

Chapter 1: Uani

A storm was coming to the port of Autu'rel, one brought by strange winds from faraway lands. Vale could see it from the terrace of his pleasure chamber, gathering out at sea; a great mass of darkness on the horizon drawing closer and closer with every heartbeat. It was not unlike the storm that had brought him to Autu'rel all those years ago he mused. Though somehow this storm seemed...different.

There was a deathly silence about it. A silence so profound that it was oppressive. The wind was still for the most part and the thunder only came in sporadic, guttural rumbles which emanated from deep within the darkness. And when the thunder faded, only the silence remained. It spread through the port like morning mist; flowing through every market, every tavern, every home. It was as if the denizens of Autu'rel were holding their collective breath, waiting for the headman's ax to fall.

The gathering storm was more than enough to fill even the most seaworthy men with unease and consume those less hardy with fear. And when men's fears were aroused their other passions followed suit. Vale knew this to be true. As soon as dawn broke, clients flocked to the Deleton in droves, despite the earliness of the hour. Sea captains and wealthy merchants, power brokers and ministry men, pirates and privateers; they all came searching for pleasant distractions. And the women...and boys of the *house* were more than happy to oblige them, provided the gentlemen in question had the coin. Vale was known for providing excellent distractions, perhaps even the best distractions at the Deleton, according to those who favored sweet little things such as himself (though Vale would make no such claim lest he appear immodest).

However, if one consorted with certain circles in Autu'rel with questionable proclivities, one would no doubt hear about a certain boy at the Deleton. A boy with golden hair and “sensual eyes” that were “blue as the midsummer sky.” A boy whose touch could make you “melt like butter” and whose skin was of a “gentle, golden hue, like honey.”

They all loved his skin.

A faint rumbling noise filled the air, interrupting Vale's musings. For an instant, he thought it was more thunder grumbling away in the distance, but quickly realized it was merely Lord Boral's snoring.

“Lord Boral” may have been a noble by name, but there was nothing regal or dignified about his current bearings. He lay sprawled on his back in a tangle of blankets; mouth agape and snoring loudly, his manhood half-erect and slumped against his thigh. No doubt he was dreaming of Vale, or some other pretty little thing in his service.

Boral was a giant of a man, hardy and strong; he had been quite fit in his youth, but years of excessive feasting had turned his taut physique to fat. To make matters worse, gout had taken ahold of his feet, leaving them red and swollen. Vale had done his best to ease his lord's pain lathering his feet with exotic lotions and massaging them gently. He had also laced Boral's wine with calainth root to ensure that he slept peacefully and painlessly. In hindsight Vale supposed he had been a little overzealous with his dosage, but at least his venerable lord had been able to enjoy a few hours rest...and Vale had been able to spend some time in solitude, marshaling his strength for the day that lay ahead.

The door to Vale's room creaked open slightly. A small crack. Lord Boral stirred fretfully but remained fast asleep.

“Vale. We’d best be off. It’s first light,” a voice whispered through the crack; the voice of Vale’s guard Tormir. “Are you decent?”

“I like to think so.”

Tormir let out an audible sigh. “Just put some damn clothes on,” he hissed.

Vale obliged, stepping away from his terrace and heading towards the dressing room, though he did pause for a moment, giving the storm out at sea another appraising glance. He could swear it had doubled in size in a mere matter of moments.

It truly was like the one that had brought him to Autu’rel all those years ago, a great monster of a storm. But he had been in the thick of that one, in the heart of the monster’s maw; his ship torn asunder by tremendous waves and ferocious winds. The black, murky water had swallowed him whole, dragging him down to a great black void and then, without warning, it had spat him out on shore. The whole ordeal had been terrifying, but the darkness...that was the one thing Vale remembered most vividly. The complete absence of light. Try as he might, Vale could never forget the darkness...or the one who had brought it.

“Hurry it up won’t you. You don’t want to keep him waiting,” said Tormir, snapping Vale back to attention. Tormir was quite right. Master Aliar was most certainly not someone who should be kept waiting. Vale turned his back on the storm and entered his dressing room. After a moment of dithering, he settled on an emerald green doublet.

When Vale exited the chamber, he shut the door softly so as not to wake Lord Boral, though he knew the chances of rousing the sleeping giant were slim to none. Tormir stood slumped against the far wall, fiddling with his prized dagger. He was a brute of a man, a

fearsome sell-sword of some renown—albeit one well past his prime. The Deleton often attracted such fighting men; men with sharp blades and sharp wits but who had reached an age where more dangerous and lucrative contracts were simply not viable options for them anymore. While work at the Deleton was far from glamorous or worthy of song, the pay was decent and the work was fairly easy. Save for ferreting consorts around in the wee hours of the morning, butchering the odd cutthroat or two and leaning on uncooperative clients, Tormir rarely had to do anything other than stand around and look intimidating. A task that was not difficult for him in the slightest.

Seeing Vale approaching, Tormir heaved himself from the wall and sheathed his dagger.

“You ready? Good. Aliar wants a word with us and then we’ll be off.”

Vale nodded, smiling. He smiled often. Too often for his liking. Some days he smiled so much his face began to ache. But smiles had their uses he supposed, for they often opened doors and legs alike.

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“Eight hours. No More,” Master Aliar said, scribbling in his ledger, the rasping scratches of his quill carried throughout his cavernous office. “Five for Uani. Three for Helena.”

“I understand. Uani has a considerable amount of...stamina. Pleasuring him takes time—”

“Five hours should be more than sufficient...”

“And despite her demure demeanor Lady Helena is not without her...vices.”

“I am all too aware of her vices.”

Aliar continued scribbling in silence for a moment, not acknowledging Vale's presence. For a man who made his fortune off of passion Master Aliar was a rather cold man. He rarely smiled. He never laughed. And despite being surrounded by some of the comeliest women and boys the Kaden Isles had to offer, he rarely laid with any of them. Aliar only enlisted Vale's services on one occasion, after drinking too much wine. Through the whole encounter he had kept his eyes on the same ledger he was currently engrossed with, scribbling away even as Vale pleased him. Though Vale was a witless youth at the time, it was abundantly clear to him that gold was Aliar's favorite mistress. Which Vale supposed was wise in a certain sense seeing as gold would never betray or abandon him.

Aliar dipped his quill in his inkpot. "Remember, I don't want either of them keeping you. Guard your time...especially with Uani."

Vale nodded. "Of course Master."

Aliar broke into a fit of coughing. He did look rather ill. Vale thought he looked paler than he had the day before, but it was difficult to tell, for the skins of those who hailed from the Isles proper were of a darker hue than his own.

"Are you alright master? Some water perhaps?" Vale said, feigning concern. Aliar waved dismissively, hacking into the sleeve of his ornate silk robe.

"I'm fine. Don't waste time attending to me," he croaked. "Uani's first. Go to him. Go now." Vale bowed and moved to leave, Tormir followed suit.

"One more thing..."

Vale paused in the doorway. Aliar raised his gaze to him. Vale supposed he should be grateful for being acknowledged in some small way, but in truth he found Aliar's gaze rather disconcerting. His eyes had a bizarre lifeless look to them, an eerie grey tinge. The sort one could expect to see in the eyes of a corpse as it turned to rot.

“You are not to suffer any wounds as you did last time. Make that clear to Uani. Bruises are fine, they can be covered up. But no cuts, scratches or bites. I need you tonight. Whole and unspoiled. Understood?”

“Yes Master...I understand, but Uani can be quite insistent...”

“No wounds,” Aliar said, cutting Vale off. “If Uani does not heed my warning he will pay this time...more than he knows.”

Vale nodded. “As you wish. I'll explain the situation to him clearly.”

Aliar turned his attention back to his ledger and resumed his scribbling. “Be vigilant,” he said to Tormir. “I don't want those savages in the Lower Quarter cutting him up. These storms bring out the worst in men.”

Hence the reason we've been doing so well this morning. Vale mused.

“I wouldn't worry. Everyone's busy scurrying back to their holes. It's quiet as a tomb,” Tormir replied.

Aliar made a noise halfway between a cough and a snort. “Autu'rel may very well be our tomb if this storm does not break. But until our bloated corpses float out into the bay, I will assume we are to go on living. Business will continue.”

“As you wish...Master,” Tormir said, his voice carrying just the faintest hint of disgust, or anger, or both. Vale was not sure which one it was, but he was certain there was latent venom in Tormir’s words. Master Aliar however seemed oblivious, oblivious or indifferent. He bid them leave with another dismissive wave.

“That will be all.”

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The streets of Autu’rel stood naked and forlorn save for a few pedestrians hurrying this way or that and the odd merchant frantically disassembling their stall. In truth, Vale preferred the solitude and bleakness to the usual hustle and bustle of the crowds to which he had grown accustomed. During a typical day there was never enough room to think and barely enough room to breathe in the endless labyrinth of narrow alleys that made up Autu’rel’s lower quarter. Beggars, street whores, and disreputable merchants one step above confidence men would solicit him on all sides with gusto, Tormir’s menacing aura the only think keeping them at bay.

But on this day, there were barely any other living souls present, most had already secreted themselves away in their homes or the nearest establishments they could find, boarding up windows and barring doors as if in preparation for an invasion. Personally, Vale thought all their efforts were a fool’s errand. Storms could not be kept at bay with such crude defenses or felled with steel like a hoard of frenzied marauders. If Varu marked you for death during a storm the water or the wind would find you. One way or another, the storm would have its due.

For some reason the prospect of imminent death did not frighten him as much as he thought it would. He supposed a normal boy of his age would be terrified of dying. But Vale felt oddly indifferent. Almost numb. Then again, he supposed the average boy of his age had

something he did not. Hope. A childish belief that his future would be full of light and love. A future he would dread to have seized from him.

Alas, hope had deserted Vale a long time ago, his family's destruction and his current circumstances had smothered that fire. But another fire still burned brightly within him. One he had been fanning for years until it had blossomed into an inferno.

He hated Aliar, his apathetic task master who had broken his will and sold his virtue to the highest bidder. He hated his clients, their faces, their bodies, their perversities. But the man Vale hated the most was half a world away, sitting where his father sat, strutting through his father's halls; halls that by all the laws of man and Varu should belong to Vale. It was this man he hated most, hence the reason he resolved to live. Every breath that man drew was an insult, an insult Vale would hopefully correct one day.

"Do you have a family Tormir? A wife and children? I don't believe I've ever asked," Vale said, trying to lighten his mood. It was important that Uani not see any signs of distress.

"A family, no. But there're a few pups running around with my seed I'd wager. Can't help but feel sorry for them, sons of whores the lot of em," Tormir replied, gloomily.

"Better a whore-child than a whore."

"Aye, that's true. You'd know better than anyone I suppose."

Vale nodded in agreement. "I fear you're right."

Tormir remained silent for a good moment, chewing his lip. "It's disgusting," he finally said.

“I’m sorry you find me repulsive. I’ve always appreciated your company.”

“Not you...”

“Then who irks you so?” Vale inquired, though he already had a pretty good idea who it was, the anger in Tormir’s eyes when they had been speaking with Aliar had been palpable.

“Aliar. The clients. All of them. They all disgust me,” Tormir said. As soon as the words left his lips he looked as if he had regretted their utterance.

“Then why work for them?”

“The pay is good and the work easy. An opportunity an old sell-sword like me cannot afford to let pass by.”

“Hence the reason you continue, despite your misgivings.”

“I’m not a good man Vale. Not a good one at all...but I probably don’t need to tell you that.” Tormir turned his gaze to the tangle of dark alleys that lay ahead, surveying them for any threats. Though in truth, Vale suspected Tormir was attempting to avert his eyes.

“You feel some guilt at least...”

Tormir snorted. “True, I feel guilty. I feel it. But what do I do Vale? How do I act? If I were a good man, I’d put Aliar and his clients to the sword and I’d burn the Deleton to the ground. I’d release you and the others and ferret away as many of you as I could. But I won’t. I’ll patrol the grounds as I always have. I’ll lead you to the next pervert Aliar orders you to lay with as I always have. And if any of you try to escape, I’ll run you down as I always have. What does that say about me pray tell?”

“Nothing good I’m afraid,” Vale replied.

Tormir laughed grimly. “I fear you’re right.”

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The journey to Uani’s mansion took the better part of an hour on foot, even with the alleys of the Lower Quarter more or less abandoned. While clearly built by one of great affluence, the mansion’s exterior was worn and weathered. Countless storms had taken their toll on the stonework, leaving the outer walls looking rather stricken. Ivy snaked its way along the roof and walls uncontested, the place had an unmistakable aura of decayed grandeur and perhaps even menace. The interior was no different. The halls were lined with imposing tribal carvings, the ceilings were so high they were often shrouded in darkness, and the inside walls were free of any adornments. The shutters on the windows were always closed regardless of the hour and during the day, an eerie half-light would seep through the cracks, deepening the shadows and when darkness fell the shadows grew deeper still.

Vale remembered the first time he had come to Uani’s mansion all too well. He had been a slip of a boy then, young, far too young to service a man such as Uani many thought. Some of his fellow consorts at the Deleton had protested Aliar’s decision. But the more questionable the proclivity, the higher the price the act in question commanded and Aliar was not one to squander an opportunity to turn a profit on his latest acquisition.

“It is better he learn the way of things now. He is ready.” Vale overheard Aliar say as he was being led away to Uani for the first time.

“He’s only a child...” Mistress Serena had pleaded.

“Some clients prefer boys of a certain age. You know this. Besides you’ve been training him yourself and you’ve trained him well. I don’t understand why you’re feeling so conflicted.”

“It’s just...Uani...I fear it will be too much for him. He is a delicate one.”

“His wellbeing does not concern me. He will serve his purpose or he will be replaced.”

Tormir drove the knocker against the mansion’s great wooden door thrice; each boom reverberated throughout the deserted street. After a pregnant pause, a small peephole slid open and a pair of eyes peered out at them. Tormir gave a slight nod and Vale flashed another one of his “winning” smiles...the last for a while hopefully. There was an unspoken understanding between them all, Vale, Tormir and the eyes. The peephole closed, and the door opened with an audible groan and creak.

“I’ll wait for you in the kitchens as usual,” Tormir said.

Vale nodded. “Would you mind saving a sweet roll for me? I’ll need something to cleanse my palate.”

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Uani’s bedchamber was every bit as foreboding as the rest of his home. The only illumination came from a skylight through which a feeble ray of sun shone, rendered gray by the storm. Uani stood not far away, leaning against one of the several stone pillars that dotted the room, watching Vale intently. His piercing green eyes beckoned Vale into the darkness.

Uani’s pitch black skin made it difficult to see where the darkness ended, and he began, it was as if he were a living shadow in the shape of a man. But Vale knew that his current

appearance was merely a trick of the light. He was as much flesh and blood as anyone, with fleshy thoughts and fleshy desires...thoughts and desires Vale knew all too well.

“Hello Sunshine, I’ve missed you.”

Vale’s gaze swept over Uani; a bulge was already beginning to take form in his trousers. Vale allowed himself a sly smile, a genuine one for once.

“I can see.”

Vale approached, brushing up gently against Uani as he reached for an apple from a nearby bowl. He felt Uani shudder as he began to harden in earnest.

“May I have one? I’m famished,” Vale said, taking the apple. Uani nodded, his eyes fixed on Vale. Vale took a deep bite from the apple, savoring its flavor.

“It’s ripe...as are you from the looks of it.” His eyes fell down to Uani’s crotch.

“You mean to taunt me I see. You can be so cruel Sunshine.”

“But you also know how kind I can be.”

“I know all too well. Just as you know, and appreciate, all that I do for you.”

Vale placed a hand on Uani’s shoulder. “And I’ve given much thought on how I can show my gratitude for all your...generosity.” Vale began to trace the sculpted splendor of Uani’s form: his jaw, his shoulders, his forearms— his touches slowly wandered lower and lower.

By the time Vale deftly unlaced Uani’s trousers and his hand reached its destination Uani was quivering. With a playful caress of the bud, Uani bloomed in Vale’s palm with an indrawn

breath. Vale raised his hand and licked the seed away, as if it were the sweetest thing, sweeter than any apple.

