

## Chapter 1

*Bistari, Aneira, year 879, Bian's Moon waning*

The duke rode slowly among the trees, dry leaves crackling like a winter blaze beneath the hooves of his Sanbiri bay. Massive grey trunks surrounded him, resembling some vast army sent forth from the Underrealm by the Deceiver, their bare, skeletal limbs reaching toward a leaden sky. A few leaves rustling in a cold wind still clung stubbornly to the twisting branches overhead. Most were as curled and brown as those that covered the path, but a few held fast to the brilliant gold that had colored the Great Forest only a half-turn before.

Even here, nearly a league from Bistari, Chago could smell brine in the air and hear the faint cry of gulls riding another frigid gust of wind. He pulled his riding cloak tighter around his shoulders and rubbed his gloved hands together, trying to warm them. This was no day for a hunt. He almost considered returning to the warmth of his castle. He would have, had he not been waiting for his first minister to join him. This hunt had been Peshkal's idea in the first place, and they were to meet here, on the western fringe of the Great Forest.

"A hunt will do you good, my lord," the minister had told him that morning. "This matter with the king has been troubling you for too long."

At first Chago dismissed the idea. He was awaiting word from the dukes of Noltierre, Kett, and Tounstrel, and he still had messages to compose to Dantrielle and Orvinti. But as the morning wore on with no messengers arriving, and his mind began to cloud once more with his rage at what Carden had done, he reconsidered.

Kebb's Moon, the traditional turn for hunting, had come and gone, and the duke had not

ridden forth into the wood even once. More than half of Bian's Moon was now gone. Soon the snows would begin and Chago would have to put his bow away for another year. He had the cold turns to fight Carden on his wharfages and lightering fees. Today, he decided, pushing back from his work table and the papers piled there, I'm going to hunt.

When Peshkal entered the duke's quarters and found him testing the tension of his bow, he seemed genuinely pleased, so much so that the Qirsi even offered to accompany Chago.

"Thank you, Peshkal," Chago said, grinning. "But I know how you feel about hunting. I'll take my son."

"Lord Silbron is riding today, my lord, with the master of arms and your stable master."

"Of course. I'd forgotten." The duke hesitated a moment, gazing toward the window. Moments before he hadn't been sure whether to go or not, but having made up his mind to ride, he was reluctant now to abandon his plans. "Then I'll hunt alone."

Peshkal's pale features turned grave and he shook his head. "That wouldn't be wise, my lord. There have been reports from your guards of brigands in the wood. Let me come with you. I have business in the city, but I'll meet you on the edge of the wood just after midday." The Qirsi forced a smile. "It will be my pleasure."

Still Chago hesitated. As white-hairs went, Peshkal was reasonably good company. But like so many of the Eandi, the duke found all men of the sorcerer race somewhat strange. If the object of this hunt was to calm him, riding with the first minister made little sense.

Then again, neither would it be wise for him to ride alone; he'd heard talk of the brigands as well. In the end, Chago agreed to meet Peshkal in the wood, and a short time later, he rode forth from his castle, following the king's road away from the dark roiling waters of the

Scabbard Inlet toward the ghostly grey of the forest. His bow, unstrung for now, hung from the back of his saddle along with a quiver of arrows. But even after he entered the wood, he saw little sign of game. Not long ago, the forest would have been teeming with boar and elk, but each year, as the cold settled over central Aneira, the herds moved southward and inland, away from the coastal winds. Chago would be fortunate just to see a stag this day, there was little chance he would get close enough to one to use his bow.

Again, the duke felt the anger rising in his chest, until he thought his heart would explode. He could hardly blame the king for a poor hunt, yet already he was counting this cold, grey, empty day among the long list of indignities he had suffered at the hands of Carden the Third.

He couldn't say when it began. In truth, his own feud with the Solkaran king was but a continuation of a centuries-old conflict between House Solkara and House Bistari that dated back to the First Solkara Supremacy and the civil war that ended it over seven centuries ago. During the next two hundred and fifty years, the Aneiran monarchy changed hands several times, ending with the Solkaran Restoration and the establishment of the Second Solkara Supremacy, which persisted to this day. It was a period of constantly shifting alliances, all of them based on little more than expedience and cold calculation. But throughout, Aneira's two most powerful houses, Solkara and Bistari, always remained adversaries.

In the centuries since, when circumstances demanded it, the two houses managed to put their enmity aside. During the many wars the kingdom waged against Eibithar, Aneira's neighbor to the north, men of Bistari fought beside men of Solkara. But the wars ended and the crises passed, and always when they did, one essential truth persisted: Chago's people and those

of the royal house simply did not trust each other.

Of course, rivalries among houses of the court were common in Aneira, and, from all Chago had heard, in the other kingdoms of the Forelands as well. When one's enemy was the king, however, the royal court could be a lonely place. Chago had friends throughout the kingdom. Bertin of Noltierre journeyed to the western shores each year and stayed with Chago and Ria. And though he hadn't seen Ansis of Kett in a number of years, he still counted the young duke among his closest allies. In most matters of the kingdom he could expect to find himself in agreement not only with Bertin and Ansis, but also with the dukes of Tounstrel, Orvinti, and Dantrielle.

Unless he was at odds with the king.

It was not that the others were blind to Carden's considerable faults, or that they agreed with every decree that came from Castle Solkara. But Solkaran rulers had made it clear over the centuries that those who opposed their word, especially those who sided with Bistari in doing so, would suffer for their impudence. Raised fees, restrictions on hunting, increases in the number of men levied for service in the king's army -- all were measures used by Aneiran kings to punish what they viewed as defiant behavior. And no house had borne more of this than Chago's own.

It was a credit to his strength and that of his forebears that Bistari had retained its status as one of the great families of Aneira despite the abuses of the royal house. A lesser house would have crumbled long ago; Bistari had thrived, all the while taking pains to keep its rivalry with House Solkara from manifesting itself as anything that could be interpreted as an act of treason. Bistari's dukes paid their fees, though they were far greater than those paid by any other house. They sent soldiers to the king's generals, though their quotas were too high. They hunted the

forest only when they were allowed, though their season was nearly a full turn shorter than that allowed in Dantrielle, Rassor, and Kett. Let the Solkaran kings play their foolish games. Bistari was the rock against the tide, the family blazon a great black stone standing against the onslaught of the sea. Chago's people endured. And this made Carden's most recent affront that much more galling.

The increase in the lightering fees he could accept. Kings had always taken their share of profits from trade and it was too much to expect that Carden would be any different. But no fair-minded man could doubt that the wharfages were directed almost solely at House Bistari. To be sure, several of Aneira's houses were located on water -- almost all of them really. But Bistari was the only one on the coast; the others were on rivers or, like Orvinti, on a lake. Their wharves were in little danger of needing replacement any time soon. Bistari's, on the other hand, had to be rebuilt almost every few years after the passing of the cold turns and the powerful storms they brought to the Scabbard Inlet. Carden's latest fees covered the entire kingdom, but since the wharfages only applied to newly constructed wharves, Bistari would bear the brunt of this new levy.

The king knew that. Chago was certain of it. This was merely one more reprisal for an imagined slight that should have been forgotten years ago. How long did Chago and his people have to suffer for the fact that Silbron had been born within a day of when Carden's father, Tomaz the Ninth died? Ria had nearly died giving birth to the boy, and for the next several days, Chago refused to leave her side. True, it was a short ride to Solkara, and he was the only one of Aneira's dukes who did not attend the observances honoring the old king. But this was his son, his heir, and, as he had tried to explain to Carden several times since, he had come within a hair's

breadth of losing the woman he loved. No reasonable man would have done different. The Solkarans though, had never been known for their reason.

A woodpecker drummed in the distance, the sound echoing among the trees, and two crows flew silently overhead, black as vultures against the grey sky. Chago reined his mount to a halt and surveyed the forest. At first he saw nothing, not even a jay. But as his eyes came to rest on the path just before him, something caught his eye. He swung himself off his horse to take a better look, his pulse quickening. Elk droppings, just as he had suspected. Squatting beside them, he saw that they were fresh.

The duke stood again, glancing around, his entire frame taut, as if for battle. He stepped carefully to his bow, removed it from the saddle, and shouldered his quiver. Resting one end on the ground and bracing it with his foot, he bent the smooth wood until he could slip the bowstring into place at the top. Then he removed an arrow from the quiver and nocked it.

It was hard to say which way the beast had been traveling. Chances were that it had crossed the path rather than followed it, but Chago couldn't say more than that with any confidence. After a moment's pause, he started south. A small stream flowed through the wood not too far from where his horse stood. Perhaps, he thought, the elk was headed there. Had it not been for the blanket of dead leaves covering the forest floor he might have found tracks, but as it was, the ground told him little. Before long, however, he came to a small tree with tooth scrapings on it, from where the elk had eaten off much of the bark. The marks appeared as new as the droppings he had seen on the path. He heard something moving in front of him, the dead leaves betraying each step, and he stepped forward as quickly as he dared, craning his neck to see beyond the thick trunks just before him.

For just an instant he caught a glimpse of the beast, the warm brown of its coat flickering amid the grey trees like candle fire on a moonless night, and then vanishing again. He couldn't see its head, but the animal certainly appeared large enough to be a stag. He hurried on, bow half-drawn, expecting to come face to face with the creature at any moment. He spotted it briefly once more, farther ahead than it had been a moment earlier. It almost seemed to be drifting among the trees like a wraith. Running now, he tried to catch up with it, but all he saw was grey.

The duke stopped again, straining to hear over the whispering of another gust of wind. Nothing, at least not from the elk. Far behind him, his mount snorted and stomped. Chago felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck. And then he heard it, too.

Singing. It was so soft at first, so ethereal, that the duke thought he must be imagining it. Who, in his right mind, would be singing in the wood on a day such as this? Who, indeed?

The thought made him shudder, as if another chill wind had knifed through his cloak. His sword was still strapped to his saddle, and though he carried his bow, he preferred to face an assailant with his steel. Turning quickly, he started back toward his horse, fighting an impulse to run. For just an instant the duke lost his bearings and halted again, feeling panic rise within him like bile. Then his bay nickered and he strode toward the sound, cursing his lack of nerve. As he made his way among the trees, he scanned the wood for the singer, listening as the voice grew stronger.

It was a man, with a voice both strong and sweet, rich and high. As the man drew nearer still, the duke even recognized the song: "The Blossoms of Adlana," a Caerissan folk song that Chago had learned as a child. It struck him as an odd choice for such a chill, dreary day. But it

set his mind at ease somewhat and he slowed his gait. A moment later, he spotted his bay and could not keep a relieved smile from springing to his lips.

By the time the singer came into view, the duke had his sword in hand and was securing its sheath to his belt. Armed now, and within reach of his mount, the duke was able to laugh at the dread that had gripped him only moments before. This was no brigand, not with a voice like this, and seeing the singer's face, Chago felt what remained of his fear recede like the tide after a storm. The man was lean and bearded, with long dark hair that fell to his broad shoulders and pale eyes that were the same color as the silver bark on the maples that grew all around them. He smiled kindly at the duke as he walked toward him and he nodded once, though he continued with his song. His glance fell briefly to Chago's sword, but the smile remained on his face.

Chago thought him vaguely familiar and wondered briefly if he had ever sung at Bistari Castle, perhaps with the Festival. He almost stopped the singer to ask him. But though the man was clearly a musician, they were still alone in the wood, and the duke thought it wiser to let the stranger pass.

He offered a nod of his own as the singer stepped past him, but he kept his blade ready and turned to watch the man walk away. Only when the singer had disappeared among the trees, his song fading slowly, did Chago sheathe his sword and allow his mind to return once more to the elk.

He would have liked to track the animal; given time, he knew that he could find it again. But Peshkal would never find him if he left the path.

Where could his first minister be? It had to be well past midday. The Qirsi should have been there already.

“Damn him,” the duke murmured.

The bay whinnied softly, as if in response, and Chago froze. The wood was silent. Even the wind had died away. More to the point, though, the singing had stopped. Or had it? The man had been walking away. Had the song ended? Had he just covered enough distance to be beyond the duke’s hearing?

Chago stood, still as death, listening for the singer’s voice, much as he had listened for the elk a short time ago. He was being foolish, he knew. Surely the singer was too far away to be heard by now. Besides, Chago had his bow and his sword, and he knew how to use both. He had nothing to fear from a musician.

Yet he continued to stand motionless, waiting. This time he heard no song. Only a footfall, soft and sure, and closer than it should ever have been. It had to be the elk again. Still, the duke reached not for his bow, but for his blade.

Before he could pull the weapon from its sheath, before he could even turn to face the sound, he felt someone grab him from behind, a hand gripping his right arm at the elbow, and a muscular arm locking itself around his throat.

The duke struggled to free his sword, but the man holding him was remarkably strong. He opened his mouth to scream, but the singer -- it had to be he -- tightened his hold on Chago’s throat until the duke could barely draw breath.

“My apologies, my lord. But it seems someone wants you dead.”

*He’s an assassin then,* Chago thought, *not a brigand.*

Not that it mattered. He was going to die here in the wood, not even a league from his castle.

Where in Bian's name was Peshkal?

The realization came to him so suddenly, with such force, that his knees actually gave way, forcing the man to hold him up. He had been hearing the rumors for nearly a year now, long enough and from so many different sources that he no longer doubted their truth. But though he had little trouble believing in the existence of a Qirsi conspiracy, it had never occurred to him to question Peshkal's loyalty.

The sorcerer had been with him for eight years now, the first several as an underminister, the last five as his first minister. Chago would never go so far as to call the Qirsi his friend, but he had paid the man handsomely, relied on his counsel without hesitation, and trusted him with the well-being of his dukedom, the safety of his family, and his own life. Until this day, Peshkal had given him no reason to do otherwise.

The hunt had been his idea. So had Silbron's ride for that matter. He had contrived every circumstance so that the duke would be hunting alone. And then he had made certain that Chago would be at this very spot at precisely this time. He could hear the minister's words once more -- he could see the man's smile. "I have business in the city, but I'll meet you on the edge of the wood just after midday." Indeed. The Qirsi had killed him, and Chago had made it far too easy for him.

All of this occurred to the duke in a single instant. The assassin still held him fast, and now he pried Chago's fingers off the hilt of his sword and drew the weapon himself.

"A pretty blade, my lord," he said, tossing it aside as if it were a trifle. "Where is your dagger?"

Chago said nothing, and the man began to crush his throat.

“Tell me.”

“My belt,” the duke rasped.

The man ran his hand along Chago’s belt until he found the blade. This, too, he threw to the side. Both of Chago’s hands were free, and he straightened, bearing his own weight again. If he moved fast enough. . . .

Before he even formed the thought, the point of a dagger was resting against the corner of his eye.

“This can be done quickly or slowly, my lord. Painlessly or not. It’s your choice.”

“I’ll do whatever you say,” Chago whispered. “Please, not my eyes.”

The man said nothing, though he did remove the blade.

“You don’t have to do this,” the duke said. “Just tell me what you want.”

The man shook his head. “I’ve already told you, someone wants you dead. It’s not my choice.”

“No, it’s your profession.”

The singer offered no response, though it seemed to Chago that he pulled something from his pocket.

“Were you hired by the Qirsi? Can you tell me that much?”

The man stopped what he was doing. After a moment he turned the duke around and looked him in the eye. Chago and the assassin were almost the same height, and looking at him again, knowing now that he was more than a mere singer, the duke saw much that he had missed before. The man had a small scar high on his cheek, and there was something cold and uncompromising in those pale eyes. Without the smile he had worn as he sung, he had the look

of a killer.

Their eyes remained locked for another moment, and then the assassin raised his hands. He held a garrote, the cord wound around his fists and pulled taut between them. For centuries, the garrote had been the weapon of choice for assassins sent by Solkaran kings.

“Is it Carden then?” the duke asked. “Is that who sent you?”

The assassin said nothing, and Chago backed away. He stumbled, fell backward to the ground, tears running down his face.

“Please,” he said again, as the man came toward him, pulling the garrote taut once more so that it thrummed like a hunter’s bow. “I have gold. I can pay you more than whoever it was that hired you.”

Incredibly, the man seemed to waver.

“Just tell me how much you want,” the duke went on, feeling bolder now. “My treasury is yours.”

Cadel had never considered such a thing before. People paid him to kill and he killed. In his profession, failure meant death. If by some chance he had forgotten this over the years, the death just a few turns before of Jedrek, his partner, had served as a bitter reminder. But what if he refused to kill? What if he chose to let this man live?

Would the Qirsi try to kill him? A part of him wished that they would try. He had been working for them for too long, and had grown far too dependent on their gold. He longed to strike back at them. It was far more likely, however, that they would try to destroy him while stopping short of killing him. Somehow they knew his true name. They knew of the

circumstances that had driven him from the court of his father in southern Caerisse when he was little more than a boy. And, of course, they knew of every murder he had committed on their behalf. They could keep him from ever working again. With a mere word uttered to the right person, they could turn him into a fugitive.

All of which made the gold offered by this duke cowering before him that much more attractive. Before they died, many of his victims tried to buy his mercy -- his employers were wealthy and powerful, and, not surprisingly, so were those they wanted dead. Always in the past he had refused. But something in the duke of Bistari's plea stopped him, probably the fact that he knew who had paid for his death. It had come to that: he so hated working for the Qirsi that he saw in their newest enemy a possible ally, or at least a way to break free of the white-hairs and their gold.

In any case, the duke had Cadel's attention.

"You don't want to do this," the man said, still sitting on the ground, his cheeks still damp with the tears he had shed.

Cadel opened his mouth, then closed it again. Some things were best left unspoken.

"You offered me gold," he said instead. "How much?"

"More than you can imagine. My dukedom is the wealthiest in Aneira. Only the king has more gold than I."

"I wasn't asking how much you have, I was asking how much you'd give me."

"As much as you want. All of it, if that's what it takes." He faltered. "I'm not a brave man, and I fear dying more than anything else."

Cadel closed his eyes for just an instant, cursing his own stupidity. Jedrek would never

have allowed him to even begin this conversation. What had he been thinking? No duke would offer all of his gold, even out of fear. Bistari had no intention of actually paying him.

“And I suppose after you give me all this gold, you’ll send your soldiers to ride me down, cut out my heart, and retrieve your money.”

“No, I’ll let you go. You have my word.”

