of the temple. An engraving of the founding Enlibrite Emperor, Thrommious I, the Great Conquer, looks over the front doors. A light west wind blows the chirps of crickets and frogs from behind us. As Thanatos thought, I see no guards. The air hangs heavy.

We wrap our faces with dark rags. I must move quickly. The small gate unlocks easily. I walk in the shadows to the unlit cellar entrance. I feel around the wooden frame and the iron padlocks. It seems clear. A series of heavy chains lock the entrance to the cellar. They are definitely hiding something down here.

I hear clicking, clanking, footsteps coming my way from the south side of the building. I thought there would be no guard. I crouch into the shadowy nook of the temple wall and the cellar entrance. A small puff of dust rises around the corner. There is no way to re-chain the door once it is opened. I can't let the guard pass. He must die.

A black mutt rounds the corner with a broken chain around his neck. No guard, but a sign of good luck instead,

I hold back my laughter and sink further against the wall as the tension leaves my body. I shoo the black dog, and he trots away.

I pull my single ball pick and pop each lock. I spin the chain off the door, winding it like a rope on my uncle's boat. I signal with a whistle. Thanatos guides the giants across the yard and down into the cellar where I wait.

The cellar seems normal, dark, stacked with food, wine, blocks of salt, oils, hanging herbs, and dawning with wooden shelves and stone walls.

The map showed three doors, I only see two, the one we came in, and the one into the temple kitchen. Thanatos pushes a stone on the entrance side wall, and the stone wall opposite the entrance grinds and grates open revealing a long hallway.

"Information is my specialty," he whispers with a smirk. "Straight down all the way to the end." He points down the long hallway.

The horse from my dream flashes through my mind with its glowing eyes. Thanatos continues his whisper. "I'm going up. I'll see you on the way out."

I lead the two large men down the long narrow hall. Glass and tin lanterns scatter up and down our path, dimly lighting spots along the way. My grandmother always told me if a hallway goes long enough it will lead you to the spirit-world.

I look back and Sed and Staufan pushed in by the walls are moving at half my speed. We are done for if we have to fight here. Maybe we will, maybe that's what the dream meant. We will die here tonight. I don't want to die. Gather yourself this is just another job.

The hallway gets smaller. I see a door finally. The lock feels heavy like it pulls a trigger when it unlocks. I whistle down for the large men to stop. I kick the dust from the floor, a trapdoor. This old thin door is meant to only be unlocked from the other side. I check the stone walls for spike-holes or arrow-slits. They seem clear. I pull myself up off the ground with my feet and shins press against the narrow hallway and unlock the door.

A hole three forearms by three forearms opens in the floor. What a joke of a trap. I don't think Sed or Staufan will even fit in there. A chilling air runs over me.

I push the thin wooden door open and reach to the inside of the ancient doorframe, pulling myself through with a tuck and roll. The room seems to open into a central area with hallways weaving in all directions, but I can't really see.

I turn back around and whistle for Sed and Staufan to continue and wait for them there. As they get close enough, I point to the hole in the floor and tell them, "Watch your step and grab some lanterns off the walls."

This dark and damp room of black stone seems to lose its shape with all of the different openings. Skulls and bones stack from the floor to the ceiling filling the chambers that spike off the hallways. A bad feeling hits me in the guts.

Straight ahead to the end, I carefully lead the way carrying a lantern and checking for wires and triggers. We reach the door on the other side, I pick the lock, and we enter. The chambers on this side of the door stand empty and locked with bars.

I saw the horse in my dream, here! An unrecognizable fear leaps upon me. I begin to sweat, my heart pounds, everything spins. I grip the lantern handle tighter trying

to hold on to reality. There is nothing safe in this world. The horse, black and evil, the breath hot on my neck, RUN, RUN! All those I love will die. It takes me over. I cannot move. This terror weighs so heavy. I want to hide, hide in the corner. Staufan speaks, but with no words. Circles of light glow from the lantern. I feel the touch of a hand on my shoulder and one on my arm. Ah, I feel.

Staufan's face comes sharp into my view as the light disappears, and his quick gravelly words pop into my head. "Vashanka, Lord of Strife, Prepare this man for battle and take the fear from his heart. May he die a bloody death with no fear, show him the glory of bloodshed, and strike fear from the depths of his soul."

Staufan's eyes lock with mine. He sees I see him. "Grab the axe."

I grab his battle axe necklace, and he chants the prayer with quick repetition. How many times did he say it before I came to? I face the door I just came in. Did I piss myself? Did I run the other way? He continues until he sees the spell of fear leave me.

Staufan then sniffs the air and growls slowly, "There is something here, a cloud of fear. The sun god must use it to keep the peace and prisoners."

Staufan pats me on the back and says with a look of concern. "You're lucky I prayed, and made extra sacrifices today, otherwise you would be running to the hills."

I hear rustling and clanking in the chambers ahead. As I turn my head in that direction Sed and Staufan draw their weapons with one hand and hold out their lanterns with the other. I drop mine and pull my dirks from my hips. The darkness will do me just fine.

We walk forward. The barred chambers ahead have no locks, but above them carved in the stone sits an outline of strange symbolic writings with tress, twisting ladders, and suns.

Young Ilsigg boys wrapped in rags huddle in the corners of the chambers with frozen looks of terror on their faces. I open the gates to the chambers and the boys huddle closer and tighter in the corner.

Staufan growls. "They won't go anywhere without crying and screaming. I will set them free."

A large door flaking with yellow paint stands down the catacomb hall, and through it we hear the muffled screams of a young boy. Sed drops his lantern and runs his massive frame through the door like a tournament bull exploding dust and cobwebs into the air, pulling the frame from the wall.

On the other side lies a young helpless Ilsigg boy overtaken by fear, gagged with a rag and belt, and covered with fresh lashes on his red-brown skin.

Two bald, young, milky-pale Enlibrite priests painted with the red sun-marks of Krozious in open yellow velvet robes hold the boy down and bent over a stone altar with their cocks in his face, as an old bishop has his way with the young boy's ass.

A bloody pile of dead rats with twisted and mangled bodies lies next to them at the foot of the altar.

Sed's tactics work as the men drop the boy with a jolting turn.

Sed yells, "Who dies first?"

Four temple guards wearing red padded armor marked with golden ladders on their bellies, and carrying long swords walk down the wooden stairs of this round, gray,

stone tower. I don't see any other doors. This is the end, the jewel, the guards, the kids, the horse. The boy curls up at the foot of the altar, afraid to move.

The old, brown faced, white haired bishop throws his arms back. His white and gold robes open in the front and swoop back toward the cover of his approaching guards revealing his old hard pecker and the necklace of a gold sun with a small golden ladder hanging from it.

He speaks through his white goatee that sinks with missing teeth, "Fools of Vashanka, do you think what you seek will be easily found? Do you think you may come in here and use murder to find your way to your prize? Kill me and you will never find the stone."

I know he must not escape. As the guards move closer to engage my new companions, I begin to loop behind the towering Sed and Staufan's square, wide frame of muscle to cut off the bishop's route.

Staufan cuts one guard in half with a crossing and crushing swipe of his axe. The blood splatters far and high as the guard's entrails spill, the strings of torn muscles pop, and his torso falls to the ground leaving his legs standing in a pool of blood.

What a show of violence. What kind of man has such strength? Awe struck by the gruesome show I turn back for another look like a fan of the gladiator's dance.

Sed runs his first guard through the middle pushing his guts out with his sword, and then grabs the dying guard's long sword as he spins behind the other soon to be deceased. He splits his throat through. The blood shoots from his neck and out of his mouth. I work closer to the stairs. The bishop sees me and runs.

The image of the black horse rising from my dream hits my mind again.

The last guard swipes at Staufan. He stops the blow with little effort trapping the guard's sword down. He swirls a blow up, and then down that splits the guard's head in two, whipping his long black braid like a snake, and adding to the sea of crimson spilled on the floor and splattered over the walls.

The bishop moves faster than expected. He clomps up the wooden stairs holding his robes off the ground. I follow. The red door at the top of the stairwell begins to open. I brace myself to do battle alone in this narrow space with the new wave of guards.

The door creaks open and through the darkness appears the tall, lean, slithering Thanatos. He walks in and immediately closes the door behind him. "Here piggy-piggy. I've been looking for you," he aims toward the bishop as he moves down the stairs, searing a hole through him with his black eyes.

"Not yet. We need to find the diamond," Sed calls up to Thanatos from his aristocratic, somewhat birdlike face.

"Look at you guys, always having all the fun," Thanatos shoots toward the bloody piles of flesh on the floor.

The bishop backs down the stairs in fear toward me, and the other priests hide in the corner. I let him down and Thanatos follows. The air seems chilled as he passes by me. "Watch the door." I head up the narrow stairs to the red door.

Staufan reaches down his trunk-sized arm to the abused child curled up at the altar, and his fear seems to break as he takes Staufan's hand. Staufan leads the boy out of the room toward the other children in the catacomb, and Sed props-up the yellow door behind him. Sed keeps the priests

in the corner, and looks on at Thanatos with distaste through his pale blue eyes.

Thanatos' long, straight, black hair flows behind him as he stops the old bishop at the bottom of the stairs. "Should I give him a fuckin' lick of his own treatment?" He nicks the old man's chest with a dagger and bends him over the stairs.

"You would like that too much, wouldn't you piggy? I got something special for you, piece of shit." He plunges the dagger through the bishop's right hand impaling it deep into the wooden stairs with a splatter of blood. The old man tries to scream, but Thanatos shoves his robe in his mouth.

Thanatos gets up off the man shivering in fear and walks up a few stairs. He crouches down and picks up his chin. "You have never met the likes of me. Your depravity means nothing to me, your gods mean nothing to me, but your lingering, intense, pain does. You will tell me what I want or no one will even know your body when they find you. Starting with all the little bits."

Thanatos pulls out some sort of flat, round pliers from his waist. He pushes the robe further in the bishop's mouth with his boot as he pulls the old man's left hand up.

I look on in shock, as the relaxed flower-head I've known for almost two moons falls away and his empty, black eyes come to light. He rips the long fingernails from the bishop's left hand. He flops kicking his feet back and forth, screams and cries trying to talk, but Thanatos shoves his robe deeper into his mouth, and doesn't stop until all the nails are gone.

When he finishes, he waits for the old bishop to stop flopping and pulls the robe from his mouth. "Shall we continue? I think I will fillet your face next, or maybe you need some teeth pulled." Thanatos clanks the pliers together.

Staufan re-enters the room with a puzzled look on his face and roars with his ultra-gravelly voice, "What is he still doing alive?"

Thanatos smiles down at the bishop. "No, please, in the light of Krozious, no, please, please," the bishop begs to Thanatos as he begins to weep.

His fingertips drip heavy with blood. "The stone has gone north. I swear. It left three days ago. Three Cardinals of the Order of High Ascension and fifteen or so guards—I swear."

Thanatos connects his stare with Staufan's. "Three days ago? They knew you were coming. Someone followed you."

Sed whips his long well combed blond hair and shouts to Thanatos. "And where were you? Why didn't you see the Tear leave or find out it had gone?"

"Maybe I was tending to your arrival when it left? Maybe whoever followed you was smart enough to figure that out. The point is it isn't here." Thanatos waves his dagger in the air.

"He is a liar!" I scream. "I saw him two moons ago with another bishop and four arch-bishops in the Pit calling for souls. I knew then they didn't belong here. But there was four of them, not three. If he is lying about that what else is he lying about?"

The bishop's eyes burn at me. "Fool, we were there for more than that."

"We see now," I say as I point to the altar where the bishop raped his prey.

Staufan approaches the bishop, lifts an eyebrow through his scarred forehead, and pulls an old browned cloth from under his chainmaille. "Listen to me now you sick violator of children. What are the rats for? I saw the mark of Fera above the holding cells. Where's the witch?"

The bishop laughs through his pain. "Witch, you have no idea, do you?"

He laughs again and harder. "I don't need a fucking witch, you stupid follower of the order of strife!"

He spits at the floor. "You think warriors deserve paradise, that there is order in war, in some sacred circle of life and death? Be like your god, blinded with rum. Feed chaos. You know nothing."

Staufan laughs and spits in the bishop's face. "I will find the Tear. The shroud will find the Tear if it is here, and if it is, I may not be able to kill you here, but we will let our friend finish you off, and let you answer to your god for your sins against his ways."

"Ha! The Order of High Ascension answers to no one, not even the mighty Krozious. I know I'll end up in the Realm of No Order, but not for the reasons you think!" The bishop smiles a wicked smile.

"And as for the stone I swear it's gone north. Just keep your beast away from me." He spits at the feet of Thanatos.

Thanatos reaches down and lightly slashes the bishop's face. "Where is it? Where did they take it?"

"Thanatos, Fuck! Enough!" Sed booms out. The young priests still huddle in the corner. In shock, I do not speak, and watch on. Still no one comes down the hall. I watch back and forth.

"There are rumblings of war everywhere."

The bishop tries to speak. Thanatos slices at his other cheek. "We are the rumblings—and I asked you where, piggy, not why."

"Enlibar City," the bishop shouts as he curls up.

"See what happens when you let me fuckin' handle things, Sed. This is why I am here." Thanatos waves the dagger in Sed's direction.

Thanatos looks down at the bishop. "See, he came to his senses, Enlibar City."

Thanatos smiles. "But I think he is a liar."

The horse's red eyes flash through my mind. "We need to leave soon."

"Are they coming?" Thanatos asks up at me.

"Not yet, but certainly soon."

"Be patient. Just tell us if someone is near," he says calmly.

Staufan takes out a small round wooden box filled with yellowish white paste that he wipes around his round, brown eyes. "With the bones of my enemies, and the shroud of the Tear, grant me sight."

He covers his eyes, wrapping the old cloth around his head, and begins to chant something I do not understand over and over. His head darts back and forth, up and down, and side to side, back and forth and up and down, over and over in an unnatural jerking way. He stops, falls to one knee breathing heavily, removes the cloth slowly as if exhaustion takes him over, and says through gasps for air, "It's gone. I can do that only one more time, and the shroud will lose its connection. I can feel it's far."

Staufan folds the cloth into his chainmaille. He then rises, stumbling, and shakes his head to break his dizziness. He grabs the arms of the bishop and pulls them

behind his back. The dagger in his right hand stays stuck deep into the stairs as his hand pulls through it. The blood pours through the ripping muscles and the old man passes out in Staufan's grasp like a ragdoll.

Thanatos pulls from a small pack a corked, thick, brown glass bottle. He pops the cork, places a hard leather funnel in the top. He then reaches up casually and plunges a hole in the bishop's throat and places the bottle under his neck to catch as much blood as possible. Staufan holds up the old man's slumping body as Thanatos holds his head up with one hand by his hair.

"There, it is full. The blood of a Bishop of Krozious' Order of High Ascension as you ordered." Thanatos drops the funnel, corks the bottle, wipes it off, and hands it to Staufan as the bishop is dropped to the ground.

"At least we got half of what we came for. We know it has to have gone north. What are you waiting for Sed? They've seen everything." Thanatos points to the priests in the corner.

"I cannot—I do not hack down defenseless cowards. You do it," Sed volleys back to Thanatos.

I can't believe no one is here, that we are still alive. This has become way more than a simple recovery. Sed

signals me down as Thanatos murders the witnesses to our crime. We exit out through the catacombs. The children are gone.

Thanatos catches up with us carrying one of the priest's robes. "I closed and locked the doors behind us. Here Staufan, Sed, wipe off a little, then throw some of this dirt on any big spots, you guys are a mess."

"Where are the kids?" I ask Staufan.

"They are waiting for us at the other end of the long hallway," Staufan softly answers back.

"Sed should go with you two guys. I will take the kids back to their homes. I am sure they are poor kids from the Pit." No one probably even cared where they disappeared to, poor fuckin' kids.

"They should go to their homes, to their parents, to be protected. You will need the axe or they will not follow you." Staufan nods and hands me the necklace.

"And you're not bloody. I'll meet you at our place when the sun breaks to bring you the rest of your cut," Thanatos adds with his smirk.

Sed jumps in. "But we did not get the Tear."

"That's not my friend's fault. He did his part and is done. Now you will pay him," Thanatos shoots back as we approach the narrow hallway. "You don't want to go chasing a giant diamond, do ya?"

"No," immediately jumps from my mouth. I have had enough of this company. I will deliver the children, get my crowns, and live like a king, for a time. "No, Thanks. My life is here."

Thanatos ducks a bit as he and I enter the narrow hallway before Sed and Staufan; we will make better time to the waiting children. We separate quickly and easily from the two large men. "I will be leaving the apartment to you—when I bring you the rest of your pay. I gotta stay close to these guys now. This is not over. I need to get paid, and I don't want what happened here tonight to rest on my head alone."

"Don't you know them?" I ask puzzled. It seemed like they knew each other. How unaware am I?

"No. Not until a few days ago. They hired me from Sallidon, but I was dispatched from Varisvaaria. Never mind all that, I'm traveling with them now. And sorry, but I never trust anybody."

We somehow escape before anyone finds the massacre. Morning will approach soon. I lead the children south into the Pit, and begin the only sane thing I've done all night. I thought Thanatos was my friend, but I don't even know him. He is Krosk's cousin from Varisvaaria, who loves holy flower, jokes, and teenage girls; but he also loves others' suffering, violent, bloody suffering. I don't know how those go together? A sense of relief comes over me when I think of his absence. And the gold crowns won't hurt anything.

The farther we get from the Temple of Krozious the more the boys return to themselves. None seem to recognize me, know where they've been, or what has happened. I didn't know priest's powers were real? The trance wasn't a drug that was a spell. The cloud of fear in the catacombs was some weird spell too. I've never seen such a man as Staufan. The idea that magic lives in this realm makes me shake my head with disbelief. And Sed will only split your throat if you have a sword in your hand.

All of the boys dart-off the pack and twist their way home through the nearly empty streets. All except the boy who was violated. He seems around nine years old. His red-brown Ilsigg skin stretches around his bones, as he stands

around chest high. His matted dirty black hair needs to be shaved from his head. The skin around his brown sunken eyes looks raw.

I tell him I found him with the others wandering in an alley. I hope he will recognize something as we walk around, but nothing. I stop to get the boy some food, and then take him home with me.

When I get to the apartment, I see no clues of Thanatos or his things. I do not see any crowns. I look in my room. The floorboard under my bed seems ajar. I can't believe this. He robbed me. I rip up the floorboard expecting to see nothing, and the 200 crowns lay on top of my strongbox. I take off the axe necklace of Vashanka and place it with my crowns, and fix the floor.

I question the boy in Ilsigg: "Where he's from? Who he is? What happen to him?" But nothing. He speaks but does not remember. I show him to Thanatos' old room.

"Sleep easy. Tomorrow we will find your parents."

He nestles into the bed. "Thank you sir, for your kindness."

I close the door and go to bed. A nightmare of the horse floods into my mind. I pull myself back to reality

from my nightmare within a dream. I look down and the boy crouches by my bed and pulls at the floor.

"What do think you're doing?" I drop my foot to kick him away from my gold, but he does not move. He looks up at me with glowing eyes that fade from red to white, and fangs that hang from his dripping mouth. He hisses at me, and draws up his hands above his head revealing long claws dangling from his fingers. He hisses again and jumps for me, as I roll off the other side of the bed. What the fuck?

The boy-creature jumps at me from the bed. I roll my shoulder tossing him into the wall with his own force. I dive and roll for my dirks. I pop up to my knees, and pull one from its sheath, as the creature lands on my back. He sinks his teeth into my neck pumping sharp pain through my body, blood on my shoulders, and rage through my heart.

I drop my dirk, reach up and grab him by his hair, which feels like fur, and rip him from me throwing him over my shoulder into the wall.

I stand and kick him in the face. He lets out the whimper of a hurt animal, as I kick him again. I grab my dirk, mount his back, pull his head up by his hair and slit his throat. He slumps on the floor the blood spilling from

his neck. I hurry and grab the blankets from my bed wrapping his body, and mopping the floor before the blood seeps through to the apartment below.

As I wrap him I see a blue glow from the floor. I open the trapdoor and the necklace of Vashanka throbs with the glowing light. What the fuck? What am I going to do with the body of this thing? What is going on here? I pick up the necklace and the glow fades. I can make it to Sorb's pig sty through the alleys and throw this thing to them. I throw the necklace around my neck.

The mid-morning sun beats already pressing its heat on my back, as I loop through the dirt alleyways guarded on either side by rundown apartments. The apartments turn to restaurants and taverns. I reach the sty.

On both sides lay chicken coops, and the square overflows with venders of lime, orange, onion, corn, and potatoes, mixed with livestock. Hundreds of hungry pigs rustle in a chaotic dance of instinct. The thick mud and shit mix in clumping, beaten, lumps and divots. The smell fills the block.

I have a clear shot through the alley to the pen. I could just drop this thing here and go, but what if someone

finds it, what if it pulls from death and comes back for me? Nothing comes back from the pigs. I stick to the side of the alley and get close enough to throw the bundle over the fence. I hear the thump in the sty, the pigs squeal in happy competition, and the voices of gasping onlookers, as I turn and run down the alley before anyone can see my face.

Chapter 3: The Library/ The Whore of Politics

After dumping the body, I turn west and head for Trader's Way to disappear in the chaos. Appearing in front of me stand four men led by the jittery Wrak Tagnot with a fresh scar across his right cheek.

The men wear the black clothes of poor thieves. Wrak curls his small nose, and squints his blue eyes.

He pulls a curved dagger and swipes it in my direction with his typical jittery motion. I turn my head back around, I wait for the image of the horse, but it does not come. Wrak and his men surround me.

"Out early this morning, aren't you?" Wrak's men draw their daggers. Is this how I will die? After all I have seen.

"Where have you been? Not in the Pit, we've been looking for you all night. Stilcho needs a face to face with you. He is at the track. I would just assume to kill your ass. You're lucky he has use for you, but when he's done you're gonna get more than a scar."

The track stands five stories with blood-red painted hardwood siding horizontally surrounding concrete arches.

The long oval arena extends several blocks and casts a shadow for several more. Golden, pointed arched gateways dot along the massive structure. Painting of the faces of annual champions fills the spaces between gates. We enter. Giant columns line through the inside. We wind up the spiraling ramps to the top level. Large masts extend horizontally tying together flapping blue and black cotton curtains shading the crowd.

Two guards post at the balcony door. Sweat beads on my tanned skin. Krozious rages with anger today.

Wrak takes my daggers, and pushes me inside. A beaten man huddles in the corner. Stilcho's elite stand tall in black studded leather armor with the formal mark of their guild on their right shoulders, a red 'S', with a hand holding a coin between the thumb and forefinger for the ends, and a dagger running through the middle. They surround Stilcho sitting on a large ironwood bench behind a table full of cochon de lait, oysters, rice, and wine. The roasted pig smells like paradise. Damn I'm hungry.

Stilcho "The Extortionist" has a reputation for being a large man. Age and inactivity have made him huge. He has a round shape and sits with his legs spread wide and his belly hanging low. A long black and gray beard surrounds

his pitted yellow-brown face. His brown oval shaped eyes bug out of their sockets. The light shines off his bald head, surrounded by a crop of long thin black hair, and a crown of small, white, tightly beaded seashells.

An Ilsigg born in this city, but he dresses like a Shou. He wears wood sandals, a red silk robe decorated with gold dragons, a white silk tunic, and brown silk skirt. Gold, pearls, and rubies cover his fingers, and hang from his ears and around his neck. A necklace of yellow and white plumerias sways below his gold.

Stilcho points at me with his long fingernails and speaks through his crooked teeth in a loud but surprisingly smooth voice. "Kormar Voorhexees, thief of women's hearts, burglar of towers, larcenist of his own making, come over here and sit where we can talk."

The guards step back and I sit next to Stilcho. How can such an ugly man produce such a beautiful daughter? I feel extremely calm.

Stilcho pours peppered vinegar on the hog and oysters. "Ha, here comes your race." He points to the beaten man in the corner, as he throws an oyster down his throat.

Stilcho reaches his large arm around my neck and pulls me close like a child. "I have something that must be done, and you are the only one that can do it."

I perk up with a little excitement, this seems better than dying. Stilcho pats me head and lets me go. "My powerful patrons from the north need some documents from your father's library—Documents of the Confederacy of Free Kingdoms treaties and trade-alliances. The trade alliance documents with those across the Western Sea carry the most power and will be the hardest to replace—so those are a must. Costing them time and coin is what is important in this—but my patron wants all the documents. You must take them within the next week. I will pay you as much as you can carry."

"Fair enough," I quickly say. I hate the Citadel and I have never heard of this Confederacy of Free Kingdoms. Riches seem to be coming my way.

"Ha, Ha, Ha," Stilcho booms, slamming the table. "That was fast. I told you he had no loyalty to his father." Stilcho looks around the room and points at me, as his belly jiggles at his ideas of me.

"What do you mean?" I stand and the guards move forward.

"Calm yourself. Sit down boy, and watch the race." Stilcho pulls me back down to the bench.

The race begins. Seven riders spring from the gate on large muscled horses blanketed with different colors. "Do you ride, boy?"

"No." I feel my brow curl.

"You don't enjoy the races?" He nudges me with his arm the size of my leg. "John there, he bets his life on the pink. What do you think?"

"The paint with the blue looks good to me, but I've heard it's all about the rider."

"You hear that John? The kid doesn't even bet on the races, and he knows more than you. You stupid fuck! You know, I would much rather have the crowns you owe me, but you're in too deep. What will people say if I don't kill you?"

The beaten man pulls up from the corner. "You can just say I bet on the winner."

"Soft, people will think I'm soft John. You'll run your fucking mouth about how you got one over on me."

"No, No, No. I swear. I will never." John falls to his knees, clutching his hands to beg.

"What do you think, boy? Is he a big mouth, stupid loser, or not?"

"The race isn't over, yet. Maybe he'll win?" I shrug.

"Always searching for an answer—that's why I like you." Stilcho winks.

The horses zoom down the packed sand track, throwing dust and dirt around the corners, drawing to the inside of the path with wild looks in their eyes. The crowd cheers as the group finish the first lap, and the riders pull their clubs.

Stilcho sits up on the edge of his seat. "Now the fun begins."

The riders club their horses for speed, or each other if they get close enough. Three horses pull from the pack, the blue, the green, and the pink. The riders left behind begin to knock each other from their horses with wild blows. The orange rider gets knocked from his horse and

trampled by the ensuing pack. The crowd cheers with excitement as his blood and brains get trampled into the sand.

"Yes!" Stilcho booms. I played one or more deaths in this match. Who will have the most knocked from their horses, boy?"

"Not the orange."

"Ha, ha, ha, ha! That's a good one."

The three horses in the lead rally back and forth against each other, the riders taking swipes at one another. The blue rider clubs the green rider in the face, knocking teeth and blood so high that all can see it around the arena, but the green rider hangs on. The crowd mixes with cheers and gasps, as the blue and pink pull away on the third lap. Chaos erupts behind them, as the other riders out of the race go for the most kills.

"Both your horses are still in it! What a great race, it's a beautiful way to end it for you, John."

The blue rider pulls close to the pink, swinging his club as they approach the finish.

"It looks bad for you, John!" Stilcho stands in excitement.

The blue rider swings at the pink, but he dodges the blow, riding his horse harder and pulling to the end by the length of a nose.

John suddenly finds strength and jumps to his feet. "Thank the gods, I won, Yes! Yes!"

"I won, John." Stilcho speeds around the table and knocks John back to the ground with a slap across the face. He stomps John's hands until he drops and rolls to his back. He then drops the force of his large knee in the chest of John. Then he rises off his gasping, crushed body, and pulls John's winning ticket from his tunic. He hands the ticket to one of the Elite, and stomps John's head in until the blood and brains spill from the top of his skull.

He turns to me. "Now, you just bring me the documents!" Stilcho slams the table, hunkers down, narrows his eyes, and points his finger at me. "Your father is not much to be ruined. Everyone knows their plans. Conspiracy against the Empire is their cause, and they should pay." Stilcho's fat face glows like a ball of fire. "We will reign in blood!"

I remain calm. My thoughts stay focused on the guard's movement. "I will not do it then. I will not turn my father over to the Empire, never."

"What is this around your neck? A symbol a Vashanka? Perhaps you side with them and their cause and you are a traitor too?" Stilcho points at me again. "It is of no matter. You will do what I want or die. Men will be following you. You have two days until the last night of the Festival of Krozious." He waves his hand casually.

Two days, the end of the Festival of Krozious, I have the Tuscon job with Krosk then. We have planned it for moons. The Festival, it will have a shortage of at least one bishop and two priests. The Gods certainly speak of what we did last night. Will they choose their sides, and become the pawns of men, or did they push us there? And what of the beast-boy? I need to go to the Den and find Sed, Staufan, and Thanantos, but I have to live through this hit first.

"Do not betray me on this—death or worse, will come your way." Stilcho looks at me in a matter of fact manner. He holds up two fingers. "Two days. Get him out of here."

The guards begin to push me out. "And Kormar, when this is all finished, and your family lays in ruin you shall come live with me and take Sidara's hand. You have lived long enough as a shadow sneaking in and out of her window."

The sun shines bright. I turn to Wrak and extend my hand for my daggers. He shakes his head and says, "Go on. You don't need those right now."

I leave the stadium and I start back the way I came. Wrak and his men only give me a few steps before they begin to follow me.

"You know you can't kill me Wrak, right?"

"No one said anything about killing you, yet, not until you fuck this up—but I didn't hear anything about not beating the fuck out of you. I still owe you."

I take off down an alley. I feel the clomping chaos behind me getting further away. I glance back to make sure I'm losing them. When I turn back around a shadow comes over the sun, and day becomes dark. A figure stands ahead of me at the end of the alley. The shadowy man pulls a naval dirk from each hip in such a way, I know it is Krosk.

Relief spills over me. I reach Krosk and turn to face our foes.

"Where the fuck did you come from?" I put my hands on my hips to catch my breath.

"I thought I might even the odds a bit." Krosk smiles with the pleasure of an ornery child just let loose from its parent.

I look up at the sky, and through my hand I see the sun beaming through the edges of a shadow that covers it, night in day, the disruption of order.

Wrak and his lackeys stop about fifteen paces away. He pulls his daggers, looks to his men and says, "Just keep the pretty one out of this—while I take care of his savage. Remember, don't kill him."

I always wondered how Wrak's Ilsigg lackeys felt about his racist comments. They never flinch when he pops off. He turns to Krosk and says, "I have no such orders for you, and I've been waiting just as long to kill you."

Knowing their plan, I back up. Maybe, I can catch one or two of these guys and put them down before they surround me and beat me into the ground.

I look over to my friend. Wrak, used to chasing us around when we're drunk, moves slowly. Krosk looks quick, and as sober as a Theibian nun. This fight might not last very long at all.

I slide to my right trying to outflank the group so I can turn the angle and keep my back clear. I ready my left hand. They move to surround me. I throw a hook as hard as I can into the outside man's right side, into his liver just under his ribs. I spin behind him, he crumples to the ground, and I turn to face the remaining men backing up.

I glance to Krosk. He sheaths one of his dirks, picks up one of Wrak's daggers from the street, hurls it into the back of one of my opponents, and pulls out his dirk again, all before Wrak can shake the dizziness from his head, and rise to his knees.

The two men starting to flank me stop in their tracks and turn with the sound of Wrak's scream. Wrak on his knees, disarmed, holding a slice across his other cheek, rolls back and now yells for his men, "Get the fuck over here!" They have already started to run at Krosk. I follow.

I tackle the nearest one wrapping his shins, driving my shoulder through his thighs, planting him firmly in the

hard alley. I look up and in the air I see a sprinkle of crimson rain. I follow the drop down and see that they spew from the other man's throat. Wrak turns and runs, screaming for help from Stilcho's elite at the track.

At the same time Krosk and I turn to each other. "We got to go," pops out of my mouth!

We quickly cross Trader's Way, and tuck into the dark, dirty alleys of the Pit, and climb to the rooftops and disappear. As Krozious' eye burns the cloak from its sight and rains down sunshine once again, we head to Trigg's, where we go our separate ways.

The end of the Festival of Krozious draws closer every moment, and the stallion of my dreams returns that day. It haunts me and causes me to give up the idea of sleep. Freedom rules the city-state of Port Karpricious, How will the Empire even reach my father? Stilcho will have no problems killing me, torturing me, or worse. What was that creature that bit me? Who really are Sed, Thanatos, and Staufan? How can you commit treason against something you don't belong to? My life here has some promise and prospect if I just do this. My father will be fine. I prepare to go to the library tonight. Finally, exhaustion weighs my eyes closed.

The shaking crash of thunder pulls me from bed and away from the face of the beast-boy in my dreams. Who knew monsters were real? I have to find that priest of war, but I don't have time for that now.

The heavy pounding of rain on the clay tile roof echoes through the room. Drips drop down in the corner through the wooden ceiling, plopping, plopping, plopping. Life feels like a dream as a flash of lightning brightens the room. I can smell the peeling leather of the old trunk as I pull my black, burlap poncho, the forged copy of my father's credentials, and my lock-picks from the velvet lining. It is time.

I rise to the roof-bridges and make my way north to the end of the Pit. The heavy rain puts a gray haze on the blue-black cloak of the night. At the Merchants' District I drop down onto the northern tip of Trader's Way, and move toward the North Gatehouse. The rain beats down and flows like a stream through the middle of the large, stone street. I stay on the east side of the roadway stepping quickly by the citadel's gray granite walls, which surround the city and citadel, stacked at least thirty paces in height.

The smell of horseshit from the Legion's base, Thousand Horse Stables, across the street pounds against my nose. They say, before the city's declaration as a free kingdom there was no need for a Legion or Naval base, but now to protect our "freedom" we must pay extra tax. I've just known it my whole life. The base about the same size as the Citadel complex tucks up against the city wall to the north, and the Legion's bell tower in the south, and runs from Trader's Way in the east stretching all the way to Le Calvario road in the west.

Through the rain the white limestone bell-tower still gleams. The east face carves out at the bottom in the shape of a giant clam shell into the Old King's theater and stands surrounded by Speech Park. The weeping willows and pink azaleas of the park sway in the heavy rain.

I slosh up to the Citadel gatehouse and pound at the door. The viewing slot slides open in the brown, oiled, heavy oak door. I pull up the poncho and flash the papers. The short, thick door creaks open. I step up and in. The narrow pathway terraces up several floors with oil caldrons and archers' perches defending it. In the dry sanctuary of the gatehouse the young Enlibrite guard with sand colored

hair, wearing chainmaille with a hard leather breastplate commands, "Let me see those papers again."

I hand him the paper. "It's about time for the storm season to hit full force." I smile and shake some water from my poncho.

"Yep. This one here is quite the storm. Don't you think?"

"It is. This season might be a rough one."

"It's kinda late to be doing work at the library, isn't it?" The guard looks me up and down.

"It is. I just have to pick up some paperwork for the Head Scribe, Gathaus Voorhexees."

"Well, these papers seem to be in order. I guess if you want to carry papers at night through the rain, it's your ass on the line." He cracks a smile and hands back my paper lie. He reaches up next to the door and pulls the rope twice ringing the signal bell at the other end.

I step out onto the solid slate yard of the Citadel. The library stands on the north wall between Le Soberano's stables, one of the bunkhouses of the Legion's elite, and across an alley from city guard's head precinct at the east

end of the complex. Everything in sight stacks of rough gray granite. I first work my way east, going between a guard tower and Le Soberano's Guard bunkhouse.

The heavy rain has pushed everyone to shelter. Next, I move past the Legion's Elite bunkhouse smith's shop and find myself standing in front of the library. This was easier than I imagined. The library raises three floors, about ten paces below the top of the wall. The heavily oiled oak doors and shutters fit together so tight they appear seamless.

I pull my arms inside my rain soaked poncho and reach for my bundle of tools. Without looking, I pull the double ball and hook picks, then work the door open.

I step inside my father's holding cell, where he has been a servant my entire life. It seems like the only time I had with him as a child was here. I would sit and read, and he would work. Even right next to him I felt invisible, but at least I was with him.

A flash of lightning fights to brighten my view through the south-side wall of shuttered windows. The square room opens up to the ceiling with catwalks and small lofts around the edges of the second and third floors. The levels

connect by a narrow staircase in the northeast corner. Books filed on shelves cover the east and north walls of the first floor. Stacked in cubby-holes the entire west wall of the ground level is full of loose papers, some rolled, some stacked. Scribes' desks in five rows of four line up in front of me. The musty smell of old leather, paper, and ink fills my nostrils.

My father's office sits on the second floor. The papers Stilcho seeks will hide there, if they are here at all. Crash! A roar of thunder shakes the stairs. The image of the black steed fills my mind, as my heart jumps. I shake the feeling from my back and move to the office.

My father has forgotten his key to this door many times over the years. I slide the spare from atop the door frame, and enter.

This north-side room against the wall has no light. I leave the door open and carefully step to the desk finding the box of Shou sulfur sticks. I light the brass oil hand lamp and begin my search. The large, tall desk with no drawers stands covered with neat stacks of papers: Tax records, payment records, magistrate court records, mail addresses, street surveys, mill permits, and business licenses, all city documents. I didn't think the papers

would be in the open, but a good thief is fast; so always check the easiest places first.

With the lamp in hand I turn back south toward the door where my father's chest sits. Lightning flashes, a knowing feeling comes over me, as I step closer. My father, predictable, always uses it for "safe" keeping—silly.

I glance at the east wall where as a child I sat and read. On either side of the fireplace stands the books that took me to different places and times: Stories of the Old Ellonia heroes, the adventures of Zaus Abdola, the Theibian sailor, the conquering and colonizing of the Ilsiggs' tribes by the Ten Kingdoms, the Revolution of Enlibar split from Ellonian, all of the stories of the gods, plays, songs, and poems nestle next to each other in alphabetical and categorical order.

I place the lamp onto the chest next to the door, pull my tools, and pick the lock. SNAP! My hook pick breaks in the lock. FUCK! I'll have to pry it open. I move the lamp back to the desk, pull my dirk, and with a clanking pop open the chest.

Inside sits the tome of city history written by my father's hand. I thumb through the tome. I see the sort of

the Rankan invasion when he was a boy. I remember the blood in the streets. The city rose in revolt against the oppressive raiders. But the ruthless nature of their warriors could not be matched. They paraded the heads of the dead on poles, and burned what they couldn't kill. Back and forth the bloodshed flowed. Then suddenly peace was struck and the Rakans settled for lands outside the city walls. And the Port declared itself a free territory from the Empire when no support was sent. I snap from the memories.

I see in the chest also rests a single hard leather tube. I go to the desk and pull the papers from the cylinder. My eyes widen as I read.

The Declaration of Free Kingdoms

Through the unfolding of historical events, it has become necessary for political alliances to dissolve or shift. We the proper representatives and authorities of the Kingdoms of Dorna, New Theibia, Voorhexees, and Sallidon declare secession from the Empire of Enlibar and its Emperor. We will bind these new free kingdoms within the confines of

existing borders in a Confederacy with the already free kingdom of Port Karpricious. This Confederacy will allow each kingdom to govern and tax itself. We call for the remaining kingdoms of Thrommius, New Balla Ch'luveson, Varisvaaria, and New Ellonia to find the strength to follow our separation from Enlibar, but if they do not, we will treat them as allies to the Empire . . . We will not be denied this freedom, and will join together in war to gain it . . .

A large space for signatures at the bottom of the document rests mostly empty. The only name, at author, Gathaus Voorhexees.

In shock I rustle through the other documents that fill the tube, trade alliances between the free kingdoms and lands across the seas, military agreements, and agreements of prisoner exchanges between the free kingdoms, all with my father's name as the author.

I plop down in the chair. I can't believe what I have read. Stilcho was right this will be viewed as a conspiracy to destroy the Empire, I will not, cannot, hand these over. I hate the rule of this Citadel, but I hate the Empire more, and my father must not end his life as a martyr.

These papers must make it to their destination, but as important, I must help find the stone to win this war. What has he gotten into? What have I gotten into? I roll the documents back in the tube. I will go to the Den to find Staufan and Sed after I meet with Krosk. I feel stallion's breath beating down on my world.

The front door slams open. I jump from the chair and grab my tools, and throw the tube back into the lid of the chest, bouncing back into its resting place, closing the lid shut, and clanking the lock down.

"We know you are here. Show yourself and answer to the guard of Le Soberano."

I quickly move to the fireplace and bury my tools. I wipe my hands on my black poncho, grabbing the lamp, key, and the tax documents from the desk. I walk out of the office as if I belong here, turning to lock the door.

Four guards step quickly through the darkness toward the stairs.

"Hello, Gentleman. How are we doing tonight?"

"Halt! No one was to enter the complex tonight outside of working hours."

I don't push my luck. I freeze and hold my hands out. The four guards clop up the stairs and circle me drawing their swords.

The young guard that let me by the gate hangs his head at the end with a scolded look in his eye. Next to him, stands a city guard with white beard that sticks out of a watch commander's black helmet.

The other two guards are Le Soberano's Guard. Their red velvet sleeves puff out at the shoulder and taper into red leather gloves. Chainmaille covers their chest and hangs below their hips. Their helmets have fins in the middle from front to back and shine in the dim light. The darkness makes their tan Tierabeaux skin look almost Ilsigg.

The one standing in front of me commands through his thin black mustache in a Tierabeaux accent, rolling his 'R's, "Dere has been an ord'r fo no one to ent'r 'ere out of workin' hours. Jour boss has vio'lated an ord'r by havin' jeu come here. Sho me jour papiers."

I hand over the perfectly forged papers with no worry. "Gathaus is not my boss. I am his son, Kormar. He sent me here to retrieve these tax orders. He said something about

there was a mistake that could cost the city thousands. He was worried, and acted like this was an emergency."

"I see. Jeu were yust goin' to carry dem t'ru da rain, den."

"No, No, I was going to get a carrier pouch downstairs. He said tens of thousands. I'm sure he would only violate an order for something of major importance."

The Elite commander turns to the watch commander and orders, "Go to Gathaus, brin' him to Le Soberano's manor. Tell de Elite at da gate to take him to da private dinin' hall.

Quickly!" He then looks at me. "Jeu get da car'ier and come wid us."

We walk between the city offices and the courthouse to the inner walls of the complex that surround Le Soberano's manor. Small gatehouses stand protected by statuesque Elite. The rain beats off their motionless faces. The commander signals and we enter the courtyard of the manor.

Huge oak trees canopy our path protecting us from the rain. Perfectly manicured azaleas of all colors form circular gardens beyond the trees. Pelican statue fountains

spit into the rainy night. White marble stairs stretch as wide as the front of the huge, gleaming, white stucco manor. Arches hold up the second and third floor balconies that run as wide as the stairs. A clay tile cover tops the third floor terrace. Two sets of polished oak double doors stand side by side decorated with black iron pelicans spreading their wings that split in half when the doors open.

We enter on the right side. The vast foyer opens around a large fountain with a statue of the Tierabeaux founder of the city, Jacques Mortinez in the center. The marble figure stands twice the size of a man and holds trade scales out and high above its head where the water spills out to the pool. A massive serpentine staircase with rod iron railing twists up the back wall. Well polished black stained, oak plank floors shine brightly with the light of the iron oil lanterns. We exit to the first door on the right and move down a large hallway. Paintings, tapestries, and gold carvings hang on all the walls.

The personal dining hall seems small compared to the rest of the house with lower ceilings. It sinks down into the ground and the walls stack of gray granite blocks, no stucco. Hundreds of years of storms have left water stains

at different levels on the walls. An Elite sentry stands on either side of the staircase, and at the ends of the large polished, rectangular, black oak table. Gold framed mirrors of all shapes and sizes cover the walls, brightly bouncing the light of the lanterns through the room.

At the end of the table sits Le Soberano. The tall, handsome Tierabeaux man with groomed, curly, black hair and a beard with no mustache; stands and his yellow-orange, knee-length tunic decorated with gold pineapples and synched around his thin waist, flows with his quick motion. A smile comes across his face, as he points at me. "We were yust talkin' about jue, my friend."

Shock, confusion, wonderment. Surrounded by Tierabeaux and Enlibrite nobles at the table sits Staufan, Sed, and a man that looks like me, but with white blond hair and a frailer frame. I guess I found the priest.

"Here is jour long lost twin, Stennous, dat our guest were just sayin' dey met." He looks to Staufan. "Dis is him right?"

Staufan nods his head in agreement. Le Soberano continues, "I knew it! Jour right, It is unbelievable da

resemblance. I knew it 'ad to be 'im." He then looks at me.
"Who ar' jue?"

The elite commander speaks up, "'e was in da library, where 'e claims that 'e was retrievin' papers for his father, da head scribe, Gathaus."

"Jes, Gathaus Voorhexees, of course! Stennous dis is jour cousin."

"My name is Kormar, Kormar Voorhexees it is an honor to meet you Le Soberano."

"It will be my honor. We were yust talking about if we could find jeu. We 'ave an important task for jue, and da honor of jour family."

The man that looks like me scoots back, stands, and extends his hand with a feminine nature. "Cousin, nice to meet you, I am Stennous. I have heard whispers of you over the years. You've never came to visit with your father. How is my old uncle?"

"Well." I shake his hand. Stennous reaches back and grabs two golden goblets from the shining black table. He hands me one of the drinks.

"Good then." Stennous raises his wine above his head for a toast. "May the empire forever have its hand slapped from our pockets. For the cause gentlemen."

"For the cause!" the room repeats.

Staufan exclaims, "For the cause and by the grace of Vashanka may we crush the puppet emperor."

"We 'ave paid for over a 'undred jears to da Empire, even now we call ourselves free, but pay dem tribute. No! More! Our Time 'as come!" Le Soberano points at the Elite commander. "Jue can go now."

"But sir, we 'ave sent for 'is fat'er for verifica'tion—Jue do not want to wait for him?"

"We 'ave all da proof we need. Look at dem. Jue don't believe dey ar' related? Send riders to stop da patrol dat ya sent to fetch an old man from 'is bed in the middle of da night! I said Jue can go now!"

Le' Soberano looks back to me. "I will tell jour father da good news tomorrow, when 'e comes to work. Dat jue 'ave found jour way into our plan. Meet jour escort in two days. Jue will leave da day affer dat. Take him home. Da h'our is late."

The guards march me out before I can even take another glance through the room. I guess I will talk to the war priest day after tomorrow. I hope I don't die or turn into a monster. It seems like a normal wound.

Chapter 4: That Night /Soon it will Rain Every Day

The wind from the south glides off the wine dark water of the Great Thassia Sea. Blowing by me, the salty air tickles my nose. I wonder. How far does the wind carry the salt? Does it take it all the way north into the Enlibrite kingdom? Soon, I will know, maybe Port Karpricius will become a distant memory?

I sit in my favorite spot atop a hidden roof bridge on the Temple of Lorick overlooking the city as the sea air heals my soul. Up here the chatter and restaurant smells of the city mix with the croaks of the frogs, the stink of the swamps of the east bog, and the salty winds from the sea. As I look to the north, I can see all the way past the Merchants' District into the homes of the rich that tuck up against the citadel wall.

The Citadel my new master, I shake my head in disgust. I hate the sight of it—the way my father's work kept him from us. My father has twisted into an enigma. I thought he was simple. They don't respect him. Even though he has devoted his life's work to Le Soberano, we have never been allowed to live inside their precious walls because of my mother's dark skin. I hate them. Should I go north? I guess I must.

A small smile comes across my face as I think of all the times I have plucked riches next to the Citadel, but the heavy patrols have always made it difficult. Until tonight.

Tonight the festival of Krozious ends. I know the dirty secrets of the Order of High Ascension. Their repentance tomorrow won't be enough to keep their souls from wandering the Plains of Penance into the Realm of No Order. But the celebration of their followers tonight pleases me, as it will fill my purse. The followers of Kroziuos light candles and torches for their dead, gorging themselves before their fast tomorrow.

Soon it will rain every day but tonight the torches flicker in the wind all over the city. From up here you can see the flames and wind dance with each other in a swaying rhythm. The torches burn east and west of Trader's Way from the North Wall and Citadel to the southern tip of the docks. I love this city.

This spot has saved my life before, and I suspect it may again sometime soon. I slip from between the outcroppings of black stone that hide my presence and slide down the long back side of the Temple of Lorick.