“How long has it been,” Vale said with a silvery laugh, “scarcely a day and yet still too long without me it would seem.” He drew nearer. “Why don’t we go out to the conservatory... you look so much better in the light.”

Uani seized Vale, forcing him up against the wall. His breath warm and erratic against the Vale’s neck. Vale couldn’t say that he was surprised. Uani could only be toyed with for so long.

“I want you here as much as I want you in the conservatory,” Uani hissed, his breath quickening. “You look just a good in darkness as you do in light.” Vale thought Uani meant to take him there; he began to prepare himself, gathering his wits. He would have to make this encounter special, something Uani would remember fondly. But then, without warning, Uani released him.

“But you want your lesson first, don’t you?” Uani said, his voice carrying just the faintest hint of disappointment.

“That would be nice. We can...refresh each other afterwards when we’re all hot and bothered. You may like me in both darkness and light, but you’ve always loved me nice and sweaty.”

Uani smiled. “That is true.”

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Darkness. Howling wind. The spray of the waves against his face. All of these things took Vale back to the dark nothingness the storm six years ago had brought. Though he knew his feet were planted in the shifting sand beneath him, Vale couldn't help but feel almost as if he were floating through that great black void again. He felt his breath grow shallow and fast and his flutter in its cage of bone.

Fear...

He was afraid.

His lips curled in disgust. Fear was an indulgence he could not afford. The faster his heart beat, the faster his blood would rush from an open wound. The more ragged and shallow his breath grew the less steady his grip on his blade would become.

"Your form is excellent. You've been practicing." Vale could hear Uani's voice clearly over the roaring waves, though no matter how hard Vale tried he could not glimpse even the faintest hint of Uani's silhouette through the blindfold that covered his eyes.

"I have. The others believe I am attempting to learn how to dance."

"They are correct in a certain sense. Lorthinian Death Craft is a dance at its core. Save more beautiful and more terrible."

Uani was right; there was a perverse beauty to the ancient fighting arts that had originated in the mythical empire of Old Lorthane. The rhythmic thrusts and counters with sword and knife were fluid and elegant as opposed to the crude hackings and slashings with claymore, axe and mace the world had since become accustomed to.

A terrible dance indeed, Vale thought grimly. The blindfold seemed tighter this day, the cloth more constricting, the darkness more absolute. A dance where the slightest mistake costs far more than some minor injury or embarrassment...and if all goes well then you'll have no partner left to tell tales of your inadequacies.

A dance Uani had agreed to teach him—so long as Vale continued to “amuse” him.

“The warriors of Old Lorthane conquered the Isles centuries ago,” Uani had said, during Vale’s first lesson four years ago. “Not long after a stranger arrived at my kin’s village one stormy night. He offered to teach my kin the fighting arts of the Lorthini in exchange for sanctuary. Who he was and why he sought shelter with my kin he would not say, but after he demonstrated his skill to the elders his offer became too tempting to refuse? And so my ancestors became skilled with knife and sword.”

“Very interesting,” Vale had said his eyes filled with curiosity and a respectful degree of deference. “I may be mistaken Uani, but I’ve heard most of the Tirivak are merchants by trade. I imagine a family of skilled warriors such as yours is invaluable to the rest of your clan.”

“We were quite a prize,” Uani had replied.

“Were?” Vale had said with a smile. “Are you not still?”

Uani either had not heard Vale or had deftly ignored him; he walked away and returned with two blades fastened around his waist. One long. The other short. After a moment of contemplation, he had withdrawn both blades from their scabbards. They had caught the light, looking every bit as fearsome and elegant as Vale had anticipated.

“They look amazing...” Vale had said, staring at the blades.

“They are. There are no other blades like them, but you’ll soon discover that for yourself. I have two to spare. Should you prove yourself worthy, I’d be inclined to give them to you—when the time is right. Knife and sword both. Though hands and feet will serve you just as well when I’m through with you...you’re in for a treat Sunshine.”

That night under the eerie red glow of a blood moon, Uani had revealed the two aforementioned blades that in time would become Vale’s. They were truly remarkable things, light as feathers with an almost perfect balance. Thin enough to slash through a foe’s armor with ease, and yet strong enough to withstand a blow from a war hammer with only a quiver. They were forged from Moonstone, Uani had explained, a rare ore found most prevalently in the ruins of Lodus Luminae, the fingers of Mor’Set and the hidden mines of Mons Apparex (and the not so hidden ones of Apparex Mons). But there were also a few other smatterings to be found here and there throughout the known world, not in equal abundance to be sure, but deposits of equal potency none the less. A few such veins lay in woods of Mankara, the smallest, yet ill-omened island of the Isles, the air thick with secrets and menace.

During the day Moonstone could easily be mistaken for iron due to its unremarkable hue, but under the moon’s gentle unassuming light, the truth of it would be revealed when the veins of ore began to glow. Any blade forged from Moonstone did as well, Uani had shown Vale a sword of his that gleamed milk white when held aloft under the night sky. But his other blades (Vale’s included) had been of a darker, more subtle hue. Under Lady Luminae’s watchful eye they shone red (and even then little more than a flicker), not white, silver, or blue. Weapons that ensured their wielder would be less likely to draw attention to them self in darkness ...no doubt while they stalked about on business of a nefarious nature.

Uani kept Vale's blades secreted away in a hollowed-out floor panel in his chambers. He only removed them from their hiding place when Vale needed them for training or to polish them in order to ensure they stayed in peak condition. For all their virtues, Lorthinian blades were very delicate, if they did not receive the care they required, they would grow rusty and brittle, a fact Uani was certain to emphasize during their first sessions together.

"Treat your blades as you would a lover, Sunshine," he would often say. "Love them tenderly and love them often."

Vale heeded Uani's advice; being sure to care for his blades whenever he visited the mansion—in addition to refining his blade work and martial ability with Uani as often as time would allow. Vale's progress during the time he had trained with Uani had been quite remarkable. Though it would be foolish of him to profess that he had equaled Uani in skill, he was able to duel on par with him most of the time. Occasionally, he'd win a few rounds when Varu smiled upon him and the odds were in his favor. Alas, Uani often made certain that the odds were rarely in his favor.

"Why must I wear this?" Vale had asked the first time Uani had placed a blindfold over his eyes during one of their earlier sessions. "It doesn't seem very sporting, me being sightless while you are not."

"Violence is not a "sporting" thing. It is not a game. It is cruel. Selective—" Uani had lashed out with his blade, striking Vale in the gut. Their blades were always locked firmly in their scabbards for obvious reasons, but the blow had still smarted none the less.

"—and final. We do not always have the luxury of choosing how and where we will fight. But we must fight none the less; and we must fight adversity as well as our foes."

Each one of Uani's sessions brought a new surprise. Sometimes they would spar solely with sword or knife—and other times with both at once. Sometimes they would spar in one of the mansion's cavernous chambers where the sounds of their footsteps and the hissing of their blades and cracking of their blows would carry easily. Other times they would spar in the gardens, where the wind and birdsong would soften the sounds of Uani's approach as the prickly vines tore at Vale's feet.

Occasionally Uani would add other distractions to throw Vale off balance. He'd scatter grits on certain areas of the floor or affix a weight to his foot or arm, or on even on occasion release a serpent or two. Vale was never sure what Uani had in store for him on any given day, no two sessions were ever the same...one of the few constants was the blindfold.

The absence of sight was the greatest disadvantage one could have while dueling. However, Vale had slowly managed to find ways to compensate for this deficiency; just as Uani had hoped he would. After much practice his hearing had become much more adept, allowing him to hear the tell-tale clues of Uani's approach. The slight shuffling of his feet. The sound of his blade as it swished through the air. Even his breath.

Vale had also become acutely aware of his other senses, able to feel the shift in the air as Uani charged or brought his blade to bear upon him or smell Uani's familiar scent when began to draw near. But try as he might, all his newfound ability seemed useless in his current predicament.

The waves of the approaching storm were beginning to reach the shore, battering Vale this way and that. The wind howled and screamed with relentless fury, masking any sounds that

might betray Uani's plan of attack. For the first time in years of enduring Uani's trials Vale felt utterly blind.

"Do you think this is wise Uani? The storm will be upon us very soon," Vale called over the roaring wind.

"Fighting is rarely wise—" Uani began, his voice closing in from the right.

"But it is necessary," Vale said, finishing Uani's thought. "And we do not always have the luxury of choosing where or how we will fight."

"You're learning," Uani replied, his voice suddenly approaching from the left. Vale shifted his stance again to compensate.

"But is it really necessary to practice in such a dangerous place? Why risk everything over a simple sparring match? Death is quite unbecoming..."

"You fear death?" Uani was near. Almost near enough to strike.

"Up to a point. But I've accepted it as an inevitability."

"You 'accept' it?" Vale could hear the contempt in Uani's voice, which left him perplexed. He did not know what he had said to earn Uani's scorn.

"Yes I suppose. We are all fated to die at some point, are we not? Though I must, confess I had hoped to last till summer's end. But still, I accept that—"

"Accept nothing!"

Without warning, Vale felt the all too familiar sensation of Uani's sword striking him across the thigh. The blow would likely leave a significant bruise...not that it mattered.

"Fight Sunshine. Fight death. Fight me."

Vale backpedaled furiously, trying to put as much distance between himself and Uani as possible. It was the only thing he could do. No matter how hard he tried it was impossible for him to know where Uani was. The wind and waves were getting stronger with each passing moment. The heavy, wet sand clung to his feet like clay, slowing his retreat. A particularly nasty wave sent Vale sprawling; he got up just in time to feel the faintest whisper of Uani's blade drawing near. He managed to block Uani's first strike but quickly fell prey to the second...and the third, suffering a blow to the shoulder and abdomen.

"If I meant to kill you would have been dead twice over by now," Uani chided.

"If I could see so would you."

"My, my is that confidence or arrogance I hear Sunshine? Be careful that you don't confuse the two. For if you do—" a blow to his gut toppled Vale, knocking the wind out of him. He fell to his knees, before he even touched the ground he felt Uani's Sword against his throat. "It will be your undoing."

Vale bowed his head in defeat and gave the traditional yield in Lorthinian Deathcraft.

"You've bested me again," Vale conceded.

"Of course I did. I had every advantage once could possibly have. You would not have won no matter how hard you fought."

“Then why bother fighting?”

“Failure is bitter. Victory is sweet. It is better for you to learn the taste of bitterness first so that the sweetness becomes that much sweeter.”

“I see—”

Uani gently removed the blindfold from Vale’s eyes. The pale gray light of the sun assaulted Vale on all sides. He cupped a hand around his eyes, squinting in an effort to see through the light. Uani swam into focus, looming above Vale. He lowered his blade and offered Vale his hand.

“I feel I’ve learned an invaluable lesson today—” without warning, Vale lashed out with his foot, striking Uani in the shin; Uani fell to his knees, face level with Vale’s. Before he could recover Vale had his Sword up and ready, pointed directly at Uani’s ribs. If his blade was not locked in its scabbard Vale could have ended Uani right then and there; with the slightest upward thrust of his arm and twist of his wrist. “That which is sweetest is worth the wait.”

Uani kept his composure for the most part but couldn’t entirely hide his surprise. Shooting a few furtive glances down at the blade inches away from his heart. After a moment his predatory smile slide back across his face as well as a look of guarded curiosity. “That which is sweetest you say? There is no sweetness in a victory such as this. No honor.”

“That may be. But there is still a victory,” Vale replied.

Uani laughed. “A victory over me perhaps. But don’t forget Sunshine that you are facing two foes today.”

Vale tensed and a host of worrisome thoughts attempted to jostle their way to the forefront of his mind. But two in particular won out—they often did in moments such as this... ones when Uani gave him cause to worry.

Can he see?

Does he know?

Vale looked for any hint of malice or recognition in Uani's eyes, but saw none, merely the same feral gleam that had always been there. Vale's worry quickly gave way to bemusement.

I'm facing "two foes" today? What does he mean? It's a trick of some sort...has to be. He means to distract me so he can escape from his unfavorable position and continue the fight.

However, the true meaning of Uani's words became all too apparent.

Vale turned just in time to see an icy wall of water descend on them both. The wave collided with Vale knocking him down and dragging him through the wet, heavy sand. It took all of his strength to keep a grip on his blade lest the water yank it out of his grasp.

After a few harrowing seconds, he washed up on shore spluttering and miserable. His hair disheveled and caked with sand, his clothes soaked, his head ringing from the impact of the wave. Uani was waiting on the shore, drenched, but otherwise seemingly unaffected. He smiled maddeningly. Letting out a few inaudible curses, Vale made his way towards him, coughing fretfully.

"I would offer you my hand. But I have no desire to lose it," Uani said as Vale drew near, shaking his head in mock disapproval. "Honestly Sunshine, I'm beginning to wonder if I can trust you anymore...perhaps it was a mistake to allow you into my bed."

“I suppose I am blinder without my blindfold than I am with it,” Vale managed, after he had recovered, beating a respectable amount of seawater out of his ear.

“Yes...in a way you are. Our eyes often deceive us; we see what we want to see, not what is. That is why my people use a blindfold when training, the absence of sight while tedious can— in a certain way, be liberating.”

“A blind man sees in ways a sighted man cannot,” Vale quoted. It was saying he heard often from members of clan Tirivak, a tribe that hailed from the Island of Manu, Uani’s supposed kin.

Uani smiled, looking pleased. “You know our words.”

“I might be blind at times Uani, but I always listen.” Vale added, speaking in the Tirivak Tribe’s native dialect.

Uani looked genuinely impressed. “And you know our tongue as well...you speak it as if you were born to it.”

Vale laughed. “You flatter me; I only know a few of your words and less of your tongue...”

“You really are quite intriguing...”

“Thank you for the lesson Uani, I’ve learned much today.” Vale took Uani’s hand in his own, and drew a little closer than was necessary. He could feel Uani’s heartbeat quicken, his palm throbbing with an unspoken urgency. Vale’s gaze fell to Uani’s left forearm, as it had many a time before. There was a peculiar symbol branded on it, a tribal one—but not one that was associated with the Tirivak. The hot iron’s kiss had left the affected area of Uani’s skin

discolored, making the brand look as if there were a great pallid worm that lay coiled beneath his flesh. It had enthralled Vale for years...ever since Uani had laid hands on him for the first time.

#

They made it back to Uani's mansion just as the storm broke, roaring its fury. Vale fled up the stairs as he often done when he and Uani had first become intimate, a sly grin spread across Vale's lips, as much an invitation as it was a tease. Uani, eyes filled with want, gave chase.

"Get his blood up and...other things will follow suit," Mistress Serena had once told Vale. *"Get his heart racing and in time he'll believe it beats for you."*

When Uani finally caught up to him in his chambers, Vale finally submitted allowing Uani to take him. In some ways Vale did get just the tiniest modicum of pleasure out of his encounters with Uani. He was after all extremely attractive, with a taught, athletic physique and handsome features. But there was no softness in him, nothing gentle or kind...nothing sweet.

Activities of a sexual nature had never been for Vale's enjoyment; they were just a means to an end. But should the day come when someone would lay with him...no not "lay," but make love with him, Vale hoped they would be someone he could hold close all night long, till dawn began to break. Or perhaps they could be the one holding him.

"That was lovely Sunshine..." Uani said, letting out a sigh of contentment. The steam from the great wooden tub in which they sat rose thick and white, filling the room.

"I'm glad I could be of service," Vale replied, slipping deeper into the water, its warmth holding the chill of the stone chamber at bay.

“A service ey? That is all it is to you? I find that difficult to believe, the things you do Sunshine, the things you do with such...fervor. Even you are not that good a liar.”

“How can you be sure? Maybe that is all I am. A liar. And a good one,” Vale said, raising his leg aloft and letter the water run through his toes. “Do you want to know how to lie Uani? To lie like me—”

Uani gave no answer, but watched Vale intently through the mist, looking more a living shadow than ever.

“I find the nearest mirror or patch of water in which I can see my reflection and repeat my lies over and over to myself. Almost like I’m praying. Eventually, if I say them enough times and with enough “fervor” I’ll begin to believe them. That is the secret to being a good liar. If you can fool yourself, you can fool anyone.” Vale let out a sigh, closing his eyes and surrendering himself to the darkness.

