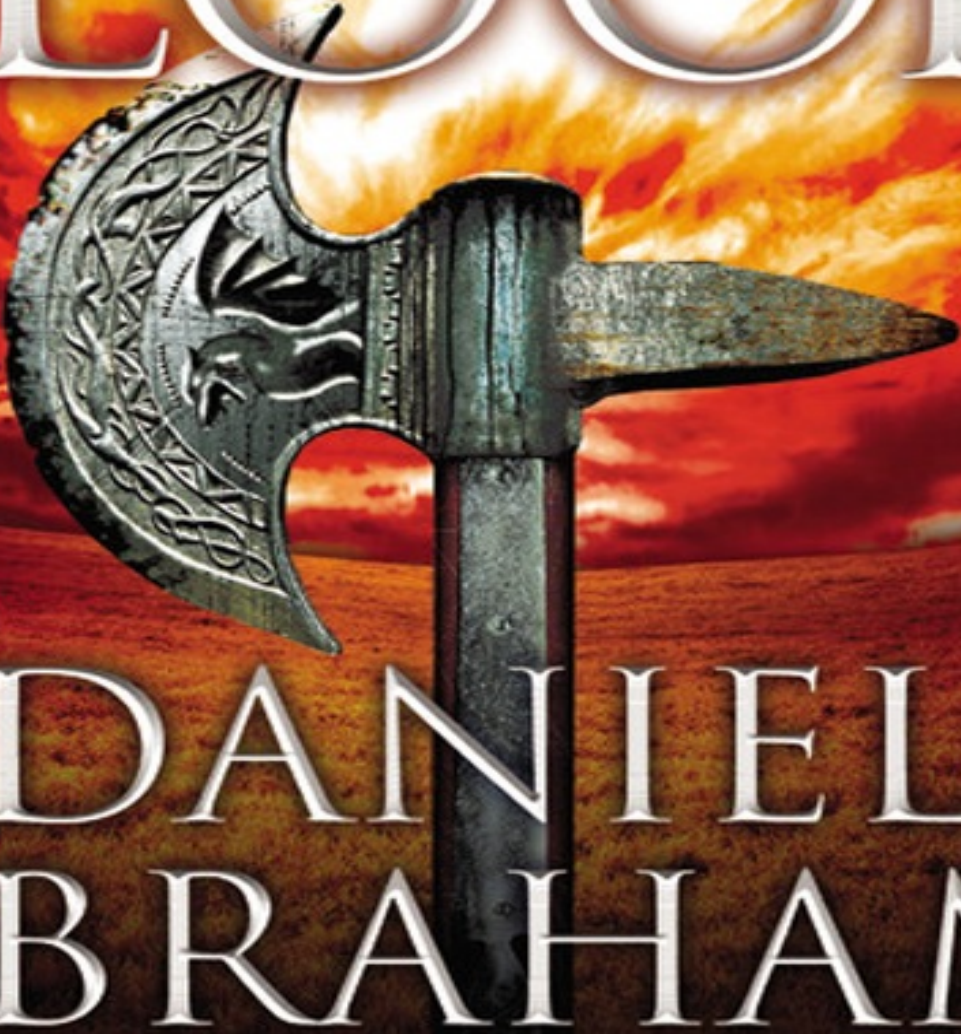


"EVERYTHING I LOOK FOR IN A FANTASY."
—GEORGE R.R. MARTIN, ON *THE DRAGON'S PATH*

THE
KING'S
BLOOD



DANIEL
ABRAHAM

AUTHOR OF *THE DRAGON'S PATH*

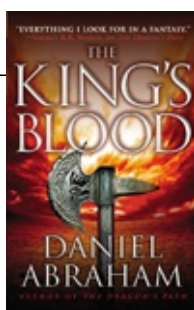
THE
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BLOOD

BOOK TWO OF THE DAGGER AND THE COIN

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Master Kit

The apostate, called Kitap rol Keshmet among other things, stood in the soft city rain, the taint in his blood pressing at him, goading him, but being ignored. Fear and dread welled up in his throat.

In any of the cities and villages of the Keshet or Borja or Pût, the temple would have been the central fact of the community, a point of pride and honor, and the axis about which all life turned. In the vast glory of Camnipol, it was only another of a thousand such structures, awe-inspiring in its scope, beauty, and grandeur, and rendered unremarkable by its company.

The city was the heart of Imperial Antea as Imperial Antea was the heart of Firstblood power in the world, but Camnipol was older than the kingdom it ruled. Every age had left its mark here, every generation growing on the ruins of the old until the earth below the dark-cobbled streets was not soil, but the wreckage of what had come before. It was a city of black and gold, of wealth and desperate poverty. Its walls rose around it like a boast of invulnerability, and its noble quarters displayed great mansions and towers and temples casually, as if the grandeur was trivial, normal, and mundane. Had Camnipol been a knight, he would have worn black-enameled armor and a cloak of fine-worked wool. Had it been a woman, she would have been too handsome to look away from and too intimidating to speak with. Instead, it was a city, and it was Camnipol.

Soft rain darkened the stone walls and high columns. Wide steps rose from street to landing and then again to the shadowed colonnade. The great spider-silk banner—the red of blood with the eightfold sigil of the goddess at its center—hung beneath the overhanging roof, dark at the bottom from the rain and at the top from the shadows, and the breeze sent ripples across it. The carriages and palanquins of the highest noble families of Antea filled the narrow road, each trying to reach a more prestigious place on the smooth-cobbled street and none willing to retreat a step that might give a rival some opportunity. And it was still hardly past first thaw. When summer and the court season came, the place would be unnavigable. To the north, the great tower of the Kingspire was greyed by mist, its top shrouded so that it appeared to grow up into the spreading cloud: the Severed Throne reaching out in all directions and weighing down the world.

The apostate pulled the hood of his cloak forward to hide his face and conceal his hair. Tiny spheres of rain beaded his beard like web-caught flies. He waited.

At the top of the steps, the hero of Antea stood, smiling and nodding to the few grantees who had come early to the city as they passed into the dimness of the temple. Geder Palliako, newly Baron of Ebbingbaugh and Protector of Prince Aster who was the only son of King Simeon and heir to the Severed Throne. Geder Palliako who had saved the kingdom from the conspiracies of the courts of Asterilhold. Geder wasn't the image of a national hero. His face was round and pale, his hair slicked back. The black leather cloak he wore was cut for a thicker man's frame, pooling around him like an ornate curtain. He stood under the great red banner like a new actor freshly on a stage. The apostate could almost see him repeating lines to himself, straining his ears toward his cue.

This was the man who had brought back the cult of the goddess, long forgotten, and dropped it into the center of the greatest empire outside Far Syramys. In a more pious age, the temple might have struggled to take root, but the priests of Antea had long ago become political spokesmen and

champions of the expedient. The voice of the goddess, impossible to resist for long, had found willing ears here, and the nobility streamed in like children before a puppet show, excited by the hint of the exotic, the decadent, and the strange.