I enter the through the old wooden backdoor and move into the main worship hall. The dark oak ceilings stretch in the shape of a teardrop to the top of the tower. I can smell the spicy incense from the service that has just ended, but I cannot see anyone. I hear only my footsteps as I slowly step to the altar. The smoke leaves a metal taste in my mouth as I kneel. Large black and white candles burn and surround the black slate altar. The sign of Lorick, a great silver starburst against the black field of the night, hovers above.

I pray aloud, "Lorick, Great Guardian of the Night, on this day when Krozious celebrates his Reign of Long Days, and the cover of your cloak grows shorter—Grant me the cover of shadows—Let the Star's light guide my hand where others cannot see, and move me to safety. It is you alone that guards the realm of men when Krozious' blind eye looks on the world, and can guard me in the night."

I leave my sacrifice of diamond dust and coin and turn to leave. I exit through the large dark oak front door. As my feet hit the cobblestone streets of the Temple district, I remember that in only a few hours I will risk my life for the gain of a friend, based on another promise. The smart thing to do would be to meet Krosk and call it off, then

find Staufan to head north and figure-out what monster was bit me. But I've never been accused of making smart choices. I chuckle. Besides we've put a lot of work into this and I know he needs the money. And the risk of the job does pump excitement through my body. I take off with a quick pace to my steps. I walk south down Temple Street toward the Pit.

The cobblestones disappear from the streets and the snaking, narrow, solid dirt paths of the Pit appear. As my steps take me further the smells of trash, piss, and ale hit my nose like a stone. I hear the chatter of beggars, whores, and conmen rise in volume. The sounds and smells cover me like a warm safe blanket and calm my excitement a bit.

I will meet Krosk later up a few streets and around the corner at *Trig's Shrimp and Beans*, but I have time to go to my parents' apartment. Krosk is always late, and my parents live close. I continue south, three streets north of the docks and make my way to my parents' apartment.

Down here the wind off the water brings the smell of fish, and tonight the smell rises with the heat and wind. I climb the wooden stairs off the busy street up to the weathered third floor balcony. I reach my parents' abode.

The flaking stucco here blows in the wind. At eye level my father has ornately carved a pineapple and our last name in the new dark wood planks. I knock.

My sister opens the door. "Hey! Kormar." She turns to everyone inside and shouts, "Kormar is here. He must be hungry."

"When did you get here from the country?" jumps from my lips with the excitement of seeing my sister.

My sister, aging, but still beautiful favors my mother with swarthy skin, dark hair, and brown eyes, even though she's ten years older than me we have always stayed close. I reach out and hug her.

"We came by for mom's festival feast, and stayed for cards. Father is home," she says, sliding the door open for me.

"Shit, I missed dinner. What did you have?" I could smell the fried fish, the beans, and cornbread, as I enter the living room.

In the room sits my sister's husband, Stav, my father, and my mother. Everyone stands to greet me. Stav, a typical Rankan, very tall, powerful, red hair and beard, blue eyes, warrior, sailor, farmer, like the rest of his people here

has shed his furs and now wears thin cotton trousers and tunic. I love Stav. He's good to my sister, but he has turned her into a country-girl.

My mother springs up when she rises. "Kordmar, my baby, come ta Mama!" My mother cannot say my name without adding the "d" in the middle. Her Enlibrite rolls with a thick accent. She grew up as a kitchen servant only speaking Tierabeaux and Ilsigg.

My mother, a short portly woman has dark leathery skin, and looks far from her days as a stage acrobat when my father met her. Her long hair, once so black it looked like the night, fades now to mostly gray. I go to her, and as I hug her she tells me that she loves me in Ilsigg and pulls me down to sit beside her. She sits next to me with our legs touching and grips my hand.

She asks with her accent, "Jue want any fish, rice and bean, cornbread, tortilla, crawdad?"

"Yes, Mama." She gets up to get me some food.

My father, a fairly large pale man, looks at me with his glowing green eyes over his glasses that rest on his large nose. All the men in our family have some version of the "nose." The light dimly shines off his balding head

spotted with light brown hair and he says, "Where are you going tonight?"

"Out with Krosk." I look to the kitchen as if I am dying of hunger, but I really just want to avoid eye contact with my father.

"Out, huh. Out where? You look a little overdressed for carousing around here," my father questions with a gleaming smirk on his face.

What kind of comment was that? I know my silk tunic and leather pants cost more than he makes in a month, or does he mean they're all black? Did he find my tools? I buried them deep. They should be just a clump by now. I didn't break the lock on the chest when I pried it. He doesn't know.

I quickly lie, "We are going into the Merchants' District tonight for the festival."

He acknowledges my answer only with his eyes and continues to talk, "Why don't you come to work for me? You know not very many people can read at all, much less four languages. Um, where is your mask for the Festival? You know if we worked together we would be together every day, like when you were a boy and spent day after day with me

there. So where is your mask?"

Even though I know the questions my father asks are for show, at this moment I can only think I don't want to see any more disappointment on his face and so I answer, "I will, Father. I am tutoring Reg Tuscon's children, and I can't leave them in the middle of their studies, but soon—and we are getting masks on the way."

I stand up and pat my father on his once broad shoulder, which has shrunk from years of work in the library and say, "I will soon Father."

I have no interest in following my father's footsteps and he knows this. Why did he pick this subject for a fake conversation, because of four days ago, or just to hear what I would say? I regret having come here. I have work to do, and Krosk doesn't wait for others very well. I have to get out of here.

My father turns his head to my sister, "Lyna go help your mother get the food."

As my sister walks off my father leans in to me, "Don't trust your cousin. None of them are good people, even though we are all on the same side. They cannot be trusted."

He pauses just a moment then continues, "I am going to ask you one more time. What were you doing in the library in the middle of the night? Do you need some crowns? If you were home, you would not be involved with this. Just remember you are the poor half-breed son of the fifth son of the poorest kingdom. I have no title, and you never will. You will be lucky to run the kitchen for them when they are done with you. If they promise you anything, don't count your crowns."

Thank Lorick, my mother arrives with a clay bowl overflowing with fish and cornbread. My desire to depart so hastily suddenly leaves. As I eat, the others pick up their card game, and the conversation turns to the mundane local rumors and stories of neighborhood characters.

My mother motions me to sit closer to her. She loves her baby. Since my brother, even though he was my father's first wife's son, went north she worries the rest of us will leave her too, and she clings to me. I sit next to her.

I finish eating and I hear knocking at the door. Everyone looks at each other puzzled, as if to see if anyone else expects someone. I get up and answer the door.

Krosk dressed in all black stands powerfully in the doorway. He looks up at me with his brown eyes and mutters, "I knew I would find you here." He then speaks in a loud drawn-out voice, "Kormar Voorhexees, come my friend, the ladies await our arrival."

I turn to my family and say, "I am leaving."

My mother comes and gives me a hug and we exchange, "I love you" in Ilsigg. My mother and Krosk then exchange hugs as he tells her in Ilsigg how great she looks, and asks to come over for dinner tomorrow.

I shout to my Father, "I love you." We step out onto the wood balcony and head down the old stairs.

My mother shouts to us, "Be careful" and stands in the doorway as we make our way down the dirt street.

"Come on, Mama's baby", Krosk pokes at me through a giggle.

We weave our way west out onto Trader's Way and make the uphill climb north. Trader's Way the largest street in the city, divides the city in half east to west and runs north to south the entire length of the city from the wall to the sea.

It seems as if every sound and smell in the city comes in as a giant wave and collides here: the grind of the mills on the river in the west and their sticky putrid odor, the sizzle and smell of food from the Ten Kingdoms, and the roar of the waves crashing in the south bringing the crisp air from the sea.

The well lit street rustles with people. Cast iron railed balconies point out from every upper window and door that faces street side. From the balconies drunken crowds, whores, and bar crier's umbrella the street with their shouts. The smells of roasting chicken, fried fish 'n' gator tail, and garlic noodles fills this part of the street. I love that this part of the city never sleeps.

The cobblestone street slopes south, downward toward the sea, and dips in the middle. The rains always wash the street clean. Soon it will rain every day. The street bounds with excitement of the street carts selling masks, shell necklaces, crawdads, shrimp, and drinks of beer, ale, honey mead, wine, rum, and corn liquor. I love this festival.

I turn to Krosk tugging his sleeve, "Did you remember the masks?"

"Does an Enlibrite lust for power? Yes I have the masks," he answers sarcastically. "Not you of course, you're only half sandskin."

I answer his sarcasm with some of my own. "Thanks, my brother. Let's drink."

We walk past *Taste the Tradition*, where the large sign reads,

*Sailor's Soup Day and Night,
Since worried Mothers' Lit
the beach fires and made the first pot
over 200 years ago.*

The closest beer stands rest on the other side. The wooden stand, tied together with rope looks like a strong wind could knock it over. I people-watch while Krosk pays the deposit for our mugs and the first fill. The street bounds with a parade of drunken merriment. We continue north.

"Let's stop at Trigg's. I'm hungry," Krosk barks rubbing his guts like a dying man.

"You didn't eat here earlier when you were waiting?" I shake my head.

"I never came over here. I just went to your mom's. I knew you would be there, and I was at the dock spot." He

smiles and pats me on the back.

"Go, Go inside, and get it to carry. I'll wait here and drink," I answer back.

Krosk goes inside Trigg's, and I wait in the street. I notice across the street stands two men who also were close to the beer shack. They stopped at a necklace shop. They don't look like the necklace types. They wear black leather armor and carry large daggers. They would have swords if they were city-watchmen. Maybe just a coincidence, we'll see.

Krosk comes outside balancing his wood mug of beer and a paper cone full of fried shrimp and crawdad tails covered in peppered vinegar. I meet him and we continue north on Trader's Way. I stumble a bit and then look down and back as if I'm checking to see what I tripped on, but I look to see if our new friends trail us. I see them.

I tell Krosk, "There are two guys behind us wearing black leather armor, tall, sandskins, one with brown hair, one bald."

Krosk shoves a few more shrimp in his mouth and slams his beer. He takes the lead, picking up the pace. I slam my beer and follow. We take a right and head east down

Merchants' Road. This large street spokes out with five small cul-de-sacs on both sides. It connects Trader's Way with Temple Street and though not very long with the sixteen cul-de-sacs it has more merchants, traders, restaurants, bars, and inns than anywhere else in the Port.

We head to the first tavern and walk in the front door. The large pig-faced door-guard stands and stops us with his huge hands to our chests, and says, "Whoa! Does this look like the Pit?"

He takes his hand off my chest and says, "Just kidding sir, but you should know, your man has to go in the back entrance."

The men following us appear in the door. I say to the door guard, "I need him to come with me, inside."

"Then you got to go! We don't allow it." The door guard puts his large paws in my chest.

We look at each other with a smirk then turn and leave brushing by the two armored followers. We take off running down the first large cul-de-sac. As we enter the circle road we swerve left running across the black cobblestone toward one of the dark alleys that connect the backsides of the slanting street circles.

As we run, Krosk turns to me and says, "Those look like Stilcho's men to me." He then starts to shake his head, muttering in an angry tone.

He looks at me as says with a slight sarcastic tone, "Why are they fucking with us, Kormar? It couldn't be from your little letter crimes with those rich broads, could it? Or maybe it is the fact you fucked his daughter? I can't believe this, tonight of all nights."

I feel the heat rise to my head and my pulse pound in my throat. I answer, "How many times do I have to tell you, I didn't know who she was—maybe it is the fact that neither one of us has never paid him, anything—or maybe it's because you owe one of his gambling houses, again?"

As we enter the alley the two men following get closer. Krosk turns to me and says, "All I know is I'm sick of this shit. Let's kill these fuckers and send him a message."

"Send a message, What? That we want to die—listen to you—let's put on our masks and loose these goons," I plead. I'm sick of this too. I have had too many nights like this lately.

We get about halfway down the dark alley and two

different men appear at the end facing us, a tall skinny Ilsigg and a short blond haired Enlibrite. I recognize the short one, Wrak Tagnot.

Wrak's pale blue eyes glow at us in the moonlight. The men following us enter the alley behind us.

Wrak speaks, "Krosk and Kormar, How's the festival going for you guys?"

I answer, "Just fine Wrak. What do you want?"

"You know what we want. I figure you two guys owe about a thousand crowns a piece in tribute, but we'll take what you have on you right now. And before you start jumping around like little bunnies and climbing the walls and disappearing—there are men on the roof," Wrak commands in a very animated way, making motions like a bunny and climbing ladder. He is serious, but he looks so ridiculous I can't help myself and start to chuckle a bit.

Wrak's scarred cheeks begin to glow red as he shouts, "You think this is a joke? You think I brought ten men to follow you and your clay-faced friend for a joke? I owe both of you, and it is time to pay."

Wrak and his men draw their long curved daggers. I see muscle-bound extortionist, smugglers, and tower burglars.

All dressed with black leather armor. I now see several men on the roofs on each side of the alley.

I raise my hands and say, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hey I know you're not joking Wrak, but Stilcho doesn't want us dead, right? He would have told you as much. Look, take all we have, but tell Stilcho we're not part of your guild and we're retired. I teach kids how to read."

Wrak begins to laugh at me now, "Throw me the coin." We throw him all of our crowns, princes, and commons.

Our riches hit the ground with little noise. As Wrak picks up our small purses, he states, "Stilcho wants you to come to him, tonight." He points at me and continues, "The message has been delivered—you have until morning. Come alone."

The men sheath their daggers. As Wrak leaves he turns and says with a laugh, "Thanks for the tip, half-breed. You guys beat the shit out of these . . . fucks."

The tall skinny Ilsigg standing next to Wrak flips back his long, straight, black hair. He then looks back at me with disgust narrowing his black eyes and spits toward my feet, as he and Wrak leave.

The ten men surround us. How bad is tonight going to

turn out? Fist and feet blur between flashes of black. The thunking and thudding of blows against our heads and bodies echo through the alley. We fight our way toward the exit, taking out as many of them as we can, waiting for all the men to hit the ground, and looking for a way up and out. I see Krosk bound off some abandoned crates and up the wall with the speed of a street cat. He extends his arm down.

"Come On!"

We take off across the roofs, nursing our wounds, looking back at the group of men trickling up after us. No one can keep up with us across the roof-bridges. We weave back south, east toward the swamps, and double-back north losing our followers and heading toward our target.

"Well at least that didn't take our mugs," I state with a shrug.

"That's all you have to say—and I guess we're alive? This is definitely your fault," Krosk lectures me. "You aren't seriously going to go meet him? He is going to kill you no matter what. You might as well make him catch you. We should just disappear after tonight for at least a few moons."

"He doesn't want me dead. He wants me to work for

him."

"Just you?" Krosk states with an insulted tone, pointing his finger at me. "To do what?" He crosses his arms looking at me like I have taken something from him.

"Nothing, I already told him, No. No matter how much he offered me." I want to avoid ceaseless ridicule from Krosk, so I do not mention Sidara.

"What is wrong with you!" Krosk demands. "He has more coin than we can carry."

"It's the Citadel. Guards, soldiers, the holding yard for Moorkall prison. No thanks." I've already been caught there once. If I had Krosk with me then, we would both be dead.

Krosk waves his finger in my direction. "I've heard a lot of crazy tales about what trouble you and my cousin have been getting into over the last two moons, but . . ."

I interrupt, "You don't know the half of it. There are things in this world you think are only stories. I have to go north. I've got to go."

"That came from off the sea. What do you mean you are going north? When did you decide this?" Krosk's look goes

from concerned to confusion.

"I was going to tell you, when we got done tonight."

"You're just going to leave me in this shit?" Krosk narrows his eyes and shakes his head at me.

"No, you can come with us. We'll hide out at the dock spot and we will leave in the morning in two days after tomorrow. You don't have a choice now. They will kill you looking for me."

"Or you can just do what he wants you do to. We would have a chance to pull any job off together. You can stay here, and we don't have to hide" Krosk has no idea how deep I already am stuck in this.

"I can't. He wants me to take some documents from the library."

"What? What documents? Isn't your father city scribe? Doesn't he have the key?"

"Yes, I had the documents in my hand, but I could not leave. I put them back. My father is involved in something. I can't do it. I would rather die, or go north. Come with us," I plead.

"I don't know. We will have to hide and I won't even

get to say goodbye to anyone." Krosk has a look on his face like this is way too much.

"I can write my father a letter and he can tell your mother not to worry. Just think about it. This is why I didn't want to bring this up, now. We have a job to do tonight. We need a traveling purse," I say, trying to redirect our focus.

I grab my disguise, put it on, and lead us out of the alley. The black hooded masks cover our faces except for our mouths. I worry about Krosk. This job should be easy with our plan, but now who knows? The huge house sits close to the citadel walls and if things go wrong, it could get real bad, real fast.

We make our way back to the main part of Merchants' Road and head west to Temple Street. The entire plan begins to play through my head. We will loop around back north to Magistrate's Avenue off Temple Street, and two houses down through the iron, street gate, next to Reg Tuscon's house our target awaits. I tutored Reg's children, but only to spy this house and to get Reg's key to the street gate that protects this district. Johana Soget, the largest spice and tobacco trader in the Port owns the house. I have watched him count his crowns and put them away. He keeps his

holdings in a simple strongbox in his bedroom on the second floor.

We will avoid the patrols by acting as drunken Merchants. Then make our way to Reg's house. His security accompanies him at Le' Soberano's Ball for Krozious's festival. From the boost house we can tightrope across into Johana's room, get the strongbox and bring it back-over, where the house stands empty and we will have time to empty the strongbox. Then we should just walk out.

Our plan works. We go through the gate and enter the plush Quartier de Rico, home of rich. The manors here rise larger than some apartment buildings in the Pit. Gated courtyards dotted with palm and magnolia trees surround the large homes built in the city's own style: heavy with white stucco, arched doorways, shuttered windows, clay tile roofs, a pillared balcony that circles the home, and decorated with carvings and statues of pineapples and pelicans. The slate streets shine with a newness seen nowhere else in the city, but the smell of horses floats heavy in the air here.

Chain and plate armor clanking against each other signals the approach of a group of young guards. The city's symbol of a pelican rising over a nautical wheel and trade

scales spilling with gold shines with new paint on their long-shields. We stumble right by them without a second glance. We glide through the courtyard near the blooming azalea bushes, up the short staircase, and to the door. I pop the lock and we enter.

We make our way to the second floor balcony on the side of the house that faces the Soget's manor. Krosk sets the rope and I cross. As I balance, I begin to worry if Krosk will keep a good eye out. I look back at him, which almost causes me to fall. Stay focused, Krosk will worry about Krosk. The circular, white stucco balcony curves around bigger than my parents' living room. I pick the lock to the wood framed glass door and enter Johana's bedroom. I know he hides his coin on the north side of the bedroom, but I lied to Krosk when we put this plan together and I don't know where in here the box hides, but certainly I will find it.

Light pine wardrobes, night tables, and chairs scatter around the huge room. Woven tapestries of hunting scenes hang on the south and east walls. Fur rugs surround the overstuffed bed sitting high on its frame. I see the crumpled, white cotton blankets on the bed move. I drop and slowly crawl to the north side of the bed. I peer around

the large, light pine footboard carved with deer, and see feet, skinny, female feet. Mrs. Soget', quite large, does not have skinny feet. This is starting to go wrong. How fast will this unravel? Pull yourself together.

The mystery woman sleeps still. I only see an oak and iron chest on the north wall. I can't believe that's all that holds the box. What a cheap ass, men like him deserve to be robbed. He could at least have it hidden in the wall behind a picture, too easy. Don't wake the whore, step softly, and I will get out with ease. I rise up and walk slowly and silently. The whore lays restful. I pick the iron padlock. It may be trapped. I slide against the wall and jimmy it from behind. The old chest creaks open.

I hear the whore rustle the bed. She speaks in a strange accent. Her voice sounds drunk and half-asleep, "Master?"

I hide behind the open trunk and I pray to myself, "Lorick, please, take this whore deep into the nights slumber." I wait for silence.

The longer I hide, the more I worry. The time, the time. Krosk waits. The time drags. I hear nothing. I know the horse wants to chase me, but I have done this too many

times.

I peek around the chest and see no movement on the bed. I move out to retrieve the strongbox. The red and black box weighs much more than I thought. I smile. I get it out and turn to walk to the balcony door. Walking with this strongbox I feel like a child with a full pail of water from the street well. My eyes fix on the bed. I see no movement. As my eyes stay locked, I misjudge my steps and my right foot catches the corner of the bed. It shakes a bit, and the whore rises from her sleep.

"Master? Who are you?" she questions in her strange accent that has a deep but throaty sound, in which she slightly rolls her 'R's.

I raise my hand to my lips and whisper, "Be quiet. Shhhhh."

"Take off your mask or I will scream," the whore demands.

I put the strongbox on the floor and take it off. "Don't scream. I'm not your Master, and I'm not here to hurt you."

"No, you're a thief."

"And you're a whore. So we are both poor merchants of the street."

"I may be a whore, but he has me locked in here. There are men downstairs. I've had enough, get me out of here."

"He will let you out tomorrow for repent, and pay you," I state with a grin.

"Not if you take all his coins."

She gets out of bed and walks toward me. Her beauty freezes me. I can see her naked body clearly in the moonlight as she slithers closer to me. She is not an Ilsigg or an Enlibrite, but has olive skin with long straight black hair. Her green eyes sit atop high cheek bones. Thin dimples stretch down from her cheeks to her full angle-bow lips. She has the slightest overbite. Her strong but feminine jaw points to her dimpled chin. Her body moves with the firmness of youth. Her hips, though narrow, sway with an experienced women's authority.

She stands in front of me. "Well, now that you've unlocked the balcony—I can climb down with you and we can split the box. Besides, you're kind of cute." She begins to work her hands under my tunic. "And strong too. You got a lot of muscle under this thing. I love green eyes and

you're more handsome than Johana, than most." She says with her supple lips. I suddenly find my hands caressing the dimples on her back moving down to grab her round ass. She throws her head back and I kiss her neck.

Thump, thump, thump, I hear someone coming up the stairs. What am I doing? "Get your clothes." I tell her. As she moves to get dressed I grab the heavy strongbox and waddle as fast as I can to the balcony. As I reach the door I turn back to her and say, "I'll be back for you."

I move out to the rope. I cut my end and tie a quick sailor's knot on one of the handles of the strongbox. I look over to Krosk and he motions me to stay, but I hear the door to Johana's room opening. I cannot wait. I put the box on the edge, grab the rope and jump off. I stick my feet out to brace the impact of the wall, but the heavy hard wood strongbox swings between my legs and thuds against the wall shaking all of the coins. As I impact the wall I hear the girl screaming from the room above, "Help! Thief!"

As I look up and motion to Krosk to slide down the rope. I hear from behind me the clanking of armor, the drawing of swords, and voices in unison, "Answer to the city guard, and state your business."

I raise my hands, pull the thumb release on my arm daggers, and turn around. Two young guards stand in front of me pointing their long swords in my direction. I drop my hands and the daggers fall into my palms.

As I snap my wrists to release my volley, I see Krosk flying off the balcony and smashing into the backs of the guards. I run to them and kick the closest guard in the face. Krosk rolls on top of the other guard and smashes his face in the street. His blood and teeth shoot into the air. Krosk picks up the guard's head again and slices his throat. The thick crimson life pumps from his neck. He looks at me and says, "Do the other one! Where is your mask?"

I hear people on Johana Soget's balcony as I give the guard another kick to the face. Krosk cuts the strongbox from the rope. We each grab an end and run across the street. We won't make it out of here like this. I hear horns and whistles as we make it into the darkness on the other side of the street.

We rapidly dart from shadow-to-shadow making our way over the small iron-gate and through the overgrown courtyard of the large manor across the street. We continue south and struggle over the tall stone back wall of the

courtyard, and enter an alley of the Merchants' district. Soon, the patrols will flood the streets.

We smash into the back door of a small shop's old, fading, storage house. I pull off my tunic and turn it inside out to reveal the white inner lining, and put it back on. I tie back my hair as Krosk opens the strongbox. I empty our treasure into a sailor's sack as Krosk takes off his mask and switches his tunic.

"Why didn't you kill that guard? He saw your face," Krosk scolds me.

"So did the girl upstairs. We definitely have to leave now. Blood of a city guard is on our hands," roars out of my mouth.

"Is on your hands—no one has seen my face."

"That's why we should split up, and you take the sack. They will be looking for two of us in different clothes. It is our best chance. We will meet at the dock spot later."

"That's the first smart thing I've heard you say tonight." Krosk grabs the sack, slings it over his shoulder and starts to leave west down the narrow dark alley.

He then turns back to me and says, "You're not going

back for the girl, right? Tell me you're not going back for her or I'm not leaving."

"I promise I just want to get out of here, alive." I hold my head down.

"Hey, what's this chance to go north? Do we just travel with these guys? Do we have jobs? What?" Krosk questions.

"We are part of a guard detail."

"You? What are you guarding?"

"I play the decoy. The Prince is my cousin. We look alike," I say, trying to make it sound better than I know it really is.

Krosk throws back his head with laughter and says, "So you're the bait. They got the poor half-breed son of some exiled librarian to take the arrows. Smart! Real fucking smart! My mother always said you would get me killed. We are going to die if we stay or if we go!"

Krosk jogs west down the alley shaking his head in disbelief, and I head back east toward Temple Street. I turn south through the alleys and cul-de-sacs of Merchants' Road, and make my way to the south side roof bridges of the

Merchants' District that lead me to the Pit. I reach my apartment.

I look around the heavy oak door to see if anyone has entered the apartment. It looks untouched. I unlock it and go inside. I gather my things including my newly purchased long sword and start to leave. I can't get the girl's image out of my head. I exhale a deep breath, my thoughts burden me. Why? Why do I want to go back for her? Krosk sees through me like glass. I will surely die if I go back. I turn back around, throw my things on the floor, lock the door, and decide I will go back for her later.

I go to my room and lay in bed, thick and comfortable with Thanatos' blankets. I look at the rotting beams and cracked ceiling with a sense of sadness. I'll leave this place and perhaps never come back. Will my mother and father become memories? Rebellion, giant diamonds, it all seems so unreal. Time will make the patrols slow down. I'll rest here for a bit longer. I don't know if I really want this, to leave, to find what I don't know in the world. I am leaving in service to someone else. I don't work for anyone, never have. Now, I'm going to be a servant, a decoy. Krosk is right—what a joke. These thoughts drive me to rise in anger. Calm down! Rest, think of the girl—lay

down. I close my eyes.

I walk down a long stone hallway, a gray door, a red door, a pale blue door, a yellow door, doors, doors, doors, swirling around me. I run down the hallway, but the hallway grows. I run faster. The hallway blurs, as the doors twist into a star of color, the head of the snake, the wolf, the boar, the horse, the rat-boy, the horse, the monster's lunging fangs, the horse!

My heart pounds. My forehead sweats. How long have I been asleep? It only felt like moments, but I think I see the red sun rising. My heart still races as I gather my things as fast as I can. I have to get to the docks.

Thank Lorick, night still cloaks the sky as I leave through the window of my apartment and make my way to the roof. I have made my way to the docks many times from here. So I move unseen with ease.

The rosy morning horizon begins to brighten and yellow as I approach the docks. I work my way down the harbor and past my uncle's spot for his fishing boat to the warehouse where me and Krosk hid many times. I go up the sea weathered stairs and open the pale blue door to the overhead apartment. I see Krosk sitting in a chair with his

back to me and his head back as if he sleeps. As I approach him, I see his hands tied behind his back. I sprint to face him. His face is bloody, swollen, purple, his throat cut. Blood covers his shirt and a note is stuck to his chest with a Thieves' Guild Dagger. The note reads.

You Will do what I want.

*Thanks for the tip,
\$*

The death of my brother buckles my knees. Krosk's words, "This is definitely your fault," plays through my mind over and over. I feel the pain surge in me, but I don't have time for emotions. I have to get out of here. I gather my things and head out. I do not know where I can hide so I head back onto the roofs to head into the Pit.

As I reach the first roof I see a fire about three blocks north. My parents! I move as fast as I can toward their apartment. My heart pounds and my head spins with worry and grief. Getting closer. I plead to all the gods, "Please let them live." I see their apartment. I see men on the roof throwing buckets of water. I go down to the narrow dirt street to find my parents.

The street jumps in chaos with hundreds of people hauling buckets from three different street wells. In a

daze I bump my travel pack into people as I make my way down the street. I begin to cry out, "Mama! Poppa! Mama! Poppa!" I see Stav towering over my father. My sobbing father sits in the street clutching my burnt mother in his lap.

I approach them and ask, "What happened? I take a few more steps that seem to take hours, as I notice I do not see my sister. "Where is Lyna?" I ask as I pull from my daze.

Stav replies, "She is inside. She is dead."

I turn to go inside and Stav grabs me from behind. He whispers to me in his Rankan accent, "They killed her. When she opened the door and they killed her. I don't know who. They threw flaming oil in das door. Ve will find them. Go to your mother. She is not long for dis vorld."

When I hear those words my knees buckle again, and the most sinking feeling one could ever feel comes over me. My breath strangles me. I wipe my face and head toward my mother. Her eyes open, and I see that she can see me. I kneel to her and she speaks through coughs and gasps, "Remember no matter what I love you."

"I love you too." Her brown eyes have never seemed so

beautiful and full of light as I hold her hand and she dies.

The tears begin to flow down my cheeks. My mother, my sister, Krosk, how could the Gods allow this? My head spins. I feel weak. I stand and watch the embers crumble. I don't know me. I don't like me, this life. What have I done? Confusion sets in as I hang my head in shame. I hear thunder. My dreams, the ill-conceived ideals of a child, spin out of my grasp. I deserve nothing. The rain begins. Servant, decoy, bait, penance in labor, my life. I will go north. Soon it will rain here every day. There's nothing here for me now.

Chapter 5: The Next Day /To the Lands of Plenty

We return to the ashes of my parents' apartment to look for my sister's body. Stav has not cried a tear for my sister, but I can see the pain on his face. So I ask him, "Why don't you cry for her?"

He turns his head and in his deep voice says, "It is not das Rankan way." The words fall out of his mouth with no conviction. I can feel the weight on his chest.

The moon shines through the broken roof tiles on the black walls. The smell of smoke rests heavy and thick in the air. I see the charred remains of my sister lying in a puddle in the middle of the room with a steel crossbow bolt sticking out of her chest.

At least she was dead when the flames engulfed her body.

I stand puzzled over my sister's corpse. I can't believe or understand what happened here today? Was it Stilcho? Was it assassins looking to destroy the Prince's plans? Had they come for my father? How does the diamond fit into this? Does that all mean the same thing? Exhaustion covers me. I stand there over my sister's corpse. The water seeps through my boots. I stand there.

Stav shakes me out of my confusion with a light pat on the shoulder and says, "We need to get her out of here."

"Yes," solemnly echoes out of my mouth.

We lay my sister's body in one of the old gray blankets we have brought, and lay the other blanket on top of her. We each grab an end and rise up. Stav begins to swing his end toward the door.

"We can't take her out that way," I say planting my feet.

"What do you mean? There is no other door." He stops in confusion.

"She has to leave the house feet first. So she can walk to the Land of Plenty." I take steps forward to swing her body around.

Stav looks at me with understanding on his face. I explain to him, "It is our custom. It is bad enough her body will not be prepared at home. We must at least have her leave feet first."

We carry her body through the muddy streets to my nearest relative's apartment in the Pit, my aunt's. Shaldoth, the Lord of the Tomb, must be able to find them.

Lit candles of all shapes and sizes cover the sidewalk only leaving a path to the door. To light death's way the light must burn all night.

We walk through the small entry area to the back. We lay my sister's charred remains next to my mother's blue body. Stav leaves the small room of death and goes to sit with my father. I look up and see my mother entering.

My heart jumps with excitement, but in a flash I realize it's my mother's sister carrying an abalone shell full of strawberry paint. Her short frame is rounded with age much like my mother. Her long grayed hair swings with the rhythm of her steps. Her eyes rest red and swollen. The tears have left a path on her cheeks. We change the gray wet blankets under my sister's body, and we each paint a red circle on her burnt cheeks. We do not speak.

She sings the song of death in Ilsigg with long chanting tones as we paint.

*Time has come to leave this world
To the lands of plenty
Let Shaldoth guide your spirit
To the lands of plenty
Find your way through the fields
To the lands of plenty*

*Your spirit will not want or wander
You go to the lands of plenty*

The song repeats as we lay the red burial blankets over my mother and sister's bodies. Tears begin to stream from my eyes. I want to break down and sob, but I hold myself back. I have cried all day. I don't have much left in me. The candles must burn all night.

Until dawn, my thoughts flash between, the horse waiting for me on the other side of the ivory gate of dreams, the girl from the Soget job, the boy monster, and the weight of death.

In the morning our family crowds inside my aunt's home while the rest of the funeral party waits in the soggy street. I gather myself and squeeze through the mass of my relatives to help my uncle carry my mother. Stav and my father carry Lyna. We take the bodies out feet first and into the crowd on the drying street. Krozious' light grows longer each day this time of year. Soon the street will be a hard dry impression of yesterday's chaos in the soaring heat. The mass surrounds us and we walk easterly together down Funeral Road to the Ilsigg burial yard.

As we walk, we do not speak. The procession sings songs and shares bottles of red wine, loaves of bread, and heads of hard cheese. The party grows as we walk through the Pit. Each step seems to echo through my body, thud, thud, thud. I have no thoughts. I just keep stepping in the sludge.

This small road stretches all the way to the east gate of the city wall. The wooden buildings covered in black mold rise on stilts here. We exit the urban sludge, and seemingly in only a few steps we reach the levee, and on the other side lay the Ilsigg burial yard just west of the east bog.

Huge, ancient oak trees with large twisting limbs snaking up and down off the ground spot the burial yard. Hanging moss flows from their limbs, and creeping vines and ferns cover their trunks. The white stucco covered stone tombs that keep the dead from floating in the wet ground sit crooked and leaning. I can't see through the wall of skinny pine, swamp red maple, magnolia, and ironwood trees on the east side of the burial yard. The soft, moist grass squishes under my feet.

In the distance, Cyprus gum trees hide gators with their roots half buried with water and their limbs covered

in hanging moss. I feel like I can reach out and grab the thick, damp air. Wild azaleas poke through the edge of the tree line. The chirps and rustles of life fill my ears.

Entering the burial yard, I see my mother's friends honored with the right to lay her and my sister to rest standing next to their freshly stacked tombs. The three men wear large black and white beaded necklaces decorated with seashells. The one woman wears a large black and red beaded necklace fragilely decorated with the shells of different eggs. They have painted their faces white, the men with a black stripe through the middle, and the woman with large red dots on each cheek. They stand straight and hold their heads up. Their posture reminds me that my sorrow is selfish; my mother and sister are headed to a better place; but the sorrow is mine and all I have left of them. So, for now, I will keep it. The crowd silences as the large skin drums begin to beat, and the honored begin to remove the blankets covering the top of the tombs, and loudly sing the song of death in a haunting chant.

We place my mother and sister in their graves. The silence breaks with a thunderous cacophony of sobbing, talking, and singing. The honored lay symbolic shovels across the graves.

The myriad of conversations around me ceases to exist as my father speaks to me, "When this is finished, I need you to walk with me to your aunt's house."

I answer, "Yes, sir," with a smile, but as I answer I think this will be another lecture about my safety and the woes that my northern relatives will cause me.

The chatter of the crowd rushes back into my ears, but the volume dies down as the Priestess of Shaldoth appears and takes her place upon the great stump of the burial yard to speak.

Her wide face has the look of general unpleasantness. Deep wrinkles surround her sunken gray eyes. The tall woman hunched with age wears black robes. Skull tattoos cover her shaved head. Large disc shaped wooden skulls stretch her ear lobes.

She speaks through rotting and missing teeth with a creaking voice, "Shaldoth leads us through the plains of penance to the Lands of Plenty. He guides us with our ancestor's ways to the Lands of Plenty. Heed the word of Shaldoth, for what other journey is more important than the journey of death. The journey must be paved with sacrifice. You can bring your sacrifice for your journey to the

temple—but today we are here to speak of the triumphs of the lives of these two women, Ryiah and Lyna. To raise our voices so Shaldoth may hear, and come and guide these spirits. Who will be the first to come and speak?"

Many people speak on my mother's behalf, praising her days as a fearless performer, her loving heart, and her endless nature as a prankster. Many of my cousins and sister's old friends from the neighborhood speak for her.

Stav gets up and moves toward the great oak stump of the burial yard grabbing a largest bottle of wine from a member of the crowd. This move worries me. He stands on the stump like a giant blocking the sun, and holds the big bottle of wine high above his head. He takes a large gulp of the bottle, and in a booming voice sings a line in Rankan. He stops and takes another drink and sings the same line over and drinks again, each time passionately urging everyone to drink and sing with him. I can make out that he sings something about drinking spirits to the sky, but I can see no one else in the crowd but my father understands him.

Yet, his passion spreads through the crowd as more and more of us join him in drinking and singing the words. Tears barely trickle down Stav's face as the Ilsigg crowd

begins to roar his Rankan song, *Vi skal drikke din ånd til himmelen*, and drink with him. Stav smashes his empty bottle on the ground, raises his hands in the air, and lets out a fierce yell. The crowd roars as he steps down.

The honored friends signal the end of the ceremony by taking their shovels from across the graves and covering the bodies with dirt.

The crowd and family begin to disburse in small waves after consoling Stav and my father. I anxiously wait, wondering what my father wants. He works closer to me through the crowd. I think of a hundred different conversations, none of them good. My mouth is dry. A sense of pressure mounts on my chest.

His hand falls on my back as I spin and we walk toward my aunt's house. "I was a boy of fifteen when my mother died. It is a pain that still haunts me from time to time, but it will get better, son," my father consoles me. "Your mother loved you very much."

As my father attempts to comfort me we separate ourselves from everyone else with our steps. Our feet squish in the boggy grass as we work our way up the green levee and head west back to the city.

"I love you father, but why did you want me to walk with you?" I ask confused, since this conversation seems like one we could have anytime.

My father stops, looks at me, and lets out a sigh of worry and says, "I was going to take this to my grave, but your mother is dead—and you are running headlong into the truth."

I feel my face twist to reveal my confusion. He continues to speak. "You are my son and I love you, but I am not your father and your mother did not carry you in her womb. You were exiled to us as a baby, a son of my brother, the King of Voorhexees."

I can't believe what he is saying. "We just buried my mother!" Like a child my lip begins to quiver and tears stream from my eyes, as I point to the burial yard. "What do you mean she is not my mother? All the love I know in this world is gone, and you want to tell me she is not my mother. You are a liar!" I turn back toward the city and walk off.

I feel my father grab my arm. "I love you." I hear as he pulls me into his chest and embraces me. He feels like the safest pillow in the world. I break down. His voice

softly echoes into my ears, "I never wanted to tell you this, to break your heart. I do, and your mother did, love you like a child of our own—but this is not a lie."

I can't take anymore. My whole world disappears. I thought I knew sorrow, but now I feel my body melting away as the waves of cries leave me.

I run out of energy in my father's arms. I raise my head and step back. "Why are you telling me this? Do I have some title waiting for me north?"

He grabs my chin to lock my eyes with his. "This is a warning to you. You are his bastard son of an Ilsigg slave. You are an embarrassment to them, but you are MY son. I was already sent here for marrying an Ilsigg. Everyone just thought it easier to send you here. It made sense. But you are my son now. Before you arrive my brother will recall his past. He is not a dumb man, and your fate will be sealed. What that will be is the real question, be prepared for anything. Your brother . . ."

I know my father speaks of his blood son, but when I hear the word brother my thoughts flash to my childhood with Krosk . . . The wave board jerks from under me. The rolling tide pulls me down, and the salty water fills my

nose. I try to reach for the light as I tumble into the sandbar. I can feel the swirl of the undertow grabbing me, and then I'm pulled the other way. Popping up from the sea Krosk splashes me.

"You don't have to break for the big ones every time!"

I feel a bit dizzy. "Thanks."

"Thanks?"

"For saving my life, bro. I was going under."

"It's what we do. Let's go ashore and get some sailor's soup like young fishermen returning from sea."

As we paddle back, I think of how many more times he had saved me.

I come back to the world where death rots my family. We begin to walk again. ". . . is there. He will not be your equal anymore. He is not Ilsigg or a bastard. He is considered one of them. I hope they will place you in his service. If the King has any love for his blood, he will accept you as my son. He knows if it becomes known you are the son of a slave woman, you will become property, even as his son. This is why he sent you to me. So let's hope his heart remains the same."

The words my father speaks seep in my ears, but distracted with my thoughts of Krosk and the weight of what he has said, I struggle to listen.

His lecture continues. "Servitude awaits you there. You would be smart to get back here as fast as possible. I will have nothing left here when you are gone, except this cause, which has cost me everything and if you die too . . ."

I interrupt. "It is all our cause, now father."

"That is it, boy—all because they saw your face. Why were you in the library?" He gives me a smirk.

I want to tell him the truth, and watch his mouth drop open, to see him realize I know an entire life he does not. That any death I caused was to protect him, but I cannot. He will realize the Empire knows something of our plans, and worry too much. Maybe I am not worried enough of the unknown, because I know the death that waits for me here. Stilcho cannot reach my father inside the citadel.

I open my mouth and lie, "I was there reading *The Bard's Lie*, a whore told me that I could have her for as long as I could recite the tale—and I told her I would recite all seven thousand lines. I failed the first time.

So, I thought I would scrape the barnacles from my memory before I gave it a second shot. I didn't know how to ask for the key. Was I supposed to say? *Hey Dad I'm trying to impress a whore, so lend me the key.*"

"Your desire for whore mongering confuses me. You should get married when you get back. They'll love you in our homeland. They'll say you're a true Voorhexees with your drink and lust. I've thought that so many times in secret. It feels strange to say it out loud. Be careful." He shakes his head in disbelief. The beautiful foreign girl I left stranded in the Soget's room flashes in my mind, with her glowing green eyes and the slithering motion of her narrow hips.

"I think you said that already. How about you promise me with all that has happened you'll go straight to the citadel and stay in the library." We step closer to my aunt's home.

"Yes, and you promise me that you will hide during any attacks."

"Don't you mean if there are attacks?" I smile.

"If they did not expect an attack, why would they demand you to go?" A concerned look comes over his face.

"Please son, just survive and come back. Your brother is already sworn to lead troops. Please, just come home."

The word brother hits me again. Krosk. I do not know how to answer this. He has no idea that death awaits me here. "I will, father, avoid any danger."

We enter my aunt's home and I collect my things. Images of the dead flash through my mind. Krosk's body just waits for my Uncle's arrival from his fishing trip, with the note stuck in his chest. The smell of fish will hide the smell of death eating Krosk's body. If I just leave him the citadel will know he was murdered and who gave the order. I like this idea. I envision Stilcho in shackles.

I snap back to reality. Stilcho has probably already paid the patrol. If I can't get Krosk to his family his spirit will never rest. Maybe I can just get to *The Swamp-Wolves' Den* and tell Thanatos. Together we can get a cart and tonight take Krosk's body to the rest of his family, and I will stay there at The Den until we leave.

As I leave my father and Stav follow me to the dry malformed street.

Stav looks at me and I see the sorrow in his face change to bottled rage. "It was a tall skinny Ilsigg with

long straight black hair. He wore a black cloak." My thoughts flash to Wrak's sidekick spitting at my feet. Stav's voice fades back to my ears. "I could not see his face. I fear we will never find him, but if we do. I will smash them."

"We will find them one day," I reassure him patting his shoulder.

My father has a look on his face as if he will tolerate the revenge talk, for now, as he says simply through his exhaustion, "Be careful."

I look at Stav, "Please walk with him to the citadel." I then turn to my father. "For the Cause, father. For the Cause." The words almost choke me as they come out of my throat.

He responds as we shake hands and he pats me on the shoulder, "For the Cause, son, For the Cause."

I walk off and head north down a narrow alley and hit the nearest stairs. I take the fastest route to the north side of the Pit, the rooftops. This maybe the last time I do this. So, I put everything aside to enjoy this. I take off. Even with my pack I soar from roof to roof, up and

down stairs, from balcony to balcony, flying through hanging laundry and kicking cats off their perches.

For a moment it works, and my pain slips away. I remember the joy of innocence. As I hit the roofs again, I see Wrak's Ilsigg sidekick in my path and holding a dagger in each hand. He looks ready to pounce, slightly crouched with his feet standing just wider than his shoulders.

"Sorry to hear about your friend." He chuckles.

I pull my sword from my pack.

"What are you going to do with that thing?" He laughs at me.

I step forward. I see Wrak entering the roof on the left side. I faint the long sword up and slash down across the Ilsigg's hips and crotch. He looks shocked at my skill and viciousness of attack. I keep stepping. I plant a boot in his chest as he freezes. He falls to the ground. I step forward. I plant my sword through his chest until I hear the clay roof tiles crack and break. The blood from his heart squirts up around my blade and into my face, and pools on his chest. The spirit leaving his body pulls one last scream from his throat. I grab the dead man's daggers as Wrak approaches and hurl one into his gut.

He hits the roof rolling and screaming. "AAAaaaa. O Fuck You! Kormar I Hate You! AAAaaa. I hate you. I hate you. AaAaAaa! You fucking stabbed me!"

I walk over to Wrak and steady his fit with a boot to his chest. I take the other dagger and point it to his throat. "Did you kill my mother and sister?"

"Fuck you! I can't believe you fucking stabbed me. Stilcho thinks you're so fucking great. Fuck You!"

I put pressure on the dagger pushing it into his throat just a bit. "First of all, I didn't stab you. I threw the dagger, and you're not answering my question. Did you or your friend kill my mother?" I release the pressure.

"I gave you your answer, fuck You!" Wrak spits up blood.

I plunge the other dagger into his chest piercing his flesh. The blood flows. I turn to leave. I pull my sword from the Ilsigg's body and wipe the hot salty life from my face. The sprays of crimson on my clothes blend mostly away in the deep black material. A great sense of satisfaction and relief comes over me. I never felt happiness for the death of a man, but it comes now guilt free with a huge sigh. I need to move quickly from the murder scene.

I get off the tile roofs and head to Merchants' Road. It begins to rain large heavy drops. When the rain first starts it falls so large on the hot dry ground plumes of dust rise and fall. The rain grows to a steady pour within seconds. I see the sign of The Swamp Wolves' Den, a red shield with a gray wolf's head on the left side and the Battle Axe of Vashanka on the right.

I enter the tavern and shake the water from my hair. The raincloud-cloaked sunlight that stretches through the shutters dimly lights the blue-gray room. Above the entire length of the bar hangs a tapestry of a battle scene. A wide wooden stairwell runs up on the opposite wall of the bar. I see no one but the barkeep pulling chairs down off the grayed tables. The wood floor creaks as I step forward.

The barkeep notices my travel pack and speaks in a slightly raspy voice, "We only board soldiers and followers of Vashanka here. You don't look like neither to me, kid."

The barkeep's powerful build frames in a nice size gut. He wears a tight black shirt with a long sleeve on the right arm and no sleeve on the left. His bare arm looks the color of milk. His right hand is draped with a black leather glove armored with sliver plates. His long salt and pepper hair tangles down around his pointed, weathered

face. Lines of age sink deep around his pale blue eyes. He looks confused as I continue to step forward. He places a chair on the floor and straightens up as he turns to face me.

"I'm looking for a couple of friends of mine, Sed and Staufan," I quickly say with a smile as he takes an aggressive step in my direction.

"Who the hell are you?" the dangerous looking man commands.

"I am Kormar. I am traveling with them tomorrow."

"I guess they'll travel with anyone," he says with a smirk.

"Come have a seat. I'm Morngrym. They're out back with my papa."

I see a look in Morngrym's eyes that looks a bit unstable. The sound of the rain stops.

Morngrym looks me up and down as I step into a sliver of light and take a seat at the black oak bar. He sniffs at me. "Where did the blood come from, kid?" He raises an eyebrow.

"Chickens—I had to dress a few chickens for my father," I fire back with a smile and motions like it is nothing.

Mornngrym looks at me as if he believes nothing I say as he rounds the bar, "Looks like chicken blood to me. Have an ale." He plops a mug down in front of me.

"I'll go tell them their chicken murderin' squire has arrived." He shakes his head and laughs. He exits through a door behind the bar.

I have an unusual feeling of ease and safety here with Mornngrym at his place. Even though I have never even seen the inside, it comforts me. I need to sleep.

He returns and says with a sigh. "They will be a bit."

"Good ale." I raise my mug.

"Oh, ya—One silver noble for the ale," he states as a matter of fact.