But Cadel felt his hope slipping away. Perhaps there was still a way for him to regain his freedom, but this was not it. Not with this man and his promise of gold. He should have realized it from the start. Jedrek was dead, killed by an enemy of the Qirsi men and women who had been paying him. That his friend’s killer was Qirsi as well struck Cadel as ironic, perhaps even funny in a way Jed himself would have appreciated, but it changed nothing. If Cadel wanted to find this man, he would need the help of the white-hairs. Even if the duke of Bistari’s offer had been sincere, he was in no position to accept it.

He smiled, extending a hand to the duke. The cord of the garrote was still wound around his fist, but the duke didn’t seem to care. Chago took Cadel’s hand and let the assassin help him to his feet, smiling broadly, as if they were old friends. He started to say something, but Cadel, still gripping his hand, spun him around and in one powerful, fluid motion wrapped the cord around the duke’s neck and pulled it tight. The man’s neck snapped like a dry twig, and Cadel felt the duke’s body go limp.

He laid the duke down on the forest floor, pulling the garrote free as he did. Then he reached into the pocket of his trousers and pulled out a small strap of leather that was frayed at one end and adorned at the other with golden trim and a carving of the Solkaran panther. It had been given to him, along with half of his payment, by an older man, a Qirsi merchant in

Dantrielle. Cadel had not bothered to ask how the white-hairs had gotten it, though he wondered. There was little chance that the man knew, and less still that he would answer the question if he did.

He placed the strap in the duke's hand, with the golden edging facing up so that it gleamed brightly, despite the grey shadows of the wood. Cadel even went so far as to break off one of the duke's finger nails and bruise the man's hand by squeezing his palm closed with the strap and its trim pressed awkwardly within.

They had said to make it look convincing, and given what they were paying him, he could hardly do less.

He stepped back, looking down on the body and the surrounding area to make certain that he hadn't forgotten anything or left something foolish for one of the duke's men to find. Satisfied that all appeared as it should, he started walking back toward the east, away from Bistari and the Scabbard Inlet. He had only walked a few strides, however, when he heard someone approaching. Concealing himself behind a broad tree, Cadel watched as a Qirsi rode into view on a small grey mount.

The man wore his hair shorter than did most Qirsi and the yellow of his eyes was so bright that they almost seemed to glow. He had on ministerial robes and his riding cloak bore the blazon of House Bistari. The first minister.

Cadel was so confident of this that he stepped out from behind the tree trunk. The man's horse snorted and the minister's eyes fell upon him. The Qirsi reined the mount to a halt and stared at Cadel for several moments. Then he glanced toward the duke's body, faced the assassin again, and nodded.

Offering a nod of his own, Cadel turned and started walking eastward once more, resuming his song as he strode swiftly among the silver trees. He had three days to reach Solkara, and though the distance wasn't great, he could ill afford to be late.

## Chapter 2

### *Solkara, Aneira*

Yoli crossed her arms over her chest and stepped as close to the hearth as she dared. She was wearing the heaviest of her black robes and soft woolen undergarments beneath it. But they weren't enough to keep the frigid air from chilling her frail bones, nor, she soon realized, was the fine fire built for her by the clerics.

She would have given nearly anything to be able to close the doors to the sanctuary. But this was Pitch Night in the turn of Bian, god of the Underrealm, and she presided in the Deceiver's temple. She could no more close the doors than she could extinguish the candles that burned on the god's altar.

It was early yet -- the sun had been down for but an hour or two -- and already she longed for this night to end. The cold, the constant stream of worshipers, the repeated offerings; it was too much. Yoli had never been a proud woman, and she wasn't above admitting that she had grown too old for this. It was time to pass the robe to one of her clerics. Several of them had been with her for the requisite twelve years, and of those, at least two or three seemed ready to lead the sanctuary. Perhaps when the snows ended and the warm winds returned, she would step aside.

But that did her little good tonight. She had barely managed to warm her hands before she heard the next group of suppliants approaching the shrine, their footsteps and hushed voices echoing off the domed ceiling.

Visitors came to the sanctuary every Pitch Night of the year, for in Bian's shrine, no matter which turn, one could always meet his or her beloved dead when both moons were dark. In the same way, on the Night of Two Moons in Bian's turn, one could encounter lost loved ones anywhere in the land. Pitch Night in the Deceiver's turn, however, was unique. On this one night, the wronged dead roamed the land. This was not a time when young widows came to cry for their dead husbands, or bereft parents offered blood and shed tears for children taken from them too soon. This was a night of fear, rather than grief, a night when the dead sought vengeance rather than solace. Tonight, the sanctuary opened its doors to mercenaries, executioners, and brigands, healers whose errors had cost lives, and lovers whose passion inflamed their tempers to deadly violence. As prioress of the god's sanctuary Yoli could turn none of them away, no matter how justified the wrath of their dead. On this one night she thanked the gods for her failing eyesight. For though she could sense the darkness in their hearts, she had no desire to see their faces.

She met them at the altar, raised her knife to spill their blood into the stone bowl, and gave them leave to pass the night within the walls of the shrine. Their dead could still reach them here, but many of them found comfort in the offerings and the presence of Bian's prioress and the shared company of others who had killed.

The newest to arrive were mercenaries, broad shouldered men with Caerissan or Sanbiri accents -- Yoli had never learned to distinguish the two. They had white hair and their arms,

once thick with muscle, had grown flaccid with the years. Still, they endured the edge of her blade stoically before moving off to a distant corner of the shrine to cry like babes at the sight of those they had cut down in some long forgotten battle.

Yoli watched them walk away from the altar, dark, blurred shapes in the candlelight that vanished into the shadows beyond the flickering flames. She swirled each bowl so that the blood covered the entire surface, then left the altar once more for the warmth of her hearth. She hadn't gotten very far when she heard another footfall in the shrine.

"Mother Prioress," a man called to her gently, his voice accented as well.

She turned wearily and forced a smile as she watched him approach. He was tall and lean, with long dark hair. Her eyes were too weak to see more than that. He stopped a few paces from where she stood and bowed to her.

"You wish to offer blood?" she asked.

"I do."

Something about him -- the accent, the gentle voice. . .

"You've been here before."

He hesitated then nodded. "Yes, several times."

"Come," she said, returning to the altar. The bowls were already empty; the god had a mighty thirst tonight.

The man pulled up his sleeve and turned his arm up to her blade.

"Is it my skill with the knife that brings you back?"

"You have a deft touch, Mother Prioress. But it's your beauty that draws me here."

Yoli laughed out loud. "Serves me right for asking."