They were dead. Their city, their empire, the truths they had learned at their nurses' breasts. Like the first pale mark of leprosy, the rot had touched their city, and none of them could see it for what it was. Nor, in all likelihood would they ever, even as the madness took them. They would die and never understand what they had become.

"Hoy! Old man!"

The apostate turned. The armsman was Jasuru, bronze-scaled and black-tongued. He wore boiled leather and the sigil of a serpent on a field of orange. Behind him, a young woman was stepping down from a gilt carriage with the help of a footman in matching colors. The woman herself wore a black leather cloak, cut too generously. Fashion in all things.

"What's your business here?" the Jasuru demanded, his hand on his sword's pommel.

"Nothing pressing," the apostate said. "Didn't see I was in the way. Quite sorry."

The guard growled low in his throat and looked away. The apostate turned his back and walked. Behind him, the high, rattling sound of the tin gongs began. He hadn't heard the call to prayer since he was a boy and a priest in a mountain temple half a continent away. For a moment, he could smell the dust and sweet wellwater, could hear the scrape of lizards across the stone and taste the curried goat that no one else in the world made the way they had in the village of his youth. A deep voice began the call to prayer, and the power in the apostate's blood thrilled to the half-forgotten syllables. He paused, ignored the wisdom of a thousand children's tales, and looked back.

The bull-huge man wore the green and gold of a high priest preparing the low rites, but he was none the apostate recognized. The high priest he had known was dead, then. Well, the spider goddess promised many things, but physical immortality wasn't one. Her priests could die. The thought was a comfort. The apostate pulled his cheap wools closer around him and disappeared into the wet labyrinth of broadways and alleys.

The Division split Camnipol down its center like God's knife wound. Half a dozen true bridges spanned the abyss from its rim, standing high above the empty air, massive webworks of stone and iron. Any number of improvised chain-and-rope constructions reached across it lower down where the walls came closer together. If one were sitting near its edge, the history of the city was laid bare, ruin laid upon ruin laid upon ruin until the ancient architecture vanished, indistinguishable from stone apart from the occasional archway or green-bleeding bronzework. Since the age of dragons and before there had been a city where Camnipol stood, growing upon and out of the ruins of the city before it. Even now, poor men and women of the thirteen races lived deep in the flesh of the city, inhabiting lightless caves that had been the storehouses and ballrooms and palaces of their ancestors.

"You never really think about drainage," Smit said, looking out into the grey air.

"I don't believe I do," the apostate said, shrugging off his cloak. "Was there a reason you felt I should?"

The troupe had taken shelter in a common yard at the Division's edge. The cart's thin doors were open, but they hadn't lowered the stage. Cary sat cross-legged with her back against the wide wheel, sewing beads to the blue gown. They were going to play *The Bride's Folly* that night, and the role of Lady Partia called for a bit more frippery. Sandr and Hornet were at the back of the high shelter with sticks in their hands, walking the choreography of the final battle where Anson Arranson exposed the

treachery of his commander. Charlit Soon, their newest actor, sat with her hands under her thighs, her lips moving as if in prayer. It was her first night playing in *The Bride's Folly*, and her anxiety was endearing. Mikel was nowhere to be seen, likely off to the market and haggling for meat and river fish. There would be plenty of time for him to return and make ready. It was only the gloomy weather that made everything seem late.

"Well, you think about it," Smit said, nodding at the rain, "the things that really make a city are about controlling nature, aren't they? This here rain may not look like much, but Camnipol's a big city. It all adds up. Right now, just looking at it, it's like God upended a river on the place. All that water's got to go somewhere."

"*The sea, the sea, the endless sea,*" the apostate said, quoting a play they'd done two years before. "*As all water finds the salt waves, so all men end in death.*"

"Well sure," Smit said, rubbing his chin, "but the important thing's how it gets from here to there, isn't it?"

The apostate smiled.

"Smit, my dear, I believe you've just committed metaphor."

The actor blinked a false innocence.

"Did I? And here I thought we were talking about gutters."

The apostate smiled. For fifteen years now, he had traveled the world with his little band of players. They had sung for kings and brutish mobs. He'd taught players from eight of the thirteen human races, and taken lovers from three. Master Kit, he'd been. Kitap rol Keshmet. It was a name he'd given himself even before that, when he had delivered himself into the world out of a womb of desert stone and madness. He'd played a thousand roles. And now, God help him, there was time for one more.

One last.

"Cary?" the apostate said. "A word?"

The long-haired woman nodded, slipped her needle into her sleeve, and laid the handful of beads carefully into a cupping fold of the gown's cloth. It looked casual and unthinking, but not one bead would escape that little nest. The apostate nodded, smiling, and strolled toward the next shelter in the common yard, empty apart from a cold iron brazier and a stone bench. The brick paving was wet where the rain struck, the subtle red and green deepened and enriched until they seemed enameled. He sat on the little bench and Cary sat at his side.

Now that the time had come, he couldn't ignore the sorrow any longer. It had been there for weeks. The fear was an old companion by now; a fire lit in a common house in Porte Oliva months before when he had first heard word that a banner of the goddess flew in Antea. Sorrow had only come later, and he had put it aside as long as he could, telling himself that the thickness in his throat, the weight in his breast, would keep. They would keep no more.

"Master Kit?" Cary said. "Are you crying?"

"Of course not," he said. "Men weep. We find crying undignified."

She put her arm around his shoulder. Like a sailor sipping his last freshwater before a voyage, he tried to drink in the feeling of her beside him—the bend of her elbow at the back of his neck, the solid weight of her muscles, the smell of verbena and soap. He took a deep, shuddering breath, and nodded his assent. It took a long moment before he could speak.

"I believe we will need to find another player," he said. "Older man with a certain gravity. Someone who can take the paternal roles and the villains. Lord Fox. Orcus the Demon King. Those."

"Your roles," Cary said.

“Mine.”

Raindrops as small as pinpricks tapped the thatching above them, the bricks before. The practiced blows of false swords and the grunts of the boys swinging them. Hornet had been with the company longer than Cary. Smit played more roles. But Cary would guide them. She would hold the little family of the road together after he was gone, if anyone would.

“What’s happened?” she asked.

“There’s something I feel I have to do,” he said.

“We’d help.”

“I believe you would try. But...”

“But?”

He shifted to look her in the eyes. Her arm slid away from him. Her eyes were as dark as her hair, and large enough to make her seem younger than she was. He could see her now as she had been that first night, seven years before in the free city of Maccia, dancing in the public square for coin. She’d hardly been a girl then, feral and hungry and distrustful of anything masculine. Talent and ambition had burned off her like heat from a fire. Opal had warned him that the girl would be trouble and agreed that the price would be justified. Now Cary was a woman full-grown. He wondered if this was what it would feel like to have a daughter.

“I am afraid I wouldn’t be able to do what was called for if I was also protecting all of you,” he said. “You are the family I’ve made. If I can imagine you safe and content, I think I can sacrifice whatever else is needed.”

“You’re expecting a high price, it sounds like,” she said.

“I am.”

Cary sighed, and the wry smile that haunted her lips in times of trouble came to her. *Remember this*, he told himself. *Remember the way her lips twist and her eyebrow rises. Keep it close. Pay attention.*

“Well, piss,” she said.

“For what it carries, I am truly sorry to go.”

“Do you have anybody in mind to take the roles?” she asked.

He could see the pain in her. He was betraying her, abandoning them all, and she would no more blame him for it than cut off her toes. He wished he could take her hand in his, but she’d chosen the tone for their conversation, and he didn’t have the right to overrule her. Not any longer.

“There’s a group that makes the northern circuit. Paldrin Leh and Sebast Berrin. Three years ago, they had two fighting for the same roles. Find them, and you might get someone who already knows the lines. Paldrin’s a Haaverkin, but that might add a touch of the exotic if you take him south.”

“I’ll ask around, then,” she said. “When are you leaving?”

“Tonight,” he said.

“Do you have to go alone?”

The apostate hesitated. It was a question he hadn’t decided yet. The task before him was impossible. As doomed as it was inevitable. His sacrifice was his own, which made it curiously easy. To ask someone else to walk willingly to death beside him was no favor. And yet if it made the difference between success and failure, a world redeemed or lost...

“Perhaps not,” he said. “There is one other who might help. But not from the troupe.”

“And I suppose it would be entirely too much to ask what this mysterious errand is that’s calling you away?” she asked. And then, contradicting herself, “You owe us that much.”

The apostate licked his lips, searching for words he hadn’t used, even to himself. When he found

them, he chuckled.

~~“This may sound a bit grandiose,” he said, scratching at his beard with one long finger.~~

“Try me.”

“I’m off to kill a goddess.”

Cithrin bel Sarcour,
Voice and Agent of the
Medean Bank in Porte Oliva

Cithrin bel Sarcour, voice of the Medean bank in Porte Oliva, stepped out of the bank's office with her head high, her features composed, and rage burning in her breast. Around her, Porte Oliva was entering its springtime. The bright cloth banners and glittering paste jewels of the First Thaw celebrations still lay in the streets and alleyways, slowly decaying into grime. Snow haunted the shadows where the midday sun couldn't reach. Cithrin's breath plumed before her as if her heart were a furnace belching pale smoke, and she felt the bite of the air as a distant thing.

Men and women of several races bustled on the cobbles before her. Kurtadam with their slick, beaded pelts; thin-faced, pale Cinnae; brass-and-gold-scaled Jasuru; black-chitined Timzinae; and fleshy, rose-cheeked Firstblood. Some nodded to her, some stepped out of her way, most ignored her. She might represent one of the greatest banks in the world, but as far as the hazy sky over Porte Oliva cared, she was just another half-Cinnae girl in a well-tailored dress.

When she stepped into the taproom, the warm air caressed her. The related, yeasty scents of beer and bread tried to gentle her, and she felt some of the knot in her gut begin to ease. The anger slipped, showing itself only a mask for the despair and frustration beneath. A young Cinnae man came forward to take her shawl, and she managed a tight-lipped smile as she relinquished it.

"The usual table, Magistra?" he asked.

"Thank you, Verril," she said. "That would be kind."

Grinning, he made an exaggerated bow, and gestured her on. Another day, she might have found it charming. The table was at the back, half hidden from the main room by a draped cloth. It cost a few coins more. When she felt capable of civil conversation, she would sometimes sit at the common benches, striking up conversation with whoever was there. There were more sailors and gossip of travelers farther south at the docks, more word of overland trade north where the dragon's road opened to the main square and the cathedral and the governor's palace, but the taproom was nearest to her bank—*her* bank, by God—and not every conversation needed to be a bid for advantage.

The Kurtadam girl who most often served in the daytimes brought a plate of cheese and brown bread with a tiny carved-wood bowl full of black raisins. More to the point, she brought a tankard of good beer. Cithrin nodded sharply and tried to make her smile genuine. If the girl saw anything odd in her, the soft fur of her face covered it. Kurtadam would make good card players, Cithrin thought as she drank. All of them wearing masks all the time.

The front door opened, light spilling into the main room. A shadow moved into it. Without seeing a single detail of face or body, without so much as a cleared throat, Cithrin recognized Yardem Hane. He was the second in command of her guardsmen—*her* guardsmen—and one of two men who had known her since her flight from Vanai. With that city burned and all its residents dead, that made him someone who'd known her longer than anyone alive.

The Tralgu walked gently across the floor. For so large a race, the Tralgu could be uncannily quiet. He sat down on the bench beside her. His high, doglike ears pointed forward. He smelled like old leather and sword oil. His sigh was long and deep.

"Went poorly, then?" he said.

“Did,” Cithrin said, trying to match the laconic banter Yardem and Captain Wester employed. But the words wouldn’t stop coming. “She barely even heard me out. I spent all winter negotiating that deal. Yes, there are risks, but they’re *good* risks.”

“Pyk didn’t think so.”

“Apparently not,” Cithrin said. “God damn, but I hate that woman.”

Cithrin had known from the moment the deal was made that answering to her notary would chafe. For months, Cithrin had exercised total control over the wealth of her branch of the Medean bank. Any loan she’d thought worthy, she’d made. Any partnership she’d felt wise, she’d entered. She’d cut thumbs on dozens of agreements and contracts, and she’d made good profits overall. Only, of course, the foundation documents of the bank had been forged and the contracts she’d signed illegal. It was still four months before she reached majority, inherited her parents’ holdings in the bank, and became fully adult in the eyes of the law. But even after that, the role she’d taken on of an older woman and only a quarter Firstblood would remain hers. The bank was built on lies and fraud, and her discretion would be needed for years before the suspect agreements could all be purged. She fantasized about throwing it all to the wind just to spite the notary sent from the holding company in Carse. Pyk Usterhall.

You’ll sign nothing. All agreements are signed by the notary. And the notary alone. Negotiations don’t happen without the notary present. If you’re overruled, you accept it. Control rests with the holding company. You’re a figurehead. Nothing more.

Those were the terms she’d been offered, and she had agreed to them. At the time she’d been half drunk with relief that she’d kept any hold at all. She’d felt certain that once the notary was in place, it would be a matter of time before she could maneuver herself back into real power. The period in between would be a necessary test of her patience, but nothing worse than that. In the weeks before the notary’s arrival, she’d fallen asleep every night imagining herself playing meek before some well-seasoned member of the bank, offering insights that would catch the new man’s attention, building up her reputation with him until he trusted her judgment. From there, she told herself, it would be a short leap to making policy for her bank again. Her work was only to win over one man. Even if it was difficult, it was possible.

It had been a pretty story.

Pyk Usterhall arrived in the dead of winter. Cithrin had been in the café across from the Grand Market where she paid Maestro Asanpur a few coins for the use of a private room at the back. Winter’s dark came early, even so far south as Porte Oliva, and there was little to do in the dark, cold afternoons besides play tiles and drink down the ancient, half-blind Cinnae’s stock of coffee beans. That day, there had been four Firstblood queensmen resting after their patrol in the café trading jokes and stories with a Timzinae merchant. The Timzinae had been wintering in Birancour before heading back to Ellassae in the spring, and Cithrin had been laughing at his jokes for days, waiting to see if some news of that nation might slip from him. The six of them had pushed two of the tables together and were playing a complex round of tiles when the door had swung open and a cold draught had washed away the warmth of the room, literally and figuratively.

At first, Cithrin thought the woman was an enormously fat Firstblood. She was huge, wide across the hips and shoulders both, fat and strong both. She stepped into the room, her tread heavy on the floorboards, and unwound the black wool scarf from around her head. Her hair was grey where it wasn’t black. Heavy jowls and full lips gave her a fishlike expression. When she pursed her lips, the gaps where her tusks had been filed off came clear. A Yemmu.

“You’ll be Cithrin bel Sarcour then,” the woman had said. “I’m your notary. You have somewhere

we can speak?"

Cithrin rose at once, leading Pyk back to the private room. Once the door was closed, Pyk lowered herself to the little table, scowling.

"Playing games with the city guard? That's how you run this place? I'd have thought Komme Medean's voice would be at the Governor's Palace or dining with someone important."

Cithrin still felt the thickness in her throat when she remembered the words and the scorn that soured them.

"There's little going on in the coldest months," Cithrin had said, cursing herself silently for the apology in her tone.

"For you, I'd guess that's truth," Pyk said. "I've got work to do. You want to bring me the books here, or is there someplace you do the real business?"

Every day since had been another minor humiliation, another opportunity for the notary to remind Cithrin that she controlled nothing, another scathing comment. For weeks, Cithrin had swallowed it all with a smile. And for months after that, she'd at least borne it. If there had been even a pause in the assault, a crack in the dismissive façade, she'd have counted it a victory.

There had been nothing.

"Did she say why?" Yardem asked.

"She won't deal with Southlings," Cithrin said. "Apparently a pod of them killed some part of her family in Pût nine or ten generations ago."

Yardem turned to her, his ears shifted to lie back almost flat against his skull. Cithrin drank deeply from her beer.

"I know," she said. "But what am I supposed to do about it? No negotiations without the notary present. I'm not permitted to sign, even. And if she doesn't cut thumbs on it, it doesn't happen."

As part of her bargain, Cithrin had surrendered all the leverage she had over the bank. If Pyk sent message back to Carse saying that Cithrin was a liability to the bank, Cithrin had nothing that would keep them from separating her from the business. She broke off a crust of bread, chewing on it absently. It could have been spiced with dirt for all the pleasure she took in it. Yardem pointed at the plate, and she pushed it toward him. He pinched a corner from the cheese and popped it into his mouth. They chewed in silence for a long moment. The fire murmured in its grate. From the alley, a dog yelped.

"I have to go tell him," Cithrin said, then took another long drink.

"Company? I'm stood down for the day."

"He won't get violent," Cithrin said. "He isn't like that."

"Could offer moral support. Encouragement."

Cithrin laughed once, mirthless.

"That's why I'm drinking," she said.

"I know."

She looked over at him. His eyes were deep brown, his head broad. He had a scar just under his left ear she'd never noticed before. Yardem had been a priest once, before he'd been a sellsword. The beer sat in its tankard. One wouldn't do much. Two would leave her feeling looser and less upset. But it would also tempt her to reach for a third, and by the fourth she'd be ready to postpone the unpleasant until tomorrow. Better, she thought, to end it quickly and sleep without dreading it in the morning.

She pushed the tankard back, and Yardem stood to let her up.

The boarding house was in the middle of the salt quarter, not far from the little rooms Cithrin, Yardem, and Marcus Wester had hidden in during their first days in the city. The salt quarter streets

were narrow and twisted. In some places, the streets were so narrow that Cithrin's fingertips could have brushed the buildings on both sides. Everything stank of raw sewage and brine. By the time they reached the whitewashed walls and faded blue windows of the house, the hem of her dress was black and her feet cold and aching. She pulled her shawl closer about her shoulders and went up the two low steps to the common door. Yadem leaned against the wall, his expression empty but his ears high. Cithrin knocked.

She had hoped that someone else would answer. One of the other boarders or the man who kept the house. Something that would postpone the actual conversation for another minute or two. Luck wasn't with her. Or, more likely, he'd been perched by the door, waiting for word from her. His ash-grey skin and the oversized black eyes of his race made him seem childlike. His smile was bright and tentative at the same time.

"Magistra Cithrin," he said, as if her appearance were a delightful surprise. Her heart thickened. "Please come in. I was just making tea. Have some, have some. And your Tralgu friend."

Cithrin looked back at Yadem. She thought there was pity in his expression and she wasn't certain who it belonged to.

"I'll be right back," she said.

"I'll be right here," he rumbled.

The common sitting room smelled damp despite the little stove that kept the air almost uncomfortably warm. The high, wailing voice of a colicky child forced its way from somewhere in the back, even when the doors were shut. Cithrin sat on a cushioned bench with lank tassels of red and orange that had probably been beautiful once.

"I'm pleased to see you," the Southling man said. "I've been writing to my son in Lyoneia, and I just got a message back. He said that he could—"

"Before we—"

"—have a full shipment as early as midsummer. Last year's nuts are dried and ready to grind. He said they smell like flowers and smoke. He was always good with words that way. Flowers and smoke. Don't you think?"

He knew then. Or guessed. The words flowed out of him, pushing hers back. As if he could keep the inevitable at bay. Cithrin remembered being at the seashore sometime when she'd been very young. Maybe even before her parents had died. She knew what it was like to try stopping a wave with your hands.

"The bank can't move forward with this plan," Cithrin said. "I'm very sorry."

The man's mouth kept working, trying to bring out new syllables. His brows shifted, rising in the center and falling at the ends until he looked like the caricature of loss and disappointment. Cithrin forced herself to take a breath. Her stomach hurt. When he spoke, his voice was small.

"I don't understand, Magistra."

"I've had some new information arrive, unrelated to our conversations, and I'm afraid at the moment it isn't possible for the bank to move forward with the loan you would need."

"If, if, if I could just read you the letter my son sent me, Magistra. You see, we could—"

The man swallowed, closed his massive eyes and hung his head.

"Can I ask why not?"

Because you've got the wrong eyes, Cithrin thought. Because my notary won't let me. I'm as sorry about this as you. I think you're right. She thought all the things she couldn't say, because they would mean admitting that she was ruled by Pyk Usterhall. If that became public knowledge, the last bit of influence she had over her bank would be gone. So instead she hardened her soul and pretended to be

banker who was working her own will, and who had the power to match her responsibilities.

~~“You know I can’t divulge other people’s conversations with me,” she said. “Any more than I would disclose our discussions to them.”~~

“No. Of course not,” he said and opened his eyes. “Is there any chance you might reconsider?”

“I’m afraid not,” she said, every word costing her.

“All right. Thank you, then. Did—did you still want some tea?”

I’m not drunk,” Cithrin said.

“You aren’t,” Yardem agreed.

“Then why can’t I have another glass?”

“Because that’s how you stay not drunk.”

They hadn’t gone back to the taproom. That was where Cithrin went to have meals and polite company. She didn’t want those. She wanted to scream and curse and break things with a stick. Frustration and impotence were like a thin iron cage, and she was a finch beating itself to death against them. Her own rooms were above the bank’s office and had been since before there had been bank. It had been a gambler’s stall when she’d first walked up the steps. And she’d shared it with Yardem and Marcus Wester and a cartful of crates loaded with silk and gems, tobacco and jewels, and the wax-sealed account books more precious than all the rest put together. Now it held her bed, her desk, her wardrobe. Where there had been bare boards, she’d put a thick red rug to keep her feet warm in winter. A painting hung on the wall over her bed with the mark of the Medean bank worked together with the sigil of Porte Oliva. It had been a gift from the governor.

Cithrin rose from her table, pacing. Voices rose from below them, reminding her how thin the floor was and how sound could travel. There were always guards in the office, making sure that no one could reach the strongbox set in stone beneath the building. It held the hard reserves of the bank. But the real wealth was in the paper—loan agreements, partnerships, depositors’ contracts—that were no longer even in the office. They were a long block to the south in the rooms that Pyk had taken for herself, the secret base of the bank.

“She’s *gutted* me,” Cithrin said. “She’s taken it all.”

“That was the agreement,” Yardem pointed out.

“I don’t care what the agreement was,” Cithrin said, fighting to keep her voice—even the tone of it—from leaking to the ears of the guards below her. “It’s not just that she disagrees with me. Or that she condescends. She’s making bad choices, Yardem. She’s walking away with coins still on the table. And she’s doing it because she’s too proud to take direction from an underage half-Cinnae girl.”

Cithrin raised her palms, daring Yardem to disagree. He scratched his knee in a way that made her think it hadn’t actually itched.

“Well, I am done with this,” Cithrin said. “If she wants war, then she will by God get it.”

Dawson Kalliam, Baron of Osterling Fells

Wars are easier to start than end, and where they take you is rarely where you intended to go,” the ambassador said. “It will be better for all of us to avoid it.”

Dawson turned back from the window. Sir Darin Ashford, Lord of Harrin and Ambassador of King Lechan to Antea, sat in the old library, his legs crossed at the ankle and a carefully charming smile on his lips. He had come to the Kalliams’ holding at Osterling Fells two days before, announced by a letter and bringing a small enough retinue that he posed no obvious threat. They had observed the forms of etiquette since his arrival. This was the first candid conversation they’d had.

The walls of granite and dragon’s jade gave the room a sense of terrible age and grandeur that Dawson liked. It lent the room and the holding the sense of permanence that they deserved. The sense of right things in their right order. It was a contrast to the subject of their talk.

“You might have thought of that before you plotted to kill Prince Aster,” Dawson said.

The ambassador sat forward, one finger held high. He wore the silver cuffs that Dawson’s wife Clara assured him were the fashion in Kaltfel that year and the decorative wrist chain that marked a married man in the courts of Asterilhold.

“Now that’s just the kind of rhetoric to be careful of, Baron Osterling.”

“As long as you’re lecturing me on how to speak, you may as well call me Dawson.”

Ashford either missed the sarcasm or chose to ignore it.

“All I mean is that Asterilhold didn’t have any ill wishes toward the prince or the Severed Throne.”

Dawson walked three steps and gestured to a pelt that hung on the wall. The years had greyed the deep golden fur, but the sheer size of the tanned skin was still impressive.

“Did you see this?” Dawson asked. “Mountain lion killed ten of my serfs. Ten of them. I left court a month after my first boy was born to hunt it. It took me three weeks to track it down, and four of my hunters fell before we brought it to ground. You would have been... five years old, then? Six?”

“Lord Kalliam, I respect that you are my elder, and I see that—”

“Don’t lie to me, boy. We both know there were knives meant for Aster’s throat.”

“There were,” Ashford said. “In both our courts. Asterilhold’s not a single thing any more than Antea is. A few people corresponded with Lord Maas about his ambitions. To hold the whole court responsible for the secret actions of a few will drag both our kingdoms into chaos.”

Dawson stroked the dead cat’s fur as he weighed what to say next. The kingdoms of Asterilhold and Antea were like brothers. In centuries before, they had answered to the same High King. Several generations back, the noble houses had made a fashion of intermarrying in hopes that it would drive their nations toward peace. Instead it had confused the bloodlines and given dukes in Asterilhold a plausible claim to the Antean throne. If only you killed enough of the people in between.

It was the fate of all reforms that they turned against the reformers. History was rotten with men and women who had sought to remake the world in the image they had created of it. Inevitably, they failed. The world resisted change, and the nobleman’s role was to protect the right order of things. If only that order were always clear. He caressed the dead animal one last time and let his fingers fall from it.

“What do you propose, then?” Dawson asked.

“You are one of King Simeon’s oldest and most trusted friends. You were willing to sacrifice your reputation and accept exile from the court in order to expose the plot against the prince. No one is better placed to speak in favor of negotiation.”

“And in addition, I was the Palliako boy’s patron.”

“Yes,” Ashford said placidly. “And that.”

“I thought you were a skeptic of the romance of Geder Palliako.”

“The sure-sighted viscount who burned the city he’d been set to protect in order that he rush back to Camnipol and save the throne from insurrection. His mysterious self-exile to the east taken at the height of his triumph and his return with secret knowledge of the traitors within the court,” Ashford said. “It sounds like something a man would pay good coin to have said about him. Next, he’ll be waking dragons to play riddles against them.”

“Palliako’s an interesting one,” Dawson said. “I underestimated him. More than once. He lends himself to that.”

“He’s the hero of Antea, savior and protector of the prince, and darling of the court,” Ashford said. “If that’s being underestimated, the truth must be something out of an old epic.”

“Palliako’s... odd,” Dawson said.

“Does he respect you? Does he listen to your advice?”

Dawson didn’t know the answer to that. Once, when the boy had just come back from Vanai, Dawson had been fairly certain that he could exercise whatever influence he liked over the younger Palliako. Now Geder had a barony of his own and Prince Aster as his ward. There was an argument that he outranked Dawson, if not formally then in effect.

And there was the temple. Ever since the boy’s return from the wilds of the Keshet, it was unclear how much the foreign priests he’d brought back were his pets and how much he was theirs. The high priest, Basrahip, had been central to the raid against Feldin Maas, once Baron of Ebbingbaugh and now bones at the bottom of the Division. From what Dawson understood, without the priest, all might have been lost that night. Geder might not have escaped with the letters of evidence, King Simeon might have gone ahead with his plan to foster Prince Aster with Maas, and the world might be a very different place.

And still, there was an answer to the question that he could honestly give.

“Even if Palliako doesn’t bend his neck back to look up at me, he’ll listen to my son. Jorey served with him in Vanai. They were friends of a sort even before it became the popular thing to do.”

“A word from him would go quite a long way toward throwing oil on these waters. All I’m looking for is a private audience with the king. If I knew what assurances he would need, I could take them home with me. Plots of regicide are no more appealing to King Lechan than King Simeon. If nobles in Asterilhold need be called to justice, Lechan will be the one to do it. There’s no need to field armies.

Dawson made a small sound in the back of his throat, neither assent nor refusal.

