



JULIE MANNINO

THE
GREY
WOLF

A NOVEL OF ALTERNATE EARTH

The Grey Wolf
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Julie Mannino

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Special thanks to the real Hamdan who agreed to be the hero in this novel.

Thanks to K.C, the owner at 4everstore on Etsy for allowing a picture of one of her masks to be used on the cover of this book. The real [mask](#) can be purchased from her store.

Thanks to Nain Book Covers for another lovely cover.

This is the life and the way that was chosen

When you feel the last bit of breath leaving their body, you're looking into their eyes. A person in that situation is God!

-Ted Bundy quoted by Bill Hagmaier

The Stranger Beside Me, Ann Rule

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Leon the Lion](#)

Prologue

Mama always said monsters never lived under people's beds, and Hamdan shouldn't be listening to such nonsense from the other children on Baker's Lane. Despite her assurances, Hamdan didn't like the dark space underneath. Anything could be under there, and how would he see it? What if monsters were real?

Now, the dark space was his friend as he huddled underneath the bed, close to the wall. Monsters were real, and they were in the small house that he had spent his entire, short life in.

He watched the men's boots thump back and forth. Something glass broke, and he recognized the green of Mama's serving platter as the shards scattered across the floor. One of the soldiers swore. Other items joined the glass bits. Someone stood in front of the chest by the wall, and Hamdan heard rustling as the soldier presumably rifled through the contents.

Boots clomped closer to the bed, and Hamdan tried to shrink against the wall, willing himself to be smaller. If they found him, he knew they'd kill him. He'd already seen what they could do. The screams and shouts from outside in the streets told him what was happening right now to others.

"This house barely has anything of value," one snapped. "You always pick the shitty ones."

"Fuck you," snarled another man.

"What's that thing?"

"One of them fucking things the Muslims sit on when they pray."

"Fucking scum."

Something rustled again, and the light from the fireplaces flared brighter for a moment. The boots closer to the bed shifted.

"Anything under there?" someone asked.

Hamdan covered his face with his hands, not wanting to see the face of the monster. Surely they could hear his heart with the way it was pounding. They'd drag him out and stick him with a sword just like the blacksmith's son. He'd seen it. Where were Mama and Baba? They were supposed to protect him from monsters.

“There isn’t anything under there unless you want to loot dust.”

“Come on.”

Boots hurried across the floor. Something was kicked out of the way. Glass from Mama’s serving platter was crunched under a pair without remorse. The door slammed shut a moment later. The sounds of the battle outside continued, and Hamdan remained against the wall, too frightened to move.

He didn’t move even when the sounds of the slaughter and pillaging faded. Mama and Baba would come back soon and make everything better. Baba would buy Mama a new serving platter, they’d fix up the house, and everything would be all right.

The door opened again, and a pair of boots entered. The soldiers weren’t done. They were coming back for him. But instead of other pairs following, the lone person closed the door, stepped around a broken jug, and tried to avoid the glass littering the floor.

“Hamdan!” a female voice urgently whispered. Something wood thunked the floor.

Hamdan knew that voice. It wasn’t Mama, but that was all right. Vaywin would never hurt him. He scrambled out from under the bed, hoping she’d tell him that his parents would be back in just a few minutes. He was used to seeing Vaywin dressed in men’s clothes because she was a Native Gramoan.

He’d never seen her with blood all over her breeches and the loose shirts she favored. Her leather vest was smeared with it, and streaks covered her face. Red glistened on the tip of her spear, and she had a quiver hanging from her belt. Only two arrows were left. She had fought in the battle but seemed unharmed.

Vaywin sighed at the sight of Hamdan covered in dust bunnies. He looked around the house which was always so neat. Clothes hung out of the chest, glass littered the floor, everything on the shelf was askew, and some things were gone entirely. He gazed at the fire and recognized something poking out.

The soldiers had burned Baba’s prayer mat.

“Come on,” said Vaywin. “We need to go.”

“I have to wait for Mama and Baba,” said Hamdan.

“They’re not...We need to go. Now.” Her tone suggested she wasn’t looking for an argument.

But Hamdan wasn’t going anywhere. Not without his parents. “I have to stay here. Mama said to run and hide.”

“And you were a good boy to do so, but we can’t stay here now. It’s not safe, especially for one such as you.”

“Baba keeps us safe,” said Hamdan. He’d probably fought in the battle too, just like Vaywin, and he was surely unharmed. He’d come back soon and know what to do next.

“Hamdan, they’re not coming back,” she said gently.

He blinked, uncomprehending. Baba had to come back, and so did Mama. Baba always returned in the evening after work or if he had to go somewhere. He wouldn’t have his prayer mat, but until he bought a new one, he could use something else. God wouldn’t mind because it wasn’t Baba’s fault that the bad men had destroyed it. Mama would cook dinner as usual. Tomorrow, life would go on as normal just like it had for the past six years. He couldn’t imagine any other way.

“I saw them both,” said Vaywin. “Your Father fought bravely, but he died. Your Mother never made it out of the field. It’s just you and me now.”

Dead. Parents couldn’t die. Only old people did that.

“Mama said she would be right behind me!” yelled Hamdan.

She had told him to run to the house and hide under the bed. She had said she’d follow. Mama never lied.

“She tried, but they killed her,” said Vaywin. “You’re still alive, so I’ll take care of you. Now come.”

She must have made a mistake. His parents couldn’t be dead. Hamdan repeated that to himself as he stood. Vaywin snatched something from the bedside table and pressed it into his hand.

“So you’ll remember their faces.”

It was the miniature a traveling artist had painted for his parents before Hamdan was born. The likeness was perfect, and everything from their expressions to the folds of Mama’s blue hijab was lifelike.

Vaywin grabbed his free hand and tugged him toward the door. Baker’s Lane had never been so quiet before. Dropped items littered the cobblestones. One of the neighbors, an elderly man who always seemed to have a sweet in his pocket for Hamdan, lay dead in a pool of blood. A

cracked shield had been discarded near him. Farther down, the blacksmith's son lay unmoving, his eyes blank. A shriek came from somewhere.

Vaywin pulled Hamdan down the street and past other dead people. Soldiers from both sides were mixed in. Not all of the men from the invading Baron had made it, but they had done enough damage. Hamdan struggled to keep up with Vaywin who seemed to know where she was going.

Nothing looked the same anymore. Windows had been broken, doors were smashed in, blood streaked the step of someone's home, and a woman with her skirts hiked up lay half in an alley with a bloody gash on her forehead. The smell of smoke wafted through the air, and Hamdan saw some rising from somewhere in the town near the Church.

Soldiers milled around farther down the street outside of a large stone house. Vaywin quickly led Hamdan down an alley, heading toward the edge of the unwalled town.

"Hurry," she whispered.

They didn't see any more soldiers on that side. The buildings gave away to dirt and then grass. They continued past a farm. The house was a smoking wreck, and the cornfields had been half-trampled. A lone goat ran by, bleating in terror. Vaywin kept her tight grasp on Hamdan's hand, forcing him to run to keep up with her strides. Ahead, the woods loomed.

She paused on the edge to glance behind them. "Nobody followed. We still have to hurry in case they look for survivors."

Hamdan looked back at the town where he'd been born. He always thought he'd live there with Mama and Baba forever, but Vaywin pulled him into the woods and away from his old life.

Chapter One

Dan kept his grip on the crossbow as he crouched behind the counter and listened. Two more lay next to him, and the rigged one waited on its stand. Outside of the shop, the sounds of the battle went on. Men shouted, weapons clashed, and horses whinnied. Something hit the large shop window and probably cracked it, but it wasn't broken. Yet.

The sound of an axe against the door was loud. The wood cracked.

"Be ready," warned Dan.

The axe thunked into the door again. Wood splintered. Dan popped up from behind the counter to see someone kick it open.

The force of the door opening tripped the leather cord, and the rigged crossbow released its bolt. The soldier didn't even scream as the bolt drove itself into his mouth and likely shattered half of his teeth. He stumbled back and fell. Another soldier snarled as he stepped over the body and entered.

Dan aimed and pressed the trigger lever on his crossbow. The invader screamed as the bolt buried itself in his eye. He dropped his sword, jumped back, clutched at his face, and tried to pull it out as if that would help.

Dan threw down the crossbow and grabbed the next loaded one. Another soldier who was enormous and had a bushy beard stomped in, wielding a two-headed war axe. Gore marred the edges of it. The bolt slammed through his armor right over where his heart was. It had to hurt, but that just seemed to make the soldier even angrier judging by the roar he let out.

"Fuck," said Dan.

Muhammad jumped up from behind a low shelf and drew back his longbow. The arrow entered the big man's throat and created an impressive spray of blood. The soldier fell back, crushing the first dead guy. The one with a bolt in his eye had collapsed in the street.

Muhammad already had another arrow nocked before the enemy landed. Something hit the glass window and broke it that time. The shop window was big enough to allow two men to enter at once, and if too many came in, they'd both be screwed.

The first came through and yanked down the black cloth they'd hung to cover it. He took a bolt to the skull for his troubles. Another jumped over the sill, hopped down from the window seat, and ran toward the counter, thinking Dan was the only one in the shop. With his crossbow spent and his sword not drawn, he'd be helpless. The look of shock on the soldier's face was almost comical when Muhammad jumped up again, but the expression changed to pain when the arrow shaft buried itself in his shoulder.

Dan drew his sword, jumped over the counter, and swung for the man's sword arm. The cut went down to the bone through the leather armor.

"Wait-" the soldier gasped as his sword hit the floorboards.

Like he would have waited if Dan had asked. Dan kicked the man in the chest and thrust his sword into his throat. Another enemy came through the open door and almost tripped on the body of his comrade like an idiot. Muhammad's next arrow took care of him. Dan went for the new man emerging through the window and brought his sword down where the neck and shoulder met. The enemy let out a horrific scream as Dan withdrew his weapon.

Muhammad loosed another arrow, hitting the enemy in the chest. He fell back amongst the broken glass and didn't move. Nobody else seemed ready to come in, so Dan jumped back over the counter. Muhammad kept an arrow ready while Dan used the hook on his belt to span the crossbows.

The dead bodies by the window and door seemed to serve as a message. The owners of this shop weren't going down so easily.

The rigged crossbow was pretty useless now since the cord had already been pulled, and it would take too long to unstrap it from the three-legged frame it sat on. The smell of smoke drifted through the air. A fire had started somewhere, and even if they lived through this battle, the whole street could go up. Everything Dan and Muhammad had worked for could turn to ash.

He could see the grey smoke drifting down the street. Fire wasn't something that could be fought against with a sword or a bow. It had looked like it was going to rain all day, but they couldn't rely on that.

"We might need to move," said Muhammad. "If it gets worse..."

"I know," said Dan.

The smoke was thickening and drifting inside. Dan knew he was right because even if the fire didn't touch them, smoke inhalation could kill a

man. They could breathe fine now, but if it grew worse, they would have no choice but to move. With the fighting outside, no one would be able to start a waterline.

One of the soldiers from their side stumbled into the shop with blood all over his face. He collapsed a second later, beyond help. Considering the blood, Dan was surprised he'd been able to move at all. The serpent crest on his armor was also smeared with it.

Through the busted window, Dan spotted a lone kid run by just as thunder rumbled overhead. He slipped on the blood-streaked cobblestones, and a soldier came up behind him with his mace raised.

Dan didn't think. He just darted through the doorway with his sword raised. The soldier brought his mace down, and the little boy rolled out of the way just in time with a shriek. The metal clanged against the cobblestones, and before the soldier could do anything else, Dan thrust his sword into the man's back and up to the hilt. Damn child-killer. It was one thing to go after other men that could fight for themselves, but a kid couldn't hope to protect himself.

The dying man gurgled as Dan planted his boot on his lower back and yanked his sword back out. He barely had time to think before someone snatched him by the back of his shirt and threw him aside. A massive destrier's hooves came down right where he had been a second before. The Knight atop it slashed his sword at Dan's savior, who parried the strike.

Baron Kennin had yanked Dan out of the way just in time. Muhammad appeared in the window, drew back his longbow, and released it. The arrow drove itself into the destrier's eye causing it to rear with a scream, driven wild by the pain, and it stumbled back. Baron Kennin grabbed the Knight's arm and jerked him off before the horse floundered and fell.

By the time Dan got up, Baron Kennin had already driven his blade into the eye slit of the Knight's helmet and killed him. The Knight jerked and lay still after that. Baron Kennin barely spared a glance at Dan before he ran off.

"You almost got stomped flat!" Muhammad dragged Dan back in through what remained of their window just as the sky opened and rain started to pour.

Dan's heart started to pound as he realized how close to death he'd come. It hadn't been the first narrow scrape in his life. He'd been so furious

at the soldier who'd been ready to slaughter a child that he had made the mistake of not paying attention to who or what was behind him. The kid had already run away. Hopefully, he'd find a spot to hide.

"Thanks for the arrow to the horse," said Dan.

"You better thank the Baron," said Muhammad. "My arrow wouldn't have saved you if those hooves had come down on you."

They ducked behind the counter. The sounds of fighting weren't as loud now, so things had to be dying down on their street at least. Dan had no clue which side was winning. Baron Kennin was still alive, but if too many of his men had been lost, he certainly wouldn't be alive for much longer.

Nobody tried to enter the shop again. After several minutes, the sounds of fighting lessened and stopped. The city was large, and they had no idea what was happening elsewhere, so they remained there. The rain continued to pour, hopefully putting out whatever fire had started. After another thirty minutes, someone shouted.

"Dan? Muhammad?"

Dan recognized the voice and peered over the edge of the counter. A blacksmith who lived two streets over stood in the doorway with a bloodied rag tied around his upper arm. His hair had been plastered flat by the rain.

"It's over," said the blacksmith. "Baron Swamit tried to run into the Church because he knew he'd lost, but Baron Kennin ran him through."

The city of Nantret would go on under Baron Kennin's rule. Everyone that lived would have to patch everything back together. Those who lost someone would mourn.

All because some other greedy Baron wanted to add to his territory.

That night, Dan sat behind the counter with his head propped on his hand. The bodies had been cleared out. Most of the blood on the cobblestones outside had been washed away by the deluge of rain. All of the dead enemy bodies had been buried outside by the remainder of Baron Kennin's men. The dead from his side would be buried in proper graves over the next couple of days along with citizens that hadn't made it.

The broken window let in a breeze as the rain continued to trickle outside. There was too much merchandise in the general shop to cram upstairs in their living quarters. Neither Dan nor Muhammad wanted to sleep on top of a pile of potatoes with a sack of flour for a pillow, so they'd

have to take turns watching downstairs to make sure no one decided to sneak in at night and help themselves.

The window needed fixing along with the busted door. They could afford it, but it was more money from their savings. They'd already spent some because the roof had needed repairs in spring when Muhammad found there was a leak. He'd woken up with a wet pillow one morning. That was always a great way to start the day.

Plenty had died in the city, and that might cut down on customers and what people bought. Some citizens had lost their shops or their homes. They had their own repairs to worry about and things to replace.

Dan could see his goal being pushed back again. If he never could afford what he wanted, God would understand it, but Dan wanted to do it. His parents would have wanted it for him too.

The city was subdued the next morning. The glazier had survived, and his business wasn't destroyed. Dan spoke to him about getting the shop window replaced. A carpenter would also fix the door.

Dan had finished Dhuhur when Muhammad came upstairs. "There's a guard asking to see you."

"Why?"

Muhammad shrugged. "I don't know. He just said he wanted to speak to you."

Dan followed him down. The tired-looking guard stood in the open entrance since Dan and Muhammad had removed the wreckage of the door.

"Baron Kennin says I'm to bring you to see him," said the guard. "He wishes to speak with you."

"About what?" Dan would rather know what the lord intended before he went up there.

"I don't pry into his business," said the guard. "Now hurry up. I ain't got all day."

Dan scowled, grabbed his cloak from behind the counter, and followed the guard out. Something about this didn't feel right. Dan certainly owed the lord his life and a thank you, but he hadn't intended to go see him today. Everyone was busy, and he'd figured the Baron had plenty of other important matters to deal with since the seat of his county was half in shambles.

Then again, some Barons had their heads stuck up their bums and acted like the whole world should kiss the ground they walked on. This Baron Kennin had only taken the position a few months ago since his Father had died in a hunting accident.

The Castle and its grounds appeared untouched when Dan followed the guard through the gate in the wall surrounding it. The enemy hadn't gotten that far. It was almost strange to see the garden off to one side with its pretty blooms and neat foliage when he had just seen a woman scrubbing blood off of her doorstep five minutes ago.

"Just wait outside of the Petitioner's Hall," said the guard, pausing in front of the steps leading to the front door. "He's got a bunch of other people wanting something, so you'll just have to wait until he's done dealing with them."

Dan suppressed a sigh before he headed through the double doors. Why drag him up here to wait? He leaned against the wall while other people waiting by the doors to the Petitioner's Hall mumbled or quietly stood with morose expressions. The weaver kept fiddling with the edge of his cloak. His shop had been turned into a smoking wreckage, and with his source of income gone, he'd need poor relief for the upcoming rents.

A man came out of the hall with a relieved expression. "He granted me relief, so he'll probably do it for the rest of you too."

A few nodded. The guard on watch ushered someone else in, and over the course of an hour, everyone had their turn and left. Some appeared relieved but not all. Even if poor relief was granted, it didn't fix other things like dead relatives or years of hard work gone.

"Your turn." The guard gestured toward the entrance.

Dan entered the Petitioner's Hall and walked down the long, blue runner. Only a lord or someone very rich could afford such a thick cloth carpet. He knew to stop ten paces away from the Baron's chair and give a low bow.

"Baron Kennin," said Dan. "Thank you for saving my life yesterday."

"You're welcome for that." The Baron looked different today without armor and a bloodied weapon in his hand. Everything from his trousers to the knee-length coat he wore was a good weave and probably cost at least six months wages for an average person. "You own a general shop on Tatick Street, correct?"

"Yes."

“What’s the state of it right now?”

“It’s not in good shape, but we’ll manage,” said Dan. “The shop window was completely destroyed, and we have no front door right now, but it’ll be fixed soon.”

“Was your merchandise destroyed or stolen?”

“No.”

“Do you want poor relief?” asked Baron Kennin. “If you wish, I’ll grant it. The expense of a window and a door won’t be small.”

It was highly tempting to say yes and offset the cost, but Dan had a feeling there was more to this. If he had wanted poor relief, he could have come up here himself and asked.

“No,” said Dan. “We’ll manage, but thank you.”

“If you change your mind, let me know,” said Baron Kennin. “Your business partner-what’s his name?”

“Muhammad.”

“He didn’t take a normal name like you?”

Dan kept his expression placid despite the question. Muhammad was a perfectly normal name in some parts of the world even if it was rare in Gredoria. “Most people end up calling me Dan anyway, so it was easier to just take that as my name in general. My real name is Hamdan. That and Muhammad are common names in other parts of the world.”

Baron Kennin nodded. “You were born here?”

“Yes. My parents weren’t.”

“Where are your parents from?”

“They were from Egypt.”

The lord squinted. “What brought them all the way to Gredoria? That’s quite a haul.”

“My Father had the itch to travel and start over somewhere new. Plenty of people have immigrated to Gredoria.”

“They *were* from Egypt? Are they dead?”

“Yes,” Dan said shortly. “They died in a hold war when I was six.”

“I’m sorry,” said Baron Kennin. “That woman I’ve seen you with before can’t be related in any way, right?”

“Vaywin is like my Auntie. She knew my parents, took me in after they died, and raised me.”

“Oh.” The Baron raised his eyebrows. “You grew up in a tribe?”

“She’s a wanderer. She prefers to live away from the tribe, so we moved around a lot.”

Why so much interest in his past life? Perhaps Baron Kennin just saw Dan as a novelty since there weren’t many Egyptians across the Gramoan Continent.

“I’m guessing you didn’t have a Christian upbringing if that’s the case,” said Baron Kennin. “Do you believe in spirits or something like the tribes do?”

“No. I worship the same God as you do.”

Baron Kennin caught the wording. “So you follow Islam?”

“Yes. Or the best I can, anyway. I was old enough to remember the prayers and things my Father taught me, but I had no one to guide me as I grew up.”

Vaywin said God was all nonsense and tried to make him stop believing as a child, but Dan had clutched onto that like a lifeline, especially in the early days after his parent’s death. Besides the miniature, he didn’t have anything else left of them, so he hadn’t wanted to forget the prayers. His parents never would have wanted him to turn away from God. Dan had won in that battle of wills against Vaywin.

“And Muhammad?” asked Baron Kennin.

“His grandparents were converts.”

“It sounds like you’ve had an interesting life, eh?”

He had no idea. Dan tacked on a smile to be polite.

“Since I saved your life yesterday…” started Baron Kennin.

Here it came. He wanted something. It shouldn’t be surprising since Dan would be one of the dead today if the lord hadn’t pulled him away in time. He was probably interested in some sort of business transaction that he could profit from.

“I’d like you to do something for me,” continued Baron Kennin. “I’m sure you heard of the two murders in the nearby village of Riverside, eh?”

Dan paused. What did that have to do with anything? “Yes. Someone said two people were found dead after a tavern fight or something, right? I saw notices on the city boards for Samson, and a couple of customers mentioned a bit about it.”

The Baron nodded. “Yes. But I don’t think it was because of a tavern fight, and the accused, Samson, might not be responsible.”

Dan tilted his head. "Samson seems to have vanished, and two people that he fought with are now dead. It's not a guarantee, but that's pretty suspicious."

"Normally, it would be," said Baron Kennin. "But Samson was a carpenter. The people were murdered quite viciously."

"Most are quite vicious. Murder is never pretty."

"If I was a carpenter, I don't think I'd slit open their guts."

"Some murderers are quite sick. Their trade or job means little in that regard."

"I also don't think a common carpenter would be able to nail a man between the eyes with a throwing knife."

"It's not a common weapon, but some people learn how to throw them. It's a hobby for some."

"Yes, I know, but most carpenters I know don't bother to learn such things," said Baron Kennin. "Especially those in small villages. He wasn't even signed up for the army. And while he may have vanished, that's not actual proof that he did it. Also, since the body's guts were split open, some people are saying the Grey Wolf is back."

Dan didn't bother to hide it when he rolled his eyes. "The Grey Wolf is just a story."

"I've heard of the murders he's committed. They were always rather foul. It's one thing to run a man through, but another to impale him to a wall with his own sword or to cut off his private parts."

"I'm sure plenty have heard those stories," said Dan. "But that's all they are: stories. A couple of people said they saw a masked man, and suddenly, loads of murders were attributed to him. The supposed witnesses were probably drunk or making up tales. A murderer doesn't need a mask or a special name to be vicious and nasty. Do you know how many outlaws commit atrocities? People like to make up grand stories and pick a name. It gives them something very particular to hate. The supposed Grey Wolf is probably a mixture of various, sick bandits with twisted minds."

"Plenty of real outlaws take on a name. The savagery of some murders was what caused them to be tacked onto the Grey Wolf. I think he was a real man, he's come back, and he's made a couple of kills in Riverside village. Throwing knives was one of the weapons used against a victim."

“I guess you believe in fairies that lure people into mushroom circles and kidnap babies from the cradle,” Dan said sarcastically.

Baron Kennin narrowed his eyes and ignored that comment. “If he’s back, it might not be long before he comes here. That’s the thing about killers like that. Even if they stop for a bit, they often seem to have the urge to do it again. They move around and look for more victims.”

Dan nodded. “Okay...but I don’t see what this has to do with me.”

“I want you to find the killer for me.”

Dan stared at him for a moment. “I’m a shopkeeper. You have guards and knights to do that kind of work.”

“Even though we won the hold war, I lost quite a few men-at-arms. It was a close fight, and things could have gone the opposite way quite swiftly.” Baron Kennin leaned forward. “Besides, I need someone like you to do it.”

“And just why do you need me to do it?” asked Dan. “A shopkeeper? Do you expect me to sell something to this murderer?”

“You’re different,” Baron Kennin said in a blunt tone. “Easy to recognize. If it gets out that I have someone special and skilled looking for him, the Grey Wolf may seek to get rid of you. It could draw him out.”

Dan hardened his gaze. “Oh, just let the Muslim do the dirty work, and if he gets offed in the process, it’s no big deal, right? Oops. Nobody will miss him.”

“I wouldn’t send you if I didn’t think you could handle yourself,” said Baron Kennin. “I saw you run that soldier through yesterday. You may have forgotten your surroundings for a second, and sometimes even good fighters screw up or make a mistake, but you didn’t fight like some commoner who waves a weapon around like a fool. The whole attack was clean, quick, and efficient. I started learning to fight at the age of four, and I can recognize other decent fighters when I see them in action. For a shopkeeper, it was quite good. Excellent, in fact.”

Dan folded his arms. “Vaywin taught me to fight to protect myself. She said every man should learn even if he intends to live a peaceful life. If something happens, he’ll at least have a chance. I can protect myself against some typical bandit if I traveled somewhere, but it doesn’t mean I’m fit to be going after a killer. If it is the Grey Wolf, he’s probably excellent since people say he killed Baron Rullen.”

Baron Kennin shrugged. “Baron Rullen might have been drunk on that unfortunate night, but that's not the point. I need you to do this and lure the killer out of hiding.”

“And just how do you expect me to do that?” snapped Dan. “He could be in Camaday by now.”

“If you go poking your nose where it doesn't belong-in the Wolf's eyes-and maybe figure something out, he'll see you as a threat. He might come after you, a lone bounty hunter who appears foreign, and that's your chance to kill or capture him.”

“That's ridiculous.”

“I don't think it is. If a special bounty hunter is after him, I'm sure he'd want to deal with that. Of course, I'd pay you.”

Dan stepped back. “Find some other guard who is foreign and willing to go on a job like this. You've got two Spaniards in your ranks. Maybe they'd accept, so they can send more money home to their parents, and they'd also be much safer as a pair.”

“They're passable with a sword, but they aren't as good at fighting as you. Besides, the Grey Wolf seems to only go after single victims, not pairs or groups.” Baron Kennin's tone turned rather cold. “I saved your life, and you owe me.”

“So I have to put my life on the line now?” asked Dan. “If you asked me to go with you into a fight as payment for saving my life, I could see that. That would be fair. But it sounds like you're just sending me on a wild chase with no real leads, and you're putting me on a path that might end in my vicious death by a savage killer. And afterward, you still might not have him. I'll just be another victim! I don't consider that fair.”

“You could be saving future victims,” said Baron Kennin. “You saved that child yesterday.”

“A child couldn't hope to fight back against that man, and it's foul for soldiers to kill children. This might not even be the work of the Wolf because he's probably not real. It's probably Samson.”

“If it is Samson, and you find him, then you've rid Gredoria of another outlaw.”

Dan folded his arms. “He might never be found. He could be on his way to Camaday or Emaray for all you know. Plenty of outlaws are never found, and plenty don't stick around wherever they last killed or robbed someone.”

“I have a feeling this one has stuck around, and I expect to see some decent effort put into this,” said Baron Kennin. “You might be saving other victims too. Imagine if some poor boy’s Father doesn’t come home one day all because the Grey Wolf killed him. If it’s another killer, same thing.”

Dan clenched his fists and narrowed his eyes at the painful jab. “Don’t you dare. If I die, how do you think Vaywin will feel? Do you think she’d like to see me dead after raising me from the age of six? Do you think Muhammad wouldn’t miss me?”

“You owe me,” said Baron Kennin. “Do this, and I’ll pay you a handsome sum. You’ll get an advance, and if I think you did well enough overall, you’ll get more. You see, I’m not entirely ignorant of Islam, and I know if you’re true to it, or trying your best despite no guidance, then there is something you must want.”

Dan kept his expression closed off. “You don’t know what I want.”

“Muslims are required to make a pilgrimage to Mecca,” said Baron Kennin. “Hajj. It’s one of the pillars of your faith. That would require a lot of money since you would need passage to Europe, and that’s just to start. All in all, it would be an expensive trip.”

Dan lifted his chin. “If we are not physically or financially capable of it, we’re exempt. God does not expect the impossible from us.”

“I bet you’ve been saving to go because you want to. I’m sure plenty of Muslims aren’t rich, and most must save to plan for the journey because it’s important to them. If you had the money I’d pay you, you’d be much closer to affording it. While you’re abroad, you could probably also find a wife since I’m sure you won’t marry a Christian woman. Think about this very carefully. I can make your life quite easy.”

Dan did want to make the pilgrimage. He’d been trying to save, knowing the cost would be enormous. He’d need passage to England, and that was just the start. He’d be gone for a long time, and he wanted to leave Muhammad a decent safety net if anything happened and the business struggled. He’d give money to Vaywin too. She could take care of herself just fine, but he still wanted her to have it just in case while he was away. She had raised him and deserved it.

Hajj was a core component of his faith. He also did want to find a wife while abroad if possible. He didn’t know of any Muslim women in the area, and finding one in Gredoria who wasn’t already married might be

impossible or damn near it. He wouldn't marry a Christian either, and most probably wouldn't convert to Islam.

Besides that, the Baron's unspoken words hung in the air. He could make things easier for Dan by helping with something he wanted. He could also make things quite difficult. Business might start dropping, and perhaps other shop owners would start refusing to work with him. Rumors might get spread.

If the shop ended up failing, he'd be forced to move which would cost a lot. It would push his pilgrimage farther back. He was only twenty-five, but he didn't want to meet other potential misfortunes, keep getting older, and then wake up old, alone, and possibly too sick, frail, or poor to go.

And honestly, he probably could handle this murderer if he was still around. Vaywin had taught him well.

"Fine," said Dan. "I'll do it."

Baron Kennin smiled. "I knew you'd see things my way. Come to my office."

Chapter Two

“You said yes?” Muhammad jumped up from behind the counter where they were sitting that night. “Are you insane?!”

“If I said no, we could lose everything.” Dan flicked his cig over the ashtray on the counter. “Do you want to have to start over somewhere else? I certainly don't.”

“If he tells people to stop shopping here, they don't have to listen,” said Muhammad. “Even a Baron can't make such silly demands.”

“He could make up lies and have us shut down and evicted on some stupid premise,” said Dan. “He could even have people start spreading rumors. Next, half of the town will think I'm in here worshiping the devil on Tuesdays or something ridiculous. He's a Baron. He has influence. He could tell his guards to spread bullshit around too. Some people will believe the dumbest shit if they hear it enough.”

“This is crazy,” said Muhammad. “What if it turns out that you can't figure out who killed those two men? Outlaws get away every day.”

“He says I have to put real effort in,” said Dan. “So that means I can't just look around the village for a day, come back, say I found nothing, and be done with it. He figured that Vaywin taught me how to track since she raised me. I can check the spots where the victims were found, stuff like that.”

“It's still ridiculous.” Muhammad settled on the stool and jiggled his leg. “He's sending a commoner to go look for a needle in a haystack, and he thinks it might be the Grey Wolf? He should have a knight or someone else doing this work. They sign up knowing they might have to head right into danger.”

“If I find the killer or at least some evidence, he said he'll pay me more. Even with the shop repairs, that's still a huge chunk toward my savings.”

“That won't mean much if you get killed. You certainly won't be going abroad or anywhere then.”

“I'm pretty good with a weapon,” said Dan. “If it's some typical outlaw, I'll be fine.”

Muhammad pulled his cig case out of his vest. "No one's invincible."