She thought she saw him smile.

“Is there anyone in particular for whom you would like to make this offering?” she asked.

Once more he faltered, and in that moment she understood the true reason why he returned to her shrine. She shivered again, though not from the cold.

“No, Mother Prioress.”

She nodded, but would not look at him again. Instead she raised the stone knife.

“Hear me, Bian!” she said, closing her eyes. “A man comes to you offering his life’s blood. Deem him worthy and accept his gift.”

She dragged the blade across his arm, catching his blood in one of the bowls. When the bleeding slowed, she placed the bowl on the alter and bound his arm in a clean cloth.

“Thank you,” he said, flexing his arm and examining the bandage.

“You’re free to remain here through the night,” Yoli told him, her eyes fixed on the bowl of blood. “Whatever comfort there is to be found within these walls is yours.”

“Again, my thanks.” He started to turn away, then stopped. “Have I given offense, Mother Prioress?”

She shook her head. “No.”

He stood there another moment, before giving a small shrug and turning again to leave her.

“I know why you come here,” she said, surprising herself.

He halted, appearing to stiffen, but he kept his back to her.

“Shall I leave then?”

The prioress wasn’t afraid, though perhaps she should have been. She was too old and

had served the Deceiver for too long to fear death. Besides, this man came to her sanctuary precisely because he didn't have to harm her.

"I accepted your offering." She glanced down at the bowl and saw that his blood had vanished. "And so has Bian. You're free to remain or leave as you choose."

"Do I have reason to fear you?" he asked.

"You know you don't."

After a brief pause, he nodded once. "Then I'll stay."

"As you wish."

Still, he didn't move. "Mother Prioress," he said at last, facing her once again. "There is someone for whom I'd like to give blood. Will the god accept two offerings from one man?"

"Of course. Come forward, the knife and bowl await."

The man returned to the altar, pushing up his sleeve again.

Yoli began to repeat the invocation, then paused. "What is this person's name?"

"Is that necessary?"

"It's customary, when offering blood for someone."

He lowered his arm. "Isn't there any other way?"

"I suppose if you have this person foremost in your heart and your mind, Bian will know."

"Thank you, Mother Prioress. That would be . . . easier."

She finished the invocation and cut him a second time. Afterwards, when she had wrapped the wound, and swirled the blood in the bowl, she looked the man in the eye as best she could.

“You’ve been kind to me,” he said. “Perhaps kinder than I deserve. I won’t forget it.”

“I’ve done no more or less than the god would expect of those who serve him.”

He dropped his gaze. “Of course.”

“If you return here next year, you’ll probably find someone else wearing the robe.”

He looked up again. “Are you ill, Mother Prioress?”

“No, just old.”

“I see. And why are you telling me this?”

She shrugged. “I just thought you should know that there will be a new prior or prioress. I don’t know yet who I’ll choose, but whoever it is will be far younger than I.”

He grinned, and after a moment nodded as well.

“You’re an extraordinary woman,” he said. “I wish I could have met you when you were younger.”

The Prioress couldn’t remember the last time a man had made her blush, but she knew that she had missed feeling this way.

“When I was younger,” she told him, “I wasn’t nearly this wise.”

“I’m not sure I believe that.” He paused, his smile slowly fading. “I’m grateful for the warning, Mother Prioress. I’ll keep it in mind next year at this time.”

“Good. In the meantime, I hope that you find some comfort in the shrine.”

“As do I.”

He bowed to her a second time, then left the altar.

Yoli watched him walk off, and despite what she knew of him, she truly wished him peace on this night. She felt certain, however, that there was nowhere he could go to escape the

wrath of his dead. She sensed that he realized this as well, that the most he could hope for was the comfort of knowing that the prioress who took his blood was too old and too blind to see his face.

Walking to the farthest corner of the shrine, Cadel couldn't keep himself from shaking his head. For the second time in recent days, he had revealed far more of himself than he had intended, to a virtual stranger. The duke was dead of course, and he didn't believe that the prioress posed any threat, but he had been far too careless. He might have expected Jedrek to act this way, but he demanded more of himself.

He stopped in midstride.

Jedrek. Could that be the problem? For the first time in nearly two decades he was alone, wandering the land and killing without a partner. Could it be that he was lonely? He nearly laughed aloud at the very idea of it. It didn't help that he now found himself trapped in a dangerous alliance with the Qirsi, but had Jed still been with him, the white-hairs wouldn't have mattered, at least not as much.

"I need a new partner," he said, his words echoing off the stone walls.

He glanced around to see if anyone had heard him, then remembered that it didn't matter. Everywhere he looked, men and women spoke as if to themselves, confronting their dead, sobbing like children, cowering like beaten curs. Even if they had taken notice of him, they wouldn't have thought it odd to see him speaking to himself.

He hurried on. It wouldn't be long before his own dead found him and began their torment.

As if prompted by the thought, a wraith appeared before him, indistinct at first, but white and luminous as if it was made of starlight. Slowly the figure took form, like the lead soldier of some great army emerging from a mist. It was a man, tall and lean with white hair and dark eyes. Cadel would have recognized him immediately even without the odd tilt of his head and the dark thin bruise encircling his neck. It had only been three days.

“You know me,” the duke of Bistari said, his voice as bleak and hard as the moors during the snows.

Cadel nodded.

“Do you fear me?”

“No,” he said evenly.

The duke gave a terrible grin. “Of course not. An assassin learns to live with his wraiths. Isn’t that right?”

Cadel shrugged. “What choice do we have?”

Another figure emerged from the shadows, a knife wound in his chest. The marquess of Tantreve. Cadel had killed him a bit more than a year ago, near his castle in northern Aneira.

“What about him?” the duke asked.

“No, not him either.”

Others stepped forward: Filib of Thorald, his throat slit and his ring finger cut off; Hanan of Jetaya, unmarked save for the contorted expression the poison left on his features; Cyro of Curlinte, the angle of his head and the mark on his neck so similar to those of the duke of Bistari, that they might have been the twin sons of some cruel demon from the Underrealm. Soon there were dozens of them. Cadel couldn’t even recall all of their names, though he remembered each

kill as clearly as he did the garroting of Chago.