“King Lechan would be very grateful,” Ashford said, “for any aid you could be in mending the breach with his much-loved cousin.”

Dawson laughed now. It was a short, barking sound like one of his dogs.

“Do I seem like a merchant to you, Lord Ashford?” Dawson asked. “I have no interest in turning a profit from serving King Simeon. There is no gift your king could offer me that would bring me to act against my conscience.”

“Then I rely upon your conscience,” Ashford said, dropping the offer of bribery as if it had never been made. “What does it say, Baron Osterling?”

“If it were mine to choose, I’d want the testicles of every man who wrote to Maas in a pickling

jar,” Dawson said. “But it isn’t mine. Simeon sits on the Severed Throne, so the decision is his. Yes, I’ll speak with him.”

“And Palliako?”

“I’ll have Jorey approach him. Perhaps the two of you can meet when court is called. It’s only a few weeks from now, and I assume you were going to Camnipol anyway.”

“For the opening of court, as it happens,” Ashford said. “But there’s much to be done before then. With your permission, my lord, I will take my leave of your holding in the morning.”

“What? More Antean nobles to dangle Lechan’s generosity before?” Dawson said.

The ambassador’s smile thinned, but it did not vanish.

“As you say, Lord Kalliam,” Ashford said.

The holding at Osterling Fells had been Dawson’s home when he was only a boy, and his memories of it were of snow and cold. The dim patterns he’d divined as a child put autumn’s feasts of pumpkin sweets and brandy-soaked cherries in Camnipol, snow and ice in Osterling Fells. Almost into adulthood, he had thought of the seasons as residing in different cities. Summer lived in the dark-cobbled streets and high walls of Camnipol. The ice and snow of winter belonged to the narrow valley with its thin river. Granted, the conceit had become more poetic in nature. He wasn’t an innocent to think no snow fell on the bridges that spanned the Division or that the summer heat wouldn’t bring hunting dogs to torpor in his father’s kennels. But the idea had the deep resonance—the rightness—of a thing known in youth and never entirely disbelieved.

The holding had stood in its place at the base of a sloping hill, unchanged for centuries. Before Antea rose as a kingdom, the walls of Osterling Fells had been there. Dragon’s jade, eternal and unyielding, wove through the stone and defied wind and weather. The hard granite had eroded in places, and in some even been replaced, but the jade would never fail.

The room he used for his private study was the same that his father had used, and his grandfather, and so on back and back and back. Before this same window, his father had explained that the walls of the holding were like the fabric of the kingdom, that the noble houses were the jade. Without their constancy, even the most glorious structure would eventually fall into ruin.

When his father died, Dawson had taken the holding as his own, raised his own boys within it, and told the same tale over their winter cribs. *This land, these walls, are ours, and only the king can take them from us. Anyone else who tries, dies in the attempt. But if the king requires it, then it is his for the asking. That is what loyalty means.*

His boys had taken the lesson. Barriath, his eldest, served now under Lord Skestinin in the fleet. Vicarian, second of his sons, and unlikely to inherit, had entered the priesthood. His only daughter, Elisia, had married Lord Annerin’s eldest. Only Jorey still remained with the household, and that only until he was called again to service. He had ridden out once, under Lord Ternigan, fought well, and came back a hero and the friend of a hero, even if it was an unreliable one like Geder Palliako.

Dawson found Jorey in a perch at the top of the South Tower. Dawson had spent time there himself as a boy, sticking his head out the thin window and looking down until the height made him dizzy. From here, the lands of Osterling Fells spread out like a map. Two of the villages were clearly visible and the lake. The trees were all the pale green of new leaf, the shadows all thick with the last of the snow. The cold, soft breeze ruffled Jorey’s hair like the feathers of a crow. Two letters—one still sealed with wax the resonant blue of House Skestinin—were forgotten in the young man’s hands.

“Letter from your brother? What news from the north?” Dawson asked, and Jorey started, pushing

the letters behind him like a kitchen boy caught with sticky lips and a jar of honey. Jorey's cheeks flushed as red as if he'd been slapped.

"He's fine, Father. He says they didn't lose any ships to the freeze, so they're expecting to be on the water again. They might already be."

"That's as it should be," Dawson said. "I met with that idiot from Asterilhold."

"Yes?"

"I've agreed to speak with Simeon about meeting with him. He was also asking whether you would speak with Palliako. He seems to think that soft words from Geder would keep the wheels of vengeance from rolling too far."

Jorey nodded. When his eyes were cast down, he looked like his mother. Clara had the same shape of jaw, the same quiet. The boy was lucky to have that from her.

"Did you say that I would?"

"I said I'd speak to you about it," Dawson said. "You aren't bound to anything."

"Thank you. I'll think on it."

Dawson leaned against the wall. A sparrow darted in through the window, whirled twice through the narrow space, and vanished again in a panic of wind and dust.

"Are you against the thought of war or of speaking to the new Baron Ebbingbaugh?" Dawson asked.

"I don't want to go off to war unless we have to," Jorey said. The first time he'd faced going on campaign, he'd been equal parts anxiety and joy. The experience of it had pressed both out of him. "But if we have to, we will. It's only that Geder... I don't know."

For a moment, Dawson saw the ghosts of Vanai reflected in his son's face. The city that Geder Palliako had burned. It was easy to forget that Palliako had that potential for slaughter in him. But perhaps it was hard for Jorey.

"I understand," Dawson said. "Do what you think best. I trust your judgment."

For some reason Dawson couldn't fathom, the blush in Jorey's cheeks returned and deepened. His boy coughed and wouldn't meet his eye.

"Barriath sent me a letter," Jorey said. "I mean another letter. Inside his. It's from Lord Skestinin. It's a formal introduction to Sabiha. His daughter."

The pause that followed seemed to have some weight. Jorey's dread was as palpable as it was strange.

"I see," Dawson said. "Introduction to his daughter, you say? Hmm. Well, if you don't care to make the connection, we could say the letter went astray..."

"I had asked, sir. I asked for the letter."

"Ah," Dawson said. "Well. Then good you have it, yes?"

Jorey looked up. His eyes betrayed his surprise.

"Yes," he said. "I suppose it is. Sir."

They stood in awkward silence for a moment, then Dawson nodded, turned, and walked back down the narrow spiral stair, his head almost against the stone of the steps above him, with the uncomfortable sense of having given his blessing to something.

Clara, of course, understood at once.

He'd no sooner mentioned Lord Skestinin's daughter than Clara's eyebrows tried to rise up to meet her hairline.

"Oh good God," she said. "Sabiha Skestinin? Who would have guessed that?"

"You know something about the girl?" Dawson asked.

Clara put down her needlework and drew the clay pipe from between her lips, tapping its stem gently against her knee. The window of their private room was open, and the smell of the lilacs mixed with the smoke of her tobacco.

“She’s a clever girl. Very pretty. Sweet-tempered, so far as I can tell, but you know how it is with these girls. They know more ways to lie than a banker. And, more to the point, she’s fertile.”

Dawson’s confusion resolved and he sat on the edge of his bed. Clara sighed.

“She had her boy two years ago by no one in particular,” Clara said. “He’s being raised by one of the family retainers in Estinport. Everyone’s been very good about pretending it doesn’t... *he* doesn’t exist, but of course it’s common knowledge. I imagine Lord Skestinin’s quite pleased to write letters of introduction for anyone with a drop of noble blood, and lucky for the chance.”

“No,” Dawson said. “Absolutely not. I won’t have my boy wearing secondhand clothes.”

“She isn’t a coat, dear.”

“You know what I mean,” Dawson said, rising to his feet. He should have known. He should have guessed by the shame in Jorey’s body that the girl was a slut. And now Dawson had said that getting the letter was a good thing. “I’ll find him now and put a stop to this.”

“Don’t.”

Dawson turned back at the doorway. Clara hadn’t risen. Her face was soft and round, her eyes on his. Her perfect rosebud lips curled in a tiny smile, and with the light spilling across her, she looked no, not young again. Better than young again. She looked like herself.

“But, love, if Jorey—”

“There are weeks between now and the first chance he could have to see her. There isn’t a rush.”

He took a step back into the room before he knew he’d done it. Clara put the pipe stem back in her mouth, drawing gently. Smoke seeped out of her nostrils like she was some ancient dragon hidden in a woman’s flesh. When she spoke, her voice was light, conversational, but her eyes were locked on his.

“As I recall, I wasn’t the first girl you ever took to bed,” she said. “I believe you knew exactly who you were about when my bride’s night came.”

“She’s a woman,” he said. “It’s not the same.”

“I suppose it isn’t,” Clara said, a note of melancholy stealing into her voice. “Still, we’re all round-heeled sometimes. I would have fallen back for you months before you made me honest, and we both remember that.”

Dawson’s body began to stir without his will.

“You’re trying to distract me.”

“It’s working,” Clara said. “Indiscreet and unlucky doesn’t make her a bad person. Or a bad wife. Give it time, and let me see what I can learn of her when we’re back in Cannipol. Lord Skestinin might make a very fine ally if Jorey were to lift up his fallen daughter. And really, dear, they may be in love.”

She held out her hand, guiding him down to sit beside her. Her skin wasn’t as smooth as it had been two decades and four children before, but it was still as soft. The amusement in her eyes called forth softness in his own heart. He could feel his outrage fading. He plucked the pipe from her mouth, leaned forward, and kissed her gently, his mouth filling with her smoke. When he drew back, she was smiling.

“As long as she’s not unfaithful,” Dawson said with a sigh. “I won’t have someone in the family being unfaithful.”

A cloud seemed to pass over Clara’s eyes, a moment’s darkness but nothing more.

“When the time comes,” she said. “We can worry when the time comes.”

It was a week past his thirty-ninth name day, and Marcus squatted at the alley's mouth, waiting. A soft rain fell on the night-dark streets, beading on the waxed wool of his cloak. Yardem stood in the shadows behind him, unseen but present. In the house across the narrow square, a shape passed in front of the window—a man peering out into the darkness. A less experienced man might have stepped back, but Wester knew how to keep from being seen. The man in the window retreated. The tapping of raindrops against stone was the only sound.

"It's not as if I can tell her what to do," Marcus said.

"No, sir."

"She's a grown woman. Well, she's *almost* a grown woman. She's not a child, certainly."

"It's an awkward age, sir," Yardem agreed.

"She wants control over her life. Autonomy. The problem is that she didn't have any her whole life and then had all of it at once. She had free rein with this bank for months. Long enough to see that she could do it well. After getting a taste for it, I don't see how she turns her back."

"Yes, sir."

Marcus sighed. His breath barely misted. It was a warm spring. He tapped his fingertips against his sword's pommel. Annoyance and concern gnawed at him like rats in the grain house walls.

"I could talk to her," he said at last. "I could tell her that she's got to be patient. Give the situation time to change on its own. Could she hear that, d'you think?"

For a moment, the rain was the only reply.

"Did you want me to answer that?" the Tralgu asked.

"I asked it, didn't I?"

"Could have been a rhetorical point."

Across the square, a thin line of light marked an opening door. Marcus went still for a few seconds but the door closed again without opening fully. He eased his grip on his sword.

"No, I really meant it," he said. "She's my employer, but she's also... Cithrin. If you've got a suggestion here, I'm open to hearing it."

"Well, sir, I believe that every soul has its own shape—"

"Ah, God. Not this again."

"You asked, sir. You might let me answer."

"Right, sorry. Go ahead. I'll tell myself it's all a metaphor for something."

Yardem's sigh was eloquent, but he continued.

"Every soul has its own shape, and it determines the person's path through the world. Your soul is a circle standing on its edge. At your lowest point, you will only rise, and your highest is when you are most likely to fall. Someone else's soul might be shaped like a blade or a brick or a branching river. Each of them would live the same life differently."

"Which would make it the same life how?"

"I *can* explain that if you'd like, sir. It's theological."

"No, forget I said anything."

"If the magistra's soul leads her in one way, it will seem the simplest path, whether it is or not. If she's left within herself, she'll turn in that direction just like Old Imbert drifted to the left after he took that hammer to his head. To make another choice would require the action of a different soul—"

Marcus raised his hand, and Yardem fell silent. The door that had opened before shifted. The light behind it was gone, and the movement was only a deeper bit of darkness. Yardem shifted. Marcus squinted into the dim.

“He’s going north, sir.”

Marcus took to his feet and shrugged back his cloak, the rain dampening his newly freed sword arm. Around them, *Porte Oliva* slept, or if it didn’t sleep, at least huddled close to its fires. If there had been moonlight, the pale walls and blue-painted lintels of the merchant quarter would have glowed. Instead, Marcus navigated by shadows and memory. Here and there, a lantern hung from an iron hook beside a door, spilling thin light, but there was more than enough gloom to cling to for a man who didn’t want to be seen. The bricks under his feet were slick with grime and rain. Marcus walked quickly, not quite trotting, and straining his ears for his quarry’s footsteps. Yardem could have been his shadow.

The man’s mistake was a small one, and inevitable. A small splash of a heel coming down in an unexpected puddle and an involuntary grunt. It was enough. They were close enough. It was time.

“Canin!” Marcus said with a friendliness that might almost have been genuine. “Canin Mise, as I live and breathe. Imagine meeting you out on a night like this.”

For a moment, it could have gone either way. The man could have greeted him, pretended some legitimate business, and had their conversation. Instead, there was the soft hiss of steel clearing its sheath. Marcus was disappointed, but he wasn’t surprised. He stepped back slowly, putting another foot or two between himself and the man.

“It doesn’t have to be like this,” Marcus said, easing his own blade free with a finger pressed against it to keep it from singing. “No one has to die here.”

“You cheated me,” the little merchant said. “You and that half-breed bitch you dance for.”

The buzz in his voice wasn’t a drunkard’s. It was worse than that. It belonged to a man who had taken the humiliation of his own failures and forged a weapon from them. That was hatred, and too much wine would have been easier to recover from.