"I already agreed. I didn't have much choice."

Muhammad scowled. "When are you leaving?"

"I have a few days. I said I couldn't go before the repairs were finished because you can't stay up all night and run the shop all day with no sleep. I'm going to go see Vaywin tomorrow and let her know I'll be gone for a while."

As part of the advance, Baron Kennin gave Dan a horse of his own. The last owner had died in the hold war, and the horse's name was Snubby. He wouldn't respond to anything else, so renaming him was out of the question.

"Your last owner must have had pebbles for brains," Dan told the horse as he rode toward the nearby forest the next morning. "Snubby? What kind of name is that? It sounds like something a five-year-old would pick for their pony."

Snubby let out an annoyed-sounding whinny and tossed his head.

Dan snorted. "You better watch that tone with me or I'll turn you into discount dog food once this is over."

After a good twenty minutes of riding through the woods, the area grew a little rocky, and he had to be careful in some spots. Thankfully, Snubby was sure-footed. Vaywin lived alone in a cave even though he'd offered to set her up in the city or let her live with him at the shop. She had refused and said city life wasn't for her.

She came to the mouth of the cave when Snubby proudly neighed as if to announce his presence.

"I made stew," she said. "When did you get a horse?"

"I'll tell you in a minute."

Vaywin owned a horse, but she let it run free, and if she needed him, she'd just whistle. He always came. Dan tethered Snubby to a tree and headed in. While they ate, he explained to her about the hold war and what Baron Kennin wanted from him.

Vaywin accepted the cig he offered her and rolled her eyes. "You survived this hold war, and now you have to go on a wild chase? Don't let him use you."

"He could make life rather difficult for me and Muhammad," he said.

"Start over elsewhere," she said.

"I don't want to start over elsewhere. Moving and setting up a new shop costs money. Muhammad doesn't want to move either. I also need to save for Hajj."

She blew out a cloud of smoke. "You and your damn trip. If God is still so important to you, you should just convert to Christianity. Who cares where you say your prayers, which way you face, what you eat-"

"Your spirits are important to you, and this is important to me. How about if we leave it like that? My religion and the miniature are all I have left of my parents besides memories."

She leaned toward him. "Spirits don't ask all this of me. Christianity just has a couple of extra important guys. Muhammad's family converted two generations ago, and they haven't been struck down by a thunderbolt yet. You could marry some other Christian woman and finally have some kids." She flicked her cig ash into the fire. "It's the truth. You cling onto something that won't matter much in the long run, and you let it rule your life."

"God put you in my parent's path," said Dan. "Without you, I would have been homeless if no soldiers found me. I probably would have been dead soon. Beggar kids don't have it easy."

"Spirits guided things, not some guy who lounges on a cloud or whatever. Besides, everyone who follows religion says what they do is the only right way, and everyone else is doomed because they're not doing it right."

"And you think that the spirits might not give you another good life if you have a life debt to someone and don't follow them into war or whatever. It sounds like these supposed spirits have rules too."

"So how the hell do you even know that your way is the right way? Jews, Muslims, Catholics, Christians-everyone thinks the other is wrong. I think that means they're all wrong. The tribal shamans don't know of any sky daddy, and you're wasting your time by worrying about some guy with a beard breathing down your neck. At least the spirits won't toss us into a fiery pit for eternity."

Dan suppressed a sigh. They rarely spoke of religion, but in the rare instances they did, it was like talking to a wall. He didn't intend to try and convert her, but he wished she would at least accept how important God was to *him* even if she didn't believe.

"Well, maybe you'll find the killer, and you'll make more money," she said. "Then you can take your trip, get a wife, and make me some grandkids."

"Maybe by then you'd like a house of your own." Dan stood since he needed to start heading back.

"I'm not living in a damn city with neighbors squawking on either side and looking at me funny when I go outside. What am I supposed to do with my horse? Horses should be able to run around freely and not be cooped up in a barn."

"You could live in the country and not have neighbors close by," he said. "You could also have a nice big paddock for him. I'd prefer to not have any future babies of mine crawling around a cave when we visit."

"We lived in caves before, and it didn't kill you."

"I could walk on my two feet at that age. I also knew not to put rocks in my mouth."

"I'll think about it," she grumbled.

The shop window was fixed, and a new door with a sturdy lock was put in a couple of days later. Now that someone didn't have to stay downstairs at night, Dan could leave. Muhammad promised that he wouldn't set the shop on fire.

Snubby seemed excited to be going on a trip when they left one morning. Everything was probably an adventure to him, and he didn't have to fuss about savings and killers.

It was around midafternoon when Dan arrived in Riverside. He went straight to the biggest house that was set quite a ways off from the main part of the village. He had to see the Marquess and present himself as a bounty hunter.

Marquess Allard read over the note the Baron had prepared while they sat in his office and finally lowered it. "Half of the villagers think it was the Grey Wolf, but I doubt it. I'm positive that Toby and Will were murdered by the carpenter, Samson."

"What exactly happened?" asked Dan.

"Samson ran his mouth at the tavern one night and got into a fight with Toby and Will. There was a third guy too, Billy. He's still alive. Three against one isn't fair odds, and they kicked Samson's ass. A few others broke up the fight, and there were some threats of future ass-kicking."

Samson said he'd kill them, but nobody thought much of it because they were all drunk, and angry men sometimes say things they don't mean. They made Samson leave the tavern since he had started the altercation."

That certainly didn't make Samson look good.

"Toby was found dead the next morning a bit before noon," continued the Marquess. "He was out by the river near where the women usually do the washing. He'd been killed with a throwing knife between the eyes, and his gut was split open. Samson's sister, Teila, said her brother hadn't come home the night before. People went to look for him in case he was passed out drunk somewhere, and they found Toby instead. Will was found the next day out in the woods. He'd left before dawn to hunt. I'm guessing he assumed he'd be safe and nothing would happen to him. His head had been bashed in, probably with a hammer. Samson owned one. Billy's still alive and practically shitting his trousers because he thinks he's next if he goes anywhere alone."

"I'm guessing there's been no sign of Samson," said Dan.

"No," said Marquess Allard. "The few men-at-arms I have went to scour the area, but I'm sure Samson is long gone by now. He got two, but it would be stupid to come back for the third."

It was risky enough to kill one guy and then come back for the second. A third murder would be really pushing his luck. Still, Dan was pretty sure that Billy certainly wouldn't be going anywhere alone for a while.

"Everybody's saying it's the Grey Wolf because of the victim's guts being split open, which is pretty nasty, and Toby being killed with a throwing knife," said Marquess Allard. "I never knew of Samson having that hobby, and apparently, no one else did either, but he must have. Cutting their guts was just something to be spiteful I think."

It was also the mark of someone, and it wasn't the Grey Wolf either, but Dan couldn't say that out loud. Instead, he asked if Samson had any family that he might be hiding with. Marquess Allard said that Samson had nobody but Teila and his parents in the village.

Of course, Samson's family had been questioned, and they knew nothing, or at least that's what they claimed. They were also adamant that Samson would never kill anyone, but Dan was sure the family of just about every criminal claimed such a thing.

Will being in the forest was explainable, but Toby's location was odd.

"Why would he be near where the women do the laundry?" asked Dan.

Marquess Allard shrugged. "Maybe he was waiting to have a secret smooch with a lady. I don't know. There's a spot to sit."

"What was the fight about?"

"Supposedly, Samson thought Toby had been fooling around with Teila in secret and saying dirty things to his buddies about her."

Dan wanted to see where both had been killed, so the Marquess took him out. Near the river, a tree had fallen, and the trunk made a good sitting spot. The Marquess said Toby had been found on the ground by the fallen tree. Some of the grass had dark brown marks which were likely dried blood. Looking for tracks was useless since there were plenty of footprints and squashed shrubbery from women heading to the edge of the river.

The Marquess didn't go with Dan to the area in the woods where Will had been found. He said Dan just had to follow the trail east, turn left at the split tree, and watch for the white cloth tied to a branch. Someone had left it as a mark when they found Will's body before going to tell the others so they could carry it back.

It was easy to find. Dan could tell there had definitely been a struggle here. A few flimsy bushes looked like someone had fallen against them. The dirt was churned up in some spots, and a broken arrow lay near a tree. Will must have been pretty strong, and he had fought hard against his assailant. Unfortunately, it hadn't been enough.

Dan picked up the broken arrow and looked at the fletching, assuming it had fallen from Will's quiver. Perhaps it had been stepped on, breaking it. Even after carefully scouring the ground, he couldn't find the other half with the head.

If the killer came to this spot, that meant he had to leave too. There were a lot of footprints from whoever had come looking for Will and collected the body. The problem was that Dan suspected someone that wasn't Samson. Someone that could climb and wouldn't be stupid enough to leave an obvious trail in the woods so close to the murder.

He scanned the trees, looking at the distance between branches, the height, and thinking of what would make a good path if one preferred to stay off of the ground. Native Gramoans learned from childhood how to scale trees and move around the forest like that. They could hunt or attack someone if needed. Of course, Vaywin had taught Dan. A few times in his

childhood, they had stayed with tribes for short periods of time, and he had played with children up in the canopy.

"Stay here, Snubby."

The horse snorted. Dan climbed a tree and started to make his way through the branches, trying to think like his other suspect. A couple of broken twigs told him he had likely picked the right path.

He eventually came to a spot where he'd either have to go higher or get down. Climbing higher wouldn't make sense because there was nowhere else to go unless one wanted to make a risky jump to another branch. He climbed down and scanned the ground. A faint footprint was in the dirt by the roots.

He narrowed his eyes and made his decision. The Marquess might fuss a bit if Dan didn't return to the village that night, but he'd get over it. Besides, if Dan was a bounty hunter, he'd be okay against a commoner.

Turling wasn't too far away, but it was rather late when he arrived. Some people were still out, and most taverns were open. Dan found the house he wanted and saw light coming through the shutters. He hadn't seen the resident in a while, so hopefully, he hadn't moved away.

He tethered Snubby to the fence post and went to the door to knock. After a minute, a familiar voice called out. "Who is it?"

"It's Hamdan."

The door opened, and Camden, still fully dressed despite the late hour, stood there. "What a surprise, Hamdan."

"I need to talk to you."

"I'm sure you do."

Camden allowed Dan into his sitting room. An easel in the corner showed a painting in progress, and several more hung on the walls.

"I thought you'd settled at your shop," said Camden. "Was it destroyed?"

Dan shook his head. "No. Baron Kennin won. He was lucky too because nobody suspected Baron Swamit would come after his county. He went right for the seat of it."

"Did they have a quarrel?"

"No, the bastard just wanted the territory. That was all. I guess he figured a new Baron might be an easy target."

Camden sat at the little table in front of the fire. "Greedy bastard. So why are you here?"

Dan took the other chair. "Have you done any work lately?"

"If you're asking if the victims from Riverside are mine, they're not," said Camden.

Dan tilted his head. "Their stomachs were cut open. That's your mark. One was killed by a throwing knife. I won't turn you in, of course, but I need to know."

Camden shook his head. "I heard about that, but it wasn't me. I'm also not the first man to cut open someone's gut."

"The village thinks it was the Grey Wolf."

Camden shrugged. "It seems like Samson just had a foul streak. Plenty of men have that when they're driven to a point, and many have done worse. We know how nasty people can be, eh?"

Camden had no reason to lie about this, so Dan nodded. "Yes, we do."

"Why are you even asking me?" asked Camden. "Did you know them?"

"No, Baron Kennin has me investigating it. He thinks it's the Grey Wolf because of the way they were killed."

Camden laughed. "Did he lose every damn man-at-arms in his ranks? He has to send out a shopkeeper to look?"

Dan rolled his eyes. "He's seen me with Vaywin in the city before when she's visited. I have no other family, so he guessed she might have raised me since I have no other family. If a Native Gramoan raises a child, they'll know how to fight, track, and all of that stuff." He explained how Baron Kennin got him to agree to this.

"Clearly, the Muslim is expendable in his eyes," Camden said once Dan finished.

"Exactly. He thinks the Grey Wolf might come after me to shut me up if I find something. Or I'll find Samson and bring him to justice, but I don't think Samson did this at all."

"Why? Rumors said there was a tavern fight. Samson wouldn't be the first man with injured pride to snap and kill someone. Outlaws aren't born as outlaws. They all start at some point."

Dan held up a finger. "One. The tavern fight was three against one. They kicked his ass until someone broke them up. If I wanted to go kill someone because my pride got stomped on, I'd wait until I wasn't all banged up, and nobody heals overnight. Toby was found the very next morning. Two, if Samson had that much talent with throwing knives as a hobby, someone

would know about it. The Marquess said he had no idea, and nobody in the village knew of it either.”

“Villagers always know everything about each other,” said Camden. “Less happens, so what do they gossip about?”

“Each other,” said Dan. “He was good enough to get a man between the eyes, yet no one knew about it? He never showed off his talent? His own family didn’t know? Will was found in the woods, and judging by the spot, he fought back hard. It was the day after Toby was found dead, and again, people don’t heal that fast. If I got my ass kicked, I wouldn’t be so eager to go after someone two days later.”

“Maybe he tried a throwing knife and missed. With the element of surprise gone, he had no choice but to get closer.”

“I didn’t see a throwing knife,” said Dan. “I checked the area. It’s possible I missed it, and maybe someone else found one and didn’t mention it, but I think that’s unlikely. I still think I’d wait until I healed before I took the risk of fighting someone. Also, no tracks were leading away from the murder unless he took the same path that everyone else did while fetching the body. I went through the trees in a path that I thought seemed logical and found a print by the base of one when I had to get down. Someone had gone through the trees because a few twigs were broken. I doubt a commoner would think of that or be able to do it.”

“You insult me,” said Camden. “I’d never leave evidence like that behind. I can’t believe you thought it was me.”

“I don’t know anything else about those two men, and it’s not like I have any other suspects, so I had to ask,” said Dan. “I’m pretty sure this was done by someone with skill unless Samson has many secret talents. I don’t think he did.”

“I haven’t had anybody to kill in a few months,” said Camden. “There are others like me, so you should ask if anybody new has been around, or if the victims are guilty of anything. It could be some kind of revenge, and the timing made Samson look bad.”

“If they are guilty of anything, the villagers might not want to tell me even if anybody knows of something,” said Dan. “I’m an outsider to them.”

“It can’t hurt to ask. Samson might have hired someone to do it for him too.”

“There was another man in the fight,” said Dan. “Billy is his name. He’s still alive, and he’s afraid he’s next. He’s cowering in his house.”

“If Samson hired someone, that won’t save him. He’ll have to come out eventually, eh?”

“I know,” said Dan. “But that’s another thing. How many assassins are in Gredoria? Or Gramoa in general. Not many, they’d be nearly impossible to find because few know of the Gate or any other place like that, and it’s expensive. I doubt some village guy could afford that, and it was too fast anyway.”

“What if you can’t find who’s responsible?”

“I have to make a good effort, and I’ll still get paid a decent amount,” said Dan.

“Baron Kennin is a sneaky bastard,” said Camden.

“Yes, he is.” Dan stood. “I need to get going, and I won’t impose on you.”

“Good. I’ve only got one bed, it’s small, and I don’t share.”

“And I’d rather not sleep on a hard floor.”

“Take care, and don’t get killed. The Gate doesn’t get much business in that regard anymore, but you never know who else is around.”

“I’m sure I can handle them.”

“I’m sure you can.” Dan had his hand on the doorknob when Camden said one last thing. “Do you want to know something about one of the marks?”

Dan glanced at him before he opened the door. “Let the past stay in the past.”

Chapter Three

Dan stayed at an inn overnight in Turling and headed back to the village the next day. He checked the woods again just in case he'd missed anything else, but he saw nothing of interest.

"Bloody hell, I thought you were dead too!" the Marquess said when Dan showed up at his house.

"No, I went tracking through the woods, and stayed out overnight when it got too late."

"In the woods? Where someone was found dead?"

"I doubt Samson was lurking behind a tree and waiting for a bounty hunter."

Marquess Allard grunted and led him to the sitting room. "That's true. I guess you didn't find anything?"

"No. Unfortunately."

"Billy's still alive," the lord said as they sat in armchairs by the fire. "He still won't come out of his house."

"That's probably safest for a bit, but Samson might not dare come back," said Dan. "I need to know if Toby and Will had any other enemies."

Marquess Allard shrugged. "I don't know of any. I rarely ever have trouble here. In general, everyone gets along."

"Have there been any other past disputes between anybody that seemed harmless at the time? Have any travelers come and made trouble?"

Marquess Allard shook his head. "Why? It was Samson that did it, so who cares about travelers, eh?"

Dan tilted his head. "It might not have been Samson."

"Of course it was! He threatened the victims and Billy. I don't believe this Grey Wolf nonsense."

"How could he be skilled with throwing knives, yet no one knew of it? In a village, the people probably know what color drawers their neighbor is wearing. Don't you think it's odd that no one seemed to know Samson supposedly had such skill?"

Marquess Allard blinked at him. Clearly, he hadn't. "Well...maybe he was embarrassed and kept it hidden."

"If he was good at it, he'd probably show off, even if it was just to attract the attention of a lady," said Dan. "Men often like to brag and show off."

"Like I said, maybe he was embarrassed or something," said Marquess Allard.

"He managed to even hide it from his own family? Who taught him in the first place? Also, if he got beat up like you said, it seems odd that he didn't wait until he was better. Would you risk a fight if you were all bruised up? It'd be better to wait until you're healed, right?"

The lord spread his hands. "Yeah, I guess, but we're thinking logically because nobody has pissed us off, and we're not sloshed. Samson started shit, threatened to kill them, and the two guys turned up dead in my holding. Maybe you're right, and it's someone else, but it's not like we have any other suspects. I like facts, and they seem to point to Samson in this case."

"I want to talk to the families."

"Go ahead, although they probably won't be too nice right now since they're mourning. Samson's family definitely won't like you."

Dan had already assumed that. Samson's family wouldn't view any bounty hunter in a good light right now.

He went to Toby's house first. Mr. Nath, the Father, was at home. The Mother was somewhere else.

"Did you find any sign of where that bastard went?" asked Mr. Nath.

"No-" started Dan.

"You better get a move on!"

"I-"

"I want Samson found, and I want him to hang for what he did to my son!" snapped Mr. Nath.

"I understand that, but I need to ask a few things," said Dan. "Has there been anyone else in the village recently? Maybe a traveler that seemed off or tried to start trouble with your son, Will, or Billy?"

"No, and what the fuck does that have to do anything?"

"I need to know because things don't quite add up right."

Mr. Nath shut up long enough to let Dan explain his thinking that someone else did the murder.

“It’s true that nobody ever mentioned or seemed to know that Samson had or used throwing knives,” said Mr. Nath. “Maybe it would be stupid to get beat up and not even wait a few days before killing for revenge. But angry men don’t always think straight. Also, you forgot something. If Samson wasn’t responsible, then why did he run away? He never came home that night. That sounds guilty to me, eh?”

“There’s a possibility he might be dead,” said Dan. “Some of the villagers think it was the Grey Wolf-”

“That’s all bullshit. That was probably a real killer, but he’s long gone now.”

“But whether it was or wasn’t the Grey Wolf, some serial killers like to hang around in an area and move on. Villagers might have seemed like weak, easy prey.”

“It was Samson. I know it in my heart, and if he was before me, I’d kill him in a second with no hesitation.”

“Did Toby have any enemies? Did he ever have a problem with someone before even if it didn’t seem like a big deal at the time?”

“My son was a good man, and he never bothered anybody,” said Mr. Nath. “But Samson-he got in trouble once in Nantret a few years ago.”

“With who?” asked Dan.

“He got into a tavern fight with Baron Kennin,” said Mr. Nath. “I mean, he wasn’t Baron Kennin then. Samson was sixteen then, so it was...seven years ago. I think Baron Kennin is also twenty-three, so they were both just teenagers at the time. Samson spent a month in jail there for hitting a higher up. He was just trouble waiting to happen. People like that usually start with small shit.”

Baron Kennin hadn’t mentioned that, but he probably didn’t think some stupid tavern fight that happened years ago was important. It didn’t have much to do with the current circumstances except for the fact that Samson might have been the angry sort when he was drunk.

“Was Toby seeing Teila?” asked Dan. “That’s what this fight was about right?”

Mr. Nath shrugged and looked away. “Toby never said anything to me about it, but there was some rumor that they had fooled around. I warned Toby to keep his dick in his trousers if he didn’t plan on marrying her because if he got her pregnant, he’d have no choice, and I said nothing

more about it. He was an adult, so I couldn't be hovering over him all day long, and it's not like I could lock him up to keep him away from ladies."

"He didn't say anything to you when you warned him?"

"He didn't deny or confirm anything. By his silence, I'm sure he was fooling around with her."

Dan went to see Samson's family, the Smiths. He barely got to say anything before Teila got into his face. Or tried too. She was too short.

"My brother didn't do anything!" she yelled at him. "He didn't kill anybody, so you can take your arse and haul it back to wherever you came--"

"Teila! Stop it!" Mr. Smith snatched her arm and drew her away.

"He's a bounty hunter!"

"I know what he is, but you can't just yell at people like that! Sit down and be quiet or you can go sit outside."

Mrs. Smith had red hair like her daughter. She cast Dan a disgusted look and left through the back door of the one-room house. After it slammed shut, Teila sat in a chair, and Mr. Smith turned to him.

"I know you're just doing your job, but you have to believe me. My son didn't kill anybody. He did get in a fight, but he'd never kill a person. He's not at all like that."

Dan sat at the table while Teila settled for glaring at him. "I'm trying to get all of the facts. I'm not entirely sure your son was the murderer, but things don't look good for him either."

"Why aren't you sure?" asked Mr. Smith, sitting across from Dan. He gave his daughter a warning look to not start running her mouth again.

Dan explained his reasoning.

"My son didn't even own any throwing knives," said Mr. Smith. "Mr. Nath is accusing me of covering up for him, but I'm not. My son never had an interest in that."

"It was the Grey Wolf," said Teila. "What if he killed Samson too, but we just can't find his body, so everything got tacked on to him?"

Mr. Smith nodded. "Some of the other villagers also think it was the Grey Wolf. The Marquess doesn't, and he says we need to look at facts and not pull wild tales out of the air, but I know my son didn't murder anyone."

"I'm sure the Grey Wolf is just stories and several unsolved murderers were simply attributed to him," said Dan.

"He's been seen."

“Probably by people with overactive imaginations,” said Dan. “But there are nasty killers out there. I’m not saying your son is definitely innocent because he looks bad thanks to the fight, but the facts don’t seem to line up correctly either. He never came home the night of the fight?”

Mr. Smith shook his head. “Me and my wife went to bed early, but Teila said she was awake for a while. She never heard him come in. She was awake first, noticed Samson wasn’t home and went to look for him. I never should have yelled at him that day. I know if I hadn’t, he would have come home, and we could have vouched for him. There wouldn’t have been any fight.”

“What do you mean you yelled at him?” asked Dan.

“Teila came to the shop before we were ready to leave for the day, and they started bickering,” said Mr. Smith. “Samson called her a bitch, and I said he needed to apologize and not talk to his sister like that. He refused, so I told him he couldn’t come home until he did. He went to the tavern, and I guess he ate dinner there.”

Teila appeared ashamed. “I was being a bitch.”

“Don’t cuss,” said Mr. Smith.

“I was, so it’s my fault that we started fighting,” said Teila.

This made it all worse. They might never see their son again, and nobody wanted their last memories of someone they loved to be about some silly argument.

“I shouldn’t have told him he couldn’t come home,” said Mr. Smith. “He’s probably dead somewhere, and that’s our last memory together. I yelled at him and told him he needed to grow up.”

“If he ran, do you know of any place he might go to?” asked Dan. “An old friend or something?”

“No,” said Mr. Smith.

Even if they did, they probably wouldn’t tell him. The Smiths were a dead end, so Dan left them and asked around the village. Most of the people were sure that Toby and Will had been killed by the Grey Wolf. They said he was back and simply picked a new area as his hunting ground.

A few of the villagers seemed to think, like Teila, that Samson was also dead, but they just hadn’t found his body. Others thought Samson might have simply run away since he’d gotten into an argument with his Father, and the timing was just awful. He wouldn’t be the first person to do that.

Since Samson had carpentry skills, he could go make a new life for himself elsewhere.

As for the Grey Wolf, a widow swore she had seen it run by her house that evening.

“It was a wolf running on two legs!” she said, wide-eyed. “I saw it! It was in my backyard.”

Dan tilted his head. “You saw a wolf run through your backyard on two legs?”

“I did!” said the old woman.

“The Grey Wolf is a man,” said another villager. “Not an actual wolf, you dummy. Stop drinking. I saw someone lurking near the edge of the woods last winter. I thought it was one of our people, but now I’m sure it was the Grey Wolf staking out a new place to use as his killing ground.”

“And he waited months to do anything?” asked Dan.

“He’d have to be smart to avoid detection. Why not stake out the place and learn what you can before you do anything?”

Dan suppressed a sigh. Next, they’d think the ghost of Kemta the Killer was running loose and still murdering people.

The tavern owner described the fight that night and said Samson had been half-sloshed. After accusing Toby of fooling around with Teila and bragging about it, Samson ended up with a bloody nose and a split lip, and he likely had a wicked black eye the next day if he was still alive.

Samson didn’t sound like he would have been in any condition to go murder two people within two days. Hell, he could probably barely see from one eye.

Dan asked the Marquess if there was any place within a few day’s ride where outlaws might be holed up. But the lord said any local place had been searched already. There was an abandoned village two days away, but there was no sign of life there. It was just ruins and barely fit for even an outlaw to live in.

Dan wasn’t sure what to do now besides search the surrounding areas and try to track. If Samson wasn’t the killer, he highly doubted the real one was even around now. He wouldn’t come after the supposed bounty hunter. The Grey Wolf certainly wasn’t going to try and get rid of Dan.

He could have gotten a room at the village inn to pray when it was time for Asr so he could have privacy, and he needed a place to sleep anyway,

but he wanted to be alone to think for a bit. He didn't mind city life, but after years of often living in the forest or caves with Vaywin, he still liked the quiet of nature.

He had a mat he could use so he wouldn't be directly on the ground, and he could perform wudu in the stream running through so he would be clean. Snubby just watched Dan with mild interest for a couple of minutes before he started grazing.

Once Dan was finished praying, he put his mat away in one of the saddlebags before climbing a tree to sit in the branches and think. Since the Grey Wolf wouldn't be coming after him, and the villagers had nothing to fear from that, he wasn't sure what else to do besides tracking in the local areas. He could go check the ruins of the village too since he had to put in effort to make Baron Kennin happy. Maybe he should just skip getting a room and head out now.

After that, he was rather at a loss. As Muhammad said, this whole ordeal was like searching for a needle in a haystack.

He was tempted to just go off for a few days, stay in the woods, and not do much of anything. How would Baron Kennin know? He could write to the Marquess and ask if Dan was doing his job, but the Marquess wouldn't be pasted to Dan's side every second of the day, so how would he know either?

Still, even if this was all a waste of time, he didn't like to lie about the whole thing. He lit a cig and sat smoking. Snubby had walked off quite a ways, and Dan could barely see him by some bushes farther off to his left. If he whistled, the horse would come, so he wasn't too concerned.

He was nearly done with his cig when he noticed movement to his right. Teila was picking her way through the undergrowth with her cloak on. What the hell was she doing out here by herself? If everyone, including her, thought the Grey Wolf was back, why would she be in the woods where anything could happen? She didn't even have a bucket to get water, and he assumed the villagers got it from the river, not the stream.

Teila hadn't noticed Dan or smelled the cig smoke since he was high up. She hadn't even thought to look up, something Vaywin had laughed about once. White people rarely thought to look up in the woods even though they knew Native Gramoans could climb and fight from the trees. Teila picked a

spot by a bush and knelt before she started digging in the soft soil with her hands.

Dan thought to say something, but he was quite curious about what she was up to, so he remained quiet. Teila didn't dig down too far before she pulled something from under her cloak and laid it in the hole.

A hammer.

Marquess Allard said Will had been hit in the head by a hammer. Or that's what he thought since Samson was a carpenter, and a hammer was something they needed in their tools.

Dan stubbed the cig out on the rough bark of the tree to make sure it was out before he quietly climbed down. Teila was busy covering up the hammer with loose dirt and had her back to him.

"Hey," said Dan.

She squealed and jumped up so fast, it would have been comical if she hadn't been burying a potential murder weapon.

"What are you doing out here?!" she yelled accusingly. "Only perverts spy on ladies!"

"What are you doing out here burying a hammer for?"

"I'm not," she quickly said.

He put his hands on his hips. "I just saw you put it in the hole. I'm not blind."

She gripped the edges of her cloak. "It's none of your business."

"Will was a hit with what was assumed to be a hammer."

"It could have been a mace...or anything."

"Your brother is a carpenter."

She stared at him for a second. "My brother didn't kill either of them. I know he didn't."

"Then why are you hiding a hammer? I bet it's his. I bet you know where Samson is too."

"No, I don't!"

"Let me tell you something." He marched up to her. "Anybody that helps an outlaw becomes an outlaw themselves. I could take you to Marquess Allard, and he'd be quite interested to know why you were in the woods alone, and why you were hiding a murder weapon-"

"Because it's not a murder weapon!" she burst out. "It is my brother's, but he didn't use it to kill anyone! I know he didn't. I found it in the

evening by the river the day Will was found. My brother wouldn't kill someone with one of his tools and leave it somewhere like that. That's stupid! It was near where we get water, and I just happened to see it in the weeds by chance. I knew if I told anyone, even the villagers that believe in the Grey Wolf might start thinking Samson had dumped his weapon there after he killed Will."

"Maybe he did."

"If he wanted to get rid of his weapon, he could have dumped it anywhere in the woods," said Teila. "He wouldn't leave it near a spot where people might easily find it. Samson's a bit thick, but he's not that stupid."

It would be a pretty dumb spot to dump a murder weapon. Since it was a hammer, Samson didn't even have to get rid of it. If it had blood or anything on it, it could be washed off, and if it was Dan, he simply would have kept it. If he had to go live as an outlaw, it'd be better to have something to use as a weapon."

"I'm guessing your brother didn't have a sword," he asked.

Teila shook her head. "Nobody in the village has a sword except for the Marquess and a couple of his men-at-arms."

"Take the hammer out."

Teila glared at him but dug through what little dirt she had covered the hammer with. Dan took it to examine. It had Samson's name carved on the handle.

"You can't tell anyone about it," she said. "I know you're supposed to catch him, but he didn't do it, and it's not fair to have this pinned on him. Something happened to him that night. I bet it was there in the morning before Toby was found, and if I had found it then, nobody would have suspected Samson because Toby was killed with a throwing knife."

Dan couldn't bring this to Marquess Allard because the lord didn't even think it was anybody else. He had one suspect firmly mortared in his mind, and that was it.

"Can Samson swim?" he asked. "If he got beat up, he could have gone to the river to try and wash the blood off before going home. He could have fallen in."

"He can swim," she said. "We all can and learned as kids. It'd be stupid to live near a river and not know."

The problem was that if Samson had been drunk too, he could have fallen in and been swept away. Accidents sometimes happened to someone that had a bit much to drink since their reflexes weren't so good.

"I'm guessing nobody's thought to ask elsewhere if a body has washed up?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I can't even ask someone to go check because they'll want to know why I suspect that."