Yet, he felt no dread. He could hear worshipers wailing all around him, begging for forgiveness, or at least mercy. He had heard stories of mercenaries clawing out their eyes on the Night of the Dead, so desperate were they to rid themselves of their wraiths. Several years ago he had been in the Sanctuary of Bian in Macharzo, when a man used the Prior's blade to take his own life. Maybe the others knew something he didn't. Maybe he should have been scared. But he had been paid to kill these men, and while they might not have deserved death, they would have been more than happy to pay him to do the same to their enemies had they thought of it in time.

He spent the Night of the Dead in Bian's sanctuary each year not out of fear of his wraiths, but rather out of respect for the god who sent them to him. If the Deceiver could bend the rules of life and death in this way, didn't he deserve such homage? That was why Cadel came.

At least until this year. Because unlike all the years before, there now was one whom he did not wish to meet, one whose face he couldn't bear to see again. He had known it would be like this almost from the moment he saw her. It had been the middle of the planting season, a warm clear night in Kentigern, but even then he had been prescient enough to know how difficult this night would be because of her. If only he had been hired to kill her father, the fat, foul tempered duke, or, better still, the spoiled boy to whom she had been betrothed. But Filib of Thorald had already been killed, and Cadel's Qirsi employers worried that the death of another heir to the Eibitharian throne would raise suspicions. They insisted that it be the girl.

He had heard tales of her beauty and her kindness, but only that night on the tor, when he

met her in the duke's great hall, did he truly appreciate how little justice these tales did Lady Brienne of Kentigern.

She had worn a dazzling gown of deepest sapphire that made the yellow ringlets of hair spilling down her back appear to have been spun from purest gold. Though Cadel posed that night as a common servant working under Kentigern's cellar master, the duke's daughter favored him with a smile so warm and genuine that he would have liked to run from the castle rather than kill her, though it meant leaving behind all the riches promised to him by the Qirsi. But it was far too late for that. The white-hairs had paid them a great deal, and Jedrek was already spending the gold they were still owed. And then there was all the Qirsi seemed to know about Cadel's past -- his family name, the disgrace that had driven him from his father's court. What choice did he really have?

"None of the dead you see here can touch your heart," the duke of Bistari said, gesturing with a glowing hand at the other wraiths who stood with him. "Is that what you want us to believe?"

"It's the truth," Cadel said, "whether you wish to believe it or not."

A small smile touched the dead man's lips, so that with his head cocked to the side, he looked almost like a mischievous child.

"There is one though, isn't there? One that you fear?"

Cadel shuddered, as if the air had suddenly turned colder. He wanted to deny it, though it wouldn't have done him any good. The dead could sense the truth.

"Yes. There's one."

The duke turned to look behind him, and as he did, the mass of luminous figures parted,

allowing one last wraith to step forward.

He had known that she would come of course -- why should she have spared him this? -- but still Cadel was unprepared for what he saw.

She wore the sapphire gown, though it was unbuttoned to her waist, as it had been that night. Her skin glowed like Panya, the white moon, and her face was as lovely as he remembered, save for the smudge of blood on her cheek. But Cadel's eyes kept falling to her bared breasts and stomach, which were caked with dried blood and scarred with ugly knife wounds. Lord Tavis's dagger still jutted from the center of her chest, its hilt aimed accusingly at the assassin's heart.

He had wanted to make her murder appear to be a crime born of passion and drunken lust. He had succeeded all too well.

"You stare as if you don't recognize your own handiwork," Brienne said, her voice shockingly cold. "Don't let my lord's dagger fool you. It was your hand guided the blade."

Cadel started to say something, then shook his head.

"Do you deny it?" she asked, her voice rising, like the keening of a storm wind.

He looked up, and met her gaze. Her grey eyes blazed like Qirsi fire and tears ran down her face like drops of dew touched by sunlight.

*"Do you?"* she demanded again.

"No." It came out as a whisper, barely discernible over the sobs of the other worshipers.

"Did I deserve to die like this?" She gestured at her wounds and the blood that covered her. "Did I wrong you in some way?"

"No, my lady."

“Was I a tyrant? Is the world a better place without me?”

Cadel actually managed a smile. “Surely not.”

“Then why?” the wraith asked. “Why did you do this to me?”

“I was paid, just as I was paid to kill most of those standing with you.”

“You murder for money.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

He blinked. “What?”

“Why would any person choose such a profession?”

Cadel stared at her a moment. With all that had happened, and the way she glared at him now, he found it easy to forget that Brienne was just a girl when she died. When he killed her.

“It pays handsomely, my lady,” he explained, as if she were simple.

“Of course it does,” she said. “I’m not asking why you do it now. I want to know how you started down this path. Certainly you didn’t go to your Determining hoping that the stone would show you as a hired blade.”

He felt his mouth twitch. Perhaps she wasn’t such a child after all.

“It started when he killed me,” came a voice from among the other wraiths.

Another man came forward. A boy actually; the young court lad who had been his rival for Venya’s love. His name was Eben. Cadel killed him with a blow to the head. The assassin didn’t need to see the matted blood behind the wraith’s ear to remind him of that. He could still feel his fingers gripping the rock. He could even hear the sound the stone made against the boy’s skull.

“Is it true?” Brienne asked, as Eben halted beside her. “Was he the first?”

“Yes, he was.”

“Did you kill him for gold as well?”

Cadel shook his head, a thin smile springing to his lips. “No, my lady. I killed him for love. Or at least what I thought at the time was love.”

“We were suitors for the same girl,” Eben said icily. “He surprised me on the farming lane west of Castle Nistaad, a lonely, desolate stretch of road. Few venture there, and I thought I was alone. I never even saw him.”

Brienne narrowed her glowing eyes. “And you enjoyed it? You decided to make it your life’s work?”

*It was all I could do, he wanted to say. The only skill I had. I had fled my father’s court rather than face judgment for my crime. I needed gold to make my way in the world. What else was there other than killing? But he had never told any of this to another soul, and he wasn’t about to now, not even to this wraith standing before him, so deserving of answers.*

“Why does this matter?” Cadel said instead, looking away. “What possible reason--?”

“I want to understand!” the wraith said, her voice rising like a gale. “I’m dead, and I want to know why.”

“You’re dead because someone hired me to kill you. Isn’t that enough?”

“No, it’s not! Who was it? Whose gold bought my blood?”

Cadel faltered. “Why would you want to know that?”

“I already told you. I want to understand why you did this to me.”