"Sed will pay." I yawn, and act as if we already discussed it. "What's the story with the sign outside—the name of the tavern is the *Swamp-Wolves' Den*, but the sign is a shield split with a wolf's head and the symbol of Vashanka? Why not just a swamp-wolf?"

"The Swamp-Wolves is the name of the Legion I served, and my father before me—we where the nastiest, meanest, killin' unit in the whole damned Empire. The shield is our crest. You aint never heard of us? Let me tell you about the Battle of the Southern Hills."

As Mornngrym tells his story he points at the tapestry. I grow more tired. I notice his shirt has no sleeves, and his right arm is tattooed solid black. My eyelids pull down from only moments of sleep in the last two days. I fight to keep them open.

The thin wood door behind the bar slams open. My eyes pop open and I jolt up in my seat. Staufan walks sideways through the door wearing black and white priest robes with a red sash trimmed in black and white, and admiring the largest battle axe I have ever seen. The metal shines with a blue tint as he strokes the blade with his thumb. Sed dressed in a red velvet tunic and black leather pants ducks through the door behind Staufan.

From behind Sed booms an old and very raspy voice, "She's as fine an axe you'll find across all the Six Seas. She's real Theibian Steel. May the Lord of Strife strike fear from your heart—Happy Hunting Boys."

From behind the voice steps an ancient man. Deep in his face wrinkles spread from scar to scar, his white beard thin and spotty surrounds his toothless mouth, he has little hair. His once powerful build is shrunk with age, but he moves like a man half his age. The symbol of Vashanka hangs around his neck.

Staufan answers with his gravelly voice, "Thanks again, Taggart. I will wield her well."

"That's why she is yours now." Taggart smiles like a proud new father.

Staufan looks up at me with some shock. "Kormar? You said a squire was here, Morngrym. This piece here isn't fit to carry my shield. This is the Honorable Voorhexees, number two."

"Oh Shit! The bait," Taggart booms.

Sed puts his hands on my shoulders and gives me a bit of a shake. "I have never seen such a close resemblance of two people which did not come from the same mother, as this one and his cousin. It's amazing, the luck."

Amazing fucking luck, all right! I am tied to these guys several ways now.

"The drink is on the house, kid," Morngrym says with a nod and a raise of his eyebrow as if to signal impending doom.

"Come on back here." Sed smiles.

They lead me through the door behind the bar. Broken armor, bent helms, and rusty daggers lay about the small, grey, wooden room. In the center of the room sits a white, stone sharpening wheel. The north wall, leading to the outside, stands of well oiled oak planks.

In the center of the wall daylight breaks through a door of iron bars. On the other side it looks as if the courtyard has been turned into some sort of cell, or cage made of iron.

Weird, I start to get a little uneasy. Sed moves toward the cage door and waves me over. I look at Staufan and Taggart. They nudge me toward Sed with encouraging nods of their heads and a motion of their eyes.

I step cautiously. Sed waves me again, more aggressive and with a look of disappointing frustration that curls his brow. He whispers, "Come on pussy. Get over here."

My shoulders relax, my chest puffs with air, and I quickly, lightly move forward. I peer into the courtyard prison. A huge grey wolf sleeps in the moist dirt. It looks as big as a small horse with a head as big as a black bear. Its belly and tits lay swollen with life. Her grey fur speckles with a gloss of fresh rain.

Her moist black nose puffs in and out as she sniffs the air in her sleep. The wolf's eyes pop open. She charges. My reflexes pull me backward. She snarls at me. Her eyes glow a bluish green. She smashes against the door. The cage shakes. Fangs like daggers drip with spit. Barks, snarls, and growls shoot my way. Her mouth could swallow my face.

"Holy mother of men! Are you trying to get me eaten?"

The room bursts into laughter. Taggart coughs through his chuckles and says with a wheeze, "She's not to keen on strangers. Or maybe she's just moody from carrying."

I shake my head in disbelief. "She's huge."

Taggart smiles with pride. "You should have seen the father of those pups in her belly. He was a real monster and as black as a night with the blind eye shut."

"Kormar!" I hear from behind me. I turn around and see Thanatos standing in the doorway.

Staufan and Sed head through the bar and up the stairs. Sed motions me to follow. "Come on, we had our fun. You look like you need some rest. We have whores' pockets to fill tonight before our journey."

I follow my only friends in the world up the stairs. The memories of the last two moons flash through my mind. I remember awakening from the horse dream before I met Sed and Staufan.

*Chapter 6: The Night before the Journey/**The Rosie Fingered Dawn**Part I*

I awake from a memory filled dream. The early night cloaks the sky. Rays of white light of the setting sun peek through the shutters with their last grasp of existence. I wash the gritty sleep from my eyes and the stink from my pits. I pull from my pack my only other clothes and the symbol of Vashanka. The light swashbuckler shirt of Varisvaarian white cotton slides on my muscled frame easily. The well-worn tan leather pants mold tightly around me. The battle axe necklace glimmers in the lantern light as I slide it into my belt. A single dirk should do tonight.

I leave my room and walk to the top of the stairs. My three companions sit at the bar with Morngrym. The room rustles with patrons. The bright lamps give the room an orange glow. The pale blue planked walls seem even whiter in the bright lights. I tap down the stairs quickly and lightly, and approach everyone at the bar.

I pull the necklace from my belt, squeeze my arm between Sed and Staufan, and place it on the black oak bar. "I believe this belongs to you." I step back.

Staufan turns his square frame on the straining barstool. "You don't want to keep it?"

I look at him with seriousness painted across my face. "I have a god."

I could feel the sting of his gravelly words before they ever left his mouth. "Didn't do you much good with the fear spell."

I plant my feet firm and explain, "Maybe I didn't pay him homage before."

I think of the times I spent playing with my mother on the beach, and her lessons of tumbling, cooking, and praying. "I come from here. I owe it to my people to pray to the gods of my mother—and besides a smart thief always gives his praise to the night."

Staufan raises an eyebrow, curls his lip, and shakes his head in approval. "Good. That is a good answer. This charm is out of blessings. What happened?"

"I'll tell you in just a bit. I have to talk to Thanatos first."

"Remember to pray next time. Come drink."

I sit at the end of the long black oak bar next to Thanatos. "I need to talk to you."

"About where we're goin' to get girls tonight?" He flashes his black eyed smirk. "You're the expert here where do you say?"

My thoughts snap between images of the most beautiful, erotic, dancing girls in the city, and the girl from Soget's room her exotic beauty has scarred itself in my mind. "The *Unchaste Lady* in the Pit, the *Iron Maiden* in the Docks, and *Mugs and Maidens* here in the Merchants' District always has fine girls."

Sed turns into our conversation. "*Formasitas' Beauties* I hear has a show we must see. What do you know of this place?"

Thanatos leans back out of the path of my words, as I aim them in Sed's direction. "Where it is, other than that, nothing. That place is for the rich, and those with title." I look at Thanatos. "If they even let you in,

you'll have to stand next to the table or against the back wall."

"I'm not Ilsigg. I'm half-Theibian." Thanatos cracks his smile. "Don't worry about it."

Thanatos reaches up and pats me and Sed on our backs at the same time. "Well then, the Prince Voorhexees and Prince Sed of Sallidon, what are we waiting for? But first we should head to the bathhouse, and get our friend here some noble clothing." His face lights up with mischievous delight, but his eyes somehow remain dead.

"I really need to talk to you about something else," I say raising a brow at Thanatos and wiping my lip in Sed's direction with a look of slight annoyance.

Thanatos replies with all seriousness, "Look at me. I don't care what it is—tell me after I get some big young tits in my face."

"Really, it may spoil the fun," I snap back.

"Well, what are you about to do, right now?" He shrugs.

"Yes, I'm fucking serious. After tits," he says much angrier, "I have been waiting for this. Whatever it is, can

wait." He points at me with a look of commitment and walks toward the exit.

I raise my hands. "Ok, you got it." I raise my fresh mug of ale. I can get Krosk alone, if he won't listen later, and the night rests too young to go now anyway. "To the bare-chested babes of Formasita's."

"Here! Here!" The group at the bar chants in unison as they raise their mugs.

I go back upstairs and grab a purse of a hundred crowns. I will only spend it or lose it if I live through this. I have always felt a special love for whores. The rich that trap them realize their plight with apathy. I have always felt a kinship to their pain, trapped by my mixed race, never to be allowed any position, not even a merchant manager. Tonight our kinship twists even tighter together, now trapped by my devotion to an illusion. I fill the purse with as many crowns as it can carry. I should look the part of a rich noble, and make some poor girl's night. I wrap the heavy purse in a dry towel and place it under my arm.

As we walk through the Merchants' District to the upper-edge, I look around at everything I've ever known,

wondering if it is the last time I will ever see it. The black cobblestone streets slick with residue of the daily rain tuck up against the raised stone walkways.

The buildings stack tight together but break into groups of four or five with many small alleys that connect the streets and cul-de-sacs. Some groups of the buildings stack of brick or stone, others stack of timbers and cut wood, and some of lime concrete or white stucco. The sections of shops segregate many races but mostly stand as Enlibrite. The small ghettos usually include an inn, bar, restaurant, and several shops.

These things have never concealed themselves to me, but tonight I see the pores of the concrete, the cracking mortar between the bricks, the ring patterns in the wood, and the flaking stucco. It all looks back at me with the same sad wonderment. Though I have often wondered about other places, I have never really wanted to leave. I love this shithole of a city. I try to soak in more of the details, but we step too fast.

We enter a small shop, *The Ellonian Haberdashery*. The creaking oak door with a glass window rustles the bells hanging above it. Rows of hanging suit models and fabric cover the dusty shop. A very old, milky skinned Enlibrite

with a scar across his right eye waddles through a curtain in the back of the shop. Thick yellowing gray white hair covers his head and fills his trimmed beard.

"How art thou fine gentlemen this fine eve?"

Sed steps forward. "Fine sir, our friend here needs a fine suit of clothes, in the turn of a glass. We will pay extra."

The old man perks up. "C'rtainly sir, what dost he hast in mind?"

I step forward and extend my hand. "Something black, formal but not hot and stuffy."

"I hast these fine styles hith'r that breatheth with the right cotton."

"That will do. We are in a hurry."

"Leteth me taketh thy measurements, and geteth to w'rketh then."

As the old tailor measures he sings a song of Old Ellonia.

"I thought you were an old Enlibrite, but I hear from your words and your song, and see from your sign that you're Ellonian."

"Enlibrite!" The old man spits on the floor. "I am an c'rky Ellonian. I'm ninety-four years, and when I came to this continent ye Enlibrites had just conqu'r'd the oth'r kingdoms within the gen'ration. Mineth fath'r was a pilgrim of Vashanka. We came hith'r to prayeth on ye battlefields of ye war. Ye Enlibrites turn'd their backeth on Vashanka when it was over. One of their legions came across our pilgrimage. They gave me this scar, and murd'r'd mineth fath'r. This scar once cov'r'd my whole face. It's awful what the Ord'r of High Ascension doth to children, just to curse Vashanka. I came hith'r a few years lat'r aft'r the rankan invasion, and this t'rrit'ry was free of the Empire. I can dealeth with the Ti'rrabeau. Right then, art thou waiting hith'r?"

"We have seen what they do."

"Thou art thy ones that killed ye priests and bishop. I h'ar' ye tale on ye ole streeth. They say, you killed a bishop. Oh, thank you, much, thank you, lord." The old man kneels and bows. "They deserve'th worse than death, thank you. Ye wares shall be gratis."

"We were. We will be across the street at the Theibian bathhouse—you have a turn of the glass. We will pay you when you deliver. I don't believe in men working for free."

He looks at me for a bit. "Fair enough."

"Fair enough."

The white fluted concrete pillars decorate the front of the limestone building. A pyramid top, decorated with golden ram chimneys spitting out steam and smoke, shines a tan white color. Waist high gold and marble statues of the ram, naked women, and the Theibian heroes Jonah, the giant-slayer, and Isaac, the leader of the ram horde against the Harrack invaders, guide us through the entry. The black marble floors shine with polish. A wooden counter painted white and decorated with gold vines holds up a gleaming marble top.

The Theibian bathhouses dot through the city in all districts.

They were the first explorers of these lands, but no match for the Tierabeaux, and especially not the Enlibrites. So only few of them remain. They mostly abandoned their two kingdoms just to the north of here, and returned to Theibia when the Enlibrites stormed through the continent, but the few that remained have regained the power in Dorna and New Theibia.

Behind the counter stands the Theibian attendant. Her chocolate-colored skin beads with sweat and her thin blue cotton dress presses against her firm small breasts with large nipples. She wears a necklace, not around her neck, but around the crown of her head. It shimmers of blue gems. Her large round ass sticks out under a thin golden rope, and wiggles as she rounds the counter. Her black, tightly curled hair spirals down to her shoulders. Her large brown eyes hide behind long eyelashes. Her sharp face surrounds large, supple lips, and a wide but beautiful nose.

Doors rest on either side of the counter. She motions us to the right. "Welcome, Lord Sallidon. Good to lay my eyes upon you again. Enjoy your bath, and whatever other services you seek—as is the custom, pay when you leave."

Sed leads the charge and throws the girl a few crowns. "For a good start, and my friend has some clothes being delivered." He smiles at the girl. She smiles back in a way that smitten lovers do, with her chin tucked to her chest.

Sed stops, but pushes us through. "Gone on with you then, go clean yourself, or better have a maiden do it for you."

We pile through the door, and as it closes I hear the girl say, "I've missed you."

Interesting, Sed likes the Theibian girls. I would have never guessed. I wonder what his family would think of that. She's not Ilsigg, but she's not white. At least the Theibian's still have their own country, and have never been slaves but to themselves.

White marble covers the floor and ceiling in the limestone dressing room. Well polished cherry wood weaves together box-like shelves in rows through the room. We take off our clothes, and stack them into a box. We take our purses and daggers with us, and leave them close on the edge of the bath.

The steam rises in the warm air. Black marble woven with rose marble in the ribbon of the Theibians' covers the walls and floors. Steam stained paintings of the Theibian stories cover the ceilings. The fading rosy sun peeks through the small high windows. We splash into the warm soothing water.

Sed joins us, and attendants follow him bringing wine, rum, fruit, and cheese. The chocolaty attendants wear nothing but their headdresses.

"I need to tell you guys something. One of those boys that we released from the temple couldn't find his home, and I took him to my house to feed him and let him rest before we looked again, and he turned into some sort of creature."

Staufan sloshed forward. "What did you do?"

"I slit its fucking throat open and threw it to the pigs, but the fuckin' thing bit me on the back of the neck. It acted like it was going for your necklace."

"That is where the blessings in my charm went."

"I'm not going to turn into some thing?"

"You should be fine, nothing like that, but I will make you a healing patch and give it to you on the road."

Thanatos smiles. "Fed it to the pigs. I knew I liked you. What the fuck are we dealing with here, nobody told me about fighting story-time monsters."

Staufan looks to Sed, and spits his gravelly words. "What we feared. They are trying to use the tear to open the gateway. At least we know it was here."

Staufan turns to me. "It is written in the Tomes of the Gods, that the Tear can turn man to beast or beast to

man, and that it can be used every 1480 moons to open the gateway and let loose the army of beasts twisted by chaos to destroy man. That it will cast the world in darkness, as if it was the Time of the Womb. If they have discovered the incantation . . . imagine fighting an army of man-beasts twisted by chaos, driven by darkness, and lusting for human blood, as darkness consumes the world. I never really believed it, completely. That the time would come, but it seems to keep this fight in the realm of man will we need to move with haste."

"How long do we have?" Sed looks concerned.

"Not long, a moon maybe two then the cycle will be complete. It may take all out time to catch them, or to find where they have hidden it. The last time the stars were completely aligned the Enlibrite Empire came to be."

I question, "Wait a moment, What the fuck are we talking about here? Some fuckin' freaky monsters rising, from what? This doesn't bother any of you?"

Thanatos wakes into the circle. "Yes, It fuckin' bothers me! I'm not ready to die in some war against beasts."

Staunfan smiles, "Look, you have seen, fought, and killed one of these things. What are you worried about? We are blessed in this journey. We have no choice. The gods have brought us together to do what must be done."

Thanatos shakes his head. "If we are against time, you guys know it will take us 10-12 days just to get out of Port Karpricious Territory. Unless we split from the envoy and ride hard."

Sed shakes his head. "But we can't do that, there is more than one way to lose this war. I have to meet my father in Voorhexees with the documents."

He points at me. "And he has to appear before his family. Maybe we could split in Varisvaaria, and I'll go with Kormar to Voorhexees, and you guys can ride hard and track the tear for us. We'll ride hard behind you to Enlibar City using the old trade roads. When you find it you can backtrack to us and we'll retrieve it."

"Why don't we just take it when we find it." Thanatos smirks.

"Do, if you can, but you might need the boy here." Sed points to me. "The next time it won't just be behind an old shitty trap door and some pussy temple guards. They know

we're coming. But if can catch them before they get to the capital, we should."

"Sounds good to me, my prince. We have to stop them. They think they will be able to control the beasts, the darkness, but the nature of the beasts is to hunt, kill and destroy man," chimes Staufan's gravelly voice.

Sed raises his cup. "For the cause. And the sake of man."

"For the cause," we reply raising our glasses.

The words come out easy amongst my companions, no choking in my throat, but from a place of belonging. This is our cause. We will fight it, holy fuck, magic, beasts, chaos and all, for my fathers' lives and for the sake of man.

Thanatos looks at me. "Is this what you needed to tell me?"

"No."

"No? 'cause that is pretty amazing shit, beast-men, monsters, magic. Personally I think all witches and the like should be burned, the shit freaks me out."

"No, it's worse. And this shit freaks me out too. It's hard enough to get passed the cutthroats in life, but I never knew powers like these were real. Good stories, but . . ."

"Save the bad news 'til later. I need to drink."

"Me too!"

I raise my brow as he swims away to an attendant.

"So tell me, Sed, aside from all of this realm of magic shit. What is your advice on acting like a prince?"

"First of all, know that everyone that knows who you are will love you—not for you, but because they want something from your favor—but none the less they will love you, at least to your face and purse."

Sed drinks from the rum, and turns to the leaving attendant. "Thank you my dear, you are beautiful." He points to the girls large, perky, round ass. "Second, you must act like you love them back—even if you have planned to poison their children—you act like you love them."

He bows his head and gestures respect with a rolling wave. "Maybe that's why you guys are growing on me. I don't have to act like I like you!"

He splashes water in my direction. "Don't worry. Use all of the books you've read and you'll be fine." He slams some more rum. "If we end up in the court of Varisvaaria just use your manners and follow my lead. That will be the only place it matters, and those bitches are crazy."

He pauses. "What? Your father never taught you anything about court rules? Don't worry."

"No. He never even pretended he was going to take me north. He always said I had to stay and help my mother—and she always acted like it was a terrible and dangerous place. And what do you mean crazy bitches?"

Sed leans in to me. "It may become that for us my friend—a dangerous place. And I mean there are three of them. The king of Varisvaaria had six daughters, three sets of twins, but never any sons."

He leans back. "But only one daughter from each set lives now, and the three rule as equals. Some say they killed their sisters for the throne, some say that killing and drinking the blood of your twin is the fastest way to achieve the powers of a witch. Rumors, maybe, probably? I guess we will find out. We know they killed their father for the throne. This is boasted in paintings, stories, and

statues in their kingdom. When you meet them you will see. They're not right."

He claps his hands loudly, and yells for the attendants, "Bring the soap! There are dirty snakes in this water. Come wash them!"

He laughs, as the beautiful girls saunter into the bath, and their tightly curled black hair bounces with their steps. I see a relaxed look in his eye, like a sailor making the best of his last night before a long voyage.

We drink, eat, bathe, and finally my clothes arrive. The time has come to dawn my costume as a respectable man. Then we continue to Formasita's club of delights.

An iron rod almost six feet extends out several arms lengths above the front door. From the rod hangs three well-lit oil lanterns, and from the lanterns hang an old planked sign bearing the faded likeness of Formasita, the Goddess of Beauty, Lust, and Wine. She seductively lies nude in a field of black-wine grapes, fed by a glowing sun hugged around fluffy clouds. At the top of the sign in the darkest red, written largely, it reads Formasita's Beauties, and at the bottom corner in bold black it reads Cordes. Cordes? The fame of his paintings has lingered for

almost two generations. This place stinks of nothing but the rich. From the bottom of the sign hangs three more lanterns, but these are delightfully colored with ruby glass. A small line stretches around the white stucco building. Black and white marble columns and archways decorate the front face of the building.

Thanatos looks at Sed. "I thought this is an exclusive place?"

"It is," I answer for Sed.

"Why is there a line?" Thanatos questions as he points to the side.

Sed pats Thanatos on the back and leans into his ear. "Maybe the show rivals its reputation. And you so quickly forget—you keep company with the son's of kings. We will wait in no line."

We walk past the line to the front door as the sons of Kings. Sed has no idea that I am a son of a king too. The misfit bastard son doomed for slavery. Tonight I will embrace my life as Stennous. Two large Rankan door guards dressed in studded leather armor secure each side of the door. The guards look at us, confused and annoyed, as Thanatos takes the lead and begins his rhetoric,

"Gentlemen, may I introduce Prince Sed of Sallidon and Prince Stennous of Voorhexees. In their company stands Staufan Rythan, the Black Legion's highest priest of Vashanka—and I serve the Lord of Sallidon in all affairs."

I pull out the bulging purse and open it in front of the guards, as I pull out handful of crowns and extend my hand. The two guards extend their cupped hands like children begging for sweets during the Night of Lorick. I fill their greedy palms. They dump the crowns in a slot on the wall next to the door. I can hear the crowns hit a pile of coins on the other side. The door opens. Two more guards stand there. One guard, an Ilsigg, stands as tall as Sed, the other, a bald Enlibrite, spreads as wide as Staufan but cushioned with fat. The slot in the wall leads to a sealed strongbox locked with an iron padlock. This small plank entry room glows with bright pink paint, and a red lantern. The guards search us and take our daggers. The heavy black door leading inside opens.

Two more guards stand on the other side of the door, and even more post scattered through the bright pink room. The narrow entry opens up with stairs leading up to a loft on the right. Three stairs lead down to an open sunken seating area full of small round wooden tables surrounded

by pink chairs. Patrons of only white skin fill most of the tables. Their Ilssigg men stand next to them. Under the large stairs on the right sits one of the bars, to our left a T-shaped stage backed by mirrors. Next to the mirrored wall on either side of the "T" sits musicians. There song dances sweetly through the air. On the opposite side of the stage against the far wall lays the L-shaped second bar that curves around into the wall.

Tobacco smoke hangs in the air. The loft covers the first bar and hovers over the back wall. From it jets out a series of beams connecting to the wall next to us. On the beams sits two old skinny Ilsiggs that pull the ropes turning the large series of woven, leaf shaped fans that hang from the beams, between the fans hang red oil lanterns with small framed hanging mirrors surrounding them. The fans cool the room and blow the mirrors making the light from the lanterns bounce around the room in mystical shapes and flashes. There are no windows.

I take the lead as we sit, and pull the only three tables in the front together. "We will need seats for the ladies."

We sit facing the stage with empty chairs between us. I flop the large purse on the middle table. A young,

supple, blonde bar-maiden approaches our area. All of the wenches wear thin see-through white cotton togas. This one's large curves poke out the sides of her toga as she leans into our table. "Well, well, what we like to see. You lords understand how to get attention in a place like this. What can I bring you, my handsome lieges?"

Thanatos leans back in his chair and pipes off. "What are your specialties?"

The maiden looks at Thanatos, with the concern of one oppressed to another states in a low voice, "I'm not sure you should be sitting at the tables, my lord."

Sed speaks up, "Here sits the Hand of the King of Sallidon, and the Lord High Inquisitor of the Southern Region. This man has more power resting on his shoulders than any man in this room, and will sit where he pleases. If anyone questions this send them to me!"

Thanatos cracks his smirk, and looks up at the bar-maiden. "So then, what are your specialties?"

She smiles. "O.K. then—we cook our own rum from the cane of the Port. We have fine wine from the black grapes of the Voorhexian fields mixed with the juices of seven different fruits of the Port—and if you lieges are more

adventurous we have the dust of the lotus flower of the Stygious Mountains. If you are hungry, we have all the delicacies fished fresh from the waters of Backwater Bay, prepare by a Lebethian trained chef—and any beer, mead, or ale you way wish.”

“We want the nectar of the sugarcane,” answers Sed.

“Rum for everyone?” The maiden scans the table.

We all look at each other in approval and answer, “Here, here.”

“The drink of Vashanka it is.” The blonde maiden smiles and turns toward the bar, her large young curves bounce as she sways away.

Thanatos leans into Sed with a nudge. “Lord High Inquisitor, I like that one. You’re starting to develop a sense of humor.”

I can see the bartender and our maiden arguing. I feel all the eyes in the room focused on us. The tension mounts in the room like waves of a storm. The bartender, a balding Enlibrite man with puffy brown sideburns and a body worn down by his life of labor, steps quickly to us with his face glowing the color of the lanterns.

He spits out his angry words. "I don't know who the hell you are, but here in this fine establishment that caters to the needs of gentlemen from around the world the one thing we don't allow is some fucking clay-faced, prairie-monkey, asshole coming in here acting like he is one of us!"

Thanatos slowly and calmly rises from his chair. "Not a problem, sir." Thanatos inches closer to the bartender with his hands in the air. "I don't want to cause a riot in here, but now that you've made your little show. Let me tell you what is about to happen."

Thanatos locks his cold, black, piercing eyes with those of the bartender. "First, I'm going to reach in my pocket and hand you this book."

Thanatos pulls out and hands an old, small, leather travel book. "And you will look through it and hand it back."

Thanatos smoothly slides face to face with the bartender and shows him the mark on his wrist. The angry red-faced look of the barkeep fades to pale white. "It's O.K. to look surprised and, or scared. Let those who ask

know—if they disturb my evening it will mean certain death.”

The air chills as if the Lord of the Tomb stands directly behind Thanatos guiding his words, moving his hands, and giving him existence on this plane. The entire room is quiet. I feel the energy of spirits being sucked from the room.

Thanatos’ lips peel up in a huge grin, and he laughs and puts his arm around the bartender, as he slides to his side and speaks in a low voice. “You see this night is very important to me. You see there is much coin at our tables, and we intend to spend it all.”

The barkeeps stammers a bit, “I,I,I, For a slayer such as yourself . . . I’ll take the coin. I don’t care, but if the crowd starts to rise, you have to go.”

“I will handle this crowd, your pocket, and this scene you’ve caused. And you should know if you ever fuckin’ talk to me like that again, you will never get a chance to spend your coin.”

Thanatos squeezes the barkeep’s shoulder tight. “So go, friend, let everyone know to stay the fuck away from us, or a certain miserable death will follow them—but only

after I split your fuckin' guts on the floor. And let them know, no amount of crowns can buy us out of here—and don't forget how heavy our purses weigh."

Thanatos whistles at the barkeep after he takes a few steps. He pulls a small purse from a larger purse and throws it to the barkeep. He speaks in a loud voice. "As they say, receiving is much better than giving. You wouldn't want the patrols in this area to double their take."

Thanatos turns to the crowd, raises his hands, and speaks in a Northern accent, "Gentlemen of high coin and birth, Let me ease your minds. First and foremost, I am no Ilsigg. As you see my skin is a very light shade, and has a chocolate tone. I was born the highest son of the Count of Luevekia across the Western Sea in the Lands of Thiebia. My father is a deep brown, not your clay colored slaves. So you see I am of Theibian blood. My mother is Enlibrite and the daughter of the house Tol'Solie, who adjures on the Council of Nobles in Enlibrite City.

Secondly, I am an agent of the King of Sallidon, and the Lord High Inquisitor of this region, and these young men are the highest sons of the Kings of Sallidon and Voorhexees. So you see, an assault in our direction would

only mean the humiliating cold slap of the magistrate's irons followed by the lonely swing of the hangman's rope."

Two men from the back stand. "I recognize the son of the King of Voorhexees, Stennous." They point at me.

Another man stands in the back of the room. "And I the son of the King of Sallidon, Sed-I met him the evening before yesterday at the Festival of Krozious."

Thanatos continues his banter, "So you see the sons of such esteemed kings would not sit with an Ilsigg. May we all enjoy the show. A round of drinks for everyone!"

The crowd cheers in a reserved noble manner. The drinks flow and the show begins.

That was it? I wonder how he will react when I tell him his cousin is dead. We better drink more. "You knew you were going to get away with this, didn't you?"

"No," shaking his head ". . . I was hoping. What could they do? Throw us out to their competition. Coin and power speak."

The excitement grows and the crowd becomes rowdier as the show progresses. It fulfills the carnal desires of the mob as musicians pound their sweet song into a driving

thunderous beat. Ilsigg, Enlibrite, Rankan, Theibian, and Shou women take their turns on stage one, two, and three at a time, all of them beautiful. They dance, strip, and fondle themselves and each other. We drink heavily and become entwined in the chaos of the on-stage orgy.

The nobles and wealthy merchants of the crowd turn into starved pigs at a full trough, fighting for their space at the stage. Between each round of the show the mystical entertainers get auctioned off to the highest bidders like stacks of sugar cane.

The human market flows ten, twenty, and thirty crowns, for the rest of the night's service. I know to wait, the best has yet to come. This is the nature of markets whether they be fish or human. In different ways everyone in the city is only worth the amount of coins they can bring, whether it comes through their backs, their swords, or their cunts. Son of a fuckin' slave, I'm worth less than the amount of coin I can fetch. What have I gotten myself into?

Thanatos grabs the youngest girl with the largest tits he can find. I know soon it will be time to tell him that his cousin lies rotting in my uncle's apartment. We drink

more rum like thirsty dogs, and continue to cheer for the parade of flesh.

The next round begins and desire beyond even what I could image appears. It's the girl from that night. Her long, flowing, muscled legs flex with short snapping motion as she floats effortlessly unto the stage with a slithering swaying motion. Her olive skin has a darkened tone in the red lights. Is she of mixed blood? Her shining dark black hair whips out and around her high cheek bones to her slightly broad shoulders as she spins across the stage. Her breasts are large for such a skinny girl.

I quickly rise to my feet, my eyes fixed on the stage. She wears nothing but gold on her hairless body. Rings sit atop all of her fingers, and bracelets stack half way up her arms and jingle with the beats of her movement. Chains wrap around her slender neck and her narrow hips. We lock eyes. I am drawn to the beat of the music up to the front of the stage through the mass of begging old men. Her thin dimples stretch up as she smiles at me with her full bow shaped lips. She pulls me in between her breasts.

She whispers to me with her accent through her slight overbite, "How did you get in here? You never came back for me, and that old pig wasted my night with no pay. I should

let everyone know you're no more than a petty thief, and have you kicked out."

"I promise to make it up to you tonight," slides out of my mouth, as I boldly leap onto the forbidden territory of the stage.

The room halts with surprise. "You can't be up here," the exotic beauty warns me.

"You were just talking about having me kicked out, but now you look worried?" I reply with a cocky smile. The music stops, and the guards move quickly toward the stage. "Attention gentlemen, the bidding for this beauty can now begin and end. I pledge a hundred gold crowns for this one, and hundred more to you, Miss, for the troubles I have caused you."

"GET THE FUCK OFF THE STAGE!" bellow the huge guards as they split the crowd. I somersault to the stairs on the opposite end of the stage, and slide my way down into the crowd. The large guards hurl toward me with the speed of a hungry sharks, moving tables and shoving people in the crowd aside, cornering me next to the stage.

"No one stops the show. I think you have drawn enough attention, time for you to go!" The wide bald guard rumbles my way.

"Whoa, Whoa, Whoa, I was simply placing my bid," I respond with a charming smile. "I will cause no more scenes, and there will be no one here that will match my coin for this whore, or in your pocket. I have caused no damages here and cost you nothing but time—please for the sake of your own pocket forgive my ill manners, and escort me to my coin."

"You're lucky you're not the first to lose his mind over these girls." The two large guards each grab one of my arms and lift me off the ground, turning me toward my tables and my companions, who look at me with puzzled looks, and Thanatos cries, "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Shit! Krosk. I lose myself every time I see this woman. I am fascinated with her more than a young boy following the neighborhood whore. She continues her dance, her body swaying with a rhythm and motion that recaptures my eye. One of the large guards slaps me on the back, shaking me from my spell.

I pull a palm full of gold from my purse on the table and slide it into the guard's hands. "Here my friends, sorry for running amuck."

"You seemed to be blessed—the night is almost over and your purse is still heavy. Anything more from over here, and you and your friends will end up in the street with your faces bloody and your purses missing. I don't care who the fuck you are!" the tall one booms down to the table. Staufan raises his brow with interest, and a smirk on his face.

I take my seat. The dance is over. The room becomes unusually silent. No one seems to be prepared to spend their servant's annual wages on a whore. I watch on in anticipation, as she gathers herself and makes her way to our table. All that needs to be done can wait.

"Well, it seems you've gained quite a reputation in a short time," her words roll from her slight overbite.

The thoughts of all the blood and death that have surrounded me for the last seven days swirl with the rum in my mind. "Fuck those guys. You know, I have thought about YOU many times since we have parted ways."

"You mean when you left me in that old pervert's grasp. Thanks, I thought about you too, how much of an asshole you are."

"Come here, I'm sorry," I say with my best charming smile, as I pull her into my lap. "I will make it up to you if it means the end of my days."

"You are lucky I think you're cute—and that I'm used to men not being worth their word," the beauty spouts in her accent, as she twists and adjusts her round buttocks in my lap.

"What is your real name Lord Voorhexees?"

"Kormar," A knowing smile pops across my face. "And what's your name, my dear?"

"Jaulita," flows from her foreign tongue.

The wide frustrated guard comes back to the table for the payment of my wench. "I guess you're going to make it out of here on your feet." He dangles out a black velvet purse from his large paw. I gather my payment in the purse and he leaves.

"Well I guess I own you for the night," sloppily slurs out of my mouth.

"Ha! We will see who owns who by the end of the evening." She rubs her ass on my crotch. She smells like spiced perfume and the musk of sweaty sex.

"Where are you from?"

"From the motherland, Balla Ch'luveson."

The barkeep takes the stage. "We are reaching the end of the all night entertainers, but with every ending there is a new beginning. For you gentlemen left without an all night escort, your chance for fun is not over!"

The musicians begin to float a sweet soft tune. The manpowered fans swirl the smoke and musk through the melody.

"Drinks still flow and dancing girls will entertain until the sun breaks! Right here on this stage!" The barkeep drops his voice and gives a wink, "and for the adventurous, privately for only one crown per turn of the glass!"

The crowd responds with a cheer and the room breaks out into random chatter. The barkeep raises his hands.

"Now! Now! Everyone listen and gather your coin! Gather it quickly, because the best is still yet to come."

The drums begin to pound, slowly forcing the sweet song to jump to a staccato tune that brings blood to the heart.

"Last but certainly not least, the finest dancer and best lay in all of Port Karpricious, nay, the Enlibrite Continent, nay, across the entire Six Seas! Welcome to the stage, from the Kingdom of Balla Ch'luveson, the one, the only, STEELE GAZZELLE!"

The drums wind up in volume and tempo, but the melody drops to a bass tone with short jumping strokes.

Onto the stage twirls a tall, muscled woman with bronzed, white skin. Small, thin, curved tattoos of all shapes of flowers intertwine from her feet to her neck. Her modest breasts are the only fat on her well-defined body. Her blonde hair twists into ropy braids that tie in a ponytail, the sides of her head are shaved. She has bright red full lips, and sparkling blue eyes. The muscles in her ass curve out like a bloated crescent and her thick legs dance with the ripple of muscles as she twists, spins, and somersaults into a handstand bringing her feet slowly forward bending in half backwards to touch the ground, spreading her cunt for all to see. I look to Jaulita, watching me, watch the Gazelle.

"Isn't my sister amazing?"

I smile at her and turn back to the show. The Gazelle then rolls out and over onto her stomach, pushing herself up and arching her back with her hips staying flat on the ground, as she pretends to suck the cock of the crowd.

Thanatos barely realizes there is a girl in his lap. Sed's and Staufan's gazes lock on the Gazelle.

She turns around with a scissors like twist of her legs and faces her back to the crowd as she does the splits. She bounces the muscles in her ass back and forth, and then puckers her ass and pussy at the crowd as she arches forward. She twirls her ponytail of small braids in a circle, and a black and white tattoo of a battle axe reveals itself on the back of her neck.

Staufan jumps to his feet spraying his rum on the floor. He looks at the table and shouts, "How much do we have left? She must come with me!"

He turns to the stage and hastily leaves without the answer to his question. Staufan parts the crowd and makes a home in front of the stage. The Gazelle floats toward Staufan as if drawn to him. He stands there frozen with his soft, brown eyes pointed up at her, as she finishes her

dance for him. The rustling crowd tries to peer around his large frame.

The bidding begins and Staufan matches each hand raised with immediate responses.

"So you mean sister by country, right. You don't look like sisters."

Jaulita snaps her head at me. "What does that mean?"

I laugh and shake my head. "That you are much more beautiful than her. Does she look like your father and you like your mother or something?"

"YES! sisters by country. You're way cuter when you're not so drunk."

Slow down. You sound like a dumb ass. I quickly pull some lines from the Bard's Lie to save me from myself.

I stop, set up a bit in shock. "You know the Bard's Lie?"

She smiles at me. "I know all of the great love poems."

A first for me, someone who shares my passion, and a whore who's still a hopeless romantic, I think I could fall in love with this woman.

Staufan leads the Gazelle back to the table, and spouts in his gravelly voice, "These ladies have to get their clothes. Then it is time for us to go." He takes a seat next to me.

Our quartet of prizes saunters away. "So what did you need to tell me?" Thanatos pats me on the back.

The rum takes all worry from my mind. "Krosk is dead. Fuckin' murdered by the Thieves' Guild. He rots in my Uncle's apartment. We have to take him home before we leave. So he can be buried."

Thanatos' face twists in anger and his upper lip puffs with air. "I did tell you to wait to tell me." He takes a deep breath.

The tension in the crowd aimed at our table returns with a heavy hand. We pour the rest of our rum. A group of six patrons with their bodyguards approaches our table. A skinny, frail, sun-weathered man with deep wrinkles wearing red velvet decorated with gold lace yells in our direction. "Foul, foul, this man has not paid—the Gazelle needs rebidding, omitting this man."

"Right now is not a very good time to be fuckin' stupid." Thanatos points his long arm at the crowd.

The ladies return with the two guards who checked us, took me off the stage, and are now about to break up our fight.

"Ah, Old friends, you have returned," I spout in the guard's direction.

We rise and slam our drinks, and with our entourage on the exit side of the room, and an approaching crowd of angry fuckin' sore ass losers on the other. I think of grabbing Jauita's hand and running, but the rum tells me, I've had about enough. These guys are about to get fucked up.

We turn to the crowd and begin to back up. The skinny man shouts to his guards, "Take the Gazelle."

Two guards come barreling toward us. I charge forward, shocking my companions. I leap and jump down onto the approaching guard's knee, buckling it backwards. He hits the floor rolling and screaming in pain, I can see the sweat instantly form on his brow. The color from his face fades to a ghostly white.

Next to me I hear a thud on the floor. I look down and Thanatos weighs on the other guard's chest driving his thumbs deep into the man's eye sockets as they ooze blood

and jelly. The guard opens his mouth to scream, but no sound comes from his mouth.

When we get a straight shot for the exit Staufan reaches his hand toward that direction and with a thunderous yell exclaims a phrase I don't understand. The blue-steel battle axe shatters through the door and into his hand. "Who wants to skip the Plains of Penance, and go straight to Vashanka for judgment? I can arrange it for the lot of you."

The wide bald guard yells from behind us, "They paid me. They have all been paid for."

"We are leaving anyways," Sed shouts to the crowd, "with the women."

The crowd stops in their tracks. We all grab our weapons. Our party, the four of us, the girls, and the two guards fills the street.

Fingers of steely blue lightning dance through the sky, and thunder rumbles over our heads, pointing us toward The Den.

Part II

Walking down the street Thanatos turns his back to the group, facing me, while he ties his long, straight, black hair back. "Let's drop them off at the Den, and then we will go get Krosk. Just you and me. We should have plenty of time to make it back, and fuck them good before dawn."

"O.K." My eyes widen with wonder. What is he planning? How out of hand will this adventure get?

I slide back into the arms of Jaulita, and we walk and talk. We quote poetry back and forth to each other. Our attitudes and lives have more in common than I ever thought. She was born the illegitimate daughter of a servant and a Duke of Old Balla Ch'luveson. She and her mother were exiled to New Balla Ch'luveson with no means or a breath of hope. The flashes of lightning get brighter and closer, and the thunder crashes above our heads.

When we reach the Den, Staufan turns and punches the wide guard dead on the nose, knocking him back on his seat and holding a bloody face. He unravels the red sash from his priest robe and grabs the Gazelle. As he is tying her hands behind her back, he looks at the other guard. "What are you going to do?"

The guard stands petrified as Staufan slaps the Gazelle across the face and throws her over his shoulder.

"Stop! Unhand me! No! Let me go!" she cries, as Staufan begins to jog away with her to the east. I begin to jog after them and the Gazelle looks up and gives me a wink and a smile, and begins her banter again, "No! Stop! Please unhand me you beast!"

I look back at the others with a smile of confusion. "Did you guys just see what I saw?"

Sed chimes in with a smooth voice, "He is a priest of war it's his nature to rape and plunder. Never mind him, we are here."

The guards stay downstairs in the bar, and we separate into our rooms. Jaulita begins to disrobe as soon as the door shuts. "I've actually been looking forward to this. By the time I am done with you tonight—you will be begging me to never leave you."

I take a gulp, my mouth is dry. This may turn out bad for me. "Well actually, you will never believe this. I have to leave for just a bit. I will be back soon. Stay in here, be comfortable. I will have them bring you food and drink. Sleep if you want. And remember I have your tip. You will

get it when I get back, and you make me fall in love with you with that magic pussy."

"I'm waiting for you to come back for me again? You better hurry back, and you will get more than pussy. How long do you plan on making me wait?"

I change from my noble charade to my black, blood stained clothes."In a turn of a glass or two."

"A large glass?"

"Yes."

"That is longer than a bit. Maybe I will be here, maybe I won't?"

I'm not used to telling the truth, especially to women, but the truth anymore in my life far exceeds any lies I can tell. "Look, the night I met you my best friend was murdered. Thanatos is, was his cousin. We have to go get his body for burial before we leave tomorrow. I want nothing more than to be here with you. I promise I will be back with your gold. Just go to sleep and wait for me."

Thud! Thud! Thud! I feel an expression of disappointment curl my brow. "He's here I have to go."

"Get it back in your pants. It's time," echoes through the door.

I lock eyes with her. "Promise you'll stay 'til dawn. I'll leave the coin at the bar. If I don't return by then take the crowns and go. Just in case—with the way my life has been going, something may happen."

Thud! Thud! Thud! "Come on. Let's go!"

"Ok! Shit! Just a moment!" I grab my other dirk, wrist daggers, and my black poncho from my things. I turn back as I grab the door. "Promise me."

"Yes. I will be here. I believe you, maybe because I want to, maybe because you deserve it, or maybe because I'm a fool—but I will be here." She glides up from the bed to meet me at the door. She melts into my arms as we embrace. Our lips touch in a slow, passionate kiss, and I pull her even tighter to me. Her supple lips give the softest kiss I have ever felt.

Thud! Thud! Thud! I let her go and open the door.

Dressed in a black cloak, Thanatos has a sobering look of anxiousness painted across his face. "Are you fuckin' ready, princess—let's go!"

"Be careful, Farewell my love, my heart will sink in the tides of sorrow, until thy returns," soaks into my ears as I walk away.

I turn and respond with the next lines of the poem, "And so we'll lay in the black embrace, and the seed is sown in a holy place."

Then in unison we pontificate, "And I'll watch and wait for the dawn."

We clomp down the stairs. I buckle on my right dirk, make sure the left is still secure, and slide the black poncho over my head as we hit the last few steps.

Thanatos smiles peels his smirk across his face. "That was cute."

I nod at him with a sarcastic look on my face. "Ya, thanks."

"What the fuck is goin' on here?" Morngrym's raspy voice shoots from the darkness behind the bar. "Who are these tubs of shit sitting down here in my bar? You guys are about to leave?"

"There are girls in our rooms. These are their keeper's hands." I plop the remaining gold on the bar. Get

them food, drink, and give these guys a room, whatever is left give to the girl in my room at dawn."

Morngrym looks at me as if he is trying to decide whether or not to dump my gold on the floor and tell me to fuck off. "It's too late for this shit."

He grabs the purse and waves us to get out of his face. "See you guys later, I guess. Don't kill too many chickens while you're out there," pops from his mouth as he turns toward the kitchen.

We hit the cobblestones and move east. We will avoid the heavily patrolled areas and skirt through the Temple district to the Pit, then south to the docks. Still no rain, just claps and flashes, the lighting dances in the sky from west to east in large blue streaks. It seems to follow us.

Stepping quickly by the Rankan temples, Crash! A beam of lighting as wide as a house blinds the night sky, booming down in the woods behind the Rankan temple. I sense a tingling feeling. It feels as if it is just over our shoulders. The hairs on my body stand on end. We both hunker in a cowering way from instinct, and stop in our tracks. We look at each other with amazement.

Thanatos smiles. "That was fuckin' close." He chuckles a bit to relieve the tension.

"My heart definitely jumped. I have never been that close on land or sea. Shit look at that." My eyes widen as I point over to where the lightning struck. We see the glow of fire.

We look at each other again. I raise my brow. "We have to go see this, right?"

Thanatos nods. "Yes, we do. We'll move quickly."

We move to the other side of the temples. The trees in the center have been knocked over like child's blocks, split and burnt. Stringy, blue electricity pops and flashes through the air, and bits of fire scatter around the leveled circle. In the center, on a forgotten gray stone altar covered in vines and carvings of battleaxes, Staufan rapes the Gazelle. There is no passion in his movements, only violence. He holds her throat with heavy pressure, and tears that call for mercy roll onto her bright red cheeks. Veins pop from her forehead and temple. Her head thuds up and down on the stone. Blood trickles from her nose and lips.

"How is this O.K.?" I nudge Thanatos to break him from his amazement, and point to the scene.

He turns to me. "Are you going to go stop him?"

"What if he kills her?"

"What if he does? Who cares? Look we got shit to do, and stopping our friend who can stand in the middle of fuckin' lighting, from raping a whore he's paid for, and who LIKES to be roughed up, isn't one of them. Let's fuckin' get out of here. Krosk needs us."

"O.K. I don't like guys that hit women." We do have to get Krosk. I look back as we turn to leave.

"Looks like she likes it. Besides I don't take her as the helpless type. He's not going to kill her. Come on. Let's go." Thanatos pulls me back around, and drags me back onto the street.

The images of what I just saw mix in my mind with the visage of my dead brother. I thought I had seen everything, until this week, now I wonder what I haven't seen. It begins to sprinkle.

We get to the Docks and the rain comes hard and fast. I steal a fish cart, and we run west down Fish Street. We

step up the sea weathered stairs of my uncle's apartment. I prepare myself for another sight I thought would be unseen and unlock the door.

The smell attacks me, pulling a gag from my throat, knocking me back out the door against the outside wall. I cough, spit, and look at Thanatos. "Fuck!"

I cover my face and step straight to the south-side wall, and knock the shutters open. I turn and face Krosk. He sits the way I left him, but with his body swollen and bloated, his eyes bulge from their sockets, and his fattened purple tongue sticks from his mouth. His skin swirls with shades of green, purple, and black. The dry, black, and cracking blood on his chest, face, and Stilcho's note flakes off and falls to the floor. The heavy haze of the awful smell of a rotting corpse seems to be clearing with the heavy draft from the storm through the window to the door, but as I pull the dagger from his melting flesh, and hand the note to Thanatos a new wave a stench fills my nose. Gagging and coughing, I tuck the dagger into my belt as Thanatos tucks the note into his.

We carry him out feet first and put him in the fish cart at the bottom of the stairs, covering him with a blanket. The rain still beats down. Maybe with Lorick and

Vashanka covering the sky it will clear the streets? We should risk it, straight up Trader's Way and we can have him home in moments.

Through the purple night sky covered with the gray haze of rain, branches of lightning fan out over the sea, and the thunder rolls with the crash of the high waves. I wheel the cart west. Thanatos looks at me with a signal toward Trader's Way, and shrugs, as if to say, you're leading.