Dan shouldn't be doing this, but he tossed the hammer back in the hole. He could remember this spot if needed. "Cover it up."

She hesitated like she thought this was some kind of trick, but she quickly knelt and started pushing the dirt into the hole over the hammer.

"What's close by down the river?" he asked.

"Fleuve is three days away," she said. "It's a fishing town, but bodies can go a ways before anyone finds them, and sometimes they're never found."

"I know, but I can still check there," he said. "It's a possibility."

"I don't think it was really the Grey Wolf that did this." She patted the dirt down and scattered some dead leaves over the spot before she stood. "I think he's either a story or some other killer that got offed. Outlaws kill each other sometimes. They get sick, or they have an accident. They can't all last forever."

"Then who do you think did it?" asked Dan. She narrowed her eyes. "If you know something, tell me."

"The Marquess thinks the ruined village is empty, but I know it's not," she said. "Toby used to go to Fleuve sometimes to sell cloth. He had a couple of friends there, and one mentioned that outlaws are hiding in those ruins. I don't know where exactly, but they are there, and I guess they've managed to remain well-hidden. Maybe the killer is hiding there. It's close by, so it's a possibility."

"And Toby told you about this because...?"

"Toby and I had a few kisses. It was nothing." She folded her arms.

He rolled his eyes. "Is that why Toby was by the river? Was he waiting for you?"

"No. I stopped sneaking off with him because he was telling his friends that I let him go farther even though we never did anything of the sort. He was a damn liar. Samson had a reason to be pissed at them. Even though we argued, my brother did care about me."

If she hadn't been sneaking smooches with some village boy, the fight never would have happened. Things would have been different. But it was too late now, and Dan wasn't going to lecture her on morals.

"I need to go." He whistled for Snubby. "Where is this old village?"

"Just follow the river for roughly a couple of days," she said. "You can't miss it. Fleuve is another day or so past it. Are you going to the ruins? If one of the outlaws there killed Will and Toby, how would you know? They won't admit anything."

"Leave that to me." Snubby came over with an expression like this was a great bother, and Dan mounted him. "How are you going to explain your disappearance?"

"Father's napping, and Mother's helping one of the other women give birth," said Teila. "That'll take ages. If Father is already awake, I can fib about where I've been."

"I wouldn't go anywhere alone for a while if I was you," said Dan. "Just in case. I'll take you to the edge."

Teila nodded and headed to the stream to wash the dirt from her hands. Dan went with her to the edge of the woods so she could return to the village. Once she had crossed the field, he hurried off on Snubby.

Dan had some food in his saddlebags for himself and his horse, and he could hunt, so he'd be fine for a couple of days. He didn't really like sleeping on the ground if outlaws might be so close. In times like this, he could sleep up in the trees even if it wasn't very comfortable. That was another thing Vaywin had taught him. He'd make do, and if anybody suspicious came around, Snubby would make noise and alert him.

He made it to the ruins early in the morning after the second night. They were visible in the distance, so he tethered Snubby in the woods, readied himself, and approached the place on foot.

Chapter Four

Dan wished he had thought to ask the name, but it didn't matter. Some villages didn't grow or thrive either due to famine, a war, or some other reason. The huts had collapsed, and grass, weeds, and vines were trying to reclaim everything. With his longbow ready, he crouched by an old hut near the edge and peered around. Marquess Allard's men might not have thoroughly searched this place.

The outlaws might have found a clever place to hide where a guard might not think to check.

Dan remained still for a while, watching and listening. If outlaws were here, they were being quiet. Across from him was what looked like an old general shop. It was half-collapsed, but the crooked sign leaning against the front proclaimed it was "Selfin's." The rest was too faded to make out.

His shop didn't have a cellar, but some did. He made his way across the street with an arrow nocked just in case anybody popped out from somewhere with the intent to kill him and ask questions later.

The entrance to the general shop couldn't be called a doorway anymore. With the way the building was wrecked, he had to duck underneath the wood. There wasn't much of anywhere to go since the second floor had fallen in. The wood was rotted and cobwebs dangled from jagged ends. Dan brushed a loose vine out of his way and tried to see over the wrecked second floor. Parts of the roof had also given up a long time ago, allowing sunlight in. Something that may have been a bedstead lay amongst the debris.

Even with his climbing ability, he didn't want to make his way over to see if there was a cellar anywhere. If the wood shifted, he might get hurt. Bandits probably wouldn't want to risk this pile either. There was safety in having a hideout in a dangerous spot to discourage unwanted visitors, but there was a limit.

He backed out and walked along the street, keeping an eye out. A blacksmith's forge, long cold, lay surrounded by the rotted wood that had

once made the high awning for it. The shop itself was too wrecked to even enter.

Dan noticed someone had carved words into the stone of the forge: “Jimme wuz hear.” Jimmy apparently couldn’t even spell his own name. There was no way to tell how old that was, but he spotted something else.

On the edge of the stone were black streaks like someone had stubbed out a cig and dragged it along, making sure it was out. He touched it, noticing a few specks of tobacco. With the forge exposed, rain should have washed that away. That meant it was fresh. Whoever had smoked had taken the remains with them since he didn’t see any spent cigs around. The floor was stone, and he didn’t see anything else that indicated a person had been there.

It hadn’t rained in days, so it was possible that one of Marquess Allard’s men had taken a break to smoke. There were a few faint prints in the dirt around the shop, but again, it could have been the people who had been searching for Samson. Dan followed a faint pair of tracks into the scraggly grass toward what must have been the lord’s home. It was stone, and not in good shape, but it could be liveable enough.

Dan paused by the gate to the low stone wall to eye the house. The remains of curtains flapped in one window. The front door was entirely gone, and most of the windows were broken. The gate was open so he entered and made his way along the wall with an arrow pointed at the house. No movement from any of the windows was seen, so he approached the back entrance.

The door was still there. Dan shouldered his bow, drew his dagger, and tried the handle. It was unlocked, so he nudged it open just enough to look inside. It was the kitchen, and it smelled stale. He let his eyes adjust to the dark before moving further in and leaving the door partially open for light.

A long work counter stood in the center, and the fireplace was to his left. Overall, the kitchen was completely bare except for a few dead leaves, bugs, cobwebs in the corner, and dust. There were footprints on the dusty floor, but that might have been from whoever searched earlier. The pantry was empty, and he noticed a hatch, meaning the cellar was there.

Dan silently moved around the house, checking the rooms. Everything seemed untouched, and the place was mostly empty except for a portrait of some old woman with spectacles in the upstairs hallway. Someone had

drawn a huge, twirly mustache on the stern-faced woman whose grey hair was in a tight bun. He was pretty sure the original artist hadn't done that.

The only thing left to check when he got back downstairs was the cellar since he'd decided to leave it for last. Still moving quietly, he approached the kitchen and noticed a faint shadow through the doorway.

Whoever it was moved to the side where Dan could see them, although it was hard to make out their features. The enemy lunged, and something glinted. Dan batted the man's arm away, grabbed his wrist, and in a flash, he had the enemy's arm twisted behind his back. His dagger clattered to the floor, and Dan had his own to the man's throat.

"I suggest you settle down," snarled Dan.

"Fuck you!"

Someone else came into the kitchen with an arrow nocked in a short bow. "Let him go or I'll put an arrow in your damn skull before you can blink!"

"I'll slit his throat if you draw it back."

"I said let him go!"

The first guy foolishly tried to pull away. "I bet you're just a little bitch anyway."

Dan twisted his arm up higher. "Put the bow down."

"Do you think I'm fucking stupid?!" asked the archer.

"Put it down, and we can talk," said Dan. "I didn't come here to collect a bounty or clean this place up."

"Bullshit! Why should I believe you?!"

Someone else came up next to the archer with a mace. Dan caught the glint of reddish hair in the light from the open door. "I saw your sister, Samson."

"My name's not Samson," the man said far too quickly. "I haven't got a sister."

"And my horse farts rainbows," Dan said sarcastically. "You're a terrible liar just like your sister."

"Let him go," said the archer. "We haven't killed anybody, and this place is abandoned. There's no harm in squatting somewhere like this."

"Put the bow down, and let me talk to Samson," said Dan. "Otherwise, I'll kill you both, and I'll still talk to Samson."

Samson pushed the bow away. "Put that down before he kills Jimmy."

“What the fuck?” asked the archer. “Are you just going to let some damn bounty hunter-”

“Someone would come for me eventually, and I’m not letting you two get killed over this shit. It has nothing to do with you!”

The archer lowered the bow, and Dan shoved the first guy, presumably Jimmy, away from him. He snatched the other dagger from the floor before anybody could try to grab it, and held it by the blade, ready to let it fly just in case anybody made a move.

Jimmy rubbed his shoulder. “That fucking hurt, man!”

“Would you rather be dead?” asked Dan.

“Go back downstairs,” Samson told the other two before turning to Dan. “I’ll go with you if you don’t hurt the other two and keep your mouth shut about them.”

“You’re not really in a position to be making bargains.”

“I didn’t kill Toby and Will!” yelled Samson. “I’m just hiding out here for a bit.”

“Why did you leave if you’re innocent?” Dan suspected he was, but he needed to hear his side of things.

Samson hesitated. “You wouldn’t even believe me anyway. Listen, I’ll leave the mace here, the other two will head down, and I’ll go outside. I won’t make any trouble if you swear to not mention them to Marquess Allard. They haven’t done anything except hide me.”

“It’s a crime to hide an outlaw,” said Dan.

“I’m not even really an outlaw!” snapped Samson.

“Then why are you so quick to come with me?” asked Dan. “Marquess Allard will have you hanged for two counts of murder. There’s no way he’ll just imprison you for this. If you’re innocent, why doom yourself?”

Samson ran a hand through his hair. “I haven’t got many other options, do I? It’s better than trying to fight, and I don’t want to kill or hurt you or anyone.”

“We could go outside and talk first? Maybe I will believe what you say.”

“Fine.” Samson nudged the archer. “Put that away.”

The archer slung his bow over his shoulder and slipped the arrow into the quiver hanging from his belt.

Jimmy held out his hand. “I want my dagger back.”

“I think I’ll keep it for now.” Dan tucked both up his sleeve. Jimmy started to say something. “If you’re so worried I’ll stab you, I think your buddy could put an arrow in my head and stop that. Samson has a mace too.”

He could kill all three in less than a minute and likely come out unscathed since none of them looked like good fighters, but he kept that thought to himself. Jimmy shut his mouth and stomped toward the door.

“After you.” Dan gestured at the door while looking at the other two since he certainly wasn’t going to let either get behind him.

Samson didn’t hesitate, but the archer backed up a few steps before turning like he suspected Dan would stab him in the back when he wasn’t looking.

Once they were both outside, Dan took a cig from the little wooden case in his pocket before offering it to the others. It was a peaceful gesture, and not something bounty hunters would normally do if they intended to kill or catch an outlaw. Jimmy appeared mollified enough as he took a cig, although the archer still seemed suspicious. Samson said he didn’t smoke.

“You’re awfully strange for a bounty hunter.” Jimmy stomped the discarded match into the dirt to make sure it was out before he picked it up. “Don’t leave stuff like that laying around. We try to make it look like we’re not here.”

“One of you stubbed a cig out on the forge, and it made a mark,” said Dan. “It hasn’t rained, so I figured that had to be pretty new.”

While Dan struck a match, Jimmy slugged the archer in the arm. “You’re such an idiot. I told you to be careful.” The archer just scowled at him.

“You wrote your damn name on it,” said Dan.

“That wasn’t me!” argued Jimmy. “I’m not the only Jimmy in the world, and I know how to spell my damn name, thank you very much.”

“Start talking,” Dan told Samson.

“Are you still going to take me in?”

“It depends on what you tell me.”

In the sunlight, Dan could see Samson had a faint scab on his lip like someone had busted it open with a punch. He didn’t have any visible bruises since those would have likely healed by now anyway.

Samson fidgeted with his sleeve. “What did my family say about that night? Or my sister?”

“You had an argument because you called your sister a bitch and refused to apologize,” said Dan. “Your Father said you couldn’t come home until you did.”

“I went to the tavern instead,” said Samson. “I got drunk, and I’m sure you heard about the fight...”

“Everyone has,” said Dan.

“I got my ass beat, and the owner had me tossed outside afterward,” Samson continued with a scowl. “I’m pretty sure that bastard, Toby, was poking my sister. Anyway, I had blood all over my face and on my shirt. I figured since my parents would be asleep, I could just sneak in. My Father wouldn’t kick me out in the morning even though he tries to be strict sometimes. I still didn’t want to go home looking like I did. Teila’s up late sometimes, and she’d freak out if she saw all of the blood. I snagged the torch from near the tavern door and went down to the river so I could clean my face and try to wash my shirt.” He stopped.

Dan motioned with his hand. “Go on.”

“Someone tried to kill me by the river,” said Samson.

“Who?”

“I don’t know! I never actually saw their face. I had jammed the torch down into the dirt near the edge to hold it up and set my hammer down. I hadn’t even taken my shirt off when someone came running out of the dark toward me.”

“So you fought them off?”

Samson rolled his eyes. “No. I never had a chance. Whoever it was got a damn good cut on my arm. I slipped down the bank and fell in the water. I can swim decently, but I was half-drunk, and I figured if I went back to the shore, whoever it was would get me pretty easily, so I let it carry me off.”

Dan narrowed his eyes. “If he got your arm, you should have a mark.”

Samson lifted his loose sleeve to show a cut that looked like it had barely healed. “I don’t think I would have bled out, and the river’s cold anyway. That probably helped. It’s hard to swim when you’re half-drunk and disoriented in the dark, so I don’t even know how I managed to keep my head above the water for so long. I got pretty desperate and tried shouting for help. There’s a rocky bit a few miles down. I don’t remember that part too well because I hit my head on one.”

“I pulled him out,” said the archer. “There’s a good spot nearby where I sometimes put a salt lick down and wait for deer at night. I heard him shouting, and he’s lucky I just barely spotted his form in the water in the starlight. He got stuck up against a few rocks. If he hadn’t, he’d have drowned and been carried off.”

“It was risky getting me out,” said Samson. “If he’d slipped and gotten pulled along by the current, he might be dead now too. That’s why I don’t want you to take them in. He also managed to get me halfway here before I woke up, and they tended the cut and the nasty gash I had from the rocks. I was pretty fucked up for a couple of days, but nothing seems to have been shaken loose in my head.”

“Why didn’t you take him back to the village?” asked Dan, crouching to stub his cig out in the dirt. “I saw the rocky part on the way since I followed the river. It was closer to there than this place.”

The archer folded his arms. “I was pretty sure the cut wasn’t from the rocks because it looked like something a blade would cause. It was too neat. If a guy’s been sliced and ends up in the water, I figured someone wanted to get rid of him. Taking him to the village might have been a bad idea since I didn’t know what was going on. I thought he was an outlaw on his own at first, and when he woke up, he was too out of it to explain things right away, but someone clearly attacked him.”

“And we never go to that village,” said Jimmy. “It’s too close, too small, and someone might remember our faces. If we need to buy something, we always go to towns or cities where we can blend in better and disappear fast if needed. Samson didn’t want to go back right away because he was sure Toby, Will, or Billy tried to kill him.”

“We fought, so…” Samson shrugged. “I wasn’t risking that in my state. I was afraid, and I thought they’d try to kill me again.”

“By the time he was better to travel, notices were already going out,” said the archer.

“Whoever tried to kill me has to be the one that killed Toby and Will,” Samson said with a desperate expression on his face. “I wasn’t in any state to attack anybody for a bit, and I wasn’t even near there. I can’t go back home and claim to be innocent because Marquess Allard will never believe me even if these two vouch for me.”

“We’re not exactly wanted, but we’re still outlaws,” said Jimmy. “We can’t even lie and say we live somewhere proper because nobody will back us up. Anything from our mouths won’t mean pigshit to the Marquess.”

“Word’s been going around that it’s the Grey Wolf,” said Dan. “A lot of the villagers even think that. A widow there-I forgot her name-she thinks she saw a wolf run by her house on two legs.”

Samson blew out a breath. “Last year, she also thought she saw a unicorn across the river, so I wouldn’t believe much that comes from her mouth. But I’m pretty sure the Grey Wolf was a real killer. Sometimes killers stop for a bit to hide, and then go back to doing it.”

“Or maybe he’s dead, and another sick guy is just offing people,” said Jimmy. “Either way, everyone in the area better go out in pairs.”

“Father won’t let my sister leave the village alone,” said Samson. “She’ll be fine.”

“She did leave it alone,” said Dan. “She found your hammer and buried it. I happened to be up in a tree and saw it.”

“What the hell? She found it and then went out alone?!”

“She didn’t want someone to find it and think it was a discarded murder weapon,” said Dan.

“I know she’d want to protect me, but she can’t be running off alone if some killer is around!” Samson looked ready to rip his hair out.

“I told her that,” said Dan. “Your hammer is buried now, so I don’t think you’ll have to worry again.”

“Wait-did you tell the Marquess what she did?”

“No.” Dan explained his reasoning why he thought Samson might not have been the killer. “I’m not taking you in either. But if you want, we could go see Marquess Allard.”

“No, no, no!” Samson shook his head. “Even with the scar, nobody is going to believe me.”

“The villagers think it’s the Grey Wolf, and even Baron Kennin doesn’t think it was you,” said Dan.

Samson raised a finger. “With only you to vouch and two outlaws? Their word doesn’t mean anything, and you didn’t see what happened to me. Even if Baron Kennin thinks it was some serial killer, Marquess Allard could change his mind. He hates me, and he’ll say it was me. He’s a lord. You’re not.”

“Why does he hate you?” asked Dan. “He never mentioned that.”

“Father let me price the repairs on his home two years ago,” said Samson. “Marquess Allard said it was too high and that I was trying to rob him. I was sure that I did it properly, so I got pissed and told him to eat shit. Father went back over it, and I did fuck up the estimated pricing, so that made me look even worse. Marquess Allard hasn’t said a word to me since. He probably still thinks I did it on purpose and tried to fleece him.”

Dan rubbed his forehead. “You told the lord to eat shit, and you started stuff with three guys in a tavern which led to your ass getting beat. Do you have any enemies?”

“I might have a big mouth sometimes, but I haven’t made any actual enemies. Not people that would try to kill me anyway.”

“Did the lord have any issues with Toby or Will?”

“No. It was just me, and he’s simply pretended I don’t exist for the past two years.”

Dan figured the Marquess being a suspect was pretty far-fetched anyway. “Oh, and you got in a fight with Baron Kennin a few years ago, right?” he added.

Samson shifted. “Yeah...it was some dumb argument, and we were drunk. I took a swing first.”

“You really need to rein yourself in,” said Dan. “Your anger has gotten you in big trouble. Maybe you should stay away from alcohol too.”

“I know!” exclaimed Samson. “If I had just apologized, I’d have gone home, and nobody would have a reason to blame me. My family would have known where I was. But I can’t go tell the Marquess what happened. He won’t believe me, and if he speaks to the Baron, the lord will likely believe him, not us.”

Dan knew he was likely right. Lords had a tendency to stick together, and even if Baron Kennin assumed it was someone else, he could be swayed. With no other leads, he might change his mind about suspecting another killer and not give a shit what Dan had to say. Samson would end up in a noose, and people would feel safer...unless the killer struck again. Then they’d realize they had screwed up, but it would be too late for Samson at that point.

“Is there anything linking you to the other two victims?” asked Dan. “Anything at all? Baron Kennin wants me to at least try to find the person

responsible, and whoever did this does need to be taken out.”

“No,” said Samson. “We live in the same village, but there’s nothing else linking us. We don’t have any real enemies or anything like that. We’re just simple people. There are no feuds or genuine problems. No one owes money either as far as I know, so that's not an issue.”

“Toby knew you two?” Dan pointed at the archer and Jimmy.

“We met a few times,” said Jimmy. “I, erm, might have nicked a couple of bottles of good whiskey and sold them to a certain someone.” Dan narrowed his eyes. “Okay, it was Toby I sold them to. But beyond stealing, we haven’t done nothing else! We’re not the kind of outlaws that run around killing and raping for fun.”

“We just filch a few things sometimes to help ourselves out,” said the archer.

“Whatever, I don’t care about that,” said Dan. “I don’t have time to be running around after petty thieves. I’m guessing nobody’s been around here?”

“Just some men-at-arms,” said Jimmy. “We hid down in the cellar and tied it shut. I don’t think they even checked that thoroughly. Other than that, it’s been quiet. Most people don’t want to poke around an abandoned village, eh?”

“I’m not taking you in or even telling the Baron or the Marquess where you’re at,” said Dan. “They might decide to have you executed regardless of what we say. If the real person that’s responsible for this isn’t found, you’ll have to stay on the run. I’m sorry, but there's nothing I can do about that. It’d be safer if you got further away.”

“Sometimes the best place to hide is close by,” said Jimmy. “The Marquess probably thinks Samson ran a lot farther than here.”

“True, but it’s been a while, so moving would be the better option now,” said Dan. “You’re outlaws anyway, so you should know staying in one spot for too long is always a bad idea.”

“There is a good spot we could go to and stay for several months,” said Jimmy. “The thing is, it’s under a group with six men.”

“Pick a different spot.”

“Or you could help us, eh?”

Dan pretended to consider it. “Or I could not spend my time chasing after every damn outlaw in Gredoria.”

“You’re a bounty hunter, aren’t you?” asked the archer. “It’s your job.”

“Actually, this is more of just a side thing for a bit-”

“The group is all murderers,” Jimmy added hastily. “You’d be cleaning filth from the world.”

“Nobody will miss the Heart group,” said Samson. “They’re all bastards.”

“The who?” asked Dan. “I haven’t heard of any group called that.”

“They like to rip people’s hearts out,” said Jimmy. “They’re from southern Camaday.”

“Never heard of them,” said Dan.

“They’ve been behaving for a while,” said Jimmy. “Or at least as far as I know. But you know how that is. They’ll end up killing someone soon. The leader of this gang is missing an eye and part of an ear. It’s got to be the Heart group.”

“These guys sometimes go after pairs and trios like us because they see us as weak,” said the archer. “They’re fucking savage.”

“I prefer to keep my heart where it is,” said Jimmy.

“What, you think I don’t?” asked Dan, putting his hands on his hips.

“What if one of them is the killer?” asked Samson. “With the way Toby and Will were killed-”

“They don’t slit people’s guts open,” said Jimmy. “Don’t you know your heart is in your chest and not your stomach?”

Samson threw his hands up. “Maybe they did something different so people who know about them don’t get suspicious! Besides, if I was a murderer, I think I’d get pretty fucking tired of removing people’s hearts after I offed them. That’s absolutely disgusting, eh?”

“Okay, but still, they should be killed,” said Jimmy. “Come on. If you helped us, we could take six out. Then we’ll have a new hidey spot to keep Samson safe for a while. If you don’t think he’s responsible, help him out a bit more and keep other potential future victims safe. And maybe he’s right. Maybe they are responsible for Toby and Will.”

Dan thought for a few moments. It really didn’t seem like the work of this Heart gang. If a group liked ripping out a specific organ, they’d probably always keep on doing that. Some gangs wanted the world to know what they did. It was also a big middle finger to the authorities who were unable to kill them. They liked the fear they caused, and the stories about

them, and they wore it like a badge of pride that they could be so vicious and still freely run about it.

He didn't feel like doing this sort of work, but such scum did deserve to get wiped off the face of the planet before someone else met a grisly end.

"Fine," he said. "But we do this my way. I'm guessing you're not a fighter, Samson?"

Samson fiddled with the handle of the mace. "I mean, I could slug someone with this. Jimmy gave it to me."

"Anyone can do that. Am I going to have to babysit you? We need real fighters. If you can't parry a hit or move properly, you won't last long. I can guarantee you this Heart gang hasn't made it so long with clumsy attacks."

"I don't know how to properly fight. I don't even know how to use a bow."

"Fine. You better stay here until we're done."

Chapter Five

Dan wasn't looking forward to this, but he agreed on a meeting spot with Jimmy and the archer, who he learned was called Edgin. Dan had told Teila he'd ask around in Fleuve if a body had been found washed up, and he went to do that. If Baron Kennin ever checked around, Dan could honestly say he'd looked.

Obviously, since Samson was alive and mostly well, nobody had found him washed up near Fleuve. The men at the fishery said nobody had been found dead in the river or near it for over three years.

Jimmy said the Heart gang had taken over an old mill six or seven miles down the river. Everybody thought it was haunted after the miller hanged himself one night a couple of years back. Dan couldn't believe that it was 1687 and people still believed in ghosts. If they existed, every city should be loaded to the rafters with them because people died every day. Every single county that suffered from a hold war should have them drifting all over too.

"It's because he killed himself," Jimmy whispered when they had gathered outside of the mill a couple of nights later after midnight. "That's why they think this place is haunted. Maybe he had unfinished business too, eh?"

"What, like milling more flour?" asked Edgin.

"It's all a load of rubbish. Now hush." Dan peered between the foliage of the bushes they were hiding in. Snubby was tethered far off. The mill was dark and seemed abandoned.

"What if they moved on?" asked Edgin.

"Then it's ours," whispered Jimmy.

"I said shut it," hissed Dan.

He didn't think they had a guy out patrolling, but it was better to be safer than sorry. He'd ridden by earlier in the day on the pretense of just being a simple traveler, and he'd even stopped to water the horse by the river and smoke a cig. Nobody had run out from the mill to attack him, and he hadn't seen anyone, but he'd had the feeling that someone was watching him.

“Remember what I said,” whispered Dan.

A low stone wall surrounded the yard by the door opposite the river. Dan went ahead and quickly climbed up to crouch on top and look around. In the window, he could now make out the faintest crack of light. The invading residents must have hung a cloth over the window and hoped that combined with the closed shutters did the trick. Most locals wouldn't dare come here at night anyway.

After ten minutes, the others knew that it was safe to approach, but they stayed down behind the wall. A lone man was better for the next part, so Dan jumped down into the yard, approached the door, and simply knocked quite loudly.

He heard a noise from inside, but nobody rushed to answer, so he knocked even harder. “Hello?!”

Someone actually opened it a few moments later to reveal a dirty-looking man in leather armor. “Fuck do you want? The mill's closed for, er, repairs.”

Dan widened his eyes and tried to look innocent. The man probably already thought he was a total idiot for coming here anyway. “I'm terribly lost, and I'm trying to get to Fleuve, but I think I might have taken the wrong road or something. I'm not from around here.”

The man just stared at Dan for a moment. Behind him, he saw a tin lantern and a couple of bedrolls. There was only one other man by the lantern, wrapped in a ragged cloak. He probably had a weapon drawn underneath it.

“So you just pick an old, dark mill to ask for directions?” asked the first man.

“I'm really lost. I noticed a light. I'd prefer not to sleep outside if I can help it.”

“You're not from around here?” The man smiled, probably thinking this was great because no one would miss Dan for a while. The other man by the lantern stood and kept his back to the door. “Why don't you come in for a moment? Fleuve's actually not too far, and I can even give you directions to the best inn there that's not too pricey.”

Still keeping up the dummy act, Dan smiled as he stepped inside. As soon as the door was shut, the cloaked man turned, showing that he was holding a mace. A second later, Dan's throwing knife found its mark in the

man's throat. The first guy snarled and went to draw his sword, but he was too slow.

Dan thrust his dagger into the side of his neck and jerked it, opening up a nasty wound and severing the carotid artery. The outlaw fumbled for his neck as blood sprayed out, but it was already too late for him. Dan flung the door open so Jimmy and Edgin would see the light and know to come. Another man came down from the second level with an axe.

Dan drew his sword, parried the enemy's attack, ducked, and swung for the knee. The outlaw shouted as he stumbled backward. Dan thrust his sword into the man's throat, ending him. Edgin appeared in the doorway and aimed up at someone above him.

A second later, another fell and landed in a heap on the floor with an arrow sticking out of his leg. Jimmy hurried in and dealt with him while Dan rushed up the stairs. If there were still only six in the group, that meant two were left. He barely even needed the other guys.

A skinny man came rushing down toward him with a sword, but he didn't even get close. Dan nailed him in the throat with another throwing knife and let him skid down the rest of the way on his face before he continued.

The last enemy only had one eye and must have been the leader. He had his sword drawn, but his stance was poor, and his grip wasn't even right.

"I don't want any trouble," he said, backing up slightly. "For fuck's sake, if you want the money or whatever we have, take it and go."

Bullshit. Dan caught the flash of movement to his left behind a support post. A seventh man must have joined the gang at some point, and he rushed out, thinking Dan was distracted by the talking.

He wasn't. He jumped aside to avoid the sword coming toward his face and lashed his own out. The blade caught the enemy in the side and opened up a huge gash just as the leader darted forward. The poor stance and grip earlier had just been an act to seem weak.

The leader was quick and agile with his weapon. Dan barely managed to parry an attack that would have ended things quite quickly. As footsteps pounded up the stairs, he ran across the floor to put distance between them and used another throwing knife as the leader tried to follow.

He shouted as it hit his remaining eye, effectively blinding him. Dan batted aside his sword and ran him through in the gut. The leather armor put

up a token resistance but split under the force. He twisted the sword and jerked it back out. The leader let out a wheeze before he collapsed in his own blood.

“Jeez, you barely even needed us,” said Jimmy, breathing heavily as he came up. “You pretty much tore them through them all by yourself.”

“It’s still better to have someone watch your back.”

The guy with his side sliced open was still alive, and he tried to crawl away toward the wall. Edgin shot an arrow into his back, and the enemy collapsed with a thump.

“Also, you can help me with the bodies.” Dan noticed the suspicious look on Edgin’s face as he stepped around Jimmy. “What?”

“Throwing knives?”

“I was raised by a Native Gramoan woman.” Dan pulled out a piece of cloth from the inside of his boot to clean his gory sword. “She taught me all kinds of stuff.”

“Why?” asked Edgin.

“So I could protect myself. Why else? She probably didn’t plan on me helping outlaws kill other outlaws to take their spot.”

“Well, good riddance to this trash.” Jimmy leaned over to look at the leader’s face. “That is one ugly bastard, and that was before you blinded his other eye.”

Dan pulled out the knife to clean that too. It made a nasty, wet sound, and he flicked it off before cleaning it. Jimmy and Edgin tipped the bodies over the edge to let them fall so they didn’t have to drag them downstairs.

The outlaws had a few coins, half-decent weapons, and leather armor. Dan was pretty sure there wasn’t any bounty in the area if no one even knew about them. Still, he could bring the heads to Marquess Allard as proof that he’d been doing something productive while he was gone.

It was tempting to create a tale to make the Marquess or the Baron believe that one of these men was responsible for killing Toby and Will. But it still didn’t solve the problem. A real murderer was running around freely.

Dan had no idea what else to do at this point. He’d come to a dead end as he figured, so he could only return to the Baron and hope he’d put in enough effort.

He had the feeling there was something he was missing, but he just couldn’t figure it out. He took the outlaw’s heads to Marquess Allard, and

asked around in case anyone remembered something. No luck.

He took a trip to the mill on the pretense of a last check of the area to make Marquess Allard happy. Samson, Jimmy, and Edgin were safe in their hideout. Hopefully, Baron Kennin would be happy enough with what Dan had done, pay him the rest of the money, and leave him be.