“But it is all for naught. For when the truth surfaces and it always does, it lashes out with a vengeance. Tearing me apart from the inside out. Hence the reason I must keep lying.”

“And what truth pains you so?” Uani said, his voice sounded faint, as if it were coming from far away, reaching out to Vale through the darkness.

The sweet darkness.

It was not like the cold blackness of the void the storm had brought all those years ago. This darkness was warm and inviting, a great black expanse Vale drifted through, feeling light as a feather. Almost as if he was back in his mother’s womb. That must have been warm too, Vale mused, warm and sweet.

Ironic then that her end had been so cold.

Vale had found her in the garden, her lifeblood seeping into the earth. She lay next to two of his brothers, perhaps Thomas and Arthur...or Lysander and Henry. Vale could not bring himself to look for too long. The blood was bad enough. But their eyes...their eyes were far worse. They seemed to follow him, frozen in eternal accusatory stares.

Coward...

You hid...

You abandoned us...

You hid while we cried, while mother screamed...

You hid while we died...

As Vale drew near, his mother had stirred, slowly raising her bloody face to him, tears streaming down her cheeks. Vale did not know where the tears ended and the blood began. In the end it did not matter, for she had so little of either left to spare.

When their gazes met, the grief and despair left her face, the faintest flicker of hope taking its place. She began to crawl towards him, blood flowing out of her in abundance, hand outstretched.

Anthony? Anthony...my son...Anthony...

“You already know what it is, the truth that pains me. I was powerless to save my family,” Vale said, opening his eyes, the darkness faded and the room came back into focus.

“So you plan to avenge them.”

“I do.”

“And how will you do that? You cannot leave Autu’rel while in Aliar’s service, you’ll have to escape.”

“Oh that is where I beg to differ; if all goes according to plan it will be Aliar who will set me free. He is contemplating sending me away you see, back to Albimar on an assignment, and within striking distance of my enemy.”

“An assignment?” Uani said, perplexed. “What assignment could be so important that Aliar would send you half a world away?”

“One that could reap him immense wealth...”

“You’ve piqued my curiosity...”

“Have I?” Vale said, smiling slightly.

“You’re not going to tell me what it is are you,” Uani said, sounding disappointed.

“You know I am forbidden from sharing sensitive information with clients Uani,” Vale said, in a mockingly chiding manner.

“I’d like to think I’ve earned a little trust at least. How many of your clients have done as much for you as I have? How many of them have given as much as I’ve given?”

More than you think Uani.

“And I appreciate—”

“Yes, you always appreciate what I do!” Uani snarled, cutting Vale off. “But you give nothing in return, nothing I haven’t already bought and paid for!”

You lie too Uani...though not as well as me. Vale mused. You’ve never paid Aliar a single gold willow. Every morn I visit with you till midday. Every morn for the past six years and not a single note in Aliar’s ledger...now why might that be? To enjoy my company at no cost...you must be rare creature indeed. But if my time under my master has taught me one thing, it’s that everyone pays in the end...and make no mistake you will pay dearly.

Vale feared that he felt a shadow flicker across his eyes—one that belied his true intent. But it would seem it had not, or if it did Uani had not noticed it.

“Nothing?” Vale said, trying his best to sound hurt and indignant, his eyes looked like those of a wounded pup. “I’ve given you nothing, is that what you truly believe? I gave you everything. What little I had, my virtue, my soul. Name one other boy who has worked as hard to please you as I have, who has done the things for you I have?”

Now it was Uani’s turn to look taken aback, the faintest hint of regret stealing over his face.

“You say I’ve given you nothing. Nothing other than what you’ve already bought. But you forget it’s Aliar whom you are paying. I have not seen one gold willow, not one. The only payment I receive from our time together is having a teacher of your martial prowess. That is all. The way I see it our relationship has been fair and mutually beneficial.”

“What I said was in poor taste. I spoke out of anger,” Uani conceded. “But I’m sure you can understand my frustration. All I want is the truth Sunshine—the truth of who you are. I’ve earned that much.”

“No. What you really want is me. All of me. But you already have me. As I’ve said I’ve given you everything, everything I have to give.”

Vale rose out of the water and stood before Uani.

“Take a good look. This is all I am.”

Uani did, his eyes wandering greedily over Vale’s naked form, but to Vale’s surprise his gaze eventually rose to meet his.

“I don’t believe that. And neither do you, Sunshine.”

“Anthony. My real name is Anthony. It was my mother’s choice.”

“Anthony ...interesting. It is a nice name. But I prefer Sunshine.”

“I suppose that’s fitting in a way, seeing as I prefer you in the light,” Vale said, letting his wounded expression fade. He withdrew from Uani and exited the wooden tub, the chill of the chamber assaulted him in earnest and he shuddered. “It’s cold out here...”

Uani reclined in the tub, arm draped on its side, he gave the rim a pat—eyes boring into Vale’s. “It’s warm in here.”

“So it is,” Vale said with a smile that was just shy of apologetic. “But I really must be going.” Vale began to dry himself, wincing as his cloth circled over the bruises that dotted his body.

Uani sighed, sinking back into the water. “I wish Nazari was as dutiful as you...”

“If Nazari were as dutiful as me, then you’d have no need me...”

“That is not so.”

“Nazari’s your kitchen boy, true—the quiet one,”

Uani snorted. “The *surly* one you mean.”

“*Surly*...that’s an excellent word, Uani. For what it’s worth, I often find myself impressed by how much of our tongue you know.”

Uani scoffed. “Words are cheap, especially with you Albamarians...if only the same could be said of you.”

Vale tittered politely, as he approached his clothes (which had been rather hastily discarded upon entering the chamber). He fished around in the pockets of his trousers and withdrew a small golden vial.

Uani eyed the vial knowingly. “And yet another *boon* from your Brew Mother I see...”

“And yet another choice word from you—*boon*—truly marvelous, I salute you.”

Vale opened the golden vial and emptied the lotion within onto his palm and spread it over the bruised portions of his skin. Slowly but surely the bruises faded away, as if they were no more than patches of dirt being washed away by the waters of an intangible river.

“There are lessons to be learned from pain Sunshine,” Uani admonished. “I know that you need to be in good form for your work, but take care not to become overly reliant on such draughts.”

“I’ve heard much of the dangerous complacency the Arcane Arts bring with them Uani,” Vale said. “I would not use Helena’s lotion if I did not have need of it...and besides I’d be lying if I said this was a choice draught.” Vale shook the vial as if to illustrate his point. “It may *magick* the bruises away, but the ache—the pain is still there. I just wear it on the inside.”

Chapter 2: The Morning Dew

The dream began the same way it always did. Hope was alone, walking down a long black tunnel, lit only by a few spluttering torches that barely managed to hold the darkness at bay. She did not know how she knew, but Hope was certain she was somewhere underground and was descending deeper and deeper with each step she took. She always walked at the same measured pace, unable to break stride, as if she was being strung along by an invisible puppeteer. What her destination was she didn't know but judging by the pit in her stomach she somehow knew that it would not be to her liking.

As she continued on, an eerie chorus of whispers would rise to greet her from the darkness, urgent and unrelenting. It would grow louder and louder until it reached a fever pitch...and then Hope would awake with a start, cold sweat clinging to her flesh. Her nightgown would often be drenched causing her to shiver uncontrollably, so lately she had taken to sleeping in the nude—a habit Agatha, her old cow of a serving woman, noticed when she peeked into Hope's chambers one night. Agatha had chided her for such "immodest" behavior, remarking that Hope's father would not be pleased, though she did begin to falter when Hope asked why Agatha thought it appropriate to sneak glances at the Lord Regent's daughter while she slept.

Hope steadied herself, allowing her breathing to grow even again. Her heart ceased to hammer away in her chest and returned to its usual slow, rhythmic beat and her tremors began to subside.

The dream...the damn dream.

It had plagued her every night since the first honeysuckles had bloomed. It was always lying in wait for her, tormenting her in her sleep and even forcing its way into her waking mind;

filling the world around her with great black wells that lurked in the shadows. Wells she'd tumble down and emerge back in that damn tunnel. Was it a dungeon of some kind? Perhaps a crypt? It could even be a cave...though the tunnel was so dark it was difficult to tell which if any were true, and as soon as Hope awoke her waking eyes would distort its image, causing the tunnel to grow darker and fainter still.

Hope suppressed yet another shudder, eyes darting around her bedroom. For some reason she felt as if she were being watched...by Agatha perhaps? Hope's gaze swept over the obscene number of furnishings that were situated throughout the room, each of which looked more sinister than normal in the shadows.

Mercifully, Agatha was not present, the half-light revealed as much. Although Hope had a nagging fear that she was lurking just outside the door, peering in through the keyhole, or was perhaps even hiding behind a drape. Such thoughts unnerved Hope more than the night terrors she'd been experiencing as of late.

Damned old vulture...what does father see in her I wonder? Hope mused, as she rose and slid into her gown. She made her way to the windows; the chill of the stone floor against her feet blasted away any last vestiges of sleep that clung to her. She slid the drapes open and let the sunlight flow into the room unfettered, dispelling the darkness.

Agatha had been with them for as long as Hope could remember, since she and her brother had been born at any rate. Their births had not been easy ones and had taken a great toll on their mother, who remained bedridden for the better part of a year. Hope vaguely remembered Agatha's ancient and gnarled face looming above her as she lay abed as a child, lips twisted in a perpetual scowl. Even in her earliest days Hope had sensed that Agatha disapproved of her for some reason, why Hope didn't know, but Agatha's disdain had only grown as the years passed.

“She’s grown unruly and vulgar my lord.” Hope had overheard Agatha whisper to her father as she wandered the halls a few years ago. “Just this morning I found her wrestling with the stable master’s son in a suggestive manner, both of them rolling around in the mud with the swine.”

“And? Such a thing hardly sounds abnormal for a child; she’ll likely grow out of it,” her father had said, sounding exasperated.

“A child, yes. But she won’t be a child forever; in a few years she will flower and if she does not learn how to conduct herself in a manner that befits her station she will bring nothing but shame to you. The tutor Hector has done well in teaching her the ways of the mind, but a sound mind is worthless if the body that houses it is unchaste. With your permission, I can teach her to become a proper lady, one who respects herself and others, one worthy of your name.”

“If you feel it is necessary then see to it Agatha,” her father had replied. “And be warned, should she fail to grow into a proper lady, I’ll know exactly who to blame.”

Agatha had evidently taken her father’s warning to heart, wasting no time instructing Hope in “the ways of womanhood”; namely embroidery, appropriate posture, gossip, and a host of other things so frightfully boring Hope could scarcely remember half of them. Although, Hope would grudgingly admit that she enjoyed her dancing lessons, often practicing for hours on end until she was good and sweaty. That being said, she favored dances that were often not fit for a lady, dances of a sensual and “immodest” nature; though given the sheer range of immodest things Hope enjoyed, at times she began to wonder if she even had a single modest bone in her body.

There was a knock on the doors to her chambers and Hope opened them, wiping the sleep from her eyes. Agatha stood in the threshold, looking worn and weathered as ever.

“Good morning Your Highness, I hope you slept well,” Agatha said, bowing slightly, a barely imperceptible nod of her head.

Hope yawned. “I wish I could say that I did. But in truth I have not been sleeping well as of late.”

“That is most unfortunate. Would you like me to have some calainth root prepared for you tonight?” Agatha said, her voice kind, but her eyes cold as ice. “Restful sleep is a luxury for most but a necessity for a princess.”

You really don't approve of how I spend my mornings do you Agatha? My daily rides are not ladylike enough for you I take it, so you mean to drug me so that I will oversleep and miss the morning dew is that it? Well I'll have none of it.

“Thank you Agatha, but I think not. I will be fine.” Hope withdrew and took her place by the window, leaning against the sill. Her bedroom overlooked the gardens which were deserted save for Orthan, the elderly gardener who tended to them. The flowers were lovely, the early morning sun bathing them in its glow. It was a beautiful cage her father had chosen for her—an obscenely beautiful one. But it was a cage nonetheless.

Hope could feel Agatha's eyes on her; she shot a glance over her shoulder. Agatha was hovering in the doorway as was her custom.

“Agatha, would you mind fetching me some bread and honey—and some tea as well. I am rather thirsty.”

“Of course Your Highness,” she said, with another slight bow of her head.

#

Hope took her breakfast at a small table close to the windows, the one she favored. She ate with gusto, perhaps faster than was wise. Her night terrors often filled her with a hunger that was not easily sated. The sound of her ravenous chewing, while unbecoming, was rather soothing. Should she sit too long in silence the ghostly whispering from the tunnel would begin to rise up from the shadows around her...

“Lady Elena is hosting afternoon tea in her chambers,” Agatha said, eyes sweeping over the piece of parchment in her hands, *a list of her daily tortures no doubt*, Hope thought glumly. “Several other ladies of distinction will be there. Who precisely I know not, though Lady Ursula and Lady Penelope will almost certainly be in attendance. Lady Elena mentioned that she would be honored if you could attend as well.”

Hope let out a snort, ignoring Agatha’s frown.

“So she says. Elena and her hens just want to watch me bleed all over my quilt again. I’ve never been good at embroidery and now everyone at court knows it thanks to her. Vile old bat.”

Agatha’s frown deepened, but she said nothing in retort, instead she kept reading.

“Afterwards, you will have your session with the tutor Errol.”

“I expected as much, and what of the morning? Am I free?” Hope said, cutting Agatha off.

“I imagine you’ll want to go on one of your rides,” Agatha said, not bothering to hide her disapproval. “The morning is yours.”

“Really? The morning is mine you say? I didn’t think the morning could belong to anyone?” Hope expected to elicit some sort of reaction from Agatha, but she was disappointed. Agatha’s gaze remained impassive, revealing nothing.

“Since the morning is mine, I’ll take the afternoon as well...well half of it at least, mustn’t be too greedy. I’ll have my lesson with Errol but tell Elena I will not be able to attend afternoon tea. Don’t bother giving an excuse.”

“Is that wise Your Highness? Lady Elena is not one to take slights well and she has many ears in court, including your father’s.”

“She may have my father’s ear, but I have his blood and his name. I am Hope LaVey, daughter of the Lord Regent of Albimar. If Elena wants amusement then she’d better find herself a proper fool.”

There was a pregnant pause. As a rule, Hope did not care for silence for it often preceded another one of Agatha’s chidings; however, this time, much to Hope’s surprise there was none forthcoming.

“As you wish your Highness.” Agatha looked as if she had just swallowed something rather sour, her face twisted in an expression somewhere between surprise and revulsion. Hope allowed herself a slight smile between bites. It seemed she could get under her jailor’s skin after all.

Hope finished wolfing down her bread in a distinctly immodest and unladylike fashion, washing it down with the last of her tea. She held up her empty cup over her shoulder.

“Agatha, would you mind fetching me some more tea. No honey this time. I like it plain.”

“Of course.”

Agatha took the cup and slunk out of the room, leaving Hope in solitude. Strangely enough, as soon as Agatha had left, Hope wished she had stayed. She could almost swear there was something lurking in the darkness; the shadows in her chambers stirred ever so slightly, the ghostly whispers from her dream rose again to the forefront of her mind.

I don't want to be alone.

Hope did not know why she felt such dread. A chill was stealing over her, driving tiny shards of ice into her spine. She knew her disquiet was completely unfounded, pure lunacy. The stirring shadows were just a trick of the light, the whispers just the remnants of tedious recurring nightmare that was slipping away. No more. And yet...

I don't want to be alone...

She rose, more abruptly than she intended to, knocking over a potted plant on her table. She began to pace the entire length of her chambers in a feverish manner, hoping to drive away the dread that clung to her through some sort of ceaseless movement, shooting furtive glances at the shadows as she paced. Her efforts did little good, the dread within her was getting stronger, its grip tightening around her breast, the shadows began to stir even more fretfully.

What's wrong with me?

“Here is your tea Your Highness,” Agatha said, catching Hope unawares. Hope whirled around with a start; Agatha stood in the doorway a steaming mug in hand.

