

IRON CROWN

by

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Iron Crown

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by

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Bachelor of Arts
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ABSTRACT

IRON CROWN

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George Mason University, 2021

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The manuscript I am submitting to you is the first part of a novel I am writing for the internet. I intend to publish it in installments as a serial. What you will read is the pilot episode. The audience I am aiming for is teenagers and young adults.

The story is set in a kingdom called the Sundered Lands. Conflict has caused the country to break into the North and South. The North is ruled by Sulih and Curran, while the South is controlled by the Durbar brothers, Kovik and Jenner. Both sides are tired of the feud, but have different ideas about how to put an end to it. Kovik wants to annihilate his enemies. Jenner is indecisive and Curran hopes that someday they might have peace.

To find out whether this is possible, Curran travels across the border to assess the Durbar brothers' intentions. The stakes are raised when, fearing the worst, Sulih sends Grusha and several other warriors after him. Grusha ends up captured by the Durbars and executed and Curran is thrown into prison to face an uncertain fate.

A secondary subplot involves tension between Kovik and Jenner. Kovik has started to resent Jenner. He wants the Sundered Lands to be reunified at any cost and with tuberculosis slowly killing him, time is not on his side.

The bonds between the brothers snap when the Basilisks Kovik has been secretly raising attack. Jenner orders them destroyed and Kovik begins scheming to undermine him.

There were several challenges I faced with this thesis. Because I was writing this, like it would be a pilot episode, I needed to be mindful of pacing. A lot needs to happen within a pilot. You need to have the story move and make the characters and the world feel real.

I also struggled with making the characters dynamic. In the initial version, I was dissatisfied with what drove them. Curran's original plan was to sneak into Helgen to find out how many men the Durbars would gain and there was silliness with Kovik wanting to nail a skull outside of the town. I strengthened the story by changing what the characters wanted. Curran now was willing to consider peace. And Kovik was driven by being terminally ill and racial hatred. I made what he did with the basilisk ambiguous.

Some other changes I made included removed confusing filler scenes, such as Jenner and Kovik talking by the river; rearranging the sequence of chapters to improve the pacing; and toning down the fantasy elements. Curran and Kovik became normal humans.

Kovik was no longer a magician and Curran was no longer a shapeshifter. I also changed a plot line that was confusing. My original plan was for the reader not to know

one of the main characters was Curran himself. In the first version, I called him Kiernan and Sulih “the Earth Delver”. It made the story hard to follow by trying to be coy about who they were so in the end, I figured, let’s just call them Sulih and Curran and not try to make a secret out of who they are.

Lastly, I wrapped up some plot inconsistencies. There were unanswered questions, such as how was Kovik able to conceal his pets for so long?

Thank you for reading my thesis.

CHAPTER ONE – JENNER

Grey clouds spread across the Sundered Lands like watercolors running down a sheet of paper and the wind whipping about Jenner were sharp and stinging. The bone-colored forest stretched on interminably and the hills were cold and hostile. He had been on the move since sunset, searching for his brother, Kovik Durbar. Last seen, according to their guards, headed towards the Kremloch. It sat a day's journey from the fell land of Vulfier and an attack could come at any time.

Jenner's shoulders quaked as he rode deeper into the brush. Dozens of horsemen patrolled the forest, yet none of them would enter the old valley with him. Not when he had used his authority, as lord of Helgen, to pass a law, making it a capital crime for them to do so.

Jenner grit his teeth. He hated leaving the Kremloch unguarded. But there was no better place for Kovik to conceal the dangerous beasts he was raising as a last means of defense, if they should ever find themselves in full-out war with their enemies.

Jenner brought his mare to a halt and stared at the mountains. Sulih, Lord of Vulfier, and his chieftain, Curran, dwelt hundreds of miles away, in the North, but it felt as though they lived directly under their shadow, with iron spikes topping the walls of their town. Sheer watch towers overlooked every street corner and people trudged to

work as if their spirits had been broken. How much longer could they go on, living like this?