The rustling mixture of life bounding through Trader's Way never really dies, but it moves slow and with little traffic tonight. I see no patrols. We're going to make it.

Thanatos knocks on the door repeatedly. Krosk's sister, Isabella, a thin, tall, Ilsigg girl with the deepest brown eyes I have ever seen, answers the door. "Krosk is missing!"

Thanatos looks down at the ground with the rain beating off his head. "I know, we have found him." He points his black sleeved, long arm that drips heavy with the pouring rain to the cart in the street.

She runs out into the rain and throws back the covers that hide the putrid remains of Krosk. "This is your fault

the both of you! What am I supposed to do with this? Put this inside with my children? He should have been buried days ago!"

I look around Thanatos to Isabella. "We will put him in the landlord's tool-cellar."

Thanatos hands Isabella a purse. "There is enough there to pay for a burial as early as tomorrow, and a year's rent."

She shoves it back at him. "Is this your blood coin, or maybe you stole it from whoever killed him!"

"No one ever made Krosk do anything. He lived in the night because he wanted to. Don't be stupid, take the coin. Know that we . . ." Thanatos points to me. ". . . loved him, and his life was happy. Now, send him to the next world properly, before it's too late."

"You are not staying?" The looks of pain and confusion twist on her face, as she clutches the purse.

"We can't. We leave at first light."

"Leave? For where?"

"We can't say."

Her tears mix with the rain, and her face turns a glowing red. "I will never forget this! You think you can lay my dead brother on my doorstep, and just walk away! I curse you both, damn you in the name of all the Gods!" She stomps back to the apartment, and as she enters turns and says, "Put him in the cellar and never come back. I will clean up your mess for the sake of his soul." The door slams shut.

I turn to Thanatos. "I'm sorry. It was my fault. You weren't even involved—you don't deserve any blame for this."

He shakes his head, holding it down. "Like I said. He lived the way he wanted. We have done the right thing." He raises his black eyes and narrows them as they lock with mine. "Now, we will go to Stilcho and do things my way."

I throw my hands out in front of me. "Whoa. I'm not going to try and get in Stilcho's manor and kill him—that's like trying to get in the Citadel to kill Le Soberano!"

"And yet, you simply walked in there—and I hear you have snuck into Stilcho's manor many times, for a girl. So, for the love of your dead brother, sister, and mother what

will you do? Show me the way in. I will take care of the rest."

The anger wells in my throat. Thanatos certainly knows me well enough to pull my strings, and putting my life at risk does not seem as important as it was just days ago. "Alright, let's go. I'm in. We will go in together, and make him pay for what he has done—that fat fuck. I can't wait to watch him bleed."

"That's the spirit." He holds out his hand and we shake like brothers with half a hug.

We stride west across Trader's Way and into the Shou district. It nestles between the Beach district in the south, the river to the west, and the White district to the north. I heard rumors that the White's gave this area to the Shou only because the spirits of lepers roam the streets.

The Shou all seem to support each other, and keep to their own. They keep their coin and power locked with their culture, and the district seems like their own world. They have changed the Tierabeaux and Enlibrite named streets to symbols only they understand. Man-sized, soft-wood carvings, of the heads of their gods guard entry in to the

district. Wood frame and slat buildings painted brightly green crowd each other with tile roofs that curve up at the corners, and red posts hold small porches in the front of most of the buildings. They have covered the streets with red bricks and black stone woven together in a pattern that zigs-and-zags across the street.

The late night has closed many of the shops and restaurants, but the smells of garlic noodles and boiling chicken still hang in the air. The streets flow with a bit more traffic than I thought.

The large Shou men wear either silk skirts from their waist to their knees with no shirt, or long cotton tunics to their ankles with no pants. Tattoos of women, battle, and magical beasts covers the light brown skin of the men with no shirts. Their skin color is close to Ilsigg, but their noses spread wide like Theibians. All the men and women have long, wavy, black hair.

We continue west through the streets with names we can't understand. The rain finally slows. A gold dragon the size of three men rises in the center circle of the district. Stilcho's manor backs up to the river with a view of the light tower and the wealthy's beach manors to his south, and the rest of the whites to his north. He either

wants to live with them, or wants them to never forget him, like a rock in their boot. There seems to be more and more traffic as we get closer.

The wooden manor stands tall and narrow, almost like a wide tower with the roof style of the Shou. A tall, granite fence with spikes and broken glass mortared to the top surrounds the small courtyard. His daughter's room rests at the top on the fourth floor. Stilcho's fat ass stays at the bottom. A merchant of the night, he is probably awake conducting business or pleasure. His guards always surround him. This won't be easy.

"This is it." I point to the tower-home when we are a few houses away.

"How do we get in?" Thanatos looks at me raising his brow.

"I usually use a rope from the roof across the alley, but I didn't know we were coming here. But there is a spot on the other side we should be able to get over the wall unseen. We'll throw my poncho over the glass, and hope a spike doesn't get us. That's the best I got."

"Works for me. When we get inside, don't hesitate, and cripple or kill. We'll need to move fast. How many guards?"

"Four at least, around him—maybe ten in the house, maybe more I don't know. They'll be Shou warriors too."

"So?"

"Have you ever seen one? They're huge, almost as tall as Sed, and as wide as Staufan."

As we begin to move to the other side of the fence, I notice the signal lanterns pointing to the front side of the house. Stilcho must be taking tribute tonight.

"Hey new plan, See those lanterns with the purple flame. They are all over the city right now, letting every beggar, thief, and handler know to bring Stilcho his cut. He should be sitting right out front. We can just get in line, count the guards, make a plan, and kill his big ass."

"That sounds almost, too easy." Thanatos shakes his head.

I smile. "The stars shine in our favor tonight."

We round the corner and halt. The line must be a hundred long of rain drenched vassals. I can't believe these cowards stood out here in the rain.

I throw my head back. I knew the night was going too smoothly. "Any bright ideas, on how to move this along?"

"We could always just tell them who we are." Thanatos throws his smirk at me.

"That sounds about as good as just drawing our weapons and going for it—maybe something to not draw attention to us?" I raise my brow in a sarcastic face. "We have to get close."

I scan the line. "Follow me."

We step out of the crowd and skirt our way to the front of the mass of thieves, bumping into every third or fourth person, trying to provoke more than curses from the crowd. Halfway down the line, and I have a taker.

A Tierabeaux smuggler wearing a soaked black velvet tunic with puffy sleeves, and synched with a gold belt sticks his hand in my chest. "Excusez-moi, w'ere do jue think jue ar' goin'?"

I turn back to him. "Pardon?"

I face back to the front of the line. "I said, w'ere do jue think jue ar' goin'?"

"Look friend, I'm just going to say hello to an old ami." I turn back to the front of the line and point until my target reveals himself by locking eyes with me. An

Enlibrite pickpocket points to his own chest, asking "are you pointing at me?" I respond with a smile, wave, and a nod of my head. He falls for it and waves back to me.

"There he is, see." I point him out, again, and wave.

"Look, you'll see me pass back by here again, in the other direction. Don't worry."

"I'll be watchin' jue."

I walk straight toward the target. He works his way to the street edge of the line, but keeps his place. I stick out my hand. "Hello my friend, how are you on this fine evening?"

"Do I know you?" He shakes my hand.

"No. I don't think that we have met before, but I do believe that guy down there knows you." I point back toward our new Tierabeaux friend and wave. He waves back with a smug look on his face.

"No, don't know him either."

"Well he said that your mother was the cheapest whore in the entire Pit, and he's one of a thousand men that could be your father, and something about when he fucked your mother he would slap her ass and spit in her face."

"That fuckin' fruity Tierabeaux, down there?" He points, and the man responds with a wave.

"Ya, he's telling everyone around down there about how you're a bastard son of a sailor's whore."

The Enlibrite man throws a middle finger down the line. The Tierabeaux man responds with a finger of his own.

"Look, I will hold your place. Go save your name for the sake of the gods."

"You're just tryn' to get my place in line."

"Why would that guy help me get your spot? I don't even know that guy. He is down there cursing you and throwing you the finger."

I throw a finger down to the Tierabeaux man. His face begins to turn red, as he throws a double fisted fuck you back at us.

"See." The Enlibrite man pulls me into the line, and Thanatos slips in behind me giving the Tierabeaux man another finger.

The soaked Tierabeaux man's face turns beat red as he charges out of the line and at us.

"Here he comes for you. Defend yourself." The Enlibrite man steps from the line and meets the charging man with blows.

Waves of chaotic excitement flow through the crowd, as everyone rustles for position to see the fight. Three of Stilcho's huge Shou house guards carrying long, wide, curved daggers, and wearing bamboo chest plates and silk skirts pound the street down toward the fight with their black ponytails flowing behind them. Covered in swirling tattoo designs the Shou men are some of the largest men I have ever seen, and they move like agile thieves.

We work our way against the flow of the crowd to the front of the line. Black slate rests under a gazebo with the Shou style roof curved up at the corners, held up by smooth, red, large, round posts. Greened copper dragons holding up iron flame baskets stand around the outside of the gazebo. Shou woven rugs lay under a throne of golden tigers, and atop Stilcho sits surrounded by his elite in their black leather, studded armor.

I drop throwing daggers into my hands. I look to Thanatos. Everything slows. Dripping water flies back off of his soaked black cloak in swirling slow-motion circles, as he pulls a small crossbow with a box on the top out with

one hand, and slides back the box with his other hand. We move quickly before the ground-shaking men come thundering back, and push out to the edge of the slate.

"Show yourself!" booms down from the throne. We throw back our hoods, and Thanatos draws up his one-handed crossbow.

"What are you doing with him?" I hear, as a small bolt breaks through the air zipping into one of the Elite's eyes, exploding it with a spray of blood, and slumping the dead guard backwards with the force of the hit. I hear a crash and "Oh! Fuck!"

Two of the guards charge forward as Thanatos slides the top box on his crossbow back. I unleash my daggers, landing one in the throat of a charging guard, and the other misses. The blood flows from the mouth of the guard as he drops to his knees and his friend swipes his dagger at me. The sound of the air breaks.

The guard in front of me drops to his knees, slumping forward with a small bolt stuck in the base of his skull. I pull my dirks and look to the gazebo. Stilcho's empty throne lies on its side. I glance to the door and see the last Elite closing it behind him. I grab the copper dragon

and drag the flame basket close to the tower house.

Thanatos sees me and grabs the next closest.

We kick them over spilling the flames and oil onto the wood slats. The fire catches instantly. The Shou house guards divide the crowd running back toward us. I look to Thanatos and run north. He follows me and we weave back east through the strange streets, losing our followers, never slowing, never speaking, never stopping, until we reach Trader's Way. I look back and the orange glow of the growing fire lights the smoke pouring into the sky.

We calm our run to a brisk walk aiming straight north to the Den, covering our heads, and slipping into the chaos of the busy street. I look at Thanatos. "Well, I guess we are done for the night? I mean, one miserably failed assassination attempt for the night is all I've got in me."

"Who knows you are at the Den?" Thanatos keeps his head down.

"No one, You guys."

"Good. By the time they figure out where we are—we will be on the road."

"There will be hundreds looking for us."

"We're going to be marked men as soon as we leave, anyways. This will just add to the fun—and besides that, you're becoming someone else."

"I just wish we would have killed that fat fuck."

"Maybe we'll get another chance someday."

"Maybe? We all know what I am to Stilcho, but How do you know him?"

Thanatos looks at me with look of innocence. "What do you mean?"

"He said, 'What are you doing with him?' And whether or not that was for me or you me. It means he knows us both."

"I have done work for him before."

"You're a guild member?"

"No! I took a contract through him for a single job. Figured I could make some extra coin while I was down here. It really doesn't mean much, and the next time I see him he's a dead fuck for sure."

We reach the Den. Thanatos throws his smirk. "Well at least we got a couple turns of the glass to fuck our whores before dawn—if they haven't robbed us by now?"

Clomps of our steps, beats of our hearts, and the wisp of our breaths are the only sounds as we enter and make our way through the dark, still Den. The events of the night run through my mind, and exhaustion begins to take me over. If she left, then I will welcome a few hours of rest, but yet the idea of having my hands on her body quickens my steps and speeds up my heart.

The door creaks open, and the soft light of a single lamp flickers in the room. The slender curves of her body poke from the blanket. My heart speeds up even more with excitement, as I unstick the wet clothes from my body, and slip into the bed beside her.

I slide her black straight hair from the back of her neck and press my lips against her. I lightly grab her hip, pulling her ass against me.

"Mmmmmmmmmmm," she purrs as she lightly bucks up against me, and looks back at me with a smile. I tilt her over onto her stomach, and kiss her from her neck to the small of her back while I grab and caress her ass and thighs. I slide my tongue along her crack to the inside of her thigh, as I glide my hands down her calves to her ankles and back up again grabbing her thighs, and spreading her legs wide open.

She arches her back raising her pussy up for my tongue, as she sighs and lets out another, "Mmmmmmmmmmmmm."

I dart my tongue out to her clit, as I bury my face in the sweet musk of her pussy. I spread her hood and get the sensitive tip of her clit, sucking and flicking it with my tongue. She shortly bucks the arch in her back up and down, as sighs and moans surround the soft begging words, "Yes, Oh Yes," until her pussy drips with cream.

I rise up, and I roll her over onto her back. I kiss her soft supple lips pushing the taste of her pussy into both of our mouths. I slide my arm underneath her, and pull her head back by her hair, as I kiss and nibble her neck and shoulder. She spreads her legs out and pulls me into her. I slowly slide in and out of her, as I caress her breasts and kiss her neck. She bucks up against me, pulling me into her by my ass.

"Mmmm, Yes, Fuck me." We rock against each other faster and faster, and she gets louder and louder. We go on and on in different positions until our sweat slides between us. We melt into each other, and everything else disappears. The curves of her body, the grace of her movement, her eyes, her lips, her hair, her face the most

beautiful I have ever known. I roll from her to catch a breath after pounding her into a quivering state.

She mounts me, caressing her own breasts, and looking at me with a wicked smile. She reaches down and rubs her clit rocking my cock back and forth deep inside her. "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

"Ohooooo," she moans as her motions lock up, and I rock faster from underneath her. She squirts her pussy all over me, as she completely freezes, crying, "Yes, Oh yes."

She falls from me in a sweaty, musky, sexy mess face first on to the bed. We both lie there panting for a few moments. My throbbing cock pulls me up to mount her again pushing my hips against her round backside. I grab her cheeks and spread them, as I pump faster.

She arches her back, and looks back at me. "Do you want my ass?"

"Fuck, Yes!"

She spits on her fingers and slides it down her crack. She fingers her hole, as I fuck her faster spanking her on her round bottom.

"Are you going to fuck me extra hard for being a dirty girl?"

She pulls her finger from her hole, and spreads her cheeks for me arching her back. I pull from her sweet, sloppy pussy, and slide into her tight ass.

"Ohooooo, it's big in my ass . . . I like it . . . Yes, I love it . . . Fuck me in my ass!"

"I swear you are the sexiest woman in all the Ten Kingdoms."

Her tight hole relaxes a bit as she bucks hard against me. We go faster, as the sweat drips from my brow. She tightens up, as she arches back against me as far as she can.

"Oh, fuck, oh, yes, fuck, me, my, ass, oh, yes, it's getting bigger, cum, yes, oh, my, ass." Her pussy spills onto the bed. I pull my swollen cock dripping with pre-cum from her.

"I can't take much more, please, cum."

"Oh, I'm about to explode. You're so beautiful."

I slide back into her pussy, grabbing her round bottom. She tightens herself in unison with the in and out of my cock. I grab her hair, and she cries, "Fuck me!"

I rock faster and faster. I feel my load swell bigger in my cock.

"Yes, I feel it getting even bigger, cum in me."

Her pussy quivers with another spill, as I fill her deep with my seed.

We lay there staring at the ceiling and each other, panting, melted into one, in a passionate union that comes rare in life.

I look to Jaulita. "That was incredible."

"Yes." She rolls over on top of me. There is something between us isn't there?"

"Yes." I kiss her. "There is. It's not just the sex which I gotta say again, was incredible, or just your beauty, which is perfect, but I like your hustle, who you are. I don't want to know anything about anybody you've ever been with, and I'll do you the same. And I wish we could just start here, now, with who we are, and see where it goes, but I may never return to this place after today."

I get up and throw the shutters open. The storm passed over sometime while we fucked, but the sweet smell of the rain hangs in the morning air. The rosy fingered dawn pulls the cloak of Lorick from the sky, as I look over the only place I have ever known. What a city she is. Confused about herself, full of beauty and filth, opportunity and oppression, and twisted by the cultures of the world. I know that no matter where I end up this will always be my home.

"My father is Gathaus Voorhexees."

She smiles. "Voorhexees? You are prince Voorhexees?"

"No, cousin—my father is the city scribe—you can send letters to me through him, let him know where you are—if I live I will come back for you."

"Always promising to come back for me, what makes you think I want to wait for you?"

"I have no choice. Please don't be mad I have to go, but I will come back."

"Maybe, if you're alive. It's just my luck. I meet someone and . . ."

I can't believe it, but I think I'm in love with this girl. "Look, I have never felt a connection with anyone, that I feel with you. If I had a choice, I would stay."

"Where are you going?"

"To Voorhexees."

Thud! Thud! Thud! Sed's voice seeps through the door, "It's time Lord Voorhexees, gather your things."

I walk out into the hallway and past Staufan's room. He steps out. "Are you ready today?"

"Yes and you?" I peer through the open door, and the Gazelle is not there. A sinking feeling comes over me.

"What are you looking for?"

"Nothing, was just going to say hello, to the star of the show last night."

"She, well, she left. Have you ever ridden a horse before?"

"Horse? I thought I was riding in the carriage."

"Not until we get close to Varisvaaria."

"What about the girl?"

"What about her? You're getting kind of nosy. Are you hard up for my whore, boy? Come on, it's time to go."

We carry our things through the rising sun to the citadel complex and join the envoy there. The morning birds chirp, heavy dew slicks the slate of the courtyard, and around a dozen Voorhexian knights dressed in blue-black steel armor ready the steeds and load the wagons.

A maple stained, oak slat carriage with black iron hardware floats on a series of iron rods and leather straps above its oak timber frame. A forged black iron horse rising above a shield with three clusters of grapes decorates the doors of the carriage, and flat steel tires cover its wheels. Tacked to the tongue rustles two large gray warhorses.

Sed shows me how to load my saddle, and we wait for our horses to be brought. "How long will it take to get to Voorhexees?"

"Twenty to twenty-five days, up the river. We'll pass through Varisvaaria's foot, through Sallidon, then Voorhexees."

"Why don't we head down the coast by land or sea, then cross Sallidon into Voorhexees, and avoid Varisvaaria completely?"

"Time. We have to catch them as fast as possible—this way will put us in direct pursuit of them. And we can ride together longer, and this will put us in better position to rejoin. Enlibar City is over 400 leagues away, we don't want to waste time heading east. And we would have to cross the mountains, which would make it risky even if we weren't chasing them. We have arranged for passage through Varisvaaria. If we go that way, that's when you get to play the prince for the crazy bitches."

The stable boys run out Sed's dun warhorse and a black stallion for me. I shake my head in disbelief. What kind of jokes are the gods playing on me?

As I go to saddle the horse it gets jumpy and moves away. Sed, Staufan, and Thanatos laugh at me from their mounts as the horse moves away several times. Finally, the stable boys reign in the stallion and saddle him for me. The horse steps sideways and shakes its head, as I mount it.

"I don't think it likes me." The idea of the figure of death from my dreams creeps through my mind. The laughter of my friends ring in my ears, as the horse begins to rear up under me. My heart begins to race. The horse whinnies, and rears again.

Sed rides up and pulls the horse down. Calm yourself. This horse is not the horse from my dreams.

Sed pets the nose of the horse. "Whoa, it's alright, whoa."

I reach out and pet the back of the horse's neck. The touch of the soft coat and mane calm me. The horse snorts, ripples his muscles, and clomps in place, as he settles under me. I continue to pet his neck.

Out of the Le Soberano's manor walks a tired looking Stennous, dressed in a black velvet tunic with puffed shoulders and a blue chaperone hat with black trim. He holds hands with a thin, young, frail man with black hair and blue eyes dressed like Stennous with opposite colors. They enter the carriage and pull the curtains. Behind them march four of Le Soberano's Elite to join the party.

My father and Stav walk out of the library. Stav carries a small travel pack and a broad sword. "I will come with you as far as my farm."

We clomp out to Trader's Way and head to the north gate. The gate towers at least four men high. When I was a child I saw a frigate with its masts laid down towed through the gate. The huge iron fence must weigh more than the Emperor's gold. They say every generation closes the gate in war, I never dreamed I would be part of it.

A male and a female rider each on a white horse approaches us from the south. As they get closer, I see the faces of the Steele Gazelle and the tall guard, the one that didn't get punched.

I smile that she lives, that my friend didn't kill her, and that my life hasn't fallen in the hands of that kind of monster. She has a sense of belonging on her face, and a matter of dignity on her swollen lip. A hard gaze changes the look of her blue eyes into something hateful, something cold, something deadly.

She wears gold dusted, ornate plate armor pieces on her arms and legs. A black leather dress runs from her neck to her knees. Thin on the top, it flares out at the bottom

into thick straps. A symbol of Vashanka hangs around her neck.

Chapter 7: The Road Begins/ Pawn of the Gods

We clomp away from the moss filled cypress gum and oak trees through vast city gardens. Staufan rides up to me. "It's all north and uphill from here."

It's as if I can already feel the tilt of the world pushing against me, and I see the uphill climb ahead in the vast sea of land. The stone road cuts through the terraced, semi-circle rows of corn, beans, rice, lemon, and sugar. Square dug-out ponds beyond the crops farm crayfish and snails. The levee, tall on the riverside, towers over everything in the valley.

Staufan hands me a bandage full of green goop. "Put this on your neck until the sun is overhead, then take it off and let the sunshine bake the paste. The power of the sun is a wonder."

"Why do the priests of Krozious do such awful things?"

"I think most priests of the church follow the order of Krozious which is love, light, and knowledge. And in the Tomes of the Gods Krozious and Vashanka stay allied even through the death of Diodeff. They punish Fera's nature some summers more than others—Vashanka holding the storms and Krozious burning her.

It is the top of the church that is corrupt. It is only in the realm of men where the power of coin controls things, that the churches of Krozious and Fera ally, and Vashanka and Krozious war."

"Is your hair grayer than the first time we met?" I ask as I notice a paler hue in the sunshine."

"It is looking for the stone with the shroud, breaking the fear spell. It all takes lifeforce, maybe minutes, days, or years. The price of magic, Lord Vorhexees." He rides off.

Exhausted, I silently ride. The levee disappears and the road veers east as we clomp out of the city gardens into the Rankan farmlands. The sounds of hooves on stone, wheels rolling, and the squeaks of the wagons fill my ears.

The groves of lemon and oranges spill over into leagues of large, pie-shaped rice and sugar plantations. The Rankans took these lands close to the river, with farms already in place, and rebuilt the towns in their style.

The large properties wedge together to form circle communities. In the center rests a large timber hall with a steep pitched, wooden shingle roof. The Rankans use it for praying, feasting, and ceremonies. Large racks of deer, the

skulls of wolves, and woven bone nests decorate the sturdy hall. Large totems of eagles, bears, and dragons choking an oak tree, circle the center of the community.

Twelve large two-story timber homes ornately carved with dragons and twisting designs stand finished with black iron, and surround the hall. The grain of well polished timbers soaks dark with oil. Large porches stretch around the well finished homes, and fires burn under indentured servant stirred sugar pots. Wood shake shingle roofs pitch up steeply, and oak trees canopy the sharecropping communities.

We ride all day through three Rankan towns. Most of the servants look Ilsigg. Even though slavery was abolished when the Port broke free from the empire, it doesn't look like these servants have it much better. I guess it's better than everywhere else? When we reach the fourth village, the cover of Lorick's cloak creeps into the sky. The smaller single story homes of this town spread further apart with larger fields, but there are no servants.

"Ve are 'ere. My home iz das one dere." He points to a modest log home on the north edge of the circle. The tidy home looks well kept in Stav's absence. We enter the home, and I watch Stav breathe-in deeply the scent of my sister

that still hangs in the air. The weight of his pain rests on all of us. Though she was my sister, no one loved her more than him.

Sed commands the caravan to set-up camp behind the house. We hang canopies from the roof eaves to the wagons, and make beds from bags of rice. Stennous and his friend take over Stav's home, but Stav gladly joins us in the open air away from the reminders. With the horses tied and fed, shelter secure, everyone stowed away, and fires burning we head to the center-hall for dinner.

The inside vaults up with the steep pitch showing timber trusses. The unfinished timber walls stand decorated with painted wooden shields and pikes. Stone fireplaces at both ends and one in the middle of the hall harness bright flames. Around a hundred Rankan people of all ages rustle about, eating, drinking, singing, dancing, and wrestling.

No one seems surprised or offended by us, but instead they treat us as if they expected us, and welcome us as if Stav's word weighs of gold. Stennous and his boyfriend sit with leaders of the village. We join in the feast. A few turns of the glass before Lorick's cloak completely covers the horizon. Roasted pig and chicken fills our bellies. Rice-wine and rum fills our cups.

Thanatos sits next to me. "Tomorrow we will hit the leagues of orange groves, and Staufan and I will ride ahead."

"Ya."

"Well, if for some reason we don't see each other again, it's been good knowing ya. We've got some good stories, don't we? Remember that time you, me, and Krosk took the purses of those rich fucks standing right behind city guards. I nearly pissed myself laughing so hard that night."

"That was a good night." I slam my drink and lean into Thanatos. "Have you ever figured what we're doing here is all fucked up?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we're about to create a war where thousands may die in hopes to create separate less stable kingdoms that will probably lead to more wars, all so some rich guys don't have to pay some other rich guys taxes. I can see how it's good for Vashanka, but who else really profits from this shit we're doing?"

"When you put it like that it sounds like I'm going to make more coin than I can carry. Embrace the chaos. If the

hand of doom comes for the world, so be it. Besides, we're in this shit, now."

I chuckle and spit a bit. "You don't know how deep I'm in this shit?"

"Oh, I know. I know you wouldn't be here if you thought you had a choice. Like I said, it's been good knowin' ya."

We shake hands like brothers, and join Sed, Staufan, and the knights to drink.

The Voorhexian knights comprise of the second sons of the barons of the kingdom. Noble by birth, but left in the world to make their way with the riff-raff, and trained to fight from the saddle at early ages, their direction in life preordained.

The older captain's brown beard puffs out and his stringy, thick, unkempt brown hair parts on the left side. Bright blue eyes pop from his tanned skin. He smokes a cigar he rolled himself, puffing it and tumbling it through his fingers. He sips corn liquor from a silver canteen dressed with black leather.

He extends the orb flask to me, and in a raspy but smooth voice speaks to me with a wink, "Second son, of the

king's uncle, huh, they will line you up for a captain's spot soon enough."

"I never even ridden a horse before today, and I think it just followed the other horses. It was like I was something on it, not riding it."

A short snicker from deep inside him bursts out. "A Voorhexees that doesn't ride—son, your family is famous not just for wine, but for horses and riding."

He stands and calls to knights, "Here sits a man with the last name Voorhexees, that can't even ride a horse!"

The knights look at me for a moment in confusion, but go about their business, as if the Captain often blurts things from off the sea. He sits back next to me blowing air between tight lips.

"Buurrrrrrrrttt. Sorry, sorry, just couldn't believe it. Even your sweetheart cousin is one of the best riders in the kingdom." He rolls his eyes for a moment, and his head nods just enough for me to see he is shitfaced drunk.

He holds it together well. "How about handing me back that canteen? I heard you are a half-breed. That won't matter when the war breaks. Soon criers will walk the streets of your city calling those to arm, against the

evils of the Empire. I'm sure there'll be a captain's spot for you somewhere."

He points to the wall. "You seem smart enough—I'm sure you can learn the formations and tactics to lead some pikemen."

He pipes up to the table again, "We got us an infantry captain here, boys."

He turns back to me. "Hope you like blood in your face. Ya' know, the Ellonians, still don't understand after 200 years we're Enlibrites now, and the Empire doesn't understand we're Voorhexian. The Empire has been coming to our lands, taking our prize mounts, and training their cavalry since the kingdom was born. But they've taken hundreds of our steeds in just the last three moons. So remember, when you're faced against the fear to run, there have been crimes enough," he points at me, "against your family, to justify you fighting to the death."

"I don't plan to run."

"No one plans to be a coward in front of their comrades, it just happens. So, remember—and know this, they may use fear chants to leave clouds of fear on the battlefield."

"I have no choice, but to stay to the end, and I have already faced the cloud of fear."

"Excellent, fair enough then, stuck like the rest of us, you'll make a good bloody captain. You're one of us now, whether you know it or not, you always have been."

He hands me back the flask. After all I have lost; a relief comes over me knowing I truly belong to something. Even if it's only a group of outcasts trained to die.

The Captain turns to the Gazelle sitting next to Staufan. "I have never seen a warrior with such beauty. Where did you find her?"

Staufan starts to answer, but the Gazelle pipes up loudly over him, "From the stage of Formasita's Beauties in the Port." Staufan places his hand on his forehead and shakes his head, not in shame, but as if to say, "oh shit here we go!"

"Well then my dear, how about a dance?"

"You and all of you noble knights couldn't afford or handle me, Captain."

"I will handle you with my balls on your ass."

Staufan stands. "That's far enough. With all due respect Captain, watch your fuckin' mouth. She is a priestess of Vashanka, and my wife united with me by the Gods themselves from the strife of the heavens."

"I mean no offense to the church, minister, or to the Black Legions' high priest, or to such a holy union. Let me buy you a drink." He hands Staufan the canteen. "May we drink rum all day and all night like the great Vashanka."

"Here, Here," responds the knight in unison. We drink the rest of the late daylight away learning the Rankan drinking songs.

Sed calls to the table, "Night is upon us. We have an early start tomorrow."

The Captain rises and the knights follow, as we escort Stennous and his lover to Stav's home. Sentries post and I sink into my bed of rice bags singing the Rankan songs with Sed, Thanatos, and Staufan. By the time the others have settled, sleep falls on me heavy.

"FIRE!" Sed shakes me from my sleep. An orange glow peeks over the top of the house. Horses whinny, knights race back and forth in front of me to pull the wagons from the house, and to grab the horses. Sed commands the chaos.

The Captain charges out of the house with Stennous and his boy. I get up. Stav runs to the town center. Staufan moves toward the Captain, and I hear the tolling of the town signal. Thanatos climbs on the house.

As I rush to fight the fire with Rankans, arrows zip past me from the darkness. I turn back to dive for my sword and yell, "Attack!"

Thanatos disappears onto the other side of the roof, and the Captain push Stennous down behind some bags of rice. I hear another volley thud against the house crackling with fire.

"They're tucked in the rice." Staufan looks to the Captain. "Stay here with the prince." He signals to me to follow. I grab my sword and dirks. The Gazelle appears next to us wielding her axe, and we weave through the wagons, as I strap my dirks to my hips and my sword to my back.

"There are four to six nestled behind the field levee next to the cluster of three oaks. We'll have to flank them."

"Which way?" I shrug.

"You decide. I'll follow you. You should be a natural at this." He smiles at me with eyes that glimmer with bloodlust.

We dart out west and then duck across into the rice-paddy. I lead us north, and then back west where we can come in behind them. The rice covers us well in the darkness, and the winds of the rainy season cover the rustle of our steps. The cacophony from the fire and men falling from arrows disappears, as we get close to the target. We move soft and slow. I can hear their chatter.

"I haven't seen either of them."

"I've got three knights, but I haven't seen the bounties."

"There's one, the tall Ilsigg. Fuck! He went back around. He's on the ground, the west side of the house."

"There are still too many knights. He'll come back around when he does, he'll be close to the house, and everyone get his ass."

We leap upon them side by side. Staufan roars a battle cry that shakes the air. But when the men turn, their time has come. Staufan twirls with a slicing blow spilling the

guts of two of the men. The other one next to them climbs on his back, grabbling for his sword.

The Gazelle plants her axe in the back of one of the men and spins with a kick the cracks the jaw of the rising man next to him. She pulls his sword from his unconscious body and slices him open down the front like a fish. The blood and guts spill in the rice. I face the last attacker as Staufan buries his axe in the head of the grabbling man with a spray of crimson and a cracking sound.

I recognize him from the night I cut Wrak's face. The guild lackey, he must be the bounty rangers' spotter. Stilcho wasted no time in calling for our lives. I capture the lackey's attack with my dirks, and slice his throat, spilling blood down the front of his black tunic with a quick easy strike, dumb fucking kid.

As I wipe the blood from my dirks I hear Staufan. "They look like bounty rangers to me. I never expected they would be this far south. This is going to change things."

I answer with a shrug, "We should help with the fire."

We run back to the camp, and see the winds have spread the fire. Three knights and the two Tierabeaux Elite lay dead, and Stav's home burns to embers. We join the fight

against the blaze, hauling buckets until the dawn, saving the other homes. Stennous and his boy stay locked in the carriage.

After we put out the flames, we break for coffee, throw the bodies of the rangers to the pigs, and haul our dead west into the woods to the Rankan burial mound. The ashes cover us, and the smell of smoke follows us down the path.

The mound rises up six or seven paces, but weaves like a large snake back and forth through the woods. Woven bone chimes hang from posts planted along the mound, and giant skeleton totems of the Rankan god of death stand in place of every tenth post.

We reach the end of the serpent mound, and plant our dead with their weapons in a single pile with a stone frame around them. We haul dirt from a nearby creek bed to fill in and around the stones until the mound rises burying the dead deep under.

Staufan lights a dark crimson candle, holding it sideways, dripping the wax over the mound. "With the blood of warriors, we pass these men by the Plains of Penance to seek direct judgment before Vashanka, so they may enter The

Hall of Warriors where they may fight to the death every day."

He twists the candle into the top of the mound, and kneels, holding his head to the sky, and his hands out wide. "For these men have fulfilled your first order of life, and have died well with no fear. Heed the words of Vashanka's prophet Nallar from the battlefield of Alkiers, 'The first order against the darkness of chaos is to die well with no fear. Fear not death and it will reward you with paradise.' These men lived these words as warriors, and seek you now to judge their hearts."

The Captain raises his canteen. "Amen. Good words minister."

The four of us walk with the Captain back to the camp. Sed looks to Staufan. "We need to stick together for now. We need to set the decoy. We are under more watch than we expected, and with the loss of knights we need all the swords we can get until we get safely into Sallidon, perhaps even Voorhexees."

Staufan nods his head. "Agreed."

The Captain reaches up and pats Sed on the shoulder. "Appreciate it. I will let Stennous know of the plans."

Sed looks to the Captain. "The day is already wasted for travel, the men are tired, and these people can use our help, we should stay here one more night."

"Agreed." The Captain shakes Sed's hand and walks back to his knights.

We move the camp into the center of the town, and help Stav clean the ashes of his life from the smoldering rubble. The soot covers us, and the smell of smoke sticks on everything. Sed and Staufan go with Stav to pay the village for its loss. As night falls sentries post around the village on both sides of the circle. Thanatos and I stroll the circle, toking the pipe.

"The stars out here are as bright as they are a day's sail out to sea."

He shrugs. "Ya, it seems crazy to me to be in the middle of nothing but water, unless you're a fish."

"It's like the woods in a way, peaceful."

"So, I talked to everyone and heard nothing about Stilcho's men, and Sed seems to think the bounty rangers were sent by the church of Krozious to kill me and Staufan."

"I said nothing. I really don't want to hear about how I put the party in jeopardy. They were coming for me anyways, whether or not we did what we did. He already told me. He was coming for me. So, nothing's changed since we started this shit."

"It really doesn't matter, but I like to keep in the habit of not blurting out my business to everyone."

"Fair enough."

"Fair enough."

"Uh, ah, ooo." We hear the sounds of Stennous and his lover coming from their red, thick canvas, tent.

"Ha,ha,ha." Snickers roll from Thanatos as he points at me. "That's you, buddy. Everybody knows he loves men—I mean he doesn't hide it. I wonder if you'll have to hold hands with his boy?"

"You're real fuckin' funny, you know that?" I push Thanatos. "Maybe you should be my boy, and I'll hold your hand."

"Now you're real funny."

We wander back to the camp and sit around the small fire with the men. The Captain fills his canteen with a jug at the edge of a wagon.

He swaggers over and sits next to me. "So you have faced the cloud of fear, boy?"

"I don't know if I faced it. It was more like it leapt upon me, and I had to shake it loose or be crushed under it."

"How did you get free?"

"The Minister."

"What? And you don't wear the axe around your neck? Disgraceful! You might as well curse Vashanka's name!"

"Look, I would much rather fuck than fight, and I'm a half-breed, second son from the city who spent more time riding wave-boards than training to fight—why would I pray to war?"

"How did the blessing even work for you, you're not even a warrior or a believer?" The Captain nudges me with a hateful look in his pale blue eyes.

I feel the heat flash through my face. "What do you know of what I believe or what I've seen? What do you know of

what the gods hold for us? We are pawns of the gods pushed in place for their game. If you had seen what I've seen, you'd know there are forces at play here that are beyond man."

The Captain cocks his head with a look of distaste, as I reach out, nab his canteen, and take a swig and continue. "You try and make me look like a fool, because you can't believe I've done something you haven't. Remember, I may be the prince's decoy and a second son, but my last name is Voorhexees, and yours isn't."

I hand him back the canteen and he chuckles a bit. "You're going to be just fine at this kid, just fine. But so you know, what you've seen, the forces of magic, well, they've been used in war for ages. So don't break your fingers blessing your own head. Its secret is part of the warrior's pact, but I suspect you'll learn that soon enough."

I bathe in a wooden tub that looks like a huge barrel cut in half, outside a Rankan farm. Stennous' boy turns my hair a white-blond with ash and vinegar. I wrap myself in a blanket, gather my fine clothes, and make my way to Stennous' tent.

Stennous and his boy spare me a firsthand look at their fucking. The night is long. I'm not set to sleep at night, and the nightmares don't help: the stallion, the rat-boy, Krosk, my mother and sister. I see them all every time I sleep.

Before the dawn breaks we awake for coffee and ready the envoy for travel. The smell of smoke still hangs thick on everything. Stav comes out of a neighbor's home and approaches me as we are ready to leave.

"You aren't coming with us?"

"No. It is the vest time to revuild."

He looks at me with a narrow stare of concern. "Death seems to follow you. Take this."

He hands me a copper ring of seven interwoven circles. Inside each circle weaves a Rankan rune. I slip it on my finger.

"Dis vring means you are honored Rrrankan, ven death comes for you—you have earned passage to das gods. Strong Life, brother."

"Strong Life." I step into the carriage, and close the door. Plush black velvet covers the overstuffed seats. The

oak planks shine with polish. I sit across from Stennous' sleeping boy as I feel the carriage jerk into motion. We dangle out in front of the convoy with Sed, Staufan, Thanatos, and the Gazelle around it, as Stennous rides behind us surrounded by all other knights.

Stennous' boy awakes and looks at me. "So what's your name?"

"Stennous, dumb fuck. Look, you're nothing but a piece of ass to my cousin. He could give a fuck about you, and I could give a fuck about you, and I don't even want to know your name."

"Well he loves me . . ."

"Shhhh! I don't fucking care. You will be better off in the elements than in here with me. He loves you? Don't you realize there's a reason why Stennous isn't in here? It's not safe, that's how much he loves you. Where did he find you? Standing in front of a mirror, whoring for Ellonians? You got no fucking sense. Shut up and leave me alone!"

"Well, I nev..."

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

At the next stop, Stennous' boy joins the safety of the pack. The sweet smells of the suckling orange and lemon groves pull me through the next day. The next few days fill my sight with swampy woods, then forest, then cotton fields, as we pass through small village after small village still in the territory of the Port. The confinement of my role chokes me. I ride alone during the day, and my nights in Stennous' tent haunted by nightmares and surrounded by everyone, watched by everyone, seem never-ending.

The bugs swarm thick in the dusk, as we make camp in a break near a creek between cotton fields. I walk up to Thanatos. "Let's sneak out of here we'll get water, or wood, or something."

"I'll Grab my pipe and let's get the fuck out of here. All these noble sandskins are on my fuckin' nerves."

We walk to the creek toking.

"We will be in Varisvaaria soon." Thanatos smiles.

"Ya, So?"

"Well, you know that's where we'll be mostly likely to be accosted or attacked. And you know I'm from there, and they say the Queens killed their sisters and father for the

throne—that they're monstrous witches that eat the flesh of the dead."

I feel the sigh come up deep from my body. "Fuck you. You know, at this point I could almost believe that shit." I roll my eyes. "But I don't."

Thanatos chuckles through his exhale. "It was worth a try. I have heard such things from such reliable sources as the prophets of doom that stand on the corners carrying signs."

I chuckle with him, blowing my smoke straight into the air and filling my bucket. "Ya, I think I've heard that too, then. You know what's bothers me the most at this point, is that all of this shit, the bending of fucking reality and all, seems to settling in with me. Like it's O.K. now."

I shake my head in disbelief of myself. "But it's not O.K. it's fucking scary shit man. I mean that fucking rat-boy was a damn monster. A real fucking monster, but wait, that's just the beginning, we might have to fight an army of monsters. Like I said, it's settled in my brain like it's O.K. and like, like . . . I'm waiting to see what's next."

As we walk back to the camp, three large crows with black beaks and eyes buzz above our heads, making us slosh our buckets as we duck, and they fly to the north cawing frantically.

Thanatos shoots me a puzzled look and laughs. "What the fuck was that, did you just wish some bird attack on us?"

"We must have got close to their bed of worms or something." We slosh our way back, cracking jokes and killing the pipe.

I see Stennous stumble from his tent. He hits his knees, white foamy spit pours from his mouth. "Aaaahhhh! Help me! Please, help me!"

Chaos erupts! We rush frantically with the rest of the camp to his side. The dust rises around him. He twists and pulls off his clothes screaming, as the veins in his body bulge from his skin. "Aaaahhhh! Aaaahhhh! Please, help me! Get it out of me! Kill me! Aaaahhhh!"

The Captain chimes in as he reaches in to comfort Stennous. "No one's killin' no one around here. Let's go back to the tent. Water! Somebody get some fuckin' water!"

Staufan and Sed carry Stennous back into the tent. We follow as the Captain orders to post sentries, and others back to the business of the camp.

They lay Stennous on a bed of pillows in the center of the room. He flops and Sed turns to Staufan. "Is it poison?"

The gravel rolls from the throat of Staufan, as he holds Stennous down and holds his head still, "Too early to tell. Water."

I grab my canteen by the entrance and quickly hand it to Staufan. He dribbles the water into Stennous' mouth. "I need my things quickly."

As soon as the last word fills his breath, the Gazelle enters carrying Staufan's chest of trinkets and components, and large, worn, brown leather bag full of books.

Staufan rams his fingers down Stanous throat forcing him to bow, buck, and gag.

Staufan flips him over and reaches around plunging his fingers in Stennous' throat again. This time it works as Stennous heaves up everything inside him, with heave after heave.

The Gazelle opens the small chest and hands Staufan a silver symbol of an axe crossed with a lightning bolt. Stennous lies flopping, hissing, and moaning next to his vomit, as Staufan lays the symbol on his back.

The Prince of Voorhexees gently rolls over. "Water."

He sits up and takes a drink. "We have assassins near, or traitors in our midst."

Sed barges out barking orders to the Captain. "Sweep the woods!"

Staufan inspects Stennous, looking in his mouth, eyes, and testing his strength. "You seem to be alright. How do you feel?"

"Dizzy."

Staufan packs his things. "Get a shield man to clean this up. Kormar, Thanatos, come with me."

The Gazelle comes with us, and Staufan grabs Sed on the way out. Staufan leads us away from the camp at a brisk pace until we circle away from the ears of everyone else.

"He is O.K. too O.K. There are not even traces of poison. His tongue is not swollen. His eyes are clear. His veins are normal again."

Thanatos leans into the circle. "So what are you saying? He faked it?"

"No, this is not the end of this. We have been found, and he has been poisoned, but by a demon of chaos. I can confine it, with brick dust and salt, but we need a healer of Krozious to rid him. If it were wounds of battle, a spell to break, or curse to remove I could handle it, but this is different. He will be in danger until we do this. We will all be in danger. We cannot move forward."

Sed looks around the group. "I'll dig in defenses around the camp as if we expect attack, while you confine the demon. We might as well be in Varisvaaria, out here all we have is the protection of a sign."

He turns to us. "I guess that leaves you guys to ride back to the last village, as fast as your horses can run, to find us a healer."

I take the black stallion from the Port, and ride into the night with Thanatos and The Gazelle. Under the cape of Lorick at rapid speed, I can't see, but the clomp of the hooves on the road guides me through the darkness. With the idea of the mission, and trying to keep up, it is as if I never had any fears or ignorance of riding.

We gallop for several turns of the glass until we reach the village in the middle of the night.

Thanatos rides ahead and stops his horse. We slow. "We're going to get stabbed, if we just start beating on doors."

The Gazelle commands, "There is a little inn here. If he is not awake, he will at least be happy to hear a knock at the door."

We quickly trot to the inn at the other end of the one-road village. We send in The Gazelle with her beauty and charm to knock on the door. After a few thumps the viewing window opens.

An old voice that squeaks like a wagon wheel pierces through the night. "Do you have coin?"

"Sir, we have an emergency."

"I said, Do you have coin?"

"Yes." From his horse Thanatos throws a small purse to The Gazelle.

"Well then, what's your emergency?"

"We need a healer." The Gazelle smiles with a grin that buckles the men's will.

"I know of a healer, but I seem to forget exactly where he lives."

The Gazelle pulls five crowns from the purse and hands them through the window. "Well, your generosity seems to be quite intact, but I still don't really remember."

Thanatos jumps from his horse. "Enough old man, you have your coin, now tell us where he is, or I will kick in the door and cut it out of you."

"O.K. you can't blame a man for trying to fatten his pocket. He lives straight west of here, about half a league, on the sharp bend in the creek. He is a crazy hermit. He probably will not help you, but around here he is your only hope. I'm old and my wife is grumpy when awakened so leave now, unless you want to pay for a room."

The moon shines bright high in the sky, casting a halo around itself through the rows of clouds that line up like ripples in sand. I lead as we weave through the narrow trail in the woods bringing our horses one at a time, carrying lanterns we stole from the village. The limbs of the trees hang like the arms of the dead reaching to pull at our hearts. The journey moves slowly, one solemn step at

a time with the rustles of wild creatures of the night all around us.

When we finally reach the bend in the creek, and an old shack stands on the other side held together with hope. It sways poked full of holes with the moonlight beaming through. The creek seems shallow, but the bank drops sharply. We find a makeshift bridge and tie our horses and cross. As we get close I can see a single small candle burning inside.

Thanatos slides by me and enters. "Old man, we seek your help. We have coin."

A tired, drunken slur rolls up from the floor by the candle, "Keep your tools of corruption! I have no use for them."

I can see the large belly of extra years hanging from his body as he rolls to a sitting position. He holds the candle up to his face and reveals an old Enlibrite man with scars that fill the socket of his right eye, and blinking twitch in his other.

He rubs his bald head and with another twitch of his eye, reaches up and rubs the top of his left ear between

his thumb and forefinger with a rapid nervous motion. He captivates himself by humming a secret melody.

He glares with his twitching eye at Thanatos. "I don't much like the looks of your soul—dark I think."

I step forward. "My cousin is sick. They say his soul is seeded with a demon of chaos."

"Ah, the fate of the world. Soon everyone will be seeded with chaos, corruption, or death. So what's it matter? Why is your cousin more important than that? Huh?"

He burps and stringy spit falls from the corners of his mouth. He shakes his head, closes his eye, and rests his head on his own shoulder. He pops up.

"Hey, Hey, you two young guys look like, you got smoke? I make the best whiskey around. I'll trade. It's been years, you guys look like the type."

We look at each other like, what's that supposed to mean, as he continues rolling his slurred words, "I'm not sure about you, different. Rain in winter. Hard summer. Get me a toke and we'll chat about your cousin."

The Gazelle pushes through us. "We don't have time for a discussion milled over absent minded giggles. You will

smoke on the way. We will give you whatever you need, food, holy flower, tools, animals, whatever. Now let's go."

"Drought drips from the womb of wrath, queen of strife. I shall follow you, indeed. The gods have brought such beauty to my solitude."