“Thank you Agatha—” Hope said after she regained her composure, “—but I fear I’ve changed my mind. I think I’ll go on my ride now. Some sunshine and fresh air would do me some good. You can have the tea.”

“Very well,” Agatha said, trying her best not to look irritated. “I’ll send for Sir Bolras and Sir Maylan.”

“Sir Maylan will do...but I’d rather do without Sir Bolras.”

Agatha stroked her chin, “Perhaps Sir Duncan will do.”

“Sir Duncan?” Hope did not know of any “Sir Duncan” in her father’s surface, but assumed he was merely a new, pompous lordling her father had taken on as a favor. “I confess I know little of him.”

“As do I,” Agatha conceded. “But your father speaks most highly from him, an old friend from Durangaurd I assume.”

Hope waved dismissively. “Yes, yes. I’m sure his service will be more than exemplary... my safety is paramount after all. This “Sir Duncan” will do, I suppose.”

“As you wish,” Agatha said, with a nod of approval. “In regard to your attire...”

“I can dress myself. Just get my escort ready,” Hope said, suppressing a shudder. She glanced around her chambers again. All was quiet and still.

#

Sir Maylan and Sir Duncan arrived not long after, looking every bit as pompous as Hope had anticipated.

“Your Highness,” Sir Maylan said in greeting, his voice laden with forced regality. They both dropped to one knee, hands on the hilts of their swords, the traditional symbol of knightly deference to those of higher birth. It was a rather ambiguous gesture in Hope’s opinion, judging

by their grip on their blades she was never entirely certain whether they meant to defend her or run her through.

“You needn’t dirty your greaves on my behalf,” Hope said, though the floor was immaculate as always. “Please rise.”

Sir Maylan and Sir Duncan obliged, rising to their full height, their chests puffed out in a manner similar to the haughty Red Bird emblazoned on their armor, the standard of House LaVey. Hope chuckled, despite herself.

My fearless Red Birds, here to protect me from deer, magpies and chipmunks.

They exited Hope’s chambers and made their way down the hall, Sir Duncan and Sir Maylan flanked Hope on both sides, being sure to walk a few paces behind her at all times; another tedious knightly gesture of respect.

“Will the stable boy be accompanying us?” Sir Maylan inquired.

“He will,” Hope said. She could practically hear Sir Maylan’s lips begin to purse.

“Forgive me Your Highness; I know it is not my place to tell you how to manage your affairs—”

“You’re right. It is not your place,” Hope said, cutting him off. Sir Maylan took her rebuke in stride.

“—I merely wish to voice my...concerns.”

“Regarding?”

“The stable boy. His behavior with you is very familiar,” Sir Maylan said the hesitation in his voice palpable.

“What exactly are you implying sir?”

“I think you know exactly what I’m implying Your Highness.”

“You’re implying that Walter the stable boy fancies me. Is that really so hard to believe?”

“It is...not right...not natural.”

“Not natural? Why? Have I grown ugly? Is it really so unthinkable that a boy would want to be with me in that way?”

“No that’s not what I...” Sir Maylan stammered. Hope allowed herself a slight smile, she didn’t fancy herself a sadist, but watching Sir Maylan flounder about and hang himself with his own tongue never failed to amuse her. “You are very...beguiling and it is for that reason that I urge you to be wary of him. Don’t lead him on I implore you. He is lowborn...it simply cannot be.”

“My father is lowborn, or have you forgotten.”

“You should not speak ill of your father Your Highness. He is a good man,” Sir Duncan said, the reproach in his voice seemingly genuine.

Hope managed to suppress a smirk. *An “old friend” from “Durangaurd” indeed...or a new lackey from who knows where...whatever the case it seems my beloved father has found himself a new pet.* “I did not mean to insult him, but that is the truth. If you asked my father he’d tell you as much. He loves reminding everyone how far he has risen in the world,” Hope replied, doing her best to keep any hints of resentment out of her voice.

“Be that as it may Your Highness, remember that we’re tasked with defending your virtue as well as your life...and be sure to remind the stable boy of that as well,” Sir Maylan said.

Hope snorted. *Of course, my “virtue.” My glorious virtue in all of its “modesty.”*

“I will. And his name is Walter, sir. Walter.”

#

Hope found Walter in the same manner she often did, heaving a few bales of straw into Barnabas’s stall and spreading them thin with a rake. Of all the horses Walter tended to in the King’s Stables, Barnabas seemed to be the one he was fondest of and Barnabas for his part seemed equally fond of Walter.

Walter continued spreading hay, oblivious to her presence. Hope had half a mind to say something, to announce herself, but chose to remain silent for a moment, admiring the smooth flow of muscle underneath Walter’s shirt.

There was something Hope found profoundly attractive about laborers, masons and blacksmiths, men and boys such as Walter—other than their physiques of course. There was a hardness about them, a hardness brought on by years of tough living, but more often than not there was often a softness present in them as well, a gentleness often lacking in nobles and fighting men. Unlike the other boys who tried to win Hope’s favor Walter was hard in all the right places, but still soft where it counted.

After staring at Walter for far longer than was decent, Hope cleared her throat. Walter whirled around.

“Hope...”

It was then Sir Maylan’s turn to clear his throat as he peaked into the stables, undoubtedly to make sure that Hope’s “virtue” remained intact.

“...I mean Your Highness, forgive me. I did not expect you so early.”

Hope glared over her shoulder at the knight. “Sir Maylan I told you to wait outside. Please do as you’re bid.”

“Forgive me Your Highness, but I must be present with you at all times. It is your father’s command.”

“And you are performing your duties to the letter; rest assured that I will tell my father as much. However, you needn’t be with me at all times as you say, just within earshot. Trust me when I say that if Walter should attempt to be with me in the way that we discussed you will hear me.”

It was hard to say who looked more embarrassed, Walter or Sir Maylan.

“As you wish your Highness,” Sir Maylan said, ducking out of sight.

“That man can really wear me thin sometimes.”

“He’s just doing his job,” Walter said, putting down his rake and adopting a more dignified position. “Just so you know I would never do that.”

“Do what?”

“Force myself on you like that. Such a thing would be unforgivable.”

“I know. I know you never would. Which is the reason I almost wouldn’t mind if you did.”

“Did what?” Walter asked, though judging by the deeper shade of crimson creeping across his cheeks he already knew the answer.

“Force yourself on me.”

Walter's face grew even redder if that were possible; he glanced around the stables, desperately trying to avert Hope's eyes.

"The horses have been doing well for the most part. Except for your girl Lucia—" Walter said, gesturing to the stall immediately to Hope's right. Hope peeked into the stall. Lucia lay curled up in the corner; she looked to be in an ill temper, ears folded back, tail swishing away at the swarm of flies that assaulted her on all sides. "She's been eating well enough, but's taken to moping about in the corner...grumpy ol' lass she is."

Hope felt a pang of dread. *Never a good sign, horses lying down when not asleep... though Walter is too kind to say so.*

"Well she is an ancient thing, older than both of us," Hope said after she collected herself. "It's a miracle she's held up this well the way my brother rode her."

"Your brother rode her?"

"Not for long mercifully; you've probably seen all the scars on her backside. That's his work."

"That's no way to treat a horse."

"You should explain that to him. Either he's stupid or he's cruel. Or both...I'll be damned if I know."

"Are you joking? He'd run me through."

"Not if I have any say in the matter."

Hope heaved the door to Lucia's stall open. Lucia watched her approach, but made no move to rise, glaring up at her.

“Come Lucia, you mustn’t laze around all day, it isn’t good for you,” Hope said, leaning down and stroking Lucia’s mane. Hope placed one hand under Lucia’s chin, gently indicating Lucia should rise. The old mare remained unresponsive glaring off into the great beyond. Hope adopted a more forceful grip, less of an invitation and more of a command. Lucia rose grudgingly, snorting her discontent.

“She really does fancy you. She won’t budge for me,” Walter said. Though judging by Lucia’s manner Hope was not sure whether the old mare fancied her or simply resented her the least.

“Well, we do have a history of sorts. Why don’t you say we groom her and Barnabas and take them for a little jaunt in the woods? Some fresh air would do us all some good.”

“You want me to come with you? I don’t know if Sir Maylan would approve.”

“Frankly, I don’t give a damn what Sir Maylan thinks.”

“Is this a request or command ‘Your Highness’?”

“Why it is merely an invitation my good sir. Make of it what you will.”

Walter chuckled. “Who am I to refuse a lady?”

“You know I hate it when you call me that.”

“Call you what?”

“A lady.”

Walter smiled, heading towards the tack room. “I’ll get the horses ready milady. You needn’t dirty yourself.”

“I’ll tend to Lucia. She has half a mind to kick you. As do I for that matter.”

Walter smiled, feigning innocence, his eyes gleaming impishly. “As my lady commands.”

Hope had half a mind to make good on her threat, but in the end decided against it. They both went to work, readying the horses. Barnabas was on his best behavior, giving Walter little trouble, munching contentedly on his hay while Walter groomed him. Lucia on the other hand did not take well to Hope’s efforts to tame her tattered fur, constantly snorting and fretting and trying desperately to escape to the corner of her stall. Eventually, Hope managed to restrain Lucia and make her presentable as well as force her saddle and halter onto her. Hope and Walter mounted their respective horses and exited the stables, Sir Maylan and Sir Duncan followed suit, having acquired horses of their own.

The party left the castle via the western gate. It was by far the easiest way to the Woods of Reverence without mingling with the hodge-podge of small folk who were out and about in Bannermount proper. Bannermount was unarguably the lively city in Albimar, mainly because it was the seat of power in the land, but also because of its incredibly lush and fertile land that never failed to produce an ample amount of grain for both man and beast. Though Hope was young, her sixteenth name day only a fortnight away, she could not recall having ever witnessed a serious incident of mass starvation in the city. There was poverty and hunger to be sure (alas those seemed to be constant hardships no matter where one resided) but her father, as well as the Leonharth kings before him did their best to ease the suffering of the destitute.

“There are wants and then there are needs my dear. Do you know the difference between the two?” Her father had asked her a few years ago, as she sat on his knee. She was all of eight at the time and lacked the wit to answer such a question, he knew that of course, he only asked so that he could give her one of his lectures on the nature of man.

“No father.”

“The hunger for food and thirst for water are needs, for we need both in order to live. But the hunger for love, for wealth, for influence and other such things are all wants. All desires. Those things are quite pleasing but are not necessary for our survival.” Her father smiled, placing a hand on her brow. He had “smiling eyes” as her mother had called them, for whenever he smiled his eyes would follow suit scrunching up and twinkling invitingly.

“While a king can never satisfy all of his people’s wants, it is his duty to see that their base needs are met, by doing so he gives his people the opportunity to pursue their desires and hopefully find happiness. For if the hunger of the body is not sated then the soul will starve as well, languishing in its mortal cage. A soul that is starving is not a pretty thing to behold, which is why I wish to lessen the hunger of others, for a soul that is well fed and content is far more pleasing to the eye...and far more valuable.”

“Summer is finally here,” Walter said, breathing in the morning air, his voice snapping Hope back to attention. “This harvest is going to be bountiful, I can feel it.” They rode along at a leisurely pace, the woods looming before them in the distance. Hope silently chided herself for her rudeness; it was neither right nor proper for her to neglect a companion who was flesh and blood for one who lately was little more than a shadow, flitting in and out of her life as he pleased. Why her thoughts kept wandering back to her father Hope didn’t know, especially since such thoughts brought her nothing but displeasure.

“It it’s anything like last years the granaries will be close to overflowing,” Hope said, trying to push such dark thoughts out of her mind with forced joviality.

“Lucia seems to be holding up well,” Walter said.

Hope glanced down at the old mare; she plodded along at a measured gate, her eyes alert and fixed on the path ahead. Hope ruffled Lucia's mane affectionately. "Yes she does. Some fresh air and nice jaunt through the woods and she'll be good as new...a horse isn't meant to be caged."

After a few moments of riding, the woods engulfed them. The light from the rising sun took on an earthy green hue as it shone through the trees that towered above them. Hope had always found the woods to be a peaceful place; always quiet save for the birdsong and the other noises small woodland animals would make as they ambled across her path.

Legend had it that centuries ago, Augustine, the first Leonharth king, had commanded that one tree seed for each soldier who fell in his service be sown into a patch of earth for which he had no use and allowed to grow. Many seeds were sown during Augustine's tumultuous reign and the kings that followed continued the tradition, sowing seed after seed, and thus one day, the first trees began to sprout and the Woods of Reverence were born...or so the story went.

Many of course (and Hope was among their number) fancied the legend of the wood's origins just that, a legend. But regardless of the truth of the matter, it could not be denied that the woods had grown considerably over the years, stretching from Bannermount all the way to the nearby settlement of Harper's Fold, the trees growing progressively younger with each league until only seedlings remained.

Because they were in the forest's beginnings, the trees that surrounded them were ancient things, gnarled and weatherworn, their barks brittle and peeling. And yet despite the many long hard years they had endured they stood firm all the same.

Hope commanded Lucia to break into a canter and the old mare obliged grudgingly. They wound and wove their way through the trees, the others following close behind. Hope lived for these moments. The warmth of the sun on her back, the wind playing across her face, no other thought but the path ahead. It was at times such as these that her father and the dark tunnel from her dreams became nothing more than distant memories.

However, as Hope rounded a tree she felt Lucia begin to shudder in protest, her breathing growing shallow and uneven. Hope slowed Lucia to a walk, the old mare's shuddering lessened slightly but her breathing still came in short, erratic gulps, sweat clinging to her flesh.

"Oh dear...I'm sorry Lucia. I seem to have ridden you ragged," Hope said, ruffling Lucia's mane.

Walter slowed Barnabas as well, falling into stride next to them. "We best get her some water. She doesn't look good at all."

"It's my fault. I shouldn't have pushed her so hard," Hope said, feeling Lucia's flank heave in and out.

"There's a creek up this way Your Highness," Sir Duncan said, gesturing to his right. "We can stop for water there. You might want to consider getting a new horse, this one's old and spent."

Hope glared at Sir Duncan. "Rest assured sir I will get a new horse when I have need of one." Hope dismounted and took up Lucia's reigns, heading in the direction Sir Duncan had pointed.

"Let me take her Your Highness," Walter said. "You should ride Barnabas."

"I'm fine. The creek is not far."

“Your Highness,” Sir Maylan said, falling into stride beside her as well. “Please take my horse, allow me to—”

“I said I’m fine!” Hope said, rather more harshly than she intended to.

If Sir Maylan was upset, he didn’t show it. “As you wish,” he said, dismounting and taking his horse by the reigns. Walter and Sir Duncan followed suit.

They trudged through the woods in silence until they reached the creek. All of the horses drank, Lucia far more deeply than the others, gulping down water as if she were dying of thirst.

“We’d best get her back to the stables soon,” Walter said.

“I fear you’re right,” Hope said, a deep sadness taking hold of her. She’d seen fatigue of a similar nature take hold of several horses over the years and things had seldom got better. Deep down Hope knew Sir Duncan was right. That Lucia was not long for this world.

Of all the horses in the Kings Stables, she had always been the fondest of Lucia. In many ways it was on her that Hope had learned how to ride in earnest. Her brother’s lashings had done little to break Lucia’s will and eventually he had given up on her. Hope on the other hand had not despite Lucia’s disposition. The willful mare had been a handful, extremely difficult to train, that is if Hope could even have professed to have trained her at all. But after much bickering and snorts of frustration (by both parties) they had more or less reached an understanding of sorts, an accord, a pact between equals rather than the standard master and slave like relationship between man and beast. Lucia had begrudgingly consented to carry Hope from place to place and in exchange Hope ensured that Lucia was fed, watered and sheltered. Perhaps that was the reason Hope was so fond of her. Lucia was one of the few creatures in all of Albimar that didn’t look up

or down to her, but regarded Hope as an equal—perhaps even a friend, if horses were capable of such lines of thought.

But now it was abundantly clear that Lucia was in her final days. All that could be done was to give her a proper send off.