“But surely--”

“Answer me!” the wraith said, the words seeming to echo off the walls and ceiling of the shrine, though among the living only Cadel could hear her.

“No,” he said. His hands were trembling abruptly, and he thrust them into his pockets. “I won’t tell you. Someone gave me gold and I killed you. That’s all you need to know.”

“Did they want a war? Is that why they wanted you to do it? So that Tavis’s father and my father would go to war?”

“I don’t really know. Perhaps.”

“Were they Qirsi?”

Cadel felt his face color. She was a wraith, a servant of Bian. Yes, she was crying, and her face was lovely, almost flawless. But this was no girl standing before him. He had to force himself to remember that.

“I won’t tell you any more.”

The light in her eyes danced like fire demons and she grinned, as did the other luminous figures standing with her. Some of them even laughed.

“You already have,” she said. “And I intend to tell my father, and Tavis, and every other living person who can hear me.”

He shook his head. “It won’t matter.”

She stared at him a moment. “The way you say it, one might think that this saddens you, that you’d like me to stop them.”

“I take their gold. That’s all. It doesn’t mean that I share their cause.”

“But you protect them. Why?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“You don’t know that,” the wraith said gently. “Explain it to me.”

“No,” he said again, his voice resounding through the shrine much as hers had a few moments before. He shook his head. “No,” he repeated, more quietly this time. “They live in this world, my world. They know how to find me. I’m not going to risk my life telling you anything.”

“So you’re afraid of them.”

“Yes.”

“More than you are of me.”

Cadel hadn’t thought of it that way before, but there was little use arguing the point. He feared the Qirsi more than he did anything or anyone in the Forelands. It wasn’t just that they knew so much about him and his past, it was also that they possessed powers he could scarcely comprehend. His Eandi enemies, even those he respected, didn’t frighten him. He knew how to wield a blade, how to shatter a man’s larynx with a single blow, and, when necessary, how to blend into his surroundings, be they the crowded marketplace of a city or the dense, silent shadows of a wood. But for all his dreams of striking back at the Qirsi who now so thoroughly controlled his life, he knew that he could never bring himself to risk their wrath.

“More than I am of you, my lady,” he finally said. “You may be of the Deceiver’s realm, but I only have to see you once in a year.”

She nodded, gazing at him silently for several moments. Then she raised a hand and gestured for him to step closer.

“Come to me,” she said. A sound like a soft wind rose from the other wraiths, as though they had all sighed as one.

Cadel stood motionless, drawing a grin from Brienne.

“Surely you’re not afraid. You wouldn’t hesitate to stand beside one of the Qirsi who pays you so handsomely.”

He swallowed, and took a step toward her.

“Closer,” she said, her grin broadening.

He took another step so that he stood only a few hands’ widths from her, close enough to take her hands, close enough to lean forward and taste her lips.

“Now touch me,” she whispered. The other wraiths murmured their approval, but Cadel hardly noticed.

A part of him longed to do as she said. He could almost smell the soft, sweet scent she wore the night he killed her. It would have been so easy to caress her cheek with his hand or kiss her smooth brow. Except that it would have meant his death. She could not touch him -- as he understood such matters, Bian forbade the wraiths from doing so. No doubt had he not, those who died by Cadel’s hand would have taken him long ago. But when the living reached out to touch their dead, they crossed over to the god’s realm and were forever lost to the living world.

Brienne’s image wavered briefly, as when a tranquil lake is swept by a gust of wind and then again is still. An instant later she stood before him whole and unbloodied, her dress fastened and the dagger gone.

“Touch me,” she said again. “Take me in your arms.”

“You know that I can’t.”

“I know that you’ll die, if that’s what you mean. But wouldn’t that be easier than the dark death that awaits you when you leave this shrine? Already Lord Tavis hunts the land for

you. I've told him that he should restore his good name and be done with it, but he'll never leave it at that. He's vowed to avenge me, and I've no doubt that he will."

Cadel should have expected this. Perhaps he would have, had it not been for Jedrek's death and his own quest for vengeance against the Qirsi gleaner who killed his friend. He had heard rumors of Tavis's escape from the dungeons of Kentigern and he knew that somehow, so far, the Eibitharians had managed to avoid the civil war that Brienne's murder was supposed to spark. But it had never occurred to him that the boy would come after him. Here was one more reason to find a new partner, and soon.

"He'll die in the attempt, my lady," Cadel said, knowing how his words would hurt her, and regretting even this. He gestured at the wraiths standing with her. "As you can see, I've killed men who were far more formidable than your lord. You'd be wise to warn him off his pursuit before it's too late."

She gave a wan smile. "If you were in my lord's position, would you heed such advice?"

Cadel stared at her, wondering if she asked the question in innocence, or had divined his thoughts. For he was in Tavis's position.

Grinsa jal Arriet. The name repeated itself in his head like the litany of some overzealous cleric, clouding his thoughts by day and keeping him from sleep at night. Cadel knew almost nothing about him except that he was a Revel gleaner who somehow had managed to kill Jedrek.

*He might have been more.*

The Qirsi woman, another gleaner, had told him as much in Noltierre several turns before, just moments after telling him of Jed's death. Looking back on their conversation now, Cadel wished that he had stayed with her long enough to learn more. She had paid him for

Brienne's murder, and had admitted that she sent Jed after Grinsa when the gleaner left the Revel to go to Kentigern. He felt certain that she knew the man far better than she had let on. Still, even the little she did tell him should have been enough to keep Cadel from going after the gleaner.

*It's possible that he had other powers. Mists and winds, perhaps others.* There were seven Qirsi standing among his dead. Three he had killed in their sleep, the others he had taken in the back. None of them had seen him coming. And in all these cases he knew what powers they possessed before he approached them. How was he supposed to fight Grinsa when he wasn't certain what powers the man possessed? It was suicide. But Brienne was right. Like Lord Tavis of Curch, who was already hunting the land for the lady's killer, Cadel couldn't keep himself from trying.

"You see?" the wraith said. "You're more like my lord than you care to admit."

"Perhaps," Cadel said. "But if he finds me, I'll still have to kill him."

"Have you ever fought a man who was intent on vengeance?" she asked.

He considered this for some time. "No," he said at last. "I don't suppose I have."

She nodded sagely, as if death had given her wisdom beyond her years. "I see."