Hunger wracked Jenner's body as he continued on his journey. He sucked in his stomach to quell the pangs. He'd eaten nothing all day. He'd asked his food be given to a poor woman and her children.

"Kovik, where are you?" he hissed. He didn't dare shout Kovik's name. Not when the noise might attract his brother's beasts and draw them outside the valley.

He could feel the temperature dropping. He hurried into the Kremloch, scanning the treetops and the road. Danger could come from the front, the side or up above. Light streamed through the canopy and the mountains on the other side of the border were visible through the branches. Gold-colored pines covered their slopes and smoky white plumes swirled about their peaks. The nearest one was sharp and jagged and a flock of crows circled its teeth. The birds swooped and spun, creating pretty spirals in the sky.

"Kovik!"

He pressed on. Hours passed. Two, three? He couldn't recall. The wind picked up. It battered the ancient trees, blasted the boulders standing along the roadside and tried to tear the cape from his shoulders. His legs throbbed and his head swam. It was becoming tough to navigate and it would get tougher still, the further he went into the Kremloch. There, he would find false trails, confusing cross roads, and darkness and gloom.

"Damn you. Where did you go?"

Suddenly, he froze. Someone was coming up the old road. Scale maille jangled. Hoofbeats fell, clomping on the gravel, and a voice rose, fighting to be heard over the wind. It had to be Kovik.

He decided to sit under a tree to wait for his brother. White patches of lichen coated its cracked skin and the leaves rustled within the upper branches.

It wasn't long before Kovik came down the foot path. A broadsword hung at his side and a goat was draped across the back of his chestnut horse. The monsters, then, had not yet been fed.

Kovik tilted his head. His green eyes settled on Jenner. They were bright and glassy, like a leaf coated with rainwater. "What are you doing here? I told you, I can handle this, myself."

"It's best if we go together. Your beasts are getting bigger," Jenner started.

Kovik sneered. "I thought you were going to say, I might run into one of Sulih and Curran's dreng warriors!"

Jenner let the reins idle in his hands, running his fingers across the cracked leather. "Who knows what they want these days?"

"We should take the fight to them. Wipe out them and their dreng."

Jenner's skin prickled. He tried to picture what would happen if they tried to sack Vulfier. "We don't have the strength to attack them," he said.

"Someday, soon we will."

Jenner's lip twisted. "We may not see closure in our lifetime."

"When will we be free of them?" Kovik boomed.

The horses strained at the sound. Their nostrils flared and they pressed their ears back.

“Kovik,” Jenner said, “cut the goat free.”

“Why should we do anything differently than we’ve done in the past?”

Jenner tore at the kid’s bindings. The young creature let out a loud bleat.

“Because I don’t want to be here when your pets arrive. Put the goat on the ground.

They’ll find it.”

Kovik lowered the goat onto the ground. “You look exhausted. It’s because of the wedding, isn’t it? You’re not happy about it, are you?”

“No, I am not.” Jenner said. In a few days he was to be married to a woman his late father had selected for him. He had never met her and she was supposedly fifteen years younger than he was. “I would’ve chosen a different way to strengthen our house.”

He gripped the reins as tight as he could, feeling a great weight upon him. The darkness was deepening. The twilight distorted the landscape, twisting trees and rocks into spikes. They made him think of the permanent unlight he’d seen surrounding Sulih’s towers. “Come, Kovik!”

Kovik, however, did not follow. “Wait. I think I hear something.”

Jenner’s heartbeat quickened as his brother flicked sword at the trees. “It’s them.”

“Over there! Do you see their shadows!”

Jenner followed Kovik’s gaze. His face whitened as the creatures flitted from tree to tree, their bodies twisting into nooses and snaking into other unnatural shapes. The umbrage of their spiked heads swelled over the land and their wings arched across the

path. Their mouths seemed to stretch open, wide enough to swallow caves, and their clawed hands were like the peaks of mountains. They had gorged themselves to the size of wolfhounds and their silhouettes were bloated.

“My god,” gasped Jenner.

The goat landed at his horse’s feet; its throat torn to ribbons. They had taken it while he groped in the darkness and hurled its shredded remains before him in challenge.