“I don’t think she’ll be able to make it back, not while carrying me anyway. We’ll have to walk,” Hope said somberly.

Sir Duncan did not look too pleased with that idea. “Are you certain Your Highness? You could ride with one of us,” he said, gesturing to Sir Maylan and himself. “It will take a good while to return to the castle on foot.”

“And what of Lucia?” Hope said, though she feared she already knew his answer.

“She’s clearly suffering—” Sir Duncan said, his hand subtly inching towards the hilt of his sword. “—a quick and clean death would be a mercy.”

“You mean a bloody and convenient one,” Hope said, eyes narrowing.

“I’ll take her behind those bushes over there.” Sir Duncan advanced. “You needn’t see this.”

Hope laughed bitterly, shielding the old mare with her body. “Oh, yes there are many things I “needn’t see” ...but they still happen all the same. But not here. Not today. You will not kill her. That is an order. We’ll crawl back if need be.”

“As you wish,” Sir Duncan said, withdrawing. “But if we are going to walk back I suggest we get going, it’s almost midday I’d wager.”

They walked in silence, winding their way back through the woods, the wet, lush, earth squishing beneath their feet. The hem of Hope's dress was quickly covered in mud, she doubted Agatha would be pleased but she didn't give a damn. Hope was in a black mood, one that not even the fresh spring air and birdsong could alleviate. Lucia did her best to keep pace with her, but was slowly falling behind, panting with exertion.

Please Lucia, Hope pleaded silently...over and over again. If you make it back you can have all the apples and sugar you want. I'll even change your bedding myself. Just please... please.

Walter kept shooting furtive glances Hope's way, a few times he looked as if he had half a mind to say something but chose to remain silent.

"I'll take good care of her," he finally said, his voice gentle. "I'll make her last days as pleasant as possible, you have my word."

"I have no doubt you will," Hope replied with a forced smile.

"Is there anything else I can do? For you I mean," Walter said, "Anything at all?"

"Nothing that would be appropriate I fear," Hope replied, the look of terror on Sir Maylan's face lifting her spirits slightly.

#

They made it back to the stables in a timely fashion; if Hope hurried she would only be slightly late for her afternoon lesson with Errol. She doubted her tardiness would upset him; he was an amiable, witty little man, far less strict and stern than she expected a tutor to be.

Hope led Lucia to her stall and removed her halter and saddle. Lucia slumped down in her bedding with a thump, looking glum. Hope fed her several apples and a few handfuls of

sugar, Walter kept an ample supply of both in the stables. The old mare gulped down Hope's offerings greedily. If nothing else Lucia had seemed to have retained her appetite. Perhaps she had more time than Hope had thought. Or perhaps she'd just continue to gorge herself until the end; Lucia was rather fond of food after all, particularly all things sweet. Hope was not certain. She was not certain of anything anymore.

In many ways her life was not unlike the dark tunnel that had been plaguing her dreams as of late. She stumbled blindly through it day by day, led this way or that by Agatha or her father's knights or her father himself, on the rare occasion he could be bothered to take an interest in her. The halls were always full of whispers as well, some petty and spiteful and some even more malicious. Whispers of Harmon LaVey's crude, unruly daughter and how she would never be fit for marriage or any other position of significance. Hope tried to laugh the whispers away, but they were relentless, and they were everywhere.

The people in her life were little more than whispers as well.

Sir Duncan and Sir Maylan were whispers of the gallant "knights of old," the knights from the vapid, fluffy stories of Hope's youth, stories of chivalry, romance, and undying brotherhood. They looked the part to be sure and they played the part too (well enough at any rate), but both their appearance and their manner were a farce, of that much Hope was certain. The aesthetics of chivalry and goodness divorced of their essence.

Agatha and Errol were whispers of parental figures, Agatha the shrew grandmother and Errol more the kindly, eccentric uncle. Even Walter was a whisper, a whisper of a friend... perhaps something more.

And then there was her father. He was no whisper. He was more akin to darkness itself. The darkness that filled the halls in the dead of night, a darkness she constantly attempted to stumble through, make sense of, but try as she might he remained unknowable, unreachable... and yet somehow he still loomed over her world, swallowing what light there was.

Hope felt a tear slide down her cheek, followed by another and then another. Before she knew it, the tears were falling in abundance. Hope ran her fingers through Lucia's mane absentmindedly. She could not tell if she was stroking it or grabbing onto it for support.

No tears. No tears.

Walter moved to embrace her, but Sir Duncan shot him a withering glare. Instead he placed a hand on her shoulder, patting her awkwardly.

"Shh...Hope...Shh...It's okay. It's all okay. I'll look after her," Walter smiled weakly. "Who knows she may even pull through; you saw the way she gobbled down those apples. There's still life left in her."

Hope laughed, wiping the tears from her eyes. "You know, you're a really terrible liar."

Walter looked downcast. "I've never had a talent for it I fear..."

"That's a good thing. They're too many liars in this world...too many good ones too."

Chapter 3: Lady Helena

Sweetness...try as he might Vale couldn't help but love sweet things, especially sweet rolls. Master Aliar often chided him for his fondness of them, fearing that Vale would lose his figure, but Vale seemed to retain it regardless of how many he ate, so Master Aliar had eventually relented, allowing Vale to eat as many as he pleased.

After his session with Uani was over, Vale found Tormir in the kitchens. True to his word, Tormir had saved a sweet roll for him, placing a dish over it in order to keep it nice and warm.

"Thank you Tormir, that was delicious," Vale said, licking his fingers.

"I'm glad you liked it," Tormir said, eyes sweeping around the kitchen, which was deserted, save for Nazari the kitchen boy—one of Uani's few house slaves. No doubt Uani provided many...incentives for Nazari to have eyes only for his labors, for whenever he was in Vale and Tormir's vicinity he studiously ignored them, unless called upon. He was currently at work on a stew of some sort, nosily stirring it about in a pot which was suspended over a slow fire.

Tormir sighed and leaned back in his chair which creaked in protest. He was being oddly wistful, more so than usual. He had always been reasonably pleasant with Vale but was usually brusque and business-like. In all the time Vale had known him, Tormir had never opened up as much as he had in the past few hours.

It was fairly obvious to Vale that Tormir's conscience was beginning to weigh on him; but Vale had no idea as to why this day of all days Tormir's guilt was coming to a head. Perhaps he feared the prospect of imminent death— of dying with a heavy conscience more like—the

great black storm had looked rather menacing and had taken them all unawares. Such a thing was the sort of occurrence that inevitably made one contemplate their own mortality. But the fear of death should have waned with the storm. The howling wind had diminished considerably, and the rain now pattered gently against the cobblestone street outside.

In hindsight, it seemed the storm had been all bluster and littler more. Not as fierce and foreboding as it had appeared when it had gathered out at sea. Even so, Tormir still seemed to be in a rather sullen, introspective mood, staring off into the great beyond, lost in his thoughts.

Eventually, Tormir rose and opened a nearby window, a gray mist that was too thick to be fog yet too thin to be rain lay beyond. Tormir stuck his head through the window, peering outside, a faint rumble of thunder rose to greet him.

“It looks like the storm’s died down, at least for the moment. We best get going.”

Vale rose as well, brushing crumbs off his shirt. “Very well. I’ll get my cloak.”

#

They made their way to Lady Helena’s villa (Vale’s final appointment of the day save for Aliar’s summons later that evening). For the first leg of the journey, they retraced their steps through the narrow, nameless alleys they had wound their way through in hours past. But instead of taking a left at the Street of Sires they took a right onto Moonshadow Lane which pulled away from the Lower Quarter and wended its way up a rather unforgiving hill—albeit one that offered a commanding view of the city bellow.

As they climbed the mist grew so thick that it clung to their hair and clothes and made it nearly impossible to see ten feet ahead in any given direction. Occasionally, Vale could make out the shadowy silhouettes of other people attempting to make their way up or down Moonshadow

Lane. Sometimes they would draw close enough that he could see them clearly, but most of the time they remained shrouded in the mist, little more than nameless, faceless shadows passing by.

“Do you have a home Tormir?”

“Then or now?”

“I don’t follow...” Vale replied. *A lie, but an innocuous one.*

“Are you asking about where I stay in Autu’rel...or where I’m from?”

“An interesting expression. You *stay* in Autu’rel, but you don’t *live* in Autu’rel.”

Tormir sighed. “Yes. I have a house—clean, safe—but it’s not a home. Besides, one could ask the same thing of you—ask you where you *live*.”

“Then or now?”

“*Then* of course. I know where you *stay* but not where you *lived*. Where you’re from. I could ask you that.”

“Are you asking?”

“No. I am not. Nor will I.”

“Because you don’t want to know or you don’t care?”

“Both.”

Vale laughed. “I’m relieved Tormir, truly. For I have no answer... you see I’ve never really *lived* anywhere.”

They continued the trek up Moonshadow Lane in silence.

#

“That was lovely, thank you Vale.”

“I’m glad my lady approves.”

Vale lowered his head as if for dramatic effect after finishing his recital of “The Moons of Midsummer” (one of Adamus Fairchild’s, fluffier, lighthearted poems that likened the object of one’s affections to the moon and stars—nightingales and hummingbirds etcetera, etcetera). In truth, he merely wanted to give the volume in his hands a good sniff. The book smelled of mahogany and lavender, with just the faintest hint of cinnamon thrown into the mix, as did the rest of Lady Helena’s chambers. Lady Helena seemed to have an uncanny ability to sniff out the best perfumes with which to keep her villa smelling fresh and lively, though in all fairness, the perfumes in question were as much of a necessity as they were a luxury.

There was a perpetual stench that clung to her temporary laboratory in the cellar, one that smelled of rotten eggs, spoiled meat, and decay. If left unchecked it would spread throughout the rest of Lady Helena’s villa.

When Helena wasn’t reading or fussing over some concoction...or in bed with Vale, she’d recently taken to pacing around her chambers spraying every nook and cranny she could reach with generous quantities of whatever perfumes took her fancy. Vale always offered to help without fail, but she would refuse him each and every time. She was very much a woman of ceaseless pacings and fussings—as well as a host of other nervous ticks that occasionally bordered on obsessiveness.

With Helena everything from her wardrobe to her chambers, to her food and alchemic ingredients had to be just so—and even then “just so” was often not enough to satisfy her.

Helena's tightly wrought nature often lead her to be consumed by nerves and tensions...nerves and tensions Vale did his best to soothe during their sessions. For the moment, however, she seemed relatively calm and reserved, reclining in her plush velvet chair on the villa's terrace, Vale sitting opposite her. The air was still thick with mist and the sky with clouds but the sun was trying its utmost to banish the vestiges of the storm, peeking out from behind the gloom.

Vale leafed through the book in his hands, searching for another poem that was fit for his mistress. "Fairchild's work is something of an acquired taste I hear, but it's sincere and heartfelt if nothing else. Perhaps one of Mullford's sonnets would be to your liking?"

"The Moons of Midsummer' is enough for now I think," Helena said with a sigh, sinking deeper into her chair. "I'm tired of summer moons, love-undying, and such nonsense. I must confess that I'm in something of an ill temper today."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Vale gently discarding the book and leaning closer. "Surely there must be something I can do?" A knowing smile played across his lips.

Helena laughed, "You've helped...alleviate my displeasure immensely, not to worry." She ran a finger along her arm and then placed a palm upon her breast. "My humors have been balanced and are flowing well...very well indeed."

"That's good," Vale replied, drawing closer. "Perhaps we should return to bed. Get your humors flowing even more, as it were."

Helena smiled. "You'd like that wouldn't you, to watch me melt at your touch."

"Your pleasure is quite pleasing to me, is that so wrong?"

"Not at all...but I doubt it is what you truly desire. I believe what you really crave is reassurance that you have me safely wrapped around your finger."

“That isn’t true,” Vale said in mock indignation.

“Oh but it is. Don’t bother trying to deny it.” Helena laughed and gazed out at the horizon. “It’s funny isn’t it? I have...ways of getting others to do my bidding to be sure, but you’ve managed to make me yours with nothing more than sweetness and honeyed-words—and other things of course, things I could have scarcely imagined, until I met you.” Helena turned her gaze back to Vale. Their eyes met. “In the end I suppose your love is the only poison you’ll ever need.”

“But my love is so sweet. How can such a thing be a poison?”

“Sweet poisons are the most dangerous of all for they entice us into drinking deeply... sometimes even if we know with absolute certainty what they are.”

“I don’t understand...why do you compare me with poison? I know it is your stock and trade and all, but still. Have I not made you happy? Have I not served you well?”

“You have served me well... so well that—

“That you’ll miss me when I’m gone. Is that it?” Vale said, finishing Helena’s thought for her. A pink tinge began to spread across Helena’s cheeks; she looked as if she wanted to deny Vale’s assertion—but could not.

Poor sweet, little Helena. You may be old enough to be my mother, but in many ways you’re still very much a naïve little girl.

“Yes...I suppose I will. I’ve always enjoyed your company,” she conceded, somewhat sheepishly.

Vale drew close and took her hand in his. “And I’ve enjoyed yours as well Lady Helena. You have made my time at the Deleton much easier to bear.”

Helena chuckled. “I thought you’d grown beyond the need for flattery. And what is this ‘Lady Helena’ nonsense, I am baseborn; my sister is the noble...”

Vale smiled. “You’ll always be Lady Helena to me.”

Helena smiled placing a hand on Vale’s brow. “So young...yet so old. You’ve seen much. Suffered more I should think. I’m glad that I could be of some help at least.”

“You’ve been far more than *some* help. I owe you a great deal and your sister as well. Be sure to thank her for me.”

“You can thank her yourself. She’ll likely seek you out in court. Elena loves gossip and intrigue—and a good story for that matter.”

“I suppose in some ways I am no stranger to gossip or intrigue myself. And as for stories...well I know I have at least one good to tell.”

There was a brief moment of quiet between them before Helena started, evidently recalling something of import. “Silly me, I almost forgot. I have some more of your special lotion for you.” She rose from her chair and disappeared into the villa, returning a moment later with a little golden vial in hand, one identical to the empty one in Vale’s pocket. “I know you haven’t much longer in Autu’rel...but I know how taxing some of your other clients can be.”

“That was very thoughtful of you,” Vale said, gently taking the vial. “Your lotion truly is a wondrous concoction...I must confess that to me stories of magick and alchemy have always been just that, stories. But to see such wonders firsthand—to see a wound close in an instant, even it’s just a bruise—is truly special.” Vale drew ever closer. “Have you ever thought of selling draughts such as this instead of your...usual wares? I really think you could make a go of it. People would pay I assure you.”

Lady Helena laughed darkly. “Oh I have no doubt they would, but the necessary ingredients are hard to come by and the knowledge of such draughts is closely guarded. Besides I haven’t a talent for it.”

She regarded the golden vial for a good while, looking decidedly glum.

“That healing draught is the best I can manage and even then the ‘healing’ is only skin deep.” Helena sighed and reclined in her chair again. “Poisons, poisons, and more poisons—they seem to be all I’m good for. And even so, I seem to be losing my touch as of late. My laboratory in the Lower Quarter burned to the ground last week, perhaps you heard.”

“I fear I got an excellent view from the Deleton. I am sorry, truly.”

Helena snorted. “You needn’t apologize. You’re not to blame. No, if anyone is to blame it’s me. I kept several volatile draughts there. Things best kept separate from each other and securely contained. For the life of me I can’t fathom what I did wrong, which flask I left open, which valve I left unsealed...I was so careful...so sure.”

“Perhaps someone wished to make mischief for you—some sort of petty revenge,” Vale offered. “The fire may not have been an accident you know.”

“The thought certainly had crossed my mind,” Helena replied. “There are many who loathe me...rightly so I fear...it’s a miracle I haven’t ended up on the wrong end of blade yet, I suspect I have dumb luck and Elena to thank for that. But still it stands to reason that if my enemies were to seek me out, they would come for my head, not my wares. No. If the fire was indeed deliberate, it may have been a ploy to rob me blind without me being any the wiser...”

“Oh no,” Vale said with a look of feigned dismay. “You don’t think they took the Milk of the Shade do you?”