Chapter Six

Dan sat in the Baron's office and gave him a rundown of what he'd done, although he had to leave out the parts with Samson, of course.

"The killer has probably moved on," he said. "There was nothing to find except that gang, and I took care of them. If they're responsible, good. If not, there's not much else to be done, but at least they won't hurt anyone."

"That's disappointing."

"I tried my best and ran all over the area looking for this murderer," said Dan. "We both knew this might have been useless."

Baron Kennin sighed and fiddled with his quill. "This is my hold, and I don't want rabble like that running free. My people deserve safety."

"I understand that," said Dan. "But Toby and Will's killer is likely long gone."

"Ones like that occasionally come back."

"I can't live there and be Billy's bodyguard or spend forever hunting someone down," said Dan. "I have nothing else to go on."

Baron Kennin ran a hand through his hair. "All right, I'll pay you the amount we agreed on since you didn't pretend to look around for a day or two and hurry back. Plus, you got rid of some other outlaws, and that's always good." He gave Dan a hard look. "Are you sure you saw nothing or heard nothing that would be a clue but seemed irrelevant at the time? Nothing at all?"

"Nothing," Dan said firmly.

"Fine. Do you see the painting on the wall there?"

Dan turned his head to look at the portrait of the last Baron. "Yes, it's your Father." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something come sailing over the desk, and he instinctively caught the coin purse with one hand.

"Good catch," said Baron Kennin.

"Give me some warning next time." The weight felt right, and Dan relaxed a little, glad the Baron hadn't tried to wiggle out of paying. "What about your Father?"

“He took good care of this county and city while he was the Baron,” said the lord. “I wish to do the same for my people.”

Dan was tempted to say unless it involved Muslims. They could be tossed to the lions, but he held his tongue.

“Sometimes, a Baron needs help from others. I’m only one man, and I can’t be everywhere at once, nor do I have magic powers to see everything.”

“The Catholics would go on a witch hunt if you could.”

Baron Kennin laughed. “They probably would, and I’m sure the Christians would join them. But still, thank you. I knew you could protect yourself if needed.”

“Mmhm.”

“You can go now. Oh, and Snubby is yours to keep.”

“Thanks.”

Dan certainly couldn’t keep Snubby in the shop, and the horse would have no cover from the elements in the backyard, so he’d have to pay to stable the horse in the city. Later, he could get a carpenter to build a little barn in the back lot behind the shop to save on that expense.

Once he paid for Snubby to be boarded a few streets over, he rushed to the shop. It was closed for the day, and Muhammad was probably eating dinner upstairs. Dan quietly unlocked the door, slipped in, locked it, and tiptoed upstairs. The door to their living quarters was open.

“This place is terrible,” Dan yelled as he reached the top. “I have to come upstairs to get the owner myself if I want to buy something? What kind of service is that?”

Muhammad dropped his fork on the table and flew out of his chair in alarm before he realized it was Dan. “You almost gave me a heart attack!”

Dan laughed before he walked in and set the coin purse on the table. “I’m back, and Baron Kennin paid me too. I see you didn’t set the shop on fire. Good job.”

Muhammad clapped him on the shoulder before picking up his fork and sitting. “And you didn’t get killed. Good job. Tell me what happened.”

Dan did so before he counted the money. With the other coin purse from the first half paid to him, it was a decent amount. Dan pushed half of the money over to Muhammad.

“That’s for your savings.”

“But I didn’t do anything. You’re the one that went out looking for some killer.”

“You watched the shop all by yourself for ages, didn’t you?” asked Dan. “Take it.”

He figured that in a few more years, even if there were any unforeseen expenses, he’d definitely have enough to go on Hajj. He put his money in the hiding space under a stone in the hearth before getting a bowl of the vegetable stew that Muhammad had made. The bread was yesterday’s loaf, but it was still good.

“He’s not going to ask you to go check things out every time there’s a murder in the county, right?” asked Muhammad.

Dan made a face as he spread butter on a piece of bread. “If he tries that, I’ll let him know I’m not going to be his errand boy even if he does try to make things difficult for us. There’s only so far I’ll go.”

“Good.”

“Did Vaywin come by?”

“No.”

Dan worked the shop most of the next day. Afterward, he left to head to Vaywin’s with a few things he figured she could use. As usual, she was in her cave. Judging by the foul odor coming from the pot on the fire, she was cooking egg stew. It tasted great, but it sure smelled bad. While they ate, he told her what happened.

“The Marquess didn’t give you nothing for killing those bandits?” Vaywin asked once he was finished.

“No.” Dan shrugged. “They weren’t wanted.”

“Technically, every outlaw is wanted.”

“I know that, but there weren’t any notices around,” he clarified. “Nobody knew they were there.”

She narrowed her eyes at him as she set her empty bowl down by the flat stone she used as a hearth. “Why do I feel like you’re hiding things from me?”

He’d decided he wouldn’t mention Samson being alive to anyone, ever. She wouldn’t go blabbing to everyone, but it was still safer that way. “If I’m not telling you something, maybe I have a reason.”

“Hmm. You know, if you wanted to make money faster, you could go after bounties. It’s legal, and some of them pay quite well, and the groups

aren't even always that strong. They get by from picking on the weak and using numbers to overwhelm them."

"I know, but I could also get killed by doing that. I'm not invincible even with your Herafwig."

She sighed. "I've done it, and I didn't get killed. You could also go back to--"

"No." He cut his eyes at her. "I'm not doing that again. That's done, and I hope you burned it."

"It's in the chest in the back."

"Why wouldn't you get rid of that?" he asked.

"You might need it again someday."

"I won't need it. When I said I was done, I meant it."

"Maybe I should give it to Camden," she said with a snort to show she was joking. "He'd probably like it, but he'd never use it for its intended purpose."

She didn't bring it up again for the rest of his visit. He used the back of her cave for Maghrib and left. Snubby seemed to know the way now with barely any guidance. Once Dan was past the gate in Nantret, he turned down a dark street, intending to head to the stable where he boarded Snubby. The shops on that street didn't have living quarters above them, and they were all closed for the night.

Snubby suddenly paused and let out a nervous snort. The lantern attached to the saddle emitted a pool of light, but Dan couldn't see anybody around. He squinted, trying to see in the shadows where the light didn't touch. If the horse was worried about something, he better be too, but he barely even got a grip on his dagger before something slammed into his back.

Or someone. Dan's first thought was that some daring robber had picked him. An arm looped around his neck just as Snubby panicked and reared up with a whinny. Whoever had jumped on him wasn't in the saddle properly, and they started to slip with their arm still around Dan. He tried to stay on, but the weight was too much, and both of them slammed into the ground.

His assailant tried to roll to get on top of his back. Something metal flashed in the light of the lantern as Snubby's front hooves hit the cobblestones. Dan knew he better get away from the horse too in case it

backed up. He drove his elbow backward with enough force to loosen his attacker, allowing him to quickly roll out of the way.

The enemy grunted from the hit and had to scramble up to avoid Snubby's hooves as he whinnied again and backed up. Dan drew his sword, trying to see in the wild shadows that jumped around as the horse danced sideways. Whoever had thought Dan would be an easy mark to rob was wearing a dark hooded shirt, but that was all he got to take note of before the man came at him with two daggers.

This wasn't a common robber.

The enemy ducked under the sword swing and tried to bring a dagger up to stab him in the chest. Dan jumped back in the nick of time and parried the next strike with enough force to send it flying from the enemy's hand.

The man leaped on him, sending him to the ground. The point of the remaining dagger made a loud scraping noise on the cobblestones as it missed Dan's head by a few inches. He couldn't swing his sword properly like this, and he needed to get the man's dagger before it ended up buried in his eye or throat.

Dan grabbed his wrist, dropped the sword, and wrapped his free hand around the man's throat to squeeze. For a few moments, they grappled, deadlocked, neither making much progress. Finally, the enemy threw himself backward, broke free of Dan's grip, and gasped for air as he got to his feet.

Metal glinted as Dan tried to sit up and grab his sword. A throwing knife whizzed by his head as he jerked aside, and it clattered uselessly against the cobblestones somewhere behind him.

"I know your fucking tricks!" Dan snarled with his sword in his grip once more as he jumped up.

Snubby suddenly neighed and ran toward the enemy who was raising his hand. Dan didn't jerk aside in time and felt the blade sink into his upper left arm on the outer part of the flesh. The pain only made him angrier as the man ran to the side of the street to avoid Snubby.

He turned as if considering whether to come and attack again. The split-second hesitation cost him, Snubby was out of the way, and Dan, having already pulled the knife from his arm, threw it

The enemy didn't make a sound as it hit him. Judging by the dancing light, Dan was sure he'd gotten his opponent in the upper right pectoral

muscle, although he'd been aiming for the heart. Unfortunately, it wasn't a fatal strike, but the enemy must have decided he was done. He ran toward the nearest shop and started scaling the side.

Dan had been so involved in the fight, he'd barely noticed the voices at one end of the street. Someone was holding a lantern to light the way as they walked, and they weren't close enough to figure out what had just happened. Dan thought about asking them to get the guards, but it was unlikely that Camden would be caught so easily, and even if he was, he knew things about Dan that would get him in huge trouble too. They'd both end up in a noose.

The dark shape was already on the roof, and he swiftly disappeared. Dan was tempted to follow, but retreating would be the safer option now. He swung himself into the saddle and kicked Snubby into a gallop. The horse took off in the opposite direction of the two people. Forget the stable. Dan wasn't staying out any later than he had to, not with Camden lurking around on the rooftops.

It took a few minutes to get to the shop, and he noticed a dark figure by the front door. He gripped his sword in one hand as the person became clearer in the light of the lantern.

Camden.

"You fucking bastard!" snarled Dan, jumping off of Snubby. In a flash, he had the sword tip at Camden's throat.

Camden barely flinched, but he narrowed his eyes. "Get that away from me," he said in a deadly quiet voice.

"You're a bold bastard to come here right after what you did," said Dan. "Who paid you? Huh?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," said Camden. "Are you fucking insane?"

"Don't play dumb with me. I know your way of fighting, and who else would leap from a roof to attack someone?"

If Camden had been jumping around the rooftops, it would have been easy to get to the general shop before Dan, who had been forced to stick to the streets with Snubby. Camden could have even hidden clothes somewhere and changed.

"I wouldn't attack you," said Camden. "Unless you give me a very good reason to do so. That means you better get your fucking sword away from

my neck.”

“Show me your chest.”

“And just why should I do that?”

“Do it, or else,” warned Dan. Camden glared at him but started unbuttoning the linen shirt he wore. “Show me the right side.”

He had no injury. No mark. Nothing. There should have been at least a small wound.

Dan lowered his sword and stepped back. “I’m sorry.”

If it hadn’t been Camden, who was it?

“Considering the way you’re acting, I’m assuming I got here too late,” said Camden, redoing the top buttons.

“What do you mean?”

Camden wordlessly held out a piece of parchment. Dan took it, unfolded it, and squinted at the writing in the light of the lantern. Someone had scrawled five words, trying to seal his doom.

Hamdan Ahmed. Tatick Street. Nantret.

“Who gave you this?” asked Dan.

“I don’t know who passed that along the chain,” said Camden. “Who got your arm?”

“Clearly not you like I thought. They got away.”

“You must have made an enemy.” Camden tilted his head. “I doubt anybody did this simply because you’re a Muslim or they think you charge too much for potatoes. You’ve pissed off someone.”

“I looked into those murders that I told you about,” said Dan. “I never found anything pointing to the real culprit. I killed the Heart gang, but I’m sure that was every member, and nobody would likely care to avenge them. I need to set Snubby up outback.”

He used a barrel for water and had feed for sale, so he simply gave some of that to Snubby for dinner. A carpenter was supposed to come by in a couple of days to build a small but proper barn to keep him shielded from the elements. For now, the horse would be fine in the fenced yard.

“Thanks for running after that bastard, Snubby,” Dan told the horse who snorted.

“Look at Dan, all soft over a horse,” said Camden. “What a cute name too.”

“Shut up.”

They went into the shop, and Camden remained downstairs while Dan went up. Muhammad was lounging in an armchair by the fire with a book.

“I’ll be downstairs for a bit,” said Dan. “A friend came by.”

“All right.” Muhammad’s eyes went right to the bloody tear on Dan’s sleeve. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Someone tried to rob me,” said Dan.

Muhammad sat up straighter. “What?!”

“It’s just a cut from their shitty dagger. They ran off.”

“Did you tell the guards?”

“What the hell are they going to do?” Dan started digging in a cabinet by the wall.

“Catch the bastard.”

Dan pulled out a bottle of vodka, some bandages, and a small rag. “They’ll look around the area a bit, send a couple of guys to walk about, and since they won’t find the culprit, they’ll shrug and tell me to be careful. It was dark. I couldn’t see the person’s face or anything worthwhile about their appearance.”

“Did you hurt him back?” asked Muhammad.

“I decked him in the face,” said Dan, taking his shirt off. “He ran pretty fast after that. Hopefully, that’ll make him think twice in the future.”

“They can go look around for someone with a messed up face now.”

Dan shook his head while he dabbed the wound with vodka. It burned like fire, and he held back a swear. “Why bother? We live in a big city. Stuff like that happens all the time.”

Muhammad gave him a funny look. “You’re awfully calm for someone that got stabbed, eh?”

“It’s the outer part of my arm. It’s not that bad. It’s not like they got me in the chest or something.” Dan flung the rag into the fireplace, and when it caught, the vodka flared blue for a quick second as it burned off. “We just got through a hold war not too long ago, so excuse me for not being panicked because some petty robber wanted my coin purse. He wasn’t very tough if he ran after one punch.”

Muhammad fiddled with his book. “I suppose you’re right.”

“I’m guessing he knows nothing of your past,” Camden said when Dan returned downstairs with his arm bandaged under a clean shirt.

“A bit, but not certain parts. I don’t just tell anybody about stuff like that.”

“*Those* bits.” Camden boosted himself onto the counter with a snort. “Good God, if he knew that, he’d probably run for the hills, eh?”

“Maybe,” said Dan. “But that part needs to stay dead.”

“What if you get married? Are you going to hide that from her too?”

“I don’t know. A potential wife might also go running for the hills if she knew that stuff, but I guess if I’m sleeping next to someone for the rest of my life, I should be honest. There’s no marriage in my near future, so I’m not particularly worried about that right now.”

Camden tilted his head. “Whether it’s in regards to your past or the murders you investigated, you’ve made an enemy.” He pursed his lips. “Apparently, they don’t know I wouldn’t kill you or even make an attempt. I took the note to show you, but I left the money. Once I don’t come through, and it’s clear that you’re still alive and kicking, someone else will likely come after you.”

“Who else is like you?”

Camden shrugged. “I don’t know anybody. I told you that years ago.”

“Exactly,” said Dan. “Years ago. You must know of someone like you by now.”

“I don’t.”

“Do you mean to tell me you don’t know a single other assassin? After all of this time?”

“Do you think there’s a special tavern where assassins hang out to chat about their day and who they last killed?” Camden crossed his ankles and rolled his eyes. “Please. Imagine if a couple were sloshed and got into a fight. The blood would be streaked halfway up the walls by the time they got through with each other.”

“Thanks for the imagery.” Dan started pacing while he racked his brains and tried to think. “You don’t suspect anyone of being in your line of work?”

“No.”

“And you had nothing to do with Toby and Will?”

“Nothing,” said Camden. “I haven’t killed anyone in quite a while.”

He could be lying about not knowing any assassins, but Dan wasn’t sure. Camden had always been truthful before, but blabbing about others like him

might not be a good idea. Considering the attacker had used throwing knives, it might have been Toby and Will's killer, whoever that was.

Baron Kennin had wanted the murderer to come after Dan, like bait, but he'd probably assumed that would happen somewhere closer to the original murders, not in Nantret. He didn't want someone like that in the seat of his county.

Whoever his attacker was likely hadn't sent the note. Why pay that much yet go do the dirty work anyway?

Dan could go tell the Baron, but what if it wasn't the original killer? Whoever used the chain to contact Camden obviously wanted him dead, but it might not be the one who offed Toby and Will. Still, he had a feeling these two things were related. Even if it wasn't, the last thing he needed was the Baron poking too far into his past and looking at parts that Dan would rather keep hidden.

The other thing that worried him was the possibility that the chain might have been used twice. If the attacker outside had been paid, that meant someone figured Camden might not come through. Hiring two would be insanely expensive, but someone might think it was worth it.

"Fuck," he said. "I don't even know if it's safe for Muhammad to be here alone anymore."

"If they want you dead, Muhammad won't be a target," said Camden. "I've never gone after the friends or family of a mark. It's pointless, and it's also more likely to make the target flee and go into hiding. You don't want a mark becoming suspicious and fearful."

"I'm guessing all of your targets were normal people, but you're probably right," said Dan. "This has something to do with the investigation, somehow. I never should have agreed to what the Baron wanted."

"It might not be because of that. If someone figured out—"

"I'm making tea," Muhammad yelled from the top of the stairs. "Do you want some?"

"No, I'm good, but thanks," said Dan.

"No, thanks," called Camden.

"Be careful what you say," Dan said in a low voice as Muhammad's footsteps made the ceiling creak slightly overhead. "I'm going to the Gate to see if I can find out anything."

"She won't say a word," said Camden. "You know that."

“We’ll see.”

Chapter Seven

“Oh, you’re in deep shit now,” Vaywin lectured Dan. “Possibly two assassins after you-”

“One,” he said. “Camden wouldn’t touch either of us.”

Vaywin tilted her head. “Whoever it is, they’ll find someone else. They must have money and a desperation to see you dead.”

“I’m going to the Gate to see if I can find out about anything, and I need you to watch Muhammad just in case. Stay at the shop, and say you’ve been feeling ill in your stomach. I wouldn’t want you by yourself out here if you’re not well, even if it’s not life-threatening.”

“Do you expect me to act sick or something? He’s going to start questioning things.”

“Just say it’s women’s troubles,” said Dan. “That’ll shut him right up. When I get back, you can pretend to feel better.”

She scowled. “Great. Ages cooped up in a shop...it’s not Muhammad they want, you know?”

“I know that, but I’d feel better with a few precautions. It’s just in case because we don’t know who we’re dealing with.”

“I’ll do it, but I won’t like it,” she grumbled. “You know going to the Gate is useless. She won’t say a word even if she knows who brought the note.”

“I’ve got a weapon against her,” said Dan.

Most people thought assassins were just something from storybooks that chased after royalty for treacherous bastards that wanted the throne. Or maybe they were real, but only in faraway countries, not Gredoria. Few people knew of them and even fewer knew how to get one. It was never done directly, and probably no assassin would actually bother with a request to kill the King.

To get an assassin, a person had to go through others, and one place to start was the Gate whorehouse in Patting, located in the next county over. Dan figured the name was a joke referring to the gates to heaven being

between a woman's legs. The low-class establishment itself looked more like something one would find on the road to hell.

Red scarfs covered the dingy windows so the light coming from the lanterns set in them appeared red. It was probably supposed to be erotic, but it just looked eerie. The sign was crooked, and the stone walls needed the attention of a mason. A couple of men were leaning against the wall when Dan approached, but they paid little attention to him as they smoked.

The inside was no better once he entered through the squeaky door that needed oil for its hinges. The cloth carpet was threadbare, and mystery stains decorated it. A faint, foul odor in the air made Dan wrinkle his nose. The bar was to one side, and a few men sat on rickety stools while drinking. A whore who looked like she'd been worn out and used up several years ago was practically hanging off one of the men. In another corner, a couple of guys sat. Each wore a sword on his belt to discourage troublemakers, and one's shirt was half-unbuttoned. A tiny sign hanging on the wall said "no refunds."

None of the other women looked much better. A man had to be desperate to come here and risk a disease.

A whore with too much kohl around her eyes was immediately at Dan's side. "For me, it's a shilling for a half-hour. Anything goes. For a shilling and sixpence, you can do whatever you like for an hour. If you just need five minutes, it's only sixpence."

"What a deal," Dan said sarcastically. "I need to speak to the madam."

"Why speak to her when I'm right here, eh?" she purred as she cocked a hip out and ran a hand down her side. "I know tricks beyond your wildest dreams."

"Like how to give a man the pox?"

"I don't have the pox," she said, barely keeping her voice syrupy-sweet.

"I can see that sore on your lip even with the rouge you've got plastered on," he said. "It doesn't hide it, and I'd rather my dick not fall off in a year. Now, where's the madam?"

Her pleasant expression dropped as she made a noise of derision before pointing to a door. "She's in her office in the back. Down the hall."

Dan skirted a couple of other women that tried speaking to him. The hall was just as dingy and smelled like smoke. He hadn't been here in years, and Madam Lya had apparently made no effort to improve the place at all.

The door to her office was ajar. He knocked and heard her familiar, wheezy voice yell to come in.

“I swear by the saints that if this is about hair ribbons again-oh.” Madam Lya blinked. “I haven’t seen you in a while, Hamdan. Where the hell have you been?”

“Busy.”

“On the straight and narrow now, eh?”

“Yeah.” Dan eyed the plump cat sitting on the chair in front of the desk and made a shooing motion at it. “Get down.” It just glared at him before proceeding to a lick paw as if the human wasn’t worth its time.

“That’s my top killer right there,” said Madam Lya. “He’s nabbed at least fifteen mice this week. I’m surprised he’s not as fat as a house by now.”

“I can’t believe a single customer comes here with or without mice running about. I’m afraid I might catch something just by breathing.” He grabbed the back of the chair and tilted it so far forward that the cat had no choice but to jump down or slide off. It shot him a murderous look and slunk under the desk.

“My ladies have talents, and men will always pay for such things,” said Madam Lya. “But I guess your God doesn’t allow you to have any fun.”

“Disease sounds real fun.” Dan sat in the chair and gazed at the Madam. She had certainly aged, but her greying hair was still twisted up as usual, and she had too much rouge on her cheeks. It looked ridiculous on younger women but positively silly on her. A cig was between her yellowed fingers. She had to be past seventy by now.

“How’s Vaywin?” she asked.

“She’s good.”

“I have a feeling you didn’t come here to just say hello and catch up on old times.”

“I need to know who’s been by,” said Dan.

Madam Lya lit a new cig from the old one. “The usual people. I have lots of regulars, and the five-minute fee is cheap and popular. Most don’t take a half hour. Hell, some men don’t even need five minutes.” She snorted. “Three thrust and done.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I don’t get as many...requests, if that’s what you mean. If you want that kind of work, you know you can’t just come to me directly for jobs. I’m too

old now to be keeping track of things beyond my house and collecting info on baddies that should be eliminated. Besides, my current ladies don't have any problems now beyond whatever silly squabbles they get into."

"I need to know who's put a target on *me*."

Madam Lya's eyes widened in what appeared to be genuine surprise. "I don't look at the slips. I don't want to know who's marked. It's not my business, eh? It wouldn't change anything."

"Where did you get it from?"

"One of my girls had a customer." Madam Lya took a drag from her cig. "I don't know who gave it to her. I didn't even see him."

"I want to ask her."

"You're not doing that."

"To figure out who wants me dead, I will," he said. The cat, who was probably the cleanest living thing in the whole building, apparently wasn't mad anymore since it came out from under the desk and rubbed on Dan's leg.

She shook her head. "If it got out that I let marks come in here and ask my girls who uses the chain, I'll never get asked again. There are already fewer requests, but we still make a bit of coin from it."

"Nobody has to know unless you blab it around," said Dan.

"Absolutely not," she said. "I have no issue with you, but it's just business. You can protect yourself, and my suggestion is you pack up and leave. That would be safest, eh?"

Dan narrowed his eyes. "Okay. I guess I'll just go tell the Earl what's going on here."

Madam Lya flicked her cig in her ashtray and tried to act nonchalant, but he could detect the faint tension in her posture. "If you tell him about the chain, he'll want to know how *you* know of it, and that'll look mighty suspicious. He'll start digging into your past. Or he'll simply think you're a lunatic and making up tales to entertain yourself."

"I don't need to mention that at all. Let me speak to the woman who got the note or else."

"You haven't got anything on me. Not without implicating yourself. Nice try, Hamdan."

He picked up the cat who purred. "Vaywin told me some things about this place one time. For the right price, you can get something special here."

I'm sure that the guard downstairs with his shirt half-undone is willing to sell his arse for a good deal of money to any man that wants that sort of thing. Money that you would get a cut of, obviously. The Earl here is a devout Catholic, and I have a feeling he wouldn't like it if he knew such things were happening in his town. He might shut you down."

"You wouldn't dare," she snapped.

"Don't tell me what I wouldn't dare," he said, stroking the cat's head. "I guess you'd just have to pack up and leave."

She gave him a hard look and held it like that would intimidate him. He glared right back until she finally averted her eyes.

"Annabelle got the note. She's upstairs, last door on the right. She's off, but she'll talk." Madam Lya took a bracelet from her drawer and tossed it to him with a dirty look.

The cat jerked its head to follow the shiny bracelet's path. Dan caught it one-handed and nudged the kitty onto the floor. "There, that wasn't so hard was it?"

"I helped you and Vaywin before. You could be a little nicer. Oh, and leave that with Annabelle before you leave."

"You helped us for money." Dan stood. "Neither of us believe you ever really cared. It's always been just business to you."

He slammed the office door behind him when he left and stalked down the hall. A narrower side hall led to a set of stairs. A man on guard sat in a chair, ready to prevent lone people from going up by themselves. Dan held up the ornate bracelet, and the guard gave a silent nod.

Most of the whore's room doors were closed, but one was open, and he heard a couple of ladies speaking. The last door on the right was closed, and he knocked.

"Come in," called a voice.

"Are you decent?" he asked.

"Yes, but who is it? Madam Lya should have told you I'm not taking customers today."

A woman looked out from the open room with a suspicious expression, like she thought he was randomly bothering someone. He held up the bracelet, and the woman silently retreated.

"I only need to talk."

There was a long pause. "Fine. Come in."

He cringed at the decor when he entered. Just about everything from the bedspread to the color of the walls was red and pink. How could anyone look at that all day and not get a headache? Dan had never seen Annabelle before, who sat at her vanity in a frilly red dressing gown while she brushed her curly hair.

She remained facing the looking glass and cast him a strange look. "What do you want if you're not a customer?"

Dan left the door open and perched on a chair by it. "You got a note from someone to pass on."

Annabelle shrugged. "So?"

"I want to know who gave it to you."

She kept brushing her hair. "If you're intended to be the victim, you're bold to be coming here, eh? I don't know who the man was. He paid for my special services, but once we were up here, he kept his hood up, gave me the note, said to make sure the madam got it, and left. I never saw what he looked like."

"What was he wearing?"

She remained silent as she kept primping her hair, but she raised an eyebrow at him in the looking glass. He sighed and placed a few pennies on the little side table by his chair.

"He had on a green cloak, and the weave was thick, so he certainly wasn't poor," she said, the money having loosened her tongue. "His trousers were black, and so was his shirt. All good quality, but plain. Nothing else was special about what he was wearing."

"The voice?" He added a couple of extra pennies to the pile.

"Higher class," she said. "Either someone rich or possibly a lord."

"Did it sound like anyone you know?"

She snorted. "No. Most higher ups and rich men don't come here for entertainment. There are much better whorehouses that they could become regulars at."

"Yeah, I'm sure most higher ups wouldn't risk the pox."

"I haven't got the pox," she snapped.

"That's what they all say."

"I've been lucky. Lucky enough that I can leave soon and start my own house with my savings."

The lines around her eyes spoke of her age. She had to be at least forty. Even the more desperate men would probably prefer someone younger.

“What did he say exactly?” asked Dan. Silence was his reply. “I already gave you money.”

She let out a deep sigh as if this was such a bother. “I think I need a bit more to keep my savings well-stocked. What if I have unexpected expenses?”

He flung a couple of extra pennies onto the table.

“Thanks. He said, ‘make sure the Madam gets this. The rubbish needs to be cleaned up, and this man has done bad things.’” She smirked. “Like I care for the reason why he wants someone dead. I’m not the one doing the killing.” She set down her brush and finally turned to look at him directly. “I always look at the names on notes out of curiosity, even though it doesn’t tell me much. I never had a wanted victim come to see me, so what bad things have you done, Hamdan? You finally pissed off the wrong person, eh?”

“Maybe I haven’t done anything bad,” he said. “I know very well this service is occasionally used on people who haven’t done anything worth death.”

“Plenty of people think they’re innocent of all wrong-doing.” Her eyes slid to the coins. “There’s one more thing.” He sighed and added a few more pennies. “That looks a bit skimpy.”

“I think I gave you quite enough.”

“Then I think I’ve said quite enough. Maybe I should shout for the guard to take you down and toss you out on your arse.”

Damn money-grubber. Dan tossed a shilling on the table.

“May God swallow the Earth underneath him,” said Annabelle.

“Eh?”

“That’s what he said, and there was nothing else,” she said.

Dan placed a couple of more pennies on the table. “Was there anything distinctive? A limp? A scar on his hand? A weapon tucked in his belt? Anything like that?”

She shook her head. “No. Nothing.”

He thought for a few moments. “Have you ever had a Muslim customer or someone from Egypt, Arabia, or anywhere in that area? Anyone that’s not a typical European or Gramoan?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Think real hard.”

She frowned. “I don’t care where someone is from or what religion they follow. They pay, we play, and that’s all I give a shit about. Their religion or family roots don’t count, and their religion must not mean much anyway if they’re coming here. I’ve had people that looked or sounded French, German, English, Gredorian, Camadayian, and Emaraynian. I think I had an Irish guy once. But by looks or voice, I don’t think I’ve had anyone from a place like you mentioned.”

He couldn’t think of anything else to ask so he stood. “Thanks.”

“You better run far and run fast, eh?” she added.

“We’ll see about that.”

He left the bracelet with the money and left the room. Annabelle would return it to Madam Lya. He hurried out and emerged into the cool night air, which smelled much fresher than the inside of the whorehouse, but it didn’t soothe him.

May God swallow the Earth underneath him wasn’t an insult used by Christians or Catholics. Likely, only a Muslim or someone from the Middle East would know that, not a typical Gredorian or anyone on the Gramoan Continent.

Dan didn’t know anyone that followed Islam or had roots in it, except for Muhammad. He was pretty sure Muhammad had no reason to off him. Besides that, why would another Muslim want him dead? Even if they knew about Dan’s past, how would they have suspected him in the first place?

Chapter Eight

“Someone was murdered in the city,” said Muhammad.

Dan had barely been back at the shop for thirty seconds. Judging by Muhammad’s expression, it wasn’t a typical one involving a robbery or something like that.

“Was it someone we know?”

Muhammad shrugged. “I don’t think so. Someone was found dead in an alley with their gut slit open like those two from Riverside. They were stabbed in the throat too.”

Dan stared at him for a second. “When did this happen?”

“The body was found early this morning. That’s what a customer said. He thinks it’s the Grey Wolf.”

“Oh, great. Half of the city will believe that by sundown.”

Muhammad shifted on the stool behind the counter. “I don’t know if the Grey Wolf was a real outlaw or whatever, but whoever killed those two in Riverside has moved on. This sounds like the same person did it. You were attacked too.”

“That was just a shitty robber who ran after a good slug to the face,” fibbed Dan.

“Well...okay, maybe your attacker wasn’t the same person, but you better be damn careful if you go out after dark,” said Muhammad. “I bet it’s the same killer running around, and who knows when they’ll move this time? We’ll have no idea if he’s still around unless we hear of a similar murder somewhere else.”

Dan wondered if Baron Kennin would want to see him again. Hopefully not, because what was he supposed to do?

Vaywin was drinking tea upstairs. “I’m sure Muhammad already told you about the murder.”

“Yeah.” Dan dumped his pack near his bed. “Same mark.”

“Did you find anything at The Gate?”

He joined her at the table to recount his trip.

“Did you ever say anything in Arabic to anyone?” she asked.

“No, I don’t even speak that much in conversational terms,” said Dan. “I had no one to practice it with while growing up so I don’t really remember much. You know-what? Three words of it?”

“Your Mother tried teaching me, but I wasn’t a very good student,” said Vaywin. “Still, you remember a little. Did you ever curse by accident?”

“No,” he insisted. “Besides, I sound like a regular Gredorian, same as everyone else, so my accent wouldn’t give me away.”

“Thankfully, you don’t do that stupid ‘eh?’ thing they do. That’s so annoying.”

“Also, I never talked to them. I only did what I had to do and left.”

She brushed back her greying hair. “Maybe someone wants you dead because you’re a Muslim. Just because Gramoa is more tolerant in general of other religions doesn’t mean everyone likes Jews or Muslims. There will always be those who hate anyone they deem different. Someone might have been willing to use The Gate because they think ‘filth’ should be cleaned up.”

“I feel like this is connected to the murders, not because I follow Islam. We just had one in Nantret now!”

“I know, but maybe it’s just a coincidence,” she said. “There’s nothing to connect you with Toby, Will, or this new victim. Some killers just move around like that while they feed their sick heads. In a month, this person might be in a new city and already have some other random kill under their belt.”

“I was attacked by someone with skill,” he said in a low voice, although he was sure Muhammad couldn’t hear them downstairs. “I doubt someone being after me and the murders are a coincidence.”

“I don’t see anything linking you all either,” she said. “Someone could just simply hate you, and someone else might just be a sick outlaw that likes to leave a sign as a fuck you to the authorities. It happens.”

“I don’t think it’s that.”

She stared at the fire. “Maybe you should just go.”

“And do what exactly?”

“Take your money and start over elsewhere. We could go far away. I doubt assassins will go to eastern Gredoria. We could even go west or head to Emaray or Camaday.”

“You know some have gone pretty far to get a mark.”

She bit the tip of her thumb. “But why make it easy? You’re all I’ve got now. I know you can take care of yourself, but you’re not invincible. Do you want to be looking over your shoulder every day for ages? I also don’t have an unending supply of Herafwig. That stuff can’t cure everything anyway.”

Dan knew that, and the savage scar on his thigh was a reminder. Herafwig stopped bleeding and could be used to cure injuries that would normally be lethal. Native Gramoans usually kept that secret pretty close, and surprisingly, whites hadn’t ever figured out what its real purpose was. It was rare anyway. Vaywin had some, and Dan always carried a little pouch of it just in case.

“Muhammad will be fine if you just go,” she said.

“What am I supposed to tell him? ‘Sorry, Muhammad. I’ve decided to set up shop elsewhere, and you’re not invited. Good luck with whatever you decide to do in life.’”

“It’s better than worrying about your life,” she said. “You can’t tell him the truth, and what if that’s not even why someone is after you? The last thing I want is to hear you were found dead in some alley.”

“I know that, but I don’t want to run. The cost to move and set up elsewhere is enormous. I still want to go on Hajj.”

“There won’t be any Hajj if you’re dead,” she hissed.

“What if I’m not safe elsewhere?” he retorted. “The Gate isn’t the only place to get an assassin. If someone truly wants me dead, they could come after me. I don’t even look Gredorian, so I can’t exactly just blend into society somewhere else. Do you want us to separate too? A man with a Menopotak relative or friend also sticks out like a sore thumb. You’re the only family I’ve got left now.”

Her face softened. “Fine. But you better be damn careful and don’t miss next time. I’m heading back to the cave. I need a break from constant city noises.”

“I’ll come with you.”

He took her back, and when he returned to the shop, Muhammad had a dark look on his face. “A guard said the Baron wanted to see you again. I said you were out, but you’re supposed to go up there as soon as you can.”

Dan made a frustrated noise.

“I don’t know what he expects you to do,” said Muhammad.

He'd probably expected Dan to run around and talk to the victim's family and friends to see if anything was suspicious. Again, there wouldn't be much to find.

Baron Kennin didn't look too happy when the Master Steward brought Dan into his office.

"I'm sure you heard about the murder," Baron Kennin said once the Master Steward closed the door.

"Yeah." Dan sat in a chair across from the Baron. "I didn't find anything last time, and I won't be able to this time either if that's what you're expecting."

"So you wouldn't investigate if I asked?"

"No," Dan said firmly. "I'm a shopkeeper."

Baron Kennin gazed at him for a moment. "I wouldn't even know where to send you this time anyway. I have no idea who the victim was."

"Oh. Was it some beggar wandering about?"

The lord shook his head. "No, not a beggar. He had a dark blue cloak that was of decent quality. He didn't look poor, but I have no idea who he was. The body must have been there for over a day amongst some rubbish. A patrolling guard just happened to notice something looked off when he went by. You can get an idea of how long someone has been dead. A body starts to get stiff after death, but it doesn't last. The corpse wasn't so rigid, but it was long since cold, and the blood was all dried."

Dan knew that, but he wasn't admitting it. "I thought it was found this morning."

"Found," said the Baron. "That doesn't mean he'd just died. It was down near the end of Smith Street where that old blacksmith shop is. The one that closed down, remember?"

"I think I know what you're talking about."

Dan had left the morning after he was attacked. It had taken half a day to get to Patting, he'd done his business at The Gate that night and left early the next morning. He had prayed Asr before he'd come to the Baron's, and he'd normally be eating dinner now, or getting ready to make something. It hadn't been a full forty-eight hours since he'd been attacked. The stiffening of a corpse typically lasted around a day and a half.

That meant the person must have been attacked the night he was.

Baron Kennin was watching him so he thought of something to say. “There’s a little school by the blacksmith right?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah, I know where that’s at. So...it must have been a traveler if no one recognized the face.”

Baron Kennin nodded. “Exactly. It’s a shame because I have no idea who to contact. I’ve already had a few men go around to ask innkeepers if anybody knew the description, but brown hair and eyes isn’t much to go on. There wasn’t anything remarkable about the person. They didn’t have a pack on them or anything, but none of our innkeepers have had anything like that forgotten or left behind. I guess it was stolen.”

“Yeah, that happens.”

“But he did have money in his pocket,” said Baron Kennin.

Now, that was strange. What man traveled with decent clothes, money in his pocket, had nothing else, was killed in such a brutal way, and wasn’t robbed of his coins?

“If it’s the same murderer as in Riverside, considering the way the victim’s gut was split open, I can see if the killer took his pack. Even a murderer might want his clothes and things, but why take his pack and not check his pockets? The money would probably be worth more than a change of clothes or whatever.”

“Maybe someone was coming down the street,” said Dan. “He got nervous and ran.”

“It was in the alley next to the closed shop, and the house there is abandoned,” said Baron Kennin. “Even if someone happened to be coming along the street, I doubt they’d go poke around in a dark alley on the way. He could have hidden or come back. I doubt this murderer has a day job, so any kind of money or items to sell would be important.”

Dan spread his hands. “I don’t know. Whoever did it is clearly fucked in the head. Maybe they didn’t think of it. I don’t know how a murderer’s mind works.”

Baron Kennin blinked. “I’m just saying. It’s a bit strange. Remember, I told you that I don’t want that kind of rabble in my hold, but now it’s in my *city*. People are going to start talking about the Grey Wolf again and looking to me to do something.”

“You said you don't have magical powers,” said Dan. “Neither do I. I can't help you with this. People should stay in after dark, and that's what I'll be doing. If the killer has moved, that means he'll leave again. Unfortunately, he'll likely find a new victim elsewhere, but at some point, he'll either be seen or caught. Or something will happen to him. There's nothing I can do.”

Baron Kennin sighed. “There isn't much to go on, but you could do me a favor and walk around the city at night. A lone target by himself-”

Dan gaped at him. “Are you out of your fucking mind? You want to keep your citizens safe, but you'll send one out like bait? Again?”

Baron Kennin seemed to ignore the extreme rudeness. “You can take care of yourself well enough. A couple of guards could tail you. If by some chance the killer knows you investigated the village, he'd probably try to off you.”

“Absolutely not,” Dan said with an edge to his voice. “I'm not wandering around Nantret at night and hoping to be seen as an easy target.” He could barely believe the Baron had the gall to ask such a thing and try to use him again.

The lord opened one of his desk drawers and pulled out a dagger. For a split second, Dan thought it was a threat, but Baron Kennin merely examined the hilt and turned it over as if expecting the answer to his problems to be written right there.

“It was just an idea. I simply want the killer to be found. This was by the unfortunate man, but it doesn't have a name on it.”

Dan glanced at the dagger again and froze for a moment. As the Baron looked up at him, he struggled to keep a neutral expression.

“You have men-at-arms. Have one of them dress like a commoner or something and do it. I'm a shopkeeper, and I'm not going to be bait.”

Baron Kennin balanced the dagger across one of his fingers. “Fine. Go home to your shop. I'd stay inside after dark if I was you. I'll be putting out a notice to advise the citizens to do the same.”

There were no threats about making life hard. Maybe the Baron knew he'd gone a bit far, although Dan didn't trust him. Still, he had his limits on what he'd do, and walking around Nantret murder bait wasn't happening. He'd already done more than enough for the Baron.

He kept himself looking calm as walked through the city to head home, but his mind was in turmoil. He knew that dagger, and the time frame fit, but he couldn't ask the Baron anything else about the body and what it wore.

Camden had worn a dark blue cloak that night he visited, and that dagger was his personal one. Dan recognized the design of the hilt. After Camden left, he must have been attacked shortly afterward. Dan had offered to let him sleep on the floor of the shop, but Camden had said he'd be fine. Dan hadn't even thought to ask where his stuff was, but it was possible Camden had left it on a rooftop somewhere instead of renting an inn room. Like Dan, Camden wasn't averse to sleeping somewhere strange or hiding his stuff so he didn't have to carry it.

He had to know.

Muhammad usually slept like a rock and didn't seem to hear Dan when he quietly dressed that night in the dark. It was easy to slip downstairs. He made sure the door was locked and started hurrying through the streets on foot with a throwing knife in his hand just in case.

Not everyone was smart enough to stay in. A drunk weaved by while singing to himself.

"Camaday thinks they got the best fighting men, but to match up to a Gredorian, it would take at least ten. No, make that twenty, and that still won't be plenty...hee hee..."

Dan rolled his eyes as he kept walking. The idiot better hope someone didn't off him just to make him stop his awful singing.

Once he was near the old blacksmith shop, he looked around to make sure no one was about. The street was quiet, and no one had a light in their window this late. The large awning over the forge peaked, and the sides came down low enough for him to grab the edge.

Dan hoisted himself up and made his way up the slope. Halfway down the other side, he jumped onto the roof of the shop itself and quietly crouched so he could listen and let his eyes sweep the area. He didn't exactly expect the murderer to be lurking up there, but it was still better to be safe. When he'd been attacked, the person had come from above.

He couldn't see much in the dark, but he couldn't detect any human shapes on the roof, and nobody lunged for him. He carefully made his way around the edge, and sure enough, he found a dark cloth pack in the corner.

Whenever Camden went somewhere, he often left his stuff on a rooftop. He said it was safer, and an innkeeper had robbed him one time, so he didn't like renting a room and leaving his stuff there unattended. It was also easier after killing a mark. He could switch clothes, take care of an injury if needed, and be on his way.

It was highly unlikely that this pack belonged to anybody else. Dan felt through it, and his hand touched something cold. When he pulled it out and touched along it, he could tell it was a cloak clasp shaped like a C. He couldn't see it properly in the dark, but he knew it was old and scratched up. Camden had never talked about his family, but it had probably been a present from a member a long time ago.

It was definitely his body that had been found in the alley below Dan. Camden must have fought like hell, but even he wasn't invincible. A dagger thrust to the throat, and then he was left like rubbish on the ground with his gut opened. An assassin couldn't be called a great man when he killed for money, but he hadn't been the worst.

He hadn't turned on Dan and didn't deserve to be brutally murdered like that. Much fouler men than Camden existed in the world.

Had the killer been watching him, knowing he knew where Dan lived? The perpetrator must have known they were linked somehow or that Camden wouldn't make the kill. He'd mentioned leaving the money behind because he wouldn't take a job that involved Dan.

Whoever he was dealing with was smart and knew too much.

"Shit," he muttered under his breath. Maybe he should have Vaywin move in with him, just in case. She was still tough despite getting older, but if Camden could be taken out, she could too. It was true that assassins didn't typically go for friends and family because they didn't want the target to go into hiding, but this might not be a normal assassin.

He felt through the pack to see if there was anything else. Spare clothes, throwing knives in a leather sheath, a coin purse, and a couple of other odds and ends. Dan felt a little piece of parchment, but he couldn't read it in the dark. It was probably nothing, but he stuffed it in his pocket just in case. Nothing else seemed important, and he didn't want to bring the pack back because what would he do with it?

He couldn't even tell Muhammad that his friend was dead. If asked in the future, he'd just have to say that they'd grown apart over time. It

happened.

Dan knew that if he had a light, he wouldn't find anything important in the dark alley below. The pack could stay. He took the sheath of throwing knives knowing Camden wouldn't mind. If this place was bought, and the roof ever needed fixing, they'd probably assume the pack was left by some daring beggar that climbed up. The contents would be unrecognizable and battered by the sun, wind, and rain at that point.

He jumped onto the awning with little trouble and inched his way to the edge. The drop wasn't big, and once he was down, he was extra careful as he walked home. He kept feeling like he was being watched, although it was likely just nerves.

Once he was in the living quarters above the general shop, he felt much better. Muhammad was still asleep and snoring. Dan would be getting up about this time anyway for Fajr. After he quickly changed into his sleep clothes, he lit a candle to bring in the privy room so he could cleanse himself. He remembered the note as he put the candle holder on edge of the washstand but put the thought away. It was probably nothing, and besides, he needed to be in the right frame of mind now, which meant not letting his focus wander.

Once he was finished praying and put his mat away, he could go to sleep for a couple of hours until sunrise. He was exhausted from being up and walking around at night. He remembered the note and dug through his trousers pockets for it. After stuffing the sheath of throwing knives under his mattress, he tucked the cloak clasp under there too, and took the note near the fireplace.

The burning embers gave off a little light, so he crouched and unfolded the parchment. It was probably a shopping list or something worthless like that. He squinted at the words running across the page in smooth, flowing script.

May God swallow the Earth underneath you.

Dan stared at the words for a moment until Muhammad let out a particularly loud snort and rolled over in his bed. Dan jumped, nearly dropped the parchment into the embers, and swore under his breath.

He glanced behind him, but thankfully, Muhammad snored on. Dan looked at the parchment with its unfamiliar handwriting that didn't belong to Camden. He couldn't have had this before he died. If someone had left

such a strange note for him, wouldn't he have said something to Dan since he brought the other one?

This note could have easily been placed in the pack later. Whoever killed Camden assumed Dan would go looking for his stuff and find it. Suddenly, the idea that someone had been watching him outside didn't seem so foolish.

"Fuck," he muttered.

Chapter Nine

“I spanned the crossbows and left them upstairs,” said Dan. “One’s under my bed, one’s under yours, and one is in the privy room. You still got the one under the counter, right?”

Muhammad raised an eyebrow. “Yeah. Er, do you expect me to be attacked while I’m taking a piss or something?”

“No, but I’m just being cautious. There’s a crazy murderer on the loose.”

“You didn’t seem that uptight when you came back from the Baron.”

“I couldn’t sleep last night and was thinking about having Vaywin stay here with us,” said Dan. “She’s certainly not helpless, but if some sick bastard is looking for easy victims, a woman living alone in a cave might look pretty good to him.”

“That’s true, but she won’t want to live here, eh? While you were last gone, she was practically climbing the walls.”

“She’ll get over it. I just want us to have protection in case the murderer ever decides to break in or something.”

“He seems to prefer lone people, eh?”

“Yeah, but you never know. Why take chances with a lunatic? Who knows what he might end up doing?”

Dan told Vaywin about Camden, the note, and then said she should stay at the shop for a while. She acted like he’d asked her to roll around in dog shit.

“You expect me to live in the city for who knows how long?”

“Camden is dead!” exclaimed Dan. “You live out here alone-”

“If anybody tries to kill me, I’ll cut their damn dick off and make them eat it.”

He made a frustrated noise. “I know you can fight, but you’re getting older, and you’re not invincible. I seem to remember someone reminding me that I’m not invincible either not too long ago. Even if you screamed for help, nobody would hear you out here. I don’t want to come visit you one day and find you dead in the cave or out in the woods somewhere.”

“I still think we should leave the area entirely. It’s you they want, not me.”

“They’ll just follow. Besides, I have to go do something. I’d feel better if you stayed at the shop.”

“What do you need to do?” she snapped.

“Tax and rent time will come, Camden obviously won’t be paying, and if someone goes knocking to demand that he pay up, he won’t be there. He might have some things he’d rather nobody find.”

“He’s dead. I highly doubt that he cares at this point. In his next life, he won’t remember this one.”

Dan didn’t believe in people being reincarnated, so he ignored that last bit. “Let people think he was just an artist. It’s easier that way. I don’t think he can be linked to us, but you never know. It’s another precaution, and he was a friend to us before. Pack up whatever you want to take. If I have to drag you kicking and screaming into Nantret, I will, and I won’t care what the gate guards think.”

“I could kick your ass with one hand tied behind my back,” she muttered, but she got up to pack.

Dan needed an excuse to go out so Muhammad wouldn’t get suspicious, and Vaywin had that covered. Dan told Muhammad he had to go to Nan’s Apothecary in Turling to get her some stuff.

“We have an apothecary here,” said Muhammad. “And a wise woman. She’ll have whatever you need.”

“They’re inferior herbs,” said Vaywin.

“Herbs are herbs,” argued Muhammad.

“I think I know what works best for women’s troubles by now. You’re a man. You wouldn’t get it.”

“Okay, okay.” Muhammad clearly didn’t want to hear any more about women’s troubles, and he rushed downstairs.

“That worked,” said Dan.

She rolled her eyes. “What are you going to do with Camden’s stuff?”

“Bury it somewhere,” said Dan. “I don’t need it. Maybe I’ll keep a few throwing knives since I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.”

Snubby was excited to be out again on another trip. Lucky horse. He didn’t have to worry about assassins or anybody being after him. In Turling, he got to stay at an inn stable, eat oats and be lazy while Dan did the dirty

work. He paid for a room and went out that night as if he was heading to a tavern.

Camden's home was dark as expected. Dan went around the back and tried the windows on the first floor. They wouldn't budge, but a couple of good hits with the hilt of his dagger broke the glass. He listened, but nobody seemed to have heard anything. He cleared away the shards and felt for the latch inside to pop it. Once he swung the window open, it was easy to climb in.

He made sure the curtain was securely closed before he pulled a candle from his pocket and lit it with a match. He was in the kitchen. After lighting a couple of other candles on the work counter, he took one and headed straight through the sitting room and to the bedroom.

Camden had a box under his bed with all kinds of things like throwing knives, daggers, and black clothing. Basically, it was a kill box. Anything he might need to take out a mark was in there. Dan put the clothes in the chest of drawers, decided to take a couple of good throwing knives, and put the rest in an empty pack he'd had folded and stuffed in his cloak pocket.

It didn't seem that Camden had kept a journal, so Dan didn't have to worry about that. The assassin wouldn't have been stupid enough to keep such a record of everyone he killed anyway.

He was pretty sure Camden kept a different sort. In the kill box, Dan found a square piece of wood with lines scratched on it. Seventy-four scratches probably meant he'd assassinated that many people. Damn, that was a lot.

Dan put that in the pack with the weapons. Camden had left his sword behind on a rack by his bed. Then again, he was deadly with a dagger and throwing knives, so it wasn't like he needed the bigger weapon. Woe betide any common outlaw that had ever tried to mess with him on the road. Dan hooked it on his belt, shouldered the pack, and went into the sitting room.

He paused and held the candle aloft as he looked at some of the paintings on the wall. Camden had certainly been skilled at more than murdering people. If he had stuck with only that job and never ended up assassinating people, he'd be alive now.

He saw the pale canvas on its frame in the corner and turned to see what Camden would never finish now.

Dan squinted at it and approached. The rough outline showed wild horses running through a field. In the blank sky, words had been painted.

May God swallow the Earth underneath you.

It looked like blood, but it was probably just paint. Dan glanced at the little red pot on the side table with the lid off. A red-tipped brush lay next to it. The words on the canvas gleamed wetly.

They were fresh.

Dan saw the figure in the kitchen doorway and shifted the pack just in time. The crossbow bolt hit the pack instead, and the metal daggers and knives inside prevented it from entering his chest instead. A moment later, the now-useless crossbow came flying toward him when the enemy flung it. Dan jumped to the side and dropped the candleholder. It clattered on the hearth and tipped over. The candle remained lit, and he barely ducked the throwing knife in time as he ran for the bedroom.

One hit the doorframe and narrowly missed his skull. He slammed the bedroom shut and latched it just as another knife hit. Footsteps sounded on the floor as the man stalked toward it.

Bracing his palms on the door, Dan couldn't see shit in the dark, but he didn't need to. He carefully backed up until he touched the wall directly opposite, and he pulled out a throwing knife. Actually...wait...he had a much better idea.

The enemy wasn't content to leave him alone. A solid kick hit the door while Dan rushed to use his dagger on the bedsheet. Another thump sounded while he fumbled in the dark. It wasn't perfect but it would do. More kicks slammed the door, and something cracked. The pillow wasn't too heavy, but the weight would be just enough.

Dan could still smell the odor of the spent match mixing with burned cloth when the door was finally kicked open. As it bounced off the wall, the figure ducked, clearly expecting a throwing knife to come whizzing his way, but Dan came from the side.

The man never had a chance. Dan swung the burning pillow in its sheet sling toward the man who instinctively tried to jerk away from the sudden, blinding light and the natural fear of fire flying toward his hooded face. The pillow surely didn't hurt, but the enemy still shouted as it struck him in the face. Dan jumped back and threw a knife with his left hand. It struck, and he rushed forward to kick the man in the gut.

The enemy fell back with a grunt as he swiped at his hood, which had a few flaring embers burning on it. Dan reached down, grabbed him by the throat, and dragged him into the middle of the room. The pillow and sheet sling combo was tossed into the fireplace before it grew too out of control, and he dropped the enemy.

“Fuck you!” Dan roared before slamming the bottom of his boot onto the man’s face.

Bone crunched as the enemy let out a shout. The next stomp to his gut knocked the air from him. All he could do now was curl up on the floor in pain. Dan readied his dagger as he went to get the candle which was still burning on the hearth, although it looked all messed up now from being on its side. It still did the job.

He set it on the floor and put his dagger to the man’s neck before yanking the hood back to look at the face of the person that wanted to kill him.

“It was nothing personal, Hamdan,” gasped Camden. “Just business.”

Dan jerked back and jumped away. What the hell? He was dead.

Camden snorted with a strained expression. The throwing knife had pierced his chest. “What? I’m not a ghost. Some other poor guy took my place in the alley.”

“You took the hit out on me?!”

“No.” Blood dribbled from Camden’s mouth and mixed with the blood coming from his nose. “It wasn’t me that wanted you dead. But the pay was good. One last job, and I would have retired to southern Camaday. I knew you’d come back here...always the good guy. You wouldn’t have wanted people questioning my knives and talking about me behind...my back...in death...”

His voice was weakening. He didn’t have much time left with the throwing knife in such a vital spot.

“Who wants me dead?” demanded Dan. “It wasn’t you that attacked me that night in Nantret.”

Camden shook his head, although Dan wasn’t sure if it was because he wouldn’t say who else was involved, or if he was agreeing with the second statement.

“If it’s not personal, tell me who wants me dead!” insisted Dan knowing only seconds remained. “Tell me their name! Who paid you?”

For a moment, Camden looked like might be willing to say who since death had him in its grasp, and it was already tightening its cold grip. He had nothing to lose now, and no repercussions can touch a dead man. Whoever he was working with wouldn't even know.

Camden opened his mouth a bit and made a faint sound like he was about to speak, but his eyes already had a faraway look. He went limp and remained still. A few last drops of blood trickled from his mouth to the floorboards.

“Tell me!” Dan shouted in frustration. “I thought you were my friend!”

Camden didn't move again. The warped candle gave up and went out.

Dan dropped his dagger on the floor and heavily sat down. The pillow and sheet in the fireplace sizzled with embers, but even those were dying off. The room smelled smoky from the scorched cloth and feathers of the pillow.

Dan had thought of Camden as a friend in a way. There hadn't been too many people he could be open with in the past, but in the end, the assassin only cared about money. Dan had just been another mark. Maybe he should have known when Camden once said there was no room for good guys in his line of work. Only the money mattered.

He'd lied that night when he said he wouldn't take a job to kill Dan. But this wasn't just a simple job from a note found in a secret spot. He was working with someone who knew how dangerous Dan could be but wanted to toy with him and drag this out.

Fine. Let the second bastard come for him. Dan would kill him too. He picked up his dagger and collected his stuff. A couple of stomps put the rest of the embers out, and he stood over Camden's body before he left.

“Let someone find your corpse and think whatever they want.”

He upended the pack and let everything spill out on top of the body. The daggers and knives clinked together and thumped on the floorboards. Dan grabbed one and slit open Camden's stomach.

“You can die with your own mark, you traitorous bastard. You sold me out.”

Still seething, he was about to leave the house when he thought of something. He took one of the lit candles from the kitchen and hurried to the fireplace. After pulling out the burnt remains of the pillow and the sheet, he lifted the stones out of the way and used the poker to loosen the dirt. He

used the small shovel for scooping ashes to dig. Over a foot down, he hit something hard.

Under the hearth was a good spot to hide valuables. If a thief broke into a house, he'd have to put the fire out, use something to lift the hot stones, and dig down. That would take time. The owners might hear something and wake up in the meantime.

And if the owner didn't use that spot to hide something, then the thief had wasted his valuable time. But Camden had been using this spot. After Dan wrestled out the heavy box and lifted the lid, he found a sizable amount of money. It was far more than what the Baron had paid him for the task of trying to find the killer from Riverside. Maybe that had actually been Camden. If not, it was whoever he was working with.

Camden had saved a lot from hits and selling his art. The box contained silver pennies and shillings, but he must have converted most of his wealth to gold nobles at a bank. Dan picked one up, which was worth eighty pennies, and looked at the gold gleam of King Stefan's face in the candlelight. On the back was the rearing lion crest with the S for Stark.

Even after giving Muhammad and Vaywin a chunk to make sure they were fine, Dan was sure he could go on Hajj. He could really do it soon. It wasn't even stealing since Camden was technically a bandit by the structure of the law. It was no crime to kill an outlaw and take his stuff, and it wasn't like a dead guy needed his money anymore.

Dan still had the other killer to worry about, but this was one problem solved. He grabbed the empty pack because he needed something different to carry his money in. The box was too awkward.

Even with all of the money and the idea of truly being able to go on Hajj, he barely slept that night. The betrayal hurt like hell. He managed to catch a little sleep between Fajr and sunrise and decided that would have to do. After he left the inn, he did buy some herbs at an apothecary. If Muhammad happened to notice that he came back without them, it would seem odd.

Then he realized he had no idea how he would explain his newfound wealth. Shit. What was he supposed to say? That he found a pack full of gold nobles by the side of the road? Muhammad would never believe that. Maybe Dan should just come clean with Muhammad and let him decide if he wanted to be his business partner anymore. Probably not.

He was riding down the crowded street when something caught his attention. A woman was pruning the flowers in front of her small home and tossing the dead bits into a little pile to one side. She stood and wiped her shears on the corner of her apron as she turned around. Another woman walking by on the street called out a hello as she passed, and the one with the shears returned it with a quick wave.

Dan nearly fell off of his horse when he dismounted, and Snubby let out an annoyed snort at being abruptly left in the middle of the street. Dan pushed someone out of his way and ignored the yelled “Watch it, asshole!” as he ran into the yard. The woman stepped back in alarm, and Dan suddenly wondered if he’d made himself look a total idiot. Not only an idiot but a creep for scaring a woman.

But closer, he could see he wasn’t wrong. She had more lines around her eyes, and he was sure there was probably grey in her hair, but he couldn’t tell with her hijab covering it.

Still, he’d recognize her face anywhere.

“Mother,” Dan managed to get out. “I thought...”

He couldn’t finish, but he didn’t need to. She recognized her son, grown as he was, and she dropped her shears to run to him.

“Hamdan!”

In all of his memories of her, he was always smaller. When he’d sat on her lap, he’d had to look up. Now as she hugged him, he realized he was much taller compared to her. She still smelled like flowers just as he remembered.

“I looked for you everywhere,” she sobbed. “I thought you were dead.”

“Vaywin took care of me,” he said in a strangled voice. “She said you never made it out of the field.”

“I did make it out.”

She said something else, but he didn’t hear it. Vaywin had said she’d seen Mother dead in the field. Even later, after they were far away, Dan had tried insisting that his parents weren’t dead, and they had to go back and find them. Vaywin had said she’d seen them both dead, and she hadn’t mistaken Mama for anyone else. Other women sometimes wore coverings over their hair because of dust and such, but nobody else wore them like a hijab. No wishes were going to change the truth.

When Dan cried at Vaywin's words, she had said she wasn't trying to be cruel, but he had to face facts. Holding onto false hope would only make the hurt worse later on and drag it out. When he'd finally accepted the truth, he'd begged God to bring his parents back somehow.

Mother being alive meant that Vaywin had lied, and she had taken advantage of the hold war to steal Dan.

Chapter Ten

Dan hoped that somehow his Father would be alive and in the house, or maybe at work. He wasn't. He truly had died during that hold war, and Mother had seen his body herself. Dan got half of his childhood wish.

Adiva told him what had happened that day.

When she told Dan to run to the house and hide and that she'd be right behind him, she followed. The traveling fair had been using the field outside of town, and it turned into a mass of screaming, frenzied panic as the citizens tried to run to the town for protection when the invading Baron's men seemed to come out of nowhere.

Dan remembered it was easier to flit between people while he ran because he was so small. Mother hadn't been able to do that as easily, and she had to hold her skirts up to avoid tripping. Her son had gotten ahead of her, which was what she'd wanted anyway because it meant that he had a better chance of escaping even if something happened to her.

Vaywin had been nearby at first, but Adiva had lost sight of her in the throng. With so many citizens running and panicking, nobody noticed or cared when someone shoved past Adiva, causing her to fall and twist her ankle. She'd tried to get up, which was no easy task with everyone rushing by, but her ankle couldn't support her weight at all. Somebody accidentally kicked her when they ran by, and she thought for sure she'd be knocked flat and crushed.

Luckily, Vaywin found Adiva in the crowd and managed to haul her up. Instead of taking her home, she practically dragged her into the nearest Church. Others were running in as well. Vaywin left Adiva with a few other women and ignored her protests that she needed to get to Hamdan.

Vaywin told her to stay put. The house was too far, and she'd be better off here. Despite Adiva's adamant protests, Vaywin ran out. A soldier got too close and met the business end of her spear before she disappeared. The monks were already in the process of closing the thick, heavy doors. They weren't going to open them to let a woman out, no matter how desperate

she was to get to her son. Less than thirty seconds after they were closed, they heard other citizens pounding on the door and begging to be let in.

Moments after that, those in the Church heard the screams of the others as they were slaughtered by the enemy.

Being inside the Church meant they were safer at the moment, but it didn't mean the soldiers couldn't or wouldn't get to them. The acceptable thing in wartime was to break the door down, drag out the hiding people, and kill them in the street. Blood wasn't supposed to be spilled in God's house. Sometimes, soldiers didn't even want to break into a Church and felt that was too much.

But customs weren't always followed, and if soldiers got in, they might not care about ruining the sanctity of a sacred place. Soldiers hyped on bloodlust didn't always give a shit about anything except more killing.

The men in the Church guarded the windows in case anyone tried to break through, although they didn't look too hopeful. Most didn't have more than a dagger, and a few didn't even have that. A few thumps hit the door, but it seemed that the opposing side intended to leave the Church be. There were plenty of others to slaughter in town.

Everyone spent the long hours trapped inside praying for their loved ones that were elsewhere. Christian, Catholic, Muslim, Jew, it didn't matter at that point. They were all stuck in the same situation.

Once the enemy had their fill of slaughter, rape, and theft, they'd left. The winning Baron would take the county, the survivors would pick up the pieces, and life would go on in general just like it did after every war. As night fell, some of the people wanted out but were refused. If any of the soldiers were still around, they wouldn't hesitate to pick off easy targets. Deserters and looters who took advantage of situations like that might also be lurking.

The Priest didn't allow anybody out until the next morning. A woman helped Adiva limp to her house where she was positive she'd find Dan hiding, but she only found that their home had been broken into, robbed, and trashed. There was no blood, so she wasn't sure if he had gotten that far.

Her husband was found amongst the dead who had tried to fight back. Nobody could find Dan's body anywhere, and she still held hope that he was alive. Maybe he had hidden somewhere besides home and was still too

scared to come out. Everybody that she asked didn't remember seeing him anywhere.

The days passed and turned into weeks without any sign of Dan. He wasn't the only one that had seemed to disappear entirely without even a body to bury.

With no body found, Adiva had spent years hoping that somehow she'd see her little boy skipping down Baker's Lane once more, safe and well. Eventually, she'd moved, unable to stand the house that wasn't a home anymore without her husband and son.

Dan remembered running to the house and thinking Mother, or Mama as he thought of her at the time since he was little, was right behind him. He'd seen the blacksmith's son be run through by a soldier while the rest of the battle spread through the city. He'd gone into the house and hid under the bed, thinking his parents would soon come.

Even after the truth or what he thought was the truth sank in, he'd still harbored secret hope for a while that his parents were alive, and he'd find them.

"Nobody had seen or found Vaywin's body either," Adiva said as they sat in her little home. "Someone said they saw her fighting at some point, but we assumed she'd been killed or maybe...carried off by soldiers. Vaywin took you in? I'm confused that she thought I was dead?"

Adiva's expression was so innocent. Vaywin had been nothing but nice to them when Dan was little. She probably thought that Vaywin saw a similar body and assumed Adiva had somehow gotten out of the Church in her desperation to find her son. With the fighting and panic, it was possible she could have made a dreadful mistake. Maybe she had seen another woman dead on the ground with a covering on her head and a similar dress.

After all, why steal someone's child? Vaywin had *saved* Dan, right? If any other soldiers had decided to search that house more thoroughly, they probably would have killed Dan if they had found him. Vaywin had no real obligation to take in some kid, feed, clothe, teach him, and raise him to adulthood. But she had done all of those things.

Still, their stories didn't match up. Vaywin said his Mother never even made it out of the field. She never said a word about getting Adiva into the Church before running off to fight and get him once things had calmed down. Why would she lie unless she wanted to steal a child? And why Dan?

Of course, he'd already trusted her. When he'd heard her voice, he had scrambled out from under the bed, thinking she wouldn't hurt him. Physically, she hadn't, but after events in his teenage years, he suddenly felt very used.

"I'm not entirely sure," he said. "She said you never made it out of the field. She never mentioned getting you into the Church. According to her, she saw you dead, she saw Father dead, and she came to get me because it wasn't safe. She made sure I had the miniature of you and Father and got me out."

Adiva scrunched her eyebrows together. "That doesn't make sense. Why would she do that?"

"I don't know..." He shook his head. "She lives outside of Nantret, but she's staying at my shop now."

"Well, we must go ask her." Adiva seemed so overjoyed to have her son back, and she probably thought there was some kind of perfectly reasonable explanation for all of this, and they weren't seeing it. "You have a shop now? I can't believe you haven't even really been living that far from me."

"We've moved around a lot," said Dan. "We've even lived in Emaray for a couple of short periods with the Menopotak tribe. Mostly, it was just us two. Eventually, I had some money saved and decided I wanted to open a shop. I have a business partner, and I've been trying to save up for Hajj."

She beamed at him. "You still follow Islam?"

"Vaywin tried to turn me away because she doesn't believe in God, but I remembered all of the prayers Father taught me, and I've done my best to follow Islam even though I had no guidance later on."

Except for some things that Vaywin had convinced him to do.

Adiva took in sewing and cleaned for an elderly woman who was too old to do much by herself anymore. Dan wasn't going home without Mother after he just found her, so they decided she'd come with him to the shop. There was so much to catch up on, they couldn't do it in a day. Still, it was nearly midafternoon before Adiva said she'd had to go tell a few people that she was leaving so they wouldn't worry and think that she had vanished.

While Dan sat in the empty house and waited, he was still floored by the past couple of days. And Vaywin...what the hell was he going to say to her? Now that he had a moment of quiet to think, he started to grow angry. What kind of person stole a kid and made them think they'd lost both parents?

After his teenage years, he had a feeling that she only had one thing in mind from the start. She didn't take him in out of only the pure goodness of her heart. What else had she lied about? She had started things by bringing up Baron Rullen because she knew that would pull him right into her line of thinking.

Snubby had been grazing in the backyard, and he came to the open window to stare at Dan.

"These past few days have been unbelievable," said Dan. "What's next? You'll turn into a unicorn one morning?"

Snubby let out a huff before turning away.

Adiva didn't have a horse of her own, but Dan bought her a palfrey at the local stables. He could certainly afford it now. Neither could barely stop talking on the way back since they had missed so many years together. As they neared Nantret, Dan had made a decision.

"We need to head to Vaywin's cave," he said. "There's something I need to do."

"All right," said Adiva.

"There's stuff going on right now," he continued. "I've got some problems..."

"What kind of problems? Is the shop not doing well?"

"It's not that. I've got things in my past that I'm not proud of."

"Like what?" she asked.

"It's..." He didn't even know how to begin telling her. "We'll talk about it later."

He might lose Muhammad as a friend, and after thinking about things, he wasn't sure if he wanted Vaywin in his life anymore. She could have a damn good explanation for things, and he rather hoped there was some answer that would put all of his doubts and suspicions to rest. Something he simply hadn't thought of.

But at this point, he didn't see how she could explain this away. For now, he couldn't change the past, but he could at least destroy something.

He left Adiva and the horses at the mouth of the cave and headed inside. The hearth was cold, but Vaywin had some wood piled nearby. Dan built a small fire and headed to the back. Her pallet had a folded blanket on top, and next to it sat a small chest that held her clothes and whatnot. He pulled

the chest away and used his dagger to loosen the dirt before digging with his hands. The box was small, and he paused before pulling it out.

How could he ever tell Mother the truth? What woman wanted to hear that her son had killed people and spent years as the elusive Grey Wolf?

When he opened the box, the mask lay inside. The grey wood lined with soft leather on the back had saved his face and nose from hits delivered by a couple of his more difficult targets. More importantly, it had protected his true identity for years.

It had also struck fear into the few that had seen him before he delivered their deaths. With little light, the holes for his eyes would have looked like dark pits. It didn't have the lower jaw, but the expression still seemed like it was snarling, and a few victims had probably thought the devil had sent something to make them pay for the heinous crimes and sins they'd committed.

No one would see it again. He dropped it to the floor of the cave and brought his boot down on it. The wood cracked, and another stomp reduced it to splinters held by leather. It didn't look so fearsome now. He collected the remains, walked to the fire, and threw them in. The flame flared for a moment as it greedily wrapped around the wood bits and started to gnaw on them.

He sat by the fire and lit a cig while he watched it burn. Vaywin had started teaching him to fight when he was six, which wasn't unusual for Native Gramoan parents anyway. As the years passed, he grew proficient with various weapons, and he was a damn good climber. Vaywin said Baron Rullen should die for taking Dan's old home county through war. Plenty of Barons fought each other in Gredoria, but Baron Rullen and his men were said to be particularly vicious.

She said it was ultimately Baron Rullen's fault that Dan's parents were gone even if they hadn't died by his blade. If the lord hadn't wanted to take more territory, they'd be alive. Foul, vicious people who delighted in greed, death, and power should die because they always caused more suffering for innocents. Dan wasn't the only one who had lost a loved one that day.

The concept was simple but true. She said Dan could be someone who got rid of such rubbish, but he couldn't go after a Baron right away. Baron Rullen hadn't lived through hold wars by being a bad fighter.

Dan's first kill had been a Marquess. The next couple had been two of the lord's men-at-arms. Those three had found a wandering man from the Nackama tribe. They'd ganged up on him, killed him for sport, and even bragged about it, which was how the story got around. They didn't have anything to brag about after the Grey Wolf had slaughtered them.

Madam Lya used to know a lot of people and their filthy secrets too. She collected them as greedily as she collected money. A few of her ladies had fled abusive homes and ended up in the whorehouse because they had no other way to survive. Those abusers met their end. A couple of rapists were found with their dicks sliced off.

Camden had killed for money and cared little for the reason why someone was wanted dead. Dan had only killed those who deserved it, and sometimes, he didn't even get paid for it. Two of the women from Madam Lya's at the time wouldn't have been able to afford an assassin for those that had abused them before. Dan had done it for free to get rid of such scum.

That was the difference between him and Camden. But of course, foul people don't usually display their true nature to everyone. People thought that Dan's marks had been the work of a sick person who took pleasure in simple killing. Dan knew that a couple of witnesses had seen him with the mask. Camden remained unknown, and the Grey Wolf became a thing of nightmares.

When he was seventeen, Vaywin said he'd grown in skill and could go after Baron Rullen. The lord was easy to find because he often went to a particular tavern in his city every Saturday night. It was a habit he'd had for years, and nobody had bothered him until the night the Grey Wolf attacked him.

Baron Rullen had been drunk but not an easy target. He had managed to get a good slice in on Dan's leg. Still, the lord was found dead in the morning with a throwing knife lodged in his throat, and he'd been impaled to the front of a shop with his own sword.

But killing the savage bastard didn't bring back Dan's parents or fix his past. He had thought he'd feel better somehow after avenging his parents and every other dead person from that day when he was six. It didn't make him feel better, and even the fact that the Baron would never kill another innocent wasn't enough.

How long until Dan met death at the end of a sword? Even good assassins weren't invincible. It was something Camden had once told him, and he'd proven it quite recently. Dan didn't want to keep doing such work as he grew older and older even if he didn't die while doing it.

How could he go on Hajj if he was committing vigilante justice? Sure, others were avenged or were safer with certain rubbish removed from the world, but it didn't feel right no matter what Vaywin said. He could have solely gone after bounties because that was legal, but even that might result in a nasty end at some point. A life of killing wasn't for him.

He gave up the mask and told Vaywin that he wasn't going to be the Grey Wolf anymore. He'd met Muhammad in Nantret, and with what money he'd accumulated, they'd set up a general shop together.

He flicked the cig into the fire as Mother entered the cave. She quietly sat, seeming to sense that his mind was heavy with things that he'd rather not get out now. The mask wasn't recognizable at all anymore. It was ash, as it should be.

"We should pray and go," Dan said after a moment. "I'll show you the stream where Vaywin gets water."

He had grown used to praying alone over the years. He'd wanted to teach Vaywin when he was little, but she said it was nonsense, and no one was listening. Having his Mother with him again was a comforting aspect.

Muhammad was glad to see him when they entered the shop, although curious about the woman following Dan. Vaywin gave him a suspicious look when he entered the living quarters upstairs. Her expression changed to one of absolute shock when she saw Adiva behind him.

Dan dropped the packs which included the hefty amount of money onto the table. The pack of coins clinked.

"What's that?" asked Muhammad, who had followed them upstairs.

"Money, and our stuff," said Dan. "Vaywin, do you have something you want to say to me?"

Her eyes glanced between them, but Adiva spoke up. "Why did you tell him I was dead? Was this some kind of mistake? How come you didn't tell him you put me in the Church?" She still looked like she thought there would be some easily reasonable explanation from her old friend.

Vaywin looked toward Dan and shook her head. "I made no mistake. I knew where she was."

Dan clenched the edge of the table. “You fucking lied to me?” Muhammad started edging away.

“Yes. I lied, and I took you away.”

Adiva gaped at her. “Why would you help me and then take away my child? I thought he was dead this whole time!”

Real guilt appeared in Vaywin’s eyes as she glanced at Adiva. “Whatever I say won’t help whatever you’ve been thinking on the way back here.”

“What kind of answer is that?” demanded Adiva.

Vaywin made to get up, but Dan leaned over the table. “Tell me why you lied and stole me. You owe me that much. Did you ever even love me like you said? Was I just something to use? Because I’m starting to wonder if those first few you sent me after were really guilty of anything or if you just lied to get revenge on someone for some petty thing. The one after the Marquess and his buddies.”

Vaywin’s eyes flashed. “I didn’t lie about any of them.”

“How come you only sent me after people?” he hissed. “You never went.”

“Because the mask was yours, not mine,” said Vaywin. “My Grandmother used it in shaman rituals to help protect the tribe and said only one could wear it. Father took it, left the tribe, and he wore it in southern Emaray for a while. He never became greatly known, but I’m sure you could find a few old people that remember a story or two about a Grey Wolf that killed outlaws. He passed it on to me, and I used it a few times. I passed it to you, and you became much better known because you were seen.”

“I was seen as a killer!” shouted Dan, forgetting who was in the room.

Vaywin jumped up. “You wanted to get rid of trash. You were nothing like other assassins. Even when Camden warned you there was no room for morals, you stuck to your ideals. You’d only go after people who did foul crimes, and sometimes you did it for free. Camden killed whoever as long as he got paid. He never gave a shit. You did.”

“I know very well what I did. He’s dead now because he tried to come after me. But years later, I’m still paying for this shit.”

Vaywin appeared shocked for a second, but she raised her chin. “You gave up the mask, and Camden is dead, so what’s your problem?”

“Are you serious? What’s my fucking problem?! I’m still not free of my past, and someone else is out there still!”

“I mean about being the Grey Wolf. You wanted to kill Baron Rullen and others-”

“Because you manipulated me into it!” shouted Dan. “You constantly told me how savage people needed to be killed so they wouldn’t harm anybody anymore.”

“Am I wrong?” snarled Vaywin. “Do you think that Marquess and his little buddies would have never killed again? Don’t you think a Nackama woman mourned somewhere for her lost son who suffered at the hands of those monsters? How long until that lord killed someone else just because he thought some victim was beneath him? People don’t always stop after one bad act. They enjoy it, and because they get away with it, they’ll often do it again.”

“I was twelve when you started filling my head with that stuff,” said Dan. “I could have very easily turned into someone like Camden.”

“I never would have let you.”

Dan leaned closer to her over the table. “I turned away on my own, and I remained a Muslim despite what you told me. Regardless of what you said or did, I could have turned into Camden or worse. Avenging people has its place, but it doesn’t change the past. It doesn’t fix what happened.”

“You could prevent more stuff from ‘happening’ in the future. And you did.”

“That has its place too, but not like that.” Dan still remembered Camden asking if he wanted to know something about one of the marks. “You used me for someone, didn’t you? Camden figured it out.”

Vaywin’s stoic expression was firmly back in place, and she said nothing.

“You did,” said Dan. “Which one? Did you get Madam Lya to lie to me, so I’d kill some mostly innocent person you had a quarrel with?”

Vaywin shook her head. “I owed a man a life debt, but I wouldn’t pay it. He wasn’t innocent, and while he’d personally done nothing to me, I wouldn’t pay a life debt to someone like that. He was better off dead after the things he’d done.”

Dan remembered her speaking of those before. If anyone saved the life of a tribe member, that person owed the savior a life debt. There were

exceptions for certain things, but in general, if it wasn't repaid, or if the tribe member didn't at least make a good effort, the spirits would be displeased. The member might lose their protection or their next life might not be so great. Not that Dan believed in her spirit stuff.

He let out a bitter laugh. "I thought refusing to pay a life debt makes them curse you. You believe in that reincarnation stuff too. Wouldn't your next life be shit for not paying a life debt according to your beliefs?"

"I think they'd understand enough why I didn't pay it back and not curse me, but it could still cause difficulties in my next life. The debt could be a weight on my soul. I just couldn't kill him because that's too far. That's only permitted if you're in direct danger, but I could be freed of the life debt if someone else killed him. Madam Lya knew him."

"From what you've told me of your spirits, it sounds like you really twisted things and were grasping at straws with that logic. Did your problem start before you took me away?"

"Yes."

"Fucking hell!"

"You used my son to free yourself of a debt?" Adiva asked in disbelief.

Vaywin waved a hand at her. "You believers of god wouldn't get it. You'll face east and pray five times every day while avoiding pork because a book written a thousand years ago says so. Christians and Catholics will pray all day to some guy they think rose from the dead because another book says so. Yet, none of you believe that other things might exist in this world besides your god. I've seen evidence of spirits, and I damn well wasn't going to tempt them by killing a man I owed a life debt to when he never directly put me in danger. I needed someone else to free me. Yes, it was wrong, but you never killed anyone who was innocent, Dan. Everyone you went after was truly bad, and what that man did for me doesn't erase his past."

"What did he do?"

"That's not for you to know. It involves a tribe member, and I won't speak of it."

"Fine. Whatever." Dan raised his hands. "It doesn't change the fact that you *stole* me. I didn't pick that path. You dragged me onto it and then shoved me down it. You put my Mother through unimaginable pain. She thought she lost both her husband and son! Does that mean nothing to

you?!” He slammed his fists onto the table. “Are your damn spirits okay with that? Because I’m bloody well not fine with it. I loved you like an Auntie this whole time and never imagined you seeing me like a tool.”

“Dan-”

“I was just something to use, and now I’ve ended up in danger even though I tried to get away from that life. Camden’s gone, but someone else still wants me dead because of all of this Grey Wolf bullshit. You can get the hell out of my home, and don’t come back. It’s me that’s wanted, but I suggest you get far away just in case.”

She stared at him. “You’re kicking me out?”

Dan pointed to the door. “Yes. Get out.”

Her stoic expression hardened before she grabbed her spear and pack from the corner. Without another word, she stalked out of the room, and her footsteps pounded down the stairs. A few moments later, they heard the shop door slam shut.

Her sudden absence still hurt because she was the only person he had while growing up. He realized that Mother and Muhammad knew everything, and he hadn’t planned on them finding out by watching him argue with Vaywin.

Muhammad was staring at him, and his expression wasn’t pleasant. “You’re the Grey Wolf?”

“I didn’t kill just to do it or because I thought it was fun,” said Dan. “I only went after people that did terrible things and got away with it. Abusers, murderers, stuff like that. You heard us.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me that when we started the business?” asked Muhammad.

“Oh, like you’d go around telling people if you were the Grey Wolf!” retorted Dan, flinging his hands out. “Why don’t I also write it on my forehead while I’m at it?”

“What else have you lied about? The killer around here-was that you? You’re still doing this?!”

Dan frantically shook his head. “No! That wasn’t me at all. It’s someone else. I stopped. Weren’t you listening?”

“The night you got stabbed, that wasn’t a common robber, was it?” asked Muhammad. “And you having the crossbows ready-”

“It’s just a precaution. Someone’s after me because of what I did before. They know who I was.”

“You didn’t kill those two in Riverside or the other guy here in the city?”

“No!”

Muhammad moved toward the chest at the foot of his bed. “I don’t even know if I can believe you or not.”

“You’ve known me for a while now-”

“Not really,” Muhammad snapped as he started shoving clothes into a pack. “I thought I did, but I didn’t know shit. How the fuck am I supposed to trust you now, eh?”

He slammed the lid of his trunk and snatched his cloak from the peg on the wall.

“Muhammad, I’m not the Grey Wolf anymore. I wanted to put that bit away forever and just be a shopkeeper.”

Muhammad shoved his arms through the side slits in his cloak and shouldered his pack. “I need time to think.”

As his footsteps pounded down the stairs, Dan was sure he wouldn’t be back. Not after finding out that he’d been living with a vigilante killer. The door slammed a few moments later. He looked at Mother, expecting her to take her stuff so she could hurry back to Turling and away from the son she barely knew now.

“I’d like a better explanation about all of this,” said Adiva. “I’ve half a mind to go down to Vaywin’s cave and throttle her for what she did. I should have done it before she left.”

He slumped into a chair by the table. “I don’t even know where to start. You’ll probably think I’m terrible. I never should have listened to anything Vaywin told me.”

“Nobody says the law is terrible when they hang a murderer. You being the judge and executioner wasn’t right either, but I can see why. Vaywin manipulated you. You were young and would've believed just about anything she told you. After trusting someone for so long, why suddenly stop?”

Chapter Eleven

Dan explained his earlier life more thoroughly. Adiva didn't hate him for it. She wasn't happy with it, but she said the important thing was that he made up his mind to stop once he was older, more mature, and inclined to make decisions without his Aunt's input. Vaywin had gotten him into something, but he had gotten himself *out*.

Vaywin, being the only person he had for years, had used her position to manipulate him. He'd been used to trusting whatever she said for years and years, so it had been easy to get twelve-year-old him to follow her logic.

At least Dan had one person left. Muhammad still didn't come back after a couple of days, so Dan figured that was it. He and Mother settled into running the shop by themselves. He knew this temporary lull wouldn't last long. Someone still wanted him, and they probably wouldn't back off even with Camden dead. Since he had no idea how or where to find this other person, that left one option.

"We should just leave now," Dan told her one slow afternoon as they sat behind the counter downstairs.

"And just let the shop sit here?"

"If I ask around, I'm sure I can find Muhammad," said Dan. "He's probably at an inn, and I don't think he left to go to his family, because he didn't take all of his stuff. I doubt he wants to have a chat with me, but I can just leave the whole shop to him. We'll pack our stuff and get going. If we leave the continent entirely, I'm sure that will stop the other person. We could even stay over there and live in Egypt. You could see it again."

"Wouldn't you want to come back?"

"I like it here, and Gredoria is home in my mind, but with our current circumstances..."

"We still have cousins in Egypt," she said. "They'd likely let us stay until we're firmly settled and have everything figured out."

"Without the long return trip through Europe and a voyage back to Gredoria, we'd save a lot of money that we could use on a house. I'd planned on living my life out in Gredoria, but it's safer elsewhere."

“I thought we’d stay here too,” she replied. “Your Father liked this country, but you’re right. It’s safer, and it’s also high time you find a wife.”

“Can you still speak Arabic? Mine’s not very good. I don’t remember much.”

“I can, and I’ll help you. You spent your early years speaking both, so a lot might come back easier once you get used to hearing and speaking it more regularly.”

The bell over the door tinkled, and a man with the Baron’s serpent crest sewn on his cloak stepped in. “Hamdan Ahmed?”

“That’s me.”

"Here." The messenger handed over a parchment packet. "It's from Baron Kennin. He says no return reply is needed."

Dan was pretty sure this didn’t bode well. What if they were getting evicted because Dan hadn’t wanted to be bait for a murderer? Well, actually, that didn’t matter. Muhammad could have the place anyway, and Baron Kennin hopefully had no problem with him.

The messenger stepped out as Dan broke the wax seal and pulled out the letter. Instead of a sternly worded letter telling him to get the hell out, it was an invitation to dinner the next day.

“He wants me to go to dinner as an apology for things,” said Dan.

“Oh, like using you as bait?” Adiva wrinkled her nose.

“He doesn’t say that, but yeah, I guess so. I’m supposed to dress nicely.” He flung the letter on the countertop. “Does he think I’d show up in a potato sack or something? I don’t want to go. Look, he didn’t even ask, he just expects me to be there.” He pointed at a line. “‘See you tomorrow.’”

“Pretend you didn’t get it.”

“He’ll know I did, and then, he’ll think I’m ignoring him. I’m sure that would rile him up.”

“We’ll be leaving anyway.”

“But not tomorrow. And then he’ll probably have me come up there so he can scold me or ask me to do something else stupid. Or he’ll try to make things difficult for Muhammad just to be an arse once I’m gone.” He sighed. “I’ll go. At least I’ll get a free meal out of it.”

After Dan dressed the next evening, he debated about whether to take a couple of throwing knives with him. He usually always carried one or two up his sleeve out of habit. Since he’d be riding back on Snubby in the dark

most likely, it was better to take a couple. He'd wear his sword at his side, and he always had his dagger, but the extra protection was good too.

Snubby seemed so happy to be out, one would think he'd been invited to dine with the Baron too. When Dan dismounted outside of the stable, a large man was exiting.

"Are you a lord too?" he asked, squinting.

"No. I'm Dan. I own the general shop on Tatick Street."

"Oh," the big man said as the stable hand took Snubby's bridle to lead him away. "I thought just a couple of us higher ups were coming."

He held his arm out to clasp and introduced himself as Baron Hurdin. Judging by his rough accent, he was from the North, and he looked like he could snap an enemy in half with one hand.

Baron Kennin had neglected to mention that there would be others at dinner, especially lords. Dan didn't really feel like hanging out with a bunch of higher ups. The feeling was only strengthened when they went inside, and the Master Steward brought them to a sitting room. One of the lords looked down his nose at Dan like a shopkeeper wasn't worthy enough to be in his presence.

Baron Kennin greeted Dan and introduced the others. Besides Baron Hurdin, there were three other Barons, and the snob was an Earl.

"I invited Dan since he graciously went to Riverside and looked into the murders there," Baron Kennin told the other lords.

Dan tacked on his nicest smile. Graciously went. More like strong-armed into it.

"You didn't do much if he's in this city now," said the Earl.

"My men-at-arms can't even find him," said Baron Kennin. "He tried at least."

Baron Hurdin appeared confused. "You sent a shopkeeper out to look for a murderer?"

"Sometimes the best person for the job is the one you least expect," said Baron Kennin. "He's a decent fighter too, and he killed some outlaws at least. I lost plenty of men in the hold war, and they were busy with other things."

A servant came and said dinner was ready, so they headed into the Great Hall. Behind the High Table, an enormous black tapestry hung on the wall.

Silver, decorative ropes dangled down the side, and the serpent wrapped around the letter K was embroidered in silver thread.

Baron Kennin didn't keep a court, so the Great Hall seemed rather empty with just them at the High Table. Didn't the Baron hate living here all alone like this, except for servants? Not that Dan saw the appeal in a court because it seemed like having a bunch of leeches, but living in such a large home with no one else seemed like it would get boring.

He was surprised that Baron Kennin had him sit directly on his left like a valued guest. The snotty Earl looked like he'd swallowed a lemon when he noticed.

A couple of servants brought the food, poured wine, and left a whiskey bottle out. Dan ignored the wine, and when the whiskey was handed along the table, he passed it to Baron Hurdin once it got to him.

The large Baron poured some into the silver cup for that purpose, pounded it back like it was water, poured another, and handed the bottle back to Dan. "That's some good shit right there. He doesn't skimp on quality whiskey."

"I'll take your word for it." Dan handed the bottle to Baron Kennin.

Baron Hurdin raised an eyebrow. "What? You don't drink?"

"No."

Dan might as well have spoken a foreign language considering the look he got.

"He's from the North," said Baron Kennin. "Anybody that doesn't drink a liter of whiskey a day probably seems weird to him. He was probably drinking whiskey as soon as he was weaned."

"Nah, I waited until I was about five or six," said Baron Hurdin.

Dan wasn't entirely sure if he was joking or not. The fish stew was pretty good, and they had bread and butter to go with it. Baron Hurdin drank enough for a whole village and was amazingly still upright when dessert was served.

The talk shifted to the civil war that had taken place ten years ago.

"I fought in that on King Stefan's side," said one of the Barons. "Or Prince Leon I should say. He did all of the real work of keeping the Starks on the throne. King Stefan dragged his heels like he does with everything."

"King Stefan is a weak man," said the arrogant Earl. "Prince Leon should have been born first. He'd make a much better King, and I doubt

anyone would have the guts to even think of going against him.”

“He’s also a snotty bastard,” said Baron Hurdin. “Like you.”

“Screw you.”

Fortunately, Dan had lived too far away to have seen any of that fighting, but he’d heard plenty about it. Some Baron started amassing counties and power with the intent to go against King Stefan. Everyone said the King was a heel-dragger, and Prince Leon had to gather up those loyal to him and go do what his older brother should have done. Everyone also said Prince Leon was arrogant and did questionable things at times. Thank God Dan would never have to deal with him.

“Did you fight in it?” asked the Earl, looking at Baron Hurdin.

“I was up North then. We get news later than everyone else, so it was already over by the time I heard about it.”

The Earl looked particularly smug about that. “I made quite a few kills during that war.”

The comment slid out before Dan could think twice. “I’m surprised you could see past your own nose to fight at all.”

The table went dead silent for a moment as the Earl slowly turned his head to glare at Dan. The Baron on the other end busted out laughing and thumped his fist on the table which set off the others.

“He got you good,” said Baron Kennin.

“About time someone put him in his place.” Baron Hurdin clapped Dan on the back and whispered. “I don’t even know why we put up with him.”

The Earl looked like he wanted to get up and leave, but that would be terribly rude. At least he was silent after that.

By the end of dessert, the other three Barons were bordering on stupid from the whiskey, the Earl had an expression like he was constipated, and Baron Hurdin had finished off the second bottle of whiskey that a servant brought. Baron Kennin hadn’t drunk much at all.

Dan thought he could go home now and be done with this, but Baron Kennin said they could move to a sitting room for a glass of wine. How much more did they need to drink? A servant brought the wine and glasses, and Baron Kennin told her she could go home for the night.

Dan smoked a cig while the others nursed their glasses of wine. One of the Barons looked ready to fall asleep at that moment. Now would be a good time to put the wine down. Dan suppressed a sigh as he looked at

some paintings on the wall. One portrait, probably a copy of a copy, showed the Royal Family. They were always a popular subject for artists. Even in a painting, Prince Leon, also sometimes known as the Lion, appeared arrogant.

Baron Kennin leaned toward him and spoke in undertone. “Can we talk in private?”

“Yeah.”

Dan thought they would just go into the hall, but Baron Kennin led him upstairs to his inner room.

“I don’t want them listening in,” said Baron Kennin. “Did you enjoy dinner?”

“Yes, it was good,” said Dan. “Thank you for inviting me.”

Baron Kennin sat in an armchair by the fire and gestured to the other one. “I wanted to apologize for sending you all over and then asking you to use you as bait. I could just use one of my men-at-arms to do that eh? They’ve been patrolling at night, but they haven’t seen anything out of place.”