"Good, happy to hear that." She smiles and takes his hand.

We help him stumble to the creek. His rags torn and dirty hang from his body that reeks of booze and piss. By the time we have gone the short distance to the plank bridge—we have all had enough, and without a word to each other—we dump him into the creek.

He pops up from the water. "Does the chosen one walk among you? I have seen the signs. Night in Day, a storm with sun, and where is my paintbrush? There will be no return! Do you hear the wolves? Wasn't I painting the night sky? Why am I in the water? It is said the grapes of Voorhexees curl with drought. Who are you?"

I push between Thanatos and The Gazelle. "Well, this is certainly going to be interesting."

Thanatos shakes his head. "He's useless—crazy as fuck, and a drunk, but I have some silk Shou pants in my pack for

his dirty ass—I got them for my uncle, but I don't like that fuck anyways."

The Gazelle smiles and claps her hands together. "Well, I've got some soap in my pack. He's all we've got."

The old hermit holds his hands toward the night sky. "Oranges of fire. Smoothing the world. Where is the wrath of Vashanka? Dried corn popping. Holding hands. Strawberries. Cut the fields. Pave the road. Krozious calls for you to wipe the veil of deception from his church!"

The Gazelle throws the soap and knocks him in the head. "Wash! Understand! Wash!"

He looks frightened, puzzled, and lucid, as he begins to wash himself. He continues to lather as he begins to circle in the creek and his eye floats back to oblivion. "Shhhh. Listen to the wind through the trees. Fera's song of order. Krozious forces her to feed man, to suckle him at her breast. A bitch of chaos forced by Krozious, tamed by man with the secrets of Vashanka. Her place left in paradise is as a whore. Blind with deception, if she is allowed to fall to Dolus, poison will rise from the sweet berry."

The long ride back to camp grows even longer with the incessant chattering of the old fool. Certainly doom awaits

us, if our hopes lie in this madman. The midmorning heat begins to swell, the locust buzz, and the muddy smell of the river blows by as we approach the area of the camp.

As we trot into sight, the transformation of our quiet camp springs into my eyes. The tents squeeze tight together and circle the brooding cloud of chaos that seeps from the canvas coop of Stennous. Stacked walls of trees lying long ways stand guard around the camp with archers posted at the corners, and a wagon covered with timber spikes, as the gate.

The Captain sees our approach and signals the gate to roll open. As we enter, an exhausted Staufan slowly steps from Stennous' tent. He perks up a bit when he sees us enter, until he sees what we have brought him. The old hermit is quite the sight in the puffy, red silk pants with no shirt, and his belly bouncing against the Gazelle. His wild hair and beard flows to the sides, his one blue eye blinks and darts with nervous action, and a gold sun necklace now hangs around his neck.

He begins his mad dribble the moment we enter, "Your god, my god, his god, her god, Shou god, Rankan god, savage god or not, order versus chaos. The power of all the gods of order is the same, as is the power of chaos. What side

of the universe will you serve? Chaos grows in the universe every day on its own, order we must strive to feed or it will die and chaos will destroy everything. Ahhhh, it's true, bless the gods."

We dismount and walk to Staufan. As we get to the tent the old man starts to laugh a squeaking mad laugh, and shoulder rolls in the dirt.

"Drink, I need a drink."

The Priest of War eyes narrow, his teeth and fist clinch, and a stance of battle overtakes him. The gravelly roar of Staufan's thunder peels sideways, "What is this? We might as well go slice Stennous' throat and fight the demon. Are you fuckin' kidding me?"

Thanatos takes his posture of rhetoric. "They say he's the best."

Staufan's head falls into his hands. "He's rolling in the fuckin' dirt, friend. He can't do this, even if once he was the best. Look at him, his mind is polluted with demons."

The old man pops up in Staufan's face. "On the contrary, Wrath of Krozious, my mind is filled with the truth."

He laughs his mad laugh, dances, and hops in front of Staufan. "Father of Wrath, fertilizer of the womb of drought, you know not what you've done. I can squeeze demons in my hands. Command my powers where you may."

"A raving madman, a true madman! You aren't even going in the tent my friend."

"My place is here now. I know you. If I can chase the demon back to the Realm of No Order you will listen to my madness, and take me with you."

"You told him where we are going?" Staufan looks around at us.

"Nobody told him shit." Thanatos points at the hermit.

I raise a brow to Staufan. "How can he make it worse?"

"I don't need anyone to tell me your plans. I know everything, even more than you! Drink! Where is my drink? Then I will kick the demon."

Staufan shakes his head. "I guess he can't. Stennous is your family." He turns to the old man. "You got one chance, and then we'll let strife decide."

The old man dances about giggling, as the Captain hands him his flask. "The beginning of the cleanse, yes, we must

bring him out here in the sun. The one with the dark soul, and the one that is lost, that pulled me from the blinding hole of Fera, we have not much to lose with them. They will help us bring him to the sun." He drinks.

Thanatos and I look at each other faces of distaste and oppression.

"Take the mother of drought from here." He points to the Gazzelle. "She is with the child born of rage, take her from here, the demon will attack her womb."

Staufan almost sways with a puzzled look raising his brow. He waves to the Captain. The Gazelle turns and marches toward the wagon gate. "No one walks me anywhere."

Staufan steps back into the opening of the tent, and waves us his way. "This is something you have never seen. He has progressed beyond foaming at the mouth."

We enter the tent. As I cross over the threshold, I feel as if I slip into another world. No light can be seen around the edges, and not past a finger of distance of the door. The canvas dome lays empty but the floor hops with toads, and water drips from the ceiling. Stennous floats over the muddy floor bent backwards. His skin, drained of color, glows in the darkness.

I think of the horse, the beast of Fera, and how the cloud of fear twisted me like a baby left in the dark with no mother. Green light flashes through the tent.

"You each grab an arm. I will take his legs. There will be a great fight. He is bound to another realm—this won't be easy to break." Staufan motions us into position.

A voice that pulls the fear from a knot in my chest into the bumps on my skin slices through the air from what was my cousin, "The old healer, your old tricks will not work this time, Haezak. You are weak, frail with worry, eaten with doom, pickled with drink. The Father of Wrath stands more chance than you."

The old priest calmly takes his necklace off, holding the sun outstretched in his right hand, and walking toward what was Stennous. "I see you remember my name, now we'll search to find yours. Hold on to him and pull toward the light."

I do as I'm told without hesitation, but he does not move. We all pull together, but nothing. Haezak chants something over and over, over and over. I begin to hear the words even though I do not understand what he says. "*Dico*

enim ad tenebras, daemonem in regnum redire nullum ordinem."

"Murders, thieves, users, you bring darkness to remove me from darkness. Fool. I am a king of my kind."

"Dico enim ad tenebras, daemonem in regnum redire nullum ordinem. E lucis ostensor meum nomen daemonis, ut eicerent illum, et non ad hoc regnum. Dico enim ad tenebras, daemonem in regnum redire nullum ordinem..." The words send Haezak into a trance as they ring over and over, faster and faster, louder and louder. He places the sun symbol on the forehead of the possessed Stennous.

The demon throws me from his arm. As I pick myself up I see Thanatos lying in the mud with me. Staufan holds strong to the twisting demon's legs, as Haezak straddles across his body never breaking his cadence of the chant.

I grab his flailing arm. Haezak presses the sun symbol hard onto the demon. Smoke rises, as the sizzle of burning flesh pops from his forehead. We move a step to the door! His body lowers a foot! The demon cries out with a deep scream of another realm. Spit flies from the screaming Haezak, as his chant only grows stronger and louder.

The demon yells something in the language of Haezak's chant. I don't understand the words, but it sounds and feels like a curse. The old priest changes the words in his chant without a pause, and with the new words screams even louder.

"Tempestate rebus ad daemonem non iubeo ut chaos!"

The shell of Stennous flops, bucks, twists, and drops to the mud. Green lights swirls through the darkness with the wind of sea storm, and the toads jump at our feet. A scream from nowhere fills my head as we begin to pull toward outside. The old man rides my possessed cousin like a boy in a cart, never breaking his trance. The force of the wind pushes us back and screams spin around us, but we inch forward pulling his beaten body through the mud.

As Staufan pulls Stennous' feet into the break of daylight, the demon pulls Stennous' body to sit up. Haezak falls from position, ends his trance, and drops the sun symbol into the shallow mire. I feel something grab me and pull me back into the darkness.

I reach to pull the hands from me, but nothing is there. I skid in the mud on the other side of the tent. It seems

like I'm leagues away or watching a dream. I can see the light from outside surrounding Staufan's wide frame.

He holds strong to the legs of Stennous as the chaos tries to pull him back into the void. Staufan and the light disappear. The face of Stennous twist into a void. I see the demon. Haezak struggles to stand face-to-face with the chaos. He pushed up and holds the sun symbol up and speaks his words.

"Tempestate rebus ad daemonem non iubeo ut chaos!"

The demon flinches, turns away, and cowers just a bit. I leap forward, lower my shoulder, and run for the light trying to carry the chaos with me. I expect to hit a wall, but we fly through the flap into the midmorning sun.

I look down and the confused, beaten, frail face of Stennous has returned. Thanatos sways out of the tent, shaking his head. Haezak strolls outside, taking a swig from the Captain's canteen, and walks up to Staufan.

"You think the battle lies in the realm of men. Pawns of the Gods. Found naked in the rain, an orphan of the Priests' of Strife. I know who you are, better than yourself!"

He drinks again. "Now hear this, reaping and raping the wrath has been born. When Dolus ran from Vashanka and escaped the chamber of Krozious, he built a ladder of stars, through the realm of men to the gate of the Realm of No Order. Through this ladder he corrupts the church, blinds Krozious, and twists the hearts of men. There is no Order of High Ascension. Only those that bind chaos through the realms."

He wipes his lip, and takes a gulp. "The Order of High Ascension worships the ladder. They are priests of Dolus, not Krozious, but they run the church through the ladder, through the corruption of deception, have since this empire was born. The Gods need us, as we need them. It is a battle on all realms Minister of War. And we are all bound now."

He spins in a circle, raising his hands in the air, and screams for the whole camp, "Witches, demons, and priests of dark magic await us! They know we have come. They will be ready! Will you?"

He leans back to Staufan. "If the Gateway to the Ladder of Dolus is opened the Army of Dolus and Fera will pound upon the world hunting man. What few men remain will be chased under the world. Man no longer able to pray to Krozious and the ladder of Dolus strong through the realms,

Krozious will be weak enough to destroy, a wave of darkness will fall over everything bringing a dark winter that never ends—starving man, bringing war with no victor or honor, cannibalism, incest, turning man into beast, unleashing the hordes of Hell upon us all.”

The gate rolls open and three of the Voorhexian knights and Sed enter on foot. “They wait for us at the border, stationed every thousand paces, hundreds of them.”

Staufan looks around at us all. “Well then, our best chance is to ride straight to them.”

Chapter 8: Into Our Hands/ Gold Weighs Heavier than Virtue

We break camp leaving the safety of the temporary fort. I watch as the Voorhexian knights strap Stennous into a suit of their well-worn, blue painted, plate-armor. They smear soot from the bottom of a kettle on his hair and dirt on his face. They put him into the saddle and form around him.

I hear the call, "Mount up! Colors!"

Blue Voorhexian flags, sewn with a white stallion rising behind a black shield marked with a triangle of grape clusters, fly over us.

A gasp of air knots in my throat, my mouth sticky and dry. As I watch the flags wave in the wind, I wonder is the stallion that haunts my dreams a warning, a premonition of my life north, a guide to the stone, or just a vision of my mind?

All I know now, is it came to me the night of the job in the temple, ever since we started chasing this diamond. And now my life has raveled into an inescapable web of politics, death, nightmares, fear, and the ever-growing realization that magic, dark magic exists. And certainly

now we march straight into eyes of Dolus and Fera, straight into the hands of those that we hoped so much to avoid.

The screeching voice of a man trying to sound like a woman rings, "Hello." The polished oak door to the coach flies open and Thanatos appears dressed in black velvet clothes of a noble.

"We thought it would look bad if Stennous didn't have his boy, and besides, at this point if it comes down to the shit I just assume to be standing back-to-back with you than anyone."

The sight of Thanatos wrapped in the clothes of a noble and the idea of him prancing about, playing the part of Stennous' lover, forces loud rolling laughter from deep inside my belly and gives me comfort in my own charade.

Sed, Staufan, the Gazelle, and Haezak ride to the front. The Captain and knights surround Stennous and his boy lover behind us. Thanatos steps-in and the carriage creaks, pops, and jerks into motion, back north, onto the cobbled road grooved with wear.

The familiar sounds of clomping hooves, the clanking of swords, shields, and armor fills the background. I hear the Captain spit through his puffy brown beard to the

knights around us, "Make this look real boys. Standard formation."

Thanatos pulls our elk bone friend from his pouch and strikes the flint, lighting the lantern oil in his steel torch-box. The puffs of sweet skunky giddiness roll from the carriage and ease the weight on my shoulders.

The rambling-cackle of Haezak fades through into the cabin. "The Queens' castle lies just south of a large valley, hum, ah, where they say the wind won't blow, stinky cheese, the rain won't fall, paint the trees, ppppppppppaaa, and they only speak in whispers of the Queens, elbows and knees. Hum, uh, ah, They say they feed the chaos. Bees. It eats right from their hands. And you can't sleep or soul your will leave with your dreams, and you'll be frozen where you lay. But now we come for you. Drought drips from the Womb of Wrath! Hee-hee-ah-ha-ha!"

We chuckle at the constant riddle that pours from Haezak's lips. I raise my brow. "Did that crazy fuck just say something about stinky cheese?"

Thanatos quickly pulls from the chuckling with a look of deadly seriousness. "What if half of what he says is the truth?"

He pauses and a chilling air seems to be about him, much like the night in the temple and in *Formasita's*. "I'm just fuckin' with you."

He rolls back holding his belly. "You should have seen the look on your face."

"I think your right. I think half of what he says is the truth, maybe more. Staufan seems to believe him. And at this point between those two we've seen plenty to lead us to think these witches are real."

"Oh, the witches are real my friend. That I've never doubted. I've heard stories of them since I was teenager. I mean the Ladder of Dolus, and all that end of the world crap is just a crazy, old-fuck rambling."

"What do you mean, they're real."

"I mean, when I was a boy they raised statues of the three Queens all over the kingdom. So, they exist. I don't know about being witches. But to think we are saving the gods or helping in some fight? Nonsense, if they gods do exist than they would rule supreme. Why would poor thieves have anything to do with it?"

"Then why is chasing this diamond so important?"

"It's a giant diamond, dummy. It's worth more coin than we can all carry. And you heard Sed, delivering the documents is just as important. So, it's about winning the war, not saving the world. And getting the diamond has always been about the money. Why are you believing this shit?"

"Maybe, I guess. And at his point I'm in this deep enough, but how is it that priests and witches control the magic, if the gods aren't real? And if the gods are real, then why wouldn't the stories be real? And we just saw my cousin possessed by demon with the toads and all that. And I fought the rat-boy. He was fucking real man. How can you just ignore what we've seen?"

"Exactly, we saw something. How do you know it was a demon? Maybe it was an illusion. Maybe the rat-boy was just some weird, deformed animal. Who knows where it all comes from? When a god stands before me, or when I stand before the gods. I'll know they're real."

My desires for life to be a constant drunken pussy-chase without responsibility began to fade the night in the library, then my mother, sister, and brother were murdered, and now the fate of many rests heavy on my lies. That weight, the death that follows me has put a burden on me.

"Ha, when the gods stand before you. That will be too late."

Thanatos shakes his head at me. "Maybe the stone changes men to beasts because of what it is. A force that radiates from it because of what it's made of. Maybe it's of the stars? I don't know. I just don't believe.

Every time we talk about this shit, something fucked-up happens. And it's like a big fuckin' circle this conversation about shit we really don't understand."

"Fuck it, never mind, and you are the one that brought it up. And I don't think it matters what conversation we have things are definitely about to be all fucked-up."

As we roll through the fields of billowing cotton my thoughts fade to the image of Jaulita's naked body, the looks of pleasure on her face, and the taste of her musk. The scenery just continues to blur along—the same—different—it doesn't matter it just rolls like the sea.

We approach Varisvaaria. I see the scattered troops along the border clump together to greet our path. They clog the molded, worn, cobbled road, spilling into the ditches and standing thirty or forty deep. In front of them stands a roadside sign that reads,

Kingdom of Varisvaaria

Clay-face Don't Let the Sun Go Down on You

Free Prairie Monkeys must have their papers!

The Varisvaarian soldiers stand clad in grey leggings with scattered plates of black steel. Green sleeves flow from their shined scale-mail, and their flags and shields display a gray Tree of Fera in a red field with three black crows perched upon the tree. Their numbers seem to grow. There are hundreds of them, maybe over a thousand.

The stallion, the three crows that buzzed our path, these Queens are witches. Our fate dangles in a realm which before I never imaged to exist. What will become of all of us? These thoughts circle me, but with no fear. I have no time for emotion.

Thanatos peers out the window. "I always forget how much I hate this place, until I'm back."

What a pair me make, sons of a slaves, riding like nobles. If we pull this off they should raise statues to us in the Pit with plaques that read—*The greatest bamboozlers to ever live.*

Our ragged group clusters to a halt. Sed, Staufan, and the Captain ride toward the wall of soldiers. An old grey-

bearded officer splits the group and rides out to meet them. The short conversation ends, and Sed and Staufan return with almost laughing smiles on their faces, as if they have ridden into our hands.

Staufan growls his orders, "We ride to the Queens' castle."

I slap Thanatos on the knee. "Well, here we go."

"Not exactly, it will take two days from here to get to Varisvaaria City."

The polished army surrounds us, shrinking our group together with their numbers.

"Two days, huh. How close are we to where you grew up?"

"Two days."

His fists are clinched. The veins in his neck pump with tension. A somber face I have never seen him wear before pulls his eyes from their darkness.

Thanatos turns to me and through his shortness of breath says, "It was just me, my mama, and grandma. We lived in a shack on a plantation not far from the city. I used to always ask my mama why people wanted us to be

slaves. She could never answer. We just hid, kneeled, kept our eyes on the ground.

The master would rape my mother every few nights. We never knew when he was coming. He would just appear and treat us like fuckin' property. Do you know what it feels like to be someone's property? Did I mention—I fuckin' hate this place?" He spits out the window of the coach.

"Ya, you did," I answer.

"So I'm a half-breed like you, shit on by both Enlibrite and Ilsigg. There was no favor for being the master's son. When my mother got to old he sold her to the Queens' kitchen. I slit his throat in the middle of the night not soon after that, and never turned back. I moved to the border up by Sallidon years ago, but now in three moons I've been through here twice. I can never shake the hate from my brow." He punches the wall of the coach so hard it sways.

As we continue to roll through the day, our thick escort only allows slight glimpses of large, ornate, limestone and timber manors resting in fields of white fluffy clouds on short brown sticks, lined in order, stiff in the wind, waiting to be plucked.

We break for camp on the west side of the road in a small cut surrounded by a forest of green pine and black oak. The cut lies in a shallow valley, worn down with use, and the short grass stands green from rain.

We set-up our small force on the north end of the cut near the road. Our canvass domes pop up quickly. Our captor's guards post around the camp and on the road. Bird's songs fill the air.

The Ilsigg slaves set-up about thirty weathered tents, making the small army's camp directly south of us with the commanders' red tents backed-up to the woods at the far south end. The smell of the deep forest has a stinging tinge of vinegar and bird shit, so different than the muddy smell of shit in the swamp.

I have never seen a slave before. Rags hand on them for clothes and their skin leathered with the sun and scars. Pushed down, put-upon, second-class, yeah I've been all of that, but to see men that look like my cousins strapped in chains and kicked like dogs raises a deeper desire to start this war. A broken sense of hopelessness covers their faces. I can hardly look at them. My guilt pulls my eyes to the ground and I shake my head in shame. But I must hide my face and play my role.

Lorick's Cloak of The Night covers the sky and brings the cricket's song to life. The campfires crackle all around us. The smell of heavy smoke flashes the sights of fire, Stav's home, my parent's apartment, and the charred body of my sister through my eyes.

I slide back into my princely, canvass dome where we battled the demon this morning just fifteen leagues south of here. Squires assemble the bed and tables. Thanatos rests on a bed of pillows drinking rum with a plate of beans, rice, and tortillas at his feet. The wind snaps the tent like a sail on a ship.

Sed and Staufan enter with conviction in their steps. Sed waves his finger back and forth at Thanatos. "The time has come for you to earn your coin."

Thanatos giggles his rum through his nose. "Ah, fuck! You mean, it's time to add to the tab? What is it now? You want us to sneak over and kill their captains?"

Sed raises his brow. "No, your specialty, please. Their General should have a plot of their troop placements, movements, and supply lines. We just left him." Sed turns to me. "He wants to see you. I suppose you can bring your boy here along and he can get a layout of the place."

I lean in. "I'll go with him tonight as well."

"No, we need to make sure you make it with us to go before the Queens, while we keep Stennous hidden safely."

"Alright. I understand." To cover the lie that falls from my mouth I shake my head with a smile on my face in the most reassuring way.

Thanatos raises his mug. "We'll meet you over, and tonight I'll leave after sleep falls on the camp."

The flap of the tent snaps open and catches in a gust, as the two huge men march back toward the General's tent.

When they get far enough away Thanatos looks at me. "Your coming, right."

I throw my hands up. "I can't say no to a chance to parade in the darkness. It is what we do."

He chuckles with a mischievous tone. "I knew I could count on you—and they'll never expect us, the prince and his lover. But he's right you'll need to be careful, we'll have to plan this well."

"Are you ready to be my boy?"

"No, but let's do this."

We hold hands and saunter to our target. His swordsman calluses scrape in my palm. I begin to swing our clutched grip, and whistle the trade song of paying taxes, *Acquiescence*.

Thanatos tilts his head down at me. "I think you're enjoying this too much."

"In your dreams. If I was a cocksucker, I could do better than you. Just making it convincing. We got one shot at all of this. And don't shake anybody's hand."

We study the camp as we cross, point out our path, and throw signals to each other. I brush my nose on the left side and rub a circle through my hair, pretending to scratch my head, telling Thanatos that we will go around through the woods. He rubs his right cheek to agree.

A light fog of yellow light fills the General's modest-sized tent. A small hammock swings on one side, and a large desk, a trunk, and a table with clay washing bowls rest on the other. Between the large silhouettes of my friends I can see the General's green sleeves. He sits at the desk with brown shadows hiding the details of his face. Thanatos stays at the entrance.

I sit across from him between Sed and Staufan. As he leans forward the thin, tired face of an old man appears. His gray-white hair parts from the left side of his head, and wings-out on the sides. A chest-long salt-and-pepper beard hides the details of his mouth. His brown eyes poke at me from under black brows, and his cheeks curl up with a smile as he extends his hand.

"Prince Stennous Voorhexees, It's an honor to shake your hand, again."

Fuck! Did he just say again? I do my best to sound like Stennous and cast my voice in an effeminate nature.

"And you General."

"It looks as if the southern rays of Krozious have touched your skin."

"Yes, my hide has been tanned by these travels."

"You have filled-out your frame, as well."

"I have been unable in ride in the city. So I've been sharpening my sword skills with the Prince of Sallidon." I pat Sed on the back.

The General turns to Sed with a snickering look of innuendo in his eyes that causes Sed to say, "Swords of steel, General."

"Refresh my memory, General. When was the last time I saw you?"

He raises his left brow, stands-up, and twists his face into a look of suspicion. "This time last year, right before your father exiled me from Voorhexees, and you have changed so much. I wonder why you are asking me this? Are you trying to humiliate me?"

Oh, fuck!

A quick lie leaks from my mouth, "No, I was just wondering . . . "

The General interrupts me, "How I got here? Yes, I suppose seeing my face here is a surprise to you. Your father's decision to remove me from the Legion left me a hollow man. So, I became what I was named to be, and found my home forwarding the cause of the Emperor, leading the Queens' army."

He paces behind the desk and continues. "And what of you? How have you become so different?"

"The throne of Voorhexees will need an heir. Before my father dies . . ."

"So, your father's pressures to take a wife are finally making you a man?"

"If one must compete, then one must win, General. I do not intend for my stock to rise from some hag."

"Fair Enough." He raises his brow and walks from around the desk. "If I didn't know your face—I wouldn't believe it to be true. Your father must be ecstatic."

"I do suppose he is General, but I gather that makes no difference to you anymore."

"We may meet on the field someday, and then I will show you no quarter. But for now I would hope I could remember you as a friend. You are to be guests of the Queens. Worry not with this." The General reaches out to hug me like an uncle.

As I embrace the General, I feel for Stennous, to be something your father is ashamed of, but more I think of the complications this will bring us. If I arise to many comments as this one, Stennous will become my enemy as well, and my father's concerns about our relatives will come true.

There's not much to this tent or this camp. I'm sure Thanatos has been able to peer all around. "It was a pleasure, General."

"Your new boy over there looks more like a bodyguard than a lover. You don't trust me anymore Stennous?"

"Absurd, General! I think the High Priest of the Black Legion would be enough—if it was a bodyguard I needed." I pat Staufan on the shoulder.

"Point taken," the General says as he looks at me with an expression of disbelief on his weathered face.

"A prince is entitled to variety General. I need my rest to fulfill the custom and go before your Queens tomorrow. I said, it was my pleasure."

"Yes indeed, if you don't mind, I would love to ride with you for awhile tomorrow?"

"I would love to chat with you. And you are our escort, so whatever suits you."

"Good, we can reminisce then."

Fantastic, of course the one thing we didn't figure. We walk back. I send a guard to fetch Stennous. Sed and Stafaun head back our way.

"I sent for Stennous, so he can tell me about this guy. How did this get left-out, looked-over? Are we just making this up as we go?"

Sed shakes his head. "A little. Would you calm down? Slip him some moonflower and he'll sleep most of the ride. Certainly Stennous can tell you enough to get you through."

Thanatos smiles. "I should use the moonflower tonight, too. I will need time while I copy the plans."

Staufan pulls from his belt-pouch a palm-sized bottle of purple powder and tosses it to Thanatos. His gravelly voice rattles, "Not too much or he'll never wake-up."

Thanatos crooks his eyes mischievously. "You know, I know."

The Captain enters with Stennous who has an exhausted and excited look on his face. The rendezvous is planned. Stennous chatters at me about the General. Thanatos pretends in front of everyone else that I'm not involved as he talks to me about his plans.

But all their words just swirl in a hazy rainclouds of incoherent letters dropping all around me, but none in my ears. It is the horse. The weight of the horse has returned. It is closer this time. Breathing on me, its red

eyes pulling fear from my nightmares. For the first time I feel it drawing me toward Voorhexees.

"Hey! Are you listening to me?" Thanatos shakes my leg. "Where's your fuckin' head, man?"

"I heard you. It's not the Emperor's Vault. It's a tent. I think once is enough?"

"Right then, I'll get pipe. You get the coffee."

After some time Stennous' boy, the prince's brass tub, and a bag of dried rose petals enter the tent as part of Thanatos' plan.

We live under Lorick's cape while everyone else finds sleep. The thick syrup the cook calls coffee rattles my knees and wrings the sweat from my palms. The white feathers sway on the bottom of the elk bone pipe as we puff rings of holy flower smoke into the Ivory Gate of Dreams.

"It's time." My black-eyed friend winks at me.

"I'm ready." The nervous-excitement of risking my life while crawling through the night forces a smile across my face. I've always loved this feeling.

We cloak in our usual black garb, and wake Stennous on the way out. He looks at me with a knowing look.

Thanatos waves to him and whispers, "Just stay here like you're suppose to and everything will be fine."

We slip out the back from under the tent and into the woods. We move fast through the darkness, north a hundred paces, and then west into the woods, then south to the other side of the camp through the woods that run behind the General's tent. The evening air sinks to the dew in the grass, and the heavy wind masks the noise of the sticks and leaves that crunch under our feet as we run.

We lighten our steps and move silently through the blue colored night. The mumbling chatter of the sentries blends with the songs of the crickets. We step, slowly, we step. Thanatos pulls a stake with each hand from the back of the General's tent, and I roll under and through, behind the desk. I pick the lock on the chest with my double-ball, as Thanatos enters behind me.

I begin to crawl across the floor, as the chest creaks open behind me.

"Grummmgartdune. Hhmmmmmm." The General rolls in his hammock.

Thanatos gathers the information. He begins to plot the points from the General's maps with a series of

different stamps onto a small map from his pouch. But he's not paying attention to my position.

Fuck! Why didn't he wait? I kneel up from the ground and give the General his snort the size of a shaved gold crown, as instructed by my partner in the night.

"Ah, ah, ah!" he coughs loudly. Then a pure silence comes over him.

I crawl back toward the desk. I roll-up the maps as Thanatos finishes with each one. The General begins to grumble again. He coughs and gargles as if he someone squeezes his neck.

We look at each other like, "Oh shit!" and throw the maps into the chest, close it, and roll back under the tent toward the woods.

We hear the General cough loudly and scream, "Liar!"

We move fast into the woods. We hear the horns blow and the soldier scream, "Help there is something wrong with the General! Poison, it looks like poison."

We run into the woods as fast as we can west, then north to freedom. Torches poke through the tree line, and the woof of the hounds pulls our way.

"Our only hope is to out run them," gasps from my mouth as I pass Thanatos.

A mad determination fills the dog's barking as it jumps through the edge of the woods to my ears. Torches follow close behind.

"Follow me." Thanatos weaves toward the camp.

We duck under and into a slaves' tent. The tent looks as if it has been patched together from scraps. I see a few old iron buckets around the posts, and slaves sleeping on the ground, nothing else.

Thanatos speaks in Ilsigg with a Varisvaarian dialect. I can understand most of everything he says. "We bring no harm to you. Your enemies are our enemies. Hide us."

A young large muscular Ilsigg with a shaved head and long scars all over his body stands and points to us and says something that sounds so foreign I cock my head sideways and twist my brow.

The angry looking slaves move quick as they surround us. My feet fly up to the sky. I feel my clothes ripped as the thud of kicks, and the slaps of hands roll me through the grass. Then they pile on top of me, and rub their bodies on mine. Then suddenly, I find myself standing face-

to-face with Thanatos, beaten, dirty, and with our clothes reduced to rags. The slaves keep us silent with their hands over our mouths.

The bald leader peels through the group and narrows his one grey and one brown eye at us. He speaks to Thanatos in the Varivaarian dialect, "Will we hide you until the dogs sleep. Then you go."

Maybe it's the sound of the dogs that gives them empathy for our plight, or maybe hate for the white-man. Who knows how safe I will be?

The leader looks at me and speaks in Enlibrite, "You lay down in the back. The children will cover you."

I do as I'm told. It doesn't take long for the dogs and guards to make their way to the slave's tent. I lay-low.

The soldiers line up the men. "Get over here, clayfaces. On your knees! You run these dogs, you, you, and you come with us."

I hide easily in the confusion. The sounds of the soldiers move farther away. Popping-up my head, looking to find Thanatos, I don't see him. My feet glide to the tent opening. My eyes glare out across the camp. Thanatos

scurries into the woods with the slaves, the dogs, and the soldiers looking for him. My head shakes in disbelief.

The rest of the camp shuffles with chaos. I see soldiers line up my friends being disarmed in the middle of the camp. Stennous and his boy stand in as themselves. The Green sleeves ransack through our part of the camp. I chuckle to myself while waiting for Thanatos to return. They don't even know what they're looking for in my tent, and Thanatos runs the dogs that look for us. I've got to get out of here, but I have to wait.

The glass of time turns several times, the chaos in the camp calms, but Thanatos and the dogs do not return. If they find me here, they'll be no explanation. I can't wait for the cape of the night fold. I have to take this chance to get out of here, and send Stennous back to the safety of his disguise.

The most dangerous steps a thief ever takes come after the horns blow. The dogs still hunt somewhere. I must move quickly. I jump back into the woods. I make it back to the tent as the purple-blue color of Lorick's shadow fades into a light haze of baby-blue.

Thanatos will find his way back. I have to prepare for the General. I roll through the back of tent. Stennous waits awake for me. We only have one or two turns of the glass before the Varisvaarian guards pull us onto the road.

Is the General dead? Whether or not he lives, certainly, they will suspect us of the poison. Even though they didn't find anything in their search last night of our camp, they have to suspect us. What were we thinking? We should have just snuck Stennous and the documents out of here with a small escort, instead trying to get an advantage. Now, we're fucked.

I strap Stennous into the disguise of the old armor, while we discuss his encounters with the General.

"All you need to say to the General he should remember the garden." Stennous turns his back to me. I slide the thin padded armor over his head.

"What?" I shake my head, and then work the light chainmaille on to him.

"For the most part the General was good to me and my father, but when I was a boy, I would skip my fencing lessons that my father had arranged with the General's

first-sergeant. I would roam the gardens and the lazy sergeant would nap on a stool."

Stennous turns back to face me. "One day the General, upset with his soldier failing his duty, met me in the garden to discipline what he called 'the source of the problem.' He looked like a giant to me, as he tromped the flowers and knocked me to the ground."

I begin to strap the blue plates of armor onto him. "And then."

Stennous continues, "And then, my father arrived. He was angry—he wanted to know, 'What in the name of chaos was going on?' I lied for the General and told my father it was a training accident. I saved that poor fool from being exiled and dishonored then. He still owes me for that whether he realizes it or not. So, tell him, remember the garden."

In the background I can hear the Varisvaarian patrols stalking heavily through the camp. "What is the General's name?" I ask.

"Lefren, Ranford Lefern."

Stennous goes on to tell me other stories of General Lefren that have a more boring tone and come off rather

pleasant. I complete his charade by placing knight's helm over his head.

"You must go, but the patrols are almost circling this tent. I have an idea. We will wait for them to pass, and then just post guard in front, and they will send off to where you need to go. Just act as if you walked over here under command."

Stennous shakes his head in agreement. "I think that will work."

We wait, set him in place, and the stupid fucks do just as we thought. I hear them. "What are you doing here? Get back to your tent. We have the guard of your prince."

In the morning they gather us, and erase any treatment as guests. Any chance to sneak Stennous out of here with the documents has to be dead. I see no sign of Thanatos. Pushed like a prisoner into the Voorhexian coach, General Lefren waits for me inside.

He sits covered with a red velvet blanket embroidered with gold stitching and slight purple tone to skin. "Come in here, boy. I have some questions for you."

I sit. The coach begins to roll at the pace of a walk.

"Ask away General. It seems as if you have me as a captive audience."

He smiles at me. "And depending on your answers we shall see for how long and what kind of captive you shall be."

"Fair enough, then General, but still ask away. I have nothing to hide."

"On the contrary, I presume you have much to hide. First of all, who are you?"

"I am Stennous Voorhexees."

His eyes squint at me, and he shakes his head. "No, you look like Stennous, this is for sure, but you are not him. I know him to well. And you are not him."

"I am a different person than the boy you bullied in the garden for sure, but I am Stennous."

The General leans back with a slight look of shock. "Suppose you are him, then my next mystery is of course the attempt on my life." His volume rises as he speaks. His jaw clenches and spit flies from his mouth. "I told you, you would be treated as guests, as an old friend."

He begins to cough and choke a bit. He clams himself and leans back into the black leather seat. "And then you command me to be poisoned in my sleep. The most cowardice move in history."

He waves his fingers at me, as if he wants me to go away. I extend my hand to him. "General, I assure you I had nothing to do with what happened last night."

He hugs himself for warmth with the blanket, and sighs out an exhale of disbelief. "Nonsense, you had everything to do with it. Still mad from the one-time I treated you badly. Is that it? How you forget."

"General, you speak as if I put the poison upon you myself. I tell you now, on my word as a noble. I had nothing to do with this, nor did anyone in my camp. Perhaps, a traitor in your midst took an opportune time to make their attempt. Or an assassin stalking you struck from the woods. I am happy you are still alive, General. And those words would have been the first from my mouth, if you didn't begin this with accusations."

He squints at me. "HMMMM. We shall see."

He leans forward and raises his hand out the coach window. "Halt. Halt."

"I am done with you. I like this coach, and I'm sure as an old friend you don't mind me using it. And I'm sure you can understand until we get this cleared, that I would prefer to ride alone. Find you a horse, after all you are a Voorhexees."

I find myself in the comfortable company of my companions which I have not seen since Thanatos and I leap into the darkness. Fuck, I hope he's alright. I see Stennous clad in his armor riding with the knights he has know his entire life.

Sed rides up next to me. "Where are Thanatos and the maps?"

I shake my head. "Somewhere in the slave-line. And if he was smart he dropped that map in the woods, when he was out running the dogs looking for himself last night."

Staufan roars in, "What did you just say?"

I answer with a matter-of-fact tone, "Look, things got complicated. We were about to have guards on our trail. So we snuck into a slave tent, and they agreed to hide us. But when guards came to gather some slaves to help the soldiers run the dogs, they took Thanatos. I had to get out of there. I waited as long as I could. He didn't come back. I

guess he made it back, or maybe he killed the guys and is already waiting for us somewhere north."

The Captain chimes in, "Or maybe he's captured and turning on us. We're all hang for sure. My old boss Lefren will make sure of that."

The Gazelle shrugs her shoulders as she says, "Or maybe he's dead. And we're probably all going to hang anyway after last night."

Haezak's eyes roll in his head. "Look out! The sun is growing black. Black! He can never, never, never go back. Look out!

My hand goes to my forehead and pulls down my face as if I'm trying to wipe away Haezak's nonsense. "O.K. then. So what we can all agree on, is that we don't know where he is, and we're all going to die. That's fucking great."

Staufan speaks up, "I don't plan on dying at the end of a rope."

Sed smiles a wicked smile. "Nor do I."

Disbelief shakes my posture. I trot ahead, and look back and say, "We'll find out."

Through the day the uphill road north begins to rise and fall on green rolling hills and the cotton fields give way to crops of tobacco and holy flower.

As the eye of Krozious fades west our escort leads us on a downhill slant that reveals our target on the road ahead. I can see a city in a basin with limestone walls. Farms scatter all around the outside. Battalions of a large assault force scatter all around.

Lumber constructed logging flumes alongside stone aqueducts run down both sides and across the valley. They're gigantic. The length, the height, the sheer number of trees needed. I've never seen anything like it. The aqueducts run straight and steady down on their stone, bridged bases. The flumes snake and twist shooting down steep and fast. The north side, the high-side, has a stream and mills that feeds these great beasts. Sharp cuts run down both hillsides of the basin. Large timber cranes perch atop the cuts.

The giant swing-arms made of timber and ropes pull logs up the valley to the mills with their mule-powered cranks. Cut lumber flows down from the mills to one of many holding pools or the lake in the valley flats. Log drivers work on platforms above the waterways guiding the wood

along the proper forks. Workers swarm on the construction of siege engines on the banks of the lake, which runs off to join the Smuggler's River. What a sight.

All the buildings inside the city walls appear white and most of the roofs that I can see shine red and dome. An arbor intertwines through the roofline. There are as many trees as buildings here.

In the middle of the metropolis stands a castle and keep the sandy colored limestone. A large tower looms from the center of the castle. Turret-couplets guard the corners of the walls. A forest of Maple, Ash, and Oak trees sway on the other side of the valley.

We make our way down the snaking road into the depth of the basin. The small gate in the city wall main entrance awaits open for us. This is Varisvaaria City. It seems smaller, older, and more worn than the Port. I never thought that could be possible.

Long narrow buckboards of tobacco, cotton, and holy flower sit in line waiting for the tax collector. Merchants yell from storefronts. Weathered-smooth, dirty, grey-cobblestone streets barely wide enough for two horses run around flowing fountains.

Everything stacks up and tight together. The trees grow on almost every corner pushing everything even tighter. Leaves and bird shit dot the streets. The filth of the forest invades the filth of the city. But the bustling of a city is indeed a welcome sight.

I try to soak in as much as I can, and scope escape routes. But they march us straight to the keep, and with everything so compressed, the trees, it's like a maze. As we enter the courtyard our escort pushes the Voorhexian knights with Stennous and the Captain in the center of the yard into wooden barracks painted white. The Varisvaarian soldiers garrison around the holding quarters. Stables, smiths, and slaves line the edges.

They pull us from our horses. General Lefren rolls from the coach. His steps stammer as he leads the wedge of soldiers that surrounds us. He smiles at me. "Time to meet the Queens, Lord Voorhexees."

They shuffle me, the two priests, the priestess, and the Prince of Sallidon into the keep. Inside plaster covers the sandstone giving the halls a square, gleaming, smooth appearance.

The doorways arch with giant granite keystones carved with the symbol of the Ash tree stuck in there center. Everything else, candle-stands, stairs, railings, carvings of battles and of gods, all are carved of lightly oiled wood. The wall sconces stick-out carved of stone. The only metal I see, the door hinges and locks. Rugs of green dyed wool flow like fields of grass and lead us down the main hall.

We reach the towering sandstone center. Hundreds of small windows up and around pour the light of the setting sun into the large circular room. Long banners of hunter green marked in gold with the Tree of Fera, the golden ladder, or the crow of Varisvaaria, hang on the walls around us.

An ash tree, larger than any I could image existing, stands tall in the middle and dominates the room. The tree though monstrous seems shrouded with a sick darkness. The large roots, as big as a pine trees, twist into the ground.

Between us and the huge Ash stands a cherry-stained, well oiled, statue of three beautiful women holding a decapitated head by its hair, and standing on the dead body of a fat man. The old, wood-planked floor buckles with the power of the trees growth.

I realize that this room, this castle, and the Kingdom of Varisvaaria are probably built for and around this tree. Never have I seen such a presence of power. What a strange place of giant things. It strikes me with awe as it pulls my eyes toward it.

On the other side of the statue awaits our fate. I see the Queens. Their appearance pulls a smile across my face. This is what we are all worried about? Beauty surrounds them.

They sit in thrones atop a flight of stairs carved into the great tree. A large caldron smolders on a stone base in front of them. Their faces have similar shapes, somewhat triangular with high cheekbones, but one queen has dark hair and eyes, and large supple lips, another with red hair and green eyes and full lips, and the last with blonde hair and blue eyes with thin lips. They wear crowns of woven twigs, flowing emerald-green velvet dresses, and capes covered with what looks like woven leaves made of leather.

Lefron kneels and bows. "My Queens may I present to you the Prince of Sallidon, the High-Priest and Priestess of the Black Legion, a dirty beggar that calls himself a

Priest of Kroziuous, and the heir to the Kingdom of Voorhexees."

At the base of the tree stands a motley group, by which the very sight, sinks my heart. Four Arch-bishops of the Order of High Ascension clad in their black and red, wearing their golden ladders, Stilcho with two of his personal guard, and the old Ellonian tailor from the haberdashery in Port Karpricious.

The Queens glide-down from their perches. The blonde Queen calls, "Where is the other?"

The dark-haired Queen follows, "Bring forth the Prince's lover."

The red-haired Queen then says, "So he may stand trial with the others."

Then in a strange harmonic unison they all speak, "The Order of High Ascension has brought your crime against their church, the church of the Emperor, to our knowledge. By law of the Empire, as the rulers of the lands of your capture we shall cast judgment upon you."

The guards rustle Stennous' sobbing boy into our group. "I swear, I had nothing to do with these, these, liars, scoundrels, murders."

The Queens speak again in their harmony, "Are these the men that confessed to you these crimes?"

The old Elloian looks at me. "S'rry mine Lord, but gold weigheth heavi'r than virtue. And it be ye truth." He turns to the Queens and answers, "Aye, that be them."

Chapter 9: Betrayal/ To Do What Must be Done

Sed's face glows red. "This is an outrage! My passing through these lands was arranged. And the thought of you taking the word of a poor-man, hungry for a handout is completely insulting."

The Blonde Queen raises her arms to the side. "But you never arranged to travel with your conspiring, rebellious neighbor through here."

The dark-haired Queen points at Staufan. "Nor did you arrange to run through our lands a murderer of a holy-man."

The red-haired Queen points at the Gazelle. "Nor did you arrange to bring her here."

The Queens each throw something into the caldron and speak a haunting chant in harmony. The ground beneath us begins to tremble, and a screeching rumble swells quickly in our ears. The tremble builds to a shake. Haezak falls and the rest of us struggle for balance. I notice that the footings under the Queens and our accusers stay stable.

The floor erupts. Roots of the tree, like giants snakes, wind themselves into the air and around us. Offshoots the size of my arm wrap around the Gazelle,

binding her arms and legs. Walls quickly weave between us pushing us apart and away from each other.

Staufan slaps his hands together and then calls out for his axe in the same way as he did in Fomasita's. His necklace begins to glow its blue light but then dies with a simmer.

The Queens laugh. "Even your connection with your god cannot be called upon in the shroud of the Great Tree."

The sky darkens as storm clouds swarm above us, blocking the sun, and firing lightning all around the sky above us. Rains begin to pour. I guess that answers the question if they're really witches.

"The wrath and fury of your god will do you no good. Nor will it save his son. The rains are of the Goddess. They feed the tree growing the roots stronger. They fed your god's fury. The time of man is over. The beasts will soon rule again under darkness like that of The Time of the Womb, and will feed a new nature."

Staufan growls, "You know nothing of the power of my god! He will smite you with his might."

Haezak rises from the floor. His face glows red as he yells with spit flying from his mouth. "You are all fools

the darkness will consume us all. If you sleep with Dolus you must pay. There are no dealings that are not a lie. You will bring the end to all of us."

The Queens answer in unison, "Those of us that follow will rule with our goddess in the realm of the gods."

Haezak spits back, "You are all blinded by the deceiver, and will be cast down into the underworld with the rest of us. How will you flourish without the day?"

"Old fool, you know nothing. It is you that is blinded. Life, death, all that is, is our goddess. She is the world and will live in all states. It will be her vengeance, her power, her destruction that lives on when all else is consumed. When the mountains shake, fire pours from the earth, the winds of storms, even your god's power, it is her that controls all things. Your gods are but puppets to the great power of her nature. The Time of the Womb shall return. Take them away."

Guards pour into the room and surround us. Sed speaks up, "You have mentioned that the priest and I have legal passage through here. And it is only the Lord Vorhexees that has confessed to the crimes of murder to this beggar you call a witness. So you have no reason to hold me or any

of these holy people. Release us and our party and keep the Lord Vorhexees for your trial."

The brunette Queen turns to Stilcho. "Will this settle your debt?"

He nods in agreement. "With the unstamped gold you promised."

I can't believe I am listening to my life being bartered. The only friends I thought I have use my existence to save their own. The rain falls heavier. The betrayal hits me in my guts, heavy and hard. My face flushes. My heart jumps to my throat. The thunder crashes. If I weren't shackled I would try my luck with all of them.

"I killed no one!" I scream, as I feel the tears well in my eyes. "Why? Why are you doing this? Was this your plan all along to use me as fodder for these witches, for the fucking demons? To set me up to poison the General? Is that . . ."

The blonde Queen thrusts her voice our way, "Enough, we expected there to be no honor among thieves, liars, and murders. We will accept the life of Lord Vorhexees for the payment of the priests of Krozious that were taken in Port Karpricious."

The red-headed Queen then follows, "But the priestess will remain as a prisoner of the Great Tree to insure that you ride from this place and do not return for the stone."

The Queens speak in unison, "We know what draws you. Leave the heir of Vorhexees to pay for your crimes against the church, and the priestess for assurance that you will not follow the stone, or we will pluck from her the seed and feed it to the beasts of the night."

The Gazelle screams out, "Leave me. Leave here and fight another day. Do what has to be done."

Vashanka's blue electric light that I have seen and felt many times now, flows between them, between all of us, not our captors, but me, Sed, the Gazelle, and Staufan. But yet, Sed just proposed my life for his freedom. What of this light? I don't feel anything. The light fades fast.

Staufan smiles. "The power of my god is greater than you think."

Sed looks at me and then to the Queens. "We accept your offer."

I cry-out, "I do not fucking accept your offer."

"The arch-bishop in the middle speaks, "You have confessed to the crime. You have no rights or voice."

"I'm a fucking prince and you have heard no confession from me. You have the hearsay of a confession. I refuse to accept these proceeding on any terms—including that this is any sort of real trial. This will bring war to these lands faster than you all are ready for. I have seen your troops, defenses, and sieges-engines. You are not ready, great Queens. You know it. And I know it."

"Then we will hear your confession first hand. Take him to the inquisitor. He speaks lies my Queens. The Empire is ready to crush this rebellion," the arch-bishop refutes.

"Then where is their presence. You have only what nature provides. The Empire sends you only promises. I don't see any of the Empire's red crosses hanging on your banners. It will take the blood of men to win this fight. You are not ready. You need me, alive. If you want any hope of negotiations, I am a commodity with the greatest value."

Stilcho grabs his belly and chuckles. "This is no prince. He is a Voorhexees, yes—but no prince. I have known him for years. His death will send the right message to the right people."

"I don't know what this pig is talking about!" I scream.

General Lefron speaks up, "His identity is not in question, Lord Stilcho. I vouch for the boy. And I would know better than any. I need to mention that an atemp on my life occurred just last evening. I suspect lord Vorhexess to be behind this crime as well."

The Queens pierce the room in unison with a shrill that blasts through my ears, "The blood of beasts will win our war. The Goddess' vengeance will lead us. There will no terms and no quarter." The shrill tames back to the slithering, haunting, beautiful harmony. Their voices start to call to me. "But the time is not now. Take him to the inquisitor. He will have many uses. And nail his lover to the Pondering Tree. Perhaps, he will find his memory there."

They force me into shackles and to leave the hall through the other side from where we came, as they drag Stennous' boy out the way we came. He screams and cries for mercy, "Noooooooooooooooooooo, please, aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhh." Sobbing, he claws at the floor as they pull him to his doom.

The root walls around Haezak, Sed, and Staufan snake back into the ground. The thunder and lightning dance above us, and the rain of another god that cares not for me rolls down the Great Tree. I turn to my next ex-friends in disgust and spit on the floor as they walk me down beneath the earth.

Betrayal. I can't believe this. This was their plan all along. How could I not know? All fishermen know that the bait gets eaten. I punish myself with the thoughts of what a fucking idiot I am.

I must count the steps and doorways as we shuffle down the cracked, stone stairs. Giant roots of the Great Tree spiral the down the sides of the tunneled stairwell. Torches burning a pure red, simmering, magic-like flame dimly light the path. A sticky moisture hangs in the air of the narrow, dirt space.

Why did they do this? Of all the times I have brushed with death, this seems the most hopeless. I am totally abandoned. I cannot panic, feel, or do anything but think. To have any chance I must think, and to look for an escape every moment until I'm free.

As we plunge deeper my forced hope begins to sink with every step. I will have to see my final destination to devise my plan. At the twisting step 109 and door six we take a right and enter a shorter hallway. The corridor sits with four doors on each side. Looking for daylight will waste my time. The door lock looks easy enough.

When I look at the guards that walk me to my demise, I can see they wear the uniform of a typical Varisvaarian soldiers, but they remain faceless to me. Who they are, where they came from matters not, their faces matter not to me, only their death.

My end comes here? A fucking stone hole sunk in the damned dirt. I have some time to make a plan. Hopefully, I talked my way into that.

My faceless oppressors push me into a small, stone, dome-shaped room that lightly shimmers with the unnatural red light of the torches. In the middle of the room stands a shadowed cross. One guard prods me forward as the other one pulls me by my shackles to the center.

They lock in my right-side, unlocked the middle, and then shackle my left-side to the beaten, bloodied,

splintering cross. The shackles should be easy enough to pick open, but the chains fit too tight.

"So, they say this one likes todgers. A noble class peter-puffer this one he is," the guard pops off in his northern accent.

As the other one nods and replies, "Oh, ya."

The first guard smiles. "Ya, maybe we should have chained him to the cross arse out. But you'd like that too much I suppose." He grabs my face by then chin and licks me across the cheek. He slides his other hand between my ass and the cross and grabs a handful.

"Oh, yes I like this. You definitely got some bussy down here." He laughs. "Come on, grab you some of this boy-pussy." He nods to the other guard.

The second guard slides his hand to grab the other cheek. "Oh ya, He likes that."

I stand still with no reaction. They do not deserve the satisfaction. But I cannot remain silent. "I am a prince. . ."

The guard interrupts me. "You are a fucking dead-man. What happens to you and your little bussy will never leave this room."

"I'm sure I wouldn't even be able to feel your tiny pecker, stupid little man."

He struggles to pull aside his uniform and remove his cock from his pants.

I laugh loudly. "Is that is? What are you going to do with that thing? Bait a hook?"

The door slams open and a fatter, older, faceless guard enters. "Boys, the Inquisitor has made his arrival. What in the dwarves' hill are you doing? Pull your fucking pants up, watchman! Well go fetch the bloody torture maestro."

As he pulls up his pants, the guard winks at me. "I'll be back for you, sweet arse."

The guards gather the glowing torches and leave me alone in the darkness. Water drips somewhere in the room. I try to adjust my eyes to the darkness, but it is useless. I can see nothing. A damp musty odor fills the air.

The drops plop. I try to move but the chains fit snug against the cross. Hours pass with nothing but the drips. My shoulders and feet, stuck in position, burn.

The plopping shatters with screams through the darkness. I can feel them, feel their pain. Again more screams, louder, with more agony. The screams curl my fingers and toes. Such misery awaits me. Nightmares, visions of pain and death flash through my mind. I can feel the heartbeat of the horse. I can feel it running. Fire, I can feel fire.

An endless sea of grass opens in front of me. Wind rushes through my ears and my hair flows back. My heart pounding as the landscape rushes by me.

The thumps in my chest, the warm lathering tingle of muscles working, and the burning friction of my feet pounding the ground consumes me as the landscape disappears. Everything slips into a void but the run, the friction, the fire.

Hooves gallop. Fire scorches the ground. Nostrils flare. The landscape reappears on both sides of me. The open sky shimmers with the starlit violet-blue of the

night. The run flows through me. The grass ahead invitingly sways to me. The fire pulls me forward.

The nearby screams of suffering pull me back to the black chamber under the dirt. I can hear steps, the clanking of chains or heavy keys, talking. Does the inquisitor come my way? Or does the guard return for a piece of my ass. I've got to find a way to get out of these shackles. They're so tight.

The keys rustle in the lock. I hear the actuators click three times, huh, a simple rim lock. Red light glows through the door. The silhouettes of two guards enter. The flicker of a natural flame follows them. A tall thin cloaked figure passes through the door. Thanatos?

Bless the gods. My only friend in the world just walked-in. I will live. I should contain myself. I start to laugh.

The slapping smack of an iron glove blisters across my face. "What the fuck you laughin' at, arse boy?" the perverted faceless guard says.

"You're a walking dead-man." I spit in his direction.

Another smack, pounds across my cheek. "That's what I said to your boyfriend. Right before I shoved his balls in

his mouth and choked him to fuckin' death. I can't wait 'til the cut-master gets done with you. I'm going to rape your ass over and over. Then kill you slowly."

I look at Thanatos. "Do you see what I've been dealing with?"

Thanatos barks at the guards, "Back away from my prisoner."

The guards cower back and then gather themselves at attention on either sides of the cross. I smile as Thanatos waves the torch in my face. I squint through the bright flame and see my friend covered in blood as he drops his cloak to the ground with a quick flutter that pushes the flame to one side of the torch.

"It looks as if he is relieved to see me." Thanatos looks at the guards. "Maybe he's not as much of a cock lover as they say?"

A cold stare of death builds up my friends face like a stone wall. "I wouldn't be so happy if I was you. This isn't going to turn out like you think."

He hands the torch to the guard on his left and plucks a knife from his belt. "You see my friend someone has to do the realm's dirty work. The Order of Knowledge is the

highest calling, and its necessities are always the first order of duties."

This must be a joke. Maybe he thinks it's funny. Thanatos quickly slices me across the chest. The razor sharp blade cuts without much pressure. The burning sting of a slice hits me. "What the fuck? Are you serious?"

This has gone too far. He waves the blade in my face.

"The problem with you is you've always thought you were the only one that could tell your own story. Do you think this war will end without you? Do you think the poem, songs, or tales will even mention you? Perhaps, they will. Perhaps they will tell of your death here today."

I spit at him. "You fuck. Really, everyone is fucking me over today? I almost expected it from those other fucks, but you too?"

Thanatos laughs. "You are a fool. I am darkness. Who do you think I am? I am trained to kill, maim, and torture. I am all of what goes creeping through the darkness. But don't worry as a chronicler of knowledge—I will finish telling your story."

Curse the gods, curse everything. Why tease me with one last bit of hope before sticking me with the final

dagger of betrayal. He's right. He's a ruthless, torturing killer for hire. Why would I think he was anything else?

The sting of hopelessness wrenches my guts and tightens my throat. "Just fucking do it would you. Please get it over with. I am tired of this world. Please send me on to the next. There is nothing but torture for me here." I can feel the betrayal squeezing the tears out of the corner of my eyes.

Thanatos shifts his eyes at me. "Are you crying? That's one I could never do. Tell me old friend, did you find a good way out of here? Did you count steps, look for light, water, check you're the locks for picking, all the normal tricks for escaping? Well, did you?"

"Of course I did."

"And what did you find?"

"Nothing to help me," I say with disappointment.

Thanatos smirks at me as he had done some many times. "Well that's too bad."

The knife still fresh with my blood whooshes past me and deep into the guard's eye to my left. The accuracy of

the strike drops him. Thanatos takes his time as the second guard drops the torch and fumbles for his sword.

The cut-master, a fitting name for my friend, moves slowly, precisely, draws another dagger from his belt, and opens the fumbling fool's throat with a slash so fast I can only hear it in the poor light.

The faceless foe gurgles his blood and mouths a silent scream. He slumps to his knees trying to hold back the rush of life pouring from him. The look of pain, shock, and fear on his face satisfies me.

"Did you have to cut me, man? I mean, that was a little much don't you think?"

"You spit at me."

"You cut me first!"

"You're right. Sorry, I guess that was too much. I was in the moment."

Thanatos looks up at me as he pulls the keys from the body on the floor. "Acting, I missed my calling don't you think. I could have been a star on the stage—performing for kings' courts, maybe even the Emperor, traveling the Empire tasting its wines and whores."

As he unlocks me from the cross he says, "You were awesome too, with the tears and all that. We could be a traveling troop."

I shake my head. "I think that's all your dream my friend. Not really my thing."

He smirks. "What about, 'Kill me now, take me from this world' and all of that?"

I shoot him a dirty look as we pull the swords from the carcasses.

He chuckles. "Wait a minute, you didn't think I was for real, did you?"

"It's been a long day. And everyone else betrayed me. I just need to go back home. I can kill Stilcho."

"First, we need to get out of here my friend. And look there's something you need to know about everyone else. .
."

I hear the door leading into this hallway open and close. We both stop all movement and conversation. We look at each other.

I wrestle the dagger from the guard's eye, and say slightly hushed, "I hope there's not too many of them."

I hear the rustles and clanks of a patrol near the cell.

I point to the door. "A patrol."

Thanatos grins and his eyes come to life. "Hostages."

I wave my hands. "No way."

He raises his sword. "Well then, we'll do it your way and kill them all."

Thud! Thud! Thud! The door rattles.

I smile big and whisper. "Meet them in the hall. Go act."

The door pounds with knocks again.

I give my best blood-curdling scream, and then quickly whisper, "Go. At least you can find out how many there are."

He nods and moves quickly to the door and opens it. He sets his sword against the doorframe and steps outside. Thanatos pulls the door shut. "He is almost ready to have the Queens hear his confession. Please, go and retrieve them."

I hear the watchman respond. "That's good. The Queens and their guests are on their way. We were sent to notify you to prepare the accused and give you time to put away any secret tools of your order. We have orders to post sentry here."

Thanatos replies, "Very well."

The door cracks open and Thanatos slips back into the cell. "We've got to act fast there's only four of them. There will be more soon."

We rush out and the sentries on either side of the entry fall dead with daggers in their throats before they see us. The two across the hall unsheathe their swords.

We pair-up and the one in front of me charges with a battle grunt. He strikes down at my legs. I jump back. I step forward raising the blade above my head with both hands and chopping down, trying to catch him as he recovers from his swipe, but he cross blocks my blow.

I step back. I look over and panned against the wall struggles Thanatos. These guards fight to well. Thanatos' guard bends over with a kick to the groin. My friend pushes off the wall.

My watchman thrusts forward. I counter. I hear a cry of dying. My thrust sinks true into his guts as I watch the life drain from his eyes. He snarls at me as he falls. I can smell his shit and blood as I pull the sword from his viscera.

I look to Thanatos and his guard has a dagger stuck in his heart. Blood pumps from around the blade.

Thanatos runs for the main stairwell. I follow. We enter the stairs and he looks at me. "Up or down?"

"Up," quickly comes out of my mouth.

We head left and up. Only a few steps into our ascension I hear a lock unlock, hinges creak open, and voices. We stop and hold.

"Lord Voorhexees' death will send the proper message to the Emperor. And troops march as we speak." I hear the blonde Queen.

"I'm glad we could come to this agreement. The church demands justice," the Arch-bishop that spoke at the Great Tree says.

"I just want the satisfaction of telling him. I want to see his face when he knows he is going to die," Stilcho says with a chuckle.

The clank and clomping of a patrol accompanies them. Thanatos points down the stairs and whispers with a sarcastic smile, "Down?"

I hold up my pointing finger and whisper, "Hold on."

I point up the stairs then to my ears. Thanatos shakes his head with disgust and puts his hands on his hips.

"Yes, Sir Stilcho. You will get your satisfaction, and then you will review the reports from your spies. Then return to your southern hole of decadence and destroy the Port's navy," the blonde Queen speaks with a singing tone.

The Arch-bishop replies, "He is one of us dear Queen. Sir Stilcho was placed in the south by the Order decades ago. Coin, though it may seem, is not his only motivation. His loyalty rests with our order."

The Queen responds, "His act is very convincing. We shall see who he serves, soon enough."

From around the bend in the stairwell appears a guard. Was I too focused on the conversation? Why didn't I hear him?

Thanatos accidentally clangs his blade against the tunnel wall as he throws his hands out to the side and shrugs his shoulders in a way that says, "See I told you."

The patrolman screams, "Escape! Lord Voorhexees has escaped."

I have a great shot but no knives to throw, and I cut off Thanatos' angle. We turn and run down.

I hear Stilcho laughing. "And you wonder why I haven't killed him yet."

The guard's whistle blowing and screaming, "Escape, Escape," fills the air.

The passage down soon becomes a dead-end. A short hallway leads to a weathered door. We glance toward each other and run full speed shoulders down. A passage to a tunnel smashes open as we stumble through. I hear our pursuers gaining ground.

Oil lanterns flicker down the long, straight tunnel. I don't know which way we it goes, but at least it doesn't go down. We just run.

I think I see light shining down at the end. It looks far, maybe a quarter of a league. Slowed by their armor, we start to break away from the patrol behind us. I didn't see any archers. We can out-climb them even more than we can out-run them. They shouldn't be able to catch us.

We reach the end with plenty of distance between us. The light beams down from the moon through a shaft longer than and twice as wide as the tunnel. Two elevator carts rest at the bottom.

The giant pulleys, twice as big as those on the ships at home, line up on both sides of the shaft. Wheels, cranks, and a brake attach the carts to the lines. Thank Lorick for my time at sea. If these work like sails, with the heavy loads there should be counterweights at the top.

Thanatos grabs the wheel. "Do you know how to work this thing?"

"Get in." I nod.

The soldiers get closer. It looks like ten or more, too many to fight.

Thanatos barks, "Any time now, you can get this thing going."

I point out the brake to him. "Hold that. I'm going to cut the counterweight."

"What?" He shakes his head.

"That's the brake hold it, and pull it if we take off too fast." I point again.

Thanatos shakes some of the ropes. "Wait what if you cut the wrong one?"

"Then we're stuck, or we fall." I smile.

"Can't we just crank it then?" He starts to turn the crank.

"Ya, turn it. That will help me figure this out." I look for the weight at the top, but in the shadows it's hard to see.

We start to inch up the shaft. The watchmen get close enough to start their battle-cries. Then they suddenly stop. The group splits and the blonde Queen and the Archbishop float through. A cloud of purple and black mists surround them.

The follower of Dolus holds a purple glowing ball in his hand high above head. He sings an enchantment that sounds like the demon that possessed Stennous. Thanatos turns the wheel faster. We start rise at a good rate, but not fast enough.

The bishop throws the ball toward us. He then crumples to the ground. The sphere grows as it speeds our way. Tails of dark fire burst from its sides. It swells to fill the tunnel. Scorching heat pushes in front of us as it races toward us. We will not survive this.

Thanatos braces for impact. The crank-wheel spins backwards. We start to fall. "Cut the thing!"

I take a swipe. The rope slices. The cart shoots up as the ball of dark flame explodes on the wall below us. It rocks the cart knocking Thanatos to the floor and me to the edge. I drop my sword.

As the cart tips back I feel my feet come out from underneath me. I grapple for a hold on the railing as begin to fall. The helpless feeling of falling hits me. The type of slowed, powerless descent everyone feels in their dreams. Then my hands hook a hold.

With my heart in my throat I fight to wrap my arms around the rail. "Get the brake."

Thanatos fights against the force to reach the brake. We race toward the top. The moonlight covers us. I can hear the signal bell ringing rapidly at the exit. We have to slow down or this thing will throw us. The bell gets louder.

"The brake!" I scream.

I pull myself up, and get my feet on the platform outside the railing. Thanatos reaches the brake. The top rushes upon us. He pulls it. We slow, but not enough.

We leave the tunnel. I think I see trees, but it's dark and everything blurs. I hold tight to the railing. The top frame of the cart smashes through the stop with loud snaps. The signal bell tolls uncontrollably. The lines unfurl with a zip and a whistle as they smoke. The cart zooms past the huge top pulleys. We take flight.

Everything slows. I can see the other side of the valley, a clearing underneath me, and Thanatos soaring out of the top of the cart. I need to jump. I push down and away from the cart. I tuck my legs in and my hands behind

my head, then hit the ground on the flat of my back with a roll. I only tumble a few times. We didn't get that high.

I hear the cart crash to the ground. I pop up quickly from reflex. I look around. The ache of the impact starts to set in. Fuck, I think I twisted my ankle. I take a few steps. We're at the top, at the mill side of the basin. My ankle feels alright, fair enough anyway. Where did Thanatos go?

"Holy Fuck me. O.K. I believe in magic, the gods, all of it. What was that?" I hear.

I answer, "About time. Over here. Are you alright?"

"I can stand," he says.

Loggers and soldiers push our way from behind the shaft. The signal bell still stands on the opposite side of our exit. It starts to ring at a steady pace.

"They're coming up and we've got other company. Let's go," I command. But when I look up I see Thanatos running with a limp away from the approaching party and toward the valley. I follow.

We soon run out of room. At the edge where the valley cuts down sharp, stacks of timbers stuck with tuffs lay

ready for delivery down the flumes. This was once a great waterfall, but has been channeled to construct the waterworks. Thanatos gives me his smirk and points at the waterslides ahead.

"No, fucking way. We can't ride a timber we'll get smashed between it and the sides."

"The workers have sleds. They use them to get to the lake and across. I've seen it hundreds of times. Trust me. I grew up here. The only thing is you got to hit the middle. We want to go across."

We find a stack of sleds carved of cedar with rope handles sitting at the bank. We grab a single board big enough for both of us and a paddle for each. We enter the stream sitting with our feet forward. The strong current pulls us south quickly. We paddle toward the center.

"How do you know which one is which?" I ask.

"I don't. But it makes sense. The left side is the west side of the lake, right is the east, and the middle across. If we end up in the lake, we're fucked. That puts us back where we started, basically. On the other side we can ride out of here."

The rush of water pushes us to our fate as we sail past the log driver's platform and into the flume.

I hear. "Throw your paddle and hang on."

My hands wrap into the rope handles just as we drop. We rush into the channel shooting down and straight across. We move just fast enough for it to be exciting. The water level runs about a quarter of the way up the u-shaped slide. The gradient seems to level and we slow just a bit.

Thanatos yells, "Whoooooo hoooooo! We made it! I can't fucking believe it!"

The exuberance of beating another scrape with my mortality and the mild excitement of the ride takes over. "Damn right we made it. Whoooooo hoooooo! Fuck you Stilcho. Fuck you Queens. Fuck you everyone."

Finally, something goes right. I peek up to see over the side. What a sight, we must be a hundred feet in the air. The purple-blue moonlit sky reflects back off the lake like a rippled painting.

Signal horns send a wave of low bellows that roll through the air. Fires light behind us and in the city below. Then more flames spring to life ahead of us.

"It looks like we woke-up to whole city. I hope you've got some more daggers hidden somewhere."

The horns continue to howl. More torches shine to life.

Thanatos shakes his head and reaches into his tool belt and removes a well wrapped fire mirror. "Nope all out of cutlery. This is not good. Rule number one, never celebrate until you ride out of town. Fuck! I'm startin' to think your bad luck, man."

He holds the contraption up to the moonlight and adjusts the depth of the magnifying glass to the mirror until it gets a good flash of light and then repeats it turning toward the south side of the valley.

I snap back, "I'm bad luck? You're fucking bad luck. Maybe if you didn't have to be a great actor we would have never been seen?"

He turns his head to look back over his shoulder at me. "And maybe if you didn't wait on the stairs we wouldn't have been seen?"

I knock him in the back of the head like a parent would tap an unruly child. "What are you doing? Everyone is going to see where we are put that thing away."

He flinches for a moment then holds the mirror back up. "You said fuck the Queens. They want us, they can come and get us."

I shake my head and raise my voice. "Sure, sure and when this thing gets blasted with a catapult or some priest's fire, you'll be real funny."

"Hopefully, the fools with our horses are the only ones that saw it. Look, I said before there is something I need to tell you. Oh shit, the end."

We come to the end on the other side of the valley. Just ahead I see a pool large enough to fit several wagons of timbers in it. More flumes fork down from it and run back into the valley and lake. The light of the moon and torches shine on the wine dark waters of the holding pond. Shadows of horses and men dart around the banks.

I hear from ahead, "Aye, there they are. I told you I sawre something. This has to be why the bloody horns are blowing."

The men draw their swords and archers nock their bows as we empty into the holding waters. All for nothing, in a few hours I'll be dead.

"We surrender. We surrender." I pronounce as we wade up and out of the manmade waterhole to our captors.

Here we go again. I know we need to get close, and let some of them wonder back to their cabins to escape. Thanatos throws his hands up and whispers, "Way to buy time."

A young man with long red braids and a soldier's uniform barks orders from the back, "Gather a rider. Notify the Queens' we have a gift for them. Hurry!"

We walk toward their camp of small cabins. Saws, timber-tongs, and log jacks sit loaded in heavy wagons. The muddy ground lays worn with use.

I nudge Thanatos. "So what do you want to tell me? You know, about everybody else."

A horseman soon gallops past us to notify the Queens. He rides beyond the pool into a young, replanted portion of the forest. As he enters his mount starts to neigh in a frantic way. The horse soon returns the way it came, but with the messenger's headless form slumped in the saddle.

Thanatos smirks. "They're here."

A charging line that fills every inch of free ground pounces upon the camp. The night glows off of their blue Voorhexian armor.

I hear Staufan. "Kill them all!"

The cacophony of battle fills the air in an instant as horses run by me, swords clank, and men scream in agony. I sidestep and grab the wrists of the nearest guard as he turns with a wide swipe to engage me. I head-butt him in the nose, knee his groin, and yank the sword from him.

As he staggers back, I chop into the side of his skull with an angry hack. Blood squirts from the impact and he falls to the ground. I turn. Thanatos moves toward the fray with fresh blood on his face and a new sword in his hand.

Whistles blow as riders from the camp gallop toward us. As their cavalry approaches I ready myself. I can feel the horse, the horse in my dreams, the horse charging, and the horse behind me. Behind me? I take one step to the right. A mare from my backside collides into the assaulting line.

My savior cuts down two horsemen with ease and rounds back to my flank to ward off anymore attackers. The visor rises on the knight's helm. Jaulita?

I hear her accent "Come with me my dear."

"Whoa!" The Captain and his mount slow and turn in front of me. He tucks my stallion. I saddle-up.

The Captain yells, "One!"

I hear Sed. "Two!"

We run our steeds back onto the path and into the forest of saplings leaving the camp stained with blood. The pool turns red. The ground squishes with carnage. All lay dead as ordered. I see Thanatos riding behind Sed. Our group pushes out of the forest. The valley soon lies behind us.

I trot up next to Jaulita. "So, I see you are sisters with the Gazelle in more ways than just country."

She smiles at me. "Yes, I'm her war-nurse. I was ordered to ride a day behind with extra guard in case of trouble. And yes, I love you. I have thought of you often."

That was fast. I didn't expect that. I shake my head with a confused look on my face. "Shit, I love you too. I think about you every second I'm not worried about dying." I chuckle with a smile. "It's true."

She smiles at me with a sexy grin. "I knew the first time I saw you our journeys would intertwine."

Thanatos rides up next to us. "Aaaahhh, aren't you two so cute."

I point to Thanatos. "Hey fuck off, and by the way how did you get away from slavery to bust me loose?"

"I slit some fuckers' throats, and found everyone on the road after you were taken. You know why all slaves don't cut their masters' throats? They've got nowhere to go. I always have a place. Anyway, you were supposed to know we were coming back through some magic message."

I scream back to Staufan, "The blue light? I must be deaf your gods words. I saw only light."

He screams back, "Perhaps, perhaps it was other factors."

Staufan charges to the front and turns his steed sideways to block our progress. "The road ahead should be clear. I have to go back, with the nurse, and wait."

Sed fires back, "I'm not leaving you."

"Yes, you are," growls Staufan, "and you'll get the papers to Voorhexees and when you get to Sallidon you'll dispatch a squad of war-rogues to meet us here. Tonight."

Sed turns his warhorse. "Anyone here can do that. It is my place to go with you."

Staufan trots to Sed. "With all due honor sir, your place is to ready the army. It's my and the nurse's charge to go back for her. We can hide easy here, there's plenty of water, game, and cover. They'll never find us. We are too close. I can't leave her or the stone. But you have to go. They can't harm her, for now. They want to use her to open The Gate. We have a little time. Go do what must be done. When the time comes we will all be here together."

The captain turns to me. "Sir, we ride for your cousin, and he should be waiting for us ahead. I suggest we move on soon."

Sed spurs his mount. "Fair enough. You heard the priest we have a job to do."

I turn my horse. "Captain, I believe my mission is complete."

"Our orders are to bring you and the prince to Voorhexess. Even at the expense of our lives. It would be

against my orders to let you turn around here. Rangers will soon be on our trail."

"You're lucky that backwards is a worse choice, or I would turn around just to make your life miserable." I smile.

The Captain laughs. "You're going to be a damn fine prince, damn fine indeed."

Jaulita stops beside me. She smiles. "I must wait for you to return to me once again it seems."

"Soon and with an army I presume." I reach out to hear.

She leans in. Her large supple lips press softly against mine. "Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm. You are a beautiful man. Tell all of the Voorhexian castle concubines I will cut a bitch, if I catch them trying to temp you away from me. I love you."

I chuckle and smile. "I love you too. There is passage into the castle on the other side of the valley, but I'm sure it will be guarded now. Good luck. Wait for the rogues at least. I'll be back as soon as I can."

We ride for as long and as far as we can. No conversations, not a nod, we just ride. The Captain continues to push the pace. We work our way onto a farm trail that lines across open plains where Haezak awaits. The path runs with heavy tree lines that hide us from any trade routes or war roads.

The Captain shouts ahead, "Where is the prince old fool?"

As we approach and stop in front of him the Sun Priest replies, "Mmmmm. . . hhhmmmm. . . He rode to you. Southwest. You did not see him?"

The Captain clicks his tongue and turns his steed. "Well boys. We have to go find our prince. He can't be far."

Sed raises a brow. "There are riders in pursuit. We have the documents. We must move forward."

The captain pulls out his silver canteen and takes a swig. "Yes, you must. But we can't return without our prince." He takes another swig. "Aaaahh." The captain sqints. "I can't believe we go through all this, all this trouble, to keep his little ass safe and he fucking rides

off. Something seems off about that, don't you think priest?"

"Demons strange? Hardly but dangerous yes. Beware the broom. Dogs in heat. . .

I interrupt, "He has no reason to lie. And do you really think he could plan or hide anything?"

"Damn the gods!" The captain looks at me with a twisted expression that concedes. "Let's ride boys. Sed make sure he gets there."

In only a few turns of the glass he'll be in the hands of your cavalry."

Haezak, Sed, Thanatos, and I part ways with the knights and continue northeast. Krozious soon opens his all seeing eye and the rays of the sun break upon the horizon. We ride hard. The morning birds still sing as we gallop into Sallidon.

Sed leads us onto the war road. The wide pat cuts through the dirt. No cobblestones or slate just a beaten path large enough for legions. We find a small Voorhexian cavalry patrol clad in their blue armor.

As we approach, the patrol leader calls, "General Sallidon, Lord Voorhexees. Escort the prince." The parties join.

I see a massive camp ahead. It looks as if all of the forces of the Voorhexian and Sallidon armies gather here. Hundreds upon hundreds of tents line through the hillside. Thousands of horses and men fill the grounds. Banners flap in the surging breeze. The tinks, clinks, crackles, sizzles, and chatter of the legions swirls to my ears.

Sed leads us to the center. He smiles at me. "We have hoping to strike the first blow, but it seems the Queens were thinking the same."

He dismounts. "With what we know now, I need to stay here. I want you to leave to sun-priest with me. We'll get you a fresh change of clothes, a watered horse, and here."

He takes a scroll tube and letter satchel from his saddlebags and hands them to me. "I think you know what these are. This part is up to you now. I'll send you with some of your horsemen. They'll be stations along the way to change your mount. If you ride hard you should make it in two days. Ride hard day and night, stopping only to get a

fresh steed, maybe a day. Somewhere around 175 leagues, but the road from here to there makes good time."

"Riding day and night sounds good to me. I'm ready to get this over with. Make the arrangements."

Thanatos dismounts. "I suppose I'm leading the war-rogues back to Staufan?"

Sed nods. "Yes."

Thanatos stretches. "Good. I'm going to sleep until dark then." He turns to me. "Kormar, see you soon. Watch yourself."

"Don't get all sweet on me." I give him his smirk.

By midday my new escort and I find ourselves 15 leagues into the trip. The steeds froth as we drive them. To spite the hills and cliffs in the landscape growing in number, the trade road lies straight and easy. The heartbeat of the charging mount thumps in my chest. My destiny pulls me forward like a ship blown by the wind.

The next morning as we charge into the dawn we top the crest of a hill. In a shallow valley ahead we find the final road through the Voorhexian capital. A thin fog covers everything. Leagues of blooming grapevines line

alongside the slate road. A small town sprawls out past the fields with no defenses. Beyond that a large black granite fortress sits on a sharp cliff and backs-up to the mountain range. Deep, jagged ridges twist along the entire horizon. Snowcapped, stone peaks rise to the clouds and poke from the oak and pine tree-lines about halfway up. The edge of the Empire, the Impassable Mountains, we've made it.

Chapter 10: Voorhexees/ The Change

The knights trot me up the single, steep, twisting road that leads to the castle. Gravel crunches under my horse's shoes. Honeysuckle lines the edges and fills the air with its sweet scent. Dogs bark from the gate at our approach. The gatehouse rises with rectangular towers on either side. The thick black granite walls stand twenty feet in height. Many archers populate it. Defensive turrets sit every twenty paces around the outside bulwark. I can still feel something pulling me beyond this place. But it's somewhere close, very close. I feel ease, comfort, pull still a pull.

How will this bastard be greeted? What will he do when I tell him Stennous rode off? Will that become my fault? This safe haven could turn into a hornet's nest.

The large iron portcullis slowly begins to crank open as we work further up the incline. As I ride through the gate spearmen line the sides of the passage. On the other side stands a face I nearly forgot existed.

I hear. "Brother? Kormar is that you?"

And there he stands, Gathaus junior, towering over six feet, his long brown hair and beard resting across his blue

plate-armor. His green eyes smile at me around his Voorhexian nose, as he marches my way. "I see you finally learned to ride."

I dismount. "Yes, brother. It's so good to see you."

A relief comes over me. Strange, I exist as a lie to him, and yet he knows me better than anyone else alive. We embrace.

He grabs my face and with heartfelt words says, "I'm sorry about your mother. She loved me as her own, but I know your heart must especially ache."

We hug again. "Come little brother, you must come meet our uncle the King. Where is our cousin? I thought you are to arrive together?"

I grab the packages of precious paper that have dictated my life. We enter the massive yard. It sits almost as large as the village below. Stables, equestrian walkers, steeple and lancer runs fill the immediate area. Smiths, horse driven mills, silos, gardens, and stock pens bustle with movement and surround a series of barracks. Coaches bearing the purple cross of Dorna, the ram of New Theibia, and the axe of Sallidon rest next to the stables. The keep rises almost a quarter-league away.

"He is on the road still. To tell you the truth, I was told he rode off on his own, and the last I heard, he was lost. Should I tell the King the truth?"

Junior looks back to me. "Besides losing the heir to the kingdom, I don't know that he would care that much. He doesn't like the idea of Stennous loving men. And the fact everyone else in the Ten Kingdoms knows makes it worse."

"But no one cares." I shrug.

"In the Port maybe, but up here everyone still follows the old ways. To keep everything secret." He chuckles. "And besides it's never a good idea to lie to the king."

"Right, I'm glad you're here." We laugh together.

He leads me through the complex to the Grand Hall. We enter through thick, oak double doors. The long rectangular room sits on the ground level sticking off the side of the main tower. Flags of the white Voorhexian horse, tapestries of cavalry heroes, and paintings of Formasita hang around the hall. A large slate fireplace rises in the center of each wall. On the short side opposite the doors, running the length of the wall stands the king's black-stained, highly polished banquet table. Behind it, windows allow the early sun to light the hall. The smell of a morning feast

fills the air. It has been so long since I ate a decent meal.

Seven men that look like kings and princes gorge themselves at the king's buffet. A beautiful Theibian woman with caramel colored skin, wearing a golden silk dress sits with them. She sits next to a man from his position at the table and his look must be the King of Voorhexees. On his other side dines a man that from his height, white hair, and bird like face must be Sed's father. Next to him, a man almost as fat as Stilcho, guzzles wine that drips onto his purple robes. The four other men sit at the ends of the table. Smaller oak tabletops with benches filled with bodyguards in different uniforms scatter around the rest of the room.

All movement ceases as we walk toward the royal diners. When I get close the king in the middle rises from his seat.

An older picture of myself stands before me with grayed hair, a long braided beard, and belly of luxury. There lies no doubt why Stennous and I look the same. Muscles of a once powerful warrior shape his blue tunic trimmed in white rope. A look of confusion torques his face. "Stennous? Son?"

I clear my throat. "I'm Kormar, your nephew from The Port. I have the documents."

A bald man from the end of the table on my left, dressed in a blue kilt and a white tunic, steps down and retrieves the documents.

"And what of my son?" The King smiles.

I take a gulp of air. "I was told he rode off by himself. Your first captain and his Elite rode after him."

The king's face turns red. "What do you mean you were told? Were you not together?"

I shake my head slowly. "No sir, I was imprisoned in the Queens' dungeon."

"Imprisoned?" A shocked look comes over his face."

"Yes sir. We hatched a plan on the spot where I, posing as Stennous, would stay prisoner so everyone else could ride free. I then later escaped. When I returned the next morning I was informed that he had left."

He speaks through clinched teeth, "Who is we?"

"Myself, Prince Sed of Sallidon, and the War Priest."

He huffs with frustration. "Well, you certainly look the part. And where are they now?"

I point to the south. "Sed commands the joint army in Sallidon, and Staufan stayed in Varisvaaria for surveillance."

"When did you leave them?" he questions.

I answer, "A full day ago."

"You rode a twelve day march in one day?"

"Yes, sir."

The king smiles at me with a bit of pride. "So you escaped their dungeon, rode over 120 leagues, to complete the mission even with the risk of bringing me the news of my son disappearing?"

"Aye, King."

A bigger smile peels across his face. "You must get your bravery from your father. A Voorhexees we can be proud of."

The bald man speaks, "Everything is in order. All the copies are here."

The king laughs. "Come here boy sit at the table where you belong. Have your breakfast, while we sign these papers. Then we will talk privately and devise the extra means needed to retrieve Stennous."

I rip into the buffet and do my best to disappear. I hear the chatter of the kings and their advisors shuffling through the pages. They have no idea of the amount of blood it took just to get those here.

I hear the bald Voorhexian advisor. "Is there any amendments anyone would like to request?"

I know I should hold my tongue, but after what I've been through, I have no fear. "I know of a change that needs to be made."

He responds, "This document is for Kings and the council members of the Confederacy."

The old man that looks like me speaks, "How many times did you risk your life to get these here, boy?"

"I have lost count, sir."

"Let the boy say his piece. Maybe we will like his idea, maybe we won't."

Sed'd father, the Theibian Queen, and the purple-clad King of Dorna agree with nods to let me speak.

"Well, I come from the Port. And there all men, all women are born free. Free from their father's debts, free to work, live, move. Why not make everyone free under the Confederacy? The sight of slavery should sicken men of freedom and weakens this cause."

The King of Sallidon springs from his seat. "Mind your tongue. You don't have the knowledge or authority to speak on what the cause stands for. You mean to take profits from our pockets with your idea. That will weaken the cause."

The advisors begin to chatter. What did I say? Just shut-up and get out of here. I raise my hands. "Forgive my tongue, sir."

The Queen of New Theibia stands. "We have for the most part reduced our dependency upon slaves in ways that have increased our profits. When the slave holders do not have to buy slaves but can instead pay lowered wages to hungry workers, we have found it raises our profits, even over great time. Freed slaves work for not much more than what is needed for their existence. I vote, yes."

"Though I'm happy for your lands progress, we are not prepared to make such a move. And how can we make such an amendment without Le Soberano present?" Sallidon refutes.

The King in purple takes his turn. "As the boy has spoken Le Soberano's and the Port's position on this matter are clear. Slavery is already illegal there. We can make this vote amongst ourselves. And I too vote yes. We still hold many slaves in Dorna, but our army is small. I fear we will be overrun. I can triple my force if I fill it with slaves, but why would they fight? For freedom, they will fight for that."

Sed's father shakes his head with dismay. "What good does it do for you to fill your forces with untrained rabble? And what is your assurance once loose, these freemen won't just leave? Then you will have no army and no workforce."

The King of Dorna responds, "If we lose this war, none of us will have any workforce. Even if only half of them fight I will be better off. All of the Varisvaarian forces have been drawn east to Sallidon. All of our other borders neighbor allies. I have already discussed this with my Barons and have their devotion. We will have time to prepare. And I will leave for there when we are done."

The large man works his way up from his chair. "I was thinking of this for only my kingdom as means of preservation, but if we do this. Make an order for the Confederacy, and this war lasts we may have the advantage in numbers and perhaps we can cause uprisings, rebellions, or even mass evacuations amongst their slaves to our cause."

Sallidon again shakes his head. "But for this very reason Kingdoms from across the seas will support them and turn from us."

The King of Voorhexees chimes in, "Perhaps they will. Perhaps it will bring support from others we have not yet thought of." He looks at me. "But before I cast my vote, which it seems for the time will decide the fate of this matter. I want to talk to you alone." He points to me.

We walk from the great hall to the adjoining throne room through an oak door. The King's Elite move to follow us.

"I said I want to talk to him alone."

The space lies equal to the hall. Tapestries of prized steeds and Voorhexian Kings line the granite walls. A long blue velvet rug runs through the center and the length of

the room. Open shutters allow the Eye of Krozious to pour light from behind the gold throne casting a glow around it as if it was dropped by the gods from Paradise.

The King sits in his chair. "What are you trying to do here? Are you here for this seat?"

I quickly answer, "No."

He smiles at me. "Well it seems to me to be awfully advantageous to you to walk in here and to suggest what you suggest."

I shake my head. "If you mean, I can live as your son and heir to the throne, then I could care less about that. Stennous, should be on his way back with the Captain. He can have all of this. I only want to return to assist the war-priest in Varisvaaria. I have lived my whole life as your brother's son. I prefer it stay that way."

The King rubs his chin and nods. "He did tell you. I thought he might. Maybe it's him that you want to help. He would have no reason to stay in the Port if the lines of race are erased."

I shrug my shoulder and throw my hands out to the side. "He is the chief advisor to Le Soberano, and my

mother, his wife is dead. He could return if he wanted, but he has purpose there. He doesn't want this here either."

He nods and squints an eye at me. "So you want nothing from me or this kingdom. You believe in this cause of freedom, and only wish to ride with your comrades?"

"Yes." I nod my head in agreement.

The King rises from his throne. "Well, I do agree with the Queen of New Theibia and the King of Dorna and their points. It makes all the sense to make the change. But then by law you will be the heir to this throne."

I frantically shake my head no. "I don't want that. It does not belong to me. I was not raised for this. To tell you the truth I lived most of my life in the slums of the Port as a common thief. That is who I am."

He turns to me and smiles. "Tell me, you don't suck cock do you?"

I laugh. "It's never appealed to me to try, sir—though the Varisvaarian guards wanted to make me."

He raises his brow. "And what of them?"

I slash my hand across my throat. "Dead as fuck, sir. Both of them. Is that what you want? To shame Stennous. The

thought of a mixed bastard thief on your throne comforts you more than the idea of a man-lover. No thanks, I'm sure he would want me dead, and have a constant plot for my demise, as he should. I've not been raised for this, this is not my life. Give the job to someone else."

He looks at me with angry judgment in his eyes. "No, I want my line to live, to thrive, to rule. You are my blood. He is my blood. What if he is dead? I care more about that than his lovers. If he does not come back you are my only son. The throne will need an heir. If he does return then you will father children in his name so our kingdom will live with true Voorhexian blood ruling it. Either way, the laws must be changed. And you must be known."

"What part of, 'I don't want that' did you not understand?" I turn toward the door to the great hall.

His eyes widen and he screams, "Watch your tone with your king, boy!"

I stop and turn back around. I fire back, "You're not my king. I'm from the Port. All these years, nothing—and now when it serves you best I'm supposed to be excited or even content about you, this kingdom, and what you want from me?"

He chuckles and shakes his head. "Life is not about what I want, what you want. That is not this world. We are all bound to our role. I have duties sworn to this kingdom, to our name. I don't have a choice and neither do you. You don't have to be raised for that. It's birthright. We are done for now. I must go attend to my business. You should finish your breakfast. Come boy." He walks toward the door and motions me. "We can finish this later."

I walk with him back into the great hall. The King of Voorhexees exclaims, "I have made a decision."

He looks at me. "My answer for now is no. If the kingdoms of Dorna and New Theibia have an advantage for themselves then they can do as they like, as will I with this kingdom. But the purpose of this confederacy is to rule our kingdoms as we see fit. I will only agree if we all agree."

He walks into the middle of the room. "Sword. Bring me my sword!"

The room stops as the Voorhexian Elite charged with the king's sword, unsheathes the sharpened, Theibian steel from his back and hands it over to his majesty.

"Having said all of that, this young man here is my bastard son of a slave, and therefore a slave by my lands laws."

He motions his guards around me. "Bring him here."

The guards push me forward with the brunt end of their spears.

The king snarls, "Put him to his knees."

The soldiers knock me in the back of my legs kneeling me down. The king continues, "I would rather put him to his death than see him a slave."

He turns to the bald advisor. "Let this be written." Then the king turns to the other leaders. "And let this be known throughout the Five Kingdoms of the Confederacy and all other lands."

He raises the sword as if to swipe my head from my neck. What just happened here? It's as if everything he said has flipped upside-down in an instant. I'm tired. I lower my head. But instead of the death slicing my soul I feel alternating taps on my shoulders.

"I, Philippe Voorhexees, King of Voorhexees, abolish slavery throughout this kingdom. And hereby in the name of

my forefathers, in the name of his forefathers, and by the Goddess of Lust, Wine, and Beauty, I name you, Kormar Voorhexees, the Prince of Voorhexees, and my firstborn son. Rise as a Defender of the Realm and swear to withhold the secrets of battle within your brotherhood."

Defender of the Realm, finally something we can agree upon. I rise. "I swear." As the words come from my mouth I feel an instant change throughout me. No longer will the tools of thief define me. Instead I've become a man of the sword, horse, lance, and title. Comfort covers me. Birthright, an interesting word, I was not born to anything, and yet circumstances conspire, and here we find ourselves.

My father hands his sword to its keeper, hugs me, and turns to the advisor. "Dispatch this proclamation of royalty in all directions, by riders, pigeons, and criers. And send the documents to our foreign allies and make sure we all have copies."

The consultant replies, "Consider it done already, sire."

"Wait!" the King of Sallidon calls. "We shall sign the order as a nation to rid the lands of slavery. I agree."

There is much death ahead of us. As a house of the War God many of our slaves are squires and with only a few weeks and the right to carry a sword they will be ready to die. And the thought of causing riots in Enlibar City appeals to me. Let's make the order. We all must start our travels."

As I sit and wait for the room to clear I become drunk with exhaustion as it pulls on the lids of my eyes. I slump in my place at the end of the table. I hear my king. "Take him to a room. He has traveled far."

I welcome the thought of sleep as the guards march me to my quarters. The room spreads out bigger than my apartment in the Port. Sitting, dining, and sleeping areas sit with posh furniture ornately carved with horses and grape clusters. Silk and fur beddings cover the massive mattress that lies surrounded by the cherry wood frame. Two fireplaces stand on either ends of the room. Rugs, tapestries, and more furs cozy the room and cushion sound. I flop onto the bed and sink into its comfort. Chambermaids enter, close the shutters and curtains, light the fires, and change the chamber pot.

Will I dream of the dead, the horse, or war? Maybe, I will be blessed without nightmares. Sleep falls fast upon me. The day and the night pass, but I can only find the

strength to interrupt my sleep to fill the chamber pot. No dreams. The bed shakes.

"Get up prince."

I look up to see Junior with a mischievous smile on his face. "Little brother, or should I call you cousin now? Wake up the King would like to see you."

I pull myself up. "I have to get back to Varisvaaria."

Junior laughs again. "I don't think you'll be leaving here anytime soon, little cousin."

I wipe the sleep from my eyes. "I have to go."

"For what, you have no need for coin, your mission is complete."

I get up and look for my clothes, but they have been replaced with a finely woven blue tunic and white leather pants. I slip them on. "Many reasons, there is more to the mission, and those I left behind."

He smiles at me. "Is there a girl?"

I snap me head around. "There's more than that. More to this fight than you know."

He laughs. "You are so predictable. Of course there's a girl."

"Take me to the King and I will tell you both."

We walk together laughing and joking about our childhood. We make our way to the large front courtyard. The guard population looks small.

I ask, "I don't see many troops. Are they all in Sallidon?"

He replies, "For the most part. Archers for the walls and the King's Elite. All others have been sent southwest. I was charged as the Captain of the Elite and the King's safety moons ago."

We approach the steeple run where the King jumps a white stallion through the course. The sunlight shimmers off the well brushed animal. Its mane and tail flop with tight braids. I have never imagined a horse more beautiful or maintained. Phillipe maintains sight of his run as we approach.

After he finishes he rides to us at the fence. "Well good morning, Prince. I have never seen anyone sleep an entire day."

"Until I yesterday, I have not sleep well in moons, King."

"Well, I'm glad you find it comfortable here. I wish to ride more. Meet me in the hall. I'm sure you're hungry. We have much to discuss."

"Sir, I need to leave soon and return to Varisvaaria."

The king laughs. "We must discuss Stennous' return. Do you think I'm going to let you run into danger, especially while he is still lost?"

Junior looks at me raising his brow and smirking.

"What did I say?"

"The Queens hold a war priestess and the Tear of Vashanka. If Staufan does not recover the stone the Queens plan to use it with the help from Priests of Dolus to bring about darkness equal to the Time of the Womb. I must return to help them."

Phillipe scoffs, "Darkness! The ends of the world, do you say. That sounds like business alright for the priests. If I believed this, I'm sure they could use you and your courage, but what else? What do you bring to them that they can't find in a brave warrior? Explain to me, my son, why

would I let you leave here and not send, let's say, Junior here, in your place."

I look into his green eyes. "I know the way into the castle's keep, from escaping."

"Draw a map." He throws his hands in the air.

"Anything else? Besides, that castle and everything in it will soon be leaped upon by our armies. I would say things there are well taken care of. Go, go eat your breakfast and we will talk of your brother's return, not your departure. I don't want . . .

Horns blow from the wall. Sentries yell, "Rider approaches."

The king rounds his mount, speeds to a gallop, and jumps over the fence and trots to the gate.