Helena grimaced, “I fear you’re right. My poisons and venoms are quite valuable to be sure, but the Milk was worth a small fortune. No man alive today knows how to make it; the secrets of the mixture were lost with Old Lorthane. All one can do is collect the few vials that remain and hoard them. I was fortunate enough to acquire one such vial from a witless merchant in Hashetti; he truly had no idea what he stumbled upon.”

Helena let out a weary sigh. “I intended to make a gift of it. I owe a Shaman in Manu a great debt, one I feel obligated to repay. As it so happens, a necromancer has been terrorizing his village—” Helena shuddered. “—nasty business...I won’t burden you with the details. Anyway, if I were to provide the Shaman and his kin with a way to rid their village of this vile sorcerer then my debt to him would be repaid in full.”

“Is it possible this necromancer was aware of your intentions? That he staged the fire and took the Milk so that it couldn’t be used against him?” Vale offered.

“It is possible...” Helena conceded. “But I doubt it. From what I hear he’s half mad, with no other thought beyond indulging his own twisted obsessions. For mages with fragile minds and tainted hearts, magic and insanity regrettably seem to be intertwined.”

Helena paused for a moment, stroking her chin. “No...I suspect a lone thief is to blame. One hired by someone who wanted the Milk for themselves—a fellow alchemist most likely. A few somehow knew that I had acquired it and approached me with rather generous offers, but I turned them all down.”

Helena cursed under her breath. “Those halfwits I hired from Lord Boral are to blame I’m sure of it. When I arrived to find my laboratory reduced to ashes, their words were slurred and their breath stunk of sweet wine. For all I know they may well have fallen asleep at their posts,

allowing the thief to waltz in and out without care in the world. Needless to say, the damage has been done. I've lost the Milk of the Shade and after word of the fire spread I haven't been getting much business."

"You don't sound very upset."

"You're right. Oddly enough I am not...truthfully I've grown tired of this life," Helena said, gesturing to her work table and the various alchemic flasks, vials and decanters that surrounded them. "I've grown tired of poison. I do want to straighten out that necromancer business before I retire mind you. My Shaman friend and I will have to get a little creative to be sure...but there is more than one way to peel a calainth root as they say."

Helena fell into quiet contemplation for a moment, but quickly snapped back to attention. "And besides with the rather generous finder's fee Aliar gave me I can now afford to be a woman of leisure. I have relatively frugal tastes; you were by far my most expensive indulgence."

"I'm sure you'll have no trouble finding some other pretty little thing to warm your bed. There are a few other boys at the Deleton who may be to your liking."

"None of them could replace you."

Vale smiled. "I thought you'd grown beyond the need for flattery as well Lady Helena."

"Is it selfish of me that I want you to stay?"

"Yes, I believe it is."

Helena chuckled. "Such candor. I must confess I'm not used to seeing this side of you." Her eyes returned to the golden vial which Vale had placed on the table between them. "I'm

glad I could give you something...to give you a sendoff, as it were. I only wish I could give more.”

“Rest assured Lady Helena, you have already given me all that I need,” Vale replied with a smile.

Chapter Four: Tales of Ages Past

When Hope returned to her chambers Agatha lay in waiting, fussing over Hope's dress which was caked with dirt. Mercifully, Agatha had made herself useful for once and prepared another one for Hope in her dressing room. Hope slid out of her current dress which she'd managed to soil so marvelously and put on the clean one that lay before her, swatting away Agatha's hands as she attempted to fiddle with her corset...which true to form was a shade too tight.

After she had made herself presentable, Hope swept out of her chambers, walking at a brisker pace than usual. Her lessons with Errol were one of the few items on Agatha's agenda she found genuinely interesting and she did hate to appear disinterested due to her tardiness. Sir Maylan and Sir Duncan took their places behind her, their boots clacking away as they walked. Every so often they'd pass the odd porter or serving girl who'd bow or curtsy.

Eventually they reached her father's study which was full of imposing shelves weighed down with leather-bound volumes—some new, others ancient, and all for show. The distinctive aroma of musty parchment clung to the air, so thick Hope could almost taste it, a smell she had become intimately familiar with over the years.

Unlike the rest of the castle, the study's furnishings were rather plain; a modest sourwood table lay in the center of the room with two narrow chairs situated on either side of it—a place of learning and reflection, not one of comfort.

Errol stood at the table, leaning over a young boy who was reading from a ponderous tome, fumbling with his words as was to be expected for a boy of his age.

“And then the Shade came before Geylen and—talk? —took him to his l—liar?”

“No lair,” Errol corrected, “the place a beast lives.”

“Sorry sir...” The boy mumbled, staring at the words before him with the utmost concentration.

“Oh hush, you needn’t be sorry. You’re doing beautifully.” Errol said, in his usual singsong voice— his beetle-black eyes warm and inviting.

“Before them lay many doors. Far more than Geylen could c—count. Three doors were open. Three doors for the three evils the Shade had unleashed, three evils not of the forest, nor of the sea, nor of the sky, but of man...”

“*Geylen of Lorthall?*” Hope interjected. “Such a tale hardly seems fit for a child.”

“And what makes you say that Your Highness?” Errol said, smiling in his usually, irritatingly carefree manner.

“It’s a rather morbid for starters; full of monsters and fiends...not to mention Geylen dies at the end.” The words slipped out of Hope’s mouth before she could stop them. The boy looked up at her; his expression torn between shock and dismay.

“Sorry...” Hope muttered, silently cursing herself for her loose tongue. The boy’s eyes fell back down to the tome in his hands, looking forlorn.

“But Geylen dies a hero,” Errol said, placing a consoling hand on the boy’s shoulder. “He offers up his own soul to the Shade so that his village might be spared and the Shade greedily devours it. But Geylen’s soul is so pure that the Shade cannot consume it. Instead he vomits it out along with all the other souls trapped in his stomach, allowing them to pass peacefully into the next life. Without the souls of his victims to give him life, the Shade dies; returning to the great black void from whence he came...in the end all is set right.”

This revelation didn't seem to make the boy happy, but he looked a little less glum at least. Errol smiled as he ruffled the boy's hair, looking pleased. Sir Duncan on the other hand did not look pleased at all.

"You forget your place tutor," Sir Duncan said, his voice icy. "This is the Regent's private study; the boy has no business being here."

"Ah yes forgive me for the breach in protocol my good sir," Errol said, bowing in an excessively dramatic fashion. "But this young man is Olyn Wolf, son of Lord Farren Wolf... a guest of the Crown. As you can see he has been learning his way around the written word as of late and I thought I could be of assistance. I doubt the Lord Regent would mind..."

"The Regent told me that no one is to enter his study without his consent."

"Yes but I thought—" Errol began.

"You thought?" Sir Duncan said, cutting him off. "And who said you were allowed to think pray tell?"

Errol chuckled. "I dare say it would be rather difficult for me to perform my duties as a tutor without thinking would it not?"

Sir Duncan lurched forward as if he meant to say something angry. Hope let out a sigh.

Why must all men be like this?

"Enough." Hope's voice cracked like a whip, halting Sir Duncan in his tracks. "Sir Maylan would you kindly escort young Master Wolf to the gardens. I believe the Hartford boys are playing solider."

“Of course Your Highness,” Sir Maylan said. He motioned for the Wolf boy to approach, smiling. “Come along young master. Let’s go see what the other lads are up to.”

The boy obediently waddled over to Sir Maylan but paused as he passed Hope. “I’m sorry Your Highness,” the Wolf boy said, eyes full of childish sincerity. “I didn’t know that I wasn’t supposed to be here...please don’t blame the tutor.”

“Oh hush,” Hope said smiling. “No one here is to blame, everything is fine.”

“The King won’t be angry will he?”

“The Regent doesn’t have to know.”

The boy sighed in relief.

“Now run along,” Hope said, playfully shoeing him away. “Go play with the other boys. It’s a beautiful day.” The boy obliged, scampering over to Sir Maylan who escorted him from the study.

“Sir Duncan would you kindly wait outside. See to it that we’re not disturbed,” Hope said after Sir Maylan and the Wolf boy had left.

Sir Duncan looked as if he were about to protest, but in the end decided against it. “As you wish,” He said, exiting the study and firmly closed the heavy wooden doors behind him.

“You shouldn’t bait him like that,” Hope said, rounding on Errol. “He could have your head on a spike you know.”

Errol grinned, raising an eyebrow. “You’d like that wouldn’t you. You’d be spared your lesson for the day. Alas, your relief would be short lived I fear. You father would have no trouble conjuring up some other poor soul to make your life miserable.”

“I’m being serious Errol. Be careful...please. I like your head where it is.”

“My, my—is that sentiment I hear Your Highness? Perhaps even a modicum of... concern?”

Hope snorted. “Don’t be ridiculous. The tutor before you was frightfully boring. If I have to suffer through another puffed-up, drawling sycophant, I may throw myself off the battlements.”

Errol laughed. “Well it is good to know where we stand at least. But I wonder, are all people merely amusements to you?”

Now it was Hope’s turn to laugh. “Amusements? Certainly not. Most are far too tiresome to be amusing.”

“I see,” Errol said, sliding a quill and piece of parchment over to Hope. “We may be in agreement there. People can be tiresome.” Errol rose and withdrew a massive tome from a nearby shelf titled: “A Complete History of Albimar and Old Lorthane.” It was so large that Errol had to carry it with both hands. He dropped it on the table before Hope with a thud. “And I fear I am no exception.”

Hope eyed the tome before her sullenly. “You can’t be serious.”

“I can be I’ll have you know,” Errol replied somewhat defensively. “And in this instance I am.”

“I’ll never win, you know that. You’re just too—well—you’re just you.”

“So you accept defeat then?”

Hope let out a few inaudible curses and pulled the monster of a book toward her. Errol knew how to goad her into doing just about anything. Hope ran a finger along the binding which had grown so coarse over the years that she wondered whether it would draw blood.

A Complete History of Albimar and Old Lorthane. Errol had chosen this particular book many a time. The title itself never failed to amuse him, according to Errol the “history” within was far from complete and “Old Lorthane” was something of a redundancy, for Lorthane by definition was quite old.

Errol also seemed to hold the author—the historian Tobias Flint—in contempt, going so far as to call him: “A vain self-absorbed braggart who tweeted the truths the-powers-that-be in his day wanted, like the dutiful little mockingbird he was.” Ironically, Errol’s disdain for Flint and his book had served as the inspiration for a particularly effective writing exercise.

“Sir Flint may have fancied himself a historian, but in truth he was little more than a bard. One who spun many tales for applause and applause alone,” Errol had said, one dreary afternoon a few months ago. “In the end I suppose he was more of a fool than a bard. Any learned man who’s not blinded by their own prejudice can see his work for what it is, a string of half-truths and quarter-truths twisted to suit the ends of his benefactors. I wonder...do you think you can twist the truth as deftly as our friend Tobias? Can you spin tales to suit your own ends?”

“I suppose...” Hope had replied, slightly bewildered. “Anyone can tell a story—and anyone can lie. It’s making your lies believable that’s the challenge. I’m not sure I’d be any good at that.”

“Perhaps it’s time to find out,” Errol said, smiling mischievously as he gently nudged the tome towards Hope. “Let’s play a little game.”

“A game?”

“Yes a game. Why don’t you pick a section from our friend Tobias’s book here and copy it down—not word for word mind you— feel free to change as much or as little as you see fit. Rewrite a tiny piece of ‘history’ for yourself. When you’re done, I’ll attempt to discern which words are yours and which are his,” Errol had said, rubbing his hands together.

“What happens if you’re right about which words are mine and which are his?”

“Then I win. But if even a single word of yours goes undetected then you win. This game is very much weighted in your favor.”

“What do I win if I win?”

“Why the pure unadulterated pleasure of knowing that you’ve bested me at a game of my own design.”

The prospect of beating Errol at his own game was too juicy a morsel for Hope to resist and so she accepted his challenge. After all, how many women of the court could say they’d bested a learned man at anything save embroidery or dancing? Alas, any dreams Hope had of emerging victorious quickly deserted her. Errol was always able to identify which pieces of the text Hope copied were hers without fail. No matter how obscure the passage she chose, no matter how clever she thought she was being Errol always won in the end. Hope would often try to trip him up by throwing in several painfully obvious alterations in an effort to draw his attention away from the subtler ones she had discretely scribbled in. Yet despite her best efforts, Errol still saw through all her ruses.

After he identified the changes Hope had made to Tobias’s text, he would smugly explain why Tobias’s work was incorrect, often referencing the work of some obscure historian to prove

his point. After a while, Hope had begun to suspect that Errol had somehow committed the entirety of Tobias's work—along with countless other books—to memory. How such a feat was possible Hope didn't know. Sometimes she began to wonder if Errol was some sort of living book, a human receptacle for every word ever written. Hope laughed such silly thoughts away most of the time, though occasionally she couldn't help but wonder if there was a kernel of truth to them.

“Go on,” Errol said, motioning for Hope to open the great dusty tome. “Pick any section that takes your fancy.” Hope begrudgingly slid the tome towards her and opened it, letting the pages slide through her fingers; the pages eventually came to a rest on page two-hundred-forty-seven. *Why not.* Hope thought glumly. It didn't really matter which section she chose; Errol knew them all by heart.

“Page two-hundred-forty-seven to page two-hundred-forty-nine,” Hope said a proclamation halfway between a simple statement of fact and a challenge.

“Ah yes, chapter three, the history of the glorious reign of Augustine Leonharth. Or at least the history he commissioned Tobias to pass along to future generations,” Errol said.

“You don't approve of Augustine?”

“I must say I am flattered your highness. I was not aware the approval of a lowly tutor amounted to much.”

“Oh don't be coy. You know I hate it. I'm just curious as to why you don't like him? All the historians speak highly of him, not just Tobias. He was kind, strong and wise. Everything a good king should be.”

Errol chuckled. “Was he...was he good?”

“I don’t follow,” Hope said, confused.

“Was Augustine a good king?”

“Well yes, I think so. He started a dynasty that lasted for four centuries didn’t he.”

“That he did. But was he a good king, or an effective one?”

“Is there a difference?”

Errol smiled his all too familiar sly smile, as if he were enjoying a joke to which only he was privy. “Well, I suppose that will be up to you to discover for yourself won’t it, Your Highness.”

Hope glowered. “Enough small talk. Let’s get back to the game.”

“As you wish, feel free to begin whenever you are ready,” Errol said, motioning to the book again.

Hope drew her piece of parchment and quill closer to her and began to read. Errol may not have been terribly fond of Augustine, but if even a fraction of Tobias’s writings were true then he couldn’t have been that bad a fellow. The section Hope selected described how Augustine opened his doors to smallfolk who were fleeing from his rival the “accursed” Malcolm Hart, a self-styled king from the Southern Reach.

Augustine even had an orphanage built inside the castle ground, which was unfortunately torn down during his grandson Peter’s reign and a modest temple of Varu erected in its place. Hope passed the temple every day as she went out for her morning rides. It was a relatively small and unassuming place, clearly built to only accommodate a dozen people or so; a place of worship reserved for the royal family and their attendants. Hope could count the number of times

she'd been in there on one hand. Her father for all his supposed virtues was not a very devout man.

The temple, that's it. I'll make it sound as if it was always there...I'll say Augustine temporarily used it as an orphanage...Errol will know I'm lying of course, but it's a good distraction if nothing else.

Hope began to scribble on her parchment, trying her best to look innocent. Errol watched her intently.

“Are you alright your highness? You seem a little dour today.”

“Dour? Of course I'm dour. I'm not exactly thrilled at the prospect of getting thrashed by you in a game of wits for the umpteenth time.”

Errol leaned closer, his eyes boring into hers. Hope always felt naked under his gaze. She felt a powerful impulse to look away but resisted the urge.

“No...there's something that's troubling you, something other than our little game. Perhaps if you were to talk about it you'd feel better; get it off your chest as it were.”

“Many things have been troubling me of late. None of which I want to talk about.”

“As you wish.”

Hope turned her attention back to her parchment, resuming her scribbling.

“And besides you're breaking my concentration...would you mind being quiet for a moment while I finish this.”

“Of course,” Errol said, reclining in his chair. “But if you're considering using the temple, I wouldn't bother. It will serve as a distraction but little more.”

Damn him.

“How could you possibly know I was going to use the temple?”

Errol shrugged. “Lucky guess I suppose. It seemed like something you’d pick. And besides you’ve just confirmed my suspicions.”

Damn him...

Hope turned her attention back to the tome and continued to read, attempting to regain her composure. Tobias continued prattling on about the glory of Augustine’s reign, detailing Augustine’s “stunning” victory over Malcolm Hart. Augustine pardoned the lords who stood against him after the fighting was over and kindly took the fallen Malcolm Hart’s children as his wards, though unfortunately the children all died of sickness not long afterwards. As far as Tobias was concerned there had never been and would likely never be as just and true a king as Augustine Leonharth. Tobias’s words and turns of phrases eventually grew so florid and pretentious that it became a chore to read on any further. Hope closed the tome in disgust.

She was certain that there had to be something within the leather-bound heap of parchment that lay before her that Errol did not know. Some tiny tidbit of information he had overlooked, but despite all the times they’d played their little game Hope had yet to find it.

Unless...

Unless the answer had been in front of her all this time, just waiting to be discovered...

Hope flipped the tome back open and continued copying the section she had selected—scribbling on her parchment as she buried her face in the tome’s pages.

“You seem to be taking this rather seriously,” Errol said after a moment of Hope scribbling away in silence.

“I am,” Hope said curtly as she finished rereading her work for the final time.

“I can hardly wait to see what you’ve come up with.”

“You won’t have to,” Hope said, handing Errol her parchment with a flourish. His eyebrow raised, Errol took it and began to read.

“Tut tut, Augustine’s treasurer was Cleo Selwyn, not Martin Guilford, but I’m sure you already knew that.” Errol said, scratching out a sentence on the parchment. “And Augustine’s first wife Maureen was most certainly not barren; she had many healthy children, so many in fact it was rather astonishing. Though in all fairness the Leonharth seed is known for being exceptionally...potent.”

“Maureen eventually died in childbirth unless I am mistaken.”

“That she did. It was tragic but not entirely unexpected. I imagine even the strongest of women would be quite spent after twelve births.”

“You know how the old jape goes; marrying a Leonharth is a cruel and bloody fate.”

Errol chuckled. “That it was... that it was.”

“From what I hear the men were something else,” Hope said with a sigh. “Gorgeous faces with figures to drool over. It would almost be worth an early grave to lay with one.”

“My, my Your Highness...” Errol said in mock indignation.

“Have I offended your sensibilities?”

“Not in the slightest. You are quite right, many men of the Leonharth line were known for their looks and sunny dispositions. The sort who’d get any maiden’s heart fluttering.”

Errol turned his attention back to the parchment, continuing to search the section Hope had copied for any changes she made to Tobias's original text. "Harper's fold is located to the northwest of Bannermount not to the northeast..." Errol muttered scratching out a sentence. "Jacob Pierce was executed for treason not sedition..." He scratched out another. "And a few other odds and ends..." He said as he deftly snipped away another assortment of falsehoods as casually as if he was pruning a plant.

After he had finished Errol handed the parchment back to Hope. "Unless I'm mistaken that should be all of them. You've grown quite adept at weaving deceptions. Tobias would be most pleased. Let me know if there are any that I have missed."

Hope looked over the parchment; she managed to keep a straight face, but her heart pounded away so fiercely in her chest that she thought it might burst.

It was there.

The deception she had placed among her numerous feints. The one she had prayed that Errol's quill would not find.

I've won...I've actually won.

Hope was sorely tempted to smile but suppressed the urge, her lips instead curling into a look of feigned displeasure.

"Well?" Errol said. "Did I miss anything?"

"Of course not. You were right about everything. Not one mistake escaped you." Hope finally allowed herself to smile. "Which is why you've lost."

"I'm afraid I don't follow..." Errol said, sounding genuinely perplexed.

“Just to be clear, the rules of our game are that any changes I make to Tobias’s work that go undetected result in my victory, but if you can find all the changes I’ve made then you win. Those are the rules true?”

“Yes those are the rules. But I must confess that I don’t understand what point it is you are trying to make. I’m fairly certain I’ve identified all the changes you’ve made.”

“That is precisely my point,” Hope said, lurching forward, barely managing to contain her excitement. “You were so busy looking for the changes I made to Tobias’s text that you never considered the possibility that the changes I made were necessary ones.”

Errol started to look genuinely perplexed. “Necessary?”

“The orphanage, the one that was turned into a temple,” Hope said. “Page two-hundred-forty-eight. It was constructed by Peter Leonharth the second was it not?”

“Yes it was. I noted as much when I read your work. You gave the correct answer. Tobias did as well.”

“Did he?” Hope said, grabbing the tome and flipping it open again. “Tobias states, and I quote: “The orphanage gave shelter to children from all over the land for many years; alas it was eventually torn down by his majesty Peter Leonharth and a Temple of Varu was erected in its place.”

“I see...” Errol said, comprehension dawning.

“By “Peter Leonharth” it is not entirely clear whether Tobias was referring to Peter Leonharth the Second or his father Peter Leonharth the First. Such a distinction is an important one to make, one Tobias did not. I changed the text to make it clear to which king Tobias was

referring. A change you failed to notice because it was so obviously true that you didn't give it a second glance." Hope laughed. "In the end I guess I deceived you with the truth."

"So it would seem..." Errol said, begrudgingly, though also regarding Hope with a heightened level of respect. "You know, you do have a devious mind. And a... keen eye for detail. Perhaps you'd make a good diplomat."

"Oh, come now, you know I'm not tactful enough to be a diplomat."

Errol smiled. "An absence of tact more oft than not leads to victory in squabbles over power."

Hope snorted. "An absence of manners you mean. I wonder—are you attempting to humor me or insult me?"

"To enlighten you. That has always been my intention."

They sat in silence for a moment—Errol's eyes boring into Hope's. Again, Hope could not help but feel as if she were naked under his gaze. It was as if Errol could see every part of her. Even the darkest and seamiest parts that were never meant to see the light of day.

"So do you accept defeat?" Hope finally said.

"Accept it? No. But I will acknowledge when I am beaten," Errol replied. Hope reclined in her chair and stretched, loosening up her shoulders. She often found sitting hunched over her parchment to be oddly tiring, even for only short periods of time.

Errol sighed. "I believe a reward is in order..."

“A reward?” Hope sat back upright. “I thought the only reward I was supposed to receive was, “the pure unadulterated pleasure of knowing that I’ve bested you in a game of your own design.”

Errol chuckled. “Yes that’s true. But I’d like to reward you all the same. You’re free to go without it if you like.”

“What sort of reward do you have in mind?”

“A story.”

“A story?”

“You’ve read to me so many times...I suppose it’s only fair that I read to you.” Errol gestured to the countless books that filled the shelves around them with a flourish. “Pick any one you desire and I shall read it.”

“You’re promising me that you’ll read a story...but there are many other books in this study: historical texts, journals—even a cookbook or two. What if I were to choose one of those? Would you still read it?”

“If you wish to be bored to tears then I will be more than happy to oblige. But surely there is some tale among these countless works that you have yet to hear? A reward is meant to be something enjoyable is it not?”

“If I were to choose an entire book, say *Whitewater’s Folly*, would you read it front to back or just a chapter?”

Errol laughed. “So many questions...”

“You said yourself that I have an eye for detail,” Hope reminded him.

Errol stroked his chin looking rather amused. “I shall read from whatever title—or titles—that take your fancy, until either you tire of them or we run out of time; whether a thrilling epic such as *Lodrae Lomia* or something less scintillating as say...a cookbook, no volume is off limits. Furthermore, I will read any chapter or count of pages from a single work, multiple works—or any combination or variety hither to unmentioned. Is this arrangement acceptable to you?”

Hope nodded.

“So what shall I read?”

“‘Geylen of Lorthall’ I think—the story you were reading to the Wolf boy. Start where you left off with him.”

“Are you certain? It seems an awful waste to choose a tale you’ve heard before. Where’s the fun in knowing how it all ends.”

Hope shrugged. “These are uncertain times, and I for one am craving something certain. Something familiar. You wouldn’t mind indulging me would you? Not that you have a choice in the matter. You did promise me a reward after all.”

“Your wish is my command,” Errol said, opening *Songs and Tales of Ages Past*. Errol licked his finger as he flipped through the pages.

“Ah...here we are,” Errol said when he reached the place he had left off when Hope had barged into the study unannounced. He cleared his throat and began to read.

“Before them lay many doors. Far more than Geylen could count. Three of the doors were open. Three doors for the three evils the Shade had unleashed. Three evils not of the forest, nor of the sea, nor of the sky...”

“Behind each of these doors lies a sin of man,” The Shade said, gesturing to the countless doors the surrounded them. “Many years ago I agreed to remove each and every one from the people of Lorthall, bringing peace and contentment to a wicked and barbarous village that sorely needed both. In return for my service, your forbearers promised to sacrifice an innocent to me every year at harvest’s end. For three ages, your forbearers have upheld their end of the bargain...alas three harvests have come and gone o’er the past three years and no innocent has been given to me.”

The Shade laughed its horrible laugh and Geylen felt his blood run cold.

“Fools...” The Shade hissed. “Do you truly believe you can cheat me? If so you are fools indeed. Fools!” Errol’s voice rose, his face twisted into a quite believable expression of malicious glee. His reading seemed to be as much of a performance as it was a recitation.

Fools! Errol yelled, slamming his fist on the hard-wooden table. Hope jumped, partially from shock, but also from...pain. Her head was ringing as if it had been physically struck, a low dull, whining filled her ears and reverberated throughout her skull. She massaged her temples.

Fools! Errol slammed his fist on the table again. The whining and pain intensified. Hope gasped as she clenched her temples even tighter.

“Fools!” Errol yelled yet again, driving his fist against the table for the third and final time. The pain within Hope’s head reached a fever pitch and the whining became deafening. She felt as if a thousand white-hot nails were slowly being driven into her skull.

“Errol...” Hope said hoarsely. “I think...”

But Errol was too enthralled in his performance to notice her discomfort.

“Behold your doom boy. The price of your arrogance.” The Shade said, gesturing to the three doors that stood ajar. “For three harvests you and your kin have refused to give me my due, so three evils I have returned to your village. Three nameless, faceless horrors to poison your hearts and peel the meat from your souls; for men’s virtues are few but their vices are many...”

Hope’s vision suddenly grew distorted and blurry. An all too familiar chorus of whispering began to fill the air, closing in on all sides.

Hope clamped her hands over her ears in an effort to shut the whispering out, but it was of no use. It wormed its way between her fingers, urgent and unrelenting. There was something different about the whispering this time; a discernible change from the previous occasions in which it had arisen in Hope’s dreams and when her waking mind began to wander—another layer to the eerie chorus—the faintest traces of sobbing...and pleading.

“...And now the fourth harvest has past and I have naught to show for it. So as promised, I will return another evil to the people of Lorthall—a fourth evil. Behold boy as I raise my hand and open the Black Door.”

The sobbing and pleading grew clearer and louder. It was a girl’s voice, youthful and filled with fear.

Wim...please! Please don’t!

“Errol...” Hope whispered hoarsely.

Errol continued to read, sweeping his arms around for dramatic effect.

“Errol!” Hope tried to shout, but all she could muster was a strangled cry.

“Your Highness, are you alright? You look rather pale...” Errol said, discarding the book and leaning in close. Hope’s vision began to swim in earnest and she retched all over the table.

“Oh dear...” she heard Errol whisper.

And then Hope saw it.

A great, black symbol lay on the table between them; it looked as if it had been written with black, smoldering smoke as opposed to ink. The more Hope stared at it the more she felt compelled to look away, and yet no matter how hard she tried to avert her eyes they remained fixed on the symbol. She felt Errol place a hand on her shoulder and give her a shake.

“Your Highness...”

Hope continued to stare at the symbol before her. She was not certain if it was even really there or if it was merely an invention of her increasingly unstable mind. Whatever the case, she did not have much time for contemplation, for she soon fell into unconsciousness—her head falling to the table with a thud. As the darkness engulfed her, she caught one last glance of the symbol, the black smoke with which it was wrought flowing away into oblivion. It looked as if it was in the process of dissipating, yet no matter how much smoke was lost to the air, the symbol remained. As Hope’s eyes fluttered closed her last conscious thought was of the sobbing little girl, whose pleas rose unbidden to the forefront of her mind.

Wim, please...

Chapter Five: Gold, Writs and Decencies

After what seemed an age Vale and Tormir finally reached the Deleton. The gates were always open regardless of the hour, allowing any and all into the grounds. Gaining entry to the building itself was another matter, a privilege reserved for clients in the company of a consort or who had made arrangements to meet one inside. The building was well guarded; if anyone was brazen enough to sneak or force their way in, they would receive a brutal—and most likely final lesson.

That being said, Master Aliar did his best to keep the atmosphere civil and inviting, ensuring that both consorts and guards remained on their best behavior (to paying clients) at all times. He spared no expense on the upkeep of the building or the grounds. The floors were polished daily, the walls repainted every year and every sennight the hedges were trimmed, the flowers pruned and the grass kept short and tidy.

Unfortunately, the harsh winds from the storm had not been kind, tearing the leaves off of several bushes—reducing them to stalks and stems—as well as disfiguring some topiary that had previously been rather becoming. The rain had also left the earth quite sodden. Vale nearly lost a boot as he and Tormir waded through the muck, heading towards the Deleton's rear entrance.

No doubt it would cost a good deal to restore the battered grounds to their former state, a prospect that would not thrill Master Aliar. He was willing to pay whatever it took to keep the Deleton presentable, but if Aliar had a choice in the matter he would probably rather remove his own rotten teeth by hand than part with any of his precious gold.

An image of Aliar giving a large amount of gold to a nameless, faceless stranger sprang unbidden into Vale's mind; Aliar placing the gold piece by piece into the stranger's hand,

wincing with each piece he surrendered. Such thoughts brought a smile to Vale's face and a spring to his step. Though in truth, the knowledge that his scheme was finally bearing fruit brought enough "spring" on its own—Aliar's illness was merely the cherry on top of the pie. He was distracted and disoriented, his wits dulled by the host of concoctions he was taking to restore him to health. Aliar was currently far more vulnerable to Vale's powers of persuasion than he would otherwise have been, on a night Vale would need all the influence over him he could muster. On a night that would be instrumental in Vale's quest to be rid of the Deleton for good and to be one step closer to visiting terrible vengeance upon his true enemy—the one who waited for him half a world away. Strutting through his father's halls.

Vale had to prepare for the night that lay ahead, to make himself presentable and gather his wits yet again. But first he had to sleep. A brief nap would dull the pain and reinvigorate him. He'd awaken renewed and refreshed but not truly rested. No matter how hard he tried Vale could never truly find rest.

#

The sounds of moaning, creaking headboards and the rhythmic thumping of flesh on flesh grew louder and louder as they climbed the all too familiar staircase which lead to the Deleton's upper floors.

"You should get some rest and eat some real food. Something other than sweets," Tormir said as they approached Vale's room. "As you know Aliar needs you tonight. I'll come collect you when its time."

"Well I'd best get ready then," Vale said, opening his door.

“I’ll send one of the girls to help get ready. If they’re not spreading their legs they might as well do something useful.”

“Would you mind sending for Daisy if possible?”

“Daisy, are you sure? Not to be rude, but I hear she’s a bit of a lack-wit.”

“You shouldn’t heed malicious gossip Tormir. She’s a sweet girl and she gives an excellent massage,” Vale said, rubbing his back. “I must confess I could use one right about now.”

“If you want Daisy then so be it. I’ll have her bring up supper from the kitchens, I think they’re making that roast again, but it’s better than nothing.”

Tormir turned and walked away down the hall, slouching slightly.

“Thank you Tormir,” Vale called after him, though he was not sure if Tormir had heard him. Once Tormir disappeared around the corner, Vale shut his door and fell into his bed breathing in the aroma of the freshly washed sheets. Sleep took ahold of him far more swiftly than he anticipated; he was often so starved for it that he would fall into a deep slumber as soon as his head touched his pillow. Sleep for him was deep, black, dreamless and often brief. This time was no exception.