“You borrowed money,” Marcus said, circling slowly to the right. The rain chilled his sword. “You knew the risks. The *magistra* forgave you three payments already. And now there’s a story you’re looking to leave the city. Set up shop in *Herez*. You know I can’t let that happen until you clear your debt. Now let’s put the sharp things away and talk about how you’re going to make this right.”

“I’ll go where I want and I’ll do what I please,” the man growled.

“That’s not where I’d put my bet,” Marcus said.

Canin Mise was decent with a blade. Veteran of two wars, five years as a *queensman* before the governor’s *magistrates* suggested he look for work elsewhere. His plan for starting a fighting school had been a good one. If he’d followed it, he’d likely have died with a reputation and enough money to set up any children he’d fathered along the way. Instead, his foot scraped against the cobbles and his blade hissed through the rain-thick air. Marcus held his sword in a ready block and stepped back out of his reach.

Probably out of his reach. If there had been even a glimmer of light, it would have been safer than what they were doing now. In the darkness, Canin Mise could no more judge his attacks than Marcus could avoid them. Marcus strained his senses, listening for the small noises that could guide him, trying to judge the pressure of the air. It was less swordplay than gambling. Marcus slid forward and took an exploratory swing. Metal clashed against metal, and Canin Mise yelped in surprise. Marcus pressed in with a shout, blocking the counterstrike by instinct.

Canin Mise shouted, a full-throated roar filled with rage and violence. It cut off suddenly. His

blade fell to the cobblestones with a clatter. Soft, wet choking sounds came through the darkness, the splash of heels beating at the puddles. The sounds faded and went still.

“You have him?” Marcus asked.

“Yes, sir,” Yardem said. “You’ll want to carry his heels.”

“So,” Marcus said, “you’re saying that someone will choose against the shape of their own soul if some other-shaped soul’s in the room with them?” Canin Mise’s boots were slick and the unconscious man’s legs were dead-weight heavy.

“Not that they will, but that by having that, the opportunity arises. The world has no will of its own so *it* can’t. Action that comes from without can change the awareness of other possibilities. Are you ready, sir?”

“Wait.” Marcus swung his foot in the darkness until he found the fallen man’s sword. He lifted it with one toe until the steel was close enough to grab with his encumbered fingers. He didn’t want to be responsible for a horse or a person stepping on a live blade in the darkness. And they might get a few coins for it. Likely more money than he’d paid on the loan. “All right. Let’s get him to the magistrate.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So talking to her may or may not improve things, but keeping silence certainly can’t help?”

“Yes, sir,” Yardem said as they started off at a slow walk, Canin Mise slung between them like a sack.

“And you couldn’t just say that?”

Marcus felt Yardem’s shrug translated through their shared burden.

“Didn’t see the harm, sir. We weren’t doing anything else.”

The public gaol of Porte Oliva looked like a statue garden in the first light of dawn. Blue-lipped prisoners huddled under whatever tarps and blankets the queensmen had seen fit to throw over them. The wooden platforms they stood or squatted on were dark with rain. A Kurtadam man, all the beads pulled from his pelt, stood bent double with a carved wooden symbol at his hip that showed he hadn’t paid his tax. A Cinnae woman moaned and wept at the end of an iron chain, her pale skin stained by iron rust, for abandoning her children. Three Firstblood men hung by their necks in the central gallows, unconcerned by the cold.

To the west, the huge brick-and-glass hill of the Governor’s Palace. To the east, the echoing white marble of the high temple. Divine law on one side, human law on the other, and a bunch of poor bastards dying of cold in the middle because they had the misfortune to get caught. It seemed to Marcus like the whole world writ small.

To the north, the wide, soft green of the dragon’s road led away, running solid and eternal out to the web of ancient roads that the fallen masters of the world had left behind when madness and war destroyed them. For a moment he stood on the wide steps of the square and watched the queensmen wrestle Canin Mise into a tiny metal box with a small hole on top where his head would be exposed to the air. Canin Mise would be easy enough to find until the magistrate had time to review his situation. By taking the man into custody for breaking a private contract, the governor had tacitly purchased the debt at a tenth of its price. Whatever value the law was able to squeeze out of the man now was no concern of Marcus or Cithrin bel Sarcour or the Medean bank.

Dragons had built this square in millennia past, and the sun had risen on it every day since. Rain and snow and hail had battered or caressed it. Porte Oliva itself was an artifact grown over the

remnants of a fallen age. None of these buildings had been where they now stood when the races of humanity had been made. Empires had risen and fallen, and while *Porte Oliva* itself had never been stormed by an invading host, it had been home to riots and slaughter and death just as any city. It had suffered its fevers and loss. It had become complex, pulling its history around it like a knit shawl. The square hadn't been meant to house the suffering and the guilty, but it served the purpose.

A pigeon took wing, grey in the grey, flying out over the square to alight on the top of the gallows post. Marcus had the sudden and profound sense of living in a ruin. Generations of *Firstblood* and *Kurtadam* and *Cinnae* had risen and fallen, lived and loved and died within the walls of the city. And so had the pigeons and rats, the salt lizards and the feral dogs. He couldn't say that there was a great difference between the walls and roofs and passageways that humanity had built and the birds' nests that huddled in their eaves. Except that birds didn't have thumbs. None of them were dragons.

He considered *Canin Mise's* lost sword. It was a nice piece, well forged and well cared for. The letters *SRB* were worked into the pommel, but what they meant was anyone's guess. Perhaps the blade had been a gift from a lover or a commander. Or *Canin Mise* might have taken it from its owner before him. Regardless, the letters had meant something once, and they didn't now.

"All right," Marcus said. "I need food and sleep. I'm getting maudlin."

"Yes, sir."

But when they reached the bank office, *Pyk Usterhall* was waiting for them. The grey slate still hung on the wall, an artifact of the building's history as a gambler's stall. Where the day's odds had been posted, the duty roster now stood. The three names for the standing guard—*Corisen Mout*, *Roach*, and *Enen*—were listed in *Yardem's* block letters, but none of them were present. Marcus had noticed before now that when the *Yemmu* notary was in the front room, there always seemed to be pressing work in the back.

She sat at a low desk, leaning on one massive elbow. The papers on the doomed *Canin Mise* loan were spread out before her. Her lips sagged in where her tusks should have been, the gap between front and back teeth giving her face a horsey look. She could almost have been a fantastically ugly, obese *Firstblood* woman. Almost, but not quite.

"You're back," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," Marcus said.

"She's still sleeping."

"Sorry?"

"I saw you looking around for the girl. She's not here. She's still sleeping. What happened?"

Marcus put the sword on the desk. *Pyk* looked down at it, then up at him, scowling.

"He was where we thought, and he knew we were looking for him. When I talked to him, he tried to cut me down."

"And?"

"He didn't manage."

Pyk nodded curtly.

"You've handed him to the magistrates?" she asked.

"Saw him in the box before we came back."

Pyk sucked at her teeth, plucked the pen from its inkwell, and wrote a line in the margin of the original contract. For a woman with such huge hands, her writing was tiny and precise. Putting the pen back in place, she sighed prodigiously.

"I need you to fire half your guards," *Pyk* said. "Whichever ones you like. Use your best judgment."

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