Junior looks at me. "He's right. You should stay, and if he gives me the order to hold you, I will. Now, let's go see what the excitement is about."

We stride to the gate. I hear. "He's one of ours. Open the gate."

The portcullis raises and a messenger clad in blue rides through. He stops his steed sideways and dismounts.

"Sire, Imperial troops approach from New Ellonia in the north. They are maybe a week away. But raiding parties could be here within a day."

The King answers with no hesitation, "Take a fresh mount. Start the chain to Variavaaria. Let them know. Tell Sed the Kingdom of Voorhexees needs its soldiers to defend its homeland. Tell them they must march the twelve days in six."

The rider runs to the stable. The king turns to me. "How large was the Varisvaarian force?"

"Too large for Sallidon to take alone. Especially, once they pile in the castle and finish their ramparts."

He shakes his head. "Your friends may need you now, but so do I. I can't let you leave."

I open my mouth and let the lie fall from my tongue. "I understand, father."

He smiles at me. "Good."

I spend the rest of the day trying to help, to convince everyone that I'm going to stay. But when the night falls I will climb down the keep and over the castle

wall. If I can ride out, I will, if not, I can climb down the cliff and steal a horse from the town.

The cape of Lorick finally casts its shadow. I wait until past the middle of the night to begin my descent. The alert from the rider and these damn white pants will make this difficult. I take a deep breath and commit myself to the climb. I strap my sword to my back. Down always seems scarier than up. I work out onto the ledge, across to the dark side of the tower, and then down. The cold granite scrapes my fingertips. My hands shake and burn as I struggle with little footholds. Maybe I should go back. If I could find something to land in I would just jump. Shit. I don't know if I can make it. I find a stable foothold. I wonder how far I have to go. I look down. Fire, I see fire in the village below. The raiders made it early. I can see them in the light of the flames. They gallop out of the town and toward the castle. They will never make it past the archers or the wall. They ride hard and fast my way. Then disappear into the cliff below the castle. What are they doing? Did they ride into a passage? Or are they climbing up?

Horns blow. Fuck! I've got to get back in. I saw a closer window on the way down. I move that way. As I get

close the shutters open. I see a silhouette scanning the commotion below. Junior? I risk it. "Pssst, Junior."

"Blessed by the night!" he yells and moves back inside.

I move to the window as fast as I can, but the small holds slow me. Junior reappears sword-in-hand hacking out the window.

"Junior! Damn the gods, it's me, Kormar. Fucking stop."

"What are you . . . get in here."

I crawl inside. "There are raiders trying to enter the castle. I saw them. I think they are climbing up."

"What were you doing out there Kormar?"

"Never-mind that now, we must protect the King."

He looks at me scornfully. I answer his look, "Don't make me order you. Let's focus on what's important."

He nods. "Let's go."

We begin to work our way up to the king's floor, but he meets us in a few steps half dressed and with his

chamber-guards. "Are we under attack? The rider said a week."

I answer quickly, "Marauders, I saw them. I think they are trying to climb in. Maybe war-rogues, they rode to the castle cliff."

Junior and Phillipe look at each other with shock.

Phillipe says, "The throne room passage?"

Junior replies, "Impossible, even if they knew it was there, unless you've been through it, I mean, no one has ever found it, and in the dark, never."

The king orders Junior, "We must defend it. Gather more guards and meet us there."

"King, we should stay together."

Phillipe turns to me, "How many did you see?"

"I don't know ten, twenty maybe, it was dark."

The king commands, "Sword, Give me my sword." He turns to Junior. "Just hurry. I have my two guards, and we should join at least two more on the way there. And besides, I have the demon-slayer here."

I look at the king with as serious as a look as I've ever had and say, "I've only wrestled demons so far. The slaying comes later." I draw my sword, start down the stairs, and stop and turn around. "Well let's go kill these fucks."

The two guards join us as we tromp toward the throne room. I kick the door open and boldly enter. The guards follow behind me. Twenty maybe more soldiers marked with the Empire's Red Cross stand near an open secret entrance on the north wall.

I start to give the order to fall back and wait for the others when the King barges through our small line. "We should turn, sir, and meet Junior."

From behind the Imperial soldiers steps Stennous. He looks sick with pale skin and swollen bloodshot eyes. An air of command drives his steps forward. "Father, how good of you to not make me have to track you down. And I'm glad to see you brought my long lost brother. Perfect, I think I'll drink his blood when we're through. When I was on my way here I was told you had named this fool your firstborn, and I thought, well I will just have to kill him too. Your little confederacy will never get a breath. What a joke it is, you are. This Kingdom is mine. And by the time your

army gets here we will be rooted in and they will have a new King. I will turn them back to Varisvaaaria to help crush this silly rebellion."

Phillipe interjects, "Are you done running your mouth now. If you want this kingdom then come and take it, boy. I can admit I have not been a good father to you, but please reconsider before you die, put an end to this. Your brother has already renounced the throne. You are trying to take what already belongs to you."

A look of reason comes across Stennous' face. Then the whistle and thud of an arrow driving into the King's chest fills my ears. From behind me I hear junior and the other guards enter the room and charge forward. "The king is down."

They still outnumber us. I begin to charge with them, but a tug at my leg reminds me Phillipe lays wounded. I stop and kneel. Our hands latch. The brilliant light of Paradise glows dimly somewhere behind his eyes. The desire to support my father with strength fills the moment. I try to speak, my mouth forms the words, but no sound comes from my throat. As if, the words are being strangled back.

He looks at me in confusion and dies.

A rage filled scream roars from my throat. I charge forward hacking and slashing to find the archer. I get pushed back. I see Junior and the guards holding a line in front of me. He turns his head. "Go, go through the passage. Ride to our army. They will follow you."

I want to stay, but I know I must go. I know I leave him to die. I shake my head. "No."

"I love you Kormar. You can do this. Go. It's fine. We'll meet in the Lands of Plenty."

"I love you brother." I dart for the exit. Arrows whistle past me. The guards and Junior push forward to death to make my path.

I dart for the passage.

I hear Stennous. "After him. He must die."

I run. The tunnel flickers with the raider's torches. The pitch of the carved stone steps slants hard. I hear the invaders following, stumbling, and falling. Just stay on your feet. I see the imperial mounts and two soldiers at the bottom. I stumble on the last step and feel the thud of my head on the dirt. A flash of black covers my eyes. I drop my sword. I jump to my feet. The guards charge at me. The one on my right moves slightly faster. He raises his

right arm to take a one-handed swipe at me. I cross block with my left and push him into the other one. They stumble. I kick him to finish them to the ground. I can kill them another day. I stride and hop onto the closest horse.

I charge forward but the end looks to be covered with branches and brush. I lean forward to shield myself and gallop forward. As I near the end the cover opens like a gate. I made it. I point my ride to south. I will have to stay off the roads.

Gray puffy clouds scatter trough the night sky and twist with the columns of smoke rising from the village. Fingers of flame dance their orange glow against the cool blue light of the moon. The myriad of sounds, the horns, the crackle, and the bustle of towns people fighting the blaze fade from my ears as the night wraps around me. I cannot count the times the night has offered me its shelter. Another long ride lies ahead, but when I return here everyone wearing or swearing to a red cross will swim in their own blood.

As I take in the scent of the smoke. Five more raiders on horseback cut off my path. They trot toward me, as if I was a friend. I don't have much time before my white pants glare from the shadows. No weapons, outnumbered, maybe I

can lose them in the forest. I turn toward the mountains, click my cheek, and heel the imperial dun. We race to the range. The five invaders pursue faster than I thought. I weave my mount through the spruce and oak. They get closer. I run deeper and higher up the mountain. As they hit the tree line it slows them too.

I start to pull away again. I hear a shriek of dying. I look back. I see only four riders. I push upward. Another painful cry pierces the night. I turn my head back to see. I feel my horse falling from underneath me. I'm thrown from the side of the saddle. I land on top of the poor dun as we crash into a hole.

This hole has walls, a dugout pit, maybe ten feet deep. I wish Sed were here, I could just jump on his shoulders. The horse whinnies with pain certainly both its front legs broke in the fall.

The shadows of the three soldiers loom over the edge at me. Through the light canopy of the forest above them I see the sky lighten with the first rays of the morning.

"Well who do we have down there? You sure went to a lot of trouble to die." The whistle and thud of arrows fills the air as the words fall from his mouth, and I see

the silhouettes fall backward with the force of the blows.
A rope falls over the edge. As I climb the smooth, buckskin
rope I wonder who saved me.

Chapter 11: Dream Walking/ Hopeless

Turkey feathers and black beads sway in their long, straight, black hair as Ilsigg tribesmen surround me. Red and black paint of different designs covers their faces. They wear buckskin pants and boots, but no shirts. I turn my head quickly around to try and find a way out, but the only thing I see are the points of spears, some blackstone, some blood-quartz, some steel, but all look sharp.

I raise my hands in the air, while pointing to the pit with my left hand. The horse neighs. I slowly make the motion of slitting a throat and point back down to the suffering animal.

A large, older warrior with his face painted white, black circles around his eyes, and red bear claws on his chest barks an order. Four warriors with only thin red stripes across their faces step to the edge, nock arrows, and unleash. The sounds from the animal below stop.

From behind the circle of spears lassos loop around me, I try to shake free. One lands around my neck. I throw it off, but another soon replaces it and quickly chokes me. I feel the ropes tighten my legs together, and my arms to

my waist. They pull me in all directions, yanking me to the ground, and straightening me out.

They drag me through the woods over thorns, rocks and fallen limbs. Pain pokes and rolls around me. I struggle, but nothing. I can't loosen the ropes at all. The bumps, scrapes, and nicks frustrate me with their burn and sting. I grit my teeth and hold back my screams. The rage builds. We stop in a large, grassy plain. They tie me to a fire hardened oak pole like fresh killed game and cast me over their shoulders. Someone covers my head with a hide sack.

The journey picks up to a trot. The weight of my body hanging grows a dull burning ache in my wrists, ankles, shoulders, and hips. I see only shadows and the inside of the skin hostage hood. The heat and moisture of my own breath press against my face. I hear the thumps of their bouncing steps, the chatter of their voices, and the rustle of grass against their buckskin.

Who are they? What do they want with me? Why aren't I dead? I have to track this. I try to use time as my marker, but what if they're running me in a circle. Their footsteps splash and water covers my back, a marker.

The rustle of grass lessens after we cross the stream and the crunching of leaves of the woods returns. I feel my weight shift down, as if we are going steeply uphill. I keep waiting to feel some fear, or to have the horse burn its eyes into my mind, but listening consumes me. And the only question that really matters, where are we going? That's all I need to know to escape. I assume up and over the mountain. For two thousand years explorers looked to no avail for a passage to the other side.

The snapping of twigs and the crunch of leaves ends abruptly. The tight clean sound of a hard packed path carries us for the next turns of the glass. Finally, our pace slows to a walk. The tribesmen's tone of their voices relaxes into conversation and laughter. Still we go up.

Flashes of black cross over my eyes, and the angering pain of blows thump against my head. Laughter, more blows to my head and now to my body, laughter. They couldn't wait to set me down to beat me? Helpless, I just hang off the pole as continue to move up. I can feel faint bits of moisture fall on me, as I hear the hard "T" sound of spitting. These fucks rage curls my brow and forces a deep relaxing gust from my lungs. Save your strength, yelling will only bring them satisfaction.

Warm streaming water, I can't believe it, now they're pissing on me. I can't take it. The words roar from my mouth, "I will kill you," I scream in Enlibrite, Southern Ilsigg, Tierabeaux, and Rankan, "I'll fucking kill you all."

To my surprise, a voice answers me in Rankan, "I will wait for you." As if to say, when you're ready.

"Good," I answer.

The tight sound of the path disappears to the noise of loose rock underneath us. The day continues much the same way with my captors occasionally beating, spitting, and pissing on me for their amusement as we slowly move up.

They leave me tethered to the pole with the sack blinding my eyes and lay me on rocky ground to sleep. The darkness grows deeper inside the sack as the eye of Krozious closes. I hear them talking, laughing, and eating. A cool wisp like the southern winter snaps the wind as cold rain drops begin to soak me.

Is this Stennous' doing? Who else could arrange such madness? But the tribesmen killed the Imperial soldiers. Where am I? I've got to get a look around. The rain and cold ground set a shiver through me. My teeth chatter, my

bones ache, now I know how the cold feels, miserable. I shake like a nervous dog through the night. I can hear the songs of the morning birds as glimpses of light poke through my blinder.

Then I begin to scream in Rankan, "Shit! I have to Shit!" I yell over and over to wake the camp.

I feel kicks against my back. "Shut your mouth." I hear the Rankan words of my tribesman opponent from yesterday. "Shit in your pants, white-trash."

"You don't want to smell that all day. Please, leave my hands tied, the sack over my head, and send a warrior with me. Where will I go? I don't even know where we are."

I hear unfamiliar words exchanged. The ties that bind me begin to loosen. Ah, it feels amazing just to lower my shoulders and straighten my legs. They don't take the time to retie my hands and leave them in the position to hang, in front of me. And leave my feet free to walk. The rope that bound me to the pole dangles between my legs and drags behind me.

Why do they want me alive? How much do they want me alive? I can escape now. Kill this guy, take off my hood, see where I am, and run. I can get rid of this binding

later. I don't know where I am but I just have to go downhill. I don't know. I'm hungry, cold, and just want this to end.

We walk far enough away from the others that my plan should work. I loop the rope in front of me while I begin to unfasten my trousers. I feel my guard brush by me.

A thump to the back of my head, he pushes me down and says something that sounds like a prompt. I fall flat on my face. I roll over, sit up, and rock back-and-forth acting like I can't stand.

He comes over to pull me up from the ground. He yanks me up by the ropes. I can feel the motion of him turning his back to walk away from me. I gather the binding up quickly into a loop, step forward until I feel him, and cast the line around his neck. Fuck! I can't get it tight, as he begins to struggle. I feel him turn toward me, and swipe a punch or maybe a knife at me. I fall and pull him to the ground. Pain screams into my left hip and flashes through my body. A knife, he fucking stabbed me.

I finally get the rope tight around his neck. I sit on his chest. My desperate rage takes over and I bash his head into the ground over and over. I can feel him trying to cry

for help, but his breath falls short. I feel him go limp. I twist around and pull the knife from my hip. The pain shoots through me again. The blood pumps down my leg. I scoot down and plunge the knife into his chest.

I reach up and untie the hood. A feeling of triumph wells inside of me as I free myself from the blinder. I stand and pull the knife from my captor, one of the red-stripped archers. Blood quickly pools from his cracked skull and slowly leaks from the hole in his chest.

I scan all around me, nothing but the stone of the mountain. I stand on the only life I can see close, a small grassy knoll with a bouquet of multi-colored wild flowers. It lays surround by the jagged edges of steep stony cliffs. Far below I see pockets of the forest sloping down. Behind me, I see the rocky path. I think I see where it rises up the crest of the gray mountain. It lies shrouded by cliffs on either side. Why? Why are they taking me into their territory?

I hear someone coming my way. I begin to run, but the sharp hot flashes of pain from my hip remind me of my wound. Easy to track, slower to run, prey for the tribesmen, cougars, and bears, I'll never make it. This plan turned to shit quickly.

I certainly can't fight them all. They have me alive for some reason. Something else, a feeling in my gut tells me not to run. Certainly and quickly, I'll find what I am worth to them. I cut the ropes, throw the knife into the dead warrior, drop my trousers, and begin to squeeze out my shit.

I see four of them meandering down the path from the camp. Their red and black war-paint across their faces makes them look fierce even while they relax. One has white stripes painted on his chest. I wait for them to see me then I point in the direction of the dead body.

"I didn't like the way he looked at me."

They charge, screaming, drawing their knives and steel-bladed tomahawks. I stand and work my pants up with little concern. They tackle me. Oh shit! Maybe this was a bad choice. White Stripes raises his axe over his head. I try to wiggle lose. A look of fury blankets his face. It is over. He chops down.

The large, older warrior with red bear claws painted on his chest catches the young warrior's wrist and throws him off of me. Thank the Gods. That was stupid.

They pull me up and push me back to the rocky campground. I can feel the grass stuck in my hair and the fresh dirt on my back.

Bears Claws looks as if he is explaining everything to his superior, a man who—even through his war-paint of black dots—looks more like a boy. Gold bracelets wrap his wrists. Turkey, eagle, and raven feathers dangle in his hair.

The older one marked with the red bear claws turns to me and speaks in Rankan, "The son of our king, wishes to speak to you."

That answers the question of who speaks Rankan, and who pissed on me. The young tribal prince cocks his head and with a smug smile says in Enlibrite, "By our laws you entered a sacred land of our people and must face trial. Only the Defenders of the Path are allowed on this mountainside."

He points at Bear Claws and continues, "He will pay for his stupidity. Prisoners are expected to try to escape. Bind him."

As they tie me I see a fresh patrol of about twenty warriors emerge from the tunnel-like mountain path and head down.

For a moment I remember there's more than surviving this. Will my three friends get the stone? Will they turn back to lead the forces of the Confederacy to take back Voorheexes? Staufan will stay for the Gazelle, that much I know. Either way, the war has begun and we have lost the first battle.

The prince points to the group of tribesman and orders them again in his tongue. They knock me to the ground, take my boots, and bind my ankles to my wrists with just enough room to shuffle. Bear Claws whispers in Rankan to me as he tightens the ropes, "But if you die by accident, we have not violated the law."

The warriors then stand me up and tie their dead friend to my back with his arms around my neck. I have to hunch over and jump his weight off of my neck and onto my back to keep from choking. They put on long-sleeved buckskin shirts and pull furs from their large, leather side-satchels.

We leave the prince at the grassy knoll camp as he welcomes the new patrol. We head up the tunnel. The rock trail's uneven edges slice against my feet. I rise up with pain, but the dead warrior's weight chokes me back to a hunkering position. I see nothing but stone. The bitter air

and cold rock under my feet bring me to a new level of cold.

Exhaustion continues to reach new levels for me. Only the desire to live and the fear of dying push my steps. Just days ago I feasted in the hall of the king as myself, as his son, and now I step toward uncertainty.

Wind howls down the path at us. The stone fades to packed snow under my steps. My feet start to burn with stinging biting agony. Every step feels like a thousand needles poke my soles. We go on. I can't go much further. My feet don't hurt as much, but they look blue. The tunnel widens. I see the blue sky. We're almost to the top. A new wave of energy hits me.

As we cross the crest of the peak I see a large plain that must stretch fifty leagues to the sea. A small forest enters the grassy flatland on the north. I see their village at the bottom. I'm not sure. Everything looks so small. I see roaming herds to the south. The jagged edges round off and the cliffs turn into rolling hills. We begin our descent. We march from the snow, to the gray rock, to the dirt and grass. The steep angle and easier terrain adds speed to our journey.

About three-quarters of the way down the slope levels a bit and we stop. Thank the Gods. They cut their putrid friend from my neck. My feet, bloody and battered, pulse with pain. The idea of running has died. I'm sure some sort of emotion should at least flicker through me, but the exhaustion, and the constant thoughts of how to survive each second fill all the space in my inner being.

They leave their dead friend outside. We camp in a shallow red rock cave that digs into a grassy hill. The rock shelter already sits prepared with a fire pit, bedding, and clay jugs of water in place. They force me to sit with my back against the far wall and tie me with my hands over my head to an iron spike at the end of the deep outcrop. The stone feels cold on my back.

Red and black crude drawings of their gods or stories, I don't know which, cover the walls. Exhaustion takes me.

The smell of rabbit cooking over the fire wakes me. My shoulders now ache as much as my feet. I try to scoot up the wall to relieve the pressure. My mouth waters.

In Rankan I shout, "Food, water."

Bear Claws translates my words to his companions. White Stripe throws the entrails, skins, and heads at my feet. They all laugh, as he mockingly imitates me.

Bear Claws, White Stripe, the two others that tackled me, the three archers, and six other warriors sit around the warm fire and feast on the fresh roasted rabbits and laugh at my pain. I finally feel an emotion, hate. I'll kill each one of these fuckers, one at a time. I know the look must be all over my face, but I don't care. Hate. Yes, there's my emotion.

I fake sleep and wait. White Stripe will go next. The fire of my rage keeps my exhaustion from taking me. Kill him. Kill him. Kill him. It runs over and over through my mind. I think of nothing else.

The Blind-eye of Krozious shines bright through the cape of Lorick and lights up the shallow cave. They're all asleep. I suppose this method of hostage holding works for them, but they usually don't tie-up someone like me.

I use my anger, hunger, and will to pull myself up the wall. I work my hands out the edge of the spike and use the corner to loosen the center of the knot.

It feels almost like a double sheet bend. It's tight, the leather rope binds hard. My fingers slip. Out of practice, hungry, tired, this is harder than I thought. Fuck! Frustration pushes a deep sigh from me. I can feel tears welling in my eyes. All this is becoming too much. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I bang the back of my head against the cave in frustration. Calm down.

Giving-up never produces anything but failure and death. I try again. Slowly, finally, the knot loosens a bit. I feel the relief of success. This should be the hardest part. I untie myself from the spike. My hands, stinging with the popping pain of being asleep, drop in front of me. My shoulders ache.

I step slowly and silently over the rocky ground of the cave with mangled feet. The surge of the moment dulls the pain.

I bend slightly to the side and pick up a handful of entrails with my right-hand, and then with a few more steps I grab a tomahawk from one of the sleeping warriors into my left. The bright moonbeams make this part easy.

When I get to White Stripe, I pounce quickly, driving my knee into his chest, shoving the entrails into his

mouth, and slicing his throat from ear-to-ear with barely a gust of wind from him. I ride him to his death, and then leave him in a pool of blood with the rabbit guts stuffed in his mouth and the crimson covered axe on his chest. I step softly to the spike and tie myself back to the wall.

They want to break me. Never. I slump down into the sleeping position they left me in. Relief fills me for a moment. The only other time I've felt this much satisfaction over someone's death was when I ran through Wrak and his Ilsigg buddy.

A still, black sleep falls heavy me. I wake to the thumping of kicks across my ribs, and Bear Claws standing over me.

"What have you done?"

"I have done nothing."

He cuts me from the spike and pulls me by my wrist bindings on my stomach across the red rock to view White Stripe's corpse. "This, you did this, dark heart white skin."

"I have been tied to the wall all night. How could I do such thing? Whose axe lies on his chest, maybe they did it? Perhaps my gods sent a spirit to protect me?"

Bear Claws yells back, "Some god curses you. There is no doubt of this. And now I am cursed."

My feet throb, ache, and burn as they pull me to my feet. They hang my boots around my neck and drag me outside. One of the red stripe archers climbs a worn slick, twenty foot, wooden pole and lights a signal fire in the basket on top. They shove me down at the base of the pole. The warriors take turns watching me five at a time.

A tribesman approaches with a caravan of horses. They poke, prod, and smack me with the instructions to load the dead onto a horse. Bear Claws ties leather binding around my neck, connects it to my wrists, and the other end to his horse. The party works down to a well worn trail wide enough for three horses.

This will take a great escape. My beaten, bloodied feet feel a sense of relief on the softer ground of the path, but still ache and throb. I hold my head down in exhaustion as they march us onto the plains. My blue tunic and white pants stink with stains of blood, dirt, shit, and piss. I feel my blond hair sticking out wildly. The caw of hawks soars past me. On the horizon sunlight pokes through grey clouds and reveals cascading storms awaiting us. The

long grasses sway in the sweeping winds that blow the sweet smell of the rain.

We pick up to a jog trot, my feet burn with throbbing misery. I want to just quit, but the thought of dragging down the road keeps my legs striding. Sweat builds on my brow and trickles down my back. My heart begins to pound. The muscles in my legs shake as they push me forward. Deep easy breaths flow through my lungs. The run entrances me. I pain in my feet dulls. Strange, I feel like I can, like I want to run faster.

We slow to a walk as we enter the large, sprawling village. My feet drip with blood and suddenly scream with pulsing sharp torment. We cross a flat, removable, log bridge. Below lies a mote ten feet deep and ten feet wide. The bottom and sides of the huge pit rest full of sharpened, erect, log spikes. A six foot rampart of the dirt from the ditch encircles the tribe. Thunder claps.

Thousands of hide tents scatter inside the protective circle. Smoke flows from their tops. Brightly painted carved poles of animals, gods, and kings, like the totems of the Rankans, line the path. I see tanning stretchers, gardens, pens for hogs, and stalls for horses.

The tribe's people fall in and follow our convoy as we pass. In the center of the town sits a large open area filled with white sand. In the center rises a large pole. Next to the white rectangle an equally large, log hall. Around the large structure stands ten tunnel or mine entrances. As we move into this area, word of me has already spread, and people from the other side of the village move toward us. Bears claws walks me to the center by the pole and cuts my ropes. The men, women, and children of all ages come to witness my existence, or perhaps my death.

They circle the sand pit and begin hurling rocks, shit, rotten food, and half burnt logs from their fires at me. I try to duck and cover my head but the parade of humiliation pummels me. When the mob runs out of things to throw they move the circle closer rearm with the debris and pound me again. Again and again until they stand close enough to club me. They beat me. The thuds in my ears, the black across my eyes, the pain, the pain weighs so heavy. I feel dizzy, sweaty. The ache fills every part of my body.

I awake alone in the white dirt with my head in a hood. My arms held above my head by my wrists. My hands bound together in a sack. It feels like they tied me to the

large timber in the center. The rain pounds against me. My face feels swollen. I can barely move my mouth or eyes. Misery throbs through me. I stink of blood and filth. Cuts, bruises, and agony cover me. I have never hated the rain. I'm tired of hurting, being cold, wet, and hungry.

The thunder claps and lightning flashes. I hear dogs barking, horses neighing, but no people. The storm has driven everyone to shelter. Maybe I can get the sack off of my hands. Catch it on the pole. I try to stand but sharp, slicing, waves of torture shoot through my feet and drop me back to the sand. As I fall the hood shifts and a small hole lines with my left eye. I can't tell the time. The grey-black shroud of the storm covers the sky.

Vashanka swipes his axe once more and the fingers of white light shoot across the horizon and pull a smashing roar from the clouds. The village animals respond with their fear. It sounds as if one of the horses is right behind me. I turn to see. The hood shifts. I see nothing. I can feel its hoof-steps falling around me. I hear a light whinny as its nose brushes against my shredded feet. I desperately try to resituate the hole in front of my eye. I can feel its breath puff against my toes for a moment.

Finally I get the peephole lined with my eye. The black nose of a large warhorse fills my view. Its large nostrils widen as it sniffs me. The horse lowers and turns its head. A mighty black beast with dark eyes that shine like polished jewels. It shakes its glowing uncut mane and neighs at me. The steed steps back and with the tenderness of a mother licks my bloodied feet.

The pain wipes away with each swipe. The light and sound show of Vashanka's might crashes through the air once more. As the burst of light reflects in the steed's eyes and a red center shines through. The horse. The horse. Is it real? I laugh out loud like a madman. The fucking horse, what do you want? Why have the gods brought me through these trials, for a horse? A swirl of relief, desperation, confusion, and exhaustion spins through my mind. I lose control laughing and crying. An uncontrollable urge to close my eyes pulls them shut.

I wake-up to clubbing blows to my ribs. I can see the light of the sun through my blinder. I hear the familiar Rankan words of Bear Claws. "Get up fool."

"I'm awake. Stop hitting me." I scoot away from strikes.

"Where did you get this ring?" He commands.

"What are you talking about?" I question.

"This Rankan circle of honor." He inquires.

I realize he speaks of the ring Stav gave me. I feel for it on my finger but I can't find it.

"Where did you get it?" Bear Claws questions again.

"My sister's husband. He is Rankan. We have had troubled times. My sister was murdered. He gave it to me after that. Give it back."

He laughs. "You have no use for it. Our council met through the storms and decided your fate. You will die this afternoon. Today a warrior will become a Spirit Rider, the highest of all our soldiers. Many will fight for the honor, but only one will prevail. But whoever wins this honor, their first rewarded task will be to cut your heart from your chest and present it to the families of the warriors you killed."

I hear him step away. The image of the horse in my dream last night flashes through my mind. It seemed so real. What did it mean? I try to stand. My feet let me. I

don't feel any pain. I rub my sole on my leg and find no wounds.

The dream was real, was it? My face feels fine. I think the swelling went away. I don't understand. I can stand though. As I rise I have enough slack to pull my bindings to my chest. I just need to get this bag off of my head, or my hands.

I work the hood up and to a point using my forearms. I work my hands to the edge of the sack. I get hold of the hood and pull up, but the rope around my neck doesn't give. I pull again. I quickly move to a new plan and start to search for the knot holding my blinder.

I can't get hold of it. I feel eyes upon me. I hear the sounds of a crowd gathering. I stop, slump, and play the role of a wounded animal. I adjust so I can see. Soon the tribe gathers. The children sit in front, the women gather behind them, and the men behind the women. Behind the standing tribesmen, warriors on their horses close the large circle. I see hundreds if not thousands in the horde.

From behind me riders enter the arena. I think I see about ten of them. They line up in front of me with the asses of their horses pointing at me. I hear words in their

language. He calls out introductions to the crowd. The mob cheers for each warrior. Then he says something about me. I know, because the masses boo and throw things at my way.

The participants in the contest to take my life spread out around the edges of the pit. Drums begin to pound. The mob turns into a choir as they chant with the beat. The rhythm quickens. The horsemen dance their mounts in circles. The song ends with the horde erupting with a wave of yelling. The riders charge at each other in a free-for-all collision that sprawls out into isolated fighting. Each man welds a club and has a knife sheathed on their hip.

I use the shroud of the battle to try and free myself. I use the friction of the pole to push the sack on my hands to my fingertips. The thick hide bunches. I manage to work my pointing finger to the edge. I work it into the peephole, hook my finger, and pull to rip the hood open. It tears. I free my head. I gnaw at the leather bindings around my wrist. The fight continues. I hear the whoops and woos from the crowd. I glance up. A warrior with a black bird painted on his chest and white circles around his eyes falls in front of me with his brains popping from the top of his skull. I work the knot with haste. It unwinds and the sack falls to the crowd. Freedom. I untie the ripped

hood from my neck and throw it to the ground. The combatants see and circle me. Four of them remain.

I'm tired of this shit. Maybe I can get them off their mounts. I scream, "Fuck you, every one of you." I know they don't understand but that sure felt good. I spit in the sand, point at the ground, and motion back to myself. Trying to signal them to get off their horses and fight me.

A warrior with a cougar's head for a hat laughs at me. He pulls his horse from the circle, trots to the other end, and turns to face me. The others follow and line up behind him.

He charges, raises his club, and yells and battle cry. I can do this. I stand my ground. I can feel the horse. The hoofs fall with a slowed motion. The pulse of the animal beats in my chest. Closer, the breath of the beast fills my lungs. I wait. As the steed barrels down I sidestep, but Cougar Hat's club waits for me there.

Thud, flash of black, my knees buckle, I fight to keep my eyes open. I hear the crowd cheer. I rise from my knees, spit, and shake my head. I sweat. I hear the next rider charging. I turn to face him.

Through my dizzy head I still feel the motion of his mount. I step to the side opposite his club hand. I jump. Through my life I've turned many handsprings, jumped higher than others thought possible, but never have I jumped like this. The power of the horse pumps through my legs as I plow the man from his ride into the white pit. The satisfaction of knocking the shit out of an enemy wells in my throat. I pull the knife from his hip and plunge it deep into his neck. I stand and pick up his club. I whistle for his pinto. The shocked crowd stands in silence as the steed turns back for me.

I mount up. I shake the club over my head, yell with all of my hate, and charge Cougar Hat. He heels returns my assault. We thud the clubs as we pass. I continue the gallop toward the fools waiting their turn. I see one turned sideways. I jump the pinto and smash his front hooves into the man's face as we fly over. The force knocks him to the ground where the back hooves crush his chest as we pass.

I turn and run back at Cougar Hat. He already charges my way. When the tip of our horses' noses pass each other I throw my club and yank my mount right. I heard the thump of success. I continue the hard right turn, and circle back to

find him lying in the pit with his cougar hat bloodied next to him. I rear the beast and smash the life from his unconscious body. I whoop, holler, and snarl at the shocked horde.

I turn. Both remaining combatants come at me, spreading out on either side. Before we clash I pull me knees to my chest, place my feet on the pinto's back and leap at the rider to my right. I barely catch him, but find my legs wrapping his white horse. He tries to club me by swinging over his shoulder. I sway, grab his knife, pull his hair, and slit his throat.

I snag his club as he slithers to the ground. I put the knife in my teeth, raise the club, and charge the last man in the pit. I feel the blood of the dead man running down my chin, the look of fury on my face, and the power of the horse. Fear paints across his face.

We clash and turn. We circle battling with the clubs until I come straight down on his head folding his neck and caving his skull. The white steed rears and dances for the crowd. They stand quietly.

An old tribesman wearing a crown made of thick, white horns steps into the circle. He carries what looks like a

long, hooked, shepherd's staff with turkey feathers hanging down its spine. An air of tension floats through the crowd. He steps toward me with a lack of concern. He stops about ten feet from me and pushes the staff forward, as if to motion me to take it. He then sticks it in the sand, turns his back to me, and walks away.

I walk the mare to the stick and pluck it from the sand. I raise it over my head and the crowd begins to cheer. I gallop her around the pit, shaking my prize high, and encouraging the adulation.

A large man covered from head-to-toe in white paint rides a dun stallion toward the tribeman with the bone crown. The crowd silences. I ride to them while I yell in Rankan, "Bears Claws, I need you to speak for me."

As I approach I hear the white warrior yelling as he points in my direction. Bear Claws walks with his head down to join the group.

I point to the white warrior. "Bears Claws, what does he say?"

"My name is not Bear Claws, and he says you are not worthy of any honor, and can never be a Spirit Rider. He

also says you are a cheat. Our king says you are the best warrior this day and have raised the Spirit Rider's staff."

I point to the man with the horned crown and then to the white warrior as I say, "If he is your king, then who is he?"

"He is our best warrior and leader of the Spirit Riders. He says you have no spirit, that the power of the Great Horse will be lost if you are allowed to live. That you are only lucky, and he will prove it with your death."

I point at the white warrior again. "You tell him that I am one with the Great Horse. That it came to me last night in the storm and healed my wounds. That it called me by my dreams to this place."

Bear Claws looks at me with a look of shock and fear. "You should not say these things."

"Say, what the truth. Tell them!"

Bear Claws interprets my words. The white warrior yells and tackles me. He straddles my waist.

As he punches me in the face I hear Bear Claws. "He says you are a liar."

I've never been hit this hard. I shift my hips, give him my back, and push myself up. I strain under his weight. I grab two handfuls of sand. He locks his legs around me and punches me in my ears as I rise. I throw the sand over my shoulders. He pushes me forward as he drops from my back. I stumble forward. I turn to see him wiping the sand from his eyes. He pulls a tomahawk from his waist. The blade shines in the sun. He swings the small axe from a leather thong on the bottom in circles and figure eights around him.

He goes so fast I can barely see the blade. He runs and swipes at me. I backpedal with small jumps, dodging his attack. I don't think he'll make any mistakes.

The king starts to yell and walks between us. Soon about ten warriors with long, blackstone tipped spears surround the white warrior. He stops the motion of his swing, puts his weapon away, and gets back on his horse.

The king, Bear Claws, and the spearman escort me to the other side of the village and down into a tunnel. The short passage dumps into a round dugout room. Bones stick out of every part of the walls. Furs cushion the floor. A two-foot circular hole in the center of the ceiling floods the space with light. Smoke rises and flames flicker from a

large fire pit on the floor under the opening. Next to the pit stands a man.

White paint covers his face but cracks in his deep wrinkles. Two black lines run over each eye and the length of his face. Raven feathers hang from his ears and flow with his long, gray hair. Two necklaces of white beads hang with a third of blue and red around his neck. He wraps the fur of a large brown bear around himself like a blanket.

The king and Black Stripes exchange only a few words. My escort leaves. Black Stripes surprisingly speaks in Enlibrite to me. "My name is Toufik. I know who you are. Tonight we will find answers. What does the horse want from you? What must you do to fulfill your visions? But first you should eat and drink."

He hands me a water-skin. I gulp the cool liquid like a hungry baby. "You said we will find out what it wants. Does that mean you know what the horse is?"

"They are the Horses of the Gods. There are three. One twists the winds destroying everything above ground, another rides the lightning, the other gallops across the dry plains so fast he brings the fires. Tell me, which is your horse, wind, lightning, or fire?"

"Fire," I gasp out as I guzzle more water.

"Yes, I know the Fire Horse well." He motions me to sit.

"The last time the Fire Horse called to a man was 120 years ago. All tribes lived on the other side of the mountains. Then a great darkness came with your people with your empire. We were sure to die against the mountain, crushed by the darkness, or enslaved by the empire. But the Stallion of Fire chose a rider and burned the sacred passage for us to escape. We have guarded its secret from your people ever since. Tonight, we'll find your role."

I eat, drink, and sleep a bit. As night falls two young tribeswomen enter and bathe me. The thick blanket of stars shines through the roof as the cool water soothes my soul and tenses my skin. They scrub me with hard sponges and Yucca soap.

Toufik enters with a wooden bowl of steaming soup. "Drink, drink this and lay on the furs by the fire under the stars and all will be revealed to you."

I drink with no hesitation. I struggle to choke back the bitter taste of the soup and the leathery chunks of

mushrooms. The soft furs tickle my balls as I sit next to the fire and finish my stew.

Toufik sits across from me with a bowl of his own. A drummer enters and sits against the wall and begins to softly tap soothing beats. The women who bathed me begin to dance in slow, seductive rhythm. I drink. Time passes. I stare into the fire. Low chants start to flow from the dancers. Toufik shakes a rattle and joins the chant. Time passes. The flames dance.

The melody builds in my ears. A smile peels across my face. A twist in my guts bends me over. When I look back up the room swirls, the movement of the dancers mixes with traces of light falling from the stars. I stare into the fire. The flames flicker in the shape of the horse.

I see blood pouring over the mountain onto the Castle of Voorhexees, lightning flashes against the sun, the wolf, the eagle, the boar, the horse. The run of the beast beats in my chest. I ride through grapevines into a sea of blackness. The Tear, the blue pulsing diamond explodes with light. Then an absolute sense of nothing, no sound, sight, smell, or touch, only nothing.

I awake by the fire with the sun shining in my eyes. I feel clothes. I sit up. I see my blue tunic, rough but clean, and some buckskin pants covering my body. I feel dizzy. I shake my head and feel feathers and beads hanging from my hair.

Toufik stands in front of me with a smile on his face. "What did you see? I have heard the horse throughout the night, even now he awaits you."

I tell the wise man my dream. He leans down toward me. "You must ride to the other side of the mountain to find this stone. The end is unclear and has not been decided, but you have been chosen to ride with the horse. It's the horse's destiny to battle the dark god once more. You have been chosen for many reasons."

He raises back up, chuckles, and says, "And there are many trials that come with the Fire Horse. Your will has been tested. But all of this was a test for the real task. This I know. My father was the other rider. The nightmares haunted him to death. You must keep your will."

I hear the whinny from my dreams above my head. I look through the ceiling and see the shadow of the great black stallion rear.

*Chapter 12: Into the Darkness**Part I*

I stand atop the small hill of the dugout's roof. The sunlight shines like a polished coin off of his blue-black coat. Confidence, majesty, power flow from the mustang's gait. Small columns of smoke trail from his hooves. He shakes his head and joyfully whinnies at me as he trots closer. Puffs of smoke shoot from his nose. The steed's red eyes lock into mine. I'm frozen.

The large horse, probably seven feet to his withers, stands in front of me, lowers his nose, kneels and touches his forehead to mine. I hug his neck. The words, "There are many trials that come with the Fire Horse," echo through my blood. All of the death and agony that I've faced since I saw the horse hits me. The cavalcade runs long. Tears stream down my cheeks. My knees feel weak. The trials have been many. Fuck! Fuck all this! I'm tired of it. It doesn't matter what lies ahead. I hear a voice in my head "Do not worry, friend."

I silently mount the bareback of the divine steed. I lean over and say in his ear, "Let's ride to our doom."

The rush of wind hits me immediately. My legs lock around the flexing tons of muscle, as if ropes bind me to it. The path we need to take, the way to take it, and why exchanges through our minds in an instant. The rhythm of the run takes me over quickly, and turns my mind to the thought of my friends' shock when they see me alive. I can't wait to ride with them once more and to our fate. The thrust, speed, and force of the Fire Horse propel us faster and faster. Its hooves pound the ground in a glowing red blur. Flames spread in the swirl on landscape underneath us.

We hit the base of the range and forge through the sacred path. The girth of the mountain tests the great beast, but we gallop the up and down by midday.

My friend slows for me as we reach Voorhexees. The town and vineyards lay in ashes. The Imperial banners fly high. I would love to march the troops straight back here and run Stennous into the dirt. But there will be nothing to save if I don't head to the stone. The same archers fill the wall as when I left, but with red sashes across their blue coats. The ground lies deeply trampled. They must have ridden their cavalry ahead of their columns to defend

Stennous' victory. We trot through the smoldering grapevines.

Ahead a small patrol of dismounted Imperial soldiers reprimand Voorhexian citizens with an iron fury and barbed whips. As the thought crosses my mind, we charge forward trampling the first two guards. I hook my leg and drop into a death drag. I snatch a sword from the smashed patrolman as we turn and pass back. We turn again and charge. I hack the skulls of foolish attackers as the horse rears and tramples of two more guards.

I hear. "Look at him. He looks like a Voorhexees. He wears the blue tunic of the house. He must be the lost son. The King. The King lives!"

I turn. "Keep your voice down old man. Spread the word to hide in the hills. I will return with an army." We turn back toward Varisvaaria and gallop away.

The fury that beats the road forces long flames to spread from the stallion's hooves. His massive frame explodes wakes from puddles and digs divots in the hardened war road. The path of imperial destruction runs with us as we blur through the day. The run binds us, twists our existence into one, the feeling of one heartbeat, one

breath. The speed amazes me. It can go three times faster than any racing horse.

The horse keeps the secrets of its knowledge clouded from my thoughts. He shares little with me. I don't know if he hears all of my thoughts, or just those I direct at him, but I know he hears those. The cape of night begins to unfold on the horizon. From the last bits of light, shadows of marching columns dance into my view. We slow to a trot. We've found them.

As the stallion's hooves step on the dewy, grass route they sizzle with steam and smoke. His muscles twitch as he walks. The last rays shine in the steed's red eyes as riders from the column approach. I can see a look of shock on their faces as they get close enough to gage the size of the great steed.

I command, "Take me to the leader of this march."

The patrolman responds, "Who are you?"

"I'm Kormar Voorhexees. Who are you?"

The guard stammers, "I'm . . . sorry . . . Prince."

"Just lead the way, hurry."

Under the banner of the white stallion I find the pleasant surprise of a familiar face.

I yell, "Halt! Halt! Stop this line!"

The Captain holds his hand up and signals the stop and looks at me with surprise.

I smile. "Hello Captain, I thought your head would be on a Varisvaarian pole by now."

He looks at me with a confused smile. "In the holy bath of the Mother's Wine, where did you get that beast? Where is your saddle? And what in the fuck is in your hair? Sir."

I lean down to him from the massive beast. "You wouldn't believe it, if I told you. The important part is I'm here."

He takes a drink of his silver canteen. "Yes, I'm glad to see you're here to lead us back, to defend the homeland."

"I'm here to lead you, yes—but back to Varivaaria."

He spits his drink. "What? We've marched almost four days, with never making camp, barely a rest, upon direct order of the King . . ."

I interrupt, "The King is dead. Voorhexees has fallen. Stennous is allied with the Empire. I barely escaped. How do you not know this? It's been four days. Have you not sent any riders?"

"We have been doing nothing but marching, pushing ahead. The last I heard. The King ordered us back, freed and paid our slaves, and named you his first born. So if he is dead, then . . ." He bows his head. "Then we take orders from you, Sire."

I point back toward northeast. "Your brothers man the walls against you. The Imperial Cavalry sits in your stables. Can we beat their columns there? Yes, I think so. So we could smash them in the field then lay a slow siege against their riders and our archers, while we wait for them to send more troops to slaughter us."

He narrows his eyes at me. "Or?"

I lock eyes with him. "Or, we turn around join everyone else and take Varivaaria, then turn, and together take back Voorhexees with a huge force."

I slide off the great beast and say, "Besides the horse tells me we are running out of time. There are other

fights that must be fought—you know this. We must turn, the time is near.”

The captain huffs through his puffy brown beard then says, “So be it. Into the darkness we march. I will address the men.”

“No, I will address them, Captain.”

The captain nervously smiles. “Sir, I suggest you don’t tell the men your horse is talking to you.”

I laugh my best fake laugh. “He doesn’t talk to me. That was a joke.”

I want to tell him that I hear his thoughts, but we don’t have time for me to prove my sanity. The stallion enters my mind, “But we do have time to let the men rest. We will make it up tomorrow.”

I command, “The men are tired. We should rest tonight, make camp, eat warm food, and tomorrow I will speak to the men, and we will run.”

As I walk toward the men I hear the orders to make camp being yelled and the Captain saying, “You mean triple-time? What do you mean run?”

A wave of relief rolls down the line as the men sprawl and scramble in the twilight. The Fire Horse gallops around the forming site then off to the southwest. Soon, the smell of smoke twists with the air of roasting pig, my ears fill with song and the crackles of fire, and hundreds of stars like diamonds shine bright above me. I enter the captain's domed, white canvas tent.

"I'm going to stow in here for the night, Captain."

"Suit yourself, sir. I have to say, I think it was wise to let the men rest before turning them around."

"Thank you, Captain. But it was the horse's idea," I say with a sarcastic tone.

The captain chuckles and extends his canteen. I take it and gulp the last bit. "Seems she's empty, Captain."

He motions my way. "Damn the Gods, come with me to the chow wagon to refill her."

We walk through the reveling troops to the circle of supply wagons in the center of the camp.

The captain barks, "Water, water, water, where's the damned barrels of whiskey? Cooky, fetch me some whiskey."

I ask the captain, "Is this all of the water? How do you water the horses?"

"We've got troughs in a wagon over there, if there's not a good stream or something around."

"Have them out and filled before sunrise, and all of the barrels unloaded and opened. Tell every man to have a cup and as many canteens as they can ready when the sunrises."

"We usually just fill them up from the spigots one barrel at a time, sir. Seems a waste to open them, especially all of them."

"Just have it done. Trust me"

"Aye, sir. You are the king." That sounds so strange, though this journey has changed many things, still, less than four moons ago I was just a thief on the street.

I sleep peacefully. Before the morning breaks the horse summons me to awake. The crickets still chirp as we walk through the sleeping camp to the supply wagons. The barrels sit unloaded but not opened. A boy fills the troughs as the cooks prepare some morning slop. The bustling kitchen stops in awe of the massive beast as he weaves through the tents.

I command. "Get those barrels open, boy. And get out of here."

I lead the horse to the troughs. "Drink, some from each barrel and trough. Get your nose in the water. Let your divine powers of healing run through the horses and men. Let them become one with the run."

The horse begins to drink. "Ahhh, it's been a century since I last stopped for cool water. Very nice. This will give them energy and take away their pain in their feet and legs, so they may push themselves—but the run is something only we share. You are a chosen rider."

I pat the stallion's neck. "Remember to drink from all the barrels, move along to the next. Why me, why was I chosen?"

He moves around, drinking and splashing his nose in the troughs. "Many reasons that you have been chosen but mostly your blood, your mixed blood is of a riding tribe and a horse clan, different races, beliefs, but both directed by the horse. Your blood is such of the horse, I felt your first breath. Perhaps, if they are men of the horse clan we can find a way together to connect with them."

As we walk away I direct to the cooks, "Make sure every man gets his water. I will send elite to stand sentry. It is an order."

After breakfast and everyone's ration of water the line forms pointed toward Varisvaaria. I ride atop the black stallions to a small hill in the road. "Men, Imperial plots have pulled us away from our main objective. I promise one day we will return home, you will sleep in your beds, be with your families, with pockets full of gold. But for now we must head back to the siege. We must move with haste. We are needed, more than you could know. Our time has been wasted with this plot to divide us. March with me, with my pace, and when you feel you cannot continue, drink from your canteen."

The captain yells, "You heard your new king, MARCH."

I dismount and run next to the Fire Horse. We push the speed to a trot. Never in these lands has an army moved so fast. Soon the run consumes me and time slips away. We force our way on into the night. The column stops for only a few hours in the night to eat and fill their canteens.