His eyes moved from the corpse to Kovik, and in the second that they did, his horse’s nerves snapped.

The mare screamed and catapulted off the ground.

Jenner threw his arms around her neck and clasped his legs around her body as she reared up on her hind legs and lashed out with her front ones. Her feet beat uselessly at the air and blood foamed in her mouth. The bit was sawing through her tongue, and her rider was grinding his thighs into her, trying to bear her back down to the mark.

She let out a keening scream and the things in the trees screamed back at her, and closed in.

With one last desperate shake, the mare flung her master off.

Jenner went flying into the brambles, and dark shapes with scaled, bony armor bounded after him.

CHAPTER TWO - KOVIK

Kovik tore towards the creatures barreling after Jenner. The hunger in their slitted eyes and slather spilling from their beaked snouts created an unimaginable horror. He fell upon them, hollering. “Kepha! Majn!”

But it did no good.

The two creatures were in a feeding frenzy and Jenner was flailing beneath them. The thick branch he held over his face was the only thing keeping them from ripping his throat out. Blood drenched his clothes and his hands were a mangled, unrecognizable mess.

Kovik tackled the beast worrying at Jenner’s knee. He flung his arms about its long neck and held on for dear life.

The creature lunged and Kovik went down. He pitched forward, striking his forehead against the animal’s spiked spine.

The creature sprang to its feet, spun around, snapped at his shoulder.

Kovik let go, and dove to the side to avoid its serrated jaws.

The strike missed.

Witless yellow irises met his.

The creature champed its dripping teeth, and screamed out its rage. The forest shook with the force of its roar, and then a searing stream of fire flared above him.

Kovik's head snapped up in time to see the ball of flame burst. His vision blurred as hissing embers rained down upon him. For a moment, all he could see were red flares, whirling about him like swirling objects inside a kaleidoscope.

He staggered over the scorched ground, swinging his sword and shouting. The creatures bellowed back at him with primordial cries and continued to attack Jenner.

There was nothing he could do to injure them or pull them off his brother. His sword put no dent in their skulls and they outweighed him.

Panic burst in Kovik. Disbelief and horror collided, leaving his mind reeling and his body shaking. He was only half aware of his sword slipping and the side of his blade striking the injured mare.

The creatures swiveled their heads and looked.

Jenner's horse wheezed and the larger of the two monsters advanced, clicking inquisitively. The other one followed, snuffing the air.

Kovik clenched his teeth together. He recognized *that* sound. "Come on," he whispered, barely able to form the words or hold his long staff still.

Take her! Take her! he prayed, his focus skipping from the horse to Jenner.

The creatures did the same, swinging their slender, serpentine necks.

Kovik's arms buckled. They were apprising the two of them. Trying to decide which of them would make a better meal.

"Kill *her*. She's *yours*," he pleaded.

Kovik descended on Jenner as the two furies charged. He flung him across the back of his horse, and cried, "Go, go."

The creatures spun and hissed. They flared their spiked crests at him and warbled. Chunks of horse gut spilled from the larger monster's mouth.

Kovik's hand jerked. They still wanted Jenner. "Ride!" he panted.

They tore down the path. The creatures' guttural cries rang in his ears, and the shadows leapt at him.

How could this attack have happened? he asked himself. *What had he done wrong?* He had raised those creatures with love...

He clattered up the hill, wondering if the fault lay with him. *Or Jenner.* From day one, his brother had acted fearful around them.

"Where are we going, Kovik?" Jenner demanded.

Kovik shivered. The blood on Jenner's scaled shirt shone clearly in the fading light. "Far away from here," he choked, not daring to make eye contact. "We'll stop soon."

"Keep going. I'm not about to die," said Jenner.

From far off, there came a mournful cry. And then a massive, ox like shaped appeared, and wheeled around the crescent moon.

Jenner blanched. "They're following us!"

"No, they won't leave the valley."

Not yet.

"This has gone too far. You said you could control them. Why did I agree to this?" Jenner moaned.

Kovik said nothing. How could he respond to *that*?

They galloped down a gravelly causeway, sweeