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Epigraph

Take hold of my hand, For you are no longer alone. Walk with me in hell.

- Mark Morton

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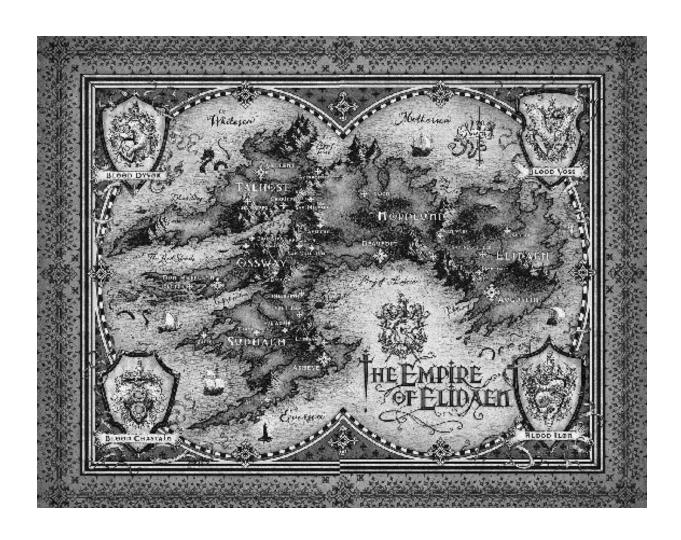
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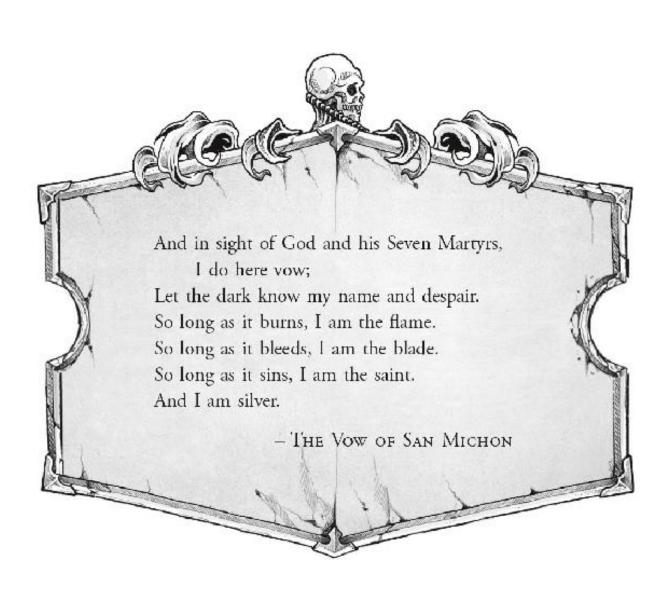
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About the Publisher

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ASK ME NOT if God exists, but why he's such a prick.

Even the greatest of fools can't deny the existence of evil. We dwell in its shadow every day. The best of us rise above it, the worst of us swallow it whole, but we all of us wade hip-deep through it, every moment of our lives. Curses and blessings fall on the cruel and just alike. For every prayer heeded, ten thousand go unanswered. And saints suffer alongside the sinners, prey for monsters spat straight from the belly of hell.

But if there is a hell, mustn't there also be a heaven? And if there is a heaven, then can't we ask it why?

Because if the Almighty is willing to put an end to all this wickedness, but somehow unable to do so, then he's not as almighty as the priests would have you believe. If he's both willing and able to put paid to it all, how can this evil exist in the first place? And if he's neither willing nor able to lay it to rest, then he's no god at all.

The only possibility remaining is that he can stop it. He simply chooses not to.

The children snatched from parents' arms. The endless plains of unmarked graves. The deathless Dead who hunt us in the light of a blackened sun.

We are prey now, mon ami.

We are food.

And he never lifted a fucking finger to stop it.

He could have.

He just didn't.

Do you ever wonder what we did, to make him hate us so?

SUNSET

IT WAS THE twenty-seventh year of daysdeath in the realm of the Forever King, and his murderer was waiting to die.

The killer stood watch at a thin window, impatient for his end to arrive. Tattooed hands were clasped at his back, stained with dried blood and ashes pale as starlight. His room stood high in the reaches of a lonely tower, kissed by sleepless mountain winds. The door was iron-clad, heavy, locked like a secret. From his vantage, the killer watched the sun sink towards an unearned rest and wondered how hell might taste.

The cobbles in the courtyard below promised him a short flight into a dreamless dark. But the window was too narrow to squeeze through, and his jailers had left nothing else to see him off to sleep. Just straw to lie on and a bucket to shit in and a view of the frail sunset to serve as torture 'til the real torture arrived. He wore a heavy coat, old boots, leather britches stained by long roads and soot. His pale skin was damp with sweat, but his breath hung chill in the air, and no fire burned in the hearth behind him. The coldbloods wouldn't risk a flame, even in their prison cells.

They'd be coming for him soon.

The château below him was waking now. Monsters rising from beds of cold earth and slipping on the façade that they were something close to human. The air outside was thick with the hymn of bats' wings. Thrall soldiers clad in dark steel patrolled the battlements below, twin wolves and twin moons emblazoned on black cloaks. The killer's lip curled as

he watched them; men standing guard where no dog would abase itself.

The sky above was dark as sin.

The horizon, red as his lady's lips the last time he kissed her.

He ran one thumb across his fingers, the letters inked below his knuckles.

'Patience,' he whispered.

'May I come in?'

The killer didn't let himself flinch – he knew the coldblood would've relished that. Instead, he kept staring out the window at the broken knuckles of the mountains beyond, capped by ash-grey snow. He could feel the thing standing behind him now, its gaze roaming the back of his neck. He knew what it wanted, why it was here. Hoping it'd be quick and knowing, deep down, that they'd savour every scream.

He finally turned, feeling fire swell inside him at the sight of it. The anger was an old friend, welcome and warm. Making him forget the ache in his veins, the tug of his scars, the years on his bones. Looking at the monster before him, he felt positively young again. Borne towards forever on the wings of a pure and perfect hate.

'Good evening, Chevalier,' the coldblood said.

It had been only a boy when it died. Fifteen or sixteen, perhaps, still possessed of that slim androgyny found on manhood's cusp. But God only knew how old it was, really. A hint of colour graced its cheeks, large brown eyes framed by thick golden locks, a tiny curl arranged artfully on its brow. Its skin was poreless and alabaster pale, but its lips were obscenely red, the whites of its eyes flushed just the same. Fresh fed.

If the killer didn't know better, he'd have said it looked almost alive.

Its frockcoat was dark velvet, embroidered with golden curlicues. A mantle of raven's feathers was draped over its shoulders, the collar upturned like a row of glossy black blades. The crest of its bloodline was stitched at its breast; twin wolves rampant against the twin moons. Dark britches, a silken cravat and stockings, and polished shoes completed the portrait. A monster, wearing an aristocrat's skin.

It stood in the centre of his cell, though the door was still locked like a secret. A thick book was pressed between its bone-white palms, and its voice was lullaby sweet.

'I am Marquis Jean-François of the Blood Chastain, Historian of Her Grace Margot Chastain, First and Last of Her Name, Undying Empress of Wolves and Men.'

The killer said nothing.

'You are Gabriel de León, Last of the Silversaints.'

Still, the killer named Gabriel made not a sound. The thing's eyes burned like candlelight in the silence; the air felt sticky-black and lush. It seemed for a moment that Gabriel stood at the edge of a cliff, and that only the cold press of those ruby lips to his throat might save him. He felt his skin prickling, an involuntary stirring of his blood as he imagined it. The want of moth for flame, begging to burn.

'May I come in?' the monster repeated.

'You're already in, coldblood,' Gabriel replied.

The thing glanced below Gabriel's belt and gifted him a knowing smile. 'It is always polite to ask, Chevalier.'

It snapped its fingers, and the iron-clad door swung wide. A pretty thrall in a long black dress and corset slipped inside. Her gown was a crushed velvet damask, waspwaisted, a choker of dark lace about her throat. Her long red hair was bound into braids, looped across her eyes like chains of burnished copper. She was perhaps mid-thirty, old as Gabriel was. Old enough to be the monster's mother, if it had been just an ordinary boy and she just an ordinary woman. But she carried a leather armchair as heavy as she was, eyes downturned as she placed it effortlessly at the coldblood's side.

The monster's gaze didn't stray from Gabriel. Nor his from it.

The woman brought in another armchair and a small oaken table. Placing the chair beside Gabriel, the table between, she stood with hands clasped like a prioress at prayer.

Gabriel could see scars at her throat now; telltale punctures under that choker she wore. He felt contempt, crawling on his skin. She'd carried the chair as if it weighed nothing, but standing now in the coldblood's presence, the woman was almost breathless, her pale bosom heaving above her corset like a maiden on her wedding night.

'Merci,' Jean-François of the Blood Chastain said.

'I am your servant, Master,' the woman murmured.

'Leave us now, love.'

The thrall met the monster's eyes. She ran slow fingertips up the arc of her breast to the milk-white curve of her neck and—

'Soon,' the coldblood said.

The woman's lips parted. Gabriel could see her pulse quickening at the thought.

'Your will be done, Master,' she whispered.

And without even a glance to Gabriel, she curtseyed and slipped from the room, leaving the killer alone with the monster.

'Shall we sit?' it asked.

'I'll die standing, if it's all the same,' Gabriel replied.

'I am not here to kill you, Chevalier.'

'Then what do you want, coldblood?'

The dark whispered. The monster moved without seeming to move at all; one moment standing beside the armchair, the next, seated upon it. Gabriel watched it brush an imaginary speck of dust from its frockcoat's brocade, place its book upon its lap. It was the smallest display of power – a demonstration of potency to warn him against any acts of desperate courage. But Gabriel de León had been killing this thing's kind since he was sixteen years old, and he knew full well when he was outmatched.

He was unarmed. Three nights tired. Starving and surrounded and sweating with withdrawal. He heard Greyhand's voice echoing across the years, the tread of his old master's silver-heeled boots upon the flagstones of San Michon.

Law the First: The dead cannot kill the Dead.

'You must be thirsty.'

The monster produced a crystal flask from within its coat, dim light glittering on the facets. Gabriel narrowed his eyes.

'It is only water, Chevalier. Drink.'

Gabriel knew this game; kindness offered as a prelude to temptation. Still, his tongue felt like sandpaper against his teeth. And though no water could truly quench the thirst inside him, he snatched the flask from the monster's ghost-pale hand, poured a swig into his palm. Crystal clear. Scentless. Not a trace of blood.

He drank, ashamed at his relief, but still shaking out every drop. To the part of him that was human, that water was sweeter than any wine or woman he'd ever tasted.

'Please.' The coldblood's eyes were sharp as broken glass. 'Sit.'

Gabriel remained where he stood.

'Sit,' it commanded.

Gabriel felt the monster's will pressed upon him, those dark eyes swelling in his vision until they were all he could see. There was a sweetness to it. The lure of bloom to bumblebee, the taste of bare young petals damp with dew. Again, Gabriel felt his blood stir southwards. But again, he heard Greyhand's voice in his mind.

Law the Second: Dead tongues heeded are Dead tongues tasted.

And so, Gabriel stayed where he stood. Standing tall on colt's legs. The ghost of a smile graced the monster's lips. Tapered fingertips smoothed a golden curl back from those bloody chocolat eyes, drummed on the book in its lap. 'Impressive,' it said.

'Would that I could say the same,' Gabriel replied.

'Have a care, Chevalier. You may hurt my feelings.'

'The Dead feel as beasts, look as men, die as devils.'

'Ah.' The coldblood smiled, a hint of razors at the edge. 'Law the Fourth.'

Gabriel tried to hide his surprise, but he still felt his belly roll.

'Oui,' the coldblood nodded. 'I am familiar with the principles of your Order, de León. Those who do not learn from the past suffer the future. And as you might imagine, future nights hold quite an interest for the undying.'

'Give me back my sword, leech. I'll teach you how undying you really are.'

'How quaint.' The monster studied its long fingernails. 'A threat.'

'A vow.'

'And in sight of God and his Seven Martyrs,' the monster quoted, 'I do here vow; Let the dark know my name and despair. So long as it burns, I am the flame. So long as it bleeds, I am the blade. So long as it sins, I am the saint. And I am silver.'

Gabriel felt a wave of soft and poisonous nostalgia. It seemed a lifetime had passed since he'd last heard those words, ringing in the stained-glass light of San Michon. A prayer for vengeance and violence. A promise to a god who'd never truly listened. But to hear them repeated in a place like this, from the lips of one of *them* ...

'For the love of the Almighty, sit,' the coldblood sighed. 'Before you fall.'

Gabriel could feel the monster's will pressing on him, all light in the room now gathered in its eyes. He could almost hear its whisper, teeth tickling his ear, promising sleep after the longest road, cool water to wash the blood from his hands, and a warm, quiet dark to make him forget the shape of all he'd given and lost.

But he thought of his lady's face. The colour of her lips the last time he kissed her.

And he stood.

'What do you want, coldblood?'

The last breath of sunset had fled the sky, the scent of long-dead leaves kissed Gabriel's tongue. The want had arrived in earnest, and the need was on its way. The thirst traced cold fingers up his spine, spread black wings about his shoulders. How long had it been since he smoked? Two days? Three?

God in heaven, he'd kill his own fucking mother for a taste

. .

'As I told you,' the coldblood replied, 'I am Her Grace's historian. Keeper of her lineage and master of her library. Fabién Voss is dead, thanks to your tender ministrations. Now that the other Courts of the Blood have begun bending the knee, my mistress has turned her mind towards preservation. And so, before the Last Silversaint dies, before all knowledge of your Order is swept into an unmarked grave, my pale Empress Margot has, in her infinite generosity, offered opportunity for you to speak.'

Jean-François smiled with wine-stain lips.

'She wishes to hear your story, Chevalier.'

'Your kind never really hold the knack for jesting, do you?' Gabriel asked. 'You leave it in the dirt the night you die. Along with whatever passed for your fucking soul.'

'Why would I jest, de León?'

'Animals often sport with their food.'

'If my Empress wished sport, they would hear your screams all the way to Alethe.'

'How quaint.' Gabriel studied his broken fingernails. 'A threat.'

The monster inclined its head. 'Touché.'

'Why would I waste my last hours on earth telling a story nobody on earth gives a shit about? I'm no one to you. Nothing.' 'Oh, come.' The thing raised one eyebrow. 'The Black Lion? The man who survived the crimson snows of Augustin? Who burned a thousand kith to ashes and pressed the Mad Blade to the throat of the Forever King himself?' Jean-François tutted like a school madam with an unruly student. 'You were the greatest of your Order. The only one who yet lives. Those oh so broad shoulders are ill-suited for the mantle of modesty, Chevalier.'

Gabriel watched the coldblood stalking between lies and flattery like a wolf on the pin-bright scent of blood. All the while, he pondered the question of what it truly wanted, and why he wasn't already dead. And finally ...

'This is about the Grail,' Gabriel realized.

The monster's face was so still, it actually seemed carved of marble. But Gabriel supposed he saw a ripple in that dark stare.

'The Grail is destroyed,' it replied. 'What care we for the cup now?'

Gabriel tilted his head and spoke by rote:

'From holy cup comes holy light;
'The faithful hand sets world aright.
'And in the Seven Martyrs' sight,
'Mere man shall end this endless night.'

A cold chuckle rang on bare stone walls. 'I am a chronicler, de León. History is of interest to me, not mythology. Save your callow superstitions for the cattle.'

'You're lying, coldblood. *Dead tongues heeded are Dead tongues tasted*. And if you believe for one moment that I'll betray ...'

His voice faded, then failed entirely. Though the monster never seemed to move at all, it now held one hand outstretched. And there, on the snow-white plane of its upturned palm, lay a glass phial of reddish-brown dust. Like a powder of chocolat and crushed rose petals. The temptation he'd known was coming.

'A gift,' the monster said, removing the stopper.

Gabriel could smell the powdered blood from where he stood. Thick and rich and copper sweet. His skin tingled at the scent. His lips parted in a sigh.

He knew what the monsters wanted. He knew one taste would only make him thirsty for more. Still, he heard himself speak as if from far away. And if all the years and all the blood had not long ago broken his heart, it surely would have broken then.

'I lost my pipe ... In the Charbourg, I ...'

The coldblood produced a fine bone pipe from within its frockcoat, placed it and the phial on the small table. And glowering, it gestured to the chair opposite.

'Sit.'

And finally, wretch that he was, Gabriel de León obeyed. 'Help yourself, Chevalier.'

The pipe was in his hand before he knew it, and he poured a helping of the sticky powder into the bowl, trembling so fiercely he almost dropped his prize. The coldblood's eyes were fixed upon Gabriel's hands as he worked; the scars and calluses and beautiful tattoos. A wreath of skulls was inked atop the silversaint's right hand, a weave of roses upon his left. The word PATIENCE was etched across his fingers below his knuckles. The ink was dark against his pale skin, edged with a metallic sheen.

The silversaint tossed a lock of long black hair from his eyes as he patted his coat, his leather britches. But of course, they'd taken his flintbox away.

'I need a flame. A lantern.'

'You need.'

With agonizing slowness, the coldblood steepled slender fingers at its lips. There was nothing and no one else in all the world then. Just the pair of them, killer and monster, and that lead-laden pipe in Gabriel's shaking hands. 'Let us speak then of need, Silversaint. The whys matter not. The means, neither. My Empress demands the telling of your tale. So, we may sit as gentry while you indulge your sordid little addiction, or we may retire to rooms in the depths of this château where even devils fear to tread. Either way, my Empress Margot shall have her tale. The only question is whether you sigh or scream it.'

It had him. Now that the pipe was in his hand, he'd already fallen.

Homesick for hell, and dreading to return.

'Give me the fucking flame, coldblood.'

Jean-François of the Blood Chastain snapped his fingers again, and the cell door creaked wide. The same thrall woman waited outside, a lantern with a long glass chimney in her hands. She was just a silhouette against the light: black dress, black corset, black choker. She could have been Gabriel's daughter then. His mother, his wife – it made no difference at all. All that mattered was the flame she carried.

Gabriel was tense as two bowstrings, dimly aware of the coldblood's discomfort in the fire's presence, the silk-soft hiss of its breath over sharp teeth. But he cared for nothing now, save that flame and the darkling magik to follow, blood to powder to smoke to bliss.

'Bring it here,' he told the woman. 'Quickly, now.'

She placed the lamp on the table, and for the first time met his eyes. And her pale blue stare spoke to him without her ever speaking a word.

And you think me slave?

He didn't care. Not a breath. Expert hands trimming the wick, raising the flame to the perfect height, the oil's scent threading the air. He could feel the heat against the tower's chill, holding the pipe's bowl the perfect distance to render the powder to vapour. His belly thrilled as it began: that sublime alchemy, that dark chymistrie. The powdered blood bubbling now, colour melting to scent, the aroma of

hollyroot and copper. And Gabriel pressed his lips to that pipe with more passion than he'd ever kissed a lover and ... oh sweet God in heaven, breathed it down.

The blinding fire of it, filling his lungs. The roiling heaven of it, flooding his mind. Crystallizing, disintegrating, he drew that bloody vapour into his chest and felt his heart thrashing against his ribs like a bird in a bower of bones, his cock straining against his leather britches, and the face of God Himself just another bowlful away.

He looked up into the thrall's eyes and saw she was an angel given earthly form. He wanted to kiss her, drink her, die inside her, sweeping her into his arms, brushing his lips along her skin as his teeth stirred in his gums, feeling the promise thudding just below the arc of her jaw, the hammerblow beat of her pulse against his tongue, alive, alive—

'Chevalier.'

Gabriel opened his eyes.

He was on his knees beside the table, the lamp throwing a shaking shadow beneath him. He'd no inkling how much time had passed. The woman was gone, as if she'd never been.

He could hear the wind outside, one voice and dozens; whispering secrets along the shingles and howling curses in the eaves and shushing his name through the boughs of black and naked trees. He could count every sliver of straw on the floor, feel every hair on his body standing tall, smell old dust and new death, the roads he'd walked on the soles of his boots. Every sense was as sharp as a blade, broken and bloodied in his tattooed hands.

'Who ...'

Gabriel shook his head, grasping at words like handfuls of syrup. The whites of his eyes had turned red as murder. He looked at the phial, now back in the monster's palm.

'Whose blood ... is that?'

'My blessed dame,' the monster replied. 'My dark mother and pale mistress, Margot Chastain, First and Last of her Name, Undying Empress of Wolves and Men.'

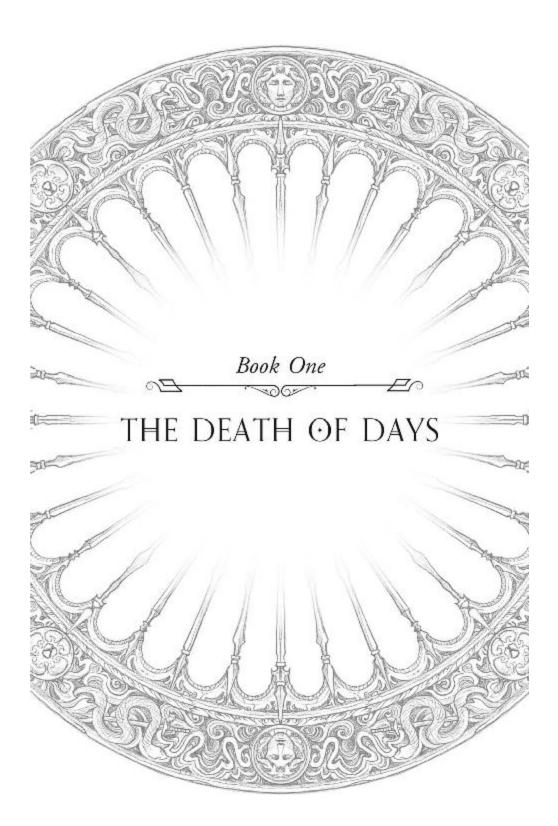
The coldblood was looking at the lantern's flame with a soft, wistful hatred. A skull-pale moth had surfaced from some dank corner of the cell, flitting now about the light. Porcelain-pale fingers closed over the phial, obscuring it from view.

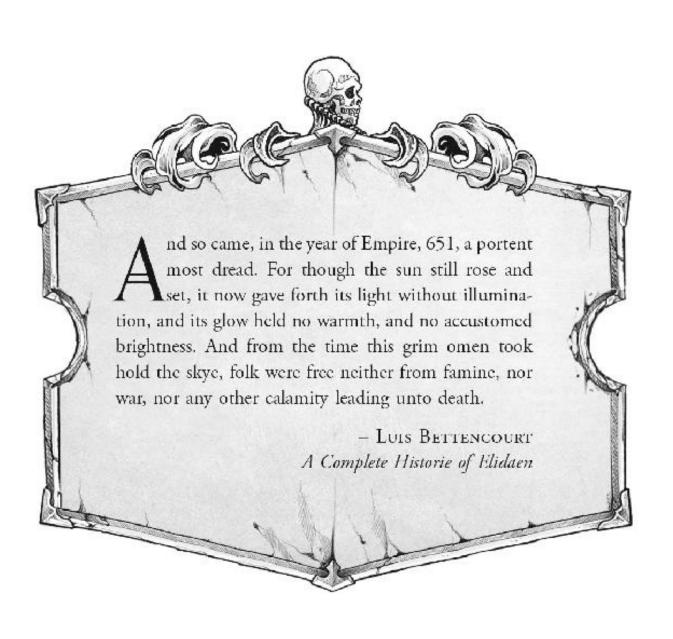
'But not one more drop of her shall be yours until your tale is mine. So speak it, and as though to a child. Presume the ones who shall read it, aeons from now, know nothing of this place. For these words I commit now to parchment shall last so long as this undying empire does. And this chronicle shall be the only immortality you will ever know.'

From his coat, the coldblood produced a wooden case carved with two wolves, two moons. He drew a long quill from within, black as the row of feathers about his throat, placing a small bottle upon the armrest of his chair. Dipping quill to ink, Jean-François looked up with dark and expectant eyes.

Gabriel drew a deep breath, the taste of red smoke on his lips.

'Begin,' the vampire said.





OF APPLES AND TREES

'IT ALL STARTED with a rabbit hole,' Gabriel said.

The Last Silversaint stared into that flickering lantern flame as if into faces long dead. A hint of red smoke still bruised the air, and he could hear each thread in the lantern's wick burning to a different tune. The years passed between then and now seemed only minutes to his mind, alight with rushing bloodhymn.

'It strikes me as funny,' he sighed, 'looking back on it all. There's a pile of ash behind me so high it could touch the sky. Cathedrals in flames and cities in ruins and graves overflowing with the pious and wicked, and that's where it truly began.' He shook his head in wonder. 'Just a little hole in the ground.

'People will remember it different, of course. The soothsingers will harp about the Prophecy, and the priests will bleat on about the Almighty's plan. But I never met a minstrel who wasn't a liar, coldblood. Nor a holy man who wasn't a cunt.'

'Ostensibly, you are a holy man, Silversaint,' Jean-François said.

Gabriel de León met the monster's gaze, smiling faintly. 'Night was a good two hours off when God decided to piss in my porridge. The locals had torn down the bridge over the Keff, so I'd been forced south to the ford near Dhahaeth. It was rough country, but Justice had—'

'Hold, Chevalier.' Marquis Jean-François of the Blood Chastain raised one hand, placed the quill between the pages. 'This will not do.'

Gabriel blinked. 'No?'

'No,' the vampire replied. 'I told you, this is the tale of who you are. How all this came to pass. Histories do not begin halfway. Histories begin at the beginning.'

'You want to know about the Grail. A rabbit hole is where that tale begins.'

'As I said, I record this story for those who will live long after you are food for worms. Begin gently.' Jean-François waved one slender hand. 'I was born. I grew up ...'

'I was born in a mud puddle named Lorson. Raised the son of a blacksmith. Eldest of three. I was no one special.'

The vampire looked him over, boots to brow. 'We both know *that* is untrue.'

'The things you *know* about me, coldblood? Well, if you scraped them all together and squeezed them dry, they could almost add up to a fucking thimbleful.'

The thing called Jean-François affected a small yawn. 'Teach me, then. Your parents. Were they pious folk?'

Gabriel opened his mouth for a rebuke. But the words died on his lips as he looked at the book in Jean-François's lap. He realized the coldblood wasn't only writing down his every word, he was also sketching; using that preternatural speed to trace a few lines between every breath. Gabriel saw the lines coalescing into an image now; a man in three-quarter profile. Haunted grey eyes. Broad shoulders and long hair, black as midnight. A chiselled jaw dusted with fine stubble and streaked with dried blood. Two scars were carved beneath his right eye, one long, the other short, almost like falling tears. It was a face Gabriel knew as well as his own.

Because, of course, it was his own.

'A fine likeness.' he said.

'Merci,' the monster murmured.

'Do you draw portraits for the other leeches, too? It must be tricky to remember what you look like after a while, if even a mirror won't profane itself with your reflection.'

'You waste your venom on me, Chevalier. If venom this water be.'

Gabriel stared at the vampire, running a fingertip across his lip. In the grip of the bloodhymn – that rushing, pulsing gift from the pipe he'd smoked – every sensation was amplified a thousandfold. The potency of centuries within his veins.

He could feel the strength it gifted him, the courage that walked hand in hand with that strength; a courage that had borne him through the hell of Augustin, through the spires of the Charbourg and the ranks of the Endless Legion. And though he knew that it would fade all too soon, for now, Gabriel de León was utterly fearless.



'I'm going to make you scream, leech. I'm going to bleed you like a hog, stuff the best of you in a pipe for later, and then show you how much your immortality is truly worth.' He stared into the monster's empty eyes. 'Venomous enough?'

A smile curled Jean-François's lips. 'I had heard you were a man of ill temper.'

'Interesting. I hadn't heard of you at all.'

The smile slowly melted.

It took a long slice of silence before the monster spoke again.

'Your father. The blacksmith. Was he a pious man?'

'He was a hopeless drunkard with a smile that could charm the unmentionables off a nun, and fists even angels feared.'

'I am put in mind of apples and the distances they fall from their trees.'

'I don't recall asking your opinion of me, coldblood.'

The monster was filling in the shadows around Gabriel's eyes as he talked. 'Tell me of him. This man who raised a legend. What was his name?'

'Raphael.'

'Named for those angels who so feared him, then. Just as you were.'

'And I've no doubt how pissed they are about it.'

'Did the pair of you get along?'

'Do fathers and sons ever get along? It's not until you're a man yourself that you can see the man who raised you for what he was.'

'I wouldn't know.'

'No. You're not a man.'

The dead thing's eyes twinkled as he glanced up. 'Flattery will get you everywhere.'

'Those lily-white hands. Those golden locks.' Gabriel looked the vampire over, eyes narrowed. 'You're Elidaeni born?'

'If you say so,' Jean-François replied.

Gabriel nodded. 'The thing you need to know about ma famille, vampire, before we get down to tacks of brass, is that we were Nordish folk. You're made pretty out east, sure and true. But in the Nordlund? We're made fierce. The winds off the Godsend cut like swords through my homeland. It's untamed country. Violent country. Before the Augustin peace, the Nordlund had been invaded more than any other realm in the history of the empire. Have you heard the legend of Matteo and Elaina?'

'Of course,' Jean-François nodded. 'The Nordling warrior prince who married an Elidaeni queen in the time before empire. 'Tis said Matteo loved his Elaina fierce enough for four ordinary men. And when they died, the Almighty placed them as stars in the heavens, that they might be together forever.'

'That's one version of the tale.' Gabriel smiled. 'And Matteo loved his Elaina fierce, that much is true. But in Nordlund, we tell a different story. You see, Elaina's beauty was renowned across all five kingdoms, and each of the other four thrones sent a prince to seek her hand. On the first day, the prince from Talhost offered her a herd of magnificent tundra ponies, clever as cats and white as the snows of his homeland. On the second, the prince from Sūdhaem brought Elaina a crown made of shimmering goldglass, mined from the mountains of his birthplace. On the third, the prince from Ossway offered her a ship wrought of priceless trothwood, to bear her across the Eversea. But Prince Matteo was poor. Since the year of his birth, his homeland had been invaded by Talhost, and Sūdhaem, and Ossway too. He had no horses, nor goldglass, nor trothships to give. Instead, he vowed to Elaina he would love her fierce as four ordinary men. And to prove his point, as he stood before her throne and promised her his heart, Matteo laid at Elaina's feet the hearts of her other suitors. Those princes who'd invaded the land of his birth. Four hearts in all.'

The vampire scoffed. 'So you are saying all Nordlings are murderous madmen?'

'I'm saying we're people of passions,' Gabriel replied. 'For good or ill. To know ma famille, to know *me*, you must know that. Our hearts speak louder than our heads.'

'Your father, then?' Jean-François said. 'He too was a man of passions?'

'Oui. But not for good. Not him. He was ill, through and through.'

The silversaint leaned forward, elbows to knees. The cell was silent save for the swift scratchings of the coldblood on its portrait, the myriad whispers of the wind.

'He wasn't tall as I am, but he was built like a brick wall. He'd served as a scout in Philippe IV's army for three years, before the old emperor died. But he got caught in a snowslide on campaign in the Ossway Highlands. His leg broke and never healed right, so he'd turned to blacksmithing. And working in the keep of the local barony, he met my mama. A raven-haired beauty, stately and full of pride. He couldn't help but fall in love with her. No man could. Daughter of the Baron himself. La demoiselle de León.'

'Your mother's name was de León? I was under the impression names are inherited paternally among your kind, Silversaint. Women give up their names when wed.'

'My parents weren't wed when I was seeded.'

The vampire covered his mouth with tapered fingers. 'Scandalous.'

'My grandfather certainly thought so. He demanded she get rid of me once she started to show, but Mama refused. My grandfather cast her out with all the curses he could conjure. But she was a rock, my mama. She bowed to no one.'

'What was her name?'

'Auriél.'

'Beautiful.'

'Just as she was. And that beauty remained undimmed, even in a mudhole like Lorson. She and Papa moved there with naught but the thread on their backs. She birthed me in the village church because their cottage didn't have its roof yet. A year later, my sister Amélie was born. And then, my baby sister Celene. Mama and Papa were wed by then, and my sisters took his name, "Castia". I asked Papa if I could take it too, but he told me no. That should've been my first clue. That, and the way he treated me.'

Gabriel's fingers traced a thin scar down his chin, his eyes distant.

'Those fists the angels feared?' Jean-François murmured.

Gabriel nodded. 'As I say, he was a man of passions, Raphael Castia. And those passions came to rule him. Mama was a godly woman. She raised us deep in the One Faith, and the blessed love of the Almighty and Mothermaid. But his love was a different one.

'There was a sickness in him. I know that now. He fought in the war only three years, but he carried it the rest of his life. He never met a bottle he wouldn't race towards the bottom of. Nor a pretty girl he'd say no to. And we all preferred his indiscretions, truth told. When he was out whoring, he'd simply disappear for a day or two. But when he was home drinking ... it was like living with a keg of black ignis. The powder just waiting for a spark.

'He broke an axe handle over my back once, when I didn't chop enough wood. He pounded my ribs to breaking when I forgot the well water. He never touched Mama or Amélie or Celene, not once. But I knew his fists like I knew my name. And I thought it love.

'The day after, the song would be the same. Mama would rage, and Papa would vow by God and all Seven Martyrs he'd change, oh, he'd change. He'd swear off the drink, and we'd be happy for a time. He'd take me hunting or fishing, drill me in the swordcraft he'd learned as a scout, the life of the wild. How to make a flame catch on wet wood. The knack of walking across dead leaves with no sound. The crafting of a snare that won't kill what you catch. And more

and most, he taught me ice. He taught me snow. How it falls. How it kills. Tapping on that broken leg of his, teaching me the truths of blizzard, of snowblind, of avalanche. Sleeping under the stars in the mountains just like a real father might've done.

'But it would never last forever.

'War doesn't teach you to be a killer," he told me once. "It's just a key that opens our door. There's a beast in all men's blood, Gabriel. You can starve him. Cage him. Curse him. But in the end, you pay the beast his due, or he takes his due from you."

'I remember sitting at table on my eighth saintsday, Mama cleaning the blood off my face. She adored me, my mama, despite all my birth had cost her. I knew it the way I knew the feel of the sun on my skin. And I asked her why Papa hated me, if she could love me so. She met my eyes that day, and sighed all the way from her heart.

"You look just like him. God help me, you look exactly like him, Gabriel."

The Last Silversaint stretched his legs out, glanced at the vampire's sketch.

'Funny thing was, my papa was broad and stocky, and I was already tall by then. His skin was tanned, and mine was pale as ghosts. I could see Mama in the curve of my lips and the grey of my eyes. But truth was, Papa and I looked nothing alike.

'She took off her ring – the only treasure she'd brought from her father's home. It was silver, cast with the crest of the House de León; two lions flanking a shield and two crossed swords. And she slipped it onto my finger and squeezed my hand tight.

"The blood of lions flows in your veins," she told me that day. "And one day as a lion is worth ten thousand as a lamb. Never forget that you are *my* son. But there is a hunger in you. One you must beware, my sweet Gabriel. Lest it devour you whole."

'She sounds a formidable woman,' Jean-François said.

'She was. She walked the muddy streets of Lorson like a highborn lady through the gold-gilt halls of the Emperor's court. Even though I was bastard born, she told me to wear my noble name like a crown. To spit pure venom at anyone who claimed I'd no right to it. My mama knew herself, and there's a fearsome power in that. Knowing exactly who you are and *exactly* what you're capable of. Most folk would call it arrogance, I suppose. But most folk are fucking fools.'

'Do your priests not preach from their pulpits of the grace that lies in humility?' Jean-François asked. 'Do they not promise the meek shall inherit the earth?'

'I've lived thirty-five years with the name my mother gave me, coldblood, and never once have I seen the meek inherit anything but the table scraps of the strong.'

Gabriel glanced out the window to the mountains beyond. The dark, sinking like a sinner to its knees. The horrors that roamed it unchecked. The tiny sparks of humanity, guttering like candles in a hungry wind, soon to be extinguished forever.

'Besides, who the fuck would want to inherit an earth like this?'

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

SILENCE CREPT INTO the room on slippered feet. Gabriel stared, lost in thought and the memory of choirsong and silverbell and black cloth parting to reveal smooth, pale curves, until the soft tapping of quill to page broke his reverie.

'Perhaps we should begin with daysdeath,' the monster said. 'You must have been only a child when the shadow first covered the sun.'

'Oui. Just a boy.'

'Tell me of it.'

Gabriel shrugged. 'It was a day like any other. A few nights prior, I remember being woken by a trembling in the ground. As if the earth were stirring in her sleep. But that day seemed nothing special. I was working the forge with Papa when it began; that shadow rising into the sky like molasses, turning shining blue to sullen grey and the sun as dark as coal. The whole village gathered in the square and watched as the air grew chill and the daylight failed. We feared witchery, of course. Fae magik. Devilry. But like all things, we thought it would pass.

'You can imagine the terror that set in as the weeks and months went by and the darkness wasn't abating. We called it by many names at first: the Blackening, the Veiling, the First Revelation. But the astrologers and philosophers in the court of Emperor Alexandre III named it "Daysdeath", and in the end, so did we. On his pulpit at mass, Père Louis would preach that all we needed was faith in the Almighty to see us through. But it's hard to believe in the Almighty's light when the sun is no brighter than a dying candle, and the spring is as cold as wintersdeep.'

'How old were you?'

'Eight. Almost nine.'

'And when you realized we kith had begun walking during the day?'

'I was thirteen when I laid eyes on my first wretched.'

The historian tilted his head. 'We prefer the term foulblood.'

'Apologies, vampire,' the silversaint smiled. 'Have I somehow given impression that I give a solitary speck of shit for what you prefer?'

Jean-François simply stared. Again, Gabriel was struck with the notion that the monster was marble, not flesh. He could feel the black radiance of the vampire's will, the horror of what he was, and the lie of what he appeared – beautiful, young, sensuous – all at war in his head. In some candle-dim corner of his mind, Gabriel was aware just how easily they could hurt him. How swiftly they could dispel his illusions that he was in control here.

But that's the problem with taking away all a man has, isn't it?

When you have nothing, you have nothing to lose.

'You were thirteen,' Jean-François said.

'When I saw my first wretched,' Gabriel nodded. 'It'd been five years since daysdeath. At its brightest, the sun was still only a dark smudge behind the stain on the sky. The snows fell grey instead of white now, and smelled like brimstone. Famine swept the land like a scythe – we lost half our village to hunger or cold in those years. I was still a boy, and I'd already seen more corpses than I could count. Our noons were dim as dusk, and our dusks as dark as midnights, and

every meal was mushrooms or fucking potato, and no one, not priests nor philosophers nor madmen scrawling in shit could explain how long it must last. Père Louis preached this was a test of our faith. Fools we were, we believed him.

'And then Amélie and Julieta went missing.'

Gabriel paused a moment, lost to the dark within. Echoes of laughter in his head, a pretty smile and long black hair and eyes just as grey as his own.

'Amélie?' Jean-François asked. 'Julieta?'

'Amélie was my middle sister. My baby sister Celene the youngest, me the eldest. And I loved them both, as dear and close to me as my sweet mama. Ami had long dark hair and pale skin like me, but in temperament, we were as far apart as dawn and dusk. She'd lick her thumb and rub it on the crease between my brows, warn me not to frown so much. Sometimes I'd see her dancing, as if to music only she could hear. She'd tell us stories of an eve, when Celene and I lay down to sleep. Ami liked the frightening ones best. Wicked faelings and dark witchery and doomed princesses.

'Julieta's famille lived next door. Twelve years old she was, same as Amélie. She and my sister teased me fierce when they were together. But one day when we were in the wood picking white buttons alone, I stubbed my toe and took the Almighty's name in vain, and Julieta threatened to tell Père Louis of my blasphemy unless I kissed her.

'I protested, of course. Girls were terrifying to me back then. But Père Louis stood at his pulpit every prièdi and spat of hell and damnation, and a little kiss seemed preferable to the punishment I'd suffer if Julieta told him of my sin.

'She was taller than me. I had to stand on tiptoe to reach. I remember our noses getting entirely in the way, but finally, I pressed my lips to hers, warm as the long-lost sun. Soft and sighing. She smiled at me afterwards. Said I should blaspheme more often. That was my first kiss, coldblood. Stolen beneath dying trees for fear of the Almighty.

'It was late summer when the pair disappeared. Vanished one day while out gathering chanterelles. It wasn't unusual for Amélie to be away longer than she said. Mama would warn her about waltzing through life with her head in the clouds, and my sister would reply, "At least I can feel the sun up there." But when dusk fell, we knew something was wrong.

'I searched with the men of the village. My baby sister Celene came too – she was fierce as lions, even at eleven years old, and nobody dared tell her no. After a week, Papa's voice was broken from shouting. Mama wouldn't eat, couldn't sleep. We never found their bodies. But ten days later, they found us.'

Gabriel traced the curve of his eyelid, feeling the motion of every single lash beneath his fingertip. Chill wind shifted the long hair about his shoulders.

'I was stacking fuel for the forge with Celene when Amélie and Julieta came home. The coldblood that killed them threw their corpses in a bog after it was done, and they were filthy from the water, their dresses sodden with mud. They stood in the street outside our cottage, fingers entwined. Julieta's eyes had gone death-white, and those lips that'd been warm as the sun were black, peeling back from sharp little teeth as she smiled at me.

'Julieta's mother ran out from their house, weeping for joy. She gathered her girl in her arms and praised God and all Seven Martyrs for bringing her home. And Julieta tore out her throat right in front of us. Just ... fucking peeled it open like ripe fruit. Ami fell on the body too, pawing and hissing with a voice that wasn't hers.' Gabriel swallowed thickly. 'I've never forgot the sounds she made as she began to drink.

'The men of the village toasted my valour for what came next. And I wish I could say it was courage I felt as my sister pushed her face into that flood, painting her cheeks and lips dark red. But I look back now, and I know what truly made me stand my ground as little Celene ran screaming.'



'Love?' the coldblood asked.

The Last Silversaint shook his head, entranced by the lantern flame.

'Hate,' he finally said. 'Hate for what my sister and Julieta had become. For the thing that had done it to them. But more and most, hate for the thought that this moment was how I'd always remember those girls. Not Julieta's stolen kiss beneath those dying trees. Not Amélie telling us stories at night. But *this*. The pair on all fours, lapping blood from the mud like starving dogs. Hate was all I knew at that moment. All its promise and all its power. It took root in me on that chill summer day, and in truth, I don't think it's ever let me go.'

Jean-François turned his eyes to the moth, still beating in vain upon the lantern glass. 'Too much hate will burn a man to cinders, Chevalier.'

'Oui. But at least he'll die warm.'

The Last Silversaint's eyes flickered to his tattooed hands, fingers curling closed.

'I couldn't have hurt my sister. I loved her even then. And so, I picked up the wood axe and I brought it down, right on Julieta's neck. The blow was solid enough. But I was only thirteen, and even a full-grown man will struggle severing a human head, let alone a coldblood's. The thing that had been Julieta fell into the mud, pawing at the axe in its skull. And Amélie lifted her head, bloody drool hanging from her chin. I looked into her eyes, and it was like staring into the face of hell. Not the fire and brimstone Père Louis promised from his pulpit, just ... emptiness.

'Fucking *nothingness*.

'My sister opened her mouth, and I saw her teeth were long and knife-bright. And the girl who told me stories every night before we slept, who danced to music only she could hear, she stood and she hit me.

'God in heaven, she was *strong*. I felt nothing until I struck the mud. And then she was straddling my chest, and I could

smell rot and fresh blood on her breath, and as her fangs brushed my throat, I knew I was about to die. Looking up into those empty eyes, even as I hated and feared it, I wanted it.

'I welcomed it.

'But something in me stirred then. Like a bear waking hungry after winter's slumber. And as my sister opened her rotten mouth, I seized hold of her throat. God, she was strong enough to grind bone to powder, but still, I pushed her back. And as she pawed my face with bloody fingertips, I felt a heat flood up my arm, tingling across every inch of skin. Something dark. Something deep. And with a shriek that turned my belly to water, Amélie reared back, clutching the bubbling flesh of her throat.

'Red steam rose off her skin, as if the blood in her veins was boiling. Red tears spilled down her cheeks as she screamed. But by then, Celene's cries had brought the whole village running. Strong hands grabbed Amélie, threw her back as the alderman pressed a torch to her dress, and she went up like a Firstmas bonfire. Julieta was crawling about with my axe still stuck in her curls as they lit her too, and the sound she made as she burned ... God, it was ... unholy. And I sat in the mud with Celene crouched beside me, and we watched our sister twirl and spin like a living torch. One last, awful dance. Papa had to hold Mama back from throwing herself onto the blaze. Her screams were louder than Amélie's.

'They checked my throat a dozen times, but I'd not a scratch. Celene squeezed my hand, asked if I was well. Some folk looked at me strangely, wondering how I'd survived. But Père Louis proclaimed it a miracle. Declaring God had spared me for greater things.

'Still, he refused a burial for the girls, the bastard. They'd died unshriven, he said. Their remains were taken to the crossroads and scattered, so they'd never be able to find their way home again. My sister's grave was to stand

forever empty on unhallowed ground, her soul damned for all eternity. For all his praise, I fucking *hated* Louis for that.

'I smelled Amélie's ashes on me for days afterwards. I dreamed about her for years. Sometimes Julieta would come with her. The two of them sitting atop me and kissing me all over with black, black lips. But though I'd no idea what had happened to me, or how in God's name I'd survived, I knew one thing for sure and true.'

'That the kith were real,' Jean-François said.

'No. In our hearts, I think we already believed, coldblood. Oh, the powdered lords of Augustin and Coste and Asheve would have thought us backwards. But fireside tales in Lorson were always of vampyr. Of duskdancers and faekin and other witchery. Out in the Nordlund provinces, monsters were as real as God and his angels.

'But the chapel bells had just struck noon when Amélie and Julieta came home. And the day seemed not to bother them at all. We all knew the banes of the Dead. The weapons that kept us safe: fire, silver, but most of all, sunlight.'

Gabriel paused a moment, lost in thought, eyes of clouded grey.

'It was the daysdeath, you see? Even years later, in the monastery at San Michon, no silversaint could explain why it happened. Abbot Khalid said a great star had fallen in the east across the sea, and its fires raised a smoke so thick, it blackened the sun. Master Greyhand told us there'd been another war in heaven, and that God had thrown down the rebellious angels with such rancour the earth had been blasted skywards, and hung now in a curtain between his kingdom and hell. But nobody really knew why that veil had covered the sky. Not then, and perhaps not even now.

'All the folk of my village knew was that our days had become almost dark as night, and the creatures of the night now walked freely in the so-called day. Standing at the crossroads outside Lorson as they scattered my sister's ashes, holding Celene's hand as our mother screamed and fucking screamed, I knew. I think some part of us all knew.'

'Knew what?' Jean-François asked.

'That this was the beginning of the end.'

'Take comfort, Chevalier. All things end.'

Gabriel looked up at that, blood-red eyes glittering.

'Oui, vampire. All things.'

+ +

THE COLOUR OF WANT

'WHAT CAME NEXT?' Jean-François asked.

Gabriel took a deep breath. 'Mama was never the same after my sister died. I never saw my parents kiss after that. It was as if Amélie's ghost had finally killed whatever remained between them. Sorrow turned to blame, and blame to anger. I looked after Celene as best I could, but she was growing up a hellion, always looking for trouble and simply making it if she couldn't find it. Mama was scarred by her grief, hollowed and furious. Papa sought refuge in the bottle, and his fists fell heavier than ever. Split lips and broken fingers.

'There's no misery so deep as one you face by yourself. No nights darker than ones you spend alone. But you can learn to live with any weight. Your scars grow thick enough, they become armour. I could feel something building in me, like a seed waiting in cold earth. I thought this was what it felt like to become a man. In truth, I'd no fucking idea what I was becoming.

'But still, I was growing. I'd sprung up tall, and working the forge had turned me hard as steel. I began noticing the village lasses looking at me that way young girls do, whispering among themselves as I passed by. I didn't know why at the time, but something about me drew them in. I learned how to turn those whispers into smiles, and those

smiles into something sweeter still. Instead of having kisses stolen, I found them given to me.

'In my fifteenth winter, I started trysting with a girl named Ilsa, daughter of the alderman, niece of Père Louis himself. Turned out I could be a sneaky little bastard when I chose to be, and I'd steal my way to the alderman's house at night, climb the dying oak outside Ilsa's window. I'd whisper to the glass, and she'd invite me in, sinking into desperate, hungry kisses and those clumsy first fumblings that set a young man's blood afire.

'But my mama didn't approve. We didn't quarrel often, but when it came to Ilsa, God Almighty, we shook the fucking sky. She warned me away from that girl, time and time again. One night we were at table, Papa quietly drowning in his vodka and Celene poking her potato stew while Mama and I raged. Again, she warned of the hunger inside me. To beware, lest it devour me whole.

'But I was tired of my parents' fear that I'd make the same mistakes they had. And furious, out of patience, I pointed at Papa and shouted, "I'm not him! I am *nothing* like him!"

'And Papa looked up at me then, once so handsome, now sodden and soft with drink. "Damn right you're not, you little bastard."

"Raphael!" Mama shouted. "Do not speak so!"

'He looked at her, and a bitter, secret smile twisted his lips. And it might have ended there if the lion in me hadn't been too enraged to let it lie.

"I thank God I am a bastard. Better no father at all than one so worthless as you."

"Worthless, am I?" Papa glowered, sliding to his feet. "If only you knew the worth I've shown, boy. Fifteen years, and I've breathed not a word, raising such a sin as you."

"If I'm a sin, then I'm *yours* to own. And just because you were fool enough to seed a son in the girl you ploughed out of wedlock, doesn't m—"

'I got no further. His fist flew as it had hundreds of nights before. Mama screaming as she'd always done. But that night, Papa's fist never found its mark. Instead, I caught it but a few inches from my face. I was taller than him, but he had arms thick as a baker's wife. He should've been able to swat me like a fly. Instead, I shoved him backwards, his eyes wide with shock. My blood was pounding, and as my papa's skull struck the hearth, that pulse began roaring in the shadows behind my eyes. As he fell, I saw he'd split his scalp upon the mantel. And from the gash spilled a slick of bright and gleaming red.

'Blood.

'I'd seen it before, of course. Smeared on my broken fingers and smudged on my swollen face. But I'd never noticed before how vivid the colour, how heady the scent, salt and iron and flower's perfume, entwined now with the song of my thundering heart. My throat was dry, my tongue like old leather, my stomach a yawning, clawing hole as I reached out with one trembling hand towards that spreading stain.

"Gabe?" Celene whispered.

"Gabriel!" Mama shouted.

'And like a spell broken at cock's crow, it fell away. That ache. That dust-dry longing. I stood on shaking legs, looking Mama in the eye. I could see secrets there, unspoken. A horror, a weight, growing heavier every year.

"What's happening to me, Mama?"

'She only shook her head, kneeling beside Papa. "It's inside you, Gabriel. I'd hoped ... I prayed God it would not be so."

"" What's inside me?"

'She said nothing, staring at the shadows on the floor.

"Mama, tell me! Help me!"

'She looked into my eyes. This lioness who raised me, who taught me to wear my name like a crown. I could see it

then; the desperation of the mother who'd do anything to protect her cub, realizing she'd only one thing left to do.

"I cannot, my love. But perhaps I know someone who can."

'I'd no idea what else to ask. Didn't know the answer I needed. Mama would speak no more, and Celene had started crying, and so I saw to my sister as I'd always done. Things were never the same after that night. I tried to talk with Papa, God help me, I even apologized, but he wouldn't even look at me. I watched him pounding his anvil, fist upon his hammer. Great and terrible things, his hands. I could remember them closing around mine when I was a little boy, big and warm, showing me how to set a snare or swing a sword. I remembered them curling into knots and falling like rain. He built things, and he broke things, my papa. And I realized that perhaps one of the things he'd broken had been me.

'My only refuge was the circle of Ilsa's arms. And so, I sought it often as I could, sneaking out at all hours and climbing through her window. Meeting in that place where words have no meaning. We were both raised in the One Faith, and ever the spectre of sin hung over us. But not even God Himself can come between a girl and a boy truly in want of each other. No scripture or king or law on earth has that power.

'One night, we were close. So close we both burned with it. Her nightclothes cast aside and my britches unlaced, my lips almost hurting from the press of her mouth. The feel of her naked body against mine was dizzying, and the want of her was a thirst, welling inside me. I could smell her desire, filling my lungs and making me ache, her long chestnut tresses tangled between my fingers as her tongue flickered against mine.

[&]quot;Do you love me?" I whispered.

[&]quot;I love you," she answered.

[&]quot;Do you want me?" I asked.

"I want you," she breathed.

'We rolled across her bed, and her breath came quicker, and her eyes saw only me. "But we can't, Gabriel. We can't."

"This is no sin," I pleaded, kissing her throat. "You have my whole heart."

"And you mine," she whispered. "But it's my moonstime, Gabriel. My blood is on me. We should wait."

'My belly thrilled at that. And though she spoke again, the only word I heard was *blood*. I realized *that* was the scent, *that* was the want, roaring now inside me.

'I couldn't have told you why. There was no why in my thoughts at the time. But my mouth drifted lower, over the smooth hills and valleys of her body, and I could feel her heart hammering beneath my fingertips as my hands roamed her curves. She shivered as my tongue circled her navel, murmured the softest protest even as she parted her legs and dragged her fingers through my hair. And I sank between her thighs and pressed my mouth against her, feeling her tremble. And a part of me was just a fifteen-year-old boy then, nervous as a spring lamb, begging only to serve and wanting only to please. But the rest of me, the most of me, was filled with a hunger darker than any I'd known.

'Ilsa pressed her fingers to her mouth, clamping her thighs about my head. And as I pressed my tongue inside her, I tasted it, God, I *tasted* it, and it almost drove me mad. Salt and iron. Autumn and rust. Flooding over my tongue and answering every question I'd never known how to ask. Because the answer was the same.

'Always the same.

'Blood.

'Blood.

'I felt complete in a way I'd never known possible. I knew a peace I'd never have believed was real. I felt this girl, writhing against the sheets and whispering my name, and though a moment before I'd promised her my whole heart, now she was nothing, *nothing* but the thing she could give me, the treasure locked behind the doors of this silken temple and calling to me without speaking a word. I sensed a stirring in my gums, and running my tongue across my teeth, I felt they'd grown sharp as knives. I could hear the pulse in Ilsa's thighs, pressed tight against my ears, struggling to turn my head as she sighed protest. And then, then God help me, I sank my teeth into her, her back arching, her every muscle taut as she threw back her head and pulled me closer, trying not to scream.

'And I knew the colour of want then. And its colour was red.

'What am I? What am I doing? What in the name of God is happening to me? These are the thoughts you might have expected to be rushing through my head. The questions any sane person might have asked himself. But for me, there was nothing. Nothing but my lips against Ilsa's skin and the flood of that punctured vein into my mouth. I drank like parched desert sand, one thousand years wide. I drank as if all the world were ending and only one more mouthful of her could save it, save me, save us all from the grand finale waiting in the darkness. I couldn't stop. I wouldn't.

"Stop ..."

'Ilsa's whisper broke through the boundless hymn in my head, that choir of our heartbeats entwined. Hers was fading now, weak and frail as a broken bird's and mine thrumming stronger than ever. But still, the part of me who loved this girl realized what the rest of me was doing. And at last, I tore my mouth away with a gasp of ragged horror.

"Oh, God ..."

'Blood. On the sheets. On her thighs and in my mouth. And as the spell of my kiss wore off, as the dark desire that had gripped her bled away, Ilsa saw what I'd done. The animal part of her took over, and even as I raised my hands to shush her, she opened her blue-blushed lips and screamed. The scream of a girl who understands the monster isn't under the bed any more. The monster is in it with her.

'I heard running footsteps. A soft curse. Ilsa screamed again, pure horror in her eyes. And that horror had me too, turning my full belly to water. The horror of a boy who's hurt the one he loves, of a boy in bed with a daughter as her father's footsteps come barrelling down the hall, of a boy who has woken from a nightmare to discover the nightmare is him.

'The door burst open. The alderman stood there in his nightshirt, a dagger in one hand. And he cried, "Good God Almighty!" as I dragged myself from the ruined bed, hands and chin drenched red. Ilsa was still screaming, the alderman roared and swung his blade. I gasped as a line of fire sliced down my back, but I was already gone, moving so swift the world was a blur, out through the window and into the dark.

'I landed barefoot in the mud, dragging my britches up as I stumbled, my hands sticky and red. I could hear the village waking, Ilsa's screams ringing across the muddy square, and the tread of watchmen's boots as little lights flared in the dark.

'I was lost and alone and running only God knew where. But I realized with awful wonder that the night was *alive* around me, burning as bright and beautiful as the day once had. My legs were steel, and my heart was thunder, and I felt every inch the lion I was named for. In that moment, I was more alive and afraid than I'd ever been, but my thoughts were clear enough now to question. What was happening to me? What had I done? Had Amélie passed some measure of her curse onto me? Or was I something else entire?

'It started to snow. I heard church bells ringing. And I dashed onwards, towards the only place I thought I might find safety. Where does the cub run, vampire, when the

wolves snap at his heels? Who does the soldier cry out for, when he bleeds his last upon the field?'

'Mother,' Jean-François replied.

'Mother,' Gabriel nodded. 'She'd tried to tell me something that night I'd struck Papa low. That night the blood first called to me. And so, I burst through our cottage door and called only for her. She rose from bed, and my little sister stared at me, wide-eyed and fearful at the blood on my hands and face. Papa snarled, "Oh, God, what have you done, boy?" and Celene whispered a soft prayer. But Mama enfolded me in her arms and whispered, "No fear, my love. Everything will be aright."

'Heavy fists pounded on the door. Angry voices. Mama and Papa exchanged a glance, but Papa moved not a muscle. And with lips pressed thin, my lioness wrapped a shawl about her shoulders and took my bloody hand, leading me back out into the cold.

'Half the village awaited us. Some held lanterns, burning brands, or icons of the Redeemer. The alderman was among them, and so was Père Louis, the priest clutching a copy of the Testaments like a sword in his hand. He raised the holy book and pointed at me, his voice hoarse with the same righteous fury with which he'd damned my sister.

"Abomination!"

'Mama cried protest, but her voice was lost under the clamour. The farrier grabbed my arm. But the blood I'd stolen pounded hot and red in all my hollow places, and I sent him flying as if he were straw. More men came on, and I lashed out, feeling bones break and flesh split in my hands. But they fell on me in a mob, the priest bellowing.

"Bring him down! In the name of God!"

"He's one of them!" someone cried.

"Gone like his sister!" another roared.

'Mama began screaming, and Celene was spitting curses, and somewhere in the tumult, I heard my papa roaring too, crying out that I was only a boy, just a boy. I felt the crowd

dragging me bloodied and half senseless to my feet, and I thought of Amélie then, dancing and wailing as she burned. Wondering if the same fate awaited me. I looked into Père Louis's eyes, this bastard who'd denied my sister her burial, hate upon my tongue.

"Faithless fucking coward," I spat. "I pray you die screaming."

'A shot split the air, the crack of a wheellock pistol ringing in my ears. And the mob fell still, all eyes turning to the figures riding slow up the muddy road.

'Two of them on pale steeds, like angels of death from the pages of the Testaments. A thin fellow rode in the lead, gaunt as a scarecrow. He wore a leather greatcoat, black and heavy. His tricorn was pulled low, collar laced about his mouth and nose. All I could see of his features was a strand of dry, straw-coloured hair and his eyes. His irises were the palest kind of green, but the whites were so bloodshot they were all but red. He had a burlap sack over the back of his stout tundra pony. The shape inside was akin to a man. On his shoulder sat a falcon, sleek grey feathers and glittering gold eyes.

'The second rider was younger, broader of shoulder, but again, I could see little of his face. He wore the same gear as the first, a longblade sheathed at his waist. His tricorn was pulled low, and he looked about the mob with an iceblue gaze.

'The snow was coming heavier, its chill digging into my bare skin. The riders bore small hunter's lanterns on their saddles, and the light glittered on the flakes falling fat and freezing from the sky, the silver sevenstars embroidered at their breasts.

'Papa had fetched his old war sword from the wall, and Mama was breathless, her hair come loose from its braid. Celene stood with her fists bunched in knots, my little hellion stepping in to defend her big brother as those ponies clopped slowly up to our house. We all of us could feel the

gravity of that moment. I watched these strange men, and I marked how fine their steeds were, how sharp the cut of their greatcoats, how the thread in those stars at their breasts wasn't thread at all, but actual, *real* silver. And the one in the lead slipped his wheellock inside his coat and called out over the song of my pulse.

"I am Frère Greyhand, Silversaint of San Michon."

'He pointed at me.

"And I am here for the boy."

LAMB TO SLAUGHTER

'THE WIND HOWLED like a hungry wolf, the snow clinging to my bloody skin. I looked to Père Louis and saw his brow darken. "Monsieur, this boy is a practitioner of witchery and foul blood rites. He is evil. He is *damned*!"

'An angry murmur rippled among the assembly. But this man called Greyhand simply reached into his greatcoat and took out a vellum scroll. It was adorned with the imperial seal; a unicorn and five crossed swords in a hardened blob of apple-red wax.

"By word of Alexandre III, Emperor of Elidaen and Protector of God's Holy Church, whom no man under heaven may gainsay, I am empowered to recruit any and every citizen of my choosing unto our righteous cause. And I choose him."

"Recruit?" the alderman blustered. "This *monstrosity*? Into what?"

'The man drew his longblade from its sheath, and I caught my breath. Bleeding and battered as I was, I was still a blacksmith's boy, and that sword was enough to dream wet about. The steel was run through with threads of silver, like bright whorls in darker wood. The pommel was a star – seven-pointed for the Seven Martyrs, surrounded by the circle of the Redeemer's wheel. In the dim lanternlight, it seemed almost to glow.

"We are the Ordo Argent," Greyhand replied. "The Silver Order of San Michon. And monstrosities are *exactly* the recruits we need, monsieur. For the enemies we fight are more monstrous still, and if we fail, so too shall God's mighty church, and his kingdom on earth, and all the world of men."

"Who is this enemy?" Père Louis demanded.

'Greyhand looked at the priest, lanternlight shining in blood-red eyes. The falcon on his shoulder took wing as the frère turned to the sack on the back of his steed, loosed the chains about it, and slung it into the mud. It grunted as it struck the earth, and as I thought, the shape inside was that of a man. But the thing that dragged its way free of the burlap was nothing close.

'It was clad in rags, deathly gaunt. Flesh stretched over its bones like a skeleton dipped in skin. It had death-white eyes, wasted lips drawn back from its teeth, but those teeth were long and sharp as a wolf's. It reared up out of the mud, and a sound like boiling fat bubbled from its throat. All the villagers about me cried out in terror.

'Suddenly, I was thirteen years old again, standing in the muddy street the day Amélie and Julieta came home. And I was terrified, to be sure. But along with that fear came the memory of my sister. I felt that old, familiar hate, scorching in my chest and tightening my jaw. There's strength to be found in hatred. There's a courage forged only in rage. And instead of crying out or stumbling back as the men about me did, I stood with feet apart. And I drew a breath. And I raised my fucking fists.'

'Impressive,' Jean-François murmured.

'I didn't do it to impress,' Gabriel growled. 'Knowing what I know now, I wish to God I *had* run. I wish I'd pissed my pants and wailed for my mama.'

Gabriel dragged a hand back through his hair and sighed.

'Call it what you will. Instinct. Stupidity. It's just the way we're birthed. There's no changing it, any more than you

can change the will of the wind or the colour of God's eyes. Of course, that thing lurching towards me gave no shits about my raised fists. But a silver chain binding it to Greyhand's saddle drew it up short, its hands flailing at my face. The frère slipped from his mount, and at the sound of his boots striking mud, that gaunt and starving monster turned, and I swear by all Seven Martyrs, I heard it whimper. Greyhand raised his arm, sword gleaming in the dark. And he struck, God above, so quick I could barely see it.

'The silvered pommel crashed into the monster's jaw. I saw a spray of dark blood and teeth. Greyhand was terrifying with that blade, and I flinched as he struck the monster again, again, until it collapsed in a moaning, battered heap. As Greyhand pushed the thing's face into the mud with his boot and looked to Père Louis, I saw the same hatred in him that boiled in my own heart. "Who is our enemy, good Father?"

'He gazed about the terrified villagers, red eyes finally settling on me.

"The Dead."

There in his chill cell, Gabriel de León paused, running a hand across his stubbled chin. He could hear those words so clearly, Greyhand might well have been imprisoned with him. He was almost tempted to check for the old bastard over his shoulder.

'Such melodrama,' Jean-François of the Blood Chastain yawned.

Gabriel shrugged. 'Greyhand had a flair for it. But as he looked me over with those bright and bloody eyes, I could feel him taking my measure. He reached up with one gloved hand, unlaced his collar so I might see him. Death-pale skin. A face carved from cruelty. He looked as if he'd leave bruises in the sheets where he slept.

"You've seen one of these before," he said, nodding to the monster. 'I had to search long and hard for the words. "My ... my sister."

'He glanced at my mama and back to me. "Your name is Gabriel de León."

"Oui, Frère."

'He smiled like my name struck him funny. "You belong to us now, Little Lion."

'I turned to Mama then. And when I saw the resignation on her face, I understood at last. These men were here at her behest. This Greyhand was the help I'd asked her for – the help she herself couldn't give. There were tears in her eyes. The agony of a lioness who'd do anything to protect her cub, knowing there was nothing now left to do.

"No!" Celene spat. "You will not take my brother!"

"Celene, hush now," Mama whispered.

"They will not take him!" she cried. "Get behind me, Gabe!"

'I stepped between the frère and my baby sister as she raised her fists, hugging her tight as she glowered at the riders behind me. I knew she'd have scratched Greyhand's eyes out of his skull if given half a chance. But meeting the fellow's cold stare, I could see the truth of it.

"These are men of God, sister," I told her. "This is his will."

"You can't go!" Celene snapped. "It isn't fair!"

"Perhaps not. But who am I to gainsay the Almighty?"

'I was terrified, I'll not lie. I'd no wish to leave ma famille, or my little world. But the villagers were still gathered about us, looking at me with fearful, furious eyes. My teeth were dull as they'd once been, but the red rush of Ilsa's blood yet lingered in my mouth. And it seemed for a moment that everything stood poised on the edge of a knife. You feel those moments in your soul. These men were offering me salvation. A path to a life I never imagined. And still, I knew there'd come a terrible cost for it. And Mama knew it too.

'But what choice did I have? I couldn't stay, not after what I'd done. I didn't know what I was becoming, I didn't have any answers, but perhaps these men did. And as I'd asked my sister, who was I to challenge the will of heaven? To defy he who made me? And so, drawing a deep breath, I reached out and took what Greyhand offered.'

Gabriel looked skywards and sighed.

'And that was it. Lamb to slaughter.'

'They took you then and there?' Jean-François asked.

'They gave me a moment with ma famille. Papa had little to say, but I saw the sword in his hand, and I knew that when my life was on the line, he'd done what little he could to save it. I was afeared at what might happen to Celene without me to look after her, but there was naught I could do. Still, I warned Papa. I fucking warned him.

"Mind your daughter. She's the only child you have left."

'Mama wept as I kissed her goodbye, and I was weeping too, holding Celene in my arms. Mama told me to beware the beast. The beast and all his hungers. All my world was coming to pieces, but what could I do? I was being swept up in a river, yet even then, I was old enough to know; there's a difference between those who swim with the flood and those who drown fighting it. And its name is Wisdom.

"Don't go, Gabe," Celene pleaded. "Don't leave me alone."

"I'll return," I promised, kissing her brow. "Look after Mama for me. Hellion."

'The young fellow who rode behind Greyhand prised Celene off me, offering no words of comfort as he pushed me up onto the back of his pony. Then he wrapped that whimpering monster back up in silver chains and burlap, slung it over Greyhand's mount. The frère looked about the gathering with pale, bloody eyes.

"We captured this monster three days' west of here. And there shall be more of them before there are less. Dark days come, and nights yet darker. Set candles at your windows. Invite no stranger into your homes. Ever keep the fires burning in your hearths and the love of God burning in your hearts. We *will* triumph. For we are silver."

"We are silver," the young fellow echoed.

'Little Celene was weeping, and I held out my hand in farewell. I called to Mama that I loved her, but she was just staring at the sky, tears freezing on her cheeks. As we rode out of Lorson, I can't remember ever feeling so lost, and I watched ma famille through the falling snow until they grew too distant to see, and the gloom swallowed them whole.'

'A fifteen-year-old boy,' Jean-François sighed, stroking the feathers at his throat.

'Oui,' Gabriel nodded.

'And you name us monsters.'

Gabriel's eyes found the vampire's, and his voice became steel.

'Oui.'

+<u>V</u>+

FIRE IN THE NIGHT

JEAN-FRANÇOIS SMILED FAINTLY. 'So, from Lorson to San Michon?'

Gabriel nodded. 'It took us a few weeks, riding along the Hollyroad. The weather was freezing, and the coat they'd given me did nothing to keep the chill from my belly. I was still reeling with it all. The memory of what I'd done to Ilsa. The dark heaven of her blood in my mouth. The sight of that monster that Greyhand had dragged from his sack, still slung behind him on his saddle. I knew not what to make of any of this.'

'Did Frère Greyhand tell you what was in store?'

'He told me one-fifth of three-eighths of fuck all. And at first, I was afraid to ask. There was such a fire in Greyhand, it seemed he might scorch you if you stood too close. He was all skin and bone, sharp cheeks and chin, hair like dirty straw. He chewed his food like he hated it, spent almost every moment of rest at prayer, pausing occasionally to whip his back with his belt. When I tried to speak to him, he'd just glare 'til I fell silent.

'The only affection he showed was to that falcon he rode with. He called it Archer, and he doted on that fucking bird like a father on a son. But the strangest part of him was revealed the first morning he washed in front of me. 'As he removed his tunic to bathe in our bucket, I saw Greyhand was *covered* in tattoos. I'd seen inkwork before – fae spirals on Ossway folk and the like – but the frère's tattoos were something new.'

Gabriel ran his fingers over the inkwork atop his own hands.

'The ink was like this. Dark, but metallic. Silver in the pigment. Greyhand had a portrait of the Mothermaid covering his entire back. A spiral of saintsrose and swords and angels ran down his arms, and he wore seven wolves for the Seven Martyrs across his chest. The young apprentice who rode with him had less inkwork, but he still wore a beautiful weave of roses and serpents on his chest. Naél, the Angel of Bliss, covered his left forearm, Sarai, the Angel of Plagues, filled his bicep, her beautiful moth wings spread wide. And both of them had the sevenstar inked in their left hands.'

Gabriel turned his hand over, showed the vampire his palm. There, among the calluses and scars, sat a sevenpointed star inside a perfect circle.

'I am curious,' Jean-François mused, 'why your Order profaned your bodies so.'

'Silversaints called it the aegis. There's no sense wearing armour when fighting monsters that can crush platemail with their fists. Armour makes a man slow. Noisy. But if your faith in the Almighty was strong enough, the aegis made you *untouchable*. No matter what monster of the night you stalk – duskdancer, faekin, coldblood – none can abide the touch of silver. And God hates your kind in particular, vampire. You fear even the *sight* of holy icons. You cower before the sevenstar. The wheel. The Mothermaid and Martyrs.'

The vampire gestured to Gabriel's palm. 'Then why do I not cower, de León?'

'Because God hates me more than he hates you.' Jean-François smiled. 'I presume you have more?'

'Much more.'

"... May I see?"

Gabriel met the thing's eyes. Silence passed between them, three breaths deep. The vampire ran his tongue over his lips, bright red, wet.

The silversaint shrugged. 'As you like it.'

Gabriel stood, the chair creaking beneath him as he rose. Reaching up slow, he sloughed off his greatcoat, unlaced his tunic and dragged it over his head, leaving his torso bare. A small sigh, gentle as a whisper, slipped over the vampire's lips.

The silversaint was sinew and muscle, lanternlight shadows etched deep on the furrows and troughs of his body. A bevy of scars decorated his skin – from bladework and claws and Redeemer knew what else. But moreover, Gabriel de León was covered in inkwork, neck to navel to knuckles. The artistry would've been breathtaking if the historian had breath to take. Eloise, the Angel of Retribution, ran down the silversaint's right arm, sword and shield ready. Chiara, the blind Angel of Mercy, and Eirene, the Angel of Hope, were on his left. A roaring lion covered his chest, sevenstars in its eyes, and a circle of swords stretched across the taut muscles of his belly. Doves and sunbeams, the Redeemer and Mothermaid – all decorated his arms and body. A dark current ran thick in the air.



'Beautiful,' Jean-François whispered. 'My artist was one of a kind,' Gabriel replied.

The silversaint dragged his tunic back on and sat once more.

'Merci, de León.' Jean-François continued to sketch him, apparently from memory. 'You were speaking of Greyhand. What he told you before you arrived.'

'As I said, as little as he could at first. And so, I was left to wonder in silence. How badly had I hurt Ilsa? How was it I'd grown strong enough to throw grown men about like toys? I'd thought the alderman's dagger had sliced me to the bone, but now, the wound seemed not so bad. How in the Almighty's name was *any* of this possible? I had answers for none of it.' Gabriel shrugged again. 'But finally, it all came to a head. Our motley little band was bedding down one eve in the Nordlund wilds, in the shadow of dying pines just off the Hollyroad. We'd been travelling nine days.

'The young rider who accompanied Greyhand was an initiate of the Order named Aaron de Coste. An apprentice, if you like. He was a princely looking lad; thick blonde hair and bright blue eyes and a face girls swooned for. He was older than me. Eighteen, I guessed. "Coste" was the name of a barony in western Nordlund, and I supposed he might be related to them somehow, but he told me nothing of himself. The only time he ever spoke to me at all was to order me about. He referred to Greyhand as "Master", but he called me "Peasant", spitting the word as if it tasted like shit.

'Whenever we were forced to stop in the open, Greyhand would hang that corpse he'd captured from a nearby tree branch. I'd no idea why he didn't just kill the thing at the time. De Coste would order me to gather wood, then light a fire as high and hot as he could. The apprentice or his master would sleep while the other kept watch, often smoking a pipeful of an odd, blood-red powder as they stood vigil. When they smoked, I saw that their eyes would change hue, the whites flooding so bloodshot they turned red. I asked de Coste for a taste one night, and the boy just scoffed.

"Soon enough, Peasant."

'Anyway, de Coste was sharpening his sword that eve. Beautiful weapon, it was. Silver and steel, with the Death Angel Mahné at wing on the crossguard. Archer sat on a branch above, bright falcon's eyes shining in the dark. Greyhand's captive corpse had been dangling inside its burlap bag for hours, unmoving. But one of the logs in the fire burst with a crack, and de Coste slipped, sliced his finger nice and deep. And all of a sudden, that thing on the branch above started moaning and bucking like a landed fish.

'Greyhand was at prayer, as usual, his back red raw from self-flagellation. He opened his eyes and snarled, "Shut up, leech." But the corpse only thrashed the more.

"Feeeee," it begged. "Feeeeemmmeee."

'I looked at the blood dripping from de Coste's finger, my stomach curdling even as the scent of it sent a small thrill along my skin. And Greyhand spat the darkest curse I'd heard in my young life, climbed off his knees, and drew his beautiful silvered sword.

'Then he stomped around the fire, tugged the burlap loose, and laid a beating on that thing like I'd never witnessed in all my years. It screamed as he struck it with the pommel, the silver hissing where it touched its wasted skin. Greyhand kept swinging, and the monster's cries turned to whimpers, and still he beat it, bones crunching, flesh pulping, until, as God is my witness, the thing started blubbing like a child.

"Stop!" I cried.

'Greyhand turned on me, eyes like fire. Fucking brave or fucking stupid, you can decide, but monster or no, this seemed a kind of torture to me. And I looked to that awful thing sobbing on its branch and declared, "It's had enough, Frère, for pity's sake."'

Gabriel sighed, elbows on his knees.

'God Almighty. I thought I'd seen rage in my papa before. But I'd seen nothing so terrifying as the look that crossed Greyhand's face then.

"Pity?" he spat.

'He stalked towards me, and I recognized the look in his eyes - the same that Papa wore when he was about to raise his fists. I tried to push Greyhand off, but God, he was strong, hauling me to my feet and backhanding me across the face. My lip split, black stars bursting behind my eyes. I felt Greyhand dragging me towards that thing hanging from its tree, holding me out by the scruff. And like a flame doused by water, the weeping died and the corpse came alive again. Madness burned in its eyes. Hunger like I'd never seen. I roared in horror, but Greyhand edged me closer as the monster clawed towards my bleeding lip.

"You pity this abomination?"

"Please, Frère! Stop it!"

'Greyhand slapped me again, harder than my papa ever had, sending me sprawling. I looked up from the frozen mud to de Coste for aid, but the apprentice didn't move a muscle. Greyhand towered over me, flame and fury in his eyes.

"Rid your heart of pity, boy. Light a fire in your chest and burn it out at the root! Our enemy knows not love, nor remorse, nor bonds of fellowship! They know only hunger!" He pointed to that thing, still keening for my blood. "Were this abomination permitted to, it would rip you privates to chin and glut itself like a hog at trough. And tomorrow night, perhaps the next, you might rise, just as soulless as the thing that slew you! Seeking only to slake your thirst on the heartsblood of fools who speak the name of pity!"

'His shout rang over the crackling fire, the hammer of my pulse. Looking into that living corpse's eyes as it pawed towards my bloody mouth, I felt myself filled with that same loathing, that same hatred as the day my sister came home.

"What are they?" I heard myself whisper.

'Greyhand's gaze burned like the bonfire. "We call them the wretched, Little Lion."

"But what are they?"

'He stared at me, and much as I wished to, I refused to look away. A quiet stole over him then. Regret softened the cruel lines of his face. He offered his hand, and knowing no better, I took it. And Greyhand brought me over to the fire's edge and sat me down, staring into the crackling blaze while de Coste watched on in silence.

"What do you know of coldbloods, boy?" Greyhand finally asked.

"They feast on living blood. They're ageless. Soulless."

"Oui. And how is one made?"

"All those slain by them become them."

'Greyhand looked at me then. "Thank God and Redeemer that's not true, boy. Were it so, we'd already be lost."

'Silence fell, broken only by the crackle of the fire. I could feel a weight in the air. A rush of adrenaline. These were the first real answers Greyhand had offered in nine days, and now that he was speaking, I didn't want him to stop. "Please, Frère. What *are* they?"

'Greyhand ran his hand over his pointed chin, stared deep into the flames. I put his age at only thirty, but from the lines of care about his eyes and mouth, he seemed a much older man. I still feared him – feared his fists as I'd feared my papa's – but I wondered what it was that had made him so. If once, he'd been a boy just like me.

"Listen close now," he said. "And listen well. Coldbloods do give their curse to those they slay. But *not* always. They cannot choose who their affliction is passed on to. And there seems no rhyme or reason as to which of their victims will turn and which will simply stay dead. It could be the victim rises only a few heartbeats after death. But more often, days or even weeks pass. And in the meantime, their corpse will go the way of all flesh. When it rises, a coldblood's victim will be locked forever in the state in which it turned.

Beautiful and whole. Or otherwise." He glanced to the hanging monster. "Times past, if a victim turned many days after dying, the sun would quickly end them. The brain rots with the body, you see. And knowing no better, mindless coldbloods would simply perish with their first dawn. But now ..."

"Daysdeath," I whispered.

"Oui. The sun no longer harms them. So they live on. Wandering. And killing. And in the seven years since the daystar failed us, multiplying."

"How many are there?" I murmured, licking at my split lip.

""In the west of Talhost, past the Godsend Mountains? Thousands."

"Seven Martyrs ..."

"It's worse than you know, Little Lion. The oldest and most dangerous, the beautiful ones who call themselves highbloods? It used to be they lived in secret. But four months ago, a highblood lord led an *army* of wretched against the walls of Vellene. He stalked the streets like the angel of death, pale and fey and impervious to any blade. He slew His Imperial Majesty's own cousin, and claimed the keep for his own. He encroaches farther through Talhost even now, and with every massacre his dark brood commits, more Dead join their number. A few rise as highbloods, forever young and deathless. Yet more become wretched, hideous and rotten. But *all* those slain are bound to his will. Rumour has it he is the most ancient coldblood that walks this earth. His name is Fabién Voss. But he has declared himself the Forever King."

'My stomach turned at the thought. I tried to picture entire legions of coldbloods, laying siege to human cities. Creatures old as centuries stalking the day with earthly feet. "And how ..."

'I shook my head, my throat dry. I remembered the honey of Ilsa's blood cascading over my tongue. The bliss as my teeth slipped through the smooth skin of her thigh. My canines were no longer sharp like they'd been, but still, I could feel them, and that thirst, lying in wait beneath my surface. Wondering if, when, it might rise again.

"How do I fit into all this?"

'Greyhand looked at me sidelong. A log cracked in the fire, a shower of sparks spilling into the dark. "What do you know of your father, Little Lion?"

"He was a soldier. A scout in the armies of Phili—"



"Not the man who raised you, boy. Your *father*."

'And I understood then. Realization like an avalanche. I knew why my papa's fists had fallen only on me, not my

sisters. What he meant when he said he'd raised a sin beneath his roof. My lips felt numb and swollen. The words too big to speak.

"My father ..."

"Was a vampire."

'It was Aaron de Coste who'd spoken, staring at me now across the flames.

"No," I breathed. "No ... no, my mama would never ..."

"She'd hoped you were not his. They both did." Greyhand patted my knee, and something close to pity softened his gaze. "Fault her not, Little Lion. To eyes that cannot truly see, highbloods are beautiful. Powerful. Their minds can bend even the strongest will, and their mouths drip sweetest honey."

'I thought of Ilsa, helpless with passion as I drank her almost to death. I looked at that corpse hanging from the tree branch, and then down at my hands in absolute disgust.

"I'm ... like *them*?"

"No, Peasant," de Coste said. "You're like us."

"You are a halfbreed, boy," the frère said. "What we call a paleblood."

'I looked between the pair, saw that their skin was white as ghosts, just like mine.

"The change comes upon us near manhood," Greyhand said. "And worsens yet with time. We inherit some of our fathers' gifts. Strength. Speed. Other boons, depending on the bloodline they belonged to. But also, we inherit their thirst. The bloodlust that drives them to murder, and us to madness. We are products of *sin*, boy. Make no mistake, we are the accursed of God. And the only way we might recover his eternal grace and win a place in heaven for our damned souls is to fight and die for his Holy Church."

"This ... Silver Order you spoke of?"

"The Ordo Argent," Greyhand nodded. "We are the silver flame burning between humanity and the darkness. We hunt and kill those monsters that would devour the world of men. Faekin and fallen. Duskdancers and sorcerers. Risen and wretched. And oui, even highbloods. Once, vampires lived in the shadows. But now, the highbloods do not fear the sun. And the Forever King's dark legion grows nightly. So we, the sons of their sin, must pay the burden of the cost. We shall stand, or all shall fall."

"So we ... we're supposed to fight this Forever King and his army?"

"Armies fight armies. But Empress Isabella has convinced Emperor Alexandre he has need of a razor as well as a hammer. The Ordo Argent is that razor. We are a brotherhood with a hallowed tradition, but never before have we operated with royal patronage. The Emperor's generals will lay their sieges and muster their lines. But we will strike the serpent's head. We will slay the shepherds, and watch their sheep scatter."

"Assassins," I murmured.

"No, boy. Hunters. Hunters with a divine mandate. Hunters of the most dangerous game." Greyhand looked back to the flames, the fire returning to his eyes. "We are hope for the hopeless. The fire in the night. We will walk the dark as they do, and they shall know our names and despair. For so long as they burn, we shall be flame. So long as they bleed, we shall be blades. So long as they sin, we shall be saints."

'Greyhand and de Coste both spoke then, their voices as one.

"And we are silver."

'Frère Greyhand gazed into my wondering eyes. I felt his stare like a fist about my heart. Then he stood, returning to his prayers, as quiet as if he'd never spoken.

'But he *had* spoken. And his words now filled my mind. I was afraid like I'd never been. Horrified at the truth of what I was. I'd just learned that my whole fucking life had been a lie. My father was not my father. Instead, I was the child of a

monstrous sin, now growing like a cancer inside me. And yet, Aaron and Greyhand were sons of that same darkness, and they stood tall in defence of the Emperor, the Church, the Almighty Himself.

'Brothers of the Silver Order of San Michon.

'My mother had always spoken of the lion in my blood. But for the first time in my life, I could feel it waking. My sister had *died* at the hands of these coldbloods. And though I couldn't save her then, I *could* avenge her now, and perhaps, redeem my damned soul besides. Though I was born of darkest sin, this seemed a salvation. And looking into those flames, I vowed that if I were to join these men, I'd be the best of them. The fiercest. The most faithful. That I'd not falter, not fail, not rest until every one of those monsters was sent back screaming to the hell that birthed them, and there, give my sister my love.'

Gabriel sighed and shook his head.

'I had no fucking idea what I was in for.'

+ VI +

A MONASTERY IN THE SKY

'WE ARRIVED AT San Michon on the last findi of the month, wreathed in snow-grey fog. Frère Greyhand led the way, Aaron de Coste came next, me on the saddle behind him. As I rode into the monastery's shadow, I didn't quite know what to feel. Fear of the sin inside me. Sorrow at all I'd left behind in Lorson. But in truth, what I felt most as I looked to the bluffs above was awe. Simple, jaw-dropping awe.

'San Michon seemed born from a faerie tale. It was built in a valley along the Mère River, nestled among rocky black crags. Seven massive pillars of lichen-covered stone rose up like spears from the valley floor, as if left there by giants in the Age of Legends. The river flowed between the granite pillars it had carved, like a serpent of dark sapphire. And on those mighty pedestals, the monastery of San Michon awaited me.

'At a nod from Greyhand, Aaron unslung a silver-trimmed horn and blew a long note through the valley. Bells answered above, butterflies dancing in my gut as we rode down mushroom-covered shale towards the central pillar. Its base was hollowed, the entrance sealed by iron gates wrought with the sevenstar. I caught a whiff of horse within, realizing the silversaints had built their stables inside.

'Next to the gates, a broad wooden platform was being lowered on heavy iron chains. After handing over our horses

to two young grooms, Master Greyhand slung his captured wretched over his shoulder, then strode to the elevator with Aaron and me on his heels. The platform swayed ominously as we rose a hundred, then two hundred feet off the valley floor. This high, I could see the Godsend Mountains to the northwest – that great spine of snowcapped granite splitting Nordlund from Talhost.

'Archer circled us as we ascended, and I found myself hanging onto the rails with a white-knuckle grip. I'd never climbed anything so high. Instead of looking down, I turned my eyes up, to a place I thought could exist only in a children's tale. A monastery in the *sky*.

"Scared of heights, Peasant?" Aaron sneered.

'I glanced at the blonde lad, my grip tightening. "Leave off, de Coste."

"You cling to that railing like to your mother's tits."

"I'm actually picturing *your* mama's tits. Though I'm told you favour your sister's?"

'Greyhand growled at us both to simmer down. De Coste kept his tongue behind his teeth, glaring at me the rest of the ride. But I couldn't really bring myself to care. After three weeks of being treated like something Aaron had found smeared on his boot, I was finding this highborn prick's company about as pleasant as a case of crotch lice.

'Our platform creaked to a halt. To our left, a toothy fellow in black leathers manned the winch house. His hair was long and greasy, and I noted no silver on his hands.

"Fairdawn, Keeper Logan," Greyhand nodded.

'The thin man bowed, spoke in a heavy Ossway brogue. "Godmorrow, good Frère."

'Gazing down, I guessed we were near five hundred feet off the grey valley floor. Master Greyhand simply glowered at me until I prised my fingers from the railing.

"No fear, Little Lion."

"Not if I don't look down," I said, trying to conjure a grin.

"Look forward instead, boy."

'I dragged the windswept hair from my eyes and sighed. "Now *there's* a sight ..."

'Before us loomed a cathedral – the first I'd ever seen in my life. Our tiny chapel in Lorson had seemed a palace to my young eyes, but this – this was a true house of God. A great circular fist of black granite with spires that bled the sky. In its courtyard stood a fountain of pale stone set with a ring of angels. Chiara, the blind Angel of Mercy. Raphael, Angel of Wisdom. Sanael, the Angel of Blood, and his twin, my namesake, Gabriel, Angel of Fire. The Cathedral's stonework was crumbling, some of the windows boarded over, but still, I'd never seen anything so grand. Workmen crawled over it like ticks on a fallen log, and gargoyles grinned atop the eaves. Huge double doors were set in its east and west faces, and in the stone above the dawndoors was a magnificent window of stained glass.

'It was fashioned like a sevenstar, each point depicting the tale of one of the Seven Martyrs: San Antoine parting the Eversea, San Cleyland guarding the gates to hell, San Guillaume burning the faithless on their pyres. And, of course, San Michon and her silver chalice, all flaxen hair and fierce eyes, staring into my very soul.

'A man awaited us atop the eastern stairs, dressed in the greatcoat of a silversaint. He was Sūdhaemi born; his skin dark as polished mahogany, his eyes a pale green rimmed with kohl. He was older than Greyhand, black hair knotted in long, winding braids. A vicious horizontal scar cut deep through both cheeks, twisting his mouth into a permanent, humourless smirk, and there were beautiful silver tattoos atop his hands. He was broad-shouldered like my papa, but he radiated a gravitas that my papa and his fists never did.

'This, I thought to myself, is a leader of men.

'Greyhand bowed low before him, as did de Coste.

"Welcome home, Brothers. We've missed you at mass." The mighty man turned to me, his voice deep as cello song. "And welcome to you also, young paleblood. My name is

Khalid, High Abbot of the Ordo Argent. I know you have travelled long to be here. And this life may not be what you imagined for yourself. But it *is* your life now. You have been both blessed and accursed, called by Almighty God to this holy task. You must not shirk. You *cannot* fall. For if you do, so shall all we know and love."

'I bowed to him. I didn't know what else to do. "Abbot."

"Until you take your vows as a full-blooded frère of the Order, you will look to your master for guidance. Initiates are not permitted to leave Barracks after evebells, nor may they visit the Great Library's forbidden section. Duskmass will be held tonight, and you'll have your maiden taste of silver. On the morrow, your training begins." Khalid glanced towards Greyhand. "If I might have a word, good Frère?"

"By the Blood, Abbot. De Coste, show our Little Lion the grounds."

"By the Blood, Master." Aaron glanced at me and growled, "Follow."

'Leaving Greyhand and Khalid to confer, de Coste led me across one of the broad stone walkways. I realized all seven pillars must have been naturally connected once, but the hands of time had brought most of those bridges low, replaced now with long spans of rope and wood. Instead of looking to the dizzying fall, I gazed to the skyline, at the beautiful, ancient buildings around us and the men crawling the walls.

"What are all the cranes for? The workmen?"

"You will refer to me by the title of Initiate, Peasant," de Coste replied, not even looking at me. "When Frère Greyhand is absent, I am senior member of this company."



'I bit my tongue. I was well and truly sick of Aaron's shit. But he *did* outrank me.

"In answer to your question, the Silver Order has only recently gained patronage of Emperor Alexandre. This monastery stood for centuries before that, and for long years, these buildings were let run to rot. Not always have we enjoyed the favour we hold now."

'I chewed on that for a moment, gazing with a peasant boy's eyes at the buildings about us. They were dark stone, grim and stately in design, arrayed on towering spires above the Mère Valley like the crowns of ancient kings. I wasn't certain what I'd been expecting to find here among this hallowed order of monster slayers, but even rundown and crumbling, San Michon was the most wondrous place I'd ever been in my life.

'Aaron motioned to the building behind us. "The Cathedral is the heart of San Michon. The brethren meet for mass twice daily, dusk and dawn. If you miss mass, you'll find yourself missing testicles shortly after."

'De Coste waved northwest, at a many-windowed structure in modest repair.

"The Barracks, where we lay our heads. The refectory is on its lower level, as are the privies and washhouse. Silversaints spend much of their lives on the Hunt, so I'd usually advise you to take advantage of the baths while you may. But I doubt a lowborn maggot like you would know a lump of soap if it hit you in the teeth."

'I rolled my eyes as de Coste nodded to the southmost structure – a circular building with blood-red banners embroidered with the sevenstar fluttering on the walls.

"The Gauntlet. While staying in San Michon, you'll spend much of your time training there. In the star, you'll be taught bladework. Unarmed combat. Marksmanship. The Gauntlet is the furnace where silversaints are forged."

'My jaw clenched at that, and thinking of my sister, I nodded.

"I'm ready."

'Aaron scoffed. "If you last more than two weeks in there, I'll send a personal missive to the Grand Pontifex, proclaiming it a miracle." De Coste nodded to another building, round and roofless. "To the north is the Breadbasket. The kingdom of good Frère Alber. There, we keep our food stores and henhouses, the glasshome where we grow our herbs. To the northeast is the Priory, where the Sisterhood sleep."

"... Sisterhood?"

'Aaron sighed as if I were somehow supposed to know all this already. "The Silver Sorority of San Michon. Before our Order found patronage in good Empress Isabella, it was their work keeping this entire monastery afloat."

'I saw small figures in long black habits walking out from that grand and gothic building. Their cloth fluttered in the mountain wind, lace veils whipping about their faces.

"Are they palebloods like us?" I asked.

"There are no female palebloods. The Almighty saw fit to spare his daughters our curse. These Sisters are godly women, devout in the One Faith and brides of the Almighty."

"I'd not expected to find nuns among an order of warrior brothers."

"Mmm." De Coste eyed me sidelong. "And you've spent a great deal of time among warrior brothers, Little Kitten?"

'I blinked at that. "I—"

"The Great Library." De Coste nodded to the sixth pillar, the beautiful hall of stained-glass windows and tall gables atop it. "One of the finest collections of lore and learning in the empire. There is a forbidden section within, and if Archivist Adamo catches you even *looking* at it, he'll skin your hide and use it for book binding. I'd normally recommend you investigate the general shelves in your free time, but I doubt you can actually read."

"I can read fine," I scowled. "My mama taught me."

"Then I'll be sure to send you a letter when I start giving a damn." Aaron waved back at the Library. "Books are kept

on the lower level, and the Silver Sisters work in the bindery above. Along with the Brothers of the Hearth, they create the most beautiful tomes in the empire." He raised his hand to interrupt my question. "There are two castes within the Ordo Argent. The Brothers of the Hunt are palebloods like me and Greyhand, men who get their hands dirty stalking horrors in the dark. The Brothers of the Hearth are simple men of faith who keep the Library, craft our weaponry and ... other tools. Speaking of ..."

'De Coste pointed at a sprawling building ahead. It had few windows, but many chimneys. They all spat black smoke, save one, which trailed a thin finger of red fumes.

"The Armoury." Aaron squared his shoulders and smoothed back his thick blonde hair. "Follow. You'll want to see this."

"Wait," I said. "What is that?"

'I pointed to a stone span jutting out from the Cathedral's pillar. It seemed a bridge, save that it led nowhere at all, ending in a balcony without a railing and a plunge down into the river Mère. A large chariot wheel sat at the edge, locked in a stone frame – the same kind of wheel the Redeemer had been flayed upon, and that now graced the necks of every priest and holy sister in the realm.

"That," Aaron said, "is Heaven's Bridge."

"What's it for?"

'The young lordling clenched his jaw. "You'll find out soon enough."

'De Coste turned on silver heels and marched to the Armoury. Pushing open great double doors wrought with the sevenstar, he led me into the vast entrance hall. And there, I breathed a sigh of wonder.

'The space was lit by myriad glass spheres suspended from the ceiling. I knew not how, but each glowed like a burning candle. It was as if the long-lost stars of my youth had come back to the sky, bathing the hall in honeyed light. And looking about, I saw that warm glow playing on a multitude of weapons, lined up in vast racks along the walls.

'I could see swords like the ones Greyhand and de Coste carried, the steel run through with traceries of silver. Longblades, bastard swords, axes, and warhammers. But there were stranger weapons too – the kind I'd only heard whisper of. Wheellock pistols and rifles and pepperboxes, wrought of beautiful metal and engraved with scripture.

'I AM THE SWORD THAT LAYS THE SINNER LOW. I AM THE HAND THAT LIFTS THE FAITHFUL HIGH. AND I AM THE SCALE THAT WEIGHS BOTH IN THE ENDING. SO SAY'TH THE LORD.

'If I was in love with the monastery before that moment, now I was utterly smitten. I'd been raised the son of both a blacksmith and a soldier, remember. I'd been drilled hard in use of a blade, but I also knew the art of making weapons this beautiful. The smiths who worked this armoury were geniuses ...

"Wait here," de Coste ordered. "Touch nothing."

'The lad stepped through another set of doors, and I caught the familiar song of hammer and anvil beyond. I saw figures in leather aprons, muscular arms glinting in forgefire. I ached with homesickness at the sight. I missed my sister Celene, Mama, oui, even my papa. I supposed I needed to stop calling him such in my head, but Seven Martyrs, that was easier said than done. I'd lived my whole life thinking of Raphael Castia as my father. Never once guessing I was the son of a *real* monster.

'As the heavy doors swung shut behind Aaron, I stepped closer to the longblades, marvelling at their beauty. Each pommel was decorated with a sevenstar, the crossguards all some variation of the Redeemer hanged upon his wheel, or angels at wing. But the silver patterns in each blade were like whorls in lengths of fine timber; each subtly different from the next. I reached for the closest sword, and brushing the back of my hand against the edge, I was rewarded with a sliver of pain and a thin line of red across my skin.

'Razor sharp.

"You have fine taste," came a deep voice behind me.

'I turned, startled to find a young Sūdhaemi man watching me. He'd entered the hall through a second doors, lithe as a cat and quiet as a mouse. He was in his early twenties, ebon-skinned like all his folk. He wore no tattoos on his flesh, but the scorched hairs on his forearms and the leather apron he wore told me this young man was a smith, through and through. He was tall, crushingly handsome, hair worn in short, knotted braids. Striding across the hall, he took the sword from my hand.

"Who told you how to test a blade like that?" he asked, nodding to my cut.

"A swordsman's strength rests in his arm. But his finesse lies in his fingers. You don't risk them on the blade's edge. My papa told me that." I caught myself then, clenching my teeth. "Well ... the man I thought was my papa, anyway ..."

'He nodded, soft understanding in his eyes. "What's your name, boy?"

"Gabriel de León, my lord."

'The young man laughed then, so deep and loud I felt it in my own chest. "I'm no lord. Although I am his devoted servant. Baptiste Sa-Ismael, Brother of the Hearth and Blackthumb of the Silver Order, at your service."

"Blackthumb?"

'Baptiste grinned. "It's Forgemaster Argyle's expression. They say a man with a love for growing things has a green thumb. So we with a love for the anvil and the fire and the rule of steel ...?" The smith shrugged. Cutting the air with the longsword, he smiled at it fondly. "You've a keen eye. This is one of my favourites."

"You forged all these?"

"Only some. My brother smiths crafted the rest. Every blade in this hall was made for recruits like you. A tiny piece of the maker's heart left in every blade. And once forged and cooled and kissed farewell, the silversteel waits here for the hand of its master."

"Silversteel," I repeated, enjoying the word on my tongue. "How is it made?"

'Baptiste's grin widened. "We all of us have secrets within these walls, Gabriel de León. And *that* secret belongs to the Brothers of the Hearth."

"I have no secrets."

"Then you're not trying hard enough," he chuckled.

'At first, I suspected he might've been mocking me, but there was a warmth in the blackthumb's eyes I took an instant liking to. Folding his arms, he looked me over, toe to crown. "De León, eh? Strange ..."

'Turning to the weapons behind us, Baptiste walked down the row. Almost reverently, he took a blade from the wall. And returning to me, he placed it in my hands.

"I forged this beauty only last month. I knew not for who. Until now."

'I looked at him in utter disbelief. "... Truly?"

'In my shaking hands was the most beautiful sword I'd ever seen in my life. Eloise, the Angel of Retribution, was wrought on the hilt, her wings flowing about her like silver ribbons. Bright whorls of silver rippled along the blade's darker steel, and I could see beautiful script from the Testaments engraved down the length.

'KNOW MY NAME, YE SINNERS, AND TREMBLE. FOR I AM COME AMONG THEE AS A LION AMONG LAMBS.

'I met Baptiste's dark eyes and saw him smile. "I think perhaps I dreamed of you, Gabriel de León. I think perhaps your coming was ordained."

"My God," I said, all awonder. "Does ... does it have a name?"

"Swords are only tools. Even those wrought of silversteel. And a man who names his weapon is a man who dreams others will one day know *his* name too."

'Baptiste glanced about us, his eyes twinkling as he leaned close to whisper.

"I call mine Sunlight."

'I shook my head, unsure what to say. No blacksmith's boy under heaven had ever dreamed of owning a sword as peerless as this. "I've ... I've no way to thank you."

'Baptiste's mood grew sombre. His eyes were far away then, as if lost in distant shadow. "Kill something monstrous with it," he said.

"There you are ..." came a voice.

'I turned and found Aaron de Coste at the door he'd left by. The dark mood that had fallen on Smith Baptiste vanished as if it had never been, and he strode across the room, arms open. "Still alive, you bastard!"

'Aaron grinned as he was caught up in the older boy's bear hug. It was the first genuine smile I think I'd ever seen on his face. "Good to see you, brother."

"Of course it is! It's me!" Baptiste released Aaron from his embrace, nose wrinkling. "Sweet Mothermaid, you stink of horse though. Time for a bath, methinks."

"Such is my intent. Once this filthy peasant is situated. You," Aaron growled. "Little Kitten. Come grab your damned gear."

'De Coste carried black leathers, a heavy greatcoat, stout boots with silvered heels like his. Without ceremony, he dumped the lot onto the floor. But I'd no interest in new boots or britches. Instead, I hefted my magnificent new sword, testing the balance.

'The silversteel gleamed in the dim light; the angel on the crossguard seemed to smile at me. The uncertainty I'd felt as I stepped into the monastery faded just a breath, the thought of home made me ache just a little less. I knew I had much to learn; that in a place like this, I had to walk before I ran. But truth was, despite the sin I was born of, the monster that lived inside me, I still felt God was with me. This sword was proof of that. It was as if the smiths of San

Michon knew I was coming. As if I were *fated* to be there. I looked down at the beautiful scripture on my new blade, mouthing the words to myself.

'I AM COME AMONG THEE AS A LION AMONG LAMBS.

"Lionclaw," I whispered.

"Lionclaw," Baptiste repeated, stroking his chin. "I like it."

'The smithy handed me a belt, a scabbard, a sharp silversteel dagger to match the blade he'd gifted me – the Angel of Retribution spreading her beautiful wings along the crossguard. And looking at the sword in my hand, I vowed I'd be worthy of it. That I would slay something monstrous with it. That I'd not just walk. Not just run.

'No, in this place, I'd fucking fly.'

+ VII +

SHAPED LIKE HEARTBREAK

'IT WAS LATE afternoon of that first day when I met her.

'I'd washed the filth of the road away in the bathhouse, changed into my new gear. Black leather britches and tunic, heavy boots, knee-high and silver-heeled. The soles were embossed with the sevenstar, and I realized I'd leave the mark of the Martyrs wherever I walked. In casting off my old clothes, in some way I was casting off what I'd been. I'd no idea what I might become yet. But as I returned to Barracks, I found Abbot Khalid waiting, a smile in his eyes to match the one that haunted his cut-throat's face.

"Come with me, Little Lion. I've a gift for you."

'I followed the abbot to the gatehouse, marvelling at the sheer size of the man. He was a mountain walking, long knotted braids trailing down his back like untamed serpents. The elevator swayed in the chill wind as we descended, and I watched him sidelong, eyes drifting to the horizontal scars bisecting his cheeks.

"You're wondering how I got them," he said, eyes on the cold valley below.

"Apologies, Abbot," I said, lowering my gaze. "But Frère Greyhand ... he said we palebloods heal as no ordinary men do. The night he took me from my village, I was cut so deep the knife struck bone. But now, there's barely even a mark."

"You shall heal all the faster as you grow, and your blood thickens. Though we do share some of the weaknesses of our accursed fathers – silver will cut us deeply, for example, and fire will leave its mark. But you are wondering what scarred me so?"

'I nodded mutely, meeting his green, kohled stare.

"The dark is full of horrors, de León. And though coldbloods concern us most these nights, brothers of the Silver Order have hunted all manner of evil, and been hunted in kind." He traced his scars. "These were gifted to me by the claws of a duskdancer. A monster, accursed, who could take the form of beast and man. I sent her to the hell she deserved." His scarred smile widened a fraction. "But she refused to leave without a goodbye kiss."

'We touched down, and with a soft chuckle, Khalid patted my shoulder and led me onwards, a hundred questions brawling behind my teeth.

'The stable was carved within the heart of the Cathedral's pillar, supported by columns of dark rock. It stank inside, as stables do: horse and straw and shite. But ever since the night I'd drunk Ilsa's blood, I could swear my senses had grown sharper, and beneath the everyday stink, I caught a whiff of death. Decay.

'Two boys were saddling a shaggy chestnut mare near the entrance – dark-skinned Sūdhaemi lads like Khalid. The first was around my age, the other, perhaps a year younger. They were fit, dressed in homespun with dark curls cropped close to their scalps. By the shared hazel of their eyes and the cut of their chins, I guessed they were famille.

"Fairdawning, Kaspar. Kaveh." The abbot nodded to the older lad, then the younger beside him. "This is Gabriel de León, a new recruit to the Order."

"Fairdawning, Gabriel," Kaspar said, grasping my hand.

"Godmorrow, Kaspar." I nodded, looked to his brother. "Kaveh?"

"Apologies," Kaspar said. "My brother was born tongueless. He does not speak."

'The younger lad stared at me as if in challenge, and I could guess why. In superstitious parts of the empire, such affliction might have been taken as the taint of witchery, the babe burned, his mother beside him. But my mama had taught me such thinking was folly, born only of fear. That the Almighty loved *all* his children, and that I should strive to do the same. And so, I offered my hand.

"Well, I'm not that interesting to talk to anyway. Fairdawning, Kaveh."

'The lad's scowl softened as I spoke, and as our palms met, his lips curled in a smile. Abbot Khalid grunted approval, called out across the stables in his warm baritone.

"And a fairdawn to you also, Prioress Charlotte. Sisternovices."

'Following the abbot's eyeline, I saw a half-dozen figures around a stack of feedbags – Sisters from the Priory above, I realized. They were all clad in dove-white novice robes and coifs, save a severe-looking woman in a black habit, who stood where the others sat. She was older, so thin she was almost gaunt. Four long scars cut down and across her face – as if she'd been attacked by some wild animal.

"Godmorrow, Abbot." The woman glanced at her charges. "Give blessing, girls."

"Godmorrow, Abbot Khalid," the sisters sang, all in unison.

"This is Gabriel de León," Khalid said. "A new son of the Ordo Argent."

'I kept my head bowed out of respect, but looked the sisters over through my lashes. All were young. Sitting on the bags with blocks of paper on their laps, charcoal sticks in hand. They'd been drawing the horses, I realized. I noted a novice among them so slight she seemed almost a child, with big green eyes and freckled skin. And seated at their

forefront, like an angel fallen to earth, was one of the most beautiful girls I'd ever seen.'

Jean-François rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair. Gabriel looked up and scowled. 'Problem?'

'I said nothing, Silversaint.'

'I heard a distinct groan just now, coldblood.'

'The wind, I assure you.'

'Fuck off,' Gabriel growled. 'She was beautiful. Oh, perhaps not the kind you'd find hanging in a portrait gallery or gracing some rich bastard's arm. She wasn't a beauty you wrapped in silk or hid inside a golden bower. But I can still recall the sight of her that afternoon. All the years between then and now, and it seems only yesterday.'

Gabriel fell so still he seemed a mirror to the vampire opposite. Even the monster seemed aware of the weight in the air, sitting patiently until the silversaint spoke again.

'She was older than me. Seventeen, at a guess. A beauty spot was placed as if by the Mothermaid herself, just to the right of her lips. One eyebrow was arched higher than the other, giving her a constant air of mild disdain. Her skin was milk; her cheek, the curve of a broken heart. There was no perfection to her. But her asymmetry commanded ... fascination. She had the face of a half-heard whisper, of a secret unshared. She sat with a block of parchment in her lap, partway through a beautiful drawing of a big black gelding.

'Abbot Khalid looked at her work. It was hard to tell with his scars, but I realized he was genuinely smiling. "You've a keen eye and a keener hand, Sisternovice."

'The girl lowered her eyes. "You honour me, Abbot."

"'Tis the Almighty that guides our hands," Prioress Charlotte said, with a disapproving glance at the young sister. "We are merely his vessels."

'The girl looked up to her prioress and nodded. "Véris."

'I knew I shouldn't gawp. On the road to San Michon, Greyhand had told me silversaints swore vows of celibacy, for fear we might perpetuate the evil of our birth and make more paleblood abominations like ourselves. After what I'd done to Ilsa, I confess that the thought sat well enough with me. I could still see the terror in her eyes if I tried, and the horror that I'd hurt her haunted me still. I'd no desire to touch another girl as long as I lived, and these weren't just girls, either – these were novices of the Silver Sorority. Soon to be married to God Himself.

'But still, something about this girl drew me in. As I watched, her eyes flickered up and met mine. I didn't look away. But surprisingly, neither did she.

"Well, Godmorrow, godly daughters." Khalid bowed. "Mothermaid bless."

"Fairdawning, Abbot." The prioress snapped her fingers. "Back to work, girls."

'I broke my stare, and the abbot clapped my shoulder, led me to the stable's heart. And all thoughts of raven-haired sisternovices fled my head at what I found there.

'A throng of horses waited in a wide pen. They were tundra ponies from Talhost – that hardy breed known as sosyas. Smaller than their Elidaeni cousins, sosyas have shaggy coats and stomachs of iron, ideally suited to the years of privation that followed daysdeath. Those bastards will chew on *anything*. I once knew a man who swore blind his sosya ate his fucking dog. These beasts seemed of the finest stock. But as I stood admiring them, again I caught that whiff of decay. And looking up, I finally discovered its source.

"Mother and Maid ..."

'Two wretched coldbloods were hanged from the ceiling. An older male, thin and rotten, and a boy, no older than I. Their skin was pallid, their clothes were rags, and their eyes burned with hunger and malevolence as they glared down at me.

"Have no fear, de León," Khalid said. "Bound in silver, they're helpless as babes."

'Looking close, I saw that the vampires were strung up by silver chains, swaying like ghastly chandeliers. The grooms and sisters and even the animals themselves seemed entirely unconcerned. And at last, I realized why these coldbloods were here.

"You keep them for the horses ..."

"Just so," the abbot nodded. "God's creatures cannot abide the presence of monsters of the night. But these steeds are meant to bear us into battle against the dark. So, we expose them early and often, that they become accustomed to the evil of the deathless." Khalid gave one of his scar-face smiles. "You've a sharp mind, Little Lion."

'I nodded, seeing the wisdom in it. The abbot handed me a few sugar cubes – a luxury since the crops had all failed, but one that San Michon could apparently still afford with the Empress's patronage. "Take your pick, son."

"God's truth?"

'Khalid nodded. "A gift, for your trials to come. And mind you choose well, lad. This horse will bear you into battle against all the horrors that call the dark home."

"But then ... how should I decide?"

"Trust your heart. You'll know the one."

'Ma famille hadn't owned so much as a sheep when I was a lad. It was only the nobleborn who could dream of keeping beasts as fine as these. Marvelling at the fortune that saw me gifted my own sword and steed on the same day, I stepped into the pen. And there in the throng, I found him. His stare was deep as midnight; his shaggy coat, darkest ebony. His mane was tied in thick plaits, his tail the same, switching from side to side as I approached. I realized he was the same gelding that the talented sisternovice had been drawing, and glancing in her direction, I found her dark eyes upon me again. She seemed to bristle as I closed in on the horse. But still, I did.

"Hello, boy," I murmured.

'He took the sugar cube I offered. Nickering, he nuzzled my face in search of more, and I stroked the shaggy satin of his cheek, laughing for joy.'

Gabriel shook his head.

'Cynics say there's no such thing as love at first sight. But I loved that fucking horse the moment I met him. And feeding him another cube, I knew I'd made a friend for life.

"What's your name?" I asked, bewildered at his beauty. "His name is Justice."

'Turning, I saw the sisternovice had spoken, furious now. But before I could ask what I'd done to earn her ire, the prioress's voice cut the air. "Sisternovice Astrid, be silent!"

"I will *not*." Her drawings spilled as the girl stood, and I saw every sketch was of this same horse. "Why should this *peasant* have Justice's keeping? I—"

'The girl's words were cut off by the prioress's slap.-

"How dare you take tone with me," Charlotte glowered. "A sister of the Silver Priory owns no goods. She covets no earthly possession. And she obeys her betters."

"I am *not* a sister of the Silver Priory," the girl spat, defiant.

'I winced as the prioress brought the girl to her knees with another slap, her scarred face twisting as she snarled, "Continue with this insolence, and you never will be!"

"Good! I never wanted to be here!"

"That much is plain! But there are two places in this world for a bastard daughter, Astrid Rennier! Before God's altar on her knees, or in a brothel on her back!"

'An awful still settled over the stables. Astrid stared up at the prioress, furious. I looked to Khalid, but one glance told me he wouldn't intercede. So, fool that I was ...

"I beg pardon," I said. "If the horse belongs to the good demoiselle—"

"She is no demoiselle," the prioress spat. "She is a sisternovice of the Silver Priory. She owns nothing, save the cloth on her back. She deserves nothing, save the

punishment she is due. And unless you wish to share it, you would do well to mind your tongue."

"Stand down, de León," Khalid commanded.

'I looked to the abbot, uncertain. The prioress reached into her sleeve and drew out a leather thong tipped with a short spur of iron.

"Beg God's forgiveness," she commanded the girl.

'The novice only glared. "I beg for nothi—"

'Her words became a strangled cry as the thong landed across her back.

"Beg it, whorechild!"

'The girl lifted her head and spat in fury. "Fuck you."

'A gasp rang out among the novices. I was astonished at the hate in the girl's eyes, bewildered at her stubbornness. But more and most, sickened at the violence being done to her. I knew what it was to suffer a beating like that. I knew the courage it took to bear it without a sound. The strap fell six more times, and still, the girl refused to yield. So finally, fearing she wouldn't beg until it killed her, I begged instead.

"Prioress, stop, please! If punishment must be meted—"

'Strong fingers took hold of my arm, so hard I winced. Turning, I found Abbot Khalid behind me. "This is not your place to speak, Initiate."

"Abbot, this is cruelty beyond—"

'His grip tightened, so hard I could feel my bones groaning. "Not. Your. Place."

'I felt a cur. My mouth gone sour and my belly turned cold. But with that crushing hold on my arm, and only a boy after all, I dared not speak again. Charlotte kept striking, the scars on her face turning a livid red with her rage. My stomach churned as those awful cracks rang in the stillness. And finally, like anyone would have, the girl broke.

"Godsakes, stop!"

"Do you beg the Almighty's forgiveness, Astrid Rennier?" 'Crack.

[&]quot;Oui!"

'Crack.

"Beg, then!"

"I'm sorry!" she screamed. "I beg God forgive me!"

'The prioress finally eased back, her voice like ice. "Get up."

'I looked on helpless as the weeping girl took a moment to gather her strength. And then she struggled upright, arms wrapped about her. I glanced among the sisternovices and saw fear of the prioress in their eyes. Fear of God above all. There was only one who seemed truly concerned – the tiny girl with green eyes and freckles, who looked at Astrid with the same pity I felt in my own heart. But Prioress Charlotte clearly felt none.

"You will learn your place, whorechild. Do you hear me?" "O-oui, Prioress," the girl whispered.

"That goes for *all* of you!" Charlotte rounded on her charges, fervour flashing in her eyes. "You are promised to God now. You will serve him and His Church as faithful wives should. Or you will answer to me, and hell itself!"

'The woman glowered at me as if inviting reply. But though the words roiled behind my teeth, Abbot Khalid still held my arm. And so, I stayed mute.

"My apologies for the unseemly display, Abbot," Charlotte said, lips thin.

"Unnecessary, Prioress," Khalid replied. "The sheep that stray are prey for wolves."

"Just so." The thin woman nodded curtly at the Testaments quote, turned to her novices. "Come along then, girls. We shall spend the day in silent contemplation. Sisternovice Chloe, assist Sisternovice Astrid."

'The small freckled girl nodded, helped her fellow novice collect her things. Astrid's hands were shaking. She met my eyes briefly – a clouded, fleeting glance stained with tears. It was only when they were out of sight that Khalid released his grip on my arm.

"A strong will shall serve you well on the Hunt, young brother," he said softly. "And a good heart shall prove a shield against the perils of the dark. But if ever you question my orders again, I will drag you to the wheel and flay the skin right off your back. You are a servant of God. But you are *my* soldier now. Do you understand?"

'I looked into Khalid's eyes to see if he was angry, but his voice was matter-of-fact, his stare steady. The Abbot of the Ordo Argent didn't rage. Didn't raise his voice. It was at that moment I learned a true leader didn't need to.

"Oui, Abbot," I bowed.

'Khalid nodded, as if the matter were already forgotten. Looking to the gate the sisters had left by, he murmured, "Prioress Charlotte is a godly woman, devoted to the Almighty and Mothermaid. And if she is of a temper this day, you must forgive her. Mass this eve will be painful for you, youngblood. But for most of us, it will be agony."

"Why? What happens at mass this evening?"

"Someone dies, de León."

'Khalid heaved a sigh, and stared out into the cold.

"A good man dies."

+<u>VIII</u>+

THE RED RITE

'AS THE FEEBLE sun set, I was ushered to the Cathedral by the song of mighty bells.

'Figures were answering the call from around the monastery, and I was struck by how few there were. Half a dozen silversaints, perhaps a dozen apprentices, workmen and servants and sisters of the Silver Sorority. But ascending the Cathedral's steps with Aaron de Coste beside me, I still had goosebumps on my skin. No matter how old or empty it appeared, I could sense the sanctity in this place. And stepping inside, I found my breath stolen from my lungs.

'The Cathedral was carved of dark granite, circular like the sigil of God's Holy Church. As was tradition, two pairs of great graven doors were set in its walls – one in the east, for the dawn and living, and one in the west, for dusk and the dead. Graven pillars rose up to the dome, taller than the grandest trees, and the space was softly lit by the same glass globes that hung from the Armoury ceiling. Many of the windows were under repair, but those uncovered were breathtaking. Dark light struggled through the great sevenstar window in the façade, casting dim rainbows on the floor. Wooden pews were arranged in concentric circles around a stone altar at the building's heart, and above it hung a great marble statue of the Redeemer upon his

wheel. His hands were bound, back flayed open, throat cut ear to ear.

'Upon that altar sat a brazier, and a glass bowl filled with bubbling silver liquid. Before it sat a single silver chalice.

'I'd no ken what the brazier was for, but every God-fearing soul knew the Grail. Like every other church in Elidaen, this was only an imitation, of course. But while that chalice was present in the room, so too was the Redeemer's spirit. And I swear, I could *feel* it.

'Despite the Cathedral's size, there were only four dozen at mass. Baptiste Sa-Ismael sat close by, along with three others who were certainly fellow blackthumbs. My master, Frère Greyhand, knelt in the front row among a handful of men in silversaint garb. They were dour-faced and black-clad, and each seemed a living legend to me. But I noticed many were mutilated somehow; wrists absent hands and faces missing eyes. At the end of their row sat a silversaint with lank greying hair. I saw he was rocking softly, back and forth. His stare was deeply bloodshot, his face carved with lines of pain.

'The air was filled with ghostly music, angelic and beautiful. I saw sisters of the Silver Sorority in a loft above, clothed in black, singing all in unison. Their voices made my skin tingle, the beauty of their song filled my chest with ancient fire.

'From a spiral stair below the floor, Abbot Khalid ascended to the altar. He was clad in black robes, the scars in his cheeks twisting his lips into that odd forever smile. As he lifted his hands, I saw silvered ink on the dark skin of his forearms – Sanael, the Angel of Blood, a weave of swords and doves, the Mothermaid holding the infant Redeemer.

"I am the word and the way, sayeth the Lord," Khalid intoned. "By my blood, the sinner shall find salvation, and the penitent, the keys to my kingdom eternal."

'All in the Cathedral answered "Véris" - the customary reply of congregation at mass. It was an old Elidaeni word,

meaning A truth beyond truth.

"We welcome a new brother into this, your house, oh Lord." Khalid looked right at me. "His birth, an abomination. His life, a transgression. His soul, bound for perdition. But we beseech you, give him strength that he might overcome the misdeed of his making, and stand tall against this endless night."

"Véris," the brothers replied.

'The altar bell rang. I could feel the very breath of God upon my neck.

"Gabriel de León," Khalid commanded. "Approach."

'I looked to Master Greyhand, and he nodded once. Making the sign of the wheel, I found myself standing before that brazier and the bowl of silver liquid atop it.

'Six figures ascended the stair, bathed in the soft, warm light from those globes above. Prioress Charlotte stood at their fore, followed by three women in black habits, silver-trimmed. Their heads were veiled in lace, faces powdered white, crimson sevenstars painted over their eyes. But the two figures following wore novice white, their faces uncovered and unadorned.

'As they took up places at the altar opposite me, I recognized both from the stables that afternoon. The first was the tiny lass with the green eyes and freckles – Chloe, I remembered she'd been called. The second was the beautiful raven-haired girl who'd been beaten by the prioress for her disobedience. Her dark eyes once more meeting mine.

'Astrid Rennier.

'I watched Sisternovice Chloe unroll a leather satchel embossed with the sevenstar. A host of needles was arrayed within, long and gleaming in the honeyed light.

"As he gave to the Redeemer upon the wheel," Khalid said, "we pray God gives you strength to endure the suffering of nights to come. For now, we grant you a taste."

'I looked to the abbot, wondering what he meant.

"Place your left hand upon the altar," he commanded.

'I did as I was bid, placing my hand on the wood. It was only when Sisternovice Chloe gently turned my palm upwards that I understood what was happening. She wiped a cool cloth over my skin, and I smelled strong, sharp spirits. Astrid Rennier dipped a needle into the metallic liquid bubbling atop the burner. And looking into my eyes, she spoke, echoed by the other sisters around her.

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"This is the hand,
"That wields the flame,
"That lights the way,
"And turns the dark,
"To silver."
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'Astrid stabbed the needle into my palm. The sensation was sharp and bright, but brief, and I flinched only a little. Looking down, I saw a tiny spot of blood and silver etched into my flesh. Prioress Charlotte leaned close to inspect the needle stroke, gave a curt nod. I drew breath, swallowed hard. Thinking the sting hadn't been all that bad.

'Astrid stabbed my palm again. And again. By the twentieth prick of the needle, discomfort had become pain. And by the hundredth, pain had become agony.'

Gabriel shook his head, staring at the star tattooed on his left palm.

'It's a strange thing, being marked so. The hurt becomes delirium. The brief relief between each needle stroke seems both heaven and hell. My stepfather beat me like a dog on his bad days. But I'd never felt anything like the pain I knew at Astrid's touch. It was ... incandescent. Like I stood outside my body, watching through a fever dream.

'I didn't know how I'd manage it. And still, I knew this was a testing – the first of many. If I couldn't endure a needle, how was I to face the monsters of the dark? How was I to

avenge my sister, defend God's mighty Church, if I couldn't win through this?

'I tried to concentrate on the choirsong, but heard it only as a dirge. I closed my eyes, but felt only dread at not knowing when the next stroke might fall. And so, I looked to the Redeemer above.

'They'd flayed him alive, the Testaments said. Priests of the Old Gods, refusing to accept the One Faith – they hung him from a chariot wheel and scourged him with thorns, burned him with fire, then cut his throat and cast him into the waters. He could have called on his Almighty Father to save him. Instead, he accepted his fate, knowing it would be the catalyst that united this Church and spread his word to every corner of this empire.

'By this blood, shall they have life eternal.

'And now, that empire stood imperilled. That Church under siege by the deathless Dead. So, I looked up into his eyes, and I prayed.

'Give me strength, brother. And I will give you everything.

'I couldn't tell you how long it took. By the end, my palm was a bleeding, fucking mess. But Astrid finally leaned back, and Chloe poured burning spirits onto my skin. And through the boiling haze, I saw it, etched in my palm; the mark of the Martyrs, in silver ink.

'A perfect sevenstar.

"Frère Greyhand," said Khalid. "Approach."

'Master Greyhand made the sign of the wheel and stepped forward.

"Do you vow before Almighty God to lead this unworthy boy in the tenets of the Ordo Argent? Do you vow before San Michon to be the hand that guides, the shield that protects, until his damned soul stands strong enough to protect this realm himself?"

"By the Blood of the Redeemer," Greyhand answered. "I vow it."

'Khalid turned to me. "Do you vow before Almighty God to commit yourself to the tenets of our Order? To overcome the vile sin of your nature and live a life in service to God's Holy Church? Do you vow before San Michon to obey your master, to heed his voice, to be guided by his hand until you stand sainted yourself?"

'I thought of the day my sister came home. Knowing that among this brotherhood, within this holy order, I'd find the strength to stop such horror from ever happening again.

"By the Blood, I vow it."

"Gabriel de León, I name you initiate of the Silver Order of San Michon. May the Almighty Father give you courage. May the blessed Mothermaid give you wisdom. May the One True Redeemer give you strength. Véris."

'I met the abbot's eyes, and my whole body tingled with pride as his lips twisted a little further in his cut-throat smile. Greyhand gave a small nod – the first sign of approval he'd bestowed since saving me in Lorson. My head felt light, the pain now a benediction. But through that haze, I felt more at peace than I'd ever been.

'Greyhand returned to his place, and I walked beside him. A bell rang, signalling the congregation should rise. The sisters and novices around the altar bowed their heads. Khalid turned his eyes to the stained-glass window of the Martyrs.

"From brightest joy to deepest sorrow. We beg you bear witness, blessed Michon. We pray you, Almighty God, to open the gates of your eternal kingdom." His eyes fell on the greying silversaint at the end of our row. "Frère Yannick. Step forth."

'The choir had fallen silent. I watched the man clench his jaw, lift his gaze to heaven. Frère Yannick's face was gaunt, sleepless lines carved around bloodshot eyes. Beside him, a younger, sandy-haired lad squeezed his hand, pale with grief – another apprentice, I realized. And drawing a deep breath, Yannick stepped forward before Abbot Khalid.

"Are you ready, Brother?" Khalid asked.

"I am ready," the man replied, his voice like cracked glass.

"And are you certain, Brother?"

'The silversaint looked at the sevenstar in the palm of his left hand. "Better to die a man than live a monster."

"To heaven, then," Khalid said softly.

'Yannick nodded. "To heaven."

'The choir took up their song again, and I recognized the hymn sung at funeral masses; the grim and beautiful "Memoria Di." Khalid walked up the Cathedral's western aisle. Frère Yannick drifted behind like a man sleepwalking. One by one, the rest of the congregation followed, out through the doors for the dead to the courtyard beyond. I dared not speak and break the awful sanctity I could feel in this moment. But Master Greyhand knew the questions in my head.

"This is the Red Rite, Little Lion," he whispered. "This is the fate that awaits us all."

'We formed up in the courtyard, watching Abbot Khalid and Frère Yannick marching onto the stone span I'd seen earlier – the one de Coste had named "Heaven's Bridge". I saw the wheel on the balcony's edge, looking out over the drop into the river far below. And a part of me knew then, what was coming.

"We are the children of a terrible sin," Greyhand murmured to me. "And eventually, that sin corrupts us all. The thirst of our fathers lives inside us, Little Lion. There are ways we can quell it for a time, that we might earn our place in the Almighty's kingdom. But eventually, God punishes us for the sacrilege of our making. As palebloods grow older, we grow stronger. But so does the immortal beast that rages within our mortal shell. The terrible thirst that demands to be slaked upon the blood of innocents."

"Yannick ... he killed someone?" I whispered. "He drank

. . . '

"No. But the thirst has become too much for him to bear. He feels it, spreading like a poison. He hears it when he closes his eyes at night." My master shook his head, voice hushed. "We call it the *sangirè*, Little Lion. The *red thirst*. A whisper at first, dulcet and sweet. But it grows to an endless scream. And unless you silence it, you *will* succumb to it, becoming naught but a ravenous beast. Worse than the lowest wretched."

'Greyhand nodded to Frère Yannick, his voice thick with sorrow and pride.

"Better to end this life than lose your immortal soul. In the finale, that is the choice before every paleblood alive. Live as a monster, or die as a man."

'I could still hear the choir in the Cathedral. I watched Frère Yannick slip his greatcoat off, remove his tunic. His body was covered in beautiful silver ink: icons of the Martyrs and Mothermaid, the Angels of Death and Pain and Hope. That ink told the story of a life spent in service to God. Outside, he seemed hale and strong, but one look in his eyes told me all was not so within. And I remembered my night with Ilsa, then. The chorus of her veins flooding into my mouth. The beat of my raging heart growing stronger as hers weakened with every swallow. The thirst that had driven me to such depths.

'What would it become as I grew older?

'What would / become?

"We beg you bear witness, Almighty Father," Abbot Khalid called. "As your begotten son suffered for our sins, so too shall our brother suffer for his."

"Véris," came the reply around me.

'Yannick turned to face us, placed his hands upon the wheel. My mouth ran sour as I saw Prioress Charlotte approach with a leather whip adorned with silver spurs. But the prioress only pressed the whip to Frère Yannick's shoulders – seven ritual touches for the seven nights the Redeemer suffered. A candle was kissed to the brother's

skin, to mimic the flames that burned God's begotten son. And then, Abbot Khalid lowered his head, drawing a silvered knife. The choir was near the end of their hymn.

"Blessed Mothermaid ..." I breathed.

"From suffering comes salvation," Khalid intoned. "In service to God, we find the path to his throne. In blood and silver this 'saint has lived, and so now dies."

"Into your arms, Lord!" Yannick cried. "I commend my unworthy soul!"

'I flinched as the blade flashed in the abbot's hands, slicing the frère from ear to ear. A great rush of blood spilled from the wound, and Yannick closed his sleep-starved eyes. The final notes of the Memoria Di rang out over the congregation. I couldn't find air to breathe. And with a gentle shove, like a father guiding his son to sleep, Khalid sent Yannick tumbling off the balcony, down towards the waters five hundred feet below.

'About me, the gathering made the sign of the wheel. Cold horror had settled in my belly. Among the novices, I saw Sisternovice Astrid, watching me again with those dark eyes. Abbot Khalid looked about as the bells tolled. And he nodded, as if content.

"Véris," he said.

"Véris," the others echoed.

'I looked down to the new tattoo in my palm. Throbbing with pain. Burning like fire.

"Véris," I whispered.

+ X +

SWEETEST AND DARKEST

'THERE WAS NO sleep for me that night. I bedded down in the Barracks, listening to the old oaken rafters creak overhead. True silversaints had individual cells on the floors above, but we initiates slept in a communal room. There were more cots than needed – enough for fifty at least. But as we returned from mass, only a dozen or so came with me.

'I lay down, my head reeling. In the space of a day, I'd been gifted the finest possessions I'd ever owned, been inducted into a holy order, promised my life to God. But I'd also seen a member of that same order ritually murdered before he succumbed to the madness within him, and learned that eventually, the same fate awaited me.

'Not if. When.

"The first day is one of the strangest."

'I looked to the initiate in the cot beside mine. He was the boy who'd squeezed Frère Yannick's hand before he approached the altar – the dead brother's apprentice. He was a big lad, sandy-haired, and his formal accent told me he was Elidaeni born. His blue eyes glittered as he glanced at me sidelong. I could see them bloodshot from tears.

"Quite a day," I agreed.

"I wish I could promise it gets easier. But I've no liar's tongue."

"I'll not fault you for it," I nodded. "My name is Gabriel de León."

"Theo Petit," the boy said, shaking my hand.

"My condolences for your master. I'll pray for his soul."

'His eyes flashed then, voice growing hard. "Save it for yourself, boy. Pray you live long enough to face the same choice as he. And show the same courage in the making of it."

'Theo blew out the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. I lay there in the gloom, staring up into the black. Tossing and turning until de Coste eventually growled from the bed opposite mine.

"Go to sleep, Peasant. You'll have need of it amorrow."

'I'd no idea how true Aaron's words would prove. Next morn, I was roused by the Cathedral bells, and felt I'd hardly slept at all. I was half-eager, half-terrified, wondering what was to come. The tattoo on my hand was aching, bloody, and after a sombre dawnmass, Frère Greyhand gifted me a jar of sweet-smelling salve.

"Angelgrace," he explained. "The silver in your ink means it will heal slower than a regular wound. The 'grace will help until your blood does its work. Now, follow me. And leave that sword here. It's not your todger, you can take your hand off it occasionally."

'I did as my master bid, following him into the morning air. I remember it was so cold that day, my bollocks felt like they'd crawled up inside my body. The dim morning light across the monastery was frail, beautiful, and making our way along the rope bridge towards the Gauntlet's silhouette, I could feel butterflies warring in my belly. Archer cut through the chill air around us, calling to Greyhand as he soared overhead.

[&]quot;Master ... where do we go?" I asked.

[&]quot;Your first trial."

[&]quot;And what should I expect from this trial?"

"What you should always expect from this life, Little Lion. Blood." Greyhand looked to the river winding through the pillars below and sighed. A fey mood was on him, but whether it was thoughts of the Red Rite last night or other troubles, I knew not. "A part of me envies you this day, boy. The first taste is ever the sweetest. And the darkest."

'I'd no idea what he meant, but Greyhand seemed in no mood for questions. As we strode through the great double doors of the Gauntlet, I saw that San Michon's proving ground was fashioned like a vast arena; circular, open to the sky. Its flagstones were granite, but a great sevenstar was wrought in pale limestone on its surface. Training mannequins and strange apparatus skirted the edge, and banners with unfamiliar crests adorned the walls.

'In the centre of the star, a group awaited, their dim shadows reaching out towards me. The foremost was Abbot Khalid, standing with arms folded, his greatcoat billowing in the wind. A beautiful silversteel sword was slung at his back – double-handed and deadly, taller than I was. The big man nodded as we approached, and Greyhand and I bowed low.

"Fairdawning, Initiate de León. Frère Greyhand."

"Godmorrow, Abbot," we replied.

'Khalid motioned to the people about him. "These are the luminaries of the Silver Order, de León. Come to bear witness to your Trial of the Blood. Good Prioress Charlotte, head of the Silver Sorority and Mistress of the Aegis, you already know."

'I bowed to the dour woman, eyes downturned. She was clad head to foot in her black sister's habit, and her skin looked waxen in the thin dawn light, those four scars cutting angry pink lines across her face. I idly wondered how she'd earned them as she gave me a thin, bloodless smile. "Fairdawning, Initiate. Mothermaid bless."

'Khalid nodded to an elderly man in a black robe beside him. "This is Archivist Adamo, master of the Great Library and keeper of the history of the Ordo Argent." 'The fellow blinked at me, looking slightly befuddled behind his thick spectacles. His skin was wrinkled like waterlogged paper, his hair, white as the snows of my youth. His back was bent with age, and I could see no silver ink atop his liver-spotted hands.

"Argyle á Sadhbh," Khalid said, motioning to a towering fellow among the group. "Seraph to the Brothers of the Hearth and Forgemaster of San Michon."

'The huge man met my eyes, nodding greeting. He was Ossway born for sure – flaming red stubble covered his scalp, and his jaw was heavy as a granite brick. But his left eye was milky white, the left side of his face was marred by a deep burn, and strangest of all, his left hand was metal, not flesh – some clever simulacrum forged of iron, strapped to his forearm with a leather bracer. His biceps were thick as a man's thighs, his fair skin pocked by spark scars from his forge. He was a smith, through and through.

"Initiate," he grunted. "May God grant ye strength this day."

"This is Sœur Aoife," Khalid said. "Adept of the Silver Sorority."

'The abbot motioned to a young sister beside Charlotte, watching me with curious blue eyes. She was slender, pretty, a hint of auburn curls at the edge of her coif. She held a thin box of polished oak, and her fingernails were chewed to the roots.

"Godmorrow, Initiate." She bowed. "Mothermaid bless vou."

"The good sister will be assisting in today's trial. And as for your trial master," here Khalid shared his cut-throat's smile with Greyhand, "I shall allow him to introduce himself."

'I glanced to the brother in question, standing beside the abbot like a sharp black shadow. His dark grey moustache was so long it could've been tied in a bow atop his shaved skull, and his eyes looked like piss holes in his head. He seemed older than Khalid and Greyhand – past forty, I guessed. He was slight of build, his greatcoat collar laced high and tight about his throat. Save for a long cane of polished ashwood, he was unarmed.

"My name is Talon de Montfort, Seraph of the Hunt," the thin man declared in a sharp Elidaeni accent. "You will learn to hate me worse than the whore who spat you from her belly, and the devil who squirted you into it."

'I glanced at my master, then at Khalid, taken aback. This Talon was Seraph of the Hunt, the second-highest 'saint in the Order. But still, no bastard alive speaks that way about my mama. "My mother was n—"

'Swakk! came the sound of Talon's cane across my legs. ""Ow!"

"During this trial, you will speak when spoken to. Am I understood?"

"O-oui," I managed, massaging my whipped thigh.

'Swakk!

"Oui what, you pig-buggering little shitwizard?"

"O-oui, Seraph Talon," I gasped.

"Splendid." The thin man glanced to Greyhand, the other luminaries. "You may take your places in the rings, godly Brothers and Sisters. The weather is chill, but this shall not take overlong. By hour's end, the Trial shall be concluded or the funeral underway."

'I blanched a little at that. But my master only patted my shoulder.

"No fear. Heed the hymn, Little Lion."

'Greyhand turned, and with Abbot Khalid and the prioress beside him, he marched up to the bleachers. Argyle assisted Archivist Adamo, the old man taking the smith's iron hand and shuffling slowly from the star. Cold winds whispered between Talon and me, tossing my hair into my eyes. Sister Aoife stood beside the seraph, that wooden box in her hands. The thin man looked at me like an owl summing up a

particularly juicy mouse, and I watched that switch in his hand as if it were a viper set to strike.

"What do you know of the coldblood who sired you, boy?" Talon asked.

'The question caught me off-guard, mostly because I had no good answer. I thought of my mother then, a pang of resentment in my chest. All those years she spent warning me of the hungers within, and never once did she warn me of what I truly was. I supposed she was ashamed by the sin of it all. But she could have told me *something* ...

"Nothing, Seraph."

'Swakk!

"Ow!"

"Speak up, you ill-bred twatwaffler!"

'I glanced to the stony faces in the gallery, spoke louder. "Nothing, Seraph!"

'He nodded. "Now, I need ask this question like the world needed your mother to shit you into it, but are you at all versed in the divine mysteries of chymistrie?"

'My heart quickened at that. Chymistrie was a dark craft, spoken of in hushed tones about my village. My mama once told me it was something between alchemy, witchery, and lunacy. But to be on the safe side, I shook my head.

'Talon sighed. "Then let me enlighten your so-called mind, you spunk-brained fuckweasel. The foes you will face on the Hunt are the deadliest creatures under God's own heaven. Coldbloods. Faekin. Restless. Duskdancers. Fallen. But the Almighty has not left you bereft of tools in the endless night. And we shall teach you how to craft them *all*. Black ignis powder that explodes with all heaven's fury at a single spark. Silver caustic to burn the flesh of your foes like acid. Kingshield. Angelgrace. Ghostbreath. Griefthorn ..." From within his greatcoat, Talon produced a phial of dark scarlet dust. "And last, his greatest gift of all."

'My mouth ran dry. It was the same powder I'd seen Greyhand and de Coste smoke along the Hollyroad, their eyes flooding blood-red as they breathed it down.

"What is that, Seraph?"

"This, you lackwitted piss-puddle, is sanctus. A chymical distillation of the essence in our enemies' veins. Through it, we alleviate the dark thirst inherited from the monsters who sired us. *And* unlock the gifts God granted us to help send them back to hell."

"You mean that's ..."

'He nodded. "Vampire blood."

"Fuck *me*," I breathed.

"The Testaments name sodomy a deadly sin, so I'd rather not." Talon offered a brief smile. "But you're very pretty, de León, and I appreciate the offer."

'I chuckled, thinking he was making a jest.

'Swakk!

"Ow!"

"Sanctus is the holy sacrament of San Michon. A paleblood's greatest weapon against the endless night, and our damned natures. Today, you begin to wield it, and your gifts. And our first step, my cherry pauperstain, is to determine which of the four bloodlines your father's deathless cock belonged to. But before we begin ..." He twirled his cane between his fingertips and scowled. "You must give me permission to do so."

'I swallowed, massaging my leg. "Permission, Seraph?"

"It is forbidden for palebloods to use their gifts upon each other without consent, under punishment of the lash. We are brothers-in-arms, in purpose and in blood, and we must trust one another above all else, de León. So. Do you consent?"

'I looked to Sister Aoife, uncertain. "What happens if I don't?"

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'Swakk!
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[&]quot;Ow!"

[&]quot;Do. You. Consent?"

[&]quot;"I consent!"

'Talon nodded, narrowed his gaze. I felt the strangest sensation then. Like fingertips brushing soft along my scalp. Like a whisper slipping through my eyes. I winced as if looking into the sun, my head swimming. "What ... w-what are you doing?"

"All vampires have common abilities, which palebloods inherit. But each bloodline also has unique talents." Talon pointed to one of the unfamiliar crests on the wall – a white raven wearing a golden crown. "The *Ironhearts*. The kith of Blood Voss. They have flesh akin to steel. It can turn aside silver. The eldest among them can even withstand the fury of the flame. But far more sobering is their ability to read the minds of weaker men."

'I realized *that* was the sensation I felt – the seraph was *in my fucking head*. I could feel him now, like a shadow inside my skull. But just as swift as it began, the feeling ended.

"You must learn to better guard your thoughts, my dribble-chinned gibbercuck," Talon warned. "Or Voss's kin will pluck them right out of your shit-witted head."

'I blinked hard, realizing Talon's father must have been one of these Ironhearts, and that his son had claimed their gifts as his own. I wondered again about my own father, then. Who was he? What boons had his accursed blood bestowed upon me? I was unnerved Talon could simply force his way into my mind if he chose, but at the same time, a part of me felt a thrill that such a gift might also be mine.

'The seraph pointed to another banner, embroidered with two black wolves and two ornate red circles – the twin moons, Lánis and Lánae.

"Blood Chastain. The *Shepherds*. These coldbloods exert their will over denizens of the animal world. See through their eyes. Control them like puppets. The eldest can even assume the forms of the darker creatures of earth and sky. Bats. Cats. Wolves. Trust no beast when you hunt a Chastain, boy. For the eyes of the night are theirs to command."

'The seraph nodded to a third banner; a heart-shaped shield set with a beautiful weave of roses and snakes. "Blood Ilon. The *Whispers*. A line more dangerous than a sackful of syphilitic serpents. All vampires can bend the weak-hearted to their will. But the Ilon can manipulate all manner of emotion. Heighten rage. Provoke fear. Inflame passion. And the hunter who cannot trust his own heart can trust nothing."

'Talon whipped his switch at the final banner; a blue field adorned with a white bear and a broken shield. "Blood Dyvok. The *Untamed*. Possessed of a strength even the other foul bastards of the night would shit their unholy pantaloons over. These creatures can tear apart full-grown men with their bare hands. Their ancients can smash down castle walls with their fists, and make the earth quake beneath their boots. Even other coldbloods look like helpless children beside them."

'My mind was swimming as Talon turned to the young woman next to him.

"Good Sœur?"

'Aoife opened her oaken box, producing an ornate silver pipe. It was fashioned in the guise of Naél, the Angel of Bliss, her hands cupped to form a bowl. As I watched, Talon poured a tiny measure of sanctus into the angel's palms.

"Now, the monster who bellied up your mother belonged to one of these four lines. And you will possess his bloodgift, albeit in a lesser form. Do you recall the first time you exhibited some strange ability? Did you show an affinity for animals as a boy? The knack of constantly getting your way? Perhaps you knew what others would say before they spoke?"

'I chewed my lip. "My sister Amélie. She was murdered by a coldblood and returned to our village as one of the wretched. I fought her off with my bare hands."

"Mmmn." The thin man nodded. "Dyvok, perhaps. The same accursed blood as flows within our abbot. Very well.

We shall begin there."

'I looked to the bleachers, where Khalid met my eyes and nodded. The thought I might be the same bloodline as a man so mighty set the butterflies loose in my belly once more.

'Talon beat his cane upon the ground three times. I heard the oiled grinding of stone upon stone, and saw the centre of the sevenstar opening wide.

'Rising up on a plinth of dark granite was the very same wretched that Greyhand had hauled to the monastery from Lorson. Its flesh was a wasteland, blotched and grey; its mouth, a pit of razors. A silver chain bound it to the floor, metal sizzling where it touched that rotten skin. Looking into the wretched's empty eyes, I found myself back in my village, the day my sister came home.

'Other segments of the sevenstar opened, and on the rising plinths, I saw a pack of rough-bred mongrels – half wolf, half dog – held fast by steel chains. They were going berserk, snarling at the wretched in the centre of the star. But the monster stared only at me, eyes filled with an endless, ageless hunger.

'Talon lifted the long-stemmed silver pipe towards my lips.

"Breathe deep," he advised. "As San Michon caught the Redeemer's blood upon the wheel, and turned the sin of his murder to God's own holy cause, so too do we remake our own sin. From the greatest horrors are the greatest heroes forged."

'I glanced to my master, then to Sister Aoife, still uncertain. Her brilliant blue eyes met mine, and beneath her veil, I saw the sister's lips moving. Mouthing the very same words Greyhand had spoken to me:

'Heed the hymn.

'My heart was beating quick. Fear in my belly. But if this was a testing, I was determined not to fail it before the eyes of every luminary in the Order. Seraph Talon placed the pipe

on my lips, striking his flintbox and bidding me breathe, breathe.'

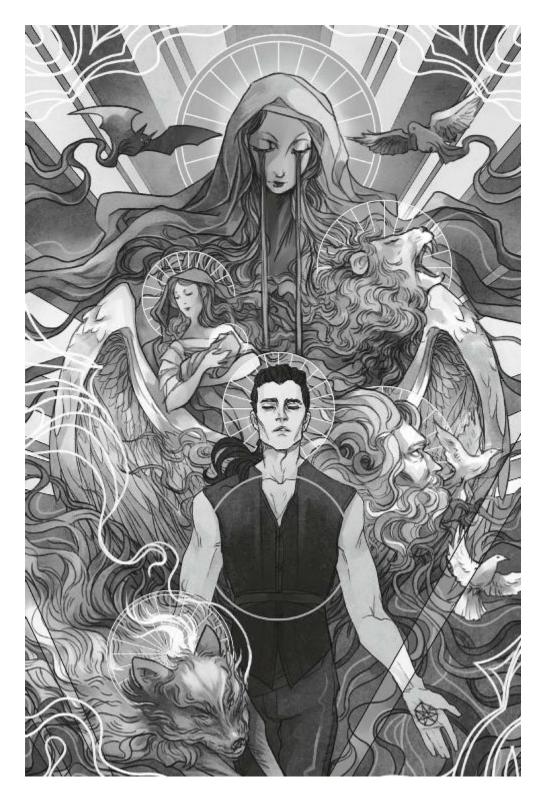
Jean-François was sketching in his book, his voice a low murmur.

'The first taste is ever the sweetest. And the darkest.'

'So Greyhand promised,' Gabriel nodded. 'If only I knew then what I know now. I would have run until I reached my mama's arms, slamming the door on the dark and the monsters who haunted it and these men who walked it with silver heels. Because it wasn't a hero Talon forged that day as I breathed that beautiful poison into my lungs. It was a *chain*. And one I shall never break.

'I saw it begin in that angel's silvered hands. A thin wisp of scarlet, dancing on my tongue. I felt it crash upon me, heavy as lead and light as feathers, all of me aflame. And inside it, I heard the first notes of a symphony, bright as heaven and red as blood.

'Heed the hymn, Little Lion.



"Oh, *God*," I gasped. "Oh, sweet and blessed Redeemer ..."

'I know not how long I lost myself. Fighting to ride that bloody wave, to bring my scattered senses to bear, awash in boiling crimson. I only remember the sound that finally dragged me up and out of it. Beneath that blood-red symphony, another noise was building, sharp enough to shake me, loud enough to wake me. Metal on stone.

'I opened my eyes and saw it. My heart dropping and thudding in my chest.

'The wretched was charging right at me.'

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BLOOD OF THE FRAIL

'SERAPH TALON AND Sister Aoife were nowhere to be seen. I was alone. Unarmed. Minutes were hours, moments were minutes, the monster running at me with fingers curled like claws. The mongrels were barking, driven mad in the coldblood's presence. My heart was racing. And in the palm of my left hand, a fire was burning, silver bright.

'I'd been raised deep in the One Faith. I'd gone to chapel every prièdi as a boy, still said my prayers before I slept every night. I loved God. Feared God. Worshipped God. But for the first time in my life, I could actually *feel* God. His love. His power, made manifest in me. And I moved then, as if my shoulders were crowned with angel's wings. The wretched's mouth was agape, tongue swollen between its fangs. But I twisted aside from its grasping hands, and the monster stumbled past, ploughing into the wall.

'I snatched up the silver chain still wrapped about the wretched's neck, cracking it like a whip. The creature turned, and I felt its unholy strength as dead hands closed about my throat. But I found myself just as strong – as strong as I'd been the day Amélie came home. I rolled my arm, once, twice, wrapping that silver chain around my fist. And drawing back, I smashed it right into that monster's black fucking maw.

'Bone shattered. Teeth splintered. I struck again, dimly aware of the dull, wet crunch of silver into rancid flesh. My old friend hatred crouched upon my shoulder, my mind alight with the sight of my sister dancing to music only she could hear, the hymn I could now hear also – red, red, red. And when I was done, the monster's head was a dark splatter upon the wall behind it, a ragged pulp lolling at the end of a broken neck.

'Heed the hymn, Little Lion.

'I let the body drop. A red wash flooded my eyes, all the angels singing in time. My right hand was a bleeding mess, knuckles ripped back to bare bone. I was so fucking high I could have stood on tiptoe and kissed the lips of the Mothermaid herself. But Talon called from the gathering in the bleachers, "I fear not. Next!"

'I heard running feet, claws on cold stone. And turning, I saw that pack of starving mongrels charging across the circle. I gripped the chain in my bloody hand, uncertain what to do with myself. There were a dozen of the bastards bearing down on me like arrows, eyes wild, teeth bared. In a growing panic, I swung the chain about me to fend them off. The dogs slowed, snarling and barking, forming a tight circle around me as I backed up to the wall. I'd no ken why they were attacking me. I'd no wish to hurt them, but I'd no wish to be dinner either, my mind racing with the bloodhymn as that length of bloody chain whooshed around my head.

"Tell them to stand down!" Greyhand called. "Command them!"

"Sod off!" I bellowed at the beasts. "Away with you, bastards!"

"Not with your voice, you cack-brained yak-fiddler!" Talon spat. "With your mind!"

'I hadn't the first clue how to do what the seraph wanted, but still, I tried. Swinging my chain to keep the mongrels at bay, I fixed my stare on the biggest – a snaggle-toothed brute with mottled fur and flashing eyes. I bared my teeth

and roared at him in my head, feeling an utter fool all the while. And as I focused my attentions on the big fucker, one of the little shits took his chance, darting under my chain and leaping at my chest.

'With a curse, I battered him aside. But something heavy struck me from the flank, and I felt fangs sinking into my forearm. I screamed as my flesh ripped, punching and flailing at the dog who had me. Another struck my legs and bore me down, I felt teeth rip into my shoulder, hot blood spilling down my back. I lashed out again, bodies flying, but there were so many of them, I didn't know which way to turn. My arms were up around my face, and I was roaring as they tore me up, wondering what drove them to such madness. They seemed possessed, almost as if their wills were not their own.'

'Ah,' Jean-François said. 'I see.'

'Oui,' Gabriel replied. 'And as swift as they'd come on, the jaws around my limbs unlocked. I rolled to my feet, covered in blood, snatching up my chain again. But the mongrels were backing away, licking bloody jowls, their eyes now fixed on Frère Greyhand. My master waved one hand, and the half-wolves returned to their places in the sevenstar, like trained Nordish sheepdogs at their shepherd's call.

'As the others looked on, Seraph Talon stepped back into the circle. His boots rang on stone as he walked towards me, Sister Aoife beside him. I could barely stand, hot blood running down my shredded arms and legs. The bloodhymn was a dirge in my ears, the sanctus still rushing in my veins along with my rage at what they'd done.

"Well, you're definitely not Chastain. No affinity for beasts in you, sure and true." Talon took hold of one of my tattered hands. "Nor a Voss, either, by the look. Your lily flesh ripped easy as paper, didn't it, boy?"

"Get your fucking hands off me!"

'Talon called to Khalid. "I believe he's upset, good Abbot!"
'"They could have *killed* me!"

'Talon scoffed. "You're a paleblood, boy. You don't die that easily. In a few hours, you'll have not a mark on you." The seraph smoothed his impressive moustache, spun his accursed cane between his fingers. "Our gifts manifest in times of duress. This trial is designed to inflict that. So cease your whining, you buck-toothed little gongfarmer."

"You did this on purpose?" I looked to the eyes above. "Are you mad?"

"Are you, whoreson?" Talon smiled.

'I gritted my teeth. Feeling my fingers curling into a fist.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, my little bumblefuck," Talon warned. "Striking a Seraph of the Silver Order unprovoked would see you whipped like an inquisitor on the feastday of the Angel of Bliss." He brushed his long dark moustache, a small smile creeping onto his face. "But perhaps ... if I were to strike you first ..."

""... What?"

"If I strike you first, you can strike me back. Blood for blood, eh, Abbot?"

'Up in the bleachers, Khalid nodded. "Blood for blood."

"So make me do it, you worthless gobblecock," Talon spat. "Take the anger. Take the fury. Take the indignation that sets that pretty lip all aquiver, and force it onto me. If I hit you first, you can hit me back. So make me angry, boy. Make me *furious*."

"[..."

'Swakk!

"Do it! Make me feel it!"

"I don't ..."

'Swakk!

"Seven Martyrs, fucking stop it!"

"Give it to me!" Talon slammed me back into the wall, frightening strong. His face was inches from mine, and I could see his eyes were run through, red with blood as he hissed with bared fangs. "Embrace what is within you! The curse within your blood!"

'I clenched my jaw, temples pounding. Sister Aoife made no move to help me. The Order's elders looked on, cold and pitiless. But I knew this was still a testing, and I wanted desperately to carve myself a place here, to learn the truth of the gifts my father had passed down to me. So, I tried to do as Talon bid. I embraced my fury, that Nordling fire within my blood, so real I could feel its heat beneath my skin. And I imagined the seraph burning with it instead, flames flooding out from me and setting him ablaze. Bloody fists clenched, chest heaving as I gathered up all my anger and all my pain and pushed it onto him.

'Talon's eyes widened. He drew one short and shallow breath.

"No," he finally sighed. "Nothing at all."

'Talon released my tunic. Piss-hole eyes twinkling, the Seraph of the Hunt turned away, stroking his moustache as he glanced to the luminaries above. Seraph Argyle was scowling, his iron hand cupped to Khalid's ear as he whispered. Greyhand's face was a mask. Archivist Adamo seemed to have fallen asleep on Charlotte's shoulder. I hovered, uncertain, the pain of my wounds a dim fire under the sanctus rush. Blood dripped down my fingers, puddled inside my boots. Sister Aoife looked at me with concern, but still, she took no steps to help me. The seraph scuffed his heels as he turned a slow circle, lips pursed.

"We haven't seen one of you in a while. How very depressing."

"... What do you mean?"

"I mean you're not particularly strong." Talon motioned to the crushed wretched. "Strong as an ordinary paleblood, of course, but certainly not one descended from the Blood Dyvok. You have no affinity for beasts, no resilience to wounds of the flesh, so that strikes Chastain and Voss off the list. But it seems you've as much talent for emotional manipulation as a cuntful of cold water, so you can't be llon, either." "So ... what am I?"

'Talon looked me over with sour expression. "You're a frailblood."

'I looked to my master. "A what?"

"The child of a vampire too young and weak to have passed on his legacy," Talon replied. "You have no bloodline. No bloodgifts, other than those we all of us share."

'The pain of my wounds was forgotten. I could feel my belly sinking without quite knowing why. "A-are you certain? Perhaps you've not tested me ri—"

"I have been Seraph of the Hunt for a decade, boy. I have conducted this Trial enough to know a frailblood when I see one." Talon's lip curled. "And I see one in you."

'Sweeping his moustache, the seraph stalked away across the sevenstar. Sister Aoife at last reached out towards me, patted my bloody shoulder as she murmured, "You shall still do God's work here, Initiate. Keep the Mothermaid's love in your heart and the Almighty's teachings in your head, and all shall be well."

'I looked to Greyhand and Abbot Khalid, my gut sinking. And as I stood there in the rush of the bloodhymn, my torn limbs shaking, sweat-damp hair hanging over my eyes, I heard Talon's parting blow like a punch to my belly.

"Disappointing."

+ X +

HOW STORIES WORK

'DISAPPOINTING.

'That was the word hanging over my head later that night. If Master Greyhand was discouraged at the news about his new apprentice, he hid it well – remaining stoic as ever as he walked me back to Barracks. But still, Forgemaster Argyle's dark scowl, Prioress Charlotte's pursed lips, Seraph Talon's words – none of them would leave me. And as I sat on my bed cleaning the blood out of my new boots, I could still hear his voice ringing in my ears.

'Disappointing.

"Should've knocked his fucking block off anyway," I growled.

"Well, look what the maggots left behind," came a voice.

'I glanced up and found Aaron de Coste staring at me from the Barracks door. He stood with another initiate – a tall, dark-haired lad named de Séverin, who carried himself in the same silver-spoon-up-his-arse manner as de Coste. From the shit-eating grin on Aaron's face, word of my Trial had already circulated among the other initiates.

"I knew you were lowborn, Kitten," he sneered. "But not so low as that."

"Eat shit, de Coste. I've not the patience for this now, I warn you."

"I suppose it makes sense," the lordling mused to de Séverin. "Vampire peasants bedding human peasants. All part of the gutter's rich tapestry?"

'His crony chuckled as the fire inside me flared.

"My mother was no peasant. She was of the house of de León."

"Oh, madame of the manor, I'm sure. That squalid little hole we dragged you out of was her summer home, then?" Aaron frowned, as if in thought. "Summer hovel, perhaps?"

'De Coste was older than I. Three years, give or take, and he had a few inches on me back then. I wasn't certain I could take him, but I swore to God if he made one more crack about my mama, I'd fucking try.

"So I've not got a bloodline," I snapped. "I'm still paleblood. I can still fight."

'De Coste chuckled. "I'm certain the Forever King is trembling in his boots."

"He fucking should be," I spat, returning to cleaning mine.

'The lordling wandered to his cot, picked up a copy of the Testaments by his bedside. But he still stared at me. "That's how you see yourself, is it? Plucky little Gabriel de León, charging up to Fabién Voss's throne of corpses with his new silver sword and saving the realm single-handed?" Aaron chuckled. "You really have no bloody idea what's happening here, do you?"

"I know all I need to. I know I was fated to be here. And I know this Order is the one true hope against the Forever King."

"We're the true hope against nothing, Kitten."

'I scowled. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that my brother Jean-Luc is a chevalier in the imperial army at Augustin. The Golden Host. The forces being mustered in the capital will annihilate the Forever King before his shambling mongrels ever reach the Nordlund. Oh, our cause might be righteous. But the sad truth is, nobody at court believes the silversaints will make a

difference." Aaron waved to the Barracks about us with lip curled. "The only reason this monastery is being financed at all is because Empress Isabella is enamoured of mysticism, and Emperor Alexandre enjoys getting his cock sucked by his new bride."

"That's horseshit, de Coste," I said.

"And what would you know about it, frailblood?" de Séverin sighed.

"I know God meant for me to be here. My sister *died* at the hands of these monsters. And if I can do something to stop them, I will."

"Good for you," Aaron said. "But in the end, for all your faith and fury, you'll be nothing but piss in the wind. I mean, look at you. Ma famille can trace our lineage back to Maximille the Martyr. My mother is baronne of the richest province in Nordlund and—"

"And yet she wasn't above bedding a vampire."

'De Coste fell silent as Theo Petit stepped through the doorway. The big lad was dressed in his leathers, but his tunic was unlaced, and I could see a hint of metallic ink beneath. A beautiful angel was tattooed from knuckles to elbow on his left forearm, and what looked to be a snarling bear was scribed on his chest. He had a plate of chicken legs in hand, and he flopped into bed, chewing noisily.

"That's the funny thing about highborn women," Theo mused. "They're the same height as any other when they're down on all fours."

"Blood from the gutter and a mouth from the sewer," de Séverin sneered. "If it isn't Theo Petit. The answer to the question no one was asking."

"We're all the Dead's bastards here, Aaron. We're all shit on the bottom of the Emperor's boots. We're *all* damned." Theo stuffed a chicken leg into his face and spoke to de Coste with his mouth full. "So give the tortured nobleson sermon a rest, eh?" 'Aaron only scowled. "Just because you lost your master to the sangirè doesn't give you leave to forget your manners, Petit. I am the senior initiate of this company."

'Theo stopped chewing a moment, eyes flashing.

"You make mention of my master again, we might have to test that theory, Aaron."

'De Coste looked the big lad up and down, but didn't seem keen to press. Instead, he lay back on his pillow, muttering beneath his breath. "Softcock ..."

'Theo scoffed, put his boots up on the bed. "Your sister sings a different tune."

'I chuckled softly, marking the ledger in my head.

"What the hell are you laughing at, Kitten?" Aaron snarled.

'I shot a poisoned glance at de Coste, but the matter seemed settled for now. I met Theo's eyes, nodding silent thanks, but the big boy simply shrugged in return – I guessed the quarrel was less about Theo defending me, and more about his dislike of de Coste. And so, silent and bruised and still friendless, I returned to cleaning my boots, trying not to think too much about my failure in the Gauntlet. I had no line and no gifts to call my own, save that which we all shared. I'd learned nothing of my father. But despite all Aaron said, despite the Trial, I still felt I was fated to be there. God *did* want me in San Michon. Frailblood or no.'

Gabriel paused a moment, lacing his fingers as he stared down at his hands.

'But you want to know the awful thing, coldblood?'

'Tell me the awful thing, Silversaint,' Jean-François replied.

'I lay in bed later that night, my wounds nothing but a memory, and I thought on what de Coste had told me about his brother in the army. About the restoration of this monastery being only an empress's whim. And my first thought wasn't for the people who might be spared if the Forever King was crushed by the Golden Host. It wasn't of the soldiers who might die defeating him, or the horror that this conflict had come at all. My first thought was to pray that the war wouldn't be over by the time I got there.'

Gabriel sighed, and met the historian's eyes.

'Can you believe that? I was actually afraid I was going to miss out.'

'Is such not the desire of all young men with swords? Win glory, or glorious death?'

'Glory,' Gabriel scoffed. 'Tell me something, vampire. If death is so glorious, how is it meted so cheaply and so often by the most worthless of men?'

The Last Silversaint shook his head.

'I'd no idea what was coming. No clue what they were going to make of me. But I *did* know this was my life now. And so, I vowed again to make the best of it. Whatever Aaron said, I felt in my bones that San Michon would be the salvation of the empire. I truly believed that I'd been chosen, that all this – my sister's murder, what I'd done to Ilsa, the cursed and bastard blood in my veins – all of it was part of God's plan. And if I trusted in him, if I said my prayers and praised his name and followed his word, all would be well.'

Gabriel scoffed, staring down at the sevenstar on his palm.

'What a fucking fool I was.'

'Take heart, de León.' The coldblood's voice was soft as the scratching of his pen. 'You were not alone in your hopes. But none can best a foe that cannot die.'

'The snows at Augustin weren't soaked red with mortal blood alone. You died in droves that night, coldblood.'

A slender shrug. 'Our dead *stay* dead, Silversaint. Yours rise against you.'

'And you believe that a *good* thing? Tell me, do you never wonder where all this ends? After the monsters you've birthed drain these lands dry of every man, woman, and child, *all* of you will starve. Wretched and highblood alike.'

'Hence the need for a firm rule.' Pale fingers brushed the embroidered wolves on the vampire's frockcoat. 'An Empress with the foresight to build, rather than destroy. Fabién Voss was wise to harness the foulbloods as a weapon. But their time is at an end.'

'The wretched outnumber you fifty to one. There are four major kith bloodlines, and all have corpse armies in thrall. You think those vipers are going to give up their legions without a struggle?'

'They may struggle all they wish. They shall fail.'

Gabriel looked to the monster then, cold calculation in his eyes. The bloodhymn still thrummed in his veins, sharpening his mind as well as his senses. The coldblood's face was stone, his eyes, liquid darkness. But even the barest rock can tell a story to those with the teaching to see it. Despite it all – the carnage, the betrayal, the failure – Gabriel de León was a hunter who knew his quarry. And in a blinking, he saw the answer, as clear and crisp as if the monster had written the words in that damnable book.

'That's why you seek the Grail,' he breathed. 'You think the cup can bring you victory against the other bloodlines.'

'Children's stories hold no interest for my Empress, Silversaint. But *your* story does.' The monster tapped the book in his lap. 'So return to it, if you'd be so kind. You were a fifteen-year-old boy. The halfbreed bastard of a vampire father, dragged from provincial squalor to the impregnable walls of San Michon. You grew to be a paragon of the Order, just as you vowed. They sang songs about you, de León. The Black Lion. Wielder of the Ashdrinker. Slayer of the Forever King. How does one rise from beginnings so low to become legend?' The monster's lip curled. 'And then, fall so very far?'

Gabriel looked to the lantern flame, his mouth pressed thin. The bloodsmoke roiled inside him, sharpening not only his mind, but his memory. He ran one thumb across his tattooed fingers, the word PATIENCE etched below his knuckles.

The years at his back seemed mere moments, and those moments were clear as crystal. He could smell silverbell on the air, see candleflame reflected in his mind's eye. He could feel smooth hips swaying beneath his hands. Eyes dark with want, lips red as cherries open against his, fingernails clawing his naked back. He heard a whisper then, hot and desperate, and he echoed it without thinking, the words slipping over his lips in a sigh.

'We cannot do this.'

Jean-François's head tilted. 'No?'

Gabriel blinked, found himself back in that cold tower with that dead thing. He could taste ashes. Hear the screams of monsters that had denied death for centuries, delivered at last by his hand. And he met the coldblood's gaze, his voice tinged with shadow and flame.

'No,' he said.

'De León—'

'No. I've no more wish to speak of San Michon just now, if it please you.'

'It does *not* please me.' A thin frown marred Jean-François's flawless brow. 'I wish to hear of your years in the paleblood monastery. Your apprenticeship. Your ascendance.'

'And you'll hear about all of it in time,' Gabriel growled. 'We have all night, you and I. And all the nights we'll need thereafter, I'd wager. But if you seek knowledge of the Grail, then we should return to the day I found it.'

'That is *not* the way stories work, Silversaint.'

'This is *my* story, coldblood. And if I have the right of it, these will be the last words I'll ever speak upon this earth. So if this is to be my last confession, and you my priest, trust that I know how best to impart the tally of my own fucking sins. By the time the telling is done, we'll have returned to Lorson. The Charbourg. The red snows of

Augustin. And oui, even San Michon. But for now, I'll speak of the Grail. How it came to me. How I lost it. And all between. Believe me when I say your Empress will have her answers by the end.'

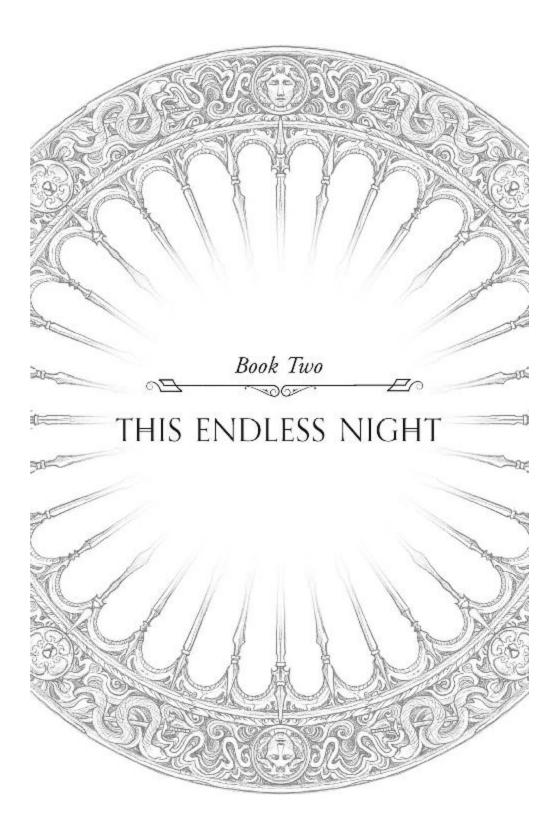
Jean-François of the Blood Chastain was displeased, a hint of fangs in his silent snarl. But in the end, the monster ran his tapered fingertips over the feathers at his throat and acquiesced with a tilt of his chin.

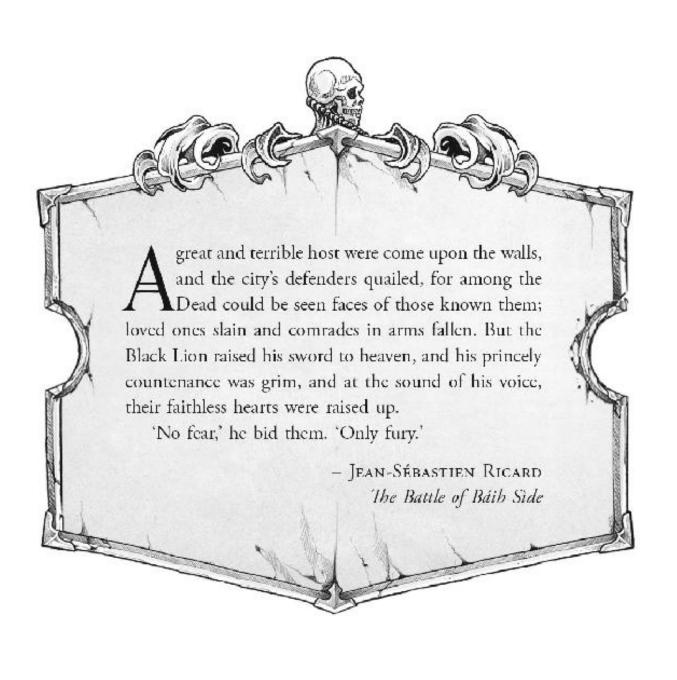
'Very well, de León. Have it your way.'

'I always did, coldblood. That was half the fucking problem.'

The Last Silversaint leaned back in his chair, steepled his fingers at his chin.

'So,' he sighed. 'It all began with a rabbit hole.'





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INJUSTICE

'NIGHT WAS A good two hours off when it happened,'
Gabriel said. 'I was riding north through ruined farmlands,
soaked with grey drizzle. The first bitter bite of winter was in
the wind, and the land about me had a haunted air. Dead
trees were hung with ropes of pale fungus, the road naught
but miles of empty black slurry. The villages I passed
through were ghost town – buildings empty and cemeteries
full. I hadn't seen a living person in days. It'd been more
than a decade since I travelled through the realm of
Emperor Alexandre, Third of His Name. And all seemed
worse than when I'd abandoned it.'

'How long ago was this, exactly?' Jean-François asked.

'Three years back. I was thirty-two years old.'

'Where had you been?'

'South.' Gabriel shrugged. 'Down in Sūdhaem.'

'And why did you leave your beloved Nordlund?'

'Patience, coldblood.'

The vampire pursed his lips, but made no reply.

'I wore my old greatcoat to keep off the rain. Faded bloodstains. Black leather. Tricorn pulled low, collar laced high, like my old master taught me. It'd been years since I'd put that kit on, but it still fitted like a glove. My sword hung in a beaten scabbard at my waist, my head bowed against the weather as we rode through the miserable so-called day.

'Justice hated the rain. Always had. But he rode hard as he always did, on into the cold and empty quiet. A beauty he was: black and brave and solid as a castle wall. For a gelding, that horse had more balls than most stallions I'd ever met.'

Jean-François glanced upwards. 'You still had the same horse?'

Gabriel nodded. 'He was a little creakier than he used to be. Just as I was. But it was as Abbot Khalid had told me – Justice was my truest friend. He'd saved my life more times than I could count by then. We'd ridden all the way through hell together, and he'd brought me all the way home. I loved him like a brother.'

'And you kept the name that foul-mouthed sisternovice gave him? Astrid Rennier?'

'Oui.'

'Why? Was the girl of some significance to you?'

Gabriel turned his eyes to the lantern, the flame dancing in his pupils.

'Patience, coldblood.'

Quiet hung in the cell, the only sound the whisper of nib on parchment. It was a long while before the silversaint continued.

'I'd been riding months without much rest. I'd planned to be over the Volta before wintersdeep struck, but the roads were harder going than I expected, and the map I carried well out of date. The locals had ripped down the tollway at Hafti and destroyed the bridge over the Keff, for starters. There were no ferrymen plying trade that I could find, no living soul for fucking miles. So, I'd been forced to double back and head upstream.'

'Why?' Jean-François asked.

Gabriel blinked. 'Why did I double back?'

'Why did the locals destroy the bridge over the river Keff?'

'As I said, this was just three years ago. It'd been twentyfour years since daysdeath. The lords of the Blood had turned the realm into a slaughterhouse by then. Nordlund was a wasteland. Save for a few coastal duns, the Ossway had fallen. The Forever King's armies were drawing ever closer to Augustin, and masterless wretched crawled northern Sūdhaem like lice on a dockside jezebel. The locals had smashed the bridge to cut off their advance.'

The vampire tapped his quill, brow creased. 'I told you, de León. Speak as if to a child. For what reason did the locals tear down the bridge?'

The silversaint stared hard, his jaw clenched. Then he spoke, not only as if to a child, but as if to one who'd been dropped repeatedly and enthusiastically on the head by its mother.

'Vampires can't cross running water. Except at bridges, or buried in cold earth. The most powerful among them might manage it with a supreme act of will. But to the newborn Dead, a fast-flowing river may as well be a wall of flame.'

'Merci. Please, continue.'

'You sure? No other fuckmumblery to which you already know the answer?'

The vampire smiled. 'Patience, Chevalier.'

Gabriel breathed deep and marched on. 'So. I hadn't smoked since morning, and my thirst was quietly creeping up on me. I knew I'd not make it much farther that day. But consulting my old map, I saw that the town of Dhahaeth lay not an hour's ride north. Presuming the place was still standing, the promise of a fire and something hot in my belly was enough to keep the shakes at bay. So, hoping to make up lost time, I cut off road, through a rolling carpet of whitecaps and into a forest of living fungus and long-dead trees.

'I was barely ten minutes into the woods before the first wretched found me.

'A woman. Perhaps thirty when she was murdered. She was silent as ghosts, but Justice caught wind of her, ears pressed against his skull. A second later I saw her, moving

like a hunter, right at me. Her hair was a wild blonde tangle, and she came at me wolf-quick, thin and naked, skin hanging in damp folds around a gaping wound at her neck.

'She was running *quick*. Far quicker than a mortal man. I'd no fear of a single wretched, but these bastards are like minstrels – where there's one, there's always others, and the more that find you, the more aggravating they get. So I gave Justice a nudge and we were running, off through the shipwrecked trees.

'I loosened my sword in its sheath as I saw another wretched off to my right. A little Sūdhaemi boy, dashing through the tall spires of tubers and toadstools. I spied another ahead, then. And another. All quiet as corpses. All running swift. None of them moved quick as Justice, mind you. But I could tell they were a pack. Each at least a decade old.'

Jean-François raised one eyebrow, tapped his quill. 'As if to a child, de León.'

Gabriel sighed.

'Newborn wretched are dangerous, don't mistake me. But on a scale of one to ten, with one being your average Ossway pub brawl, and ten being the most fearsome nightmare hell's belly can spit, they rate about a four. Not even the eldest among them is a match for a highblood. But older wretched can't be underestimated. Your kind grow more powerful the longer your blood has to thicken. These ones were dangerous, and they were many. But Justice charged on through the deadwood, weaving through the mushroom thickets at full gallop. His hooves were thunder and his heart was dauntless, and we soon left those bloodless bastards in our wake.

'We burst from the woods a while later, damp with sweat, out into the rain. A chill grey valley lay below us, thick with fog. A little way northeast, I could see a dark ribbon of road in the gloom. A few miles beyond lay the river ford, and safety.

'I patted Justice as he galloped down into the valley, murmured into his ear.

"My brother. My best boy."

'And then his hoof found the rabbit hole. His foreleg sank into the earth, the joint snapped with an awful *craaack*, his screams filling my ears as we fell. I smashed into the ground, felt something break, gasping with agony as I rolled to rest against a rotten stump. My sword had slipped from its scabbard and was lying in the muck. My skull was ringing, fire raging down my arm. I knew in a heartbeat I'd snapped it - that familiar broken-glass grind under my skin. Not so bad it wouldn't be healed by morning. But the same couldn't be said for poor Justice.'

Gabriel sighed, long and deep.

'I rose up from my boy's wreck, hands and chin blacked with mud. Looking at the shank of bone torn through his fetlock as he tried to rise, brave to the last.

"Oh no," I breathed. "No, no."

'Justice screamed again, wild with agony. I turned my face to the heavens above, a familiar rage swelling in my chest. I looked down at my friend, my arm bleeding, throat tightening, heart breaking. He'd been with me since that first day in San Michon. Through blood and war, fire and fury. Seventeen years. He was all I had left. And now ... this?

"God fucking hates me," I whispered.

'And why think ye that might be, m-might be?

'The voice came as it always did. Silver-soft ripples inside my head. I ignored it best I could, watching as my brother tried to stand on his broken leg. His fetlock bent wrong, and down he went again, big brown eyes rolling in his skull. His agony was my agony.

'Know ye what must be d-done, Gabriel, came the silvered voice again.

'I looked to the longblade at my feet, naked and spattered with mud. The double-handed haft was bound in black leather, its silvered hilt crafted like a beautiful woman, her

arms spread to form the crossguard. The blade was curved and elegant, shaped in an archaic Talhostic style, but still possessed of a deadly grace. Forged from the dark belly of a fallen star in an age whose name was legend. But it was broken. Lifetimes ago, it seemed now.

'Six inches snapped from the tip.

"Shut up," I told it.

'They shall smmmell him. Tear him to p-pieces, aye, sticky red, red sticky, as he screams and screams and screeeeams. This be sugarsweet mercy.

"Why do you always tell me what I already know?"

'Why do ye always n-n-need me to?

'I looked my horse in his eyes, the pain of my broken arm forgotten. Of all those I'd called friend over the years, Justice was the only one who remained. And through his pain and fear, in the darkest of all his hours, he looked to me. His Gabriel. The one who'd met him as a boy in the stables at San Michon, who'd ridden him from that place into exile when not a single one of his so-called brothers had come to say farewell. He trusted me. Despite his hurt, he knew I'd somehow make it all right.

'And I put my sword right through his heart.

'It wasn't the swiftest end I could've gifted him. I had a shot loaded in my wheellock. But nightfall was only two hours away, and the town of Dhahaeth was at least four on foot. The wretched were apparently thick as flies on shite around these parts now, and a man unhorsed is just a meal uneaten.

'Always better to be a bastard than a fool.

'But still, I sat with Justice as he died. His head sinking heavy into my lap as he bled his last out into the mud. The sky was dark with shadow, my tears hot in the freezing rain. My broken longblade was stabbed into the muck, bright with my friend's blood. I stared up to the heavens above, the God I knew was watching.

"Fuck you," I told him.

- 'G-gabriel, the blade whispered in my head.
- "And fuck you too," I hissed.
- 'Gabriel, she repeated, more urgent.
- "" What?" I glared at the sword, my voice choked. "Can you not give me one breath to mourn him, you unholy bitch?"
 - 'The blade spoke again, chilling my blood.
 - 'Gabriel, th-they are coming.'

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THE THREE WAYS

'THE BOY RAN first. The little one. No more than six when he Became. He moved swift as a deer, down the valley right towards me. The others followed: the blonde woman, a haggard man, another man shorter and broader. At least two dozen in the pack now.

'With a gasp, I was on my feet, broken arm swinging useless at my side. The pain returned as I tore my saddlebags loose with my good hand, sheathing my broken blade. I bid my poor brother farewell, and then I was running, down the valley towards that ribbon of distant road. The ford was at least three miles past it. There was little chance I could outpace a pack of wretched for that long. But I knew they'd stop for Justice – his blood was pooled in the mud, ripe in the air. Mongrels like these wouldn't be able to resist.

'I could feel the shakes, the thirst making my heart stutter, my belly ache. Stumbling, almost slipping in the mud, I snatched a glass phial from my bandolier. Just a pinch of powder remained in the bottom, the colour of rose petals and chocolat, the promise of it making my hand shake all the worse. But reaching into my greatcoat, my heart sank into my boots as I realized my flintbox was gone.

"Fuck my face ..." I whispered.

'I groped around my belt, my coat, but I already knew the tale; I must have lost it when Justice threw me. And now I had no way to even the odds stacked against me.

'And so I ran on, slinging my broken arm up inside my bandolier and wincing in agony. It would heal with time, but the wretched would give me none. My only hope now was the river, and that was slim hope at best. If they caught me, I'd be dead as Justice.'

Jean-François looked up from his tome. 'You feared them that much?'

'The graveyards of the world are full of fools who thought of fear as anything but a friend.'

'Perhaps your legend has swelled in the telling, de León.'

'Legends always do. And ever in the wrong direction.'

The vampire brushed his golden curls aside, dark eyes roaming Gabriel's broad shoulders. 'It is said you were the most fearsome swordsman who ever lived.'

'I wouldn't go that far.' The silversaint shrugged. 'But let's put it this way; you'd not want to flip me the Fathers if I had something sharp nearby.'

The vampire blinked. 'Flip you the Fathers?'

Gabriel raised his right hand, fingers extended, then cupped his forearm with his left. 'Old Nordish insult. It implies your mama had so many men in her bed that your paternity is impossible to determine. And insulting my mama is a good way to get your face stabbed.'

'Then why flee? A paragon of the Silver Order? Wielder of the Ashdrinker himself? Running like a whipped pup from a pack of foulbloods?'

'Law the Third, vampire.'

Jean-François tilted his head. 'The Dead run quick.'

Gabriel nodded. 'There were two dozen of the bastards. My swordarm was broken in at least two places. And like I said, I had no way to smoke.'

Jean-François glanced to the bone pipe on the table before them.

'So reliant upon sanctus, were you?'

'I wasn't reliant on sanctus, I was addicted to it. And oui, I had other tricks among my gear, but my arm was twice-fucked, and it was too much to risk fighting that many. I'd little hope of outpacing them either, truth told, but I've always been too stubborn to just lie down and die. And so, I tried to boot it. Rain in my eyes. Heart in my throat. Thinking of all I'd meant to do returning here and wondering if I'd ever get to do any of it. I glanced back and saw the wretched were finishing with Justice's body. They rose from the mud and came on, lips red, teeth bright.

'I reached the road, staggering in the mud as thunder rolled above. I was almost done by then. The wretched close to my heels. Drawing my sword in desperation.

'If thou art b-brutally murdered here, she whispered, and I end my days hanging on the hip of a m-mindless shamble-bag of m-maggots, I shall be terribly upset with ye.

"The hell do you want from me?" I hissed.

'Run, Little Lion, she replied. RUN.

'I did as the blade told me. One last burst of speed. And as lightning arced across the skies, I squinted through the drizzle and saw it before me. A miracle. A carriage, drawn by a miserable grey draught horse, sitting in the middle of the road.'

'Divine intervention?' Jean-François murmured.

'Or the devil loves his own. The carriage was surrounded by a dozen soldiers. Feed was scarce those nights, and keeping a horse had never been a poor man's game. But each of these men also had a mount – good stout sosyas, standing downcast in the rain while their riders argued, shin-deep in the muck. I saw their problem in a heartbeat – the weather had turned the road into a quagmire, and their carriage was sunk to its axles.

'The soldiers were well geared and well fed. Clad in crimson tabards and iron plate caked with filth, they tried to drag the carriage free. And standing at their head, whipping that poor dray as if the mud were the horse's fault, were two tall, pale women. They were near-identical – twins maybe. Their hair was long, black, cut in pointed fringes, and they wore tricorns with short, triangular veils over their eyes. They were clad in leather, and their tabards were also blood-red, marked with the flower and flail of Naél, the Angel of Bliss. I realized these were no ordinary soldiers, then.

'This was an inquisitor cohort.

'The men heard me coming, but didn't seem too ruffled. And then they spied the pack of corpses on my tail, and all of them looked fit to shit. "Martyrs save us," breathed one, and "Fuck me," gasped another, and the inquisitors' jaws near dropped off their heads.

'Gabriel, 'ware!

'The whisper rang in my mind, silver behind my eyes. I turned with a cry as the first wretched caught me. It was close enough that I could smell its carrion breath, see the shape of the little boy it'd been. Rot had set in hard before it turned, but it moved quick as flies, dead doll's eyes glinting like broken glass.

'My sword cut the air, an offhand swing that was far from poetic. The blade met the monster's thigh and just kept going, sending the thing's leg sailing free in a gout of rotten blood. It fell without a sound, but the others came on, too swift to fight and far too many to best. The sosyas screamed in terror at the sight of the Dead, bolting in all directions, hooves thundering. The soldiers shouted after them in rage, in fear.'

Gabriel steepled his fingers at his chin. Pausing for thought.

'Now, there's three ways a person can react when they look their death in the eye, coldblood. Folk talk about fight or flight, but in truth, it's fight, flight, or *freeze*. Those soldiers saw the two dozen corpses charging them down, and each chose a different path. Some raised their blades.

Some messed their britches. And those inquisitor twins glanced to each other, drew long, wicked knives from their belts, and sliced through the harnesses binding the horse to their carriage.

"Run!" one cried, scrambling onto the terrified beast's back.

'The other leapt up behind her, gave the dray a savage kick. "Fly, you whore!"

'Gabriel, ye mu—

'I sheathed my sword, silencing her voice in my head. And I reached to my belt, left hand shaking as I drew my wheellock. The pistol was silvered, a sevenstar embossed in the mahogany grip. The shot I could've given Justice was still loaded in the barrel. And glad I'd saved it, I gave it to the inquisitors instead.

'The shot rang out, the silver slug ripped through one woman's back in a spray of blood. She toppled from the dray with a cry, the horse rearing up and throwing her sister into the muck. Breathless, I bolted past the baffled soldiers and leapt onto the dray's back.

"Wait!" the first woman cried.

"B-bastard!" the other coughed, bloodied in the mud.

'But I'd no time for any of them. Clutching the dray's mane with my one good hand, I raised my heels for a kick. But she needed no encouragement, screaming in terror as the wretched came on. The horse dug her hooves into the mire and bolted, and in a spray of black mud, we rode away towards the river without a backwards glance.'

Gabriel fell silent.

A quiet rang in that cold cell, long as years.

'You left them all there,' Jean-François finally said.

'Oui.'

'You left them all to die.'

'Oui.'

Jean-François raised an eyebrow. 'The legends never called you coward, de León.'

Gabriel leaned into the light. 'Look into my eyes, coldblood. Do I strike you as the kind of man who's afraid to die?'

'You strike me as the kind who would welcome it,' the vampire admitted. 'But the silversaints were meant to be exemplars of the One Faith. Slayers of monsters most foul and warriors of God most high. And you were the best of them. You weep like a child over a dead horse, but shoot an innocent woman in the back and leave God-fearing men to be slaughtered by foulbloods.' The historian frowned. 'What kind of hero are you?'

Gabriel laughed, shaking his head. 'Who the *fuck* told you I was a hero?'

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SMALL BLESSINGS

'WE FORDED THE Keff a while later. The river rose up to my horse's shoulders, but she was a strong one, and I suspect, glad to be rid of the inquisitors and their whips. I didn't know her name, and I supposed I'd not be keeping her long. So I just called her "Jez" as we rode on through the dark.'

Jean-François blinked. 'Jez?'

'Short for "Jezebel". Since I'd only know her for a night and all.'

'Ah. Prostitute humour.'

'Don't fall down laughing, coldblood.'

'I shall do my very best, Silversaint.'

'My arm was slowly healing,' Gabriel continued. 'But I knew I'd need a dose of sanctus to really see it right. And without my flintbox, I'd no sensible way to light a pipe, let alone a lantern, so we ran blind to Dhahaeth, hoping against hope that the town was still standing. Whatever light the sun gave was long gone by the time I saw them in the distance, but my heart still surged at the sight: fires, burning like beacons in a black sea.

'Jez was just as uneasy as I in the dark, and she rode harder towards the light. From what little I'd heard of Dhahaeth, it was a one-chapel milltown on the banks of the Keff. But the place I drew up outside was like to a small fortress. 'They couldn't afford much stonework, but a heavy wooden palisade had been erected on the outskirts, twelve feet high, running all the way down to the riverbank. A deep trench skirted the palisade, filled with wooden spikes, and bonfires blazed atop it despite the rain. I could see corpses blackened by fire in the ditch as we halted outside the gate, and figures on a highwalk behind the palisade's spikes.

"Hold," a voice with a thick Sūdhaemi accent cried. "Who goes?"

"A thirsty man with no time for bullshit," I called back.

"There's a dozen crossbows pointed at your chest right now, fuckarse. I'd be speaking more polite if I were you."

"Fuckarse, that's a clever one," I nodded. "I'll remember it next time I'm climbing aboard your wife."

'I heard a soft guffaw from one of the other figures, and the voice spoke again. "Good luck on the road, stranger. You'll 'ave need of it."

'I sighed softly, pulled off my glove with my teeth, and held my left hand aloft. The sevenstar inked in my palm glinted dully in the firelight. And I heard a whisper then, running through the figures like red fever.

"Silversaint."

""Silversaint!"

"Open the bloody gate!" someone cried.

'I heard the heavy clunk of wood, and the palisade doors yawned wide. I gave Jez a nudge, my eyes narrowed against the torchlight. A cadre of guards waited in a muddy bailey beyond, nervous as spring lambs. I could tell at a glance they were pressganged militia – most had seen too few winters, the others, far too many. They wore old, boiled leather and carried crossbows, burning torches, ashwood spears – all pointed in my vicinity.

'I climbed off Jezebel, gave her a grateful pat. Then I turned to the stone font to the right of the gate. It was crafted in the likeness of Sanael, Angel of Blood, his outstretched hands holding a bowl of clear water. The

militiamen tensed, weapons ready. And looking them in the eye, I dipped my fingers inside and wiggled.'

Jean-François blinked in silent question.

'Holy water,' Gabriel explained.

'Quaint,' the vampire replied. 'But tell me, why insult the gatekeeper? When you could simply have proffered your palm and entered without fuss?'

'I'd just murdered my best friend. Almost lost my life to a pack of mongrel corpses. My arm was throbbing like a virgin's pecker on his first trip into the woods, I was tired and hungry and fiending for a smoke, and I'm something of a bastard on the best of days. And that day was hardly my best.'

Jean-François's gaze roamed Gabriel, toe to crown. 'Nor this one, I fear?'

Gabriel tapped an empty leather pouch at his belt. 'Behold the purse in which I keep my fucks for what you think of me.'

The vampire tilted his head and waited.

'The militiamen stepped aside,' Gabriel continued. 'Most had never seen a silversaint, I'd guess, but the wars had been raging for years by then, and all had heard tales of the Ordo Argent. I could see wonder in the youngers, quiet respect among the older men. I knew what they saw when they looked at me. A bastard halfbreed. A Godsent lunatic. The silver flame burning between what was left of civilization, and the dark set to swallow it whole.

"I don't 'ave a wife," one said to me.

'I blinked at him. A buck-toothed young Sūdhaemi scrap he was: dark skin, tight cropped hair, barely old enough for fuzz on his taddysack.

"You said you'd be climbing onto my wife later," he said, defiant. "I don't 'ave one."

"Count yourself blessed, boy. Now, which way to the fucking pub?"

ON THE PERILS OF MATRIMONY

'THE PLACARD ABOVE the taverne's door read THE PERFECT HUSBAND. The faded lettering was accompanied by a picture of a freshly dug grave. I hadn't yet set foot in the place, and I was already fond of it.

'The town had seen better nights, but twenty-four years after daysdeath, there were few places in the empire that wasn't true of. Truth told, it was lucky to have survived at all. Dhahaeth's streets were freezing mud, her buildings leaning on each other like drunkards at last call. Ancient cloves of garlic or braids of virgins' hair were nailed to every door, churlsilver or salt scattered at every window – for all the good it would do. The whole place stank of shite and mushrooms, the streets crawled with rats, and the folk I passed took one look at me and hurried on through the freezing rain, making the sign of the wheel.

'The town got enough traffic to still have a stable, though. The groom caught the ha-royale I flipped him, pocketing the coin as I dismounted. "Give her your best fare and a good rubdown," I told him, patting Jez's neck. "This dame's well and truly earned it."

'The lad stared at the sevenstar on my palm, awed. "Yer a silversaint. Do you—"

"Just mind the fucking horse, boy."

'My hands were shaking as I handed over the reins, and the ache in my broken arm and empty belly made it easy to ignore his wounded look. Without another word, I stomped across the mud, under a wreath of withered silverbell, and pushed my way through the doors of the Perfect Husband.

'Despite the grim signage, the pub was comfortable as an old rocking chair. The walls were plastered with playbills from one of the bigger cities up in Elidaen – Isabeau, or maybe even Augustin. Bordello shows mostly, and burlesque. The framed watercolours about the commonroom were of scantily clad femmes in lace and corsetry, and a full-length portrait above the bar was of a beautiful green-eyed lass with deep-brown skin, wearing naught but a feather boa. The commonroom was softly lit, jammed full of patrons, and I could see why. Every taverne I've ever visited has the impression of its owner soaked into the walls. And this one's was as warm and fond as an old lover's arms.

'Conversation stilled as I entered. All eyes turned to me as I unbuckled my swordbelt, sloughed off my greatcoat with a wince. I was soaked underneath, deathly cold, leathers and tunic clinging to my skin. I'd have boxed my own grandmama in the baps for a hot bath, but I needed food first. And a smoke, Almighty God, a fucking smoke.

'I hung up my coat and tricorn, stomped across the commonroom. The table closest to the fire was occupied by three youngbloods in militia kit. In front of them sat a few empty plates, and more important, a candle burning in a dusty wine bottle.

"... Do you wish to join us, adii?" one asked.

"No. And I'm not your friend."

'Uncomfortable silence hung in the room. I simply stood and stared. And finally getting the hint, the lads excused themselves and vacated the table.'

Jean-François chuckled, pen scratching. 'You were quite the bastard, de León.'

'Now you're catching on, coldblood.'

Gabriel scratched at his stubble, dragged a hand through his hair as he continued.

'Tugging off my boots, I put them near the fire. I was reaching for my pipe when a taverne lass materialized beside me.

"Your pleasure, adii?" she asked in a gentle Sūdhaemi accent.

'Glancing up, I saw dark tresses. Green eyes. I blinked at the portrait over the bar.

"My mama," she explained, with the wounded air of someone who had to do it often. She nodded to a woman behind the counter, generously proportioned and twenty years older, but definitely the painting's subject. I idly wondered if she'd kept the boa.

"Food," I told the girl, fumbling with my pipe. "And a room for the night."

"As you like it. Drink?"

"Whiskey?" I asked, hopefully.

'She scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Does this look a laerd's keep to you?"

'Now, a tiny part of me had to admire this maid giving me cheek while those militia boys had folded like a bad hand of cards. But most of me was just getting shittier by the breath. "It looks far from a laerd's keep indeed. And you, far from a lady. So keep the lip on your face, mademoiselle, and just tell me what you have."

'Her voice grew colder then. "We have what everyone has, adii."

"Fucking vodka."

"'Aye."

'I scowled. "A bottle, then. The decent stuff. No pigswill."

'She dropped into the laziest sort of curtsey, turned away. I should've known better than to ask. Grain liquor was as hard to find as an honest man in a confessional by then. Since daysdeath, farmers had been reduced to growing

crops that could sprout in what little light the bastard sun still gave us. Cabbage. Mushrooms. And of course, the dreaded potato.'

The Last Silversaint sighed.

'I fucking hate potatoes.'

'Why?'

'Eat the same thing every day of your life, coldblood, see how bored you get.'

Jean-François studied his long fingernails. 'A finer argument against the sacrament of matrimony I have never heard, Silversaint.'

'I nodded thanks as the lass delivered my liquor. The patrons returned to their small talk, pretending not to watch me. The taverne was crowded, and among the Sūdhaemi locals, I noted other folk with pale skin, grubby kilts, and a desperate look – refugees from the Ossway, fleeing the northern wars mostlike. But the distraction of my arrival seemed over at least. And so, I reached to a glass phial in my bandolier.

'I didn't usually take to the smoke in company, but the need was weighing on me, heavy as lead. I measured a healthy dose, then took the wine bottle with its blood-red candle and held my pipe near the flame.

'There's an art to smoking sanctus. Hold the flame too close, the blood will burn. Hold it too far, it'll melt too slow, liquefying rather than vapourizing. But get it right ...' Gabriel shook his head, grey eyes twinkling. 'God Almighty, get it right, and it's magik. A bright red bliss, filling every inch of your sky. I leaned into the pipe's stem, conscious of the stares aimed my way, but caring not a drop. It was the poorest kind of blood I was smoking. Thin as dishwater. But still, as soon as it hit my tongue, I was home.'

'What is it like?' Jean-François asked. 'San Michon's beloved sacrament?'

'Words can't describe it. You might as well try to explain a rainbow to a blind man. Imagine the moment, that first

second you slip between a lover's thighs. After an hour or more of worship at the altar, when everything else has run its course and there's naught but want for you in her eyes and finally she whispers that magik word ... please.' The silversaint shook his head, glancing at the pipe on the table between them. 'Take that heaven and multiply it a hundredfold. You might be close.'

'You speak of sanctus as we kith speak of blood.'

'The former was a sacrament for the Silver Order. The latter, mortal sin.'

'Do you not find it hypocritical that your Order of monster hunters was just as reliant upon blood as the so-called monsters you hunted?'

Gabriel leaned forward, elbows to knees. The long sleeves of his tunic slipped up over his wrists, exposing the ornate tattoos on his forearms. Mahné, the Angel of Death. Eirene, Angel of Hope. The artistry was beautiful, ink glinting silver in the lantern's light.

'We were our father's sons, coldblood. We inherited their strength. Their speed. We shrugged off wounds that would put ordinary men in their graves. But you know the horror of the thirst we were cursed with. Sanctus was a way for us to sate it without succumbing to it, or to the madness we'd fall into by denying it completely. We needed *something*.'

'Need,' Jean-François said. 'That was your Order's weakness, Silversaint.'

'Everyone has an empty place inside,' Gabriel sighed. 'You can try to fill it with whatever you like. Wine. Women. Work. In the end, a hole is still a hole.'

'And sooner or later, you all crawl back into your favourite one,' the vampire said.

'Charming,' Gabriel murmured.

Jean-François bowed.

'As that smoke reached my lungs,' Gabriel continued, 'the room came into sharpest focus. I could feel the patrons' eyes on me. Hear their every whispered word. Flames

singing in the hearth and rain drumming on the roof. The weariness slipped off my bones like a rain-soaked greatcoat. My arm stopped aching. All of me – taste, touch, smell, sight – *alive*.

'And then, like always, it started. The sharpening of my mind along with my senses. The weight of the day hit me like a hammer. I could see my poor Justice again, hear his screams in my head. The faces of those soldiers I'd left for dead, the inquisitor I'd shot. The ruins in my wake, and the shadow following. Fear. Pain. All of it amplified. Crystallized.

'And so, I reached for the vodka. My beast had been fed, and I wanted to be numb. I drank a quarter of the bottle in a single draught. Another a few minutes later. I slumped beside the fire, closing my eyes as the liquor fought the bloodhymn, black drowning the red, welcoming the onset of sweet, silent grey.

'I drank to forget.

'I drank to feel, see, hear nothing.

'And then, I heard someone speak my name.

"Gabriel?"

'It was a voice I hadn't heard in years. A voice that put me in mind of younger days. Glory days. Days when my name was a hymn, when I could do nothing close to wrong, when the Dead spoke of me with fear, and the commonfolk with awe.

"Gabe?" the voice asked again.

'They called me the Black Lion back then. The men I led. The leeches we slew. Mothers named their children for me. The Empress herself knighted me with her own blade. For a few years there, I honestly thought we were winning.

"Seven Martyrs, it is you ..."

'I opened my eyes then, and knew I was dreaming. A woman stood before me, tiny and sodden, big green eyes brimming with question.

'Her shape was blurred by the drink, but still, I'd have known her anywhere. And I wondered why my mind had conjured *her*, of all people. Of all the faces I might have seen when I closed my eyes at night, I'd have picked hers for last.

'But then she stepped to my side and threw her arms around me. And I could smell leather and parchment, horse on her skin and old blood in her hair. And as she whispered "God be praised" and crushed me to her breast, the part of my brain least numbed by the drink finally realized this was no dream.

"Chloe?"

+<u>V</u>+

DIVINE PROVIDENCE

'THE LAST I'D seen her, Chloe Sauvage was wearing the vestments of the Silver Sorority; a starched coif and a black habit embroidered with silver scripture. She'd been weeping then. She was clad as a warrior now; a dark, padded surcoat over a shirt of mail, leather britches and heavy boots – all soaked from the rain. A wheellock rifle hung on her shoulder, a longblade was slung at her belt with a silver-trimmed horn beside it. A silver sevenstar dangled about her neck.

'She was still weeping, though. I have that effect on my friends.

"Oh, sweet and blessed Mothermaid, I thought I'd never see you again!"

"Chloe," I murmured, my face still buried in her chest.

"In my heart I hoped. But the day you left—"

"Ch-chloe," I wheezed, struggling to breathe.

"Oh, sweet Redeemer, I'm sorry, Gabe."

'She released her grip on my head, finally letting me inhale. I blinked hard, black spots clearing in my eyes as she patted my shoulder. "Are you well?"

"Still alive ..."

'She squeezed my hand, smiling wide. "And I thank the Almighty for it."

'I smiled thin, looked her over with a careful eye. She'd always been small, had Chloe Sauvage. Freckled skin and wide green eyes and a stubborn mass of brown curls. Her accent was pure Elidaeni, prim and nobleborn. If there was a woman under heaven more at home in a nunnery, I'd yet to meet one. But she seemed harder than she'd been back in San Michon. Nothing like the girl who'd stood at the altar the night I'd been branded with my sevenstar. Chloe was road-worn now. She wore no holy vestments, but the sevenstar still hung about her throat, etched on the pommel of that longblade at her waist. The sword was too big for her by far.

'Silversteel, I realized.

'She glanced across the commonroom, and I saw four figures had come in behind her. An elderly priest stood at their fore, grey hair shorn to stubble, his beard long and pointed. Like most of the folk around us, he was Sūdhaemi born, dark eyes and deep brown skin, wrinkled with age. But he had a bookish look to him – supple hands and spectacles perched on a pointed nose. I summed him up in a blink: soft as baby shite.

'A tall young woman stood beside him. Strawberry-blonde hair was shaved on one side of her skull, knotted into slayerbraids on the other, and two red stripes were interwoven on her face, running down her brow and right cheek. *Naéth*, I realized; the warrior tattoos of the Ossway Highlanders. She wore a collar of tooled leather, a heavy wolfskin cloak on her broad shoulders, and more blades than a fucking butcher. An antlered helm was slung under her arm, and a battleaxe and shield at her back. I didn't recognize the clan colours on her kilt at first. But she could crush a man's throat between those thighs of hers, and no mistake.

'A young fellow stood behind her, and I picked him for a soothsinger at a glance. He was perhaps nineteen, lock-upyour-daughters handsome – big blue eyes and a square jaw dusted with stubble. A six-string lute of fine bloodwood was slung on his back, he wore a silvered necklet with six musical notes hanging on it, and his bycocket cap was tilted in a fashion that could safely be described as "rakish".

'Wanker, I thought.'

'And last among the group, stood a boy. Fourteen maybe. Thin and gangly, not yet grown into his bones. He was pale, pretty, maybe of Nordlund blood. But his hair was white – and I don't mean blonde now, I mean white as a dove's feathers. He wore it messy, draped over his eyes in a tumble so thick I wondered how he could see at all.

'One glance at his wardrobe, you'd be forgiven for thinking him a princeling. He had a beauty spot on his cheek, and he wore a nobleman's frockcoat, midnight-blue with silver curlicue, ruffled sleeves. But his leather britches were patched at the knees, and his boots were falling to pieces. He was gutterborn for sure, pretending to be something finer.

'The boy saw Chloe standing with me, made to walk across the commonroom to us. But the woman held up her hand, almost too quick.

"No. Stay with the others, Dior."

'The lad glanced to my half-empty bottle, then fixed me with suspicious eyes. I met his gaze, and he squared his scrawny shoulders in his stolen coat and stared in silent challenge. But our contest was put to rest by the landlady's shriek.

"Mother and blessed Maid!"

'The commonroom filled with gasps as a final newcomer slunk over the threshold, dripping rain onto the boards as it shook itself, nose to tail. It was a cat. Well, a fucking *lion*, if I'm honest – one of the mountain breeds that used to haunt the Ossway Highlands before all the big predators died off for want of game. Its fur was russet red, its eyes speckled gold, a scar cutting down its brow and cheek. It looked a

beast that'd gobble newborns for breakfast, then wash them down with a healthy serving of toddler.

'Men about the commonroom reached for their weapons. But the Ossway lass with the slayerbraids only scoffed. "Take yer wobbling baps in hand, ye damn blouses. Phoebe here'd nae hurt a mouse."

'The publican pointed a shaking finger. "That is a mountain lion!"

"Aye. But she's tame as a hoose cat."

'As if to prove the point, the beast sat on the doorstep and began cleaning its paws. I saw it had a leather collar, tooled with the same design the lass wore. But still, the publican remained on the safe side of unimpressed. "Well ... it cannot come in here!"

"Tch." The Ossian lass rolled her eyes. "G'wan, then. Oot to the stables, Phoebe."

'The big cat licked her nose and huffed.

"Don't sass me, ye cheeky bitch! Ye know the rules. Oot!"

'With a soft growl, the lioness hung her head and slunk back out into the rain. The Ossian lass settled into the booth with no more fuss, the priest and dandyboy slipping in beside her. The wanker called for drinks. As a semblance of calm returned to the commonroom, I turned my eyes back to Chloe, one brow raised.

"Friends of yours?"

'She nodded, pulling up a chair. "Of a sort."

'I smirked, the vodka bringing a warm glow to my cheeks. "A nun, a priest, and a lioness walk into a bar ..."

'Chloe smiled briefly, but her tone was grim. "How've you been, Gabe?"

"All sunshine and flowers, me."

"Last I heard you were living in Ossway?"

'I shook my head. "South. Past Alethe."

'Chloe whistled softly. "What are you doing all the way back up here?"

"I know a leech who needs killing."

"Eleven years, and you haven't changed a bit." Chloe brushed back her impossible curls and grinned. I saw the thought form in her eyes. The inevitable question.

"... Is Azzie with you?"

"No," I replied.

'Chloe craned her neck and searched the booths, as if expecting to see her face.

"Astrid's at home, Chloe."

"Oh." She nodded, settling in her chair. "Of course. Where else would she be?"

"Oui. Where else."

High in the reaches of that lovelorn tower, Gabriel de León leaned forward, rubbing his stubble, and he sighed from his very heart. The historian looked on in silence. The wind whispered about them as Gabriel hung his head, long locks of ink-black hair tumbling about his scarred face. Sniffing thickly. Spitting once.

'Astrid Rennier,' Jean-François finally said. 'The sisternovice who named your horse. Tattooed your palm. You still knew her then? After all those years?'

Gabriel glanced at his chronicler. His jailer. He realized Jean-François was illustrating another page – an image of Dior. Frockcoat, vest, fine features and pale eyes.

'You have the gift,' he commented, grudging.

'Merci,' the vampire murmured, continuing to draw.

'Can you see him in my eyes? Or in my head?'

'I am of the Blood Chastain,' Jean-François replied, not looking up. 'Our dominion is over the beasts of earth and sky. Not the mind. You know this, Silversaint.'

'I know it's not for nothing that Margot names herself Empress of Wolves and Men. But the blood is fickle. Ancien coldbloods can display ... other gifts.'

'I believe you are attempting to unlock my secrets, de León. But I am master of keys here, not you. It had been seventeen years since you entered San Michon. More than a decade since you'd roamed the roads of the empire. Who was Astrid Rennier to you now?'

Silence rang out in reply, the scratching of the vampire's pen and the song of the mountain wind the only sounds. And when Gabriel finally answered, he ignored the question, marching on with his tale instead.

"So this leech you're hunting," Chloe said. "Where is it?" "Elidaen. Somewhere near Augustin."



"You're heading north, then." She raised her eyes heavenwards. "Thank God."

'I took a swig from my vodka, wincing at the burn. "Thank him for what?"

'Little Chloe nodded to her comrades gathered in their booth. The priest had his head bowed in prayer. The ashenhaired boy was smoking what looked to be a traproot cigarelle, staring at me like something he'd found on the bottom of his boot.

"We're travelling that way too," Chloe said. "We can share the road."

"Ohhhh," I breathed, taking another drink. "Won't that be lovely?"

'Chloe frowned, uncertain at my tone. "There's safety in numbers. Ossway is rough country, believe me. And some of the feet following us don't belong to mortal men."

"Only some?"

'Chloe fell silent as the taverne lass returned, plonking my room key down in front of me, along with a bowl of steaming mushroom ragout and a slab of potato bread. Eyeing the spudloaf with contempt, I began shovelling down the rest.

"Anything else, adii?" the lass asked.

'I took another swig to wash down my ambitious mouthful. "More vodka."

'The lass eyed me with clear scepticism. "Are you certain?"

"Terribly certain, mademoiselle."

'The girl glanced at Chloe and then shrugged, spinning on her heel. I smiled as I felt the room spin in her wake, pushed my bottle across to Chloe. "Drink?"

'The sister was looking at me strangely. Pretty green eyes roaming my face, the sword on the table in front of me, the needle holes in the breast of my greatcoat where a sevenstar had once been stitched. She sat silently as I finished my meal. I even stuffed the potato bread down in the end. And finally, she spoke.

"Are you well, Gabriel?"

"I'm fucking marvellous, Sœur Sauvage." I thumped the empty vodka bottle down. "But forget me. Last I saw, you were holed up in the San Michon Library, eleven years and a thousand miles ago. The hell are you doing down here in Sūdhaem?"

'Chloe glanced around the taverne, wary of the few curious eyes still on us. She pulled her chair closer, speaking in conspiratorial tones. "God's work."

'I looked at the gear she was wearing, the companions she travelled with. "I wasn't aware Sisters of the Sorority were permitted to leave San Michon unaccompanied by silversaints? Let alone dressed like a common sellsword?"

"It's ... complicated." Chloe lowered her voice to a whisper. "I'll not speak of it here. But things changed a great deal around the monastery after you and Astrid—"

'She caught herself, looking up into my scowl.

"Go on," I told her. "After we what?"

'Chloe combed one mousy curl off her freckled cheek. She spoke slow, choosing her words with utmost care. "You and Azzie didn't deserve what they did to you. I was sick with it every day afterwards, and I'm sorry that—"

"So sorry you didn't even come to tell us goodbye?"

"You know I wanted to. Don't be a bastard, Gabriel."

"In life, always do what you love."

'Chloe frowned then. "You're drunk."

"You're perceptive."

'The lass returned with my second bottle, and I gave her a dramatic bow, apparently charming enough for her to muster a smile in return. My arm didn't hurt at all any more.

"Merci, chérie," I sighed, breaking the wax. "Your blood's worth smoking."

"Perhaps I should leave you to it." Chloe eyed me up and down as I took a fresh swallow. "We can talk more in the morn when you've a clear head."

"... Talk about what?"

"About the road we're to share. When you wish t—"

"I don't think we'll be sharing roads anytime soon, mon amie."

"You said you were travelling north?"

"Oui." I toasted her with my new bottle. "But I plan to float, not walk."

'Chloe's frown deepened. "Gabe, this is no jest. The roads through Sūdhaem and Ossway are thick with the Dead. I've need of a sword like yours."

"Have you now?"

'The sister turned her stare to the blade on the table before us, speckled with mud and blood. "It's not through chance alone that I find the Ashdrinker again tonight. Nor blind luck to be reunited with her master after all these years." She looked up at me, fire in her eyes. "This is Almighty God's will. And blessed are we who share in his divine providence."

"Well, huzzah and hurrah," I nodded, swallowing another burning mouthful.

'Chloe glanced around the room again. Leaning forward, she lowered her voice, barely audible above the taverne's hubbub. "Gabe, I've done it. I've *found* it."

"Congratulations, Sœur." There were three Chloe's in front of me now, and I directed my query at the middle one. "But ... what's *it*?"

"The answer." She reached out her little hand and grasped my own. "The weapon we need to win this war, and finally put an end to this endless night."

"A weapon?"

'She nodded. "One no coldblood under heaven can withstand."

'I felt my brow furrow. "Is it a blade?"

"No."

"Some work of chymistrie, then?"

'Chloe squeezed my hand again, her voice brimming with fervour. "It's the Grail, Gabriel. I'm talking about the bloody *Grail*."

- 'I looked Chloe Sauvage in her big, pretty eyes. 'I leaned slowly back in my chair. 'And then, I fell off it laughing.'

+ V +

PROMISES, PROMISES

'THE GRAIL OF San Michon,' Jean-François murmured.

'Oui,' Gabriel replied.

'The cup that caught the blood of your Redeemer as he died.'

'So the Testaments say.'

'Pretend you are more of an expert on scripture than I, Silversaint. Explain.'

Gabriel shrugged. 'Well, after his acolytes betrayed him, the Almighty's one begotten son was captured by priests of the Old Gods. At the end of seven nights of torture, the priests strung him up on a chariot wheel. They flayed his skin away to appease Brother Wind, burned the flesh beneath to please Father Flame, cut his throat to feed Mother Earth. And at the end, they tossed his body into the Eternal Waters. But his last faithful follower, the hunter Michon, was so aggrieved at seeing her master's blood lost in the dust, that she caught it up in a silver chalice. That cup became the first relic of the One Faith. And Michon, the first Martyr.' Gabriel sniffed. 'Bugger of a job, really.'

'Children's tales,' the vampire mused.

The Last Silversaint leaned back, laced his fingers behind his head. 'As you like it.'

'This Sauvage woman must have been a simpleton.'

'She was one of the shrewdest bitches I ever met, truth told.'

'And yet she put stock in peasant superstition?'

'Twenty-seven years ago, leeches were considered peasant superstition by most. And your Empress Undying must put stock in it too. Else, I'd already be dead.'

Jean-François looked Gabriel over with glittering eyes.

'The night is young, Chevalier.'

'Promises, promises.'

'You first scoffed at the tale, same as I.'

'That I did.'

The vampire brushed the edges of his quill with one sharp fingernail. 'How did Sister Chloe react, then, when you laughed in her face?'

'Well, she wasn't turning cartwheels. But I was too shitfaced to care by then. Chloe looked down on me with something between pity and anger as I rolled on the floorboards of the Perfect Husband, laughing as if she were jester to Emperor Alexandre himself.

'The old Sūdhaemi priest made his way over, hands tucked in his sleeves. His skin was wrinkled as a walnut's, dusk dark. He wore the sigil of the Redeemer's wheel about his neck; a perfect circle forged of pure silver. Worth a fortune those nights.

"Is everything well, Sister Chloe?" he asked, looking at me with bemusement.

"Oh, it's more than well, Father," I chuckled, wiping away the tears. "Our Chloe here has found the answer, don't you know?"

"Mind your tongue, Gabriel," she murmured.

"She's found the end to the endless fucking night, no less!"

"Shut your mouth!" she commanded, kicking my shin.

'The chatter around the commonroom had stopped, and every patron in the pub was busy with the spectacle of me making a complete twat of myself. The serving lass looked mournfully at the mess I'd made. The lad Dior was staring at me with pure contempt through his cigarelle smoke, though the young soothsinger raised his cup and grinned.

'It was at that moment the taverne door opened, admitting a blast of freezing sleet and a doughy, middle-aged Elidaeni man. His face was flushed, his powdered wig askew. Sausage fingers were adorned with silver rings, and he clutched a crook staff. His red robes were embroidered with scripture, and the sigil of the wheel hung about his neck. He was surrounded by militiamen from the gate.

'Glaring about, the man's gaze settled on the publican.

"M^{me} Petra," he said. "Are visits to your establishment from honoured gentry so frequent no one thinks to fetch me when a *silversaint* arrives in it?"

"We were afeared of disturbing you at prayer, Bishop Du Lac," the woman replied, eyes downturned. "Apologies."

'I looked this priest over. Noted the way the mood had fallen in the commonroom at his entrance. Even though he was Elidaeni born, he clearly had the run of the town. In the nights of famine and suffering after daysdeath, there wasn't a single game in the empire that prospered like the Holy Church. When hell had opened its gates, it was only natural commonfolk turned to the priesthood for guidance. But I've met believers in my time, coldblood. And I've met politicians. And I'd have bet my troth ring that this bastard was the latter. Too well fed, too well dressed, and too fucking sure of his welcome in the world. So, I tossed the hair from my eyes. Raised one unsteady finger at his robe.

"I just love your dress."

"You'd do well to mind your tongue, monsieur," the man warned, "lest I have you whipped through the streets like a disobedient hound."

"Well that's not very polite."

'He looked me over – sprawled on the boards with vodka in hand, unshaven jaw, bare, dirty feet. "And you hardly look a man deserving of politeness." 'Leaning on his silvered crook, the man puffed up like a peacock.

"I am Alfonse Du Lac, Bishop of Dhahaeth. I am informed a member of the Ordo Argent is come among us." He looked about each patron in turn. "Pray, where is the good frère? I desire a word or three, none of which can wait."

'The serving lass nodded to me. "That's him, Your Grace." 'The bishop's mouth fell open. "It ... is?"

'The man glanced at Chloe beside me, who simply shrugged. My stomach burbled a sternly worded complaint as I swayed to my feet. The suspicion I shouldn't have downed an entire bottle of peasant-still vodka was slowly rising, along with the threat of second dinner.

'To his credit, the bishop recovered quick, crossing the commonroom and shaking my hand so vigorously his wig began slipping. "It is my honour, Holy Brother."

"As you like it," I growled, dragging my hand free.

'Du Lac straightened his wig, altogether flustered. "Your pardon, I beg you. Had I known you were en route, I would have met you at the gate. Long months have I beseeched High Pontifex Gascoigne to send us aid against the marauding Dead. I thought perhaps His Holiness might send a few troops. If I had known he would send a bona fide silversaint—"

'My stomach burbled ominously. I held it still with one hand as the rest of me swayed with the building around us. "Should've never eaten that spudloaf ..."

'Chloe held my arm to steady me. "Gabe, you should sit down."

"Frère, please," the bishop begged. "I'd speak with you alone, if I may."

'I squinted at the powdered curls atop the man's head. "I think your cat's dead."

"Gabriel, you should drink some water," Chloe warned.

"Pardon me." The bishop glared at Chloe, cheeks flushing. "I am conducting official parish business here. Who exactly

are you, madame?"

"Well, first and foremost, I'm not a dame. I'm a demoiselle."

"Forgive me. I presumed you'd be wed. A woman of your age—"

"I beg your pardon?"

"He doesn't look too well," one of the militiamen said, eyes on me.

"He doesn't feel too fucking well either," I confessed.

"You just drank an entire bottle of vodka, Gabriel," Chloe scowled.

"Who are you, my mama?"

"I wish to God I were. I'd have taught you not to make an arse of yourself in public."

"In life, always do what you love."

'The rest of Chloe's comrades had joined the growing commotion on the commonroom floor. The Ossian lass with the slayerbraids was standing beside Chloe, one hand close to her many blades. The dandyboy stood behind her, that mop of ash-white hair hanging over his eyes. I had the almost irresistible urge to brush it the fuck out of his face.

'The handsome one was at the bar, chatting up the serving lass.

"Good Frère," the bishop said to me. "We should dine in my home. How long will you be staying with us? Have you missive from Pontifex Gascoigne?"

"Why would I have a letter from that tubby shitstain?"

'Chloe elbowed my ribs to shush me. "Bishop Du Lac, apologies, but the good brother is not in Dhahaeth on His Holiness's business. He's leaving with us in the morning."

'The dandyboy piped up. "No, he's not."

"Dior." Chloe turned to the lad. "Please let me handle this."

"He's not coming with us."

"Do you even know who he is?"

"I don't care who he is."

"Dior, this is Sir Gabriel de León."

'A gasp washed over the commonroom. I felt a tremor roll among the militiamen, the bishop looking at me with renewed wonder as he made the sign of the wheel.

"The Black Lion ..."

"This man has killed more coldbloods than the sun itself," Chloe explained. "He's a sword of the empire. Knighted by Empress Isabella's own hand. He's a *hero*."

'The boy dragged on his cigarelle, looked me up and down. "Hero, my shapely arse."

"Dior—"

"He's not travelling with us."

"Damn right I'm not," I growled.

"See? He doesn't even want to come."

"Damn right I don't."

"And what need have we for a drunken pig anyway?"

"Damn ri—wait, what the fuck did you say?"

"You're a drunken pig." The boy puffed up in his fancy coat and blew smoke in my face. "And we've as much need of you as a bull has of tits."

"Fuck you, you little shitgrubber," I growled.

"Ah. A rapier wit to boot."

"Speaking of boots, perhaps you fancy one of mine up that so-called shapely arse?"

"You're not wearing any, monsieur."

'The Sūdhaemi priest chuckled into his beard. "Touché."

"Who the fuck asked you, god-botherer?"

"Enough!" The bishop stomped his polished heel.

"Everyone not directly involved in town business will vacate this establishment, immediately! Alif, clear this room at once!"

'The man beside the bishop nodded, and the soldiery set about rousting the clientele. The townsfolk grumbled, but the militiamen cared little. And then one of the soldiers reached towards that smart-mouthed dandyboy, and sudden hell broke loose. 'The Ossian lass seized the soldier's wrist. Twisting him about smoothly, and with a swift kick to his arse, she sent the man staggering into his fellows. "Dinnae *touch* him."

'Predictably, the militiamen reached for their cudgels. But quick as snakes, the clanswoman slung that battleaxe off her back, beautiful and gleaming. Monsieur Ladykiller over by the bar was suddenly standing atop it, a crossbow slung off his back. And Chloe drew that silversteel longblade faster than I'd ever seen a nun move.

"No closer," she warned, blowing a rogue curl out of her eyes.

"I am bishop of this parish, and my word is law!" Du Lac bellowed. "Lay down your blades, or by Almighty God, there will be blood!"

'Patrons ducked beneath tables as the soldiers drew their steel. The familiar threat of violence hung in the air, hammering in my veins with the bloodhymn, the vodka's fire, the adrenaline in my still-grumbling belly. This whole scene was headed south of heaven quicker than a backalley wristjob.

'So, with a sigh, I picked up my fallen sword and drew it.

'The blade's song rang in the air. Everyone in the room fell still, eyes on the weapon in my hand. Unreadable glyfs were etched down its length, the dark starsteel glinting like oil on water. Its edge was curved, its point jagged, half a foot missing from the tip. The beautiful woman on the hilt held her arms wide, silvered, ever smiling.

"The Ashdrinker ..." the rake breathed.

'They know us, Gabriel, came her voice in my head. The bblade that cleft the dark in twain. The man the undying feared. They r-remember us ... e'en after all these years.

'I turned a slow circle among the mob, making certain everyone was still.

'Ye hast the look of hammered shite, by the by.

"Shut up," I whispered.

'The bishop's face was shining with sweat. "I said nothing, Chevalier."

"Keep it up, then." I glanced at Chloe, then back to the militiamen's blades. "Mayhaps you and your friends have outstayed your welcome, Sœur Sauvage."

"Mayhaps." She nodded, backing towards the door. "Where's your horse?"

'I scoffed. "I'm not going with you."

"But, Gabriel ..."

"Ah, splendid." The bishop smiled, mopping his lip with a kerchief. "This rabble are of no consequence. I bid you come to my home, Chevalier, we have mu—"

"I'm not going with you either, god-botherer."

"But ..." Du Lac glanced among his men. "Where, then, will you go?"

"I'm going to fucking bed."

'The room broke into sudden babble.

"But, Chevalier, the Dead grow in numbers every d—"

"Our meeting isn't just by chance, Gabriel, this is God's w —"

'Damn ye, Gabriel, listen to h—

"Shut up!" I roared, squeezing the sword's grip.

'Silence rang in the commonroom, and blessedly, inside my head.

"I already lost one old friend today, Your Grace," I warned the bishop. "And I'm apparently taking it rather badly. So I'd advise you and your men to let this one go in peace." I glanced into sad, pretty eyes. "But that's as far as I stretch for you, Chloe."

""Gabe—"

"Chevalier"

"Let him go."

'The voice was clear, crystal, bringing a strange stillness to the room. All eyes turned to Dior, standing behind the ring of his comrades. The boy crushed out his cigarelle underheel, tossed his head, ashen hair flipping from his eyes, and for the first time, I saw they were a pale and piercing blue.

"Dior ..." Chloe began.

"Can't you see?" the boy scoffed. "He doesn't give a damn about you. He doesn't care about this town or its problems. He's no hero. He's just a drunk. And a dead man walking."

'A silver whisper echoed in my head.

'From the mouth of b-b-babes—

'But I silenced the voice, slamming Ashdrinker back into her sheath. A little unsteady, I wobbled towards the hearth to retrieve my boots. Straightening with a wince, I peered around the room, settling on the blurry triplets of the publican behind the bar.

"I'll take breakfast at noon, if you please, madame."

'Chloe looked at me with wounded eyes. The bishop and his men with simple bewilderment. But without a backwards glance to anyone, I staggered upstairs to bed.'

+ VII +

STARS IN A YESTERDAY SKY

'I WOKE WHEN dark ran deepest, and hope seemed farthest from the sky.

'I opened my eyes in the velvet black. I could still taste vodka on my tongue, a hint of candlesmoke, the scent of leather and dust hanging in the gloom like an old promise. My arm didn't hurt any more. I wondered where I was, what had woken me. And there it came again – the sound that always did, that set my heart beating swift against my ribs and dragged me up through the tattered wall of sleep.

'Scratching at the window.

'I sat up, bedclothes tangled about my legs, squinting towards the sill. And though my room sat on the taverne's upper floor, still, I saw her outside, waiting for me. Floating, as if submerged beneath black water, arms open wide as she trailed her fingernails across the glass. Pale as moonlight. Cold as death. No breath on the window as she brought her heartbreak-shaped face closer and whispered.

"My lion."

'She wore nothing save the wind. Her hair was silken tar, flowing about her body like ribbons on a moonsless tide. Her skin was pale as the stars in a yesterday sky, her beauty born of spiders' songs and the dreams of hungry wolves. My heart hurt to see her – that fearful kind of hurt you couldn't hope to bear, save for the emptiness it would leave if you

put it behind you. And she looked at me, out beyond the window glass, and her eyes were black gravity.

"Let me in, Gabriel," she breathed.

'She ran those pale hands up her body, lingering over the bare curves I knew as well as my own name. Bloodless lips parted as she whispered again.



'"Let me in."

'I stepped to the window and opened the latch, invited her into my waiting arms. Her skin was cold as shallow graves, and her hand was hard as tombstones as she wove it up through my hair. But her lips were pillow-soft as she dragged me down, my eyes fluttering closed at the sound of her sigh, and I could feel my tears running down my cheeks, staining our kiss with salt and sorrow.

'Her hands were on my body and her mouth urgent against mine, and I tasted fallen leaves and the ruin of empires on her tongue. I felt her teeth then, sharp and white at my lip; an ecstatic stab of pain and a rush of bloodwarm copper, and her whole body shivered as she leaned harder into my embrace. She pushed me backwards towards the bed, and her teeth grazed my throat as she stripped away the cloth and leather between us, leaving me more naked with every kiss.

'And then she was atop me, bare and pressed against me, all shadow and milk-white, growling in the hungry hollow of her breast. Her kisses descended, and she hissed in pleasurepain at the sizzling touch of silver ink to her mouth. But there were no tattoos below my belt, no aegis to bar the way to her prize, and there at last she sank, sighing as she reached into my britches and set me free, aching and hot in the cool of her hand. I gasped as she gently stroked me, blew breathless breath upon me, as she wet red lips with the tip of her tongue and then ran it up my length, leaving me shaking, aching.

"I miss you," she sighed.

'Her lips brushed against my crown as she spoke, curling into a dark smile, teasing tongue and gentle touch setting every inch of me aflame.

"I love you ..."

'And she parted those ruby lips and swallowed me whole, and my back arched and the timbers creaked as I gripped the bed and held on for dear life. I was powerless then. Adrift in the motion of her hand, her lips, her tongue, a rhythm as old as time and deep as graves and warm as blood. She dragged me ever higher into a starless, burning

heaven, and all I knew was the feel of her, the sound of her, the hungry moans and silken flickers pulling me ever closer to my brink.

'And at last, as I fell, somewhere between the sighs and blinding light and the flood of my little death into her waiting mouth, I felt it; the stab of twin razors, a slice of agony amid the bliss, a rush of red before the rush of my ending.

'And she drank.

'Long after I was finished, still she drank.'

+<u>VIII</u>+

AT THE GATES

'I WOKE TO find a legion of tiny devils throwing a revel inside my skull.

'Most were taking turns kicking at my brain with rusty hobnail boots, though one had apparently crawled into my mouth, vomited, and died. I risked opening my eyes, rewarded with a shear of light so blinding, I thought for a moment daysdeath had finally ended, and the sun had returned to full and blessed glory in the skies.

"Fuck my face," I groaned.

'My arm had healed as if the break had never been. I reached up to my neck, down into my britches, felt no trace of wounds. The thirst crouched on my shoulder like an unwelcome friend, magpie and mockingbird. I pushed away the memory of pale curves and lips red as blood as what sounded like an enraged stallion kicked at my door.

"Chevalier de León?"

'The hinges screamed as the serving lass poked her head into the room. I was lying on my bed shirtless, britches unlaced and dragged dangerously low. The window was unlatched. After a shy glance at my tattooed skin, the lass turned her gaze downwards. "Pardon, Chevalier. But the bishop sends for you."

"What t-time is it?"

[&]quot;Past noon."

'I squinted at the pitcher in her hand. "Is that m-more vodka?"

"Water," she replied, handing it over. "I thought you'd have need."

"Merci, mademoiselle."

'I took a long, slow gulp, then upended the rest onto my face. The strangled daylight streamed through the open window like a white-hot lance. My insides began making noises like they'd prefer to be outside, and could find their own way if I refused to show them.

"Chevalier," the girl said, voice unsteady. "The Dead are at the gates."

'I hauled myself upright with a groan, dragging the sodden hair from my face. "No fear, mademoiselle. You've men aplenty and strong walls besides. A few wretched won't—"

"These are no wretched."

'I glanced up at that. My sluggish pulse tripping quicker. "No?"

'The girl shook her head, eyes wide. "The bishop bids you come with all speed."

"All right, all right ... Where are my britches?"

"You are wearing them, Chevalier."

"... Seven Martyrs, I can't feel my legs."

'I pushed my knuckles into my eyes. My skull was pounding like I'd been thrice fucked in it. The lass stepped up as I tried to stand, and with her help, I wobbled upright, holding my brow and hissing with pain.

"Should I fetch more water?"

"What's your name, mademoiselle?"

"Nahia."

'And with a sigh, I shook my head. "Just find my pipe, Nahia."

'Ten minutes later, I trudged through the mud towards Dhahaeth's southern gate, freezing sleet about my shoulders, rats about my heels. Nahia followed, wringing her hands. I'd shrugged on my greatcoat, mercifully dry, and hauled on my boots, sadly still damp. But pulling on my kit, I couldn't help being reminded of younger days. Glory days. And with Ashdrinker at my waist, I hoped I looked a fucksight more imposing than I felt.

'The bishop waited at the gate. In the water-thin light, the militia lads looked even less impressive than they had last night. Word of my name had no doubt worked its way among their number. Talk of last night's drunken fuckarsery in the pub obviously had too.

"Thank the Almighty," the bishop began. "Chevalier, doom has come t—"

"Take your jewels in hand, Your Grace."

'A cry came from beyond the palisade, a voice that made the men about me quaver. "Bring him out! Eternity we might have, but we'll waste it not on lowing cattle!"

'I set boots to stairs, old nails creaking, climbing until I stood on the rough, splintering timber of the highwalk. I hugged the shadows like old friends, hidden behind the palisade's highest spikes, the bishop following on my heels with clear reluctance. A dozen men stood up here, clad in worn leather armour and rusty tinpot helms. The skinny prick who'd given me lip last night stood among them, along with a man I presumed was their leader. He was a bulky fellow with a busted face and walnut skin, a whalebone pipe at his lips. Callused hands. Scarred chin. The only real soldier among them.

"Capitaine," I nodded.

"Chevalier," he grunted, looking beyond the walls. "Fine day to meet your maker."

'The man's voice was steady, his jaw set. But every one of his fellows seemed ready to fill their britches. And peering between the timbers, I saw the source of all their fear.

'A coach sat in the middle of the road. It was finely wrought; glossy black paint and gold trim, two lanterns casting a moon-pale light through the sleet. But instead of horses, the coach was drawn by a dozen wretched. Each

had been a teenage girl before she was murdered. Ragged and rotten, they stared up at the men on the walls with nothing but hunger in their dead eyes. And sitting in the driver's seat was something hungrier still.

'It wore the shape of a young lass, too. But unlike the coldbloods hauling the coach, this one was a perfect beauty. She wore a leather corset, a half-skirt, high boots. Her lips were painted glossy dark, deep blue eyes ringed with kohl and framed by long black hair. Her skin was white as death, her chin smudged with faint stains of murder.

"Dyvok, I'd wager," the capitaine grunted.

"No," I replied, looking the coldblood over. "She's a Voss."

"Ancien?" the bishop asked, trembling.

'I shook my head. "Just a fledgling, by the look."'

The historian suddenly tapped his quill on the tome in his lap.

'Really?' Gabriel sighed. 'Again?'

'As to a child, de León,' the vampire said. 'How could you tell this one's bloodline just by looking at her?'

'Because I wasn't fresh fallen from the last rains? You Chastains seldom travel by carriage. The Dyvoks were still busy razing the Ossway, and the Ilons were far too subtle to make an appearance this gaudy. But the Forever King's get had grown arrogant after their famille's successes in the Nordlund. All Shall Kneel was the creed of the Blood Voss, and Fabién's children saw themselves as vampiric royalty, destined to rule the endless night from atop thrones built of the old empire's bones. Rolling up to a peasant mudhole in a fancy carriage drawn by a dozen corpses was exactly a Voss's style.'

Jean-François nodded. 'And the term you used? *Fledgling*?' 'You *know* what a fucking fledgling is.'

'Nevertheless, I would like you to explain it.'

'Well, I'd like a glass of fine single malt and a courtesan with thousand-royale tits to read me a bedtime story, but we don't always get what we want.' The vampire glowered. 'Margot Chastain, First and Last of her Name, Undying Empress of Wolves and Men, does.'

Gabriel bit back an insult, drew a calming breath.

'There are three stages to a coldblood's existence. Three ages to your so-called life. The new Dead are called fledglings. Young, comparatively weak, still shedding the remnants of their humanity and finding their way in the dark. After a century or so of murder, a fledgling can be thought of as mediae; a vampire in full possession of its gifts, *extremely* dangerous, and devoid of anything approaching human morality. The last, and most deadly, are the ancien. The elders.'

'And you can tell the difference at a glance?'

'Fledglings, sometimes.' The silversaint shrugged. 'Even though they don't breathe any more, they'll do things like gasp in surprise. Blink out of habit. A few even delude themselves that they can see mortals as anything other than meals. But everything erodes. *Everything* ends. And by the time you're mediae, you're something else entirely.'

'Something more,' Jean-François nodded.

'And much, much less,' Gabriel replied.

The vampire ran his fingers along the feathered tips of his lapels, lanternlight glinting in dark eyes. 'How old do you think I am, Chevalier?'

'Old enough to have nothing left inside you,' Gabriel replied.

And, unwilling to play the game, the silversaint returned to his tale.

'I looked down on the coldblood from atop the palisade, weighing her up. She climbed off the driver's seat, heels sinking into half-frozen mud. Stalking past those hollow, wretched girls hauling the coach, she approached Dhahaeth's walls through the freezing sleet, altogether unconcerned about the arrows aimed at her chest.

'I guessed she'd been no more than thirteen when she was killed, her body trapped a year or two shy of

adulthood's shore. Her smile was razor-blade sharp as she looked among the militiamen above. The fear of her washed the walls like pale fog.

"You are all going to die," she declared.

'One of the younger men lost his nerve at that. Loosing his crossbow with a sudden *twang*. The boy's aim was true, but the arrow simply *thumped* against the coldblood's chest as if she were made of ironwood. Eyes fixed on the lad who'd shot her, the vampire reached up and plucked the bolt free of her breast. Black lips parted, she licked the tip with a long, clever tongue.

"You first, boy," she promised.

"Loose!" the capitaine cried.

'Crossbows sang, a dozen other quarrels sent speeding after the first. But the coldblood simply stood her ground. The arrows hit her in a dozen places but, again, did almost nothing. One struck her full in the face, leaving naught but a scratch in her porcelain cheek. And when the rain was done, she looked mournfully down at the holes in her outfit, plucking another arrow loose and tossing it to the mud.

"I was *fond* of this dress ..."

"Oui," I murmured. "She's Voss for certain."

"Pitch shot!" the capitaine called. "At the ready!"

'The militiamen reloaded. But the tips of these new quarrels were bound in homespun, dipped in tar. The archers of Dhahaeth gathered about their burning barrels, ready to set their shots aflame.

'The coldblood paused at that. She might've made a show of standing in the rain, but if there's one thing all Dead fear, it's fire. A small tremor of courage ran along the wall at her hesitation.

'And then the carriage door cracked open.

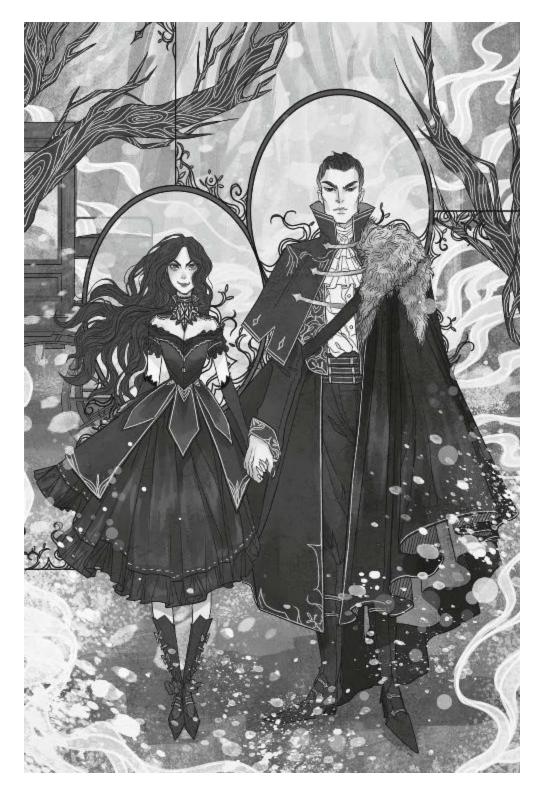
'A figure stepped out onto the mud, closing the door with a gentle hand. Through the sleet, I could see he was dressed as gentry – a dark frockcoat, silken undershirt, a beautiful sabre at his belt. A long duellist's cloak of thick wolf fur hung from one shoulder, lined with red satin. Dark hair was slicked back from his pale brow in a sharp widow's peak. He was beautiful as a bedful of fallen angels. But his hems were spattered red, and his eyes were like black knife holes in his skull. He joined his companion and took her little hand in his, and a thrill of perfect rage ran through me, toe to crown.

"That's an ancien," I breathed.

"... You know him?" the capitaine asked.

'I nodded, not believing my fortune. "That's the Beast of Vellene."

'A murmur rippled along the walls. Bishop Du Lac turned pale as babies' bones.



"My name is Danton Voss," the male declared. "Child of Fabién and Prince of Forever."

'The coldblood plucked the ruffled edges of his sleeves, smoothed a stray lock of dark hair from his brow. The wretched girls pulling the carriage remained stone-still, deathly silent. I knew they were all the Beast's offspring now – held motionless by their maker's immortal will. The little female was also his get most like, but she'd Become before she had a chance to rot. The monster's gaze settled on Du Lac, lip curling at the sight of the wheel dangling from the bishop's neck on its thin silver chain.

"Bring him to me, Your Grace. Lest I come in there and fetch him."

'I could feel the power in that voice. Cold as tombs and centuries deep. The other militiamen aimed uneasy glances my way. I'd seen the corpses impaled around the fortifications – these men had fought the Dead before today. But it was plain not a one of them had faced foes like these, and plainer still that none were in the mood to die for me.

"Do you think he means it?" the bishop asked.

"I think he does," I replied.

'The capitaine glanced around at the boys and greybeards he led, every one of them aquiver. Chewing his whalebone pipe, he blew a plume of grey smoke into the air.

"Then I think we're fucked."

+ X +

THE BEAST OF VELLENE

'I LOOKED DOWN at the coldbloods, wondering if today might actually be my last, or the day it all began. I checked the bandolier across my chest, my phials of black ignis and silver caustic and holy water. Then I nodded to the smoke drifting from the burly man's lips.

"Can I borrow your flintbox, Capitaine?"

'I struck the flame to my pipe as I descended the stairs, dragging dead-red smoke into my lungs. The bloodhymn was rushing by the time my boots touched mud, the thirst in me forgotten, my hangover nothing but a smoke-dream, the war-drum beat of my pulse, primal and screaming and wanting and needing, focused only on that thing waiting outside. I slipped my pipe away, laced my collar about my face and nodded to the gateman.

'The timbers groaned, the wooden palisade opening wide. I stepped beyond the shelter of Dhahaeth's walls, a bitter wind blowing my greatcoat about me, head lowered as the gate creaked shut behind.

'The Beast of Vellene looked at me through the falling sleet, black eyes narrowed as I tipped my tricorn.

"Fairdawning, Danton," I called. "Does your papa know you're here?"

'The Dead lass stepped closer, black gaze roaming my boots, my greatcoat, up to my blood-red eyes. "Step aside, mortal."

"Aside? You're the one who demanded I come out, leech." 'She sneered. "We come here not for you?"

'I blinked at that. Thoughts racing with the sanctus in my lungs. I'd supposed they were hunting me; that the Forever King had perhaps gathered some second thoughts, sent his son to finish the job he'd begun. But a glance into those flint-black eyes told me Danton hadn't even recognized me yet.

'I was a dead man, after all.

'My mind returned to the taverne last night. The words Chloe had spoken: Some of the feet following us don't belong to mortal men. And I recalled the good sister's comrades, their fervor and flashing blades, the way they'd stepped in to protect ...

"The boy," I realized. "Dior."

"Bring him to us," the fledgling commanded, empty eyes on mine.

"I'd tell you to say please, little one. But he's not even here."

"Will you lie as sweet, I wonder, with your bleeding tongue in my palm?"

"I'd certainly talk a fucksight less than you do, chérie."

'The fledgling glowered, black lips pressed thin. But Danton peered at me more carefully, then to the town behind. His long-dead eyes roamed the spiked palisade, the militia atop it. All was silent save for the moaning wind, and he, as still as stone.

'The Beast of Vellene they called him – the Forever King's youngest son. He'd earned the name seventeen years back, when his father's army crushed its first capital west of the Godsend. When Vellene's gates came down, the Endless Legion slaughtered every man and woman therein. But Danton had a taste for young maidens. Infamous for it, he was. Rumour had it, he'd murdered every girl in the city under the age of sixteen with his own hands.

'I glanced to the coach behind Danton now. Saw those wretched lasses, completely in thrall of the one who'd massacred them. And Danton turned his black gaze to me, and spoke the way hammers fall.

"Tell us where the boy went."

'I felt his mind pushing into mine. His will pressing against my own, all the power in his long and darkling years tingling on my skin and in my soul. The desire to obey, to *please*, was as undeniable as time itself. I wanted to relent. Abase myself before him. But my hate for this thing, for his famille and what they'd taken from me, for what he was and pretended to be, sang even louder. I blinked hard. And I shook my head.

"You didn't honestly expect that to work on a silversaint, did you?"

'Danton brimmed with contempt as his eyes flickered over me. I mustn't have looked much – haggard and muddy, eyes pouched in shadows.

"A black coat and a lungful of cur's blood does not a silversaint make," he said.

'I drew the blade at my belt, the silver music of its voice in my head.

'I was ... having the strangest d-dream ...

"Time to wake up, Ash. We've work to do."

'Oh? ... Oh, ohhhh yesss yesyes ...

'The wretched pulling the coach stirred. Their mouths slack, their fangs sharp. Danton's pale lip curled. And with a blink, he released them from his hold.

'They dropped the crossguards and came on in a rolling flood, vicious and soulless and quick. There were almost as many as the day before, when I lost poor Justice and ran for my miserable life. But today, I wasn't just a man unhorsed and a meal uneaten. Today, the sanctus was pounding in my veins and my swordarm was iron. And as Ashdrinker began humming an old broken nursery rhyme inside my head, I

was running at them, their empty eyes filling with surprise as my blade began to dance.

'It's a strange thing, to fight in the grip of the bloodhymn. Each moment feels a decade long, and yet, the whole world moves in a blood-red blur. I cut through those dozen coldbloods like a straight razor through silk, and in her wake, the air was filled with the ashes my blade was named for. Sweet release was the only gift I could give those poor girls, and so I did, to every one. And when I was done, I stood there in the muddy road, my coat, my skin, my blade, all slicked with gore and streaked with grey, and for a terrible moment, I wondered how on earth I could've left all this behind.

"Almighty God," I heard someone whisper on the walls above.

"Magnificent ..." the capitaine murmured.

'My senses were as sharp as the sword in my hand, my pulse athunder. I flicked a sluice of blood off Ashdrinker's blade and into the cold mud at my boots. And brushing a speck of soot off my lapel, I looked the Beast of Vellene in the eye.

"What do you want with the boy, Danton?"

'The vampire gave no reply, his gaze flickering briefly to the carnage at my feet, the bloody sword in my hand. I searched those dark eyes, looking for a scrap, a crumb.

"I heard some nonsense about the Redeemer's cup?"

'The female sneered. "You know nothing, mortal."

"I know you made a mistake, leech, coming here with the sun still up."

'I saw that blow land at least. A tiny flicker of it in Danton's dusk-dark eyes as he threw a glance to the watercolour sky above. The Beast of Vellene was a child of the most powerful vampire under heaven. He'd obviously ridden up to these walls thinking he'd roll right through them and the peasants atop them. But instead, he'd found me.

'The fledgling's eyes narrowed, fangs glinting. "Who are you?"

"You mustn't be much, chérie," I sniffed, "if you don't even know who I am."

'Show them, G-gabriel, came a silver whisper.

'I reached up, unlacing my collar so they could look upon my face. The female didn't blink, but Danton surely did, recognition splintering the black ice of his eyes. He glanced again at the broken blade in my hand. The place on my coat where the sevenstar had once been stitched. The tip of his tongue pressed to the edge of one sharp canine.

"De León. Ye live."

"Sadly."

"How?" he hissed.

"God didn't want me. And the devil was afraid to open the door." I took one step forward, eyes narrowing. "You look frightened too, Danton."

"I fear no man," he sneered. "I am a Prince of Forever."

'I laughed at that. High as heaven was wide. "There's no one more afraid to die than those who believe they're undying. Your big sister taught me that."

'Fury flashed in his eyes. "Ye meddle in affairs ye cannot possibly comprehend."

'I shrugged. "Other people's business was always my favourite kind."

'They moved then. A stuttering flash of black cloth and marble skin. My wheellock was in my hand in a blink, tracking the female as she charged. She was swift, no doubt. But a pistol shot moves faster than a fledgling, hits ten times harder than any arrow. And with a fresh dose of sanctus in my veins, I wasn't one to miss at that range.

'The silvershot struck her in the face, right in the tiny crack at her cheek where the arrow had already hit, sending her reeling backwards with a bubbling shriek.

'Danton moved faster, and I was on my back foot in an instant. He came on like a cannon blast – older, stronger,

just a blur of dead eyes and flashing teeth. His sabre glinted like lightning in his hand. His strikes were a hurricane. A slash from his blade almost took the jaw off my face, blood running red and hot down my neck. His boot landed in my belly, and I felt my insides rupture as I flew thirty yards back into the freezing mud.

'All coldbloods are tough as nails. Like palebloods, they ignore wounds that would orphan most men's children. But the flesh of the Voss bloodline can turn silver aside. Their eldest can even resist the kiss of flame. For all my taunts, this bastard was deadly, and I knew if I slipped just once, he'd slice my arse up like fresh spudloaf.

'I rolled back to my feet, wove aside from his blows, the bloodhymn ringing in my veins. Like I said, the batch I'd smoked wasn't top-shelf. But just because you coldbloods can prance about in the day now, doesn't mean you still aren't ten times more fearsome in the dead of night. Feeble as it was, the dark sunlight made Danton weaker than if it had been pitch black. And in the end, that was the edge I grabbed hold of.

'I reached to my bandolier, flinging a glass phial at the vampire's face. It exploded with a flash, a cloud of black ignis and silver caustic bursting in the air. The silverbomb was barely enough to singe him, but some of the dust *did* reach his eyes, and Danton reeled backwards, flailing. And hard as I could, I brought my blade down.

'Ashdrinker sheared the air, still humming off-key in my head as she took Danton's swordarm off at the elbow. His flesh was iron, but in daylight, the blade was its match, all my hate and rage behind the blow. Danton's severed hand exploded into ashes, years of denied decay turning in a heartbeat. He snarled, claws hissing past my chin as I smashed a phial of holy water into his face. His snarl became a scream, eyes wide with agony and running red with blood.

""Ye *dare* ..."

'I reached for his throat then, desperate to clutch him. One handful would be all I needed. But my fingers caught only air. The Beast of Vellene stood forty feet away now, back in the tumbling sleet, clutching his severed arm. The stump was smoking, his sabre lying in the mud. I reached inside my greatcoat, unslung my silvered chain and flail. Gasping and bleeding. Broken ribs stabbing with every breath.

"Not staying for the funeral?" I wheezed.

'I took another step forward, but the vampire flashed twenty feet back in the blink of an eye. The Beast of Vellene had weighed the scales, and though he'd kicked the shite out of me, he still plainly found the balance wanting. The sun was up. The foe he faced was one he wasn't prepared for. You don't live for centuries by being impatient.

'Unlike me, Danton had time.

'I heard a cry behind me then, turning to see the fledgling dragging herself up from the bloody muck. A ragged black hole had been blasted through her face, her one good eye fixed on her maker. "Master?"

'I marched back across the mud to where she was trying to rise. She shrieked, voice ragged with agony and fear, eye still on her dark father.

"Master!"

'The fledgling turned to run, but my silver flail tangled up her legs, bringing her back down to the mud. As she tried to drag herself away with her hands, I drove Ashdrinker down through her back, pinning her to the freezing earth. She twisted to bite me, but my boot forced her face into the muck, and reaching to my swordbelt, I drew a sharp knife made of pure silversteel, the Angel of Retribution soaring on the hilt.

"No, w-what are you doing, what are y—"

'The monster screamed as I drove the blade into her back, began sawing at the ribs just below her left shoulderblade. Fledgling she might've been, but she was still a Voss, and it was more than thirsty work, the thing bucking beneath me, thrashing and wailing.

"Danton, help me!"

'My teeth were gritted, face spattered with ashes and rotten blood – no peerless swordsman, just a butcher now. And as I worked, silvered blade slicing through bone as hard as iron, I felt that old familiar thrill, that dark joy rising as I looked into this thing's eyes and saw realization dawn – that after all the murder, all the nights of blood and beauty and bliss, here was where it all came to an end.

'No fear.

"Please," the monster begged as I drew out an empty phial. "P-please ..."

'Only f-fury.

'I forced my fingers between the fledgling's ribs. Her plea became a scream as my fist closed about her heart and tore it from its moorings. The organ began rotting as soon as it was free; stolen years rushing back with a vengeance. But I held it in my fist, squeezing a rush of luscious, dark blood into my phial before all turned to ashes. The vampire's spine arched as the thief of time took hold, stealing back what was his. And in a moment, it was over – little more than a husk remaining inside that pretty dress it had been so fond of.

'I breathed deep. Grey and red. I looked down on the monster, the wreckage, the little girl at my feet. And then, up into the eyes of the one who'd murdered her.

"Did you tell her you loved her, Danton? Did you promise her forever?"

'The Beast of Vellene stared at me across the bloody ground. Holding his ruined arm, looking on the ruin I'd made of his children, eyes like burning coals in his skull.

"Thou shalt suffer for this, Silversaint. And it shall be legendary."

'And with little more than a whisper, he vanished into the fog.'

+<u>X</u>+

RED SNOW

'THEY CAME DURING the d-day, Gabriel.

"I know," I said, marching back towards the Dhahaeth gate.

'E'en in a mud puddle like this, a Prince of Forever putting himself arisk under the n-noonday sun ... desperate must he b-be to find this boy afore something else does. We must track them down. We m-mmust know the truth of it, ttruth of it.

"I always find it so pleasing," I said, looking down at the blade, "when you insist on telling me shit I already know."

'Ye should have listened to Chloe, Gabriel. Both then and now, n-now and then. Think of all we m-may have been spared, if thou hadst b—

"Shut up, Ash," I warned.

'The fault is mine as m-mmmmuch as—

'I slammed Ashdrinker back into my scabbard, silencing her voice as the gate opened wide. The militiamen waited beyond, the taverne lass, other townsfolk, all watching me with horror and awe. Du Lac came down from the battlements, and I glanced at the wheel around his neck, up into his eyes.

"Merci for the assistance, Your Grace."

'Du Lac had the decency to look ashamed. "You seemed to have matters in hand ..."

"Which way did they ride?"

"... Whom do you mean?"

"From the taverne last night, you powdered prig," I snarled. "The short woman with the big hair. The priest. The boy. Did they head north like they said?"

"I beg your pardon, but—"

"Oui, Chevalier," the taverne lass said. "They rode out north."

"Merci, M^{lle} Nahia," I nodded, striding past. "I say again, your blood's worth smoking." Glancing to the highwalk, I called to the militiamen. "I'll be keeping your flintbox if all's well with that, Capitaine."

'The grizzled man nodded. "With my blessing, Chevalier. God go with you."

"I'd rather he minded his own fucking business, if it's all the same."

'I made my way to the stables, haggled for a saddle, provisions and harness to replace the ones I'd lost when poor Justice died. I probably left town a few royales lighter than I should've, but I was too fretful to harp on it.

'Broken and befuddled though she was, Ashdrinker had spoke true. Vampires were creatures who lived forever if they played their cards right. Ancien were seldom stupid and *never* reckless. I could scarce believe a creature as old as Danton had put himself at such risk. And if that boy Dior was so important that a son of the Forever King hunted him

. . .

'I saddled up Jezebel and rode hard through Dhahaeth's north gate. Chloe and her band had a good head start, and I'd have to ride swift to catch them. The gash Danton had given my face was slowly closing, but my broken ribs still ached with every breath. The dark sun threw a feeble light on the road ahead, autumn noon as bleak as winter sunset.

'I knew this used to be wheat country decades back – that these lands would once have swayed with stalks of gleaming gold. Now, the few farms that had managed to stay afloat grew the only things they could: potatoes and other roots, and great, rolling fields of mushrooms. Fungus sprouted *everywhere*. Luminous maryswort crusted the fence lines and rocks. Pale tendrils of asphyxia wrapped themselves around the long-dead trees, and thick growths of massive toadstools encroached into the muddy road.

'Rot. Swelling. Spreading.

'As we rode north, the sanctus began wearing off, my hangover catching up with the comedown and the pain of my beating kicking in. The farmlands receded, and Jez and I reached open road. The Ūmdir River was a silver serpent in the distance, and I could see thick deadwood through the gloom to the east, a hill crowned with a ruined watchtower. We passed a sign hammered into a lifeless elm, overrun with fungus.

'DEAD AHEAD.

'Ashdrinker was a heavy comfort on my hip. The thought of the blood I'd milked from that fledgling's heart was a greater comfort still. The thirst was already creeping back on me with red and slippered feet. Night drifted closer, I heard the rush of the Ūmdir ahead. And squinting through the darkness, I felt my heart sink.

"Face fuckery ..."

'Allow me to guess,' Jean-François ventured. 'The folk of Dhahaeth had destroyed the bridge.'

'Oui,' Gabriel scowled. 'That prick of a bishop could have warned me at least. As I reached the riverbank, I saw only mooring stones and a few broken archways midstream. I'd come across no wretched on the road, so cutting off the crossings was obviously helping to keep the Dead out of the province. But the river was too fast and deep for Jez to cross.

'And to top it all off, it started snowing.

'I pulled my tricorn lower, gave Jez a mournful pat. "Sorry, girl. Should've warned you that the Almighty enjoys shitting in my brisket at every opportunity."

'The mare nickered in response.

'There was no sign of Chloe and her band. I checked my map for the closest crossing and rode on, following a dirt track up into a deadwood hill as dark deepened. Picturing the holy sister's face from the night before. Her whisper as she squeezed my hand.

'It's the Grail, Gabriel. I'm talking about the bloody Grail.

'I'd been a prick to her, and I knew it. Justice's death had been weighing heavy, and I'd been tired and drunk. But that wasn't the whole truth of it. Truth was, the sight of my old friend had dredged up a flood of memories I'd thought long buried. And now the past was rising again, just like the Dead.

'What the hell did Danton want that boy for?

'The blackened sun had slunk below the horizon, and the snow was falling heavy as I rode into the long-dead woods. I managed to get my lantern lit, hung it from Jez's saddle. But I knew we were one stumble away from a repeat of yesterday's funeral.

"Might be time to call it a night, girl."

'A sound pierced the storm then. Blinking snow from my eyes, I tilted my head. A shot from a wheellock, I swore it. Another sound followed – a long note, high and muffled, the kind that had once borne me on silver wings into the jaws of hell. And I remembered Chloe in the pub last night. A rifle at her shoulder. And a silver-trimmed horn at her belt.

"Shit," I hissed.

'I slapped Jez's rump, and we were charging up the jagged hillside. The dray wasn't spry, but she had grit, galloping headlong into the dark. I heard the horn again, adrenaline souring my tongue, a rush of memories from nights in San Michon – the vow on my lips, my brothers around me, love my shield and faith my sword.

'And in sight of God and his Seven Martyrs, I do here vow; Let the dark know my name and despair. So long as it burns, I am the flame. So long as it bleeds, I am the blade. So long as it sins, I am the saint.

'And I am silver.

'I heard a distant cry, saw the ruined watchtower rising before me. Dark shapes were moving towards it through the deadwood, lifeless eyes and sharp fangs. The horn blew again, a silver-sharp note rising above the thudding footfalls of the Dead. Because the Dead were here, and running quick – at least a dozen wretched drawn towards the figures I now saw through the falling snow.

'I drew Ashdrinker in one hand, my other fist wrapped in Jez's reins.

'Where are w-we, Gabriel?

"We're in shit, Ash," I hissed.

'Ohhh. Just another day, another d-day, then?

'I could see Chloe standing at the base of the ruined tower, sword in hand, hacking at an oncoming wretched like a lumberjack at a tree. She fought with all hell's fury, but she was a nun, after all, and that sword was far too big for her. The soothsinger stood beside her, stubble crusted with snow, a burning brand in one hand, a steel longblade in the other. Behind them, pressed against the tower's broken walls, stood the boy Dior. He had a silvered dagger in his fist, an unlit cigarelle hanging from his lips, cold rage in his eyes.

"Get back, you unholy bastards!" the soothsinger yelled. "Chloe!" I bellowed.

'I'd no idea where the Ossian lass or her lioness were, nor the old priest. But these three were in the deepest kind of shite. The soothsinger was quick with that torch of his, catching a wretched across the skull and setting its head ablaze with a cry of triumph. Chloe lashed out with her longblade at anything that strayed too close, and the silversteel ripped through Dead flesh like rotten straw. But the wretched were too many. 'Jez was brave or stupid, or just moving too fast to slow down. We ploughed into one wretched, knocked it flying. But as the other Dead turned on us and bared their rancid fangs, the mare lost her nerve, rearing up so hard she almost threw me.

'Ashdrinker at least seemed to have her head in the game now.

'She be not a warhorse, shitwit, what in name of Gods do ye play at?

'I kicked loose from my stirrups just as another wretched came at me out of the dark. The thirst was back on me, the lanternlight wild and strobing. This was a bad wager and I knew it, but I'd little choice now save roll hard or die.

"Gabe, look out!" Chloe roared.

'Behind! Ashdrinker warned.

'I spun in time to fend off clawing hands, the coldblood flailing as I split its chest apart. Even with odds like these, I wasn't without a trick or three. I snapped the seal on a glass phial and tossed it. Two wretched toppled in a blast of silver caustic, their skin blackened, eyes bubbling as the silverbomb ripped the air.

'These were only fledgling Dead, but enough ants can slay a lion. Ashdrinker whispered warning as another wretched lunged through the dark – an old man with gore-matted hair. He should've died in his bed, this fellow, surrounded by loved ones. Instead, he ended beneath some broken tower south of the Ūmdir, his head sailing free as my sword flashed in the dark. I tossed a phial of holy water, heard another peal from Chloe's horn as glass shattered and Dead flesh sizzled.

'A wild-eyed man with bloody hands made it past the soothsinger's torch and struck Chloe from the side. She cried out, silversteel blade sailing from her hand, screaming as the thing plunged its fangs into her arm.

"Chloe!" Dior cried.

[&]quot;Sister!" the 'singer roared.

'The man lunged to save her, only to have another wretched strike him from behind. Dior picked up the fallen torch, stabbed at the flailing coldblood. A soulless screech of pain rang through the woods as the monster went up in flames, arms pinwheeling as it fell, and as I watched in astonishment, the boy spun the torch between his fingers and lit his fucking cigarelle. I hurled my last phial of holy water, emptied my wheellock into another wretched's face. But that many foes, my thirst burning brighter, I was beginning to suspect we might be proper fucked.

'And then, I heard a whisper. Saw a flash of midnight-blue, a ribbon of red. One wretched collapsed headless, another fell back convulsing, crimson steam rising from its eyes. A figure moved among the monsters now, sharp as the north wind, quick as the lightning in an Eversea storm. Long black hair and a red sword, cutting through those wretched like a dose of bad medicine.

'Stand n-not amazed, Gabriel, fight!

'I set about it, hacking at the coldbloods as this newcomer flickered among the dead trees, scattering the wretched like flower petals about its feet. And as we dispatched the last of the monsters together, I knew what kind of monster it was.

'The highblood stood now among the scattered corpses. Not sweating. Not breathing. She was dressed in a long red frockcoat and black leathers, a silken shirt parted from her bare and bone-white chest, throat wrapped in a red silk scarf. She had the body of a maid, though I knew she was nothing close. The sword in her hand was as tall and graceful as she was, gleaming red and dripping onto the bloodied snow at her feet. Her hair was the blue-black of midnight, running down to her waist, parted like curtains from a dead thing's eyes. But her face was covered in a pale porcelain mask, painted like a madame at winter court – black lips and dark kohled eyes.

'I glanced over my shoulder to a gasping, bleeding Chloe. "She with you?"

"God Almighty, no," she replied, retrieving her fallen blade.

'The newcomer offered one slender hand to Dior. Her voice was soft as pipe smoke, but she spoke with a strange, hissing lisp. "Come with usss, child. Or die."

''Ware this one, Gabriel. She f-feels ... wrong.

'Ashdrinker's whisper rang in my mind as I stepped between the vampire and the others. For the first time, the highblood turned eyes towards me. Her irises were bleached like old linen. The air around us was freezing, my breath spilling over my lips in pale clouds.

"Stay back," I warned.

"Ssstep assside," she commanded, soft and venomous.

'But even as her will came down on my shoulders like lead, I stood my ground. "I've hunted your kind since I was a boy, leech. You're going to have to try harder than that."

'Her eyes roamed my body then, lingering on the broken blade in my hands. "We heard you were dead, Silversssaint."

"Who's we, you unholy bitch?"

'The highblood scoffed softly, as if I'd said something amusing. She turned dead eyes back to Dior, sharp fingernails glinting as she beckoned. "Come with uss, ch—"

'A fierce light stabbed through the trees. Ghostly and bright. Looking over my shoulder, I saw the old priest stumbling towards us, the wheel he'd worn around his neck now in his fist. He held the holy symbol aloft, spitting scripture like a sailor spat curses.

"I am come among thee as a lion among lambs!"



'Light was spilling from his wheel as if from a mirrored lantern. The highblood flinched as it struck her, death-pale eyes narrowed against the flare. I was awed for a moment, remembering the nights when my faith shone as bright as this priest's did, when the sight of the ink on my skin was enough to burn the Dead blind. And as the old man ran towards us, a roar rang through the woods. I saw that red lioness from the taverne barrel out of the darkness, scarred face twisted as she bared her fangs. The Ossian slayer ran through the snow behind, antlered helm on her head, that beautiful battleaxe in her fists.

'At the sight of the she-lion, the priest's burning light, the highblood hissed. Her pale gaze was still fixed on Dior, but fear of that holy man was overcoming her will, the chill in the air fading as the priest finally crashed into the clearing, wheel held high.

"I banish you!" the old man bellowed. "In the Almighty's name, away!"

"Wretched priessst," the thing spat, hand up against the light. "You d—"

"And I say to you, my children, I am the light and the truth!" The old man stepped forward with the wheel in his wrinkled fist. "You have *no* power here!"

'Another hiss spilled from behind that cold, painted mask. The lioness roared again, charging closer, and the coldblood's body seemed to tremble at its edges. And as the beast leapt towards her, claws outstretched, the vampire swept her coat about her and dissipated into a storm of tiny wings – a thousand blood-red moths spilling into the darkness and vanishing up into the falling snows.

'I swallowed hard, the taste of dust and bones in my mouth.

'It was over.

'I looked around the gathering. Chloe clutched her arm where the wretched had bitten her, face twisted with pain. The soothsinger knelt beside her, pale with worry. The slayer stared at me, her axe glinting in the fading light of the old priest's wheel.

'But I had eyes only for the boy. He was crouched in the muck, his burning brand still held in one white-knuckled fist, a smoking cigarelle hanging from his lips.

'Lackwitted strumpet-stain, ye almost s-saw us killed. What in Gods' names w—

'I slipped Ashdrinker into her scabbard to quiet her. Looked the lad up and down. There seemed nothing particularly odd about him. But still, and despite what my blade might have said, I was no one's fool.

"So what's your fucking story?"

+ XI +

OUT OF THE STORM

"SAY NOTHIN', DIOR," the clanswoman warned.

"I'd no plans to, Saoirse," the boy replied, scowling at me.

"Sister, are you aright?" The young soothsinger knelt at Chloe's side. "Is it deep?"

"It's fine, Bellamy," she replied, lifting her blood-soaked sleeve. "A scratch."

'One glance told me the wound was anything but. Chloe's bicep was bleeding from a vicious bite, skin already bruising from that monster's unholy strength.

"Wretched mouths are rife with rot," I said. "That'll fester if we don't treat it. I've some kingshield and gut in my saddlebags. Strong spirits too."

'Dior dragged on his smoke. "We'd hate to part you from your revels, hero."

"It's medicinal alcohol, boy. You'd have to be thick as pigshit to drink it."

"You just leave the door wide open, don't you?"

"Look, who the fuck are you?"

"Perhaps introductions can wait?" Chloe winced, waving at the storm and carnage about us. "Stench of dismembered corpses notwithstanding, it's getting worse out here."

"A brave woman enjoys the wild's kiss on her skin, Sister," the slayer said.

"And a wise man knows to come in from the rain," the priest smiled.

'The soothsinger nodded to the ruined tower. "Let's shelter inside."

'The company gathered their possessions, the rake helping Chloe stand while I went to fetch Jezebel. I found the mare a few hundred yards away, standing in the lee of a naked elm. I gave her a soft pat and a thorough looking over, but luckily she seemed none the worse for wear. And taking her reins, I led her back to the tower.

'I got a better look at the ruin as I approached – three storeys high, dark stone, crowned with broken battlements. The walls were crawling with old lichen and new fungus, the mortar crumbling to dust. It'd stood for centuries, mostlike – built by Sūdhaemis back when Elidaen was still five feuding kingdoms, and San Michon began her crusade to bring the One Faith to every corner of the land.

'The company was gathered within, sheltered from the rain as best they could. The slayer glowered in the shadows, twin interwoven lines inked down her brow and right cheek, clawing the braided hair from her face as that she-lion curled about her feet. Dior was brushing the snow from his fine stolen coat. The priest and rake gathered around Chloe, cleaning her bloodied arm. I shooed the pair away, knelt beside my old friend, placing a small bottle of pure spirits and a phial of pale yellow powder on the stone.

"This'll burn like a strumpet's nethers when the fleet is in town," I warned. "But it's a fucksight better than gangrene." "Merci, mon ami," Chloe nodded.

'I set about the wound, my hands quick and sure, washing and sterilizing as Chloe hissed in soft agony. "Right, so who are you lot? Aside from a lodestone for the Dead?"

"F-friends," Chloe winced.

"Chosen," the slayer replied.

"Believers," the priest murmured.

"Oh, Seven Martyrs save me," I sighed.

"My name is Bellamy Bouchette," the young rake declared with a small bow. "Soothsinger, adventurer, lover of women, and songsmith to emperors." He flipped damp brown curls from sparkling blue eyes. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Silversaint. I've heard your exploits sung all the way from Asheve to the shores of the Mothersea. I fear your legend does your reality ... no justice at all."

'Oui, I thought to myself. Definitely a wanker.

"This is good Père Rafa Sa-Araki," Bellamy said, nodding to the Sūdhaemi priest. "Scholar, astrologer, and devout member of the Order of San Guillaume. Never was there a man under heaven more in need of having his lute professionally strummed, but he's a splendid fellow beneath the repression, really."

'The old priest spoke with a voice that would've sounded like music on any pulpit in the land. "My thanks for your aid, Chevalier. Seven Martyrs bless you."

"Our resident butcher, baker, and candlestick maker," Bellamy said, waving to the Ossian lass. "M^{lle} Saoirse á Rígan. She's terrible at baking and candles, by the by, but her skill at butchery more than makes up for it. Her four-legged companion there is Phoebe. I'd advise against trying to pat the little scamp if you're at all fond of your fingers."

'The lass just stared at me, hands on her axe, while the lioness licked her chops.

"Our good Sœur Sauvage, you already know," Bellamy continued. "Which leaves the youngest of our band." The soothsinger waved to the ashen-haired boy. "Gabriel de León, may I present Dior Lachance, Prince of Thieves, Lord of Liars, and incorrigible little bastard."

"You forgot whoreson," the boy muttered around his smoke.

"Dior, a gentleman never refers to a lady plying honest trade as a whore."

"My mother was no lady. And you're no gentleman, Bellamy."

"You wound me, monsieur," the fellow grinned, tipping his idiotic hat.

'I finished cleaning Chloe's wound, a steel needle between my teeth as I fetched my spool of gut. "So now I've your names. But I still don't know who the fuck you are." I cast my eyes over the group, settling at last on the boy. "You in particular."

"I'm no one special."

"Is that so?" I looked to Chloe, hoping to slice through the bullshit. "Someone came to Dhahaeth looking for Monsieur Nobody Special after you left. And they'd have run through that town like a dose of the scratch if I hadn't been there to stop them."

"I told ye." Saoirse glanced around the group. "Phoebe could smell them miles away. We've had coldbloods on our trail since Lashaame."

"This wasn't just a coldblood," I replied. "This was Danton Voss."

"... Who?"

"Sweet Mothermaid, you lackwits have no fucking idea what you're doing, do you?"

"Mind yer tongue, Silversaint," the lass spat.

"Danton Voss is the youngest heir of Fabién. A direct descendant of the most powerful vampire that walks this earth. If the Forever King wants someone found, Danton is the child he sends, and he's not failed his father yet." I glowered at Chloe as I began stitching her bleeding arm. "You want to tell me what you did to make the Forever King set his most faithful bloodhound on your tail?"

"Seven Martyrs." Chloe made the sign of the wheel. "The Beast of Vellene."

"I saw him off," I said, still scarcely believing it. "But only because he came to those walls during the day and found me instead of you. Why would a creature as old as Danton risk himself like that, Chloe? Is it this Grail nonsense you were spitting last night?"

'The group looked at Chloe, aghast.

"Ye told him?" Saoirse hissed.

"Not everything." Chloe glanced about the company, wincing as I stitched. "But Gabe was the man who put me on this path to begin with. *Years* ago. And God brought him to us for a reason. He's the greatest swordsman of the Silver Order who ever lived."

"Fat lot of good swordsmen o' the Silver Order have done ye so far, Sister."

"We need him, Saoirse."

"Why?"

"Because the Beast will be back. And next time, he'll come at *night*."

"What does Voss want with this boy?" I demanded. "It's sure as shit got naught to do with children's tales."

"The Grail is no children's tale, Silversaint," Père Rafa said, cleaning the muck from his spectacles. "From holy cup comes holy light; the faithful hand sets world aright. And in the Seven Martyrs' sight, mere man shall end this endless night."

'I glanced at Chloe. "We're spouting shitty poetry now?" 'Tis no mere poem," the priest said.

"It's a prophecy, Gabe," Chloe said. "The Forever King.
The Endless Legion. Daysdeath. The Grail can put an end to all of it."

"This isn't one of your library books, Chloe. I thought you'd have outgrown that shite by now. One of you mad fucks best start talking straight-wise."

"The cup of the Redeemer's blood *can* end this darkness," the priest insisted.

"Bullshit," I spat. "The cup has been lost for centuries! And even if you had it, there's ten thousand Dead amassing north of Augustin. Nordlund's gone. North of the Dílaenn, the bloodlords have torn the empire to ribbons! How is a fucking cup supposed to fix that?" "Because it holds the Redeemer's blood. God's own son, who died upon the whe—"

"Spare me, god-botherer."

"Gabriel, ask yourself this," Chloe said. "If the Grail is such nonsense, if the prophecy such rot, why has the Forever King got his son chasing us?"

"I don't fucking know! What's the Grail to do with *any* of you?"

"He knows where it is."

'I looked to the slayer, who was watching me like a hawk watches a hare. Her strawberry-blonde braids hung about her eyes as she stared me down, her gaze finally flickering to Dior as the snow danced in the air outside.

"The bairn," she said. "He knows where it is."

'I looked at the lad. Dior cast an accusing glare at the slayer, then at Chloe.

"You know where the Grail is?" I demanded.

'The boy shrugged, blowing a plume of thin grey smoke from his lips.

"The silver chalice of San Michon," I scoffed. "The cup the Crusaders carried before them as they fought the Wars of the Faith, and forged the five kingdoms into one empire."

'The boy crushed his traproot cigarelle underheel. "So the Testaments say."

"He's full of shit," I spat, glowering at Chloe.

"No, Gabe." Chloe winced as I wrapped her wound. "He knows where the Grail is. And the Forever King *knows* he knows. Why else would the Beast of Vellene be hunting us?"

'I stared at the boy, thoughts at war in my head. This seemed the darkest shade of lunacy. The kind of rot that pulpit-riders feed children when they're scared of the night. There was no magik spell, no holy prophecy that would bring an end to this darkness. This was our here and our now and our forever.

'But apparently Fabién Voss believed. And if the Forever King was desperate enough to send his own children to hunt this boy ...

'Chloe stood with a grimace, flexing her bandaged arm, whispering thanks. And taking my hand gently, she drew me away so the others might not hear.

"This is a fool's errand, Chloe Sauvage."

"Then call me a fool, Gabriel de León."

"I'll call you that and more. Where do you plan to lead this pageant of fuckarsery?"

"San Michon."

"San Michon? Have you taken leave of your senses? You're taking these fucking children into the Nordlund? You're *never* going to reach the monastery before wintersdeep sets in. Danton is going to find you, and when he does—"

"I need you, Gabriel. I told you, it's not by accident we met again. For us to find each other after all these years, in the midst of all this dark ... you *have* to see the hand of the Almighty at work here, you—"

"Fucksakes, give it a rest, Chloe. You've been bleating the same tune since Astrid dragged you into that Library seventeen years ago."

'Her scowl darkened. "I wish to God she was here, then. Azzie could always make your pigheaded, dim-witted, prettyboy arse see sense."

'I chuckled at the insults, despite myself. Scratching ruefully at my chin. "Making her husband see sense is the lot of every bride, it seems."

'Chloe's eyes widened. "You're ... married?"

'I lifted my hand to show the silver troth ring on my finger. "Eleven years."

"Oh, Gabriel," she whispered. "... Children?"

'I nodded, eyes shining. "A daughter."

"Sweet Redeemer." Chloe's blood-slicked hands slipped into my own. "Oh, merciful God in heaven, I'm so happy for you both, Gabe."

'I could see pure joy in her smile then. The kind of joy only the truest of friends feel, to learn their friends have found joy also. Her eyes brimmed with tears. And I remembered what a good heart she had, Chloe Sauvage. Better than mine ever was.

'And then her smile slowly died. Her shoulders slumped, and she looked over her little band, bloodied and alone in the dark. I could see the road ahead in her eyes. The wartorn wastes of the Ossway. The barren hell of Nordlund beyond. The growing sea of darkness in which humanity's light guttered like a candle, soon to be extinguished entirely.

'Chloe hung her head. "I can't ask you to risk all that."

'She released her grip, my tattooed hands falling away from her own.

"Tell Azzie hello for me. Tell her ... tell her I'm happy for her." Chloe sniffed and swallowed thickly, damp curls tumbling about freckled cheeks. "Adieu, mon ami."

'And she turned to walk away.

"... Chloe."

'She looked back at me, eyebrow raised. I opened my mouth to speak, not knowing yet what I'd say. And it seemed for a moment that everything stood poised on the edge of a knife. Those moments happen only once or twice in a lifetime. I could see two paths, either side of the blade. One where I helped this old friend of mine. And one where I left her to die.

"... I can ride with you awhile. See you to the Volta, at least."

"I can't ask you to do that, Gabe."

"You didn't ask. Which is why I'm offering." I glanced around the ragged company, eyes settling on Dior. "Who am I to stand in the way of divine providence?"

"But Astrid ... Your daughter ..."

"They'll understand. I'll be back with them soon enough."

'I saw my words sink in, Chloe's chest caving, all the weight she'd been carrying lifted from her shoulders. A sob

slipped over her lips, smothered at once by a fierce grin. She threw her arms around my shoulders, so short she had to take a running leap. I tried not to laugh as she squeezed me tight, smooshed her lips to my cheek.

"You're a good man, Gabriel de León."

"I'm a bastard, is what I am. Now stop kissing me. You're a nun for fucksakes."

'Chloe released her embrace. But still, she gave my hand one last squeeze, and all the light and life was shining once more in her eyes, just like when we were young. She looked up at the ceiling of that broken tower, tears spilling down her cheeks. And she put her hand to the sevenstar around her throat and whispered, "Almighty God be praised."

'I could see her joy, the relief of faith rewarded, and that faith itself, undimmed by toil or time. And for the briefest moment, I envied her more than anyone I'd ever met.

""What's her name?"

""Eh?"

"Your daughter," Chloe urged. "What's her name?"

'I breathed deep, running my thumb over my knuckles.

"Patience."

+<u>XII</u>+

TWO GLASSES

'NO,' THE VAMPIRE said.

Gabriel glanced up. 'No?'

'No, de León, this will not do.'

'Will it not?' Gabriel replied, eyebrow rising.

'It will *not*.' Jean-François waved his quill as if vexed. 'When last you mentioned her, this Rennier girl was but a novice sister in the monastery that trained you, and now I learn she became your *wife*? The mother of your child? It is my Empress's will to know the whole of your tale.'

Gabriel reached into his battered britches, fished about under the monster's stare. Finally, he retrieved a tarnished royale from his pocket. 'Here.'

'What is that for?' Jean-François demanded.

'I want you to take this coin to market, and buy me a fuck to give.'

'This is *not* the way stories are told, Silversaint.'

'I know. But I'm hoping the suspense will kill you.'

'You will take us back. Back to the walls of San Michon.'

'Will 1?'

The coldblood held up the phial of sanctus between forefinger and thumb.

'You will.'

Gabriel stared for a long and silent moment. His jaw twitched, and he gripped the armrests of his chair so hard the wood creaked. It seemed for a second he might rise, might lash out, might let loose the terrible hatred that roiled deep and dark behind his eyes. But Marquis Jean-François of the Blood Chastain was unperturbed.

Gabriel stared hard into the vampire's eyes. Gaze drifting to the phial between those tapered fingertips. The bloodhymn was still sharp in him, but that didn't mean his thirst was sated. One pipe wasn't enough.

It had never been enough, had it?

Truth was, he didn't know if he was ready to go back. Unwilling to dredge up the ghosts of the past. They were hungry too. Locked inside in his head, the door rusted shut from long disuse. If he were to prise it open ...

'If I'm going back to San Michon,' he finally declared, 'I'll need a drink.'

Jean-François snapped his fingers. The door opened at once, that thrall woman waiting on the threshold. Her gaze was downturned, thin red braids draped across her eyes.

'Your will, Master?'

'Wine,' the vampire commanded. 'The Monét, I think. Bring two glasses.'

The woman met the Dead boy's eyes, a sudden flush rising in her cheeks. She dropped into a low curtsey, long black skirts whispering as she hurried away. Gabriel listened to her retreating down a stone stairwell, glanced towards the now-unlocked door. Faint sounds of life drifted up from the château beneath – tromping feet, a snatch of laughter, a thin, warbling scream. Gabriel counted ten steps from his chair to the door. A bead of sweat trickled between his shoulderblades.

He saw Jean-François was illustrating the company of the Grail, now. Père Rafa in his robes, the wheel about his neck, the priest's warnings echoing in Gabriel's head. He saw Saoirse with her slayerbraids and hunter's stare, the shelion Phoebe beside her like a red shadow. Bellamy with his rake's cap and easy smile, and at the front, little Chloe

Sauvage, with her silversteel sword and freckled cheeks and all the hope in the world shining in her liar's eyes.

The vampire glanced up. 'Ah, splendid ...'

The thrall stood at the doorway, holding a golden platter. Two crystal goblets sat upon it, alongside a bottle of fine Monét from the Elidaeni vineyards. A vintage like that was rare as silver these nights. An emperor's fortune in dusty green glass.

The thrall placed the two goblets on the table, poured a generous helping into Gabriel's. The wine was red as heartsblood, its perfume a dizzying change from mouldy straw and rusted iron. The second glass stood empty.

Wordlessly, Jean-François held out his hand. The silversaint watched, mouth running dry as the woman sank to her knees beside the monster's chair. Her cheeks were flushed, bosom heaving as she placed her hand in his. Again, Gabriel was struck by the notion that she looked old enough to be the vampire's mother, and his stomach might have soured at the lie of it all were it not for the thought and thrill of what was to come.

The vampire looked to Gabriel as he raised the woman's wrist to his lips.



'Pardon,' he whispered.

The monster bit down. The woman moaned softly as ivory daggers slid through her pale skin and into the supple flesh

beyond. For a moment, it seemed all she could do just to breathe, fallen into the spell of those eyes, those lips, those teeth.

The Kiss, they called it – these monsters who wore the skins of men. A pleasure darker than any sin of the flesh, more honeyed than any drug. Gabriel could see the woman was lost now, adrift on a blood-red sea. And awful as it was, a part of him remembered that desire, pounding hot at his temples, down between his legs. He could feel his teeth growing sharp, a needle-bright stab of pain as he pressed his tongue against one canine.

Under her lace choker, he spied the old bite scars at the woman's neck. His blood stirring as he wondered where else she might hide the marks of their hungers. The woman's head sank back, long tresses flowing down her bare shoulders as she pressed her free hand to her breast, lashes fluttering. Jean-François's eyes were still fixed on Gabriel, narrowing slightly as a tight gasp of pleasure escaped his lips.

But then the monster broke his unholy kiss, a thin, ruby string of blood stretching and snapping as he pulled the woman's hand away. Eyes still locked with the silversaint's, the vampire held the thrall's open wrist above the empty glass and the blood spilled, thick, warm, crimson into the crystal. The scent of it filled the room, making Gabriel's breath come quicker, his mouth now dry as tombs. Wanting. *Needing*.

The vampire sliced the tip of his own thumb on his fangs, pressed it to the woman's lips. Her eyes flashed open and she gasped, suckling like a starving babe, one hand pressed between her legs as she drank. When the goblet was full, drip, drip, drip, the vampire lifted the woman's wounded wrist. And like a forgetful host, he offered it to Gabriel.

'We could share her? If it please you?'

The woman's eyes flickered to his, chest heaving and fingers strumming as she drank. And Gabriel remembered

then – the taste of it, the warmth of it, a dark and perfect joy no smoke could ever match. The thirst reared up inside him, a thrill pulsing from his aching crotch all the way to his tingling fingertips.

And it was all he could do then to hiss through clenched and knife-sharp teeth.

'No. Merci.'

Jean-François smiled, licked the woman's bleeding wrist with a bright red tongue. Easing his thumb from her mouth, the monster spoke, thick and heavy as iron.

'Leave us now, love.'

'... Your will, Master,' she whispered, breathless.

The woman rose on trembling legs, steadying herself against the monster's chair. With the wound at her wrist already closing, she sank into a shaking curtsey, and with a final wanton glance to Gabriel, slipped from the room.

The door locked softly behind her.

Jean-François lifted the blood-filled glass. Gabriel watched, fascinated, as the vampire held it against the lanternlight, twisting it this way and that. So red it was almost black. The monster's lips curled in a smile, eyes still on the silversaint's.

'Santé,' Jean-François said, wishing him health.

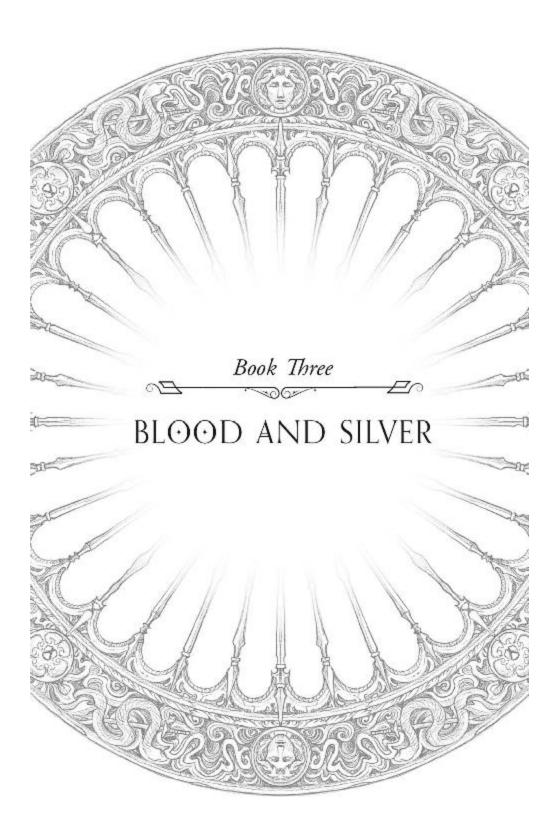
'Morté,' Gabriel replied, toasting his death.

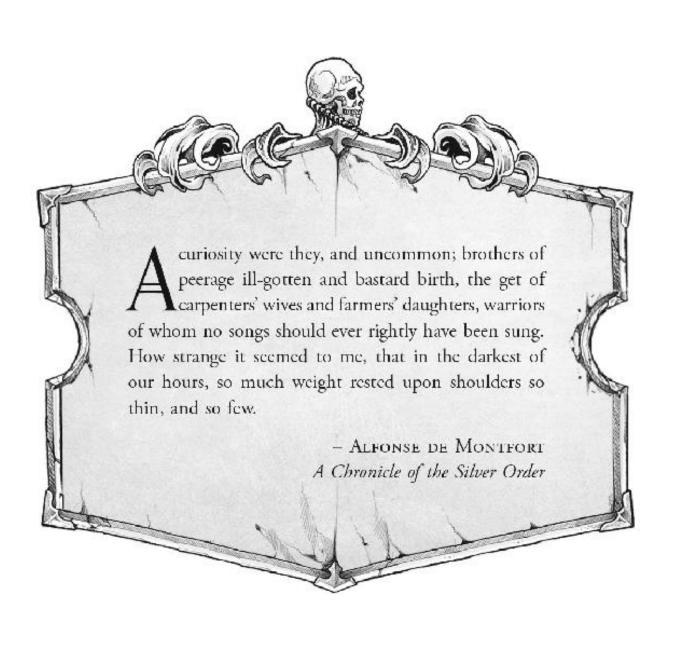
The pair drank, the vampire taking one slow mouthful, Gabriel downing his entire glass in a single draught. Jean-François sighed, sucking the plump swell of his lower lip and biting gently. Gabriel reached for the bottle and refilled his glass.

'So,' Jean-François murmured, smoothing his waistcoat. 'You were a fifteen-year-old boy, de León. A frailblooded Nordling brat, dragged from the squalid mud of Lorson to the impregnable walls of San Michon. They made a lion of you. They made a legend. A foe even the Forever King learned to fear. How?' Gabriel lifted the goblet to his lips, downed it with a long gulp. A trickle of wine spilled down his chin, and as he wiped it away, he looked at the wreath of skulls tattooed atop his right hand. Those eight letters etched across his fingers.

PATIENCE

'They didn't make a lion of me, coldblood,' he answered. 'Like my mama said, the lion was always in my blood.' He closed his hand slowly, and sighed. 'They just helped me turn it loose.'





AUSPICIOUS BEGINNINGS

'HALF A YEAR had passed since I was sworn as an initiate of the Silver Order, and every day of it, Frère Greyhand had worked me to the fucking bone.

'As Aaron de Coste had promised, the Gauntlet was the fire in which I was to be forged, or melted to slag. The dance was different every day, and for months on end, I was put to the test by my master, or by ingenious devices built by the Brothers of the Hearth.

'There was the "Thorned Men" – a knot of ever-moving training dummies that could strike you back when you hit them. "The Thresher" was a rotating series of oaken poles, thirty feet off the stone – one slip during a spar meant you'd be nursing broken bones for the rest of the day. The shifting obstacle course called "the Scar", the speed run named "the Scythe" – all designed to make us harder. Faster. Stronger.

'The sanctus they gave me to smoke every evemass was awaking the beast inside me: the strength, the reflexes, the sharpening of my paleblood senses. I felt like a blade that had been kept in a cold cellar, finally unsheathed in the sun. And yet, I knew I wasn't as sharp as the other boys around me, and never would be.

'Frère Greyhand made no mention of my frailblood heritage after the Trial of the Blood, but the taunting from Aaron and his cronies was reminder enough. Initiates at San Michon came and went, stopping days or weeks, then returning to the Hunt with their masters. Many were nobleborn, which made a kind of sense – highbloods usually liked to feed among high society. But in the end, what that meant for me was a constant stream of stuck-up tossers who looked down on me for my birth *and* my blood. Arseholes, all. I swear, there were more pricks in those Barracks than at a hedgehog's bachelor feast.

'When he could, Aaron kept company with a boy called de Séverin – son of an Elidaeni baronne. De Séverin had dark eyes and pouting lips; his face reminded me of a dead fish's, truth told. Aaron's other crony was a handsome nobleson, brown of hair and blue of eye. There was a cruelty to his stare – I reckoned the servants in his father's house would've trod carefully around the heir apparent. His name was Mid Philippe.'

Jean-François blinked. 'Mid Philippe?'

'Emperor Alexandre's father, Philippe IV, sat upon the Fivefold Throne for twenty years. Some parents name their brats for the famed, in the hope that fame rubs off. There were *three* Philippes among the initiates. We nicknamed the smallest Lil, the tallest Big, and the one between, Mid.'

'Ingenious, de León.'

'There are worse nicknames teenage boys can conjure, believe me. And I heard every one. Of the two dozen initiates I met over those six months, there were only a couple who didn't treat me like outright shite. Theo Petit, the big sandy-haired lad who'd defended me from Aaron when I first arrived at San Michon, and a wiry Ossian boy named Fincher. Finch had a face like a dropped pie and mismatched eyes, one green and one blue. Didn't bother me much, but it made the other lads nervous.'

'Why?' Jean-François asked.

'Superstition. Some folk believe a blemish like that marks you as faekin. That someone back in your famille line was

fucking with the wealdfolk. But I liked Fincher. He was of Voss blood, hard as nails. And he slept with a carving fork under his pillow. Even took it in the bath. Mad as a bucket of wet cats, he was.'

'Why a carving fork?'

'I asked the same. "Gift from me grammy afore she died," he told me, twirling it between his fingers. "Real silver, boyo."

'But even Finch and Theo weren't really my *friends*. They just didn't outright fuck with me. Every other initiate in the monastery took the same road as de Coste. "Peasant". "Boylover". "Little Kitten". These were the names they called me, Aaron worst of the lot. Porridge in my boots. Shit in my bed. All my life I'd been no one special, and even there, among these chosen of God, it seemed I'd been relegated to the bottom of the pile for what I was. The name itself spoke of weakness.

'Frailblood.'

Jean-François nodded. 'Hardly an auspicious beginning, de León.'

'It was nothing to write home about, to be sure. So, even though I wondered about my true father, who he was and how he'd known my mama, I didn't write home at all. My baby sister Celene sent me a letter every other month, keeping me informed of all that went on at home in Lorson. My little hellion sounded like she was getting up to no good, but I wasn't in a position to change any of it. I had my own shite to deal with. So, I ignored her.'

Gabriel shook his head.

'Shames me to think about it now. But I was young. Young and foolish.'

'Can it really be true, though? The Black Lion, hero of Augustin, wielder of the Mad Blade and slayer of the Forever King himself ... a water-blooded wretch?'

'Some people are born lucky, coldblood. And some people make their own.'

'Surely there was somewhere in San Michon you exceeded expectations?'

'Not at first. I was good with a sword. But only because Papa had drilled me hard as a lad. I liked being in the Gauntlet. I *loved* learning the hymn of blades Greyhand showed us. Steel never judged me, see. Steel was mother. Steel was father. Steel was friend. But I never walked into anything and found I was simply *good* at it. The only way I shone at anything in my life was being too much of a stubborn bastard to quit.'

'You *are* quite the bastard, de León, I shall grant you that.' 'I don't like to lose, coldblood.'

'The sin of pride serves you well, then.'

'See, I never understood that. Why pride is looked on as an evil. You work hard at something you're not born good at? Damn right you should be fucking proud. There's nothing comes of quitting besides the knowledge you didn't finish.'

Gabriel shook his head.

'It's only in faerie tales that everything works out for the best with a magik spell or a prince's kiss. It's only in storybooks some little bastard picks up a sword and wields it like he was born to it. The rest of us? We have to work our arses off. And we might not ever taste triumph, but at least we dared to fail. We stand apart from those cowards whispering on the sidelines about how the strong did stumble, while never daring to set foot in the ring themselves. Victors are just folk who were never satisfied being vanquished. The only thing worse than finishing last is not beginning at all. And fuck finishing last.'

The vampire glanced to the night just outside the window, the empire rising beyond. 'I'd have thought your kind accustomed to it by now, de León.'

'Touché.'

'Merci.'

'Smartarse.'

'So after six months, you were not yet a full-fledged 'saint of the Order?'

'Not even close. I needed to complete two more trials before I'd even finish the bare bones of my aegis.' Gabriel ran his fingertips up his left arm, over the silver tattoos. 'This arm got inked after the Trial of the Hunt – presuming you survived. Your other arm would be filled after you'd killed your first horror with your own sword. The Trial of the Blade.'

'What then, had you earned in the Trial of the Blood?' Gabriel pulled down the neck of his tunic, showing a hint of the roaring lion on his chest.

'That looks like it was painful,' the vampire mused.

'Didn't tickle. But as usual, I'd no idea what I was in for the day I got it.' Gabriel shook his head, smiling faintly. 'I was so excited the night before, I couldn't sleep. The inkwork on Greyhand and Abbot Khalid and the other silversaints had always held a fascination for me. But this was to be the first part of my aegis. The first true sign I actually *belonged* there.

'As I marched into the great Cathedral of San Michon on findi morn, I saw four figures awaiting me at the altar, bathed in soft light and choirsong. Even beneath her veil, I recognized the scarred, dour face of Charlotte, Prioress of the Silver Sorority. She and the sister beside her wore black habits, faces daubed white, red sevenstars painted over their eyes. But the other two figures wore the dove-white robes of novices. The first was short, green-eyed and freckled, a rogue curl of mouse brown escaped from the edge of her coif.'

'Your Chloe Sauvage, I presume?' Jean-François asked. Gabriel nodded.

'And looking at the girl beside her, I saw dark smoky lashes, a raised eyebrow, a beauty spot beside quirked lips. I realized this was the sisternovice I'd met in the stables the

day I chose my horse. The same who'd inked my palm at my first mass.'

'Astrid Rennier,' the vampire said.

"Remove your tunic and lay upon the altar, Initiate," Prioress Charlotte commanded.

'I did as I was told. Sisternovice Chloe bound me down with leather straps, shiny steel buckles, and I winced at the chill of the spirits she poured on my skin. These four were holy women of the Silver Priory, brides or betrothed of God Himself, and I dared not even glance at them. Instead, I looked to the statue of the Redeemer above. But still, I could feel Sisternovice Astrid beside me, smell the rosewater in her hair, hear the soft whisper of her breath as she ran a straight razor over the muscles of my chest.

'There was something impossibly intimate about it. Even with other eyes upon us. Her touch was gentle as feathers, the press of her fingertips to my skin had goosebumps crawling over every inch of me. My heart was all a-gallop. And despite my best efforts, I found my blood rushing to a place I'd absolutely *no* desire for it to be.'

Gabriel chuckled to himself.

'You ever get an erection in front of a pack of nuns, coldblood?'

'Not that I can recall, no.' Jean-François frowned slightly. 'Although admittedly, I've never found myself in need of one where nuns are concerned.'

'Well, it's not ideal. To their credit, if any of the sisters noticed, they were too polite to call attentions. I thought perhaps the thrill of the sisternovice's touch would fade once Prioress Charlotte began stabbing those needles into my skin. But as I saw Astrid take up a long silver lance, I realized she herself was to do my inking.

"Blessed Michon," she prayed, "First of the Martyrs, heed this prayer in blood and silver. We anoint this flesh in your name, and offer this boy in your service. May all heaven's host bear witness, and all hell's legion tremble. Sweet Mothermaid, give me patience. Great Redeemer, give me strength. Almighty Father, give me sight."

"Véris," the other sisters replied."

Gabriel shook his head, sighing soft.

'The room was filled with choirsong, yet all was silence. We were surrounded by sisters of the Priory, and somehow, completely alone. There was only pain between me and that girl then. Pain and promise. Her breath was cool on my bare and bleeding skin. Her hands warm as firelight as she hurt me, again and again.

'I'd thought my sevenstar was painful, but it was a honeyed bliss compared to this. Thirteen hours I lay on that altar, bathed in candlelight and pain from the hands of that strange and beautiful girl. It was agony. It was euphoria. And somewhere in the middle of it, both became interlinked. I couldn't bear another moment. I never wanted it to end. I wanted her to stop, and I wanted her to keep hurting me, some dam of pressure breaking loose inside. Pain had been punishment when I was a boy. But now it had become reward. Bliss in torment. Salvation in suffering.

'I didn't realize I was crying until it ended. And Sisternovice Chloe poured a measure of what felt like freezing fire over my bleeding skin, and Astrid Rennier spoke like an angel into my ear.

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"This is the hand,
"That wields the flame,
"That lights the way,
"And turns the dark,
"To silver."
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The Last Silversaint shrugged. 'And then it was done.'
Jean-François continued writing in his tome, though his
eyes flickered to Gabriel's small and secret smile. 'The
design is of some importance?'

Gabriel blinked hard, as if coming back to himself. And slowly, he nodded.

'The chestpiece of the aegis signifies a silversaint's bloodline. De Coste had that wreath of roses and snakes, which along with his ability to crawl right on my tits marked him as the Blood of Ilon. Theo and Abbot Khalid both wore the broken shield and roaring bear of the Dyvok. The wolves on Greyhand's chest were for the Blood of Chastain, which explained his affinity with Archer. I'd often thought that falcon could understand when he spoke to it. Turns out, I wasn't wrong.'

'And that is why you wear the lion,' the historian smiled. 'Your dear mama.'

'I'd no vampire bloodline to call my own. I knew nothing of my father, nor what my mama had been to him. His lover? His victim? His slave? But whatever uncertainty I had about the vampire who'd sired me, I knew at least I was hers. So I clung to that truth she'd given me as a boy. One day as a lion is worth ten thousand as a lamb. I wore that ink like armour. I worked harder than I'd ever worked in my fucking life, no matter what shit the other boys threw. Not just in the Gauntlet, either. We were expected to master all manner of knowledge – the geography of the empire, catechisms of the One Faith, and tactics of great battles. The banes of the horrors we hunted, the preparation of chymical weapons – black ignis, silver caustic, hellspark, and sanctus most important of all.

'I'd never been much for schooling. Seraph Talon gave us lessons in the Great Library or Armoury, aided as ever by his dutiful assistant, Aoife. The good sister was a patient tutor, and no slouch when it came to the arte of chymistrie. But Talon was a bastard, plain and simple. That damned ashwood switch of his tasted my palms more times than I can remember. My every mistake was met with a bloody thrashing and a creative curse about the shite in my veins

or my mother's virtue. But his punishments only spurred me on.

'I cut gashes into my heel to remember the ounces of brimstone in a one-pound silverbomb. Each morning, I'd prick the measure of shadeberry for a jigger of angelgrace or the amount of yellowwater in a charge of black ignis into my fingertips with my sword. Every day for four weeks, I plucked hairs to etch the number of hollyroot drops in a dose of sanctus into my mind. Anything, *everything* I could do to remember.'

'You plucked hairs from your head to remember a recipe?' 'Not my head.'

The historian glanced down at the silversaint's crotch, one eyebrow raised.

Gabriel nodded. 'Every day for four weeks.'

'How many hollyroot drops are in a dose of sanctus?'

'Sixteen,' Gabriel answered immediately.

'Good God Almighty, de León.'

'I told you, coldblood. Some people are born lucky. And some people make their own. I'd had nothing ever handed to me, save this curse in my veins. But this was my life now. And if I were to spend it among these hunters in the dark, then I'd damned well be the best of them, or die trying. And my opportunity for the latter finally arrived, after half a year of blood and sweat and silvered ink.

'A frail summer had been and gone at San Michon, and winter's chill was in the air. I was training at the Thorned Men, nursing a split lip and cracked cheekbone. Master Greyhand was atop the Thresher, wailing away on Aaron. It was around noonbells when the Gauntlet doors opened wide and Abbot Khalid strode into the training ground.

'I was in awe of Khalid. Greyhand was a swordsman both sharp and swift, but the abbot was a force of nature. The Blood Dyvok flowed in his veins as in Theo's, and I'd seen him at training, wielding twin two-handed swords, one in each grip. All palebloods were strong, but Khalid was fucking terrifying.

'He strode into the sevenstar circle, and Greyhand and Aaron leapt down from the Thresher. All three of us bowed in respect as Khalid's kohled green eyes met our master's.

"The town of Skyefall has been struck by malady. A wasting sickness none can explain. Mayhaps witchery. A fae curse, or cultists of the fallen. For my part, I smell a coldblood's work. But regardless, our Emperor Alexandre demands answers. Go with God and Martyrs to seek the truth of it."

'Greyhand made the sign of the wheel. "By the Blood." 'Khalid nodded, then glanced to me. "Do us proud, Little Lion."

'Archer wheeled through the sky above, his shrill call piercing the air. My heart swelled in my chest. After six months of tireless work, I'd finally been deemed worthy to leave San Michon. De Coste's proud jaw was set. As Khalid spun on his heel, Master Greyhand turned to us. And though his features were stone as always, I thought I caught a hint of a smile in his voice.

"At last, lads," he said. "We Hunt."

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THE FIVE LAWS

'GREYHAND'S BLADE SCYTHED towards my throat, glinting red in the firelight. With a gasp, I turned it aside, feeling the strength of his blow jar my arm as he sent me tumbling.

"Initiate de Coste," he said. "When stalking vampires, what is Law the First?"

'Aaron stepped aside from Greyhand's strike, countered with a stab of his own. Our master met de Coste's thrust, locking the lad up and waiting for his answer.

'We'd been travelling two weeks through Nordlund, and the mining town of Skyefall was but a day's ride away. We'd camped in the foothills below it, just south of the Velde River. And as was our nightly ritual, before we ate, we earned our fucking dinner.

"Law the First," Aaron panted. "The dead cannot kill the Dead."

"Good. What does it mean?"

"We can't kill coldbloods if we're killed ourselves, Master."

'Greyhand's boot collided with the boy's chest, sent him flying back into the corpse of a nearby fir. De Coste struck the trunk hard enough to crack the roots, and the whole tree tilted like a two-pint drunkard. Twirling his blade, Greyhand spoke as if out for a stroll on prièdi.

"Indeed. Of all the prey that silversaints stalk, coldbloods are perhaps the most dangerous. You must be cunning and

cautious in pursuit of the Dead. They surely didn't survive for centuries by being less so. Mistake not stupidity for courage. Do not be fear's slave, but its friend. Look. Think. Then act."

"Don't be a dumb fuck," I murmured.

'Greyhand parried Aaron's charge, smashed his blade aside, and punched him full in the face, sending the lordling onto his backside. Turning, he stalked across the frozen ground back towards me. "Since you're feeling talkative, de León, recite Law the Second."

'I ducked below the sweep of his blade, skipped backwards towards the fire. "Dead tongues heeded are Dead tongues tasted, Master."

"And what does that mean?"

"Listen to nothing they say."

'Greyhand feinted, and like a fool, I took the bait. Swift as a serpent, he struck at my swordarm, opening up my bicep to the bone. I cried out, felt my legs swept out from under me, crashing onto the muddy ground.

"Very good, Little Lion," Greyhand said. "All highbloods can bend the minds of men. Their gaze can mesmerize, their words are iron-clad commands to the weak-willed. Especially the Blood Ilon. But moreover, their currency is deceit. Coldbloods are foxes and serpents all. Listen not to a word these bastards hiss, lest you find yourself their meal."

'I rose from the ground and Greyhand met my strike, pale green eyes flashing. We exchanged a flurry of blows, firelight dancing on steel. Fast as a hummingfly's wings, Greyhand buried his pommel into my stomach so hard I almost puked. And with a savage uppercut from his hilt, I was sent flying in a spray of blood and spit.

"Now, young Lord de Coste. Law the Third?"

'Aaron dodged Greyhand's strike, parried another. "The Dead run quick, Master."

"I know you can speak by rote, boy. What do you think?"

'Aaron struck back, opening up a thin line of red along Greyhand's chest. "Our enemy runs quick." The lordling twirled his blade in triumph. "Quicker than we do."

"Excellent." Greyhand ran his fingers through his blood and smiled. "Mark this one well, Initiates. Your enemy is stronger than you are. Faster. More resilient. A single wretched is a match for a dozen men. An ancien highblood can break your bones with a touch, and move fast as winter wind. You have weapons and training to even the scale. But underestimate this foe, and you *die*."

'Again, Greyhand lunged, but this time, twice as fast and sure. Aaron moved too slow, and with expression unchanged, Greyhand thrust his sword through the lordling's belly and right out through his back. Aaron gasped as Greyhand *twisted* the blade loose and dropped him groaning to the floor.

"Law the Fourth," Greyhand said, turning to me. "The Dead feel as beasts, look as men, die as devils. What does it mean?"

'I raised my sword in my off-hand, heart hammering. "They're ... complicated."

'Greyhand came at me like a thunderbolt. I recognized his patterns from the Gauntlet, countering with my own. I came close to spitting the bastard, too. But then he smashed my blade aside and drove his sword through me so hard I was pinned to the tree behind me. Moaning in agony, I clutched the five feet of steel now skewered through my chest as Greyhand wandered back to the fire to check on dinner.

"Complicated, oui," he mused, stirring the steaming pot. "But in many ways, coldbloods are at root, the same. Oh, they may act as men. But you need only starve one for a night or two to discover what lies under the silken finery and cherry lips. A mortal man will fight with all he has to protect his famille. But I swear by Almighty God and all the host of heaven, you've not seen true fury until you've witnessed

the jealous rage with which these devils fight to preserve their own lives."

'Aaron had picked himself up, bloody drool leaking from his mouth. His face was paler than usual, blonde hair plastered to red cheeks. But Greyhand held up a hand.

"Nono, it's almost ready. Help de León."

'De Coste gave a weary nod. Thrusting his training blade into the muddy ground, he trudged around the fire to assist me. I had both bloodied hands wrapped around Greyhand's sword, trying to drag it free from the tree he'd spitted me upon.

"You forgot Law the F-fifth, Master," I groaned.

'Greyhand took a sip from his iron ladle, smacked his lips. "Needs salt."

'Aaron took hold of the sword embedded in my chest, giving me a sadistic smile. "Even the Dead have laws."

"Even the Dead have laws," Greyhand nodded, sprinkling the pot with a fingerful of seasoning. "This is the simplest, Initiates, and most comforting. For even though these monsters are spat straight from hell's maw, they are still governed by rules. They can cross no rivers save at bridges, nor enter a dwelling without invitation. They cannot set foot upon sanctified ground, nor bear the sight of sacred icons wielded by a person of pure faith. They have weaknesses, is the point. Weaknesses you will learn to exploit."

'I tried not to cry out as de Coste wrenched the blade loose. Falling to my knees, I pressed hard to staunch the blood, the chest wound bubbling as I breathed.

"De León, being headstrong isn't a boon in combat, it just means you're easy to fake," Greyhand declared. "This is swordplay, not loveplay. Don't go where your partner leads you, go where you need to be."

"Oui, Master," I groaned, dragging my knuckles across my bloody chin.

"De Coste, your feint announces its approach from two provinces over, and you're too cocky by half. Don't start celebrating 'til your quarry is in the damned ground."

"Understood, Master," the lordling said, spitting more red.

"Good. Now come eat while it's hot."

Jean-François was staring at Gabriel, his expression somewhere between amusement and disbelief. 'This was how your master trained you in bladework?'

Gabriel shrugged. 'It wasn't like he was doing any permanent damage. We were palebloods, and our sparring blades were ordinary steel. The flesh wounds would be gone in an hour. Even the worst of it would heal by dawn. But the *pain*, that was real. You want to teach someone a lesson about keeping their guard high, stab them in the baps a few times, they'll get the message.

'Bruised and bloodied, we settled down around the fire. Greyhand said the Godthanks as always, and I served the meal while Archer watched from the branches above. Dinner was mushroom ragout, one of our master's favourites. He wasn't the finest cook in the empire, but all I could taste was my own blood anyway.

'The brief summer was done, and winter's bite was in the wind. I could barely recall the springs of my youth, all the world cloaked in flowers. I remembered my sister Amélie weaving wreaths for Mama's hair when we were children. Celene and I running in green fields. But snow fell six months of the year now, and all the land seemed soaked in gloom and the smell of brimstone. Miserable leaves clung to the branches of failing trees, slowly being overgrown with a new luminous fungus called maryswort. The chill cut to the bone. The river's song was distant, muffled, and a thought struck me as we ate, brought on by Greyhand's talk of Law the Fifth.

"Master? What happens when the rivers freeze?"

'De Coste scoffed, holding his wounded belly. "Aside from the obvious?"

"Must you be a sour-tongued prick all your life? I'm talking about the armies of the Forever King. If coldbloods

can't cross running water, but rivers freeze ..."

"You've the truth of it, Little Lion," Greyhand said.
"Wintersdeep is not our friend. In summer, the Emperor's generals can guard bridges against the Forever King's host. Stop him crossing, or at least force a battle of their choosing. But when the freeze sets in again ..."

"Voss can cross wherever he likes," I murmured.

"So we fear," Greyhand nodded, stirring his bowl.

"How long until he marches?"

"We know not. Scouting in those freezing wilds is difficult, but we've had no word out of Talhost in months. The region is surely a wasteland by now. The Forever King likely waits in Vellene upon his corpse throne for the freeze to begin, yet it's only a matter of time before he pushes east to feed his legion. But still, we have advantage." Greyhand nodded to the snowcapped peaks above. "There are only two places he can strike, after all."

'I looked to the dark silhouettes of the mountain range around us, listening to the wind howl among its reaches. In times past, that great spine of granite marked the edge of Nordish civilization, and the beginning of the untamed lands of Talhost to the west. Hence its name: the Godsend. Each mountain in the range was named for an angel of the heavenly host. The peak above us was Eirene, Angel of Hope. The range stretched the entire northwest edge of the Nordlund, and there were only two natural gateways into the east. Two choke points guarded by two of the mightiest fortresses in the realm.

"Avinbourg in the north," de Coste murmured. "Or Charinfel in the south."

'Greyhand nodded. "Those two cityforts have guarded the Nordlund's flank since the Wars of the Faith. And Voss must take one of them if he wishes to take the empire. We know not which he'll strike, but one thing is certain. When the rivers freeze, his hammer falls."

'Greyhand looked to the darkened skies, his mood growing fey.

"Is it true what you told me, Master?" I asked. "About the attack on Vellene?"

"'Tis true," Greyhand nodded, his voice grim. "Voss took the city and slaughtered all within the walls. It's said one of his heirs, the beast Danton, murdered every virgin maid in Vellene with his own hand. The dark twins Alba and Alene set the grand cathedral ablaze with a thousand or more people inside, murdering anyone who fled the flames. And Fabién's youngest daughter, Laure, gathered all the newborn babes in Vellene, filled the fountain in the market square with their blood, and *bathed* in it."

'My stomach did a slow, sickening turn inside me.

"Laure Voss," Aaron murmured. "The Wraith in Red."

"An abomination made flesh," Greyhand spat. "But it's not for their brutality that the Forever King's brood should be feared. Nor the legend that Fabién himself cannot be slain by any warrior of woman born. No, the true reason to fear Voss is his ambition. In nights before daysdeath, to beget a wretched was considered an embarrassment among kith society. But it was Voss who first thought to forge the wretched's growing numbers into an army. It was Voss who foresaw a way vampires might conquer this empire."

'Greyhand set aside his bowl, stared up into black skies.

"But that's not the darkest part of it, lads. Kith are hateful and solitary creatures. Territorial. Vindictive. But the Voss are *famille*. Fabién has seven highblood descendants that we know of. And though creatures so soulless as they are incapable of true love, it *can* be said of all the world, Voss's children hate each other the least. Their unholy father calls them the Princes of Forever. Abbot Khalid says they are the deadliest creatures that walk on God's own earth. But no matter the name by which you call them, strike at one, you strike at seven. And their unholy father besides."

'Greyhand looked among us again, his voice as cold as stone.

"So we will have to kill them all."

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HUNTERS AND PREY

'THE TOWN OF Skyefall crouched on a hillside of black stone, wreathed in grey mist. As wealthy as a priest after the collection plate has been passed around, and as strange as the idea that the creator of heaven and earth needs the money in the first place. For a boy who'd grown up in a mud puddle like Lorson, it seemed the grandest metropolis. But riding into its shadow on that cold winter day, I'd no notion of the horrors we'd find there.

'Skyefall's fortune had been made in silver. Only eleven months had passed since the Forever King decimated Vellene, and back in those days, it still wasn't well known just how important that noble metal would be in future nights. Rumour had begun spreading, of course, dribbled from the lips of drunken prophets or screamed by wandering lunatics. But the gentry of Skyefall paid little heed to hearsay about Dead armies massing to the west, or coldbloods stalking freely along the hamlet roads.

'They were rich. God had clearly blessed them. And that was enough.

'Skyefall's streets were cobbled, her cathedral marbled and gilt. The architecture was baroque and gothic – all grand spires and stairways leading who knew where. But as our company plodded through her gates, I felt a shadow on that town. She was built on a granite slope, winding roads and grey buildings looming on all sides. Fog hung heavy in her streets, and her walls were decorated with reliefs of flowers that hadn't grown since the sunlight failed. In the town square stood a crow-pecked gibbet with a rotting skeleton inside – witch, the sign assured us. Streetwalkers with scabbed knees stood at lonely alley mouths, and miners with filthied faces staggered through the streets, sullen and drunk.

'The air hung chill. Damp. And far too quiet.

'I knew not what, but something in this place felt wrong.



'Justice was ever a rock beneath me, his head held high as he steamed and stomped. But as we rode up Skyefall's twisting streets, the roads grew too narrow and the stairs too treacherous. Eventually, we were forced to leave our mounts behind at a communal stable and continue on foot through the haze, up towards the noble quarter above the town.

'Greyhand marched in front, de Coste came next, and me last of all, my silver heels ringing on the stones. Local folk watched as we passed by their doors and windows, some with awe, some with fear. And yet ...

"They all stare at us, Master," I murmured.

"Such is the curse in our veins," Greyhand replied. "And it shall only deepen as you grow older. Folk are drawn to the dark within us, Little Lion, just as they are drawn to the coldbloods who made us." He looked at me sidelong. "Surely you noticed it, even as a boy?"

'I thought of the girls in my village then. Their eyes following as I passed by. Their kisses given so freely. But had they been given to me? Or this thing inside me?

"Oui," I muttered. "Perhaps."

"As we grow older, so too do we sink deeper into our curse and the power it gifts us." Greyhand nodded to the townsfolk. "Yet always, regular folk will smell something of the predator beneath your skin, de León. Some shall hate you for it. Others adore you. None will ignore you. A wolf cannot long hide among sheep. But Almighty God knows who we *truly* are. And our service to His Holy Church shall be rewarded in the kingdom of heaven."

'I took comfort in that. Buoyed by the notion that, though I was accursed, though I still didn't truly understand what I was or was becoming, all this was the will of the Almighty above. And through him, I would find salvation.

"Véris," Aaron and I replied, making the sign of the wheel.

'Our master strode over a long, cobbled bridge and onto an avenue of fine estates. Lanterns on wrought iron posts lit up the fog about us. The houses we passed seemed like strangers' faces, their windows, sightless eyes. "When we arrive, say nothing," Greyhand warned. "If there is a coldblood at work in this place, some of these townsfolk may be thralls. Mortal servants of the enemy."

'I blinked at that. "You mean people willingly serve these devils?"

"Cows," Aaron growled. "Cows praying for the night they might become butchers."

"But why would folk submit to such devilry?" I wondered. "Coldbloods can't choose who they turn. It's not as if immortality can be offered as a reward."

'Greyhand scowled. "It might surprise you, de León, what some folk would risk for even a *chance* to live forever. Coldbloods truck in temptation. Their power is in darkness. Their power is in fear. But most of all, their power is in desire. Drinking the blood of ancien can slow mortal ageing, and undo wounds that would send any man to his grave. But moreover, the act itself is addictive. Drink from the same vampire on three separate nights, and you will be enthralled. Helpless to resist its commands. In every sense, a slave." He patted the pipe in his pocket. "Hence we smoke a distillation of it, rather than drink it."

'We came to a halt outside the walls of a grand estate. Archer circled in sullen skies above, keeping a watchful eye on his master. The frère pulled down his high collar and breathed deep. "This town reeks of sin."

'I watched my master from the corner of my eye. Though Greyhand was dour and cruel, still I'd grown to admire him over the last seven months. He beat his back bloody at prayer every night. He read to us from the Testaments for an hour every morn. His devotion was a beacon, his faith a bright comfort. And though I was frailblood, he didn't judge me for it. He was as like to a father as I'd ever known, and I wanted to make him proud.

'De Coste rang an iron bell at the gate. *Him*, I admired far less. I had to admit he worked hard – even with his talk of San Michon not making a difference, Aaron still seemed to

believe in what we were doing. And yet, he treated me like common shite. In seven months, he'd not called me by my name once.

'Hard worker or no, I hated his fucking guts.

'From the look, the house before us was the grandest in Skyefall. The grounds might once have been bright with greenery, but now, only fungus grew at the feet of withered fruit trees. A magnificent mansion loomed in the estate's heart, all graven pillars and shuttered windows. Fog hung heavy on the grounds.

'A short fellow in a fine coat and powdered wig strode through the mist towards us, lantern in hand. He stopped behind the gate, looked us over.

"This is the house of Alane de Blanchet, Alderman of Skyefall?" Greyhand asked.

"I am his humble servant. Who might you be, monsieur?" 'Greyhand took out his vellum scroll. The servant's eyes widened as he saw that blob of blood-red wax, embossed with a unicorn and five crossed swords: the seal of Alexandre III, Benefactor of the Order of San Michon,

"My name is Frère Greyhand. And I will speak to your master."

Emperor of the Realm and Chosen of God Himself.

'Five minutes later, we stood in a grand parlour, holding glasses of chocolat liqueur. The walls were decorated with fine art, and an ornate suit of plate armour stood guard over a grand shelf of books. De Coste looked perfectly at ease. Unimpressed, even. But I'd never seen wealth like this in my life. This man's ashtrays could have fed ma famille for a year.

'Greyhand had unlaced his collar, removed his travel-worn tricorn. As ever, I was struck by how cold our master's features were. I fancied if I touched his face, he'd feel not like flesh, but stone. Still, I watched him like a hawk, soaking in all he did and said. *This* was the Hunt, I realized. And more than anything, I wanted to be a hunter.

"Initiate de Coste," he murmured. "When the master of the house arrives, I want you ready to use the gifts of your blood. If tempers flare, keep them dampened. If good cheer is required, provide it."

"By the Blood, Master."

"Initiate de León ..." Greyhand glanced at me then. My heart sinking as I realized a frailblood had nothing special to offer here. "Don't touch anything."

'The parlour door opened, and a portly man entered with sparse ceremony. He was in his early forties, well fed and well heeled, an ornate green alderman's sash across his chest. But despite the noble fashion of the time, he wore no wig. His hair was dishevelled, tied back in a thin, greying tail. He had the eyes of a man who had forgotten what sleep tastes like, his shoulders bent by some hidden weight.

'Behind him came another gent, a little younger. He wore black vestments and a stiff red collar, signifying the cut throat of the Redeemer. Thick dark hair was cut in a short bowl, and the sigil of the wheel hung about his neck. Skyefall's parish priest, I guessed.

'Our master removed his gloves, offered his hand. "M. de Blanchet, I am Frère Greyhand, brother of the Silver Order of San Michon."

'As the alderman took his grip, Greyhand pressed his tattooed palm atop the man's hand. *Touching him with the silver*, I realized. *Testing him for corruption*.

"The pleasure is mine, Frère," the alderman said, his voice thin as paper.

"These are my apprentices," Greyhand nodded. "De Coste and de León. We are here by imperial command to investigate rumour of a malady among the godly people of Skyefall."

"Thank the Mothermaid," the priest breathed.

"It is true, then? This town is afflicted?"

"This town is *accursed*, Frère," the alderman spat. "A curse that has already plucked the brightest flowers from

our garden. And now, threatens all we have left in this world."

'The priest placed a comforting hand on the alderman's shoulder. "M. de Blanchet's wife, Claudette, is taken ill with the sickness. And his son ..."

'De Blanchet broke, as if his face were splitting at the seams. "My dear Claude ..."

"Have strength, M. de Blanchet," the priest counselled.

"Have I not shown the strength of titans, Lafitte?" he snapped, pushing the priest's hand away. "The strength a father must conjure to put his only son in the ground?"

'De Blanchet slumped on a velvet longue, head low. Greyhand turned on the young priest, cold green eyes flickering to the silver wheel about his neck. "Your name is Lafitte?"

"Oui, Frère. By grace of God and High Pontifex Benét, I am priest of Skyefall."

"How long has your parish suffered this malady, Father?"

"Young Claude passed just before the feast of San Guillaume. Almost two months ago." Lafitte made the sign of the wheel. "Precious child. He was only ten years old."

"He was first to die?"

"But not the last. At least a dozen of the town's finest have fallen since. And I hear rumour from the poorer quarter. A wasting sickness sweeping the riverside." The young priest pressed his lips thin. "I hear other whispers also. Of folk gone missing in the night. Of witchery and shadows. I fear this town *is* accursed, good Frère."

"And now Mme de Blanchet is afflicted?"

"As if heaven has not tested me enough," the alderman whispered.

"Take us to her," Greyhand ordered.

'De Blanchet and Père Lafitte led us up a winding stairwell in the estate's heart, and though I tried to pay heed only to Greyhand, the opulence of that place struck me hard. Famine had cut the Nordlund to ribbons in the years after daysdeath. Whole communities had been destroyed, cities flooded with farmers and vintners and the like – folks whose livelihoods had wilted and rotted when the sun failed. It was only Empress Isabella's request for her husband to open the imperial granaries that had saved the people in those years before we found our new normal. Through it all, this man had lived like a lord, surrounded by objets d'art and polished mahogany and grand rows of unread books.

'But for all his wealth, it hadn't been enough to save his son.

'We arrived at double doors, and de Blanchet hesitated. "My wife is not ... properly attired for company."

"We are servants of God, M. de Blanchet," Aaron replied. "Have no fear."

'I heard the inflection in de Coste's voice, saw a predator's gleam in his pale blue eyes – the gift of the Blood Ilon. The Ilon were known as *the Whispers* among kith society, and their ability to influence the emotions of others was unparalleled. Aaron had inherited the same from his vampire father, and as he spoke, de Blanchet's face slackened. With a murmur of assent, the alderman pushed through the doorway, and with a nod to de Coste, Greyhand followed, with me on his heels.

'A roaring fireplace cast a ruddy glow in the room. Glass doors opened onto a stone balcony, but the curtains were almost closed. Marble mantelpiece. Gold trim. I smelled sweat, sickness and dried herbs. And resting on a mountain of pillows in a magnificent four-poster bed, was a woman who looked on the verge of death.

'Her skin was waxed paper, thin breast rising and falling swift as a wounded bird's. Though the boudoir was uncomfortably warm, her nightshift was laced to her chin, blankets piled atop her. She shivered in her sleep.

'Greyhand crossed the room, pressed the sevenstar upon his palm to her sallow brow. The woman moaned loudly, but her eyes remained closed. "How long has she been such?"

"Seven nights," de Blanchet replied. "I have tried every tincture. Every cure. And yet, each day my Claudette worsens, as did our Claude. I fear my wife soon shall follow our son to the grave." The alderman looked skywards, his shaking hands in fists. "What sin is mine that you would pass this measure unto me?"

'Greyhand lit a posy of dried silverbell and placed it on the mantelpiece, murmuring a prayer and watching it burn. Reaching into his bandolier, he dashed handfuls of metallic powder on the floor around the bed, studying the patterns.

"What is that, Frère?" the priest asked.

"Metal shavings. Faekin leave footprints no cold iron will touch. Tell me, M. de Blanchet, have you noticed the shade of your fires tilting towards blue near midnight? Milk souring in the morn perhaps, or cocks crowing as the sun sets?"

"... No, Frère."

"An abundance of lowborn beasts about the manor? Black cats, rats, or suchlike?"

"Nothing of the sort."

'Greyhand pursed his lips. I knew he was eliminating possibilities – witchery or the fae or servants of the fallen. "You will forgive me, monsieur. But I must examine your wife. I fear this may be uncomfortable to watch. I understand if you wish to wait outside."

"I will do no such thing," the alderman replied, standing taller.

"As you like it. But I warn you not to interfere with my examination."

'Aaron sidled up to the alderman, spoke comforting words. Again, I saw that predatory gleam in his eyes, and de Blanchet's resolve melting. Not for the first time, I found myself envious of my fellow palebloods. The power their fathers had given them. Control over beasts. Mastery of men's minds. And there I stood, with little to do save stare.

'Greyhand turned to Madame de Blanchet and opened the neck of her nightshift. The alderman tensed, Père Lafitte frowned, but neither spoke protest as Greyhand prodded the woman's throat. Finding nothing amiss, he inspected her wrists, muttering softly.

'I stood by one of the balcony doors, and as much as I wished to study Greyhand, it seemed improper to gawp at a sleeping woman in her nightwear. I cast my eyes to the floor. And there, between my boots, I spied a tiny, dark spot on the wood.

"Master Greyhand ..."

'He turned from the bed, saw me pointing.

"Blood."

'Greyhand nodded, slipped his gloves back on. And with no further ceremony, he took hold of the woman's nightshift, and tore it open.

'Father Lafitte cried protest, and the alderman stepped forward. "Now see h—"

"I am here by order of Emperor Alexandre himself," Greyhand snapped. "If the nature of your wife's affliction is such as I fear, it may be that I can save her life. But not without risk to her modesty. So decide now, monsieur, which you hold more dear!"

'De Coste patted the alderman's arm. "All is well, monsieur." And bristling with rage, de Blanchet stood down. It was a testament to Aaron's craft that the man hadn't already rebelled – if someone had stripped my wife halfnaked in front of me, I'd be breaking their fucking skull open.

"Initiate de León, bring that light closer."

'I did as Greyhand commanded, holding a lantern above Madame de Blanchet. Parting the ruined nightshift, he began inspecting the woman's sallow, naked body. But as soon as he placed one gloved hand on her breast, the alderman finally broke.

"This is an outrage!"

'Aaron seized de Blanchet's arm. "Calm yourself, monsieur."

'Père Lafitte stepped forward, "Please, Frère, I must insist —"

'I turned to the priest, warned him to be still. The alderman shouted for his servants, and the room descended into chaos before Greyhand's bellow split the air.

"HOLD!"

'Our master looked to de Blanchet, his voice dark with loathing.

"Come see, monsieur."

'De Coste released his grip, and straightening his coat with an indignant huff, de Blanchet stalked to his wife's bedside. Greyhand pointed as I held the lantern high. And there, in the dark flesh of Madame de Blanchet's right nipple, we saw small, twinned scabs.

"There are more between her legs," Greyhand said. "Hard to spot. But fresh."

"Plague sores?" the priest whispered.

"Bite marks."

"What in the name of Almighty God ..." the alderman breathed.

"Did any visitors come to Skyefall around the time your son fell ill?"

'The alderman's eyes were fixed on those tiny wounds in his wife's flesh, sheer horror on his face. Greyhand snapped his fingers for attention.

"Monsieur? Were there visitors?"

"This ... th-this is a mining town, Frère. We have visitors constantly ..."

"Anyone strange that young Claude might have come into contact with? Wanderers, or travelling performers? The kind of folk who come and go with ease?"

"Certainly not. I'd never allow my son to mix with suchlike. I ... I believe he spent time with the Luncóit boy while his mother conducted her affairs on the outskirts. He was a little older than Claude, but a fine lad of good breeding."

"The Luncóit boy," Greyhand repeated.

"Adrien," the alderman nodded. "His mother was come to Skyefall to survey a claim farther down the Godsend. She is from an old prospecting famille in Elidaen. She spent most of her time surveying the land around the town, and thus, Adrien kept Claude's company while his mother worked. Marianne, her name. A fascinating woman."

'The young priest folded his arms, his face darkening.

"You did not find her so fascinating, Father?" Greyhand asked.

"I ... I am being uncharitable," Lafitte said. "I admit I never met her."

"Not even at holy services?"

"She worked, even on prièdi," he said, obviously displeased. "Though she had time aplenty for soirees and suchlike, she never attended mass."

'Greyhand looked de Blanchet square in the eye.

"Where did you bury your son, monsieur?"

HOUSE OF THE DEAD

"DE COSTE, DE LEÓN, we three will check the tombe de famille," Greyhand said. "If the boy has Become, he is only a fledgling. But he may not be alone by now, and even young, he is still deadly. Keep your heads, and remember the Five Laws."

'We'd returned to the stables to fetch our horses, and my heart was pounding like I'd just been at spar. The de Blanchet tomb stood in the heart of the Skyefall necropolis, and with a few hours until sunset, Greyhand had decided to investigate. We'd no true idea if little Claude was responsible for the dark predations upon his mother, or the other deaths around town. But removing him from the list of suspects was the next sensible step.

'Greyhand took a spiked flail with a long silver chain from his saddlebags. "If pressed, keep your swords sheathed. If he's Become, I want this boy caught, not killed."

"To what end, Master?" de Coste asked.

"Perhaps it's naught." Greyhand glanced to the dark sun, now sinking towards the mountains. "But the name *Luncóit* means *raven child* in old Elidaeni."

"The sigil of the Blood Voss is a white raven," I murmured.

"As I say, perhaps nothing. But perhaps this Marianne has a dark sense of humour."

'Greyhand took a phial from his bandolier, coating his hands and face and rubbing down his leathers with the chymical concoction inside. As he passed it to de Coste, I saw the glass was marked with a wailing spirit.

'Ghostbreath, I noted. To mask our living scent from the Dead.

'I busied myself with my gear – black ignis and phials of holy water. I checked that my wheellock was loaded, then took the chymicals de Coste passed me. Aaron slung a length of silver chain about his chest along with his bandolier. He seemed to stand a touch taller, wrapped in his black leathers with a gleaming sevenstar at his breast. If I didn't know better, I'd have said the spoiled little prick almost looked like a vampire killer.

"Let's away." Greyhand mounted his horse. "Sunset waits for no saint."

'Skyefall was a town of tiers and levels, with richer folk living up the hillside and the poorer down the slopes. The necropolis lay in the lower end, close to the towering cathedral. We cantered through grey fog, past scowling townsfolk and a few trundling wagons. As we crossed one of the old stone bridges, I imagined the rivers to the north, the coming wintersdeep, the armies of the Forever King. Wondering what role San Michon was to play in stopping him, and if I'd be a part of it.

'The cathedral was a circular spire of marble on the edge of a shallow cliff. The doors were bronze, crafted with eerie reliefs of angels battling the fallen. Great bells rang in the belfry, Archer calling out in answer as we followed a winding road to the cliff base, and at last, found the entry to Skyefall's houses of the dead.

'As was custom, two archways led into the necropolis – one facing west for the dead, the other, which would usually face east, for the living. Large reliefs were carved into the stone – human skeletons with angels' wings, and the

Mothermaid holding the infant Redeemer. Wrought above the entrance were words from the Book of Laments.

'I AM THE DOOR ALL SHALL OPEN. THE PROMISE NONE SHALL BREAK.

'I tried to keep my nerves steady as we dismounted. Greyhand closed his eyes, one hand outstretched towards the necropolis. I wondered at his game, but in a few minutes, my answer appeared in the form of several mangy rats. They emerged from the shadowed stairwells leading to the crypts, snuffling and blinking in the fading daylight.

"Fairdawn, little lords."

'My master knelt on the cold stone and offered the vermin morsels from one of his pockets. Again, I felt that stab of envy, watching him commune with those beasts. The Blood Chastain was a curse, but still, it must have been a kind of wondrous to speak to animals of earth and sky. I patted Justice, giving him a swift hug and wondering what it would be like to know something of his mind. Something of where I'd come from.

"What tidings, little lords?" Greyhand asked. "What troubles?"

'The boldest rat, a fat fellow with a missing ear, chittered angrily. Greyhand nodded in sympathy, like an old friend griping over a mug of mulled wine.

"A sad tale. We shall mend it presently."

'Our master stood, and the rats scampered back into the gloom. "They speak of *darkthings* in the crypts.

Wrongthings." Greyhand shook his head. "Even the lowest of God's creatures recognize the evil of the Dead. But it seems there are more than one."

"How many?" I asked.

"They're rats, boy, not bookkeepers. They only know *one* and *more than one*."

'Greyhand nodded to himself, now certain: Coldbloods were at the heart of the disease afflicting this town. I felt a warm thrill in my belly as my master drew a phial of sanctus from his bandolier, tipped a dose into his pipe. In San

Michon, on the road, we took the sacrament at dusk, a routine part of our daily prayers. But we were given only the smallest taste to keep our thirst quelled.

'Greyhand was measuring a heavy dose. Obviously expecting trouble.

'He lit his flintbox, offered the pipe to de Coste. I watched the lordling breathe in, his every muscle stretching taut. Exhaling a cloud of scarlet, I saw that Aaron's teeth had grown long and sharp, his eyes flooding blood-red. It was my turn next, and the dose hit me like a warhammer to my chest, setting all my blood afire. Greyhand took the unholy sacrament last, finishing the pipe and breathing it down, his whole body trembling. When he opened his eyes, they were the colour of murder.

'He took two flasks of hellspark from our saddlebags, upending them over the stairs into the necropolis. When he was done, both stairwells were soaked with the oily red liquid and reeked of sulphur so thick my eyes watered.

"De Coste, you guard the duskdoors. De León, the dawn. If you hear the sound of my horn, the kith have evaded me. Light the hellspark to cut off their escape."

"By the Blood, Master," we both answered.

"God walks with us this day, boys. Stand your ground and fear no darkness."

'Greyhand stripped off his greatcoat and tunic, leaving his tattooed torso and arms bare. He was pure muscle, wiry and iron-hard, his aegis etched in beautiful lines of silver. Slinging on his bandolier and flail, he tipped his tricorn, then stepped into the gloom.'

Jean-François tapped his quill on the page, bringing Gabriel's tale to a halt.

'... Honestly?' the silversaint glowered. 'You're interrupting me *now*?'

'A brief clarification. But an important one.' The historian raised one tapered brow. 'Are you truly saying warriors of the Ordo Argent stripped half-naked to fight?'

Gabriel nodded. 'Being silverclad, we called it. Modesty is of little use to a corpse. And armour is of even less use when your opponent can crush steel with its fists.'

'But what about thralls? Surely they used blades and other weapons mundane?'

'We weren't worried about lackeys, coldblood. We were worried about their masters. The people who die in battle? They mostly die once the battle is done. It's not the swordblow or arrow that kills you. It's the bleeding you do afterwards. We were palebloods. We *healed*. So while an angry, well-trained thrall with a nice sharp broadsword was a threat, it paled in comparison to the threat of having your heart shown to you by the unholy bastard who just ripped it out of your chest with its bare fucking hands.

'It's not as if the aegis made us impervious either. But it served as a conduit by which God's power could be felt on the battlefield. The light of the aegis burns the eyes of the unholy. Its touch scorches their flesh. It's like an armour of blinding faith, making us harder to focus on, punishing to hit. It was an edge, and against faekin, duskdancers, coldbloods, we needed every one we could get.' Gabriel leaned back in his chair. 'Now, can I get on with my story? Or would you like to fucking tell it?'

Jean-François waved his quill. 'As you like it.'

'Right. So Greyhand descended into the necropolis. De Coste and I exchanged a red glance, but there was little for us to say. Aaron remained at the duskdoors while I trudged downhill to cover the other entrance. And there, I settled to wait.