As soon as the darkness engulfed him, or so it seemed, he was roused by knocking on his door. Daisy stood in the threshold, holding a steaming plate of some featureless meat that, to its credit, looked as if it may have been alive at some point.

“Vale! How fare thee?” Daisy said, smiling warmly.

“I fare rather well, thank you for asking. And how fares Daisy?”

Daisy had a wonderful smile, and a wonderful face and a wonderful figure for that matter; hence the reason Aliar demanded such a high price for her services. But there was something more to her allure than simple physical attractiveness; if Vale had to give it a name he supposed it would be a sort of feigned innocence, an innocence that men seemed to find irresistible. In public she behaved every bit as silly and bubbly as one would expect for a girl of her age, batting her eyelashes with shameless abandon and laughing amicably at even the most tasteless jokes; her doe-like eyes full of life and wonder. Between the sheets however...she was another matter entirely.

“Oh well enough I suppose, just finished up with Holland Royce.”

“The jeweler?”

“Yeah that’s the one! Dare say I wore him out. You should have seen the way he was huffing and puffing, I thought his heart might burst!”

“While consorting with a lady as fair as you, such a thing is not hard to imagine.”

“Oh you’re shameless.” Daisy gushed. “Shameless and sweet. Yet oh so naughty I should think. If you ever want to refine your technique with me, know that my door is always open.”

“I will keep that in mind. My door is always open to you as well.”

“I can see that...why it’s even open now,” Daisy said, batting her eyelashes.

“That it is. But I fear I’m spread thin. I’ve been servicing Uani all day.”

“Uani? That pervert— oh I’m sorry Vale. I did not know.”

“It’s quite alright. I do hate to impose, but I was wondering if I could trouble you for one of your Rutagan graces. I am rather sore...”

“For you, of course!”

They entered Vale’s room, Daisy kicked the door shut behind them and placed Vale’s supper gently on a bedside table. Vale began to undress slowly, wincing with pain (there were no bruises to tell of his sparring session with Uani true, but the hurt was still there—it was in fact pervasive as of late). Once Vale was disrobed and lay prostrate on the bed Daisy went to work, deftly seeking out the muscles that were the most taught and strained. As her hands slid up to his shoulders and neck Vale flinched involuntarily (the back of his neck was particularly sensitive). “I’m not gonna hurt you...poor thing” Daisy said—a solitary crack in her cheerful demeanor.

“I know. Forgive me,” Vale said, shooting a hopefully disarming smile up at her.

In many ways, Vale often saw a side of Daisy not many others were allowed to see. Beneath her lusty, doe-eyed, bed hopping persona laid a caring and empathetic soul. He had often wondered whether there was some latent reason for Daisy’s kindness, but in the end it seemed Daisy was the sort of person who didn’t need much of a reason to be kind, something of an oddity in Autu’rel.

She was what was known as “a child of the house,” one conceived from an encounter with a client (Finilia root usually prevented such occurrences, but it was not infallible). Aliar, in a rare moment of charity, had decided not to undo what had been done and let Daisy’s mother “Lily” birth her child in the Deleton. Afterwards, Lily was sold, to whom no one knew save Aliar (though there had been much hushed speculation on the matter). Who Daisy’s father was, no one

knew either; but while his identity was a mystery it stood to reason that he was a man of some account and some means given the sort who solicited the Deleton's services.

As a child, Daisy had been trained as a maid, cleaning chambers, helping with the wash and tending to the grounds when necessary. She had been a plump, curly-haired and freckled little girl and thus had initially been deemed not attractive enough for the "other work." But as the years passed she grew into her looks and after an intensive bout of instruction the "other work" began in earnest.

"Uani...oh he really makes my blood boil sometimes," Daisy said, as she massaged Vale's back. "I hope his cock rots and drops off. It isn't right the way he treats you."

Vale closed his eyes letting out a sigh. "Why? I'm just a whore."

"You're not just a whore—"

Vale raised a golden eyebrow.

"You're a consort," she added, sounding defensive.

"Words are just that. Words. A whore is a consort and a consort a whore," Vale replied, sinking back into his pillow. Daisy's hands slid slowly up his back, loosening up his shoulders.

"A dog is just a dog, but you still wouldn't beat one would you?" Daisy countered.

"Me? No. I would not," Vale said. "But others might not have such qualms."

Daisy raised her gaze to the potted flowers on the windowsill. "Your flowers are doing well...I can never remember what they're called."

Vale looked at the flowers as well. “Blooms of Lafara, I believe. I grew them myself since they were just seeds. They took ages to bloom mind you, but they’ve bloomed all the same. Rumor has it they bring one good luck.”

“Oh that’s nice. Do you feel like lady luck is on your side?”

“I’ll reserve judgement until later.”

“I suppose that’s wise.”

After a few moments of working on his torso Daisy hands withdrew. Vale felt much better than he had before, the aches and pains from his session with Uani had diminished considerably. Daisy ran her hand over his skin one final time.

“God, your skin is beautiful...everything about you is beautiful. It’s not fair. You’re the most handsome boy at the Deleton and yet you’re still prettier than me!”

“No one here is prettier here than you.”

Daisy made a noise of indignation. “Oh come now.”

Vale drew closer, eyes boring into hers. “I’m serious. You’re the most beautiful person I know.”

A small compliment when one is surrounded by ugly people...but a compliment nonetheless...I hope you see it that way Daisy.

For the first time in a long time Daisy seemed to be at a loss for words. “I...I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.”

Daisy tried her best to hide her eyes from Vale—but he could see that her cheeks tinged with pink. Daisy’s gaze returned to the Blooms of Lafara on the windowsill. “Those flowers really are lovely...”

“So you’ve said...”

“And will again no doubt...sorry if I’m a little doty—”

“You’re not doty.”

“—and a bore.”

“You’re not a bore.”

“May I have one? A flower I mean. For luck n’ all.” Daisy’s lips quirked. “You know... as payment.”

“As payment, no. But as a gift, freely given, yes. But before you...”

Too late. Daisy clapped in triumph and darted over to the windowsill.

“I’d better...” Vale advanced, attempting to halt her.

In vain. Daisy stroked the stem of a Bloom and let out a gasp of pain. A dot of red took form on the tip of her finger and wormed its way down. “Fuck,” she snarled, and then tittered.

“Pardon me. I’d best wash my mouth ey.”

“The thorns are quite frightful and well hidden.” Vale smiled apologetically. “Whichever bloom you choose, I’d best remove them first,” he retrieved his clippers, “not that I mean to mollycoddle.”

“That’s fine,” Daisy replied, lifting her bleeding finger aloft. “Apparently I need to be mollycoddled.” She pointed to the Bloom she desired, suckling on her nicked finger. Vale gently

removed it and trimmed it clean. He presented it to her with a flourish. She giggled. “I thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet, thank me when we are both certain that Lady Luck is on our side.”

“I’d best get back to work. The night is young. Aliar will flog me in the square if I don’t earn my weight in silver by the end of the month.”

“That shouldn’t be much of a challenge, you weigh so little. You really should eat more.”

Daisy snorted. “I would if the food weren’t so awful.” She gestured to Vale’s dinner on the bedside table. “I’m not particularly business-minded—and I know Aliar doesn’t give a fig about us—but the slop the kitchen has been serving up is bound to put off the clients, don’t you think?”

Poor Daisy...you assume we eat from the same plates...

“How many men come to the Deleton for food? Not many I’d wager,” Vale offered.

“They hunger for...other things. And besides even slop tastes passable after a flagon of wine.”

“That it does, that it does,” Daisy moved to leave. “Well I’d best be off.” She twiddled the Bloom Vale had given her. “Best of luck.”

Vale smiled. “And to you as well.”

Daisy left and shut the door gently behind her. Vale collected his dinner and took a seat at his modest table and began to eat. His supper was every bit as bland and tasteless as it looked, but not as decidedly unpleasant as he initially believed it would be.

After he had finished eating, he entered his dressing room, fretting over what to wear. He was torn between two doublets, one a deep shade of crimson, and the other a light lilac blue. The

crimson one was more form fitting and the blue more loose and free. Vale settled on crimson. It was more eye-catching than the lilac one and contrasted nicely with his hair.

Not long after he was clothed, Tormir knocked on his door.

“You sure know how to dress,” Tormir said, admiring Vale’s attire. “The clients will appreciate your good taste no doubt.”

“I hope so,” Vale said, smoothing out his collar. “I always make an effort to put my best foot forward as it were. I just hope it will be enough.”

“I think it will. They’re highborn—but they seem alright. Knights if you can believe it. You wouldn’t know it by the way they’re dressed and one’s just a lad, scarcely a hair on his face. He looked really uncomfortable; a few of the girls were trying to loosen him up. He’ll likely agree to anything just to get out of here.”

“You’re probably right; too many temptations lurk in these halls.”

Tormir grunted in agreement.

#

Normally Master Aliar received important clients in his office, but he had evidently decided that more ostentatious accommodations were in order for their highborn guests. Tormir led Vale to a chamber on the ground floor. Vale had passed the smooth oak doors many a time but had never been able to gain entry. Aliar kept them locked at all hours.

As Vale stepped through the threshold it became abundantly clear why Aliar kept the chamber under lock and key. An ornate rug (likely from one of Zarran’s dominions in the Far East) was spread across the floor. The walls and ceiling were gilded and the goblets, plates, and carafes that lay spread throughout—either on the sweetwood table at the center of the room or on

the cabinets near the walls— were of the purest silver. Any thief worth his salt would have skipped with joy at the sight. The only blight on the otherwise opulent atmosphere of the room was the candles which were down to their wicks, the wax twisted and unruly. It was a wonder they could hold a flame, but they served well enough, unsightly though they might be—and that was why they remained. Vale fought back the impulse to shake his head. Master Aliar really could be quite miserly about the silliest things.

Aliar sat at the table, looking haggard and sickly, but alert. His eyes kept darting to the door through which Vale and Tormir entered, he was clearly expecting their guests to arrive at any moment. Tormir took his place behind Aliar, melting into the shadows.

“You look lovely,” Aliar said, his eerie dead eyes sweeping over Vale’s form.

“I’m glad you approve.”

Aliar chuckled, his chuckle quickly turning into a cough. “My approval is of no consequence. It is our guests’ approval I seek.”

“And who might our guests be?” Vale said, feigning ignorance. *I’m nothing more than a pretty, empty-headed little thing, full of sweetness and nothing else.* Vale reminded himself, trying to still his fluttering heart. *I know nothing. I feel nothing. I think nothing. I am nothing...*

“Agents of House Wolf of Albimar, they are charged with safeguarding the Northern Reach. They are a proud family with a reputation for being just, honorable and true.”

“Hardly the sort you’d expect to solicit our services.”

“Indeed. Unless they have the utmost need of our services.” Aliar relined in his chair, look pleased with himself. Vale patiently waited for him to elaborate.

“The current Lord Wolf has fallen ill,” Aliar explained. “It is unlikely he’ll see the summer’s end. His son Rylan is set to succeed him, but there are...complications.”

“What sort of complications?”

“Rylan is apparently quite the prize, fierce in battle yet kind and gracious off the field as well. His men are fond of him and he is quite fond of them in return...in some cases, too fond for his family’s liking.”

“I see.”

“Normally his tastes would not pose much of a problem, other than the inevitable gossip and humiliation he and his house will endure; but alas they seem to have left him unable to have relations with women. A rather pressing problem for the line of succession wouldn’t you say?”

“Is he unable or unwilling?” Vale inquired.

“I suspect a little of both, but that will be up to you to determine. This is your area of expertise after all.”

“The boy needs a teacher,” Vale said, stroking his chin. “A teacher, not a consort.”

“Precisely,” Aliar said. “We’ll discuss the details with our highborn friends shortly; they’ll need some convincing.”

“No doubt. They’re expecting a girl aren’t they?”

“They’re expecting a solution,” Aliar replied. “And we’ll give them one. They can’t afford to go back empty-handed. Besides you’ll be bringing a girl with you, one with which Rylan can practice.” Aliar’s beamed. “Now come here.”

Vale did as he was bid, taking his place by his master's side. He was tempted to take the seat next to Aliar, though doubted his master would approve of him taking such liberties, and so remained standing.

After a few moments of waiting, their guests arrived, escorted in by Z'shall, one of Aliar's serving boys. *A eunuch and a handsome one at that.* Vale mused, with a twinge of sadness. Three men followed, side by side. They were dressed rather plainly, their clothes modest enough that they would not draw attention to themselves, but also respectable enough that no one would mistake them for paupers or vagrants. The man to the far left was a rather diminutive fellow, with a weasel-like face and small, close-set eyes that seemed to be in a perpetual squint. The man on the far right was well built and of an imposing height, battle ready and square jawed...yet queerly still in the throes of youth, his face and manner almost boyish, "the lad" Tormir had noticed Vale assumed. The man in the center carried himself with an unspoken authority; he walked a step or two ahead of his comrades, yet despite his commanding aura he had a kind face, with kinder eyes.

"My good knights, welcome to the Deleton," Aliar said, his smile pleasant but forced. "Please, have a seat."

The three men obliged. The man with the kind eyes took the seat directly opposite Aliar and his companions took the seats on either side of him.

"I am Sir Harold Morvan, Knight of House Wolf," the man with the kind eyes said, his voice a pleasant basso. "These are my companions Sir Bradford," he gestured to the lad, "and Sir Tailor," he added, gesturing to the Weasel.

Aliar nodded to Sir Morvan's companions. "An honor to be sure."

“An honor for you perhaps. Not for us,” Sir Bradford intoned, his youthful face made no effort to hide his disdain.

Sir Morvan shot him a warning look. “Now, now Sir Bradford mind your courtesies.”

“It’s quite alright,” Aliar interjected. “We all know my business is not a clean one. Rest assured I will use the utmost discretion in our dealings.”

“In regard to discretion—” said Sir Morvan, turning his attention to Tormir who lounged against the far wall. “—your man in the corner. He’s a sell-sword I assume. I hope he can be trusted.”

“I trust him to be self-interested,” Aliar replied. “He knows I can buy his silence. One way or another.”

“And what about you my young friend?” Sir Morvan said, turning his attention to Vale. “Can you be trusted?”

Vale smiled. “I can be many things my lord.”

Sir Morvan smiled as well, his eyes twinkling slightly. “What’s your name?” He inquired. Vale shot a quick sidelong glance at Aliar, who nodded, indicating he could respond.

“My name is Vale, sir.”

“Vale...”

“Most call me Lynn if they prefer something more familiar—though I would not be opposed to another name that might take your fancy.”

“Lynn is your given name I take it.”

Vale laughed. “Names are just names here my lord.”

“Well then, why are you here Lynn Vale?”

“Because I can help sir; help your young lord with his predicament.”

“Oh...” Sir Morvan said, taken aback.

“The Deleton provides both pleasure and...instruction,” Aliar said. “Vale here is one of our very best in both regards. He’s dealt with several clients in the past with similar situations to that of young Lord Wolf and has helped them learn to overcome their...proclivities.”

“Have you now,” Sir Morvan said, smiling sadly.

“I have my lord,” Vale said. “If I may be so bold I would say that it is something of a specialty of mine.”

“I know that I am stating the obvious,” Sir Tailor said leaning forward, “but Lynn here is a boy. I thought the whole reason of coming here was so we could get a girl for Lord Rylan. A girl that could...you know...show him the ropes as it were.”

“You’re quite right my good knight and you shall have a girl as promised. Vale will bring one with him,” said Aliar. “But what Lord Rylan really needs is a teacher, someone who can ‘show him the ropes’ as you say. Someone with whom he feels comfortable. Someone who understands him. Vale will fill that role perfectly. You’ll see.”

Sir Tailor leaned back in his chair, not looking convinced. Sir Morvan and Sir Warren looked doubtful as well, or perhaps were merely uncomfortable with the topic of discussion. Vale was not certain. But he was certain that their noble guests would need to be prodded in the right direction.

END OF EXCERPT