A number of the other wraiths laughed appreciatively.

Cadel heard the city bells ringing in the distance. It was too early yet for the midnight tolling. This had to be the gate closing. The night was just starting, and already he was weary.

"Perhaps you wish to sleep?" Brienne asked, sounding as innocent as a babe.

He merely shook his head, as the wraiths leered at him hungrily. Few of the living ever slept on Pitch Night in Bian's turn. The dead could not touch a man to kill him, but there was

nothing to keep them from huddling so close to his sleeping form that the slightest movement on his part -- a mere gesture in the throes of some horrible dream -- might send him to the god's realm.

"Well," Brienne said, "you won't touch me, and you won't sleep." She flickered like a candle once again so that she stood before him as she had when she first appeared, scarred and half-naked. "How do you propose we pass the rest of the night?"

"You could leave me," Cadel said. "Grant me peace and silence."

The ghost smiled. "Why would we want to do that?"

The other wraiths came closer, crowding around him like eager buyers in a marketplace pressing to see some wares. Cadel held himself still, closing his eyes and readying himself for what he knew would come next. It was said to be common -- something that all the wraiths did on this night. It even had a name: the Excoriation. Usually it began immediately, with nightfall and the appearance of the first wraiths. But tonight had been different, perhaps because of Brienne. Not that it mattered. This night's Excoriation, like all of them, would last for hours.

They all began to shout him, berating him for what he had done, not only to them, but to their loved ones. Their voices buffeted him like storm winds on the Scabbard coast, the din they created making his head pound. Yet, perhaps due to some power the wraiths possessed, or through some trick of the god who had sent them, Cadel could hear each of them. Brienne upbraided him for Tavis's suffering in the days after her death, when her father tortured him in Kentigern's prison. Chago told him of the tears shed by his son and wife in the few days since his death in the Great Forest. Eben blamed him for his mother's descent into madness and his father's suicide. On and on they went, and Cadel had no choice but to stand and listen.

Most of it he had heard before -- the lament of the dead did not change much over the years -- but that did little to make the night pass faster. They would continue this until dawn, as they did every year. Telling him all that they had dreamed of doing with their lives, of that which he had denied them with his blade, his garrote, or his poisons. If they ran out of things to say, they merely started over, forcing him to hear every word again. But he didn't have to look at them anymore; at least he didn't have to see Brienne.

He stood motionless, save for his trembling hands and the twitching muscles in his legs. He felt sweat running down his face, making his skin itch. But he dared not move, even to wipe his brow. He didn't have to open his eyes to sense how close the wraiths had gathered around him. His skin prickled at the mere thought of it. He could almost feel their breath stirring his hair, though he knew this was impossible.

There was nothing for him to do but endure their abuse and cling to the knowledge that dawn had to come eventually. He tried to occupy his mind with song, but their voices drowned out his own. He called forth an image of Jedrek, who had come to him as a friend earlier in this turn, on the Night of Two Moons. But the dead would not allow him any diversions. Their words demanded his attention, and he hadn't the strength to resist them.

He could not have guessed the time -- if the midnight bells rang, he didn't hear them. But after what seemed a lifetime, Cadel realized that the voices had stopped. Slowly, reluctantly, he opened his eyes. Brienne stood before him looking young and sad, despite her bloody wounds. The rest of the glowing figures had vanished.

"It'll be dawn soon," she said, her voice low. "The others left me to see you to the end."

Cadel didn't know what to say. His dead had never done this for one of their own before.

Just as they had never waited to begin the Excoriation. In his mind, he saw once more how they had parted to let her come forward when this night began. Even the wraiths could see how special she was, how undeserving of this fate. *What have I done?*

“You said earlier that you only have to face me once in a year, that you feared the Qirsi more because they were a part of your world.”

Cadel nodded. “I remember.”

“I believe this will be the only time in your life when you will have to face me in this way. By this time next year, I expect you’ll be dead and we’ll be together in the Deceiver’s realm.”

He felt a chill run through his body, as if some unseen ghost had run a cold finger down his spine.

“Is that prophecy, my lady,” he asked, fighting to keep his voice steady, “or an idle attempt to frighten me?”

The ghost shrugged. “I’m merely telling you what I think. You can make of it whatever you will.”

“You’ll forgive me if I hope you’re wrong.”

“I will. It’s the only forgiveness you’ll ever have from me.”

“And still it may be more than I deserve.”

“Yes,” she said. “It may be.”

In the next instant she was gone, and the first silver light of dawn touched the stained glass window at the farthest end of the shrine. Cadel closed his eyes briefly, reaching out a hand to steady himself against the nearest wall, and taking a long, ragged breath. The dawn bells

tolled in the city, the sound drifting among the stone pillars of the sanctuary with the morning devotions of Bian's clerics. It was time for Cadel to be leaving.

He straightened and began walking toward the main doors of the shrine. Before he could reach them, however, he found himself standing before the prioress.

"I heard you cry out once or twice," she said. "It was a difficult night?"

The assassin gave a wan smile. "Yes."

"More difficult than most?"

"More difficult than all that have come before."

She raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry to hear that. I hope our sanctuary brought you some comfort."

"It did, Mother Prioress. I wouldn't have wanted to endure last night anywhere else."

A smile touched her lips and was gone. "That's kind of you to say."

She turned away and Cadel started toward the doors once more.

"If last night was so difficult," she said, stopping him, "it may be time you considered a new profession. Much of what the god teaches us can only be gleaned through patience and contemplation. But on occasion, his lessons are as clear as the new day."

He gazed at her briefly, then nodded. "Thank you, Mother Prioress."

She smiled again, but Cadel could see in her eyes that she had little hope he would heed her words.

He left the shrine as quickly as he could. He had much to do, he told himself. Lord Tavis was hunting the Forelands for him, and Cadel himself had quarry to pursue. And before he could turn his mind to any of that, he wished to pay a visit to a tavern in Dantrielle. It was called the

Red Boar, and it was there, nearly eighteen years before, that he had first met Jedrek. He could only hope that this visit would bring him such good fortune.

In any case, he had no more time to waste in Solkara.

Or so he wanted to believe. He knew, however, that the truth lay elsewhere. He wanted to put as much distance as possible between himself and the sanctuary, to rid himself of the memory of the previous night, to be sure, but also to get away from the half blind prioress who seemed to see him so plainly.