'Paleblood senses are sharp at the best of times, but with a dose of sanctus in us, the whole world comes alive. I could hear the town above: wagons on the cobbles and the choir practising in the cathedral and the calls of a hungry babe. I watched Archer circling endlessly in the grim skies overhead. The hellspark on the stairs was pungent, but I couldn't smell myself under the ghostbreath. Lionclaw hung heavy in the scabbard at my hip. I read the inscription above the necropolis door, over and over. Words from the Book of the Redeemer.

'KNOW ONLY JOY IN THY HEART, BLESSED CHILD. FOR ON THIS DAY, LIFE IS THINE.

'Ten minutes passed without a sound. Then twenty. I stepped farther into the entrance, head tilted, but all I could hear was a faint drip somewhere within.

"He's been gone an age," I called.

'De Coste looked up from the small, tight circle he'd been pacing. "Breathe easy, Peasant. Greyhand is a cautious hunter. The dead can't kill the Dead."

'I nodded, but my unease was growing. I felt useless standing there on guard. I was a ball of nerves and restless energy, a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs, that infamous Nordlund fire hot in my veins. And then came a faint sound up the crypt stairs.

"Did you hear that?"

"... Hear what?"

'I stepped back beneath the arch, squinting down the stairs. "A cry?"

"It was the wind. Unknot your gizzards, you quivering peon."

"I heard a cry just now. What if Greyhand is in need?"

"Greyhand was stalking the dark before your worthless father slipped his dead cock into your peasant mother. Now shut up, frailblood. Hold your ground."

'I clenched my teeth, straining to hear. I *swore* I'd caught wind of something in the depths. Definitely a cry, faint, but ... perhaps pained? My pulse was thumping in my ears, the bloodhymn raging in my head. If Greyhand had fallen foul of the things within these tombs, and we just stood here doing nothing ...

'And then I heard it for certain. A distant call. A man in pain.

"Did you hear that?"

'De Coste's eyes were narrowed. "I think ..."

"Greyhand's in trouble," I said, unslinging my flail. "We have to help him, de Coste."

"No, what we have to do is exactly what he *told* us to do. Hold your damned ground, Peasant. In Greyhand's absence, I am senior member of this company."

"You want to wait up here with your thumb in your cackhole? God bless you. But I'll not stand idle."

"De León, wait! Greyhand told us to stay here!"

'I felt the press of his will on mine then, the Blood of Ilon at work in my mind. But the hymn sang louder, the sanctus and my own pigheadedness drowning out Aaron's command. And with flail in fist, heart in throat, I strode into the house of Skyefall's dead.'

Jean-François sighed. 'Foolish.'

'Oui. But remember, I'd not even turned sixteen. I'd worked my arse to the bone in the monastery. But the displays of de Coste's and Greyhand's gifts had me of a mood. No matter how much I pretended it didn't bother me, being a frailblood made me feel less than my fellows. I was desperate to prove my worth, and *this* could be my chance.

'I wasn't a complete shitwit – I lit the hellspark as I departed. It ignited with a dull roar, and I flinched back from the raging heat. I heard de Coste yell again, but paid no heed. And with shoulders squared, I bounded into the tombs in search of my master.

'A long corridor stretched into darkness, but my paleblood eyes saw clear as day. The walls were lined with stone doors, carved with names of the corpses beyond. Poorer folk had no tombs at all, bones piled atop one another in dusty niches. The slabs under my feet were also graves, and it struck me as eerie to be walking on dead bodies. But I was no coward to be frightened by old bones or the thought of death. The only thing that scared me back then was the

thought of dying without ever having done something worthwhile.

'I found myself at a crossroads leading deeper into the necropolis. Rats scurried past my heels, the scent of old death filled the air. I listened but heard nothing, cursing beneath my breath. Perhaps it was my imagination, but the stone halls below this town seemed *far* older than the town itself.

"Master Greyhand?" I called.

'No reply, save the whispering wind. And so, praying to God, I strode on through a warren of twists and turns, past piles of nameless skulls. Statues of beautiful angels loomed at each corner, guarding those who slept eternal in the tombs beyond.

'And then, in the dark ahead, I heard a cry.

'With a gasp, I was off, boots pounding the grave slabs, fist curled around my flail. I could see dim light ahead now, a silver-cold glow on the walls. I heard another shout of pain, a loud voice I finally recognized as my master's.

"Come on, you accursed dogs!"

"Greyhand!" I roared.

'I rounded the corner, skidding to a halt at the sight before my wondering eyes. A large crypt lay before me, ringed by a dozen sarcophagi. The floor was slabbed by gravestones, and a statue of Mahné, Angel of Death, loomed over the scene with his great sickles in hand. Beneath him stood Greyhand, his flail singing as it cut the air, locked in combat with two fleeting shadows.

'Goosebumps prickled on my skin – not at the freezing cold, but at the sight of the tattoos on my master's flesh. The Mothermaid and Redeemer, the angels of the host, the seven wolves, throat to wrist to waist. That holy magik, wrought by the hands of Silver Sisters. The armour of the silversaint. The aegis.



'And it was *glowing*.

'Greyhand was a white star burning in the dark, a circle of illumination spanning fifteen feet about him. I felt my left

hand growing hot, as if too close to flame, and taking off my glove, I saw the sevenstar on my palm burning with that same terrible light.

'Two coldbloods wove through the dark, wearing the clothes they were buried in. A brunette woman in an elegant black dress, and a tall gent in a long frockcoat armed with a fine swordcane. Each was a pale beauty, skin like ivory, eyes like jet, and my belly rolled at the sight of them. I'd seen wretched before, oui – those monstrosities born of rot and the coldblood curse. But these two were locked forever in a dark perfection. The first highblooded vampires I'd ever laid eyes on.

'The man's speed was unholy, his eyes black lanterns. He stood before the woman as if to protect her, all his dark strength brought to bear. But Great Redeemer, Greyhand was magnificent. I thought I'd felt the presence of God as I faced the Trial of Blood, but now I felt it true, bathing me in the light of heaven's shoreline.

"Leave us alone!" the woman pleaded.

"Stay away from her!" the man shouted. "Stay away, or by God, I'll *kill* you!"

"God?" Greyhand spat. "You profane his name with your black tongue, leech."

'Greyhand flung a silverbomb, and I flinched as it exploded in a ball of flame and white light. The coldbloods scattered and Greyhand lashed out with his flail, wrapping it around the man's legs. Bound in silver, his limbs became as useless as lead, and he collapsed to the stone. The woman cried out, "Eduard!" and flashed into the light, Greyhand's sword crashing down on her outstretched arm. She screamed, clutching the shattered bone as she drew back her hand, and I knew it true, then – these vampires were the Blood of Voss. Any other fledgling would have been holding nothing but a smoking stump after a blow like that.

"Master!" I shouted.

[&]quot;De León? I told you to stand your—"

'A third fledgling came out of the dark behind Greyhand – a street waif in rags, rotten fingers curled into claws. My master gasped as the girl flung herself upon his back, but the silver on his skin scorched the leech like flame, and she tumbled back, mouth wide in agony.

'Greyhand turned towards the wretched child, burning with blessed light. He flung a phial of holy water, the glass shattering against the little girl's skin. She shrieked, stumbling farther backwards as my master drove his blade through her chest.

"Lisette!" the woman screamed.

'The fallen man had unwrapped Greyhand's flail from his legs, his hands now blackened and smoking. He turned to the woman in desperation. "Vivienne, run!"

"No, Eduard, we—"

"RUN!"

'The coldblood turned to me, dead eyes glinting as he came on like a pistol shot. But I raised my left hand, rewarded with a hiss of agony as the light from my sevenstar pierced those cold, dead eyes. Months of training kicked in, and I drew a silverbomb from my bandolier, hurled it into the monster's chest. A silver flash and a black scream split the air.

'Greyhand tore his sword from the waif's chest and with four mighty blows, hacked her head clean off her shoulders. But untended, the woman took her chance. She had no form, no training, but still, she struck with terrifying force, smashing me into one of the sarcophagi and shattering it like glass. I felt something inside me snap, collapsing in a tumble of broken stone and old bones. And with none left in her way, she dashed down the corridor I'd entered by, just a flash of silk and dark hair.

"Seven Martyrs, stop her!"

'Greyhand drew his wheellock pistol and took a knee. Aiming carefully, he struck the spring and fired a burst of silvershot at the fleeing coldblood. He hit her leg but missed the bone, and she staggered on. Clutching my ribs, I fired off a crooked shot as Greyhand blew a long note on his horn. But even if he wanted to seal off the entrance, Aaron couldn't now – I'd already lit the hellspark to cover my back. I just prayed God it was still burning.

'My master turned, the fallen male crawling backwards as the frère came on. The vampire's pale flesh was blacked from my silverbomb, his funeral finery a smoking mess.

"No," he pleaded. "No, God, we did not ask—"

'Greyhand struck at the thing's throat. Though the force would have been enough to cleave steel, the vampire's skin didn't split, cracking like stone under a hammer instead. Another phial of holy water smashed against his face, and the coldblood howled as Greyhand struck again, finally opening up his neck. A part of me felt a whisper of pity for this thing, wed to the same thirst as murdered him. But I could see bloodstains on his cuffs, his scorched lapel – this monster hadn't been idle in the nights since he Became.

'The Dead feel as beasts, look as men, die as devils.

'With one final effort, the vampire threw itself at my master. Heedless. Hateful. Greyhand stepped aside, spun and followed through, and with one final, terrible blow, the vampire's head was loosed from his neck, the body collapsing in ruin.

'My master dashed off in pursuit of the woman as I hauled myself out of the smashed sarcophagus. Limping and bloodied, I couldn't keep up the chase, but I knew where it led. Reaching the exit, I saw the stairs were black and smoking, but the fire had died. And cursing myself for a fucking fool, I dragged my sorry arse into the dark daylight.

'Greyhand was on his knees beside de Coste. My fellow initiate was sprawled on the cobbles, lips split, nose broken, thick blonde hair soaked with blood. He threw a look of pure murder at me as I climbed the stairs. Master Greyhand rose to his feet, and I saw his fangs had grown long with his rage. "You simple-minded, bullheaded *lackwit*."

'He flashed towards me, hand to my throat, slamming me back into the cliff face.

"I told you to stand your ground!"

"I th-thought I heard—"

"You thought? You thought you'd be a damned hero is what you thought! Your disobedience has cost us our quarry, and mayhaps another innocent life! *Think* on that!"

"I'm s-sorry, Master! P-please ..."

'He choked me a moment longer, then let me slither down the wall. De Coste rose to his feet, nose dripping blood. He shot me another glare of hatred.

"Did you find the de Blanchet boy, Master?"

'Greyhand took a moment to find his calm, spitting on the cobbles.

"No. His tomb was empty. But he definitely stalks these streets. Along with the unholy daughter this *fool* allowed to escape." Greyhand rubbed his pointed chin, scowling. "There was a dusting of grit in the boy's tomb, a smell like

blasting powder. He may be alternating between nests. De Coste, you and I will search the mines before the sun fails."

"... What about me, Master?"

'Greyhand turned on me, glowering. "Until you learn to act like a hunter, I'll treat you like a damned hound. You will return to the alderman's estate and stand guard by M^{me} de Blanchet's bed until we return."

'He placed his bloody silversteel sword on my shoulder, gentle as first rains.

"And if ever I give an order to you that is not followed direct again, I vow by Almighty God and all Seven Martyrs, I will end you, boy. I will put you in your grave before I allow your impatience and glory-seeking to put an innocent in theirs."

'I hung my head, tongue thick with shame. "Understood, Master."

'Greyhand lowered his sword, offered me his hand.

"Now get up. You have bodies to burn."

+<u>V</u>+

A BEAUTIFUL VIEW

"TEA. INITIATE?"

'Père Lafitte's voice broke me from my reverie, and I glanced up from the fireplace. The sight of a little girl's burning corpse was etched in my head. The stink was on my clothes, the horror fresh, and all had put me in mind of my sister again. Amélie's death felt a lifetime ago now, and I'd thought the boy who'd watched her burn was just a ghost. And yet, I'd proved myself a boy again that day. Headstrong and foolish.

"No," I replied. "Merci, Father."

'De Blanchet's manservant nodded, placed the tray he carried on the mantel, and left the room. The pot was silver, the cups of finest porcelain. The tea's scent was sweet, sharp, only half remembered from around my mama's table in my childhood.

'The sun had fallen outside, and my comrades still hadn't returned. Wounded as she was, I knew the highblood who'd escaped us would be more dangerous in the dead of night. My fellows at deeper risk. For the hundredth time, I cursed my own stupidity.

"What troubles, my son?" Lafitte asked, sitting opposite me.

'My seat was near Madame de Blanchet's bed, Lionclaw within easy reach. The longue was red leather and plush

velvet, large enough to lose myself in. I turned my eyes to the dame ensconced in her mountain of pillows. Her breath was shallow and rapid, her skin pale as paper. The alderman was at work in his study down the hall.

"Nothing worthy of note, Father," I sighed.

"You look exhausted."

'I shook my head, knowing the bloodshot red of my eyes was only a residue from the sacrament. "I'll not sleep this night."

"I have heard only rumour of your holy order," Lafitte remarked. "My papa met one of your number once. He said the man slew a witch who plagued his village as a boy. Tracked her down and nailed her soul into her body with a length of cold iron before setting her alight. I'd thought it stuff and nonsense, truth told."

"I've met no witches, Father. But I *have* seen evil. And it walks now among us, doubt it not." I swallowed. "There will be dark nights ahead."

"The folk you found in the catacombs. They were ... changed?"

'I nodded. "I've fought the Dead before, but ... not like that. The woman seemed ... afraid. The man told her to run. It was like they remembered what they'd been."

"I knew them both," Lafitte said, dabbing his sweating lip with his kerchief. "Parishioners of mine. Eduard Farrow and Vivienne La Cour." His fingertips hovered over the silver wheel about his neck. "They were to be married in spring."

"And the little girl? Her name was Lisette."

'Lafitte shrugged. "There are many strays in a town this size, Initiate de León. Many who come and go, and more yet who would not be missed. A tragedy."

"It's God's will," I declared. "All on earth below and heaven above is the work of his hand."

"Véris," the priest smiled. "But come, if we are to stand vigil 'til dawn, you should drink something. A tea this fine is a rarity these nights. It would be sin to waste it."

'I took the cup Lafitte offered, staring into the flames. I remembered my mama, brewing tea in her big black kettle in the years before daysdeath. My sisters and I sitting at table, Amélie scoffing while Celene and I squabbled over a game of knucklebones. I missed my baby sister, felt guilty about not answering her letters. I wondered if I should write to my mother and ask her the truth about my father. A part of me didn't want to know. The rest of me desperately needed to.

"Santé, Initiate," Lafitte said, raising his cup.

"Santé, mon Père," I replied.

'I swallowed the draught with a wince. Bitter and too hot. Lafitte put his cup aside, watching me. He was quite handsome, truth told – Nordish stock, dark of hair and eye. A rich man's son most like, to have been posted by the Pontifex to a town this wealthy at his age.

"How long have you served the Ordo Argent, Initiate de León?"

'I glanced to Madame de Blanchet as she moaned in her sleep. "Seven months."

"Are there many brethren of your holy order?"

"A few dozen," I replied, rising from my chair. "Though it's hard to tell sometimes. The Hunt keeps us often from home. It's rare that we're all at San Michon at once."

"Why so few of you? If dark nights come as you say, could you not recruit more?"

'I checked Madame de Blanchet's temperature, and she groaned as my sevenstar touched her skin. "The birth of a paleblood is no common thing, Father. We are like the coldbloods we hunt. Our making is happenstance. A curse, and one not to be encouraged."

'He frowned. "Coldbloods are made by other coldbloods, are they not?"

"Oui. But not all the folklore is true. Their affliction is capricious, Father. Only passing to their victims by chance. Some stay dead. Others rise as mindless monsters."

"Chance, you say?" Lafitte frowned. "Curious."

'I rubbed my sweating brow, sloughed off my greatcoat. "That's the shame of all this. The vampire who started this mess may not have even known Claude de Blanchet turned."

"Mme Luncóit did not strike me as a careless woman."

'I blinked. "I thought you said you didn't know M^{me} Luncóit?"

"Only by reputation. The folk she dealt with in Skyefall regarded her highly. Even the alderman seemed under her spell."

"What other folk did she deal with?" I asked, wiping sweat from my lip.

'But Lafitte made no reply. His head was tilted as if he were listening, his tea untouched. My head was throbbing. My eyes stinging and blurred.

"Seven Martyrs, it's sweltering in here ..."

'The priest smiled at me. "Open the window. It's a beautiful view."

'I nodded, trudging over to the glass bay doors. Eyes still stinging, I took hold of the drapes, dragged them apart. And there, gleaming moon-pale in the dark outside, was the face of little Claude de Blanchet.

"Sweet Redeemer!"

'Ten years old. Coal-black hair and grave-white skin. He was dressed in noble's finery, black velvet and gold buttons, a silken cravat at his throat. But his eyes were the darkest part of him, heavy-lidded and gleaming like wet jewels. And he fixed them on the priest, and pressed his hand to the glass.

"Beautiful, isn't he?"

'I turned and saw Father Lafitte, now holding my sheathed sword. The priest's eyes were filled with a thrall's rapture, gazing at that pale shadow beyond the glass.

"Let me in," it whispered.

"Lafitte, no!" I shouted.

"Come in, Master," the priest breathed.

'The doors slammed apart, the glass cracking in the frame. I barely had time to turn before Claude de Blanchet was on me, slamming me back into the wall. The plaster split, the ribs I'd cracked earlier in the day bursting into new flame. I saw Lafitte walking to the balcony, but I was too busy fighting the boy off to do anything but roar protest as he tossed my sword out the window. As if roused by the thing's unholy presence, Madame de Blanchet was now sitting up in bed. She'd loosed her nightshift, arms outstretched.

"My boy," she breathed, tears in her eyes. "My sweet baby boy."

'That sweet baby boy slammed me back into the wall, his fingernails iron-hard and sharp. The whole room was blurring, a bitter tang on my tongue, and I understood at last that Lafitte had slipped some toxin into the tea, dimming the bloodhymn in my head. As the vampire fixed me in his black gaze, I realized I was in the deepest shite of my life.

""Kneel," Claude commanded.

'The word hit me like a pistol shot, wrapped in satin. The desire to please this thing was as real as the air I breathed. I knew if I simply relented, everything would be all right. Everything would be *wonderful*. But in some dim corner of my mind, I could feel Greyhand's blade skewering me against that tree, the fire of his words burning away the dark.

'Listen not to a word these bastards hiss, lest you find yourself their meal.

'I reached for the teapot on the mantel. Bright and gleaming silver. I felt my fury rising, my canines growing sharp. And as the vampire spoke again, "*Kneel!*" my fingers found purchase, and spitting, "Fuck you!" I smashed the pot right into his ruby lips.

'Claude wailed in pain, staggering. The pot crumpled like paper, but it gave me a moment to breathe as the bedroom door burst open. The alderman stood on the threshold, pale with shock. He took in the chaos – wife screaming, Father Lafitte drawing a knife from his sleeve as I smashed the monster in the face again. But de Blanchet's eyes were fixed on the thing I brawled with, the dark remnant of the boy he'd buried months ago.

"My son?"

'I lunged for my bandolier of holy water and silverbombs, but the priest leapt upon my shoulders, stabbing me with his little blade again and again. Lafitte's strength was impressive, his knife puncturing my chest a dozen times. But I was no fucking thrall like him. I was a paleblood, an initiate of the Ordo Argent, trained at the feet of a master of the Hunt. Smashing his jaw with my elbow, I heard bone splinter, a scream from the treacherous prick's broken mouth. I speared myself backwards, felt Lafitte's ribs crumble as we collided with the wall hard enough to shatter the bricks.

'But by then, little Claude was upright again, delivering a blow to my bollocks so thunderous, it actually made me vomit. I doubled up in agony, and he slung me down into the floorboards. Sitting on my chest, the vampire lunged towards my throat.

'A burning piece of timber crashed over the boy's head, splintering in a shower of sparks. Claude screamed in agony, his hair smouldering. Rising off me, he turned to his father, standing at the fireplace with a shattered log in hand.

"Papa," the vampire hissed.

"No son of mine," de Blanchet whispered, tears in his eyes.

'He struck the boy again, the thing shrieking as the fire blacked its skin. A scream rang out in the room then, and Madame de Blanchet snatched up Lafitte's fallen dagger, launched herself at her husband's back. The blade punched through the alderman's flesh, the man gasping as he and his wife collapsed onto the blood-slicked floor.

"Claudette! S-stop ..."

'Vomit in my mouth, blood streaming down my chest, I lunged for my bandolier again. I heard hissing breath, felt strong hands sling me across the room, demolishing Madame de Blanchet's magnificent bed. I raised my left hand as Claude landed atop me, the unholy little fuck shrieking as the silver in my palm flared bright. But still he struck me like a hammer, driving the breath from my punctured lungs. With one clawed hand, he grabbed my arm, forcing the light of my tattoo from his eyes. With his other, he reached for my throat. And desperate, gasping and bleeding, I seized hold of his wrist.

'My strength versus his. His will against mine. He loomed above me, cherubic face scorched and spattered red. I remembered those two highbloods in the crypts, the semblance of their old lives still clinging to their corpses. But this fucking monster atop me, glutted on months of murder, this, *this* was what they really were.

"" Hushhhhh now ..."

'I was thirteen years old again. Lying in the mud the day Amélie came home. And there, just as before, with death breathing cold upon my throat, I felt heat flood up my arm. Something stirred once more inside me, tenebrous and old. And with a shriek of agony, Claude de Blanchet reared back, clutching the hand that clutched his.

'His flesh was blackening in my grip, as though it burned without flame. The boything tried to pull away, and beneath my clenched fingers, I saw his porcelain skin bubbling and splitting, red vapour rising from the cracks as if the very blood boiled in his dead veins. His voice was a child's again, bloody tears in black eyes.

"Let go!" he squealed. "Mama, make him stop!"

'His hand was a charred ruin now, scalding blood spilling down my forearm like hot wax. Still, I held on, horrified, amazed. I heard boots up the stairs. Greyhand's shout. Little Claude gasped as my master's flail wrapped about his throat and chest. And bound at last by silver, the little bastard tumbled to the floor. Madame de Blanchet flew off her husband and towards me, but de Coste wrestled her to the ground.

"I'll kill you! You hurt my baby, bastard, I'LL KILL YOU!"

'The woman was drenched in blood, her husband dead by her own hand, and she had no thought but for the leech laying helpless beside me. Claude de Blanchet stared up at me, soulless eyes brimming with malice. I pictured the bite wounds upon his mother's breast and between her legs, trying not to imagine the shape of his nightly visitations.

And I wondered if I'd ever walked so close to hell as this.

'Greyhand placed his hands under my arms, eased me to my feet. My legs were shaking so badly I could barely stand, head spinning from Lafitte's poison. My master surveyed the carnage: the crushed priest, the moaning highblood, the murdered alderman and his screaming wife. I was drenched in sticky red, stab wounds in my chest, ribs broken. My hair hung about my eyes in a matted, bloody curtain, mind racing with the thought that I'd somehow boiled that vampire's blood just by *touching* him.

"What did I do?" I whispered, looking at the boy's black flesh. "How did I do it?"

"I've no idea."

'Greyhand patted my shoulder, gave me a grudging nod.

"But fine work, Little Lion."

+ V +

THE SCARLET FOUNDRY

'WE ARRIVED BACK at San Michon two weeks later, those mighty stone pillars rising from the sunset mists before us. In truth, I knew not how to feel. I'd both failed and flown on my first Hunt. My impatience had bested me, put innocent lives at risk. I'd killed a man with my own hands, and it's no small thing to be the one who takes a life from this earth. You make the world less by it, and if you're careless, make yourself less besides.

'But instead of regret, I felt only vindication. That I'd defended God's faithful from the evil that beset them. That I'd done *right*. And more and most, I'd defeated a highblood single-handed. I admit I was feeling more than a touch full of myself on that – sitting tall in Justice's saddle with a smile that never quite left my lips.

'Claude de Blanchet and Vivienne La Cour were both trussed up in silver chains on Greyhand's horse. The boy's arm had yet to fully heal from the wounds I'd inflicted on him, and Greyhand had to silence his wails with a gag. But the questions of exactly what I'd done, and more important, how I'd done it. were still unanswered.

'Despite my insubordination, Greyhand paid me a grudging respect – I could tell he was impressed at the prowess I'd shown in taking the boy down. But de Coste's eyes were full of loathing when he looked at me. My disobedience had seen him get his skull broken by a fledgling, and I'd gone on to thrash its maker unarmed and alone. Aaron had been overshadowed, and I knew he'd have a bone to pick once out of Greyhand's sight.

'We pulled our horses to a halt outside the stable gates, and I walked inside to fetch the grooms as Aaron and Greyhand unloaded our captive coldbloods. I called out to Kaspar, my eyes adjusting to the dim light of the chymical globes. And in the shadows, I saw two figures, starting as if surprised. The first was Kaveh, Kaspar's mute brother. And the second, her face paling a little at the sight of me, was Seraph Talon's assistant, Sister Aoife.

"Fairdawning, Initiate," she stammered, bowing low.

"Godmorrow, good Sister." I nodded slowly. "Kaveh."

'The lad lowered his eyes, mute as always.

"You are returned from the Hunt?" Aoife asked. "I am told all went well? Archer arrived last week with news of the cargo you carry."

'I looked Aoife over, head tilted. It was uncommon strange to find a sister of the Silver Sorority unchaperoned in the company of a stableboy. Kaveh was still refusing to meet my eyes. But in the end, I supposed it no concern of mine.

"Oui," I nodded to the sister. "Two highblood fledglings, both of the Blood Voss."

"Wonderful," Aoife smiled, straightening her habit. "I shall accompany you."

'The good sister followed me outside, and Kaveh hurried to bring our horses in from the cold. Aaron and Greyhand bowed in greeting to Aoife, and together we ascended San Michon's dizzying heights, with me hauling the de Blanchet boy and Aaron carrying La Cour. I watched the sister sidelong as the platform rose, but Aoife's face was stone. Archer wheeled above us, singing to the wind in joy at his master's return. Greyhand lifted his arm, and as the falcon alighted at his wrist, his lips twisted the closest to a smile they ever got.

'I thought we might report to Abbot Khalid or fill our bellies, but Aoife led us straight to the Armoury. As ever, the windows were lit by forgefire, the chimneys belched black smoke – all save one, spitting that thin wisp of scarlet. Awaiting us on the steps was Seraph Talon himself, his greatcoat's collar laced painfully tight, his ashwood switch in hand.

"Fairdawn, Frère Greyhand," Talon said in his cool highborn tone. "De Coste."

"Godmorrow, Seraph," they answered.

'The Seraph of the Hunt looked directly at me, stroking his long, dark moustache like a six-year-old strokes a favoured kitten. "Fairdawn, my little shitblood."

"Godmorrow, Seraph," I sighed.

'Talon gave a small toss of his head, and we four followed him into the Armoury. The warmth of the forges was a blessed change from the road, the chymical globes glittering like stars in the gables overhead. The walls were lined with silversteel, and there among the racks, I saw Baptiste Salsmael, the young blackthumb who'd forged my sword. His dark skin was damp with sweat, muscles glinting as he wheeled a barrow of raw coke for the forges. He stopped when he saw us, wiped his brow.

"Fairdawn, Seraph," he said in his warm baritone. "Sister Anife."

'Talon nodded, and Aoife bowed. "Godmorrow, Sa-Ismael."

'The smithy gifted the rest of us an impeccable grin. "And a fairdawn to you all, Brothers. Returned in triumph, I see?" He looked to the sword at my waist. "How did Lionclaw fare on her maiden voyage, de León? Slay me something monstrous?"

"She was piffed out a window by a bent priest, Brother. So, I fear not."

'Baptiste glanced towards Aoife and grinned. "Well, it sounds like you gave her an adventure, at least. Ladies do enjoy that sort of thing." He slapped my shoulder with one warm hand. "Have no fear, Little Lion. God will grant your chance to do his will."

'Bloody hell, I liked Baptiste. And I wasn't alone. De Coste lost all trace of his usual arrogance when in the blackthumb's company. Even Greyhand looked close to dropping his customary scowl around the young smith. Baptiste had a smile that felt made just for you, a rich laugh, a good soul. But he glanced to Talon as the seraph cleared his throat.

"I see you've business to attend, Brothers. I'll not keep you from God's holy work. We can share your tales in the refectory tonight over a glass."

"Or a bottle," Aaron countered.

'The smithy laughed, dark eyes flashing. "By the Blood. Tonight, mes amis."

'We nodded farewells, and followed Seraph Talon and Sister Aoife to an area of the Armoury I'd not visited before. Massive silver-clad doors barred the way, opened with a silver key around Talon's throat, and beyond, a large room of dark stone awaited us. The taste of old blood laced the air. Tall ceilings lit with chymical globes arched overhead, the walls covered with anatomical illustrations of coldbloods, faekin, and other monstrosities. But the room was dominated by a large apparatus, the likes of which I'd never imagined.

'It seemed a kind of forge, dreamed in an unquiet mind. A serpentine nest of pipes surrounded a row of large stone slabs. Channels were carved into the stones in the shape of the sevenstar, and on half a dozen, I could see the emaciated forms of vampires, bound in silver. Many were wretched, but at least one was highblooded – a pretty monsieur with long hair of Ossway red. Their flesh was lifeless grey, withered like old fruit. Silver tubes had been stabbed into their chests, and I could hear the *drip*, *drip*, *drip* of blood into glass jars.

'I glanced to Aoife beside me and whispered, "What is this place, Sister?"

"The Scarlet Foundry," she explained. "The hearts of coldbloods do not really beat, you see. And without a pulse to drive it, their blood goes only where they will it. The Foundry is the most efficient means of harvesting their essence, and thus, producing the greatest quantity of sanctus."

'Looking around the room with jaw slacked, I could feel a strange current crawling on my skin. This device seemed born half of science, half of sorcerie.

"De Coste," Greyhand said. "De León. Make our guests comfortable."

'Aaron and I obeyed, placing our captured coldbloods on the slabs. Both were gagged and blindfolded, but a low moan of agony slipped over Vivienne La Cour's lips as Aoife fixed silver manacles about her wrists and ankles. As her flesh began sizzling, I had to remind myself again that these things weren't anything other than leeches wearing human skin.

"From the punishment they withstood, they're definitely Voss," Greyhand said.

'Talon nodded to the boy. "This was first of the brood?"

"Oui," Greyhand nodded. "Frightening little bastard for a fledgling."

"Poor soul," Aoife sighed softly. "He's barely more than a babe."

"Never to become a man," Greyhand scowled.

"We will examine him thoroughly," Talon said, with rather more relish than was comfortable. "Flame shall reveal whatever his blood does not before he leaves us for hell."

'Aoife made the sign of the wheel. The seraph glanced down at the boything's forearm, still scorched from my touch. I saw him exchange a glance with our master.

"You two." Greyhand turned to Aaron and me. "Go get yourselves bathed and fed. We may be ahunt again sooner

than you think. De León, I'll be arranging extra duties for you until we depart San Michon again."

"... Duties, Master?"

"Starting amorrow, you'll report to the stables before each dawnmass and muck out those pens until they're spotless. I'll inform Kaspar and Kaveh tonight. I'm sure our young grooms will enjoy the extra hour sleep your labours will avail them."

'I blinked in disbelief as Aaron stifled a triumphant smile.

"I'm to shovel dung every morn? I took down this thing single-handed."

"Disobedience has its price. You think I'm being unfair?"

'I bristled with the indignity of it, but gave a stiff bow. "No, Master."

"Good. Off with the pair of you. I'll follow presently."

"By the Blood, Frère." De Coste bowed. "Seraph. Sister."

'Aoife smiled farewell. Talon nodded vaguely, still peering at little Claude's arm as Aaron and I marched out into the freezing eve. Standing on the Armoury steps, I gritted my teeth, trying to hold my temper. I'd disobeyed Greyhand, no doubt. And despite capturing the de Blanchet boy, I knew I deserved punishment. But this?

'De Coste dragged his hand through his grubby mop of blonde and smiled. "Up to your shins in shit every morn, eh, Peasant? It'll be just like home."

"Speaking of home, how's your mama? Tell her I miss her, will you?"

'De Coste turned to face me. As he stepped close, I noticed that even though he was older, I was almost as tall as him now. Able to meet his pale blue stare.

"Close your eyes," he said.

'Aaron's words slipped into my ears like the cleverest knife. Not the velvet gunshot of that darkling boy's command in Skyefall. Something subtler, and more frightening. It was forbidden for palebloods to use their gifts on each other, and part of me raged that he'd dare to do so. But for the rest of me, it seemed the most reasonable thing in the world. *Aaron is your friend*, came a whisper within. *You trust him. You like him.*

'And so, I closed my eyes.

'His punch took me right in the belly, and all the breath left my lungs. I sank to my knees on the Armoury steps, holding my aching gut.

"You h-hit l-like a lord," I managed.

"I don't like you, you ill-bred little bastard."

"You m-mean this isn't a ... m-marriage proposal ...?"

'Aaron loomed over me, sharp teeth at the corners of his mouth. "You made a fool of me in front of Greyhand. I owe you fucking *blood* for that. Our master might be content to have you swing a shovel for a while, but I surely won't be. Now that he's not around to watch your back every minute, you'd best sleep lightly, frailblood."

'Aaron spat onto the steps beside me, stalked off to the Barracks. He'd broken the laws of San Michon using his bloodgifts on me, and I was half-tempted to throw a parting jab about his cowardice. But truth told, I was just glad he'd left me the fuck alone. I'd caught that glance Greyhand and Talon had exchanged, and I wondered if the seraph knew something of the wound I'd inflicted on the de Blanchet boy.

'With Aaron's eyes off me, I aimed now to find out. So, I simply flipped the Fathers at his back, and holding my bruised belly, stole back inside the Armoury.

'My heart was racing, but all those nights I'd spent stealing out to Ilsa's bedroom came back to me in a flood. I could still be a stealthy bastard when I chose, even without warm lips waiting for me at the end. I crept through the weapon racks, low honeyed lights shining above. And soon enough, I was crouched back outside the Foundry doors.

'Peering inside, I saw Greyhand and Talon beside little Claude's body. Sister Aoife was on the other side of the room now, busy at the Foundry's workings. "... large infestation considering the time this maggot spawn had to hunt," the seraph was saying. "It only turned two months ago, you say?"

"Almost three," Greyhand nodded. "But, oui. The blood runs thick in this one."

"Interesting that the leech who made it abandoned it?"

"She may not have known the boy Became. Apparently, she departed in haste."

"Mmm." The boything shrieked behind its gag as Talon slid one of those silver-tipped tubes into its skin. "And this burn on its arm? Archer's message said it was of import."

'Greyhand glanced to Aoife, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "The boy did that with his bare hands."

"De Coste?"

"De León."

'Talon scoffed. "That water-blooded little cockgobbler?"

"Those wounds were inflicted two weeks ago," Greyhand said. "They should have healed at next dawn, and yet they linger. When I burst into the room, I could still see the blood boiling under this leech's skin where de León touched it."

"... Boiling? You're certain?"

"I saw it. I smelled it. You know what this is, Talon."

"I know nothing of the sort."

"Damn you, open your eyes, man. This is sanguimancy."

'Crouched at the doorway, I felt my whole body tense. I'd no understanding of the word's meaning, but the way Greyhand whispered it sent a chill through my aching belly. I could hear wonder in my master's voice now. Wonder, and fear.

"Impossible," Talon hissed. "That line is extinguished. Centuries past."

"Centuries are nothing to these creatures. What if the stories are wrong, Talon? Or lies?" Greyhand glanced to Aoife, lowering his voice further. "De León failed every

testing in the Trial of the Blood, but we never tested him for this. What if the leech who seeded his mo—"

"Then we should take him to Heaven's Bridge right now," Talon growled. "Cut his throat and give him to the waters."

'Again, I felt a surge of butterflies. I'd been taught there were only four kith houses. Voss. Chastain. Ilon. Dyvok. Had I heard aright?

'Were they talking about a fifth bloodline?

'And was I ... one of them?

'I pressed back against the doors. I wasn't sure if my chest had fallen into my gut, or my gut had leapt into my chest. My master had lied to me when he said he'd no idea what I'd done to the de Blanchet boy. And Talon was talking about ending me. I wondered if I should run for it. Just head back to the stables, saddle up Justice and bolt.

"We should do nothing rash until we've spoken to Khalid," Greyhand whispered. "I am the boy's master. He's impatient. Arrogant. Far too keen for glory. But he's one of the finest swords I've trained, and he took down this highblood alone, drugged to the eyeballs on rêvre. If what I suspect of his line is true ... he could be the greatest of us, Talon."

"Or the most terrible."

"Is that not for God to decide?"

"God helps those who help themselves, old friend." Talon leaned on the slab and sighed. "You *are* the boy's master, and I'll not gainsay you. But if Khalid bids we end him ..."

'Greyhand nodded, grim. "So be it. We shall speak to the abbot after duskmass."

'The taste of iron and adrenaline was heavy on my tongue. I slipped away before Greyhand could spot me, stealing back across the Armoury. Out the doors, dashing across the rope bridge to Barracks, my head swimming with all I'd heard.

'A hidden gift named sanguimancy.

'A fifth bloodline of the kith.

'What did it all mean? Why did Greyhand speak of them with fear? And could I really be born of this mysterious line, and not the frailblood Talon had marked me for?'

Jean-François dipped his quill in the ink jar, chocolat eyes on his tome.

'Could you not simply ask Abbot Khalid?'

'Fuck no,' Gabriel scowled. 'All I'd heard, I'd eavesdropped. Greyhand had *lied* to me in Skyefall. God Almighty, Talon was willing to take me to the Bridge over this. Besides, it wasn't in my nature to go bleating to adults when the road got rocky. You grow up with a stepfather like mine, you learn to solve your own fucking problems.'

Gabriel's thumb traced the small, raised ridges of the sevenstar in his palm.

'So solving my own problems was exactly what I set out to do.'

+ VII +

A LIBRARY OF GHOSTS

'THAT EVE, I did something I never imagined myself doing when I first entered San Michon.'

'And that was?' Jean-François asked.

'I broke the rules.'

The vampire's eyes widened in alarm. 'Scandalous.'

'Mock if you will.'

'Merci, I believe I shall.'

'Fuck you,' Gabriel scowled. 'You've no ken what it was like, you bloodless prick. All my life, I was raised in the One Faith. Deception sat as well on me as a rope around my neck. San Michon was a *holy* place, and in the last seven months, the commandments of the Order had become as the laws of the Almighty to me. In breaking them, I felt I was going against God Himself, and being paleblood, I knew my soul was already at eternal peril. But there was nothing for it. And it wasn't the blood of lambs that flowed in my veins.' Gabriel sighed, gulping a mouthful of wine.

'I never used to drink anything but water at meals, for fear of what the liquor had done to my stepfather. But Aaron had shared a bottle with Baptiste as promised, and as I bedded down that night, he was already drooling into his sheets. His crony de Séverin lay on his back, breathing softly, returned from a recent Hunt near Aveléne. Theo Petit was snoring loud enough to shake the floor. But I was wide awake, and taut with fear.

'I lay there with Lionclaw hidden under my blankets, one hand wrapped around its hilt. Heart hammering. Mouth dry. Waiting to hear Talon and Greyhand open the door, set to drag me to Heaven's Bridge. I knew I couldn't take them, yet I vowed to fight with all I fucking had if they came for me. But hours slipped by, and I heard no heavy footfalls, no death march to the foot of my bed. And finally, I realized Abbot Khalid must have deemed that I be allowed to live. That whatever the truth of my bloodline, it wasn't yet worth killing me for.

'I let myself breathe a sigh of relief. My belly slowly unknotting itself. But despite my reprieve, I knew no peace. Greyhand had deceived me. Talon loathed me. My life might still be at risk, I wanted the truth of all this, and there was only one place I could think to find it.'

Jean-François raised an eyebrow in mute question.

'The Great Library. The forbidden section. There must have been a reason that we initiates weren't allowed to visit it. If any word about this fifth bloodline could be found in San Michon, I supposed it awaited me there.

'The Barracks were locked after nightfall, but I'd already pondered a way out of the doghouse. I rose shaking from my bed, and on whispering feet, found my way to the privy.

'Waste disposal in San Michon was a simple affair – the Barracks was built with one wall jutting out over the vast stone pillar it rested upon. A bench ran along that wall, a dozen holes cut into it, with the waters of the Mère River waiting five hundred feet below.'

'Sounds charming,' Jean-François murmured.

'Better than chucking it out the window.' Gabriel shrugged. 'I lifted the privy cover, looking down to the silver ribbon of the Mère and wondering if I was insane to be doing this. I was already on thin ice after Skyefall. If I were caught sneaking out after evebells, Talon might convince Greyhand

to take me to Heaven's Bridge and be done. But this wasn't just idle curiosity now. My life might be at risk. I knew no other way to learn the truth of what I was. And after drubbing that vampire barehanded, I was still feeling a touch invincible. So, taking a deep breath, I slipped down through the privy spout.'

Gabriel paused, staring at the coldblood.

'... Well?'

'Well, what?'

'This is the part you make some quip about human waste and my relationship to it.'

'Please, de León, I stopped being a twelve-year-old decades ago.'

'No jabs about how I was throwing my apprenticeship down the sewer or suchlike?'

'If I were to quip, I'd be far more amusing than that.'

Gabriel scoffed. 'The wind was knives, snatching at my hair and turning my fingernails blue. I swung down onto the scaffold into a crouch, hands out for balance. An ordinary man would've broken his legs in that drop, but though I wasn't yet a man, I was nothing close to ordinary either. Slipping along the timbers, then scaling the rock wall barehanded, I found myself perched on a thin ledge skirting the building. Refusing to look down, I shuffled until at last, a touch light-headed, I reached the Barracks courtyard.'

'There were no guards? No nightwatch?'

'I could see a chymical lantern near the Ossuary, held by a dark figure that I guessed was Gatekeep Logan. But other than that, not another living soul. I made the sign of the wheel as I passed under the Cathedral's eaves, begging God to forgive my disobedience. As I stole over the next bridge, I wondered if he'd just pluck it loose and send me plunging to my death. But soon enough, I found myself before the entrance to the Great Library.

'The doors were sealed, of course. Huge copper-clad slabs they were, fashioned in baroque legends of the Martyrs – Cleyland with his key to hell and Michon with her silver chalice. I wondered if I'd have to force them to get inside. But strangely, as I pressed one hand upon them, I found the doors already unlocked. And with held breath and thumping chest, I crept into the vast hollow of San Michon's Library.

'The room was one vast chamber, lined floor to ceiling with books. Brass fixtures gleamed in the dim light, and the ceiling above was frescoed with angels of the host. Ladders on runners stretched to the loftiest stacks. Peering about the gloom with paleblood eyes, I saw the familiar sight of leather-bound volumes, dusty scrolls, beautiful tomes. Awash with dull rainbows of moons-light, spilling through windows of stained glass.

'Most curious of all, the floor was painted as a great map, outlining the empire and the five kingdoms it had been forged from. To the northwest, the frozen reaches of Talhost, now lost to the Forever King. To the east, the seat of Emperor Alexandre, great Elidaen. Nordlund ever in between, and Ossway and Sūdhaem to the south, the mighty spine of the Godsend Mountains running down Nordlund's west flank. It was ever the strangest feeling, walking through the Great Library. The knowledge of the entire empire was gathered on the shelves around you, and the empire itself laid out beneath your feet.

'I stole through long shadows, past countless books with countless stories to tell, until I reached the heavy wrought iron gates sealing off the forbidden section. Through the thick bars, I could see a long room, a maze of overflowing shelves. Strangely, I could smell candlesmoke. And ever so faint on the air, the soft perfume of ...

"Blood," I whispered.

'My hackles were up now. My mouth watering. I'd been given the sacrament at duskmass as always, but the beast within was never truly sated, and I could feel it stirring. I remembered Frère Yannick having his throat slit in the Red

Rite the first night I arrived in the monastery. That fate awaited every paleblood alive.

'Me sooner than others, if Talon got his way.

'I set my mind back to task, and took hold of the gates into the forbidden section. I thought perhaps to prise the bars wider with my dark strength and slip inside, but as I flexed, they parted like the waters of the Eversea before San Antoine's prayers.

'Already unlocked ...

'The hinges made not a whisper as I stole inside. The scent of blood grew stronger as I navigated a warren of dusty shelves, loaded with books and scrolls and the strangest curios. The skulls of men with the teeth of beasts. Sevenstars made of human bones. Metal puzzle boxes carved with arcane glyfs. I saw a skeletal creature pickled in a glass jar, and I *swore* it blinked at me as I passed by. The tomes were all shapes and sizes, but each was bound in pale leather, bleached with time. They were like the corpses of books rather than books themselves. It felt as if I stalked through a library of ghosts.

'I could see faint light ahead. My unease growing along with the bloodscent. And rounding a shelf of bleached and silent secrets, I found the strangest sight I'd yet seen in the Library.

"God Almighty ..." I whispered.

'A table of stout oak, piled with books and surrounded by leather chairs, lit by a single candle. A girl in the pale vestments of a sisternovice was slumped flat upon the table, long dark hair over her face, blood puddled thick around her cheek.

'Sweet Mothermaid, it smelled like heaven's perfume ...

'It looked like someone had struck the girl while she sat there reading, cracking her skull. I crept forward, heart thumping. And as I reached out to move her hair in search of a wound, the girl opened her eyes, looked right at me, and fucking screamed. 'I yelped and leapt backwards. She reared up from the table, face slick with blood, lifting the candlestick to brain me. And looking about with wide, dark eyes, she pressed one pale hand to her heart and whispered in a crisp, highborn accent.

"Oh, you cunting bastard ..."

"... I beg your pardon?"

'The girl dragged a shaking hand through her long dark hair and sighed. "Beg all you wish, boy. You almost gave me a fucking heart seizure."

"... You're the sisternovice who inked my aegis," I realized. "The one I saw getting whipped in the stables."

"And you're the peasant who took my horse."

"I'm no peasant," I scowled. "I'm an initiate of the Silver Order."

"Those are hardly mutually exclusive properties."

"Are you aright?"

'She shrugged. "Just resting my eyes, if that's any of your concern."

"Facedown in a pool of blood?"

'The sisternovice blinked then, realizing her face was sticky red, yet more blood pooled on the table in front of her. "Oh, *fuck* it all," she snarled, reaching into her vestments for a bloodstained kerchief. "Apologies. It looks rather more dramatic than it is."

'I stared at the blood on her lips, pulse drumming in my temples. This was the first time I'd been alone with a girl since I'd almost killed Ilsa. Remembering the sensation of that warm red rushing into my mouth as she writhed and sighed ...

"I thought your skull was broken," I managed.

"It's my nose," she replied, swabbing her face. "It bleeds a great deal lately. I suspect it's something to do with the altitude in this godforsaken pigsty."

'My mind was awash. I wondered what in the Sevens' names this girl was doing there. Alone, after dark, against

the rules. But more, and despite the blood – or likely because of it – I couldn't help noticing how beautiful she was. Skin like milk. Beauty spot beside the gentle bow of her bloody lips. She had the eyes of a dark angel.' Gabriel smiled. 'And the mouth of a she-devil on the rag.

"I've seen you about," she declared with a toss of her hair. "And though I've stabbed you repeatedly, we've not been formally introduced. My name is Astrid Rennier."

"Gabriel de León," I replied, still more than a little flustered.

"Oui. De León." Dark eyes roamed me, toe to crown. "You don't look much of a lion. Then again, you *are* out of bed after evebells. Which means you've more courage than the rest of these boorish little boys."

'Ever so slowly, she extended her hand.

"I think we shall get along famously."

'I blinked at her hand as if it were a serpent coiled to strike. This girl had seen me half-naked, after all, touched me in places few others had. The scent of her blood was stirring that memory now, and my own blood besides. But she was a novice of the Silver Sorority, soon to be wedded to God. I was an initiate of the Silver Order, servant of that same Heavenly Father. I shouldn't even have been *talking* to her, let alone ...

"Courtly manners dictate a gentleman kiss a lady's hand when he meets her," Astrid said helpfully, wriggling her fingers.

"Suppose I don't want to kiss it."

"Then I suppose you're the ill-mannered peasant I first took you for."

'She gifted me an ingénue's smile, but I saw the trap she'd laid: Obey her command or be rude. Problem was, I wanted to do neither. Holy vows and godly laws aside, this girl reminded me of Aaron de Coste and the other initiates who made my life such a misery, with their lordly accents