“No hard feelings,” said Dan.

“Thank you. Nothing has happened in a few days, so maybe the killer has already moved on. Unfortunately, that means he’ll be someone else’s problem in a while. I don’t like that, but there’s nothing I can do about it at this point.”

“Outlaws sometimes get offed by other outlaws,” said Dan. “Or he might get caught. Traveling around like that and committing crimes isn’t an easy life.”

“No, it’s not,” said Baron Kennin. “Maybe someone will catch him. Some get out of it, not that I expect this particular one to do so.” He pointed to a painting above the fireplace. “The man that did that used to be an outlaw in his youth, or so I heard. He managed to turn his life around somehow, and he had a talent, so he used it.”

That was what Camden should have done instead of being a traitor. Dan kept quiet about that and stood to look closer at the portrait of boats on a river and birds in the distance.

“He was quite talented.” He noticed the shelf by the fireplace held lots of small items, including a tiny globe.

Baron Kennin must have noticed where his eyes went. “You can look at that if you want.”

Dan approached the shelf to pick up the globe. It fit in the palm of his hand but had surprising weight to it. All of the world’s countries were painted with gold lines and filled in with pale brown.

“Is it an accurate map?” he asked.

“I suppose so. Accurate enough anyway.”

Dan placed it back on its little stand once he was done looking at it. The shelf held all sorts of other little trinkets, and on the center shelf lay the dagger from the body that hadn't been Camden.

“Did you ever find out who that man was?” he asked.

“No, I didn’t. He might have been from another county, but we might never know, eh?”

“Why did you keep the dagger?” Dan glanced at the Baron who shrugged.

“Why not?”

Dan turned back to the shelf. It seemed so strange to keep it in his inner room like it was just some knickknack. A rack above the shelf held a sword, and emeralds decorated its hilt. “Is that your Father’s sword?”

“No, Father bought that for me when I turned thirteen because he said I’d been doing well with training,” replied Baron Kennin. “Father’s sword is in my bedroom. I had an interesting trainer while I was growing up. He was French, but he spoke eight or nine different languages, and it seemed like he’d been all over the world. He’d even spent some years in Arabia, Egypt, and a couple of other places out that way, but I can’t remember all the names.”

“And he settled here?”

“I’m not sure where he moved on to after he finished teaching me. He was an excellent swordsman, but he was getting older too.”

Some of the knickknacks didn’t seem valuable at all, so Dan assumed they were kept for sentimental reasons. A shiny black button lay by the dagger. On the bottom was a hair ribbon. Baron Kennin didn’t have a wife, so maybe it was from some past sweetheart. The awl seemed strange, but perhaps a distant family member was a carpenter.

Toward the back of the middle shelf, something caught Dan’s eye, and he went very still. Why would the lord have that?

A swordsman who spent years in Arabia and Egypt likely learned the language well enough to get by. Maybe he even picked up a few sayings. Little things he might teach a young boy who wanted to know more about the world outside of Gredoria.

The arrow Dan had found in the woods where Will had been murdered had been the fletching half. The half on the shelf had a barbed head. His eyes flicked to the dagger and between the other, odd, assorted items as his heart started to pound. He was sure if he had kept that other half of the arrow and put it together with this piece, it would fit perfectly.

These weren't innocent trinkets. Camden made scratches on a piece of wood to record his kills. Baron Kennin had gone a step farther and taken something from everyone he killed. The shelf was an open display of his multiple murders. Involuntarily, Dan stepped back, revolted by it.

"May God swallow the Earth underneath you," said Baron Kennin. Dan jerked around to find the Baron had quietly stood and moved farther away. "Do you like my display? I was thinking of adding something of yours. Something very particular."

Dan didn't like the way Baron's eyes appraised him. Maybe he'd take one of the buttons from Dan's blue, knee-length coat or a throwing knife. He shifted his arm slightly, feeling the knife strapped to his forearm.

"What? Cat got your tongue, Grey Wolf?"

"I'm not the Grey Wolf," Dan said automatically. The lord laughed. "That's ridiculous."

"Don't lie to me," said Baron Kennin. "I'd prefer to have your mask. Do you have it hidden somewhere clever?"

"I don't have--"

"I know who you are. Do you remember when that traveling fair came here once? They had a knife-throwing contest, and you won it hands down. Nobody even came close to your skill."

Dan had just joined to get the small monetary reward for the winner. It had been easy to beat everyone else that had tried. Now he wished he hadn't bothered.

"I grew up with a Native Gramoan-" he started.

Baron Kennin held his hand up. "I'm not done. After you started living here, there weren't any more new stories of the Grey Wolf except for a couple made by people whose minds likely ran away. I didn't think too

much of it at the time. In the hold war, you demonstrated excellent skill with a sword. More than most shopkeepers. I noticed the rigged crossbow in your shop too. Nobody else seemed to think of that. Combined with your skill at knives, I truly did start to wonder.”

Dan forced a small laugh. “You sound absolutely insane. I thought of an interesting trick, I have a talent that’s not unheard of, and you automatically think I’m the Grey Wolf?”

“You grew up with a Native woman. They teach their kids to climb, and the Grey Wolf had been spotted climbing a building to get out of the area once.”

“It sounds like you’re just pulling fantasies out of the air,” said Dan.

“I have a couple of assassin friends, so I know their general skills,” said Baron Kennin. “No one you need to worry about.”

“Bullshit. More stories. There are no assassins.”

“I traveled a lot before my Father died, forcing me to come home. You’d be surprised what you can find out if you talk to the right people. I knew the spot where Camden would go to check for work. I slipped in a note for the Grey Wolf, a fat coin purse, and I waited. When he checked, he took the coin purse, meaning that the Grey Wolf was a real person, and he intended to do the job. If he would do it, that meant he also knew where the Grey Wolf was. I approached.”

That bastard hadn’t hesitated to betray Dan when the first opportunity presented itself.

“I offered him a lot of money to play a little game,” said Baron Kennin. “Far more coin than any typical kill would get him. He confirmed that the Grey Wolf was you, so I made another note, and sent it through the proper chain. I fought you that night, although I didn’t try *too* hard to kill you. I just wanted a better feel for your skill. Camden waited for you, and of course, you went running off to the Gate to see what you could find out. I killed some innocent traveler, Camden gave me his dagger, planted the bag with my note, and of course, you went to check that too.”

Dan suddenly felt too hot in his coat and linen shirt. The whole time, they’d been leading him, he’d been following like a cat after a string, and he’d had no idea.

“I paid Camden a lot to kill you,” said Baron Kennin. “He wanted to retire in sunny, southern Camaday and never see snow again for the rest of

his life. He knew you'd go check his house and clean it up to avoid questions being asked. Unfortunately, he failed, but that's all right. Either by his hand or mine, I wanted to be ultimately responsible for the Grey Wolf's demise."

"Why did you send me to Riverside on a wild chase?"

"I wanted to see what you'd do and maybe help me with something else. I figured if you caught Samson, you'd bring him to me, and I could finish what I started. Of course, it would have been a hanging and not a knife to the throat, but that's all right.

"Why did you want him dead?"

"Samson and I got into a fight several years ago. I wasn't really too mad about that, but I decided it'd be interesting to give him a set amount of years to live, and then kill him. Like a delayed punishment. It was amusing to think that he likely planned on a long, simple life, but his time of death would be quite soon. The other two were a bit of fun, and they made it look like Samson was a killer who fled."

Dan tilted his head. "What the fuck? You're not God. Who the hell decides a man only has a set amount of years left?"

Baron Kennin gave him a nasty smile. "I've killed a lot. My first was some stupid peasant girl near my Aunt's home when I was fifteen. She wouldn't let me take her in the bushes for a quick fuck, and she pissed me off with her attitude, so I decided to kill her. I'd already been curious about what it would be like to take someone's life."

"You were...curious? That's not something people are curious about! That's sick-"

Baron Kennin raised his hands slightly. "The rush I got from it was unlike anything I'd felt before. Do you mean to tell me that when people's lives were in your hands, and you snuffed one out, you didn't get any sort of rush? You didn't enjoy the sheer power of ending someone's existence?"

There was no point in denying who Dan had been. Not with fucking Camden having betrayed him so easily. "I only killed people who did terrible things. I never did it for fun, and I never enjoyed the act. I'd be glad that they couldn't hurt anybody again, but I didn't get any kind of rush from it."

Baron Kennin didn't look like he believed those words. "Huh. Moralistic killer, eh? I just like the feeling I get from it, and I always want more. I

keep something from every victim so I can look back and remember. It's not as good as the actual moment of watching someone bleed out, or seeing their life leave their eyes. Nothing tops that, not even sex, and it's the ultimate power over another. It's like being God for a moment. I'm quite proud of my collection over there. I've had plenty of opportunities, and my trainer taught me more than how to handle a sword. Hell, if I wasn't a Baron's son, I could have been an assassin. Then I'd get paid to get my rush. It's a pity I have to be extra careful about killing now since I have to be home more. The county won't run itself, and I can't have too many dying around here."

"You're insane." Dan stepped back until his back touched the shelf. "You're not God. God doesn't kill innocents for fun and keep a collection of their things."

"I'm not insane," Baron Kennin said with the calm surety of a crazy man who thinks he's completely normal. "I know people say my kind are sick, but we just have different tastes. I like power, and I use it."

"The other lords won't let you use it on me. I bet I can run faster than you, and if I go in there--"

The Baron snorted. "They're asleep, and they won't be helping you. The wine was a bit too strong." He smirked at Dan, which likely meant something had been added to it. "It's almost a pity that you don't drink, but I prefer my victims to be awake when I kill them because it's more fun. Besides, it wouldn't matter anyway. They wouldn't help you."

"A Baron can't get away with blatant murder."

"What if you attacked me first?" asked Baron Kennin. "Anything could have happened up here. It's self-defense. Do you really think anyone would pick the Muslim over me, a trusted and respected Baron from a good family? Someone they've known for a while? Two of them were good friends with my Father. Tell me, Dan. Do you really think they'd side with you, who they've barely known for two hours? But they don't have to pick, and your fate was sealed as soon as you stepped foot into my home."

Dan should have refused the invitation to dinner. Mother had even suggested pretending he didn't get it.

"They'll wake up in the morning with splitting headaches, laugh about not being as young as they used to be, and we'll get on with our lives," continued Baron Kennin. "It'll seem like you simply went home, and they'll

forget about you before breakfast is over. Tonight, I'll drag your body out and leave you in an alley. The guard by my gate goes home later, and I don't have anyone in here overnight. I'll let your horse loose to be found later, and when your corpse is found tomorrow or in a couple of days, no one will know who did it."

"My Mother is at home-"

"She's been dead for years. You told me that yourself."

"No, I found her-"

"Oh, good Lord, Dan. You're grasping at straws now."

"No, I'm not. She's alive. Don't forget Muhammad. They'll think it's strange that I came here and then I'm found dead later."

"That doesn't matter either. You were attacked when you tried to go home." Baron Kennin shook his head. "Don't you get it? You are well and truly fucked. Even if you ran and got past the gate guard, he'd raise the alarm. I'll say you stole one of my throwing knives or something."

Even if Dan got out and into the city, he'd never get past the city gates with Mother. His only option was to kill the Baron, get the hell out with being seen or suspected, take Snubby home, get Mother and the money, and leave. They'd have to abandon most of their stuff, but it was better than death.

Baron Kennin stepped forward with a predatory smile. The globe was cold and smooth in Dan's hand before he threw it across the room. The Baron snarled as jumped to the side and twisted just in time to avoid the knife that came next for his chest. Dan was fast, but the lord wasn't some typical fighter.

Dan aimed right for his head in the split second that Baron Kennin took to draw his sword. He heard the metal tink as the lord deflected the throwing knife with his sword and sent it uselessly clattering to the floor. Dan hadn't expected that, but he drew his weapon and lunged forward to attack, forcing the Baron to parry.

Dan ducked to avoid the sword's edge as it came for his neck and slashed his own. Baron Kennin didn't jump back fast enough, and the tip went through his coat, vest, and shirt. The cut bled, but it wasn't deep enough to stop him.

Baron Kennin came at him in a flurry of attacks that forced Dan to back up as he blocked and parried. He saw the opening and swiped at Baron

Kennin's sword hand, but it didn't land right. The flat hit instead of the edge, causing the lord to drop his weapon. Dan brought his blade back with the intent to strike again, but Baron Kennin tackled him and knocked him to the floor.

The Baron tried to wrestle the sword from him with his left hand. Dan couldn't swing or move it properly, and he tried to twist out from under the Baron until he felt the lord's left elbow slam him in the temple.

The back of his head hit the floor, stunning him for a moment, and Baron Kennin managed to get the sword from him. As he tried to stand, Dan knew the point would be driven into his chest. He brought up both of his boots and kicked him right in the stomach.

The Baron stumbled back and kept his footing, although he looked like he could barely draw air in. When he saw Dan getting up, he quickly stepped closer to the dropped sword.

"Try it," he gasped, holding Dan's in his left hand. "I learned how to fight with both hands, so don't think this will stop me."

Dan only had his dagger now, and if he went for the other weapon, he'd get impaled before he could grab the hilt. The throwing knives were too far. The lords downstairs in the back were useless. His only option might be to run. If he could escape the grounds on Snubby, he might have a chance to get out of Nantret with Mother. But that would mean killing the guard at the gate to the grounds.

A half-formed plan came to Dan, but he didn't have time to think it through since Baron Kennin was getting his breath back. He turned and bolted from the room.

"Come back here, you bastard!"

Dan made it into the hallway and raced toward the stairs. He made it down a few flights before he realized he didn't hear the Baron chasing him. He might have taken the back stairs that servants generally used. Dan didn't slow down, and when he rushed into the entrance hall, he paused.

To buy himself a little time, he'd have to kill the gate guard, and he never wanted to harm someone innocent. If he could manage to hide, he could always leave later. With his climbing ability, he didn't need the front door.

There was one clever hiding spot where he was sure no one would find him.

The Great Hall was still lit. Behind the High Table, the silver serpent gleamed on the black tapestry, and the twisted silver ropes hung on each side. At the top, a puffy valance likely hid the seams and also something to keep the tapestry up.

Dan made sure his dagger was secure up his sleeve as he checked over his shoulder. He had seconds to do this.

The tapestry, which had to be at least fifteen feet high, must have weighed a lot. When he checked behind it, he could tell that some kind of metal frame at the top held it on the wall. Dan prayed his weight wasn't too much as he grabbed a rope on the side and started to swiftly climb. It held as he made it to the top. Now for the hard part.

The frame was made from two horizontal metal bars, and the top of the tapestry was pulled over both and sewn shut. The valance hid the stitches in the front, and since it was puffy and also helped hide the metal, it came above the top of the frame. Dan grasped one of the bars and hoped the fabric didn't cause him to slip.

He let go of the rope and let his legs hang as he inched along behind the tapestry. The thick weave of it over the bar didn't make him feel safe. If he lost his grip and fell from this height, he'd surely break something, and Baron Kennin would easily finish him off. Hell, if he landed wrong and broke his neck, the Baron would only have to worry about taking care of the body.

Once Dan was in the center, he brought up a leg, hooked it over the top bar, looped an arm over it, and tried to settle his body comfortably enough on it. It wasn't actually comfortable, but at least he could bear it.

The fluffy valance hid him entirely. If anyone walked into the Great Hall, they wouldn't know he was there. If the Baron or anyone looked behind the tapestry and up, they might not see him. His trousers and coat were dark blue, and it was rather dark back here. He was also high up so he had a chance to blend in. Now he just had to wait.

The metal let out a faint creak.

Chapter Twelve

“Fuck,” he whispered to himself.

He had figured that the frame, made to hold the weight of such a massive tapestry, could support a little extra. He remained still, hoping the creak didn't mean imminent danger. The bar wasn't very comfortable against his chest even with the fabric and his clothing, but he didn't shift around in case moving his weight weakened it further. He wanted to look at where the frame was attached to the stonework, but he didn't dare attempt to twist his head around enough for that. Besides, he probably wouldn't see much with so little light.

It was awfully quiet. Where the hell had the Baron gone? What was he doing? He must have assumed Dan wouldn't be so quick to kill the gate guard to get into the city, but where the hell was he while his intended victim ran loose? He should have given chase and not wasted time.

Dan knew his only chance was to wait here. The Baron would probably search all over the Castle, and he'd come into the Great Hall. He'd likely check under the High Table, although of course, Dan wouldn't be stupid enough to hide under there.

He knew it had to be nearly time for Maghrib by now, maybe even a little past, but God would understand that he was in a tight situation now. The Baron clearly wanted to get Dan himself, but if he got the gate guard to fetch others and had them search the Castle, he might still evade detection.

With no Dan to be found, Baron Kennin might assume that his quarry had snuck out and climbed the wall without being seen by the guy guarding the gate. The Baron would have some lie in place about Dan, so his men would spread out to search. They'd check the shop and demand answers from Adiva, but they couldn't do anything to her. She wouldn't know where her son was anyway.

At some point, the Baron would have to sleep. No matter how much he wanted to kill Dan, he couldn't remain awake forever. He'd also have to lug his guests into spare bedrooms so they could sleep off the alcohol and whatever had been in the wine. Once things were quiet, and it was late

enough, Dan was sure he could get down safely. After that, he'd slip out of the Great Hall, and get over the wall outside.

A guard would surely be watching the shop, but he'd be expecting Dan to go through the door like a normal person. Dan would sneak into the backyard and get in through the window upstairs. Once he let Mother know what was going on, he'd leave. Getting over the city wall without being spotted would be harder, but he might make it. If he did, he'd be free.

Mother could take their things in a couple of days and leave. The guards might question her, but she could say she was going back to her old home. They had no reason to apprehend an innocent woman. Even if one insisted on escorting her back and checking her house, they wouldn't find Dan. Later, she could meet up with her son, and they'd get far away from this area.

But for now, he was stuck here. This was going to be a long night. The frame creaked slightly again even though Dan wasn't moving. Maybe this would be a short night.

He heard another noise, but it wasn't from the frame. It had come from the entrance to the Great Hall. He'd bet his last farthing that it was Baron Kennin, and he wished he could see, but he remained still.

After a few moments, he heard footsteps drawing closer. What if his hiding spot wasn't really so clever after all? What if he was easily spotted if the Baron checked and looked up? Vaywin said white people never looked up, but the murderer might.

The lord was probably checking under the High Table. The footsteps came even closer. Dan wanted to look down to see if the tapestry moved, but he didn't dare. For several moments, the quiet was absolute.

He heard an impatient sigh as the footsteps moved away. Baron Kennin would search somewhere else now.

The metal creaked again. Loudly. Dan felt the frame shift. He kept still, afraid the slightest movement would be too much and send the whole thing crashing to the floor. Something squeaked, and from the end his feet were pointed toward, he heard metal grating on the stonework with a shrieking noise. Baron Kennin swore, probably startled by the sudden racket.

He might not even need to kill Dan. This might do it. He tried to think of his options, but there weren't many, and all seemed to end in death. Even if

he tried to get back to the end and climb down, it could fall. Baron Kennin would see him anyway and come after him.

He felt one end of the frame shift with a horrible screech as that side came loose entirely. For a moment, time seemed to stop, and then Dan felt the fabric under him start sliding along the bars as it slipped down. The other end tried to hold, but judging by the creaks and noises, it wouldn't last long.

As one end of the frame continued to sag, Dan desperately tried to hold on, but the fabric slid along and took him with it. It stopped as it bunched toward one end. The valence still hid him, but he was in deep shit now and didn't know how to get out of it.

The other end of the frame let out an ear-splitting grating noise against the stonework. Dan wasn't quite as high from the floor now, but the fall would still hurt. If he hit the floor while still holding onto the bar, his leg or arm could get trapped. The weight would be too much.

The remaining side let out a last creak and broke free from the wall.

Dan let go, and for a second, all he could see was black fabric and flashes of silver. Searing agony pierced his right leg, and he slammed into the floor. The height of the fall hadn't been as bad, and the lower end of the tapestry cushioned him, but it was still enough to stun him.

A second later, the frame hit the floor a few inches behind him. Even with all of the cloth, the heavy metal made a deafening noise. Dan lay amongst the fabric and heard someone laughing as pain shot through his right shoulder and hip from the landing. The worst was from the damn crossbow bolt sticking out of his lower right thigh. The Baron had guessed and made a lucky shot.

"Fuck," he swore through gritted teeth, trying to push himself up.

He was still alive and not crushed by the frame, and he was sure he could walk, although not very fast, but he was still in trouble. Baron Kennin wouldn't wait long. It was over. Adiva would lose her son again, and this time, it would be permanent.

"You thought you were a clever bastard, eh?" Baron Kennin yelled from beyond the High Table. "I'll admit, that was a smart spot to hide. Do you still have the mask, Hamdan? Hm? That's what I want for my collection. If you tell me, I'll make sure your death is quick. If I think you're lying, I won't, and since your Mother is alive, maybe I'll go after her too. I'll let her

have one month to live. How does that sound? Then I'll have a hijab for my collection too. That'll be interesting.”

Dan saw red for a moment at the flippant comment about his Mother as he managed to get to his knees. The bolt hurt like hell, but if he yanked it out, he'd probably bleed to death quite quickly, and he wouldn't have time to use the Herafwig. If he was going to go down, he'd go down fighting, not begging like some damn wimp. He grabbed the back of one of the chairs to steady himself as he struggled to his feet.

Baron Kennin stood on the other side of the table with his sword hooked in his belt. He'd already spanned and reloaded his crossbow.

“Where is your mask?” he asked.

Dan clutched the back of the chair as he gained his footing and tried to keep his weight off of his right side. He shot the Baron a look of pure hatred. “You want to know where my mask is?”

“I think that's obvious, Hamdan.”

Dan held up his middle finger. “It's up your ass.”

Baron Kennin shifted the crossbow to aim it. “Last chance. Or the next bolt goes into your shoulder. I can drag this out a bit, and we'll see if your God saves you then.”

“For a murderer who has killed many and is so proud of his collection, you're a fucking coward,” said Dan. “Are you too frightened to get close to the Grey Wolf? Is that it? You have to keep a table between us and kill me from over there? Is that why you sent Camden after me instead of just getting the info on who the Grey Wolf was? Pfft. I bet you've never fought a real challenger. All of your victims were probably weak commoners.”

“I killed in the hold war here. I also saved your damn life in case you forgot.”

“Common soldiers,” Dan snarled. “And a few Knights. I bet you've never fought a real assassin. Your Father would probably be ashamed of you. All of that training with your special teacher, and you're too fucking scared to face me head on like a man. Your Father wasted his money.”

Dan was pretty sure he didn't have much left in him. Not at this point. Getting Baron Kennin to put down the crossbow was his only chance, and even then, things weren't looking too good.

Baron Kennin's expression darkened at the insult, and he slightly lowered the crossbow. “You're hardly a worthy opponent at this point.

You've got a bolt in your leg, and I'm sure that fall hurt like hell."

Dan slowly walked to the next chair and tried not to let his face show anything as his thigh protested in pain. His boot bumped something. "Then why do you need a crossbow to kill me if I'm all banged up? Then again, even if you fought me properly, your Father would probably still be ashamed to know what he raised. Hell, if your Mother knew what sort of monster you'd grow into, she probably would have smothered you at birth. In fact, considering your Father seemed decent, I wonder if you're really even his son. You don't exactly look like the portrait of him in your office. Your Mother must have been a whore."

The insulting lie worked. Baron Kennin threw down the crossbow and rushed to get around the table while unhooking his sword. Part of the metal bracket that once helped keep the tapestry frame attached to the wall lay near Dan's boot. He snatched it, straightened up, and made as if to fling his dagger. Baron Kennin instinctively jerked to the side, thinking to avoid it. A second later, the metal spun through the air and struck him right in the forehead.

The Baron swore and automatically reached for his forehead where blood was already trickling. Dan wished it had knocked his ass out, but he'd take what he could get. Trying to ignore the pain in his thigh, he lunged around the table with his dagger. One hit was all he needed. Still partly stunned, Baron Kennin reacted too slowly as he raised his sword. Dan thrust the dagger toward the lord's chest, expecting the blade to sink through his clothes and into his flesh.

Metal hit metal and grated. Dan realized he'd fucked up and should have went for the throat. Baron Kennin punched him in the face and kicked his injured leg, sending him to the floor. The dagger clanked as it fell, useless now.

"Did you think I'd get weapons and nothing to protect myself? Fool."

Dan saw the flash of metal through the little hole in the Baron's shirt, and the divot his dagger point had made. The Baron had some kind armor under his shirt. He kicked the dagger across the room, swiped at the blood on his face, and hefted his sword.

"I'm done with you, bastard."

Dan scrambled for the crossbow on the floor. His last chance. He heard boots thump behind him, and he grasped it. As he brought it around with his

fingers on the trigger lever, Baron Kennin swung his sword and hit the side.

The force made it release. The bolt harmlessly headed for the wall, and Dan was left with a useless crossbow.

Almost useless. In the split second that Baron Kennin was open, he swung the stock and hit the sword. The Baron's wrist was probably still hurting from earlier, and he lost his grip. With a snarl, he lunged on Dan, trying to wrestle the frame from him.

"You fucking bastard! I'll make sure your Mother suffers for this." Baron Kennin wrenched it from his grasp and slugged Dan in the side of the head with it.

He was pretty sure he blacked out for a second. Dimly, he heard the crossbow clatter on the floor and felt the Baron's hands tighten around his throat. Dan tried to pry his fingers off, but it felt like all of the strength had left his body. The Baron's weight was too much, and he couldn't twist away. Already, the Baron's furious expression was fading above him.

An arrow entered the side of Baron's Kennin's face and viciously spun its way through his flesh and into his mouth. He let out a strangled shriek and jerked back to uselessly clutch at his face. Blood and bits of teeth spattered Dan who gasped for breath, barely able to comprehend what he'd just seen.

"Fuck you!" shouted a familiar voice.

Another arrow hit Baron Kennin in the side of the neck. He froze for a moment, staring at Dan with a blank look as blood poured from his mouth and torn cheek. Slowly, he slumped over to the side.

Shakily, Dan kicked him off and scooted backward as blood spread across the floor. Muhammad strode toward him with his longbow in one hand.

"I don't know what the hell is going on, but I have a feeling you weren't in the wrong."

"What are you doing here?" Dan swiped at the blood running down the side of his head.

"I went hunting, and I didn't have any luck. I stopped by the shop to talk to you, and your Mother said you went to dinner with Baron Kennin, but you weren't back yet. It seemed strange to me because I know what time you pray, and you prefer to be home if you can, not around strangers who

don't understand it. I had a bad feeling in my gut." Muhammad kicked Baron Kennin's body as if checking for a response. "He's definitely dead."

"The guard just let you in?"

"I said I had an urgent message for Dan Ahmed. The guard didn't know me." Muhammad put his hands on his hips. "I leave for a few days, and you almost get yourself fucking killed! You better have a good reason because I just killed a Baron to save your ass!"

"He was the one that killed the two men in Riverside, and the guy in the city," said Dan.

Muhammad looked at him like he was crazy. "Our Baron did that?"

"I swear it. He admitted everything to me. He has Camden's dagger up in his room and made it look like he was dead. But it was another guy, not...oh, fuck it. You don't even know half of what's been going on."

Muhammad knelt by him and used his dagger to cut off a corner of his cloak. "Here. You've got blood all over you."

"Thanks, and thanks for killing him. I thought I was about to die."

"No problem. I was thinking about what you said before I left. Besides that, since I had a feeling I better come here, and you were about to die, let's assume God nudged me here. If that's the case, and He doesn't want you to die, then you had a reason for things you've done, and I shouldn't stop being your friend despite your past. We still have to talk, but first, we need to make sure you're not going to croak."

It was hard to think with the throbbing in Dan's skull. He also needed to take the damn bolt out of his thigh and pack the wound with the herb.

"No more secrets," said Dan, knowing Muhammad would want to know what the herb was. "I've got some stuff that will help my leg."

"Okay. Since you took a knock to the skull, how many fingers am I holding up?" Muhammad held up three.

"Three hundred."

"Great. You're not retarded if you've got snark left."

"Can you get me some water from the kitchen, vodka, and a tiny little bowl?"

Muhammad headed for the little side door. Dan scooted himself across the floor to sit on the edge of the dais. Baron Kennin's face looked terrible, and little bits of his teeth were on the floor. That first arrow had really fucked him up.

Dan knew he needed to pray properly once he could get cleaned up. For now, he muttered a thank you to God under his breath. If Muhammad hadn't come in time...

This wasn't quite over yet. They needed to think of what to do next since there was a dead lord on the floor. Muhammad brought what he was asked for, and Dan pulled the little pouch from his pocket. The dried leaves were easy to break up in the bowl. They could be chewed, but the taste was awful. Dan added in a little water while Muhammad watched with a confused expression.

"What is that stuff?"

"Herafwig. Native Gramoan secret. Vaywin would probably throttle me if she knew I let this slip to anyone."

The leaves started to get gooey. Dan had already seen it before, so he wasn't as entertained as Muhammad was. Dan tied off a piece of Muhammad's cloak around his leg above the wound and cut away part of his trouser leg.

"Do you want me to pour the vodka on?" asked Muhammad.

"No, because I'll probably punch you in the face if you do it. It burns."

It was best to just get it over with it. Dan took a deep breath and yanked the bolt out. Blood immediately seeped from the nasty injury, and he didn't give himself time to think. He poured some of the vodka into the wound and swore loudly. It burned like fire and almost hurt worse than the bolt did, but it was better than an infection. Vaywin said the herb seemed to generally prevent that, but it was better to be safer than sorry.

Dan carefully packed the Herafwig into the hole left by the bolt. Instantly, the bleeding stopped. It would still hurt and take a few days to heal, but he'd be fine in the long run.

"When do you take it out?" asked Muhammad.

"You don't," said Dan. "You sew up the wound and leave it. It dissolves over time as it works."

"This cures everything?!"

"Not everything. If an injury is too bad, a person can still die. It doesn't guarantee life, and if you're dead, it won't do a thing. Also, it doesn't seem to work on diseases and stuff like that."

Dan retied the rag around the injury. He'd have to go upstairs and find a needle and thread somewhere to properly sew it up, but he'd be fine for a

moment. There was some goo left in the bowl, so he had Muhammad dab it on the side of his head since the crossbow had left a gash.

“That might scar, but your hair should hide it,” said Muhammad. “How do you feel?”

“Like I got stomped on by Snubby. I need to find a needle and thread.”

“I’ll help you look. Do you want to stay here? I’m sure I can find it upstairs.”

“No, I’m tired of looking at the asshole over there,” said Dan. “Also, I should check that the other lords aren’t dead. The Baron put stuff in their wine to make them sleep, but I’d feel better if I knew it wasn’t too much. I’ll tell you about that in a minute.”

Muhammad helped Dan to stand. His right hip and shoulder hurt, but he could walk. He started toward the Great Hall doors.

“Oh, wait, your dagger. I’ll get it.”

Dan glanced back to see Muhammad darting across the floor to grab it. “Thanks.”

Dan wiped the rag he’d been using for his head across his cheek. He could feel blood drying and couldn’t wait to wash it off. It was disgusting. He couldn’t even rest yet because he still had to figure out what to do.