As midday approaches on the second day of our run we near the edge of the valley of Variavaaria City where the

Confederacy army posts. I see the banners of the other four kingdoms and a force twice as large as our own.

I mount the steed. "Captain, come with me."

We ride hard into the camp. Thousands of troops fill the plateau of the basin. The sounds and smells of a small city bubble from the camp, but the feel and movement have a desperate air about them.

I slide off the Fire Horse as it barely slows to a canter, and land in the middle of the Confederate camp with a magical sticking thud. The surrounding men look on in shock, the giant black steed, me with feathers braided in my hair, and smoke flowing around us. I stand and wait for the Captain like an impatient parent with my hands on my hips.

He arrives shortly and I tease him, "Well, that took you long he enough."

He snickers as he dismounts, then says, "Well sorry, my steed's stride doesn't stretch to the horizon." We walk together toward the princely banner of Sed.

He pulls out his silver canteen. "Well, we made it."

"Yes, we made it, didn't we?"

We near the edge. Below the back-and-forth volleys of the siege has begun. The Varivaarian troops nestle behind the walls of the castle. The Confederate troops occupy the base of the valley and burnt city. The buildings and trees smolder. Scorch marks dot across the castle walls, piles of dead burn next to the lake, and Varisvaarian assault engines have been captured and turned against them. A fire load smashes on the wall. Giant orange sparks explode out and fall to the ground. Arrows, stones, and ballista bolts fly from the castle in a staggered ballet.

We pass the sentries and enter the prince's domain. Inside I see generals from New Theibia and Dorna sitting with Le Soberano. Relief hits me to find Staufan, Sed, Thanatos, Haezak, and Jaulita standing scattered through the area. The sight of her forces a smile on my face. She turns. Her eyes look swollen and red. She sees me and her face jumps with surprise.

"Oh, thanks to the gods. You're alive." We hurry to each other and embrace. She grabs my face and kisses me. "My beautiful man, you're alive. I have missed you. Oh, I'm so glad you're alive." She begins to cry.

"I've missed you too. I love you. I'm O.K. It's O.K. Everything's O.K." I hug her as the words fall easily from

my mouth. I look up and see a face that brings a series of mixed emotions, Gauthus Sr. We lock eyes.

"The man that raised me as his son is here," I whisper into her ear.

We break our embrace and I go to him. We hug. "The last time I saw you, you were going to play the part of a decoy, and now an army marches behind you. I never would image that they could catch you in their game. But here you stand just like the rest of us."

He hugs me again. "I've missed you, son. I'm so happy you're alive. I've heard about everything. Later, you can tell me which parts are true. Junior was a good boy."

I pull away. "He died protecting me."

Gauthus nods. "As he should, nothing that happens in war is one man's fault. He did what he had to do for the kingdom. I think I know you both pretty well, and I'm sure it was his choice."

I nod. "Yes, of course it was. I'm glad to see you, Dad. I love you. When this is all over you might be the last Voorhexees left. You might have to find a young girl, and make some more." I wink at him, and he shakes his head at me with a smile on his face.

When I turn I'm greeted by my friends with volleys of my name and handshakes. The first question comes from Sed, "How are you? We got a pigeon just this afternoon that claimed you were dead, and the Voorhexian army was to be allied with the empire."

I smile. "I was wondering why everybody was surprised to see me alive."

Staufan lets loose his raspy voice, "How did you escape?"

"It's a long story. I had to fight my way free from the other side of the mountains."

Sed questions, "The other side of the mountains? No one crosses the mountains. Is that where your old fashion slave hairdo came from?"

"Yes, and the tribes on the other side cross the crest of the mountains every day. There is only one path and it is sacred to them, and guarded. I told you it's a long story."

Thanatos slithers forward. "Across the fucking mountain, huh. Damn bro. I didn't believe it when they told me you were dead. But I didn't think you were crossing the Impassable Range."

I smile. "With bare feet none the less."

Thanatos laughs. "I thought you were fucking joking."

I shake my head. "It's no joke."

A shadow descends like a dark storm over the tent. We all exchange looks of inquiry before we gather outside to investigate. A black circle sits in front of the sun, the night in day.

Haezak yells, "It has begun, the blood moon will rise tonight. When the moon is direct above the gate can be open. We must attack as soon as we can."

We go back into the tent, light candles, and begin to discuss strategies.

Sed commands, "First order, we need to send our captains to join the camps down in the basin. Get everyone down there and ready for attack immediately."

I nod to the Captain, and he leaves the tent to move the men.

Haezak breaks into the circle. "We have to get to the stone. There is nothing else more important."

Staufan narrows his eyes at him. "I think we all already know that. The question, is how? Their walls are

stronger than expected, and the shaft entrance is well guarded. We have lost several war rogues in surveillance."

Thanatos and I look at each other and I say, "We can get in the elevator shaft. By the time the troops are in place, true night and the blood moon will be above. We can move in through the shadows. We've been there, and I'm sure the rouges you sent were good, but, like I said we've been there. And I think we should start the attack too."

Sed says, "The price to break, or go over their walls will be great many men will die, but we can do it."

Thanatos speaks, "What if we can get the gate open?"

Staufan growls, "We don't have time for that."

Sed looks at Thanatos. "That would be great, but like he said the stone is more important. We can expend lives for this end."

Le Soberano speaks, "Jue can t'row jour men against da wall, but we haue a yoint army herrrre. Let's hearr dere plan."

I interject, "It would serve as the greatest distraction. It will be pure chaos in that keep if we can get the castle gates open."

Staufan looks at me and Thanatos. "You know that me and the sun priest must come with you if we are going in after the stone."

Jaulita speaks up the circle, "I am going as well."

I hear the horse, "Open the gate, then we will run." I shake my head. "Wait a moment. Let's plan what we need to do. Then will decide whose going. Look, we should have plenty of time to get the gate open if we leave at nightfall."

I turn to Staufan. "Then you, Haezak, Jaulita, whoever can walk through the gate behind the troops and we don't have to try and sneak you guys in. There's climbing the old man won't be able to do."

I hear the horse, "Yes."

Staufan crosses his massive arms and nods. "Well, then we need to open the gate. So that is settled." He points at me and Thanatos. "And it sounds like you two are going alone. I'm not too fond of climbing or cliffs, anyway. Walking or riding in with my axe-in-hand sounds good to me."

I look around the table to everyone for confirmation. "So, me and Thanatos will sneak in the shaft, open the

gate, and we will charge together to find the Gazelle and the stone in the chaos of the battle."

We all agree with a nod. We discuss the coordination of time, signals, and execution to give us the best chance for success. For this task we can find no perfect plan only the best one. This will be a blood filled adventure with many opportunities to meet the end of this world.

Sed leans forward. "Don't worry. I will have the troops at the gates, ready to overrun them. I must go. There is much to oversee."

Staufan turns to Haezak. "I hope you've gathered every component you will need, and made all your sacrifices. We will need every spell you can muster old man."

Staufan turns to us. "I must go pray."

Jaulita leans over to me, clutches my hand, and kisses me. "I must go with him. I will find you, soon."

I grab a handful of her ass. "You better find me before I leave. I've got something for you."

She winks at me. "You pervert." Then smiles and walks away.

As the foursome walks out of the tent I hear Staufan. "Get a move on, Scum. Ready for attack. Ready your souls for the end."

Le Soberano pats me on the back. "Come wit us and chare a meal wit jour fauder before jue face death once more. We got some da étouffée."

The thought of southern food crossing my lips curls my mouth in a big smile. "That sounds great. Come on Thanatos join us."

"Jes, yoin us."

We walk through the frantic camp toward the Port banners. Gauthus speaks, "Sir, we need to go see our captains, first."

"Jes, we must."

Gauthus leads the way. As we enter the tent I expect to see Port Elite with their puffy red sleeves and finned helms; but to my surprise Taggart and Morngrym sit in the room sharpening their axes, and Stav sits on the other side with two more Rankans.

Gauthus clears his throat and says, "It is time to ready for battle. Get the men gathered, joined with Sed in

the valley, and find your places at the front of the attack."

Morngrym squints at me. "Well, holy sheep shit. The bait got off the hook. What the fuck are you doing here kid?"

Le Soberano throws a scornful look. "Watch da way jue talk to da new King of Voorrhhhhexees."

Morgrym fires back, "But if I'm watchin' my mouth I can't see to fight. Come on, pops we got to rouse up this rabble. Sorry kid, no offense."

Taggart pats me on the back as he passes by. "Nice to see you made it this far. I had a feeling you were tougher than most."

Stav walks up to me and pulls me into his chest with a hug. "Little brodder, you're alive. I vas just told you vere dead."

I back up and shake my head. "That seems to be the popular rumor. I'm glad to see you. The ring you gave me was stolen."

"Stolen? By who? Where?"

"Yes, stolen by an Ilsigg tribesman on the other side of the mountains. And he spoke Rankan, better than me."

"Vell dat's not hard to do. You're Rankan is pretty bad. To da east?"

"Yes."

"Dere are many Rankans dat sailed around to the odder side of the range and live in the trives. I've veen told dere are even Rankan villages dere. He must have learned from dem. The ring of honor vill do him vell with dose Rankans. As long as you're alive dat's all dat matters. It vas good to see you. I must join my vrothers."

"What are you doing here, Stav? I thought you were going to rebuild?"

He stops, turns, and smiles. "Part of das treaty. When called upon das Rankans must fight. Das Port is our home now."

We walk to Le Soberano's luxurious tent. I've never seen such blatant extravagance. Ever mobile comfort possible sits crammed inside. We sit and eat the best étouffée I've ever had, and it's got to be four days old, at least. We drink rum and coffee as Le Soberano's personal chef fries beignets for dessert and I tell my father

everything he needs to know about what I've seen since I left The Port.

After dessert he smiles at me and says, "So, who is this girl that you're in love with?"

"Father, please."

"It seems pretty serious."

"You know what, Dad? If we don't all fall into the pit of death tonight or tomorrow, then I'll ask her to marry me. O.K?"

He smiles. "I thought it was serious. She was devastated when we thought you were dead. She's very beautiful, and obviously she loves you. You will be happy. You're a great match. She seems to be as equally mal-groomed to be a queen as you a king." He chuckles and looks at me with playful eyes as he takes a drink. "Now, if we can just survive, so you two may enjoy your love."

As we raise our cups and toast to life Jaulita enters the tent. "I thought I might find you here," she says with a grin.

Her thin, shallow dimples stretch from her strong chin to her high cheeks bones as she smiles. Her hair twists

into two large braids that fall over each shoulder. A blue, thin cotton dress hangs from around her neck. Pink gloss shines off of her large, supple lips, and painted blue shadows shade the lids of her green eyes. She looks stunning.

Thanatos smirks. "Well, look who we have here. My brother here was just saying if we make it out of this alive, he is going . . .

I cut his words off, "Shut up." I turn to her. "Don't worry about him. He thinks he's funny. I'm so glad to see you. You look great."

Le Soberano stands and bows. "Mademoiselle, welcome."

As we remember our manners the rest of us stand as well. I give her a half smile. "Shall we go for a walk?"

As we leave Thanatos says, "I will meet you in Sed's tent when it's time."

I nod. We walk through the emptying camp to her modest tent. Well polished armor, sharpened swords, and a gleaming blue-steeled, two-sided battle axe sit organized and ready for combat. A shrine to the lightning god stands next to the weapons. Red wax drips like blood from burning candles

off of the wooden altar. Sacrifices of rum, cigars, and the bones of enemies rest atop the wax.

She walks next to her cot and turns to face me. "So, when was the last time you bathed," she says with a slight rasp in her voice.

"Hummmm, two days ago."

She pulls a two-foot wide, wooden washtub from underneath her bed. "Take off your clothes and stand in this. I have warm water by the fire outside. I'll be right back."

I strip and get in. She returns with the large iron pot of steaming water and sits it next to the washbasin and backs up a few steps. "I don't want to get my dress wet," she says with a seductive smile.

Wind snaps open the tent flap and the enchanted starlight of the false night glows around her as she takes off her clothes. And the power from within her, over me, takes hold. "You are so beautiful. I want no one else, ever again."

She smiles. "I feel the same."

She takes a cup and pours some water over my shoulders, and begins to wipe me with a moist cotton towel and rose scented soap. Her touch thrills my mind and pumps excitement through my loins.

She looks down, smiles, and begins to wash my hard cock. "Mmmmmmmmmmm. I have missed you my beautiful man."

She rinses me, glides down to her knees, and wraps her large soft lips around my throbbing manhood. As she takes me deeper, pulses of pleasure tingle through my body and I say, "Oh fuck, baby, damn, don't stop."

She widens her mouth and takes me all the way and a slight gag comes from the back of her throat. As she pulls her head back spit drips from my rod. She grabs my cock and starts to jerk me as she sucks. She twists her stroke back-and-forth as she licks and sucks the tip. Her hand and mouth glide in perfect unison as she jerks me faster and sucks me harder.

"Fuck baby, it's been awhile you're going to make me . . ."

She goes faster and moans a muffled sound of accepting pleasure. She pulls her mouth away and looks up at me as she continues to jerk me. "Yes, baby come in my mouth."

She takes me again and places my hand on the back of her head. I pull her in. She moans as she goes faster and faster. Waves of ecstasy roll from the tip of my rod back through my entire body, curling my toes and fingers, then shooting back to the tip again in an instant as I erupt shooting my seed down her throat. I shiver as she pulls away.

We sip rum, laugh, and recite poetry for some time before we fall into the sweaty, musky, all-consuming harmony of pleasure that we share. We fuck until we have to leave.

I help her strap on her armor. "If we never see each other again in this world, know I have never loved anyone as I love you."

She turns and kisses me. "I never loved anyone but you."

We hug. As I walk away we try hold hands until the tips of our fingers lose each other. I move forward and force myself to not look back. The camp sits empty as I make my way to Sed's tent.

Part II

I hear the horse, "We shall see you soon."

I shake the voice from my head and try to concentrate on the task of the gate. I enter. Thanatos sits with his feet propped up on the war table smoking the elk bone pipe. Next to his feet sits black leather pants and boots, and a black war-rogue shirt complete with thin padded armor and pockets full of tools. Next to those a bundle sits wrapped in a piece of red velvet.

He hands me the pipe. I hit it and start to change. "What's in the bundle?"

Thanatos stands and as he opens it says, "Well, since the last time we were here you got your dirks taken. I thought you might need these."

Inside lies Krosk's Port Navy dirks. Thanatos continues, "I went back for these the night we moved his body. I was going to give them to you when this was all over, but now seems better."

He looks at me with actual emotion in his eyes. "Let's take him on one last adventure."

Emotion wells in me, but I instantly fight it back.
"Ya, let's do that."

We shake hands like brothers and look at each other knowing this could be our last smoke together. I smile.
"Let's go kill some fuckers."

He nods his head. "Ya, let's do that."

A deep darkness sets in and the blood moon replaces the blackened sun. We position ourselves to cross back to the entrance side of the valley using a lower flume. As we wade in the pool and start to work open the shoot, Thanatos says, "We've gotten men across, but will be almost to the base when we get to the other side. It's the climb up that's been the most deadly."

I nod to him. "Well then, we'll be just fine. We'll get across on the slide, be able to climb up to the shaft entrance level. I'm worried what we will find at the top."

As we continue to pull on the heavy gate I can see the valley below overflows with the thousands of torches sitting in battalions under different banners. The Sallidon Troops dodge arrows from the castle in the burning streets. The smaller armies of the New Theibias and Dornians flank the city on opposite side. The Voorhexian Cavalry sits in

the valley ready to charge forward. Mornngrym holds back the snarling swamp wolf leading the Port troops next to the assault towers that stand in the valley ready to move through the city and onto the castle.

The barrage from the valley catapults continues blasting fire over the city against the castle walls. The clamor of the men, the thunders of the explosions, and the neighing of horses echo through the basin. Then in only moments, calm rolls over the valley, through the city, and all seems to stop.

I see a wide figure standing on the fulcrum platform of a catapult that can only be Staufan. Then I hear his raspy yell. "Men, the time has come to fight a battle most of you could not even image, monsters, darkness, evil itself. Whatever you see, hold your line, follow your orders, and die with glory. Breaking the line or command will only get your brothers killed. You must fight for one another, spill blood for one another, die for one another. We are all here together, and no one knows or will even believe what we will fight here tonight. It will be our bond alone, those that live, and those that die. We must fight to the death. So my brothers of battle ready yourselves, your weapons, and follow me into the darkness!"

The divisions cheer and Staufan replies to them, "What say you, men? I say I can't hear you. What say you?" They exchange their screams until he works them into a raging state, as he raises his glowing blue axe above his head, and it casts a blue dome that covers the army for an instant. When the dome disappears, the valley explodes into a frenzy of warriors ready to die.

We get the gate moved and the water rushes out into the flume. I look at Thanatos. "That's our cue. We've got to go."

We shoot down then twist back-and-forth snaking our way across, gaining enough momentum to even go up a bit. The water splashes in our faces as we round the corners. Neither of us can help but letting out a few whoops. The rage in the valley below well covers our noise as horns blow the order for attack. The excitement of the ride feels like the perfect start, to what will be either a short night ending in death, or a long night of thrills.

We reach the entrance side of the basin. We moved on the other side of the lake from the building battle, but I can still hear the ruckus. The climb looks about sixty or seventy feet to the top. We begin our ascent. As we rise I can see the siege towers slowly rolling forward and

platoons marching toward the castle pulling themselves into turtle formations. Archers with shield bearers work behind them to return fire on the defenders. The fires burn a dull, hazy orange in the cast of the blood moon. We climb quickly. In a short time we get near enough to the top we need to stop and survey.

I can hear men in the distance. I don't hear falling rock, crunching steps, heavy breathing, conversation, or anything that leads me to think there is anyone close to the edge. We signal each other to look. As I peer over I see only some trees and shadows moving in the distance by the shaft entrance. We pull ourselves up and slide forward in the shadows staying low. We enter a group of spruce trees not far from where we crashed the elevator.

I see only six men. The assault worked to draw most of them away. I signal to Thanatos. We decide to move forward in a straight ahead assault. Before we move six figures dressed in black from head-to-toe climb out of the shaft and take the guards from behind. We stop and exchange confused looks. Thanatos signals for me to wait. One of them cuts the signal bell and then drops it below. The roar of the battle echoes in the background.

The cart arrives fairly quickly. Anger runs through me at the sight of the passengers. Stilcho and two more of his men step out onto the worn grass carrying a chest covered in gold dragons. An irrational urge pulls me forward.

I hear Stilcho. "Is that one of ours?"

I walk forward. "I'm going to fucking slit your throat."

He shakes his head. "Kormar, it's nice to see you too."

His men form a tight guard in front of him. "Don't you think you are a bit outnumbered? You look well kept to have been hiding in the woods all this time. Where are your friends? Stay alert men. Look, we are leaving. Don't cause trouble and you won't die, at least by us."

Thanatos steps from the trees. "Let it go. We've got to get the gate. There's too many. These guys are serious."

Stilcho laughs. "The gate? Just the two of you? There's no counterweight. It only cranks. How do you think that one of you can do that while the other holds off the army in the courtyard?"

He shakes his head and signals to his men. "Get their uniforms off. Six uniforms, I will send four of my men with you. Maybe, if you have men ready to roll under as you get it raised, you'll make it. Good luck, you need to kill them all, for everyone."

I nod as he continues, "They're at the top of the tower with the girl and diamond. I have more men with instructions to set barrels of black powder around the Great Tree. You must hurry if you want to save her." He turns to his guards. "Let's go men hurry."

As he walks off I shake my head in confusion and say, "Thanks. You'll never make it across the valley."

He smiles. "We are going north. If any of us live through the night, I hear that Voorhexees needs rebuilding. Many people will need loans there. I'm sure the new king will turn his army and take back his home. And when he does he can marry my daughter pregnant with his child."

He stops and turns with a serious look on his face and continues, "And Kormar," he looks at me and Thanatos and rubs his chin, "Remember, your friends will always disappoint you, and your enemies can always find truce in

their profit. The crank is on the right side of the gate as you enter the yard."

We throw on enough of the Varisvaarian colors to look good at a glance and take their shields. Thanatos says sarcastically, "So, you got his daughter pregnant. I wonder what Jaulita will think of that?"

I shake my head. "No way. He's just saying that. I haven't been with her in a long time. Impossible. And you're real funny. You better not say shit to her about this."

He laughs. "Don't worry. Not a word. I don't want to be anywhere around if she finds out."

We descend and jog with purpose as patrol through the tunnel, up the stairs, and through the castle. As we open the doors Thanatos says, "Right before we start to open the gate, remove my colors, and I'll get yours. We don't want to get killed by our own men."

I nod. A wave of sight and sound slams against us as we step into the courtyard. Arrows fly with a whistle in both directions and lie scattered and sticking all about. The air swirls with the screams of the dying, wounded, and commanders shouting orders. Thunder echoes from the gate.

The clank of metal flows down from the wall as the siege towers begin to connect.

Fires dot the yard. The smell of smoke wafts around us. Men move toward the wall and the wounded toward the keep in a chaotic ballet. Blood stains the ground and streaks the walls. No one notices us at all. We move quickly and directly to the right tower of the gatehouse. The crank sits poorly guarded. As the two guards see us, they fall from the bolts of Stilcho's men's crossbows. We shed our colors.

I look at Thanatos. "We're cornered here. Our only hope is to get it open fast."

He nods. "Are you ready for this?"

I return the nod. We switch the brake to open and each grab a wooden wheel of the two man crank and with an exchange of a look start to turn. Several turns in the gate barely gets a foot of the ground. And as we turn the next turn we hear, "The gate, get men to the wheelhouse."

Stilcho's guards stand ready, but a flood of men charges our way. We crank faster, trying to stay in unison. I feel the horse galloping. The heartbeat. The power. Faster. He draws near. I turn the wheel with the might of

the stallion knocking Thanatos down and spinning the crank fast enough to raise the gate for men to start rolling under from the turtle on the other side. Soldiers still charge. I spin the crank again. The Varisvaarian men slaughter the troops rolling in, and begin to overwhelm Stilcho's men. Thanatos stands up and looks at me in confused amazement. I go to spin the wheel again and it knocks me to the ground as if it opened itself.

The sound of a deafening whisper, like a crowd in a stadium, roars through the gate as platoons rush by me. I stand up, turn, and face the gate. The portcullis rests on the neck of the black stallion and two other giant horses, a gray and a white. I relock the brake and the divine trio steps forward.

As I mount the black steed Haezak, Jaulita, and Staufan enter under the next turtle through the gate.

I look at my comrades. "To the top of the tower."

Thanatos shakes his head. "You're going to ride that thing to the top?"

"Yep, and so are you." The white horse of the wind steps forward. "Get on that one. Take the old man with you."

I turn to Jaulita and extend my hand down. "Come, my dear."

She jumps on behind me. Thanatos and Haezak settle onto the Horse of Swirling Wind. I look to Staufan. "That one is all yours."

As he mounts the giant, grey, Horse of Lightning an explosion of thunder, as if the stars themselves had collided and the worlds of the universe realigned, shakes the stone walls. The grey horse half-rears and shakes a quiver from neck to hind.

Staufan smiles. "I think he likes me."

A thick, purple-black fog cascades down from the top of the tower. It pours down rapidly, covering everything around us, and creeps through the city. I lead the charge into the darkness. We jump from wagons in the courtyard to small buildings to the keep tower. A stairwell so small it looks like a rain trough from the ground spirals up the tower carved into the sandstone. The steeds gallop up the space barely big enough for my footsteps with a floating magical gait.

As we land on the top the blood moon pulls overhead. The red light takes over the sky. A growling sucking sound

fills the air. The purple and black fog continues to pour from the roof where two ladders painted in glowing black energy, cross in an "X" on the floor about fifteen feet in front of us. At each end of the ladders stands one of the four worshipers of Dolus chanting a mantra. The three Queens each stand in a separate section toward the center of the crossing ladders locked in their own song. In the fourth section the Gazelle is bound by the limbs of the tree piercing through the roof. In the center of the "X" floats the Tear.

The magnificent stone holds true to all the rumors with its beauty, but it lies shrouded in a dark cloud. We dismount, draw our weapons and move forward. Jaulita walks to my left, Staufan to my right, Haezak next to him, and Thanatos on the far right. The tower shakes beneath us. The fog grows thicker and rolls faster around us and down to the battlefield below. From the stone a black hole haloed in blue rips apart the air as if the world were merely a curtain for another place. It widens quickly.

From the other side steps out beast-men twisted in chaos and darkness. The large creatures drip with spit and puss. Crooked fangs of different animals poke from their mouths. Their hides swirl with green, purple, and black

look like the dead. Their eyes glow red in the darkness. They wear armor made of bones and carry swords forged in black metal I've never seen before.

The black air rolls quickly through the city, over the valley, and beyond spreading deep darkness and even rising into the sky. The gateway opens wider and thousands of beast-men flood through like rain. They descend upon the battle below with haste, climbing and jumping down with the power and agility that no man can match.

Many start to move our way. The steeds charge. I leap onto the Horse of Fire as he passes. I gallop into the creatures. We plow into the creatures with swirling kicks that burst with the powers of fire, twisters, and lightning. The Fire Horse throws intense flames from his hooves as he rears and stomps two creatures at a time. I guard his back swinging my sword as we fight through the monsters. The white horse legs seem to disappear and a twister appears under him throwing beasts like they were pebbles. The lightning horse throws bolts from his eyes and hooves as he races through the beasts to the Gazelle.

Staufan hacks and slays creature after creature spilling and spraying their putrid purple ooze from his glowing axe. Thanatos slithers and slides, dodging blows,

and throwing dagger after dagger into kill zones like the eye, the throat, the heart. The creatures continue to roll through wave by wave. The roof starts to fill with their bodies. I dismount and we circle up together. The Horse Gods continue the battle.

Haezak pulls a trinket from his pouch and chants a shield of light that domes around us. We move forward through the battle repelling the creatures until we stand next to the Gazelle. Staufan and Jaulita swipe their axes and chop her free. Staufan grabs her chin kisses her and hands her a battleaxe.

Thanatos draws his hand crossbow, steps from the light, and shoots both priests on the right side of the "X". I step to the left and throw one of Krosk's dirks dropping the third. The fog slows to a creep, but the gateway stays open. The Horse Gods hold the creatures at bay.

The fourth priest, the leader steps forward from himself. One of him still stands in the corner chanting, and the other steps toward us wielding two balls of dark fire. They slam against the light destroying the shield and scattering us with the force.

A giant twisting ladder of violet energy bursts from the black hole. The Queens change their mantra and the limbs of the tree come to life bursting through the roof like giant snakes and darting back down seeking to impale us. Haezak moves too slow and one heads straight for him. I dive and knock him out of the way and the wooden serpent rips through the outside of my calf muscle. The pain flashes through me. I roll over, sever it, and stand. I pull the wood from my leg. Blood oozes from the coin sized wound. Thanatos, The Gazelle, Jaulita, Staufan, and I chop and slice at the branches cutting them back. The Queens change their chant once more and limbs lose their life.

Haezak pulls a wand from his pouch that casts a line of fire that forces the dark priest back. The old sun priest then throws his own ball of flame knocking the priest of Dolus back to the edge of the roof. There he finds the axe of the Gazelle slicing his head from his body. The fog stops, but still hangs heavy over all that it has covered. The horses run the remaining monsters from the roof.

Suddenly a giant shadow slithers up the ladder. It looms over us all. Haezak yells to us through the chaos,

"We must close the gate. The witches must be pushed in. The Tear will only allow the followers of Vashanka to enter."

As the last word falls from his mouth the giant shadow reaches down, lifts him high in the air, and pulls him apart like he was made of paper. As Haezak's blood and organs rain down on the tower. A brilliant golden light shoots up from his mangled remains and the shadow drops him. The light burns through the sky and wipes the blood from the moon. The fog still hangs and the beasts still feed on the blood of men below.

The horses charge the shadow. Thunder explodes above us. The giant black mass snatches the white horse to give it the same ending as Haezak, but lightning flashes through the shadow and it loses grip. The black horse shoots flames from his nose shrinking the shadow. The dun runs around the shadow with the force of a twister pulling the ladder and shadow down a bit.

I look back to the Queens, and a transformation has come over them. The beautiful women have turned to creatures of the night twisted in Dolus' chaos. The blonde Queen has the beak, eyes, wings, and talons of an owl. Her skin swirls with the colors of rotting flesh. The brunette Queen has become an abomination of a panther with claws,

fangs, and a tail. The redheaded Queen mixes with the bat with wings and teeth like daggers.

I connect eyes with Jaulita as she runs with Staufan and the Gazelle toward the Queens and the hole in reality. Everything slows as I watch the only woman I've ever truly loved stride toward oblivion. I will never love another. She runs with grace and strength, her muscles shake through her legs as she strides.

Then I see her hit the ground. Pushed down and passed by the giant swamp wolf from The Den. A glowing axe pendant hangs from her neck and a chewed beast-man dangles in her mouth. The wolf spits the creature out. Everything speeds back up. I see it's Morngrym riding the massive wolf and I hear him yell, "Only those of Vashanka may enter, into the darkness."

He charges the blonde, owl Queen. She flies up to snatch him from the wolf, but flashes of lightning shoot from her paws, and the wolf leaps and chomps the owl Queen's legs. Morngrym jumps onto the Queen with a bear hug. The owl flaps her wings trying to get loose, while Morngrym begins to pummel the creature's head. He pays the price as the owl picks the flesh from his face and an eye from its socket with her beak. The wolf continues to drag

them toward the portal as they battle. The Horse Gods keep the shadow on the defensive with a tireless assault.

Staufan swings his axe in a figure eight as he runs toward the bat Queen. The Gazelle twirls, spins, cartwheels, handsprings, and spins again with a graceful blow which glances the panther, as it uses its power to leap backwards. Staufan misses as the bat flies up. It hovers a few feet and begins to tear at him with its talons. The wounds open deep and quick across his face and arms as he tries to shield himself.

The Gazelle does not chase the panther. Instead she twirls a blow that slices the one of the owl's wings. The panther leaps back toward the fight, as the wolf drags Morgrym and the owl into the gateway. Staufan grabs the bat by its legs, pulls it behind his head, and slams it to the ground. The creature pulls him in with its wings and bites his neck. As the panther pounces on the Gazelle she drops to her back and rolls them into the portal using the momentum of the attacking Queen beast. With the bat bent in half eating his face Staufan tightens his grip on the monster's legs strides at the hole, but the beast flies the other way. I slide my brother's dirk from my hip and hurl it toward oblivion.

Every memory of our childhood flashes through my mind as the dirk leaves my hand. Thud! I stick it in the wing. Staufan dive into the portal dragging the bat with him.

As they enter the rip in reality, the fog, the shadow of Dolus, the energy ladder, and the darkness collapse back into the gate in a single moment as if it were a clap of hands. I look below the beasts scatter from the city and valley into the forest. Both armies of men fight the creatures together. Blood, guts, and carnage lay everywhere. I feel the moon and stars shining down on me. It's as if I can hear the crickets through the battle as the beauty of night returns. The stone shines a bright glowing blue. It shakes, tremors, and rings with an intense speed.

I hear the horse, "We have to go, now!"

The other horses go to Jaulita and Thanatos and I yell to them, "Get on, now!"

The vibration in the stone shakes so fast the ringing swells like the cry of a giant whale, and the light from it shines as brighter than the moon.

I jump onto the Fire Horse, Jaulita the lightning, and Thanatos the twister. We turn to ride off of the tower.

Crash! A beam of lightning wider than a house explodes through the diamond, busts through the sandstone, and splits into the Great Tree below and blows the barrels of black powder being set by Stilcho's men. The boom forces a loud ringing in my ears, and the power of the blast throws us.

The tower crumbles. I can hear it pulling apart. I can see the stones and chunks of wall fall past us. The stallion leaps from piece to piece guiding us to the ground. He charges through the courtyard, out the gate, and into the burning city as I scream, "Retreat, get back, everyone now."

The ground shakes, clouds of dust roll past me, and the collapsing structure crashes to the ground. The crackling, grinding thud falls into the castle wall and onto the burning buildings of the city taking out everything in its path.

We turn to gaze on the destruction. What a myriad of wreckage and slaughter. Beasts, men, rubble, fire, and blood throw by the collapse. We made it. I can't believe it.

I shout over to Thanatos, "Hey fuck-face we're alive. We did it."

He smirks. "I know. I can't believe it or what I just saw. Where do you think they went?"

Jaulita answers, "The Realm of no Order. They are there forever."

Thanatos questions, "There's no other way to open it again?"

She answers, "The stone is gone, shattered. It was the only gateway, and that was only every 1480 moons."

The Great Steeds trot us back to the camp. We dismount and begin our search for Sed. I hope he and Stav made it. I'm sure Gauthus is worried about me. I can't believe I'm alive. What did we just do? Haezak's dead, Morngrym, Staufan, and The Gazelle gone, worse than death, lost in nothingness, or are they dead? I don't know. Jaulita and I head to Sed's tent.

I feel the horse galloping off, his power draining from me. I become exhausted. My feet feel like the world's oceans clamp around them. I move slowly. Our connection breaks. I look in the direction of the mountains and on the horizon rearing in the moonlight I see the horse.

I almost fall into Sed's tent. I see him and Stav, good. My eyes close. I feel dizzy. The faces of all the dead flash before me. The shadow of Dolus squeezes my heart. I can't breathe. I hear the voice of Stilcho, "Your friends will always disappoint you. What are you doing with him?" The voice of Stav, "It was a tall skinny Ilsigg." I see my dead mother and sister. The face of Thanatos swallows them and I hear him say, "I am the darkness."

I come to in a pool of sweat lying in Jaulita's tent, and to the sound of vomiting. Fuck, what was that? It can't be. It was just a dream. More vomiting fills my ears. I shake my head and sit up. Jaulita crouches in the entrance throwing up in the dirt.

I jump from the cot to her side. "What can I do?"

She looks up to me. "I will be fine. Water please."

I fetch a drink as fast as I can. She pulls herself up from the dirt. "I have not bled since the night we first laid together."

Shock widens my eyes and drops open my mouth. She sips and says, "I didn't know for sure until now."

I stammer, "I'm, I'm, I'm very happy. I just didn't think."

She hugs me. "I love you."

"I love you too." I see Taggart and the captain walking toward us. Blood mats their hair and scrapes cover their faces. Taggart carries a crate with him. Last night's events flash through my mind. Damn I'm going to miss that crazy fuck Haezak and Staufan. I didn't know the Gazzelle very well, but I know she was close to Jaulita. The ancient man lets the gravel rip from his voice, "I want you to have this."

Inside frolic two grey swamp wolf puppies. "They'll need bottle feedin' since their mother is gone. They'll be loyal to death. I already give one to Sed and that Thanatos fella. I know it seems more like a burden than a gift, but when they grow they'll be no better King's Guard."

"Thank you." I take the crate. "I'm sorry about your son."

Taggart looks at me as if I should know better than to discuss emotion. "He did what he needed to do. You should have seen him fight up that tower. Damn fury of the gods, it was a sight."

He leans in and whispers, "Thank you, he'll be missed."

As Taggart walks away the Captain speaks up, "Sir, you no longer have a horse. I have several for your choosing."

"Fair enough, lead the way." I hug Jaulita and walk through the camp. The remaining troops burn the dead and pack to leave. This is what I knew I didn't ever want, people coming at me so fast I don't even have time to process saving the fucking world as we know it. This is what the king meant when he said he didn't have a choice either. It feels like the struggle for breath when you're tired and swimming in deep water. We pass a wagon full of bloody Voorhexian armor. Attached to the wagon stands a team of large draft horses. The one the nearest to me seems young with a fine black coat. I bet he's slow.

I hear, "I'm faster than you think."

I stop. "Captain, this one." I point to the black draft horse.

"But sir, I have fine steeds bred and trained for speed and battle. You don't know how this one will act in the fray."

"Brush him, groom him, re-shoe him, and Saddle him." I turn and walk back toward Jaulita leaving the Captain at his task.

As I walk off I hear, "See, slipped right into giving damn orders that don't make sense. Damn fine king indeed. You heard the man, make this the finest damn wagon horse in all the Ten Kingdoms."

I see Sed and Thanatos riding toward me. I feel hate building in me as I hear, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Nothing, it's nothing." I remind myself sometimes dreams mean nothing. If he was their killer, why would he risk death by befriending me? Why didn't he kill me in the dungeon? Everything that happened in the Port seems like a world away. We've changed so much. We've fought the darkness of Dolus together. It had to be just a dream. But he will pay if not.

Sed smiles a forced smile. "We've talked about what happened. I'm sure Staufan has moved on, happy with his destiny, to die in such a great battle. But we will review ancient tomes, the Council of Elders, and see if we can at least contact them."

He points to the bustling camp. "But we have to deal with what is in front of us. War moves quickly. And you have many new responsibilities. I've taken the liberty to

give the order to take back Voorhexees. Then we will join the rest of our troops and march on Enilbar City. I didn't think you would mind."

He chuckles, turns his horse, and motions to Jaulita's tent. "Come King of Voorhexees, get ready, certain death awaits our enemy—they only outnumber us ten to one.

The End

Appendix

The Stories of the Gods

The Creation of the Gods and Universe

Before time existed there was only the Great Titan, his wife, and Paradise. Their first child was a son, Dolus, but he brought only chaos to the universe. Then came unto them a set of twins Fera, the World(nature), and Fredor, the Sea. The world and sea were full of darkness and chaos, fire flowed from the world into the sky, the mountains shook, giant waves rolled across the lands. This was the Time of the Womb, nature was only violent and no life prevailed.

Their next son was Krozious and he brought the order and light of the sun. Then Lorick was born to cool the world and sea from the fire of the sun with the cover of his cloak, the night. Then Frenhine, the Goddess of Love and Wisdom was born to be the wife of the sun. Then Vashanka, the God of War was born.

Fera then learned love from Frenhine and she and her brother, Fredor filled the world and sea with plants and animals. And they learned the violence of storms and war from Vashanka and created their daughters, the seasons.

Fredor's beasts swam to fill the sea. Fera's animals walked and lived in tribes like man today, and they ruled the world for thousands of years.

The Battle for Paradise

The Creation of the Moon and Thunder

Dolus jealous of Krozious being the most loved by the Great Titan and their brothers and sisters, created his demons of chaos to wage war on Paradise. Dolus and the demons pounced upon The Great Titan and the Mother of Gods while they slept and eat the flesh from their bones.

Dolus then pounced upon the world and sea under the cover of Lorick's cloak in hopes that he could destroy his brothers and sister while Krozious could not see. But the wrath of Vanshanka was awoken by the chaos, and Dolus and his demons where held at bay in a bloody brutal battle that still wages today where thunder is born with the swipes of Vashanka's axe.

When Krozious returned to look in on his brother and sister he found the war. Lorick could not leave and darkness covered the day. Order was lost, and Dolus leap upon Krozious and ate from him one of his eyes.

Kroziuous cast his fire upon the demons and threw Dolus under the world. And cursed him to where his chaos could never reach paradise again, unless he was set free by a God or Goddess. Dolus spreading his chaos and breeding demons created the Realm of No Order under the world.

Kroziuous then became ruler of the Gods and swore to always try to keep one eye on Fera and Fredor, for even his blind eye could cast light in the darkness, and the world could still be cooled by the night.

The Creation of Man

One day after the Battle for Paradise, for remembrance of their togetherness, Frennhine, the mother goddess of love, wife of Kroziuous created man and woman in the image of the Gods as a gift for her husband. The sun god was pleased with man, and wanted the earth to belong to men and women.

Dolus, with man within the reach of his deception tried to turn him against the Gods and lead them to the forest of forbidden knowledge. In the forest men gained the power of steel and the God's knowledge of war. But not even knowledge or the deception of power could lead man from the bosom of the Gods.

Kroziuous and Frennhine happy with man's loyalty gave birth to four daughters, the Goddess of man: Foramsita, the Goddess of Beauty, lust, and wine; Remeter, The Goddess of Farming and the harvest; Mamirta, the Goddess of Art; Stahitche, the Goddess of machines.

*The War of Man and Beast, The Tear of
Vashanka, and the end of the World*

. . . Clouds roll around Kroziuous' giant, gold castle that stands over a thousand men high. Kroziuous towers next to the keep with his long red robe, flowing white hair and beard, and one eye that beams with the radiance of the day and a blind eye that glows of the moon.

The mighty Vashanka stands ironclad next to Kroziuous with a lightning bolt in one hand and his giant axe in the other. His gray hair and beard twist in braids, his eyes turn with lighting and his voice booms of thunder.

Kroziuous commands Vashanka, "With the knowledge of steel man will rule the beasts. Destiny rewards their loyalty. Bring forth what must be."

And Vashanka did, reaping war through the beast and raining down his thunder and lightning, and aiding men as they conquered the world.

The Goddess of Nature, Fera, with her long straw like hair and robe of leaves walks into darkness filled with sorrow by the death of her creations. The world had always been hers, and now Krozious dare give it to mortals, and Vashanka smiting her children.

As she wonders the World, Dolus cracks open the ground under her. She descends to grey-green flames of the Realm of No Order. Green and black smoke fills the air. The landscape barren and burnt plunges with no end in sight. Lost souls flood the air with their cries for mercy as they are tortured by demons.

Dolus, the shadow God of Chaos and Deception, floats on his throne made of the bones of the Great Titan. He twists into a serpent-man with large black eyes, throwing himself upon Fera and corrupting her with chaos. He then pulls from her an army of half-million beast-men twisted by darkness and chaos. His deception clouds Fera's mind.

Fera kneels before Dolus. "I will lead you to paradise to seek your revenge against Krozious for casting you into the darkness—if you help me destroy man, and leave the world to me to rule as I wish."

The shadow nods silently in agreement.

While the moon, the blind eye of Krozious, guards the world, Fera leads Dolus to paradise, and then agrees to meet him in the gold castle of Krozious. Dolus looms over the Grand Hall of Warriors. The hall rises of iron and stone, surrounded by The Great Moat, and covered with ballistae, boiling pots of oil, and wolves' teeth. The shadow slips past the Army of the Hall that lies passed-out from rum.

Dolus takes the sleeping Diodeff, the most beautiful of all the Gods, and son of Vashanka and Formasita, through the rolling clouds to the gold castle of Krozious while he rests from guarding the world. Dolus then weaves a veil of deception to mimic Lorick's cloak blinding the good-eye of Krozious as he awakes to guard the world, causing night in day and destroying order, once again.

Krozious blasts his fire to destroy the shadow, but burns Diodeff instead. Hearing the screams of his nephew, Krozious tries to go to him, but still blinded with the veil he cannot find him. Fera enters and promises to heal Diodeff, but when she cast her hands upon him she places the face of wolf and of man onto him. Diodeff begins to thrash and roar in the voices of man and beast.

Krozious hears the beast. "You shall not cast your beast in my castle!"

Krozious still blind jumps on the transformed Diodeff, and cast him into the war, the war that Vashanka stirred. All other of Fera's creations see Diodeff as man, and men as the beast, and they all attack him at once, pulling his bones from his skin, his entrails around his neck, and his manhood from him.

Vashanka enters the Castle of Krozious, but Dolus disappears and escapes by building a ladder of stars down through the world and to the gateway of the Realm of No Order to unleash his army. But Lorick, God of the Night, speeding through the sky in his chariot scatters the stars into his cape of the night before the beasts can be unleashed.

Diodeff's body ripped apart, blinded by fire, and heartbroken he scratches, pulls, and rips the face of wolf from his skull. He then limps with no sight into the Plains of Pennece where he becomes trapped forever, forever to be the Lord of Suffering.

Vashanka, overcome with the loss of his son, cries one tear from each eye, the only tears he ever cried. One tear

fell to the earth as a beautiful blue diamond the size of man's hand, and the other grows larger and larger until it hits the world as a giant flood drowning many beast tribes, and forming the Great Western Sea.

After Vashanka cried his tears, he vowed to protect all children. His sorrow then turned into rage, and he turned man against the beast tribes in war. Man scattered and chased the beasts so far their legs grew tired and they had to hunch over and run with their hands too. Separated from the others, the beasts forgot how to live like man and only knew to run like beasts. When the tribes became no more, and man won the war the goddess of the Hunt, Loanna, was born and man began to hunt and eat the beasts, and war with each other.

It is written in the Tomes of the Gods, that the Tear can turn man to beast or beast to man, and that it can be used every 1480 moons to open the gateway to the Realm of No Order at the end of Dolus' Ladder of stars, and let loose the army of beasts twisted by chaos to destroy man.

The Realms

The underworld, The Realm of No Order- what you think it is---hell

The world -the physical world

The Plains of Penance --- A Realm where one may atone for their sins--much like catholic purgatory--a wide open never ending plain where sinners aimlessly wonder and may never rest

The Lands of Plenty--heaven for mortals

Paradise-- the realm of the Gods

The Enlibrite/Ellonian/Tierrabeaux/Balla Ch'luveson Gods

Dolus-God of Chaos, deception, ruler of the Underworld/Realm of No Order

Kroziuous-God of the Sun, Ruler of the Gods

Frenhine-Goddess of Love, creator of man, Kroziuous' wife

Fredor-God of the Sea, his shell controls the waves

Fera- Goddess of Nature(the world), animals, and natural disasters

Lorik- God of the Night and stars, thieves and sailors

Vashanka-God of War, Thunder and Lightning, and Rum-- Protector of man, in particular children

Shaldoth-God of Death, guide through the Plains of Pennance

Formasita-Goddess of Beauty, lust, and wine

Remeter- Goddess of Farming and the harvest

Mamirta-Goddess of Art

Stahitche-Goddess of Machines

Diodeff- God of Pain and Suffering, Ruler of the Plains of Penance

Loannna-Goddess of the Hunt

The Rankans, Shou, tribal Ilsiggs have different Gods that do not play a role in this story except the Horse Gods that are explained within the text.

The Theibians have only one God, the Golden Ram, the ram is all powerful, all knowing, and the creator of all.

Why do all followers of Vashanka have raspy voices? Because screaming battle cries is part of their prayers.

A Very Brief History of the Continent

The Ilsiggs are the indigenous people to the Enilbar continent. They live freely in tribal systems much like Native Americans. The continent was "discovered" by Zaus

Abdola a Theibain sailor. The Teibians settled along the west coast in what now are New Theibia, Dorna, and New Balla Ch'luveson. A slave-free republic, the Theibains sought to trade with the Ilsiggs, but also plundered the land for as many resources as possible as they grew their communities.

The idea of new lands and free resources attracted the Theibian's northern neighbors the Tierrabeaux, the Balla Ch'luveson, and the Ellonians. The Ellonians proved to be the most ambitious settling quickly what is now Enlibar, Thrommius, New Ellonian, and most of Voorhexees, Sallidon, and Varisvaaria. The Tierabeaux explore Jacque Mortinez, settled Port Karpricious for their people, and the Ball Ch'luveson settled New Balla Ch'luveson.

As quickly as they settle the Ellonians enslaved the Ilsiggs. Over 120 year period the Ten Kingdoms were born, and the Ellonians found ways to tax and impose their will upon them all. The Ellonian leaders of Enlibar and Thrommius lead a revolt that formed the Enlibar Empire that has ruled for the last 120 years over the continent. During this time the Ilsiggs have almost all been enslaved or assimilated into the colonial society. There are five free tribes that live on the other side of the Impassable Range.

Twenty years ago the Rankans set foot on the continent by invading Port Karpricios from the Frozen South. The Empire refused to send help because of unpaid taxes by Le Soberano. The people of the city with overwhelming numbers were finally able to push the invaders inland to a stalemate. A treaty was formed giving the Rankans farmlands in the northern section of the kingdom and The Port declared itself a free-city state. The Empire accepted this declaration with the paid taxes and an added tribute, and though free in title the Port financially became even more oppressed by the Empire.

The Story of Sailor's Soup

205 years ago when the Port was only Tierrabeaux sailors, fishermen, and their families the fleet set out with resources across the Western Sea for trade. When it was time for them to return a hurricane hit the Port. Days passed and the wives and mothers of the lost sailors lit fires across the beaches in hopes that the ships would return, but days passed and no one was seen. The women refused to abandon the fires. They begin to make large pots of soup from small fish, shrimp, crabs, or whatever could be found in tide pools or on the shore. As the first pots of the soup where finished the tattered fleet appeared on

the horizon. The starving sailors loved the soup and it became a staple of the city.