Should they just get Adiva and all leave? Should they get the Commander of the Guard, pray he listened for more than thirty seconds without trying to arrest them, and show him the sleeping lords? Would he believe Dan at all? Maybe it was better if they just packed their shit and left tonight.

As he neared the Great Hall doors, he rubbed his eyes with his free hand.

Something cold and sharp touched his neck and a hard voice spoke. “I suggest you don’t fucking move.”

Chapter Thirteen

Dan lowered his hand enough to see two men. One had an arrow pointed at him, and the one that had spoken had the tip of his sword at Dan's neck.

It took a moment for several little details to register properly in Dan's mind. A blue cloak. Long hair pulled back. A beard. The height. The clasp on his cloak. The other had a matching one and was similar in appearance despite his short hair and clean-shaven face.

Dan was fucked. Of all the people that could have walked in...what the hell was he doing here? Baron Kennin hadn't said anything about these extra visitors. Instinctively, Dan stepped back.

"I said don't move." Prince Leon's voice was deadly quiet as his eyes flicked toward something behind Dan. "I suggest you put that bow down or I'll kill your friend here. If you shoot me, my brother will put an arrow in your skull before you can reach for another."

Dan didn't check behind him, but he knew how the scene must look: absolutely terrible. "Muhammad, do what he says."

The other man, who must have been Prince Albrecht, didn't lower his bow, and his stoic expression didn't say there would be any mercy in the future.

Prince Leon scanned Dan for a moment, taking in his battered appearance. "Back up."

Dan started to limp back. "I know what this looks like, but--"

"But you didn't do it. It's not your fault. You just happened to randomly walk in and find the Baron dead on the floor of his Great Hall. How unfortunate. Sure." Prince Leon snorted.

"Believable," said Prince Albrecht.

"Put your bow down and slide it over," said Prince Leon. "The daggers too."

Muhammad made a faint frustrated noise and did as he was told. Prince Albrecht grabbed the bow, shouldered it, and tucked the daggers in his belt before he pointed an arrow at Muhammad once more. Once Dan had

backed up close enough to the body, Prince Leon told him to stand by Muhammad.

Even with the sword away from Dan's neck, he knew this night could not have gone worse. Prince Leon could technically run them both through right now for murder. It wasn't right, but the King's younger brother wasn't always known for doing the right thing. He had his own way of dealing with stuff. Dan had heard some things.

Since it looked like Dan and Muhammad had killed a higher up, a terrible crime, probably no one would complain if Prince Leon killed them both right now instead of having them arrested.

Two Knights came to the door with their helmets off. Judging by their expression as they took in the Great Hall, they wouldn't complain if their Prince decided to off Dan and Muhammad.

Prince Leon looked at the corpse and the collapsed tapestry behind the High Table. "It looks like we were a bit too late, Albrecht."

"We didn't kill him! I mean we did. I did, but I had a good reason! The Baron-"

Prince Leon's cold look cut off Muhammad's babbling. "You better have had a damn good reason and proof to back it up."

"He tried to kill me," said Dan. "Check under his shirt. He has armor on. Why would he be wearing that hidden under his fancy dinner clothes if he wasn't?"

Prince Leon used the tip of his sword to lift Baron Kennin's shirt. Indeed, he did have on a thin but snug cuirass. The buckles were on the side. It wasn't very heavy or thick, and most soldiers would prefer something thicker, but it was decent enough to stop a dagger. It was certainly better than just a shirt, and it could be worn under clothing.

Prince Leon tilted his head. "That is a strange thing to be wearing, but why was he trying to kill you?"

Dan tried to think through the pounding in his head. The Herafwig hadn't fixed that. The truth would get him killed along with Muhammad. Something popped into his head as he remembered what Vaywin had said about not everyone tolerating other religions.

"It's because I'm a Muslim," said Dan. "He was an atheist and said I was scum and deserved to die. I think he thought I worshiped some kind of fake God or something too."

Prince Leon said nothing as he seemed to study Dan's face for a moment. "You sound Gredorian, but you don't exactly look it."

"I was born here, but my parents are Egyptian."

"So you worship some foreign sky daddy?" asked Prince Leon.

Dan fought to keep the scowl off of his face. "We worship the same God."

"No, we don't," said Prince Leon. "I don't believe in the sky daddy."

Prince Albert let out a barely perceptible sigh and looked like he was struggling not to roll his eyes.

"Don't give me that look," Prince Leon told his younger brother.

"God's not a *sky daddy*."

"You know how I feel about the man in the clouds." Prince Leon turned back to Dan. "So you expect me to believe that he had you come over here with...I guess some lie so you wouldn't be suspicious. Then he said that you're a dirty Muslim that needs to die, he chased you around his Great Hall, and you killed him?"

"Yes," Dan said stupidly. "I mean, not exactly."

"And where do you fit in this?" asked Prince Leon gesturing to Muhammad. "Are you a Muslim too?"

"No, but I came in here, and Baron Kennin had Dan on the floor," said Muhammad. "He was about to choke him to death, so I killed him with an arrow! Even a lord can't just commit murder, and it doesn't matter how much he dislikes someone's religion. This is Gredoria, not some backward European country."

"Really?" Prince Leon asked in a sarcastic tone. "Thanks. I was feeling a bit lost. Why the hell did you come here too?"

"I had a bad feeling," blurted Muhammad.

Prince Leon stared at him for a second. "You barged into the Baron's house on a whim?"

"Oh, God, I might as well just tie my cloak into a noose right now and get it over with," mumbled Muhammad.

"Speak up," snapped Prince Leon.

"There are lords upstairs in a sitting room," Dan quickly added. "Baron Kennin had them over for dinner, and he invited me as a thank you for something I did. They're all asleep because Baron Kennin put something in

their wine, but I don't drink because Islam forbids it. Baron Hurdin is one of them. He's from the North, and-

"So you're telling me that if I go upstairs, I'll find a sitting room full of drugged lords?" Prince Leon gave him a scathing look.

"Yes! I know it sounds utterly ridiculous, but it's true."

Prince Leon twirled his sword for a moment. God knew what thoughts were running through his head. He suddenly gave Dan a huge smile that wasn't comforting in the least. "Very well. Maybe we should check on them, eh? Be a good boy, and lead the way. You, follow him."

"Keep your hands where I can see him," warned Prince Albrecht. "Both of you."

Dan had no choice but to limp out and lead the group upstairs and toward the back while he tried to think further about what he might need to say.

As expected, all of the lords were asleep. If things hadn't been so serious, the sight would have been funny. The snotty Earl didn't look so lordly when he was slumped over on the arm of the couch and drooling. He'd spilled what was left of his wine, and the giant damp spot on his trousers made it look as if he'd pissed himself.

One of the Barons was leaning against his buddy and loudly snoring. Baron Hurdin was surprisingly quiet as he snoozed in his armchair.

Dan stepped to the side with Muhammad to allow the others in.

"What the fuck?" asked Prince Leon.

"See? I told you!" Dan pointed at the sleeping men. "He drew me out of the room to speak to me in private, and he said I couldn't yell for help because they were all drugged and wouldn't hear me. I don't know why he just didn't invite me over for a meal by myself, but you can see they're here. Baron Kennin was clearly insane!"

Prince Leon kicked one of the Barons in the leg. The lord didn't even twitch. "Bloody hell. They won't be waking up for a bit."

He nudged Baron Hurdin's arm. Dan didn't expect the man, who must have been dreaming, to suddenly jump out of his armchair.

"The Camadayians are coming!" he roared right in the older Prince's face.

Prince Leon decked the Baron in the face so hard, he fell back into his armchair and made it tip over backward. It fell with a thud, and Baron

Hurdin didn't move. All Dan could see was his legs and feet sticking up.

"You startled him," said Prince Albrecht.

"He shouldn't have yelled right in my face. It was a reflex." Prince Leon leaned over to look at him. "He's still breathing, so he'll be fine, eh? As for you two." He turned to Dan and Muhammad. "Perhaps you're innocent, but I'll need to hear everything that happened before I make any decisions."

"I need to sew up my leg," said Dan. And think of what to say. If he accidentally let the wrong thing slip... "I also need to pray." Prince Leon raised an eyebrow. "I have to pray at certain times."

Prince Leon turned away, but Dan still caught the eye roll. "Very well."

"Come on, I'll help you," said Muhammad.

"You two will separate until we talk," said Prince Leon. "He can sew it up himself or one of the Knights can."

"I can manage it." Dan held back a scowl. Prince Leon obviously didn't trust them and thought they'd be making up some lie.

He used a guest bedroom and a Knight, who had found some needle and thread, waited outside. Clearly, they probably also thought Dan might try to sneak away.

Once he'd taken care of himself the best he could, washed, and prayed, they gathered in the office. One of the Knights said the lords had all been dumped in various guest bedrooms so they could sleep off the drugged wine.

"We can ask them about things in the morning." Prince Leon leaned back in the Baron's chair and gave Dan another smile that wasn't pleasant. "Start talking."

Dan spoke of the incident in Riverside and how the Baron sent him there to check that out. Baron Kennin had actually rather acted as if Dan was expendable because he was a Muslim. Dan left a lot out including Samson being alive, and he made it sound like he had found nothing that could point to the real murderer. He mentioned being attacked, how he thought it was a robber, the murder in the city, and left out things like Camden.

He mentioned the murder bait part and how the Baron invited him to dinner. Dan thought it was to apologize for using him. Nothing special had happened at dinner or in the sitting room. Everybody, except for him, had drunk quite a bit and had a glass of wine afterward. Baron Kennin invited Dan to speak in private.

“I was looking at a shelf in his room.” Dan kept his voice level and maintained enough eye contact to look honest, but not so much that it seemed challenging. “He had all sorts of little items on it, and I thought they were just trinkets at first, but the dagger he got from the murder victim here was there. Besides that, there was half of an arrow. It looked like the other half of the arrow I found where Will had been murdered. I didn’t really think it was from that, but I asked him about it, and he just admitted that he’d killed Will, broken the arrow in half, and kept the barbed part as a souvenir.”

“As a souvenir?” asked Prince Leon.

Dan nodded. “I thought he was making a sick joke, but he said every item on the shelf was from someone he killed.”

“He just admitted it?” asked Prince Leon.

“It’s like he was bragging,” said Dan. “He was proud of his collection.”

Prince Leon didn’t look entirely convinced. Maybe that had been a dumb thing to say, but Dan couldn’t backtrack now. Besides, it was partly true because Baron Kennin had been rather proud of his shelf. The fact that he openly displayed the things he took from his victims proved that.

Prince Albrecht, sitting by the side of the desk, looked at his brother and spoke up. “I read about one by the Pacific Strip. He took a finger from everyone he killed and kept detailed journals about those he slaughtered. He recorded every single detail about the murderers and seemed quite proud of them. He kept the fingers in a box.”

He had no expression while he said that as if keeping severed human bits in a box wasn’t that abnormal.

“When was this?” asked Prince Leon. “I never heard anything about that.”

“It was before our time, but I don’t remember when exactly. I read it in a book in our library.”

“Maybe I should keep a box for when I take someone’s head off,” said Prince Leon. “Considering those who betrayed the crown, I could have had a nice collection going by now.”

“Lucy wouldn’t like the smell,” said Prince Albrecht. “In fact, she’d probably hightail it out if you kept a collection of heads.”

“That’s true. It’s also disgusting and unhygienic. Continue.”

Dan had no idea who Lucy was, but he hoped she had never had to deal with a box of heads that Leon severed. Was the whole Royal Family like this except for Stefan?

Dan repeated what Baron Kennin said about how he enjoyed taking lives because it made him feel like God. He added a couple of fibs about the Baron murdering some people who he thought were trash. He said Baron Kennin also tried to kill Samson but failed because the man fell in the river and hadn't been seen since. The Riverside murders had been pinned on him.

"He said I was a dirty Muslim, that my kind should all be wiped off the face of the planet, and he was going to keep one of my coat buttons," said Dan. "I tried to explain that I worship the same God as Christians even if it's in a different way. He said he was an atheist and that all religion should be wiped out because it's just an excuse to start more wars or for one group to oppress another."

Prince Leon chuckled. "He wasn't wrong there. Everybody thinks this supposed god is breathing down their necks. They get on others for not worshiping a certain way, and then, in the end, they pick and choose what they want to follow from the Bible."

"Er-"

"But don't mind me," said Prince Leon. "Carry on."

Dan explained the fight and how Muhammad saved him.

"And why did you barge in?" asked Prince Leon. "Nobody invited you to dinner."

Muhammad hesitated. What was he supposed to say besides the truth? "I just had a gut feeling. I lied and said I had a message for Dan."

Prince Leon gazed at him quietly. So far, it was hard to tell if he fully believed Dan or not. "Hmm. I had a gut feeling about something once. I followed it, and it saved my life. I think people do have a sort of intuition when their life is in danger."

"I think it was God," said Muhammad.

"Like I said earlier, I don't believe in a god," said Prince Leon. "Men make their own choices and their own life. When you die, that's it. There's nothing. Intuition must be an instinct that helps us, rather like an animal's, except it's a little more advanced. If it makes you feel better to believe it's some god, have at it."

He leaned toward his brother and whispered something. Prince Albrecht mumbled back to him. Dan strained to hear but couldn't. Hopefully, it wasn't about putting his and Muhammad's heads in a box. Prince Leon muttered something else, and Prince Albrecht simply nodded.

"I think you're telling the truth," Prince Leon said as he straightened up. "There are some sick bastards in the world. I think someone who enjoys murdering random people must have something wrong in the head, and who's to say that can't happen to a lord? I've never met Baron Kennin or his Father, but even sick bastards could appear normal to the general public and be from any station in life."

Dan felt relief.

"He probably thought he was brilliant and saw an opportunity to brag since he intended to kill you," said Prince Albrecht. "If someone has a skill, they can usually show it off."

"But if you're murdering for funsies and tell everyone how good you are, you'll end up in a noose pretty fast," said Prince Leon. "You'll sleep here tonight, and when the lords awaken, I'll question them just in case. After that, you can go."

"We'll be free?" said Dan.

"I don't see why not."

"I'd rather go home now."

"You'll stay here just in case," said Prince Leon.

"My Mother is at home, and she'll worry."

"I'll send one of the Knights to speak to her."

At least he and Muhammad would be free tomorrow. Prince Leon had believed them. Dan almost couldn't believe it. The passed-out lords had helped with that.

"What were you doing here?" asked Dan.

"We were traveling and came for hospitality," said Prince Leon. "So much for that."

"We weren't planning on finding the lord dead in his Great Hall," said Prince Albrecht.

Dan felt like shit when he got up in the morning. He'd even gone back to sleep after praying at sunrise. Usually, he got up early, but not today. Everything was sore, especially on his right side. Once he dragged himself

out of bed, he figured Prince Leon might have been able to speak to the lords by now.

He was right. The Princes made him and Muhammad join them for breakfast in the Great Hall. The corpse was gone, and someone had cleared away the tapestry and the frame. The blood was cleaned up, and it was almost like last night had never happened.

The servant who brought their food had a faintly shocked expression on her face. Someone must have told her at least a little about what happened the previous night when she came in for work that morning with the rest of the servants. Before, not a single one probably had a clue as to what sort of person they were working for.

“The others are all nursing headaches and sick stomachs, so they won’t be coming to breakfast,” said Prince Leon. “Baron Hurdin has a black eye. Oh, well. They’ll be fine. They said they thought last night was just a simple dinner, and that you were a guest invited as a thank you since you ‘helped’ with the murder investigation. They were all quite shocked to wake up in bed with no memory of getting there and to find out that they’d been drugged so the Baron could kill you.”

“I still don’t see why he didn’t bring Dan here by himself,” one of the Knights rumbled. “It’d be much easier.”

“He probably liked the thrill of committing a crime under the nose of others. Maybe he just needed more excitement.”

“This place needs a new Baron now,” said Prince Albrecht.

“I’ll tell Stefan when we get back and make sure he picks someone good and not an idiot,” said Prince Leon. “Once you’re done eating, you two can run along. Do either of you want something as compensation for your rough time?”

“No, I’m fine,” said Muhammad.

Dan wanted something but not for himself. “I want Samson pardoned.”

Prince Leon tilted his head. “He did nothing, and if he fell in the river...”

“He might be alive,” said Dan.

“If he managed to get out of the river, why wouldn’t he have gone home?” asked Prince Leon. “He likely would have made it back before the first victim was found.”

“Maybe he was hurt,” said Dan. “No body has been found, so on the chance that he is alive but in hiding now, a notice should be put out. If he

knows he's pardoned, he can stop hiding and go home."

Prince Leon pushed away his empty plate and held his gaze for a moment with an expression like thought Dan might have known where Samson was at. Dan kept his face placid as if he didn't know shit.

"All right," said Prince Leon. "I'll write up a notice to be copied and sent out. If he's alive, he'll see or hear of it at some point."

"I have a gut feeling he's alive," said Dan.

Prince Leon's smile could almost be called normal. "Let's hope it's right."

Chapter Fourteen

A few days later, Dan's thigh was healing well thanks to the Herafwig, and his head was fine. Nothing had been shaken loose. He still didn't feel like riding around, but he had something important to do.

He crouched on the wall outside of the mill and whistled. Snubby looked up from grazing with an annoyed expression. Dan had no idea if the trio was still here or not. If something had happened to make them feel unsafe, they might have moved. Someone else could be here now. He noticed the cloth covering the window upstairs twitch slightly, and it wasn't long before the door opened to reveal Jimmy.

"Hello. What are you doing here? Is something wrong?"

"No." Dan smiled before he climbed down from the wall. "Is Samson still with you two?"

"Yeah, he's here. Come in."

Dan entered the mill. Samson looked all right, although he really needed a haircut now. Still, the trio didn't look like they were hurt or starving. They'd been safe in the mill.

"Have you been to town lately?" asked Dan.

Edgin shook his head. "No. We got food and stuff on our last trip there, and we've been laying low. We've done a bit of hunting and fishing as well to supplement our food."

Dan turned to Samson. "I wasn't sure if you'd heard anything yet, and I didn't want you waiting anymore. You're pardoned and completely free to go home to your family."

For a moment, Samson stared at Dan as if he'd said horses farted rainbows and that the sun was about to fall out of the sky. "What?"

"Your name is clear. You can go home to your family now."

Dan explained what happened, mostly using the version he'd told Prince Leon. Samson looked ready to cry since he could go back to his family and nobody thought he was a killer.

"Don't you start crying like a damn girl," said Edgin. "You'll embarrass me."

“Shut up. I’m not.”

“It was nice having a third, but I’m glad you can go home,” said Jimmy. “Edgin, I guess you're stuck listening to my chatter now.”

Dan shifted on the floor where they were sitting by a dead fire. “Actually, I was wondering if you’d like to get out of this life.”

“We’d like that, but it’s not always that easy,” said Edgin. “It’s hard to get on your feet when you get knocked off.”

“More than once,” said Jimmy. “We don’t have family to go to either.”

“But if you had a steady job, you could get on your feet and stay there,” said Dan. “I’m leaving soon to go on a long trip, and my partner, Muhammad, can’t run the shop from open to close every day. He’d go insane after a month or two. We did the budget and can afford to hire two people at a good wage. You could find a place to live in Nantret. No more hunting and stealing bits to survive. No more worrying about other outlaws or getting caught one day.”

“You’d really hire us even though we're outlaws?” asked Edgin.

“Do you plan on making off with half of the shop?”

“No! If I had a job, I wouldn’t ruin it on purpose!”

“Fuck yeah, we’ll do it,” said Jimmy.

“Pack up your stuff, and let’s get going,” said Dan. “And you, Samson. Lay off the alcohol so you don’t get into fights at the tavern.”

After another week, Dan rode Snubby toward Vaywin’s cave. This was the last thing he needed to take care of since everything else was done. Edgin and Jimmy were sharing a flat in a dwelling for the time being to save money. Samson had gone home to his family. Muhammad would run the shop in general, and quite soon, Dan and Adiva would be leaving for the coast of eastern Gredoria where they would find a ship.

They had done the budget and planned for things. Everything would be set while Dan and his Mother were away. He just had to get this off of his chest because he didn’t want to go on Hajj with a weight stuck on him.

Vaywin was in her cave, and it looked like she was packing up when Dan stepped in.

“You destroyed the mask,” she said coldly instead of saying hello.

He paused by the low fire. “I burned it. Something I should have done a long time ago.”

She folded her arms. “It was being passed down through my family.”

“Did your Grandmother really intend for someone to wear it while they did illegal justice?”

“It was intended to help with protection,” said Vaywin. “You clearly don’t care about spirits, so I won’t bore you with the details. Maybe she didn’t intend for that to be its specific purpose, but my Father picked a new use for it. I’d say it worked out because he killed people that would have harmed others. I have as well, and then you did.”

“You used Baron Rullen to get me into this,” said Dan. “You manipulated me. I was a child, and you decided something for me that you shouldn’t have done. You lied to me, stole me from my Mother, and gave her years of pain because she thought her only child was dead, and you used me to get rid of your life debt. I almost died not too long ago because of Baron Kennin. I don’t feel like explaining it all, but he knew who I was.”

Her blank expression flickered. “It was him?”

“Yeah. Long story, but Muhammad killed him. I almost died.”

“You still shouldn’t have destroyed the mask.”

“And you shouldn’t have taken me away,” said Dan. “You can’t have other people’s kids.”

“I did love you,” she said. “I didn’t enjoy making someone else hurt.”

“So did I because we only had each other,” said Dan. “Even if you didn’t enjoy hurting my Mother, you still did it. Your wants counted for more. You did take good care of me when I was small. I have a lot of happy memories, and I’m not mad at you anymore, but I still don’t think I want to see you anymore when I get back from Hajj. Even though I have no grudge, I think it’s better if we go our separate ways. Even with forgiveness, some rifts can’t be bridged.”

He’d never trust her around his future children either, not after the way she’d used him.

Her stoic expression didn’t change. “I figured that. I’m leaving anyway, and I don’t know where I’m going or where I’ll be when you get back. I’m not too old to wander.”

“Safe travels,” said Dan.

He had nothing else to say, and it seemed that she didn’t either. He left the cave without a backward glance, mounted Snubby, and headed for Nantret. He’d unloaded the last thing on his mind, and now that he was

done with that, he felt the former chapters of his life were fully closed now. It was time to focus on the future.

Nearly two months later, he was on a ship in St. John's Port. The last few people were coming aboard, and the sailors were getting ready to go. Dan had already put their stuff in the small cabin they'd paid for. Other travelers were doing the same, and many were on the deck and shouting last-second things to family members on the docks.

"We haven't even left yet," Adiva said when she noticed someone leaning over the railing and barfing.

"I guess he has a sensitive stomach," said Dan.

The motion of the ship felt odd once they started to get underway. Dan hoped he didn't end up joining the puking guy at the railing. People on the docks shouted goodbyes to those they knew on the ship. A few wept. Dan stood with Mother as the noise faded, and the shore slowly receded. Soon, they couldn't see it at all. It would take a while, but they would eventually see a new coast when they arrived at Shuring in England.

Epilogue

Four years later, Dan watched the coast of St. John's Port grow larger in the distance. Other people were already gathering by the railing, and excited chatter filled the air. Some were returning home, and others were brand new to Gredoria.

Dan and Adiva had enjoyed their trip. Groups were safer, and they had made use of them during the long journey. The people in the groups had gradually changed as they reached various locations in new countries until Dan ended up hearing more Arabic from the others than anything else. Adiva had helped him with speaking it, and it turned out he hadn't entirely forgotten it since childhood. With practice, he had become quite fluent.

He'd seen the cities of Mecca and Mina, and the Ka'bah during Hajj. It had been such a change to be around other people that prayed and worshiped as he did with the same intent.

Afterward, he and Adiva had gone to Egypt where Dan finally met his cousins for the first time. They had stayed for a while, and he loved it so much, he almost hadn't wanted to leave.

When they made the long journey back to Shuring so they could take a ship to Gredoria, a letter from Muhammad had been waiting. The business had been doing quite well, and he had gotten married the year before. He and his wife were expecting their first child at the time the letter had been written. Snubby was doing well too.

Dan had left Gredoria with one family member. Now, he was returning with three others. Rohaan, barely over the age of one, clung to his leg. Dan picked him up so he could see the shore better. Dan's wife, Nawra, came up from below deck a moment later with Adiva so they could watch it together.

He also had a friend on the boat, although he was probably still below deck somewhere. There had been a silk trader amongst the travelers on the way back that Dan had started talking to. It turned out Sal was immigrating to Gredoria to set himself up. Silk was always in demand amongst higher ups all over the continent. He already knew some merchants on the eastern

side and planned on heading further inland toward Nantret, so he and Dan decided to see what sort of business they could do together and profit from.

The Grey Wolf was gone from Gredoria forever, but Dan was returning with a deeper understanding of his faith, a wife, a son, and his Mother.

Leon the Lion

Some men like Prince Leon Stark are born to fight.

Leon has always had a way of remembering slights and anything done to him from a young age. Nothing feels better than getting back at someone that deserves it even if it takes time and patience.

After a brutal hold war, he earns the nickname Leon the Lion and returns home to find that his older brother, Stefan, has committed an unforgivable act of betrayal amongst brothers. Their simmering dislike turns to hate, and Leon waits for the chance to get back at him and the woman he foolishly gave his heart to. Stefan soon learns that revenge doesn't always require a blade.

When Leon enters another hold war, he gains new enemies, including one named Previl. Leon would rather face his opponents directly in combat, but not everybody shares that same value. Can he survive the treachery of Previl and his side? Will he reach a new height of cruelty? The arrogant Prince never had a soft heart to begin with, and there are fates worse than a sword thrust.

It never pays to mess with the Lion.

Sneak peek:

They entered County Lac next door in the morning and headed for the walled town of Norla. It was almost completely undefended when they arrived in the late afternoon.

“Surely he knew we'd take this place, right?” asked Leon. “It's decent enough, and it's on the way.”

Belnique frowned. “He's probably amassed most of the men at Arnhart.”

“Well, I think we can end this peacefully without killing everyone. Let me see the flag. I'll go ask for a parley myself.”

Leon took the white flag they had on hand for such purposes and approached the closed gate. He noticed a couple of faces peeking over the crenellation and the limb of a bow. He impatiently waved the flag, but the bow didn't go down, and he saw the point of an arrow.

"I have a white flag, and I swear to God if you shoot me, I will climb up there, rip the arrow out, and shove it straight up your ass! And I don't care if it's barbed!"

It was likely a commoner who simply didn't care about the rules. There was a shout, a loud "ow" as the offending bow vanished, and somebody popped up.

"We're sending Mr. Hoblim out to speak with you if you promise not to harm him."

"That's what this is for." Leon waved the flag again before retreating to a safe distance in case some bow-happy idiot decided to take a pot shot at him anyway.

Mr. Hoblim appeared like a rich man in his fine cloak edged in scarlet and a fancy little hat that Leon thought was ridiculous. He seemed nervous and had a limp in his right leg, but he approached and bowed deeply.

"Prince Leon," said the man.

"I suppose you're Mr. Hoblim. Why did they send you out?"

"I'm nobody special, really, just respected."

"What's your trade?"

"I'm a wool merchant."

"Nice. Well, I'm sure you can see us all here, eh?" Leon gestured at the large group of men-at-arms behind him. "Your city has no protection except for a few brave souls that went up to the wall and still pointed an arrow at me while I held a white flag. I didn't like that."

"I'm sorry, we're scared-"

"Did your Earl leave?" asked Leon, already assuming the answer.

"Yes, of course," said Mr. Hoblim. "He took the fighters with him-the real ones, I mean. Please, we just ask that you leave us alone. We have and want no part in this hold war. We're just simple people, and it's not fair if we get destroyed over an issue that has nothing to do with us."

"Well, that's why I'm going to be nice and let you leave," said Leon. "Everyone has an hour to pack their shit and get out."

Mr. Hoblim squinted. "Er, actually, we were hoping you would leave-"

Leon laughed. “No, you can all get your asses out. Did you think we’d just give up a nice walled city to sleep in? Hell no. If you prefer, we can put you out, but you know that’ll probably get nasty. You have fifty-nine minutes now. Better hurry. Time’s a-wastin’, eh?”

Mr. Hoblim nodded so hastily that his hat went lopsided. “We’ll leave.”

“You can come back after this is all done, and Baron Aspotle is dead.” Leon smiled at him.

The wool merchant nodded once more and hurried back to the gate. Leon waited patiently while turmoil grew inside as the news was passed. The people left, carrying what they could. Some seemed relieved, and others appeared quite annoyed. Once the place was empty, Leon and the rest of the men entered, pleased to have taken it so quickly and without a single man lost.

The Earl’s house was a bit small, but it had three bedrooms so the Prince and the two Barons took it. Nekala strolled in later. Leon was in the sitting room and holding the pure white cat he had found.

“Mind if I join you here overnight?” she asked with mock politeness.

“I suppose. I guess I’ll have to share my bed since there are only three rooms.” Leon sighed as if this was a massive inconvenience to him.

“Oh, poor you.”

“I guess it’s not so bad as long as you get on your knees and ask me very nicely by sucking me off,” he said.

“You really are a smug thing, all sure of yourself.” She settled into a chair and rested her spear across her legs. “I’ll think about it.”

“Oh, I’m sure you will.” He smirked.

“Is that your brave new warrior?”

“Of course. Even the most hardened warriors flee in terror when they see Knight Fluffy on the field of battle.” The kitty purred and squinted as Leon scratched his ears.

She raised an eyebrow. “You don’t seem like the sort to enjoy cats.”

“Why not?”

She gestured at it. “They’re all...cutesy and whatnot. You’re certainly not the cutesy sort.”

“Ah, but you see, cats don’t take bullshit from anyone. They don’t come when called or do anything you tell them. They’re independent and do as

they please.” The cat suddenly sprung from his arms and landed lightly on the floor. “See? He’s had enough. No bullshit. He just leaves.”

Without even a backward glance, Knight Fluffy walked across the room with an air of superiority.

She nodded. “They’re arrogant too. All right, I actually can see why you like them.”

Knight Fluffy disapprovingly peered at Nekala and proceeded to look up at the ceiling.

They had to be up before dawn so Leon took her to bed early for a couple of rounds. She wasn’t the super cuddly sort, and he didn’t mind that one bit. Both rolled over after they were finished, and he quickly fell asleep. At some point, he woke up in the night on his back and realized Nekala had flung her arm over his chest. He let her stay, closed his eyes, and was ready to drift off again, but he heard a strange creak along with a faint rustle. The place must have had rats...except there was a cat. A kitty would take care of those bastards and send any survivors running for their lives, right?

The house could just be settling, but he heard another noise, and it didn’t sound like a rat or normal house creaks. Perhaps one of the Barons had gotten up for a drink of water or just simply couldn’t sleep. But the noise had come from above.

He suddenly remembered how the cat had intently looked at the ceiling more than once throughout the evening before bed. It had been very quiet at times. The Barons had been in their rooms, Nekala had left the house for about an hour, and Leon had read by the fire. If it had been rats, he most likely would have heard rustling since they wouldn’t take care to keep quiet. But Knight Fluffy continued to occasionally stare up as if hearing or sensing something no one else could. He had brushed it off at the time since cats could be quirky.

After another creak from above, Leon sat up and intently listened as he realized what Knight Fluffy had known the whole time.

Someone was in the attic.

[Leon the Lion \(Jack's Reign Side Novel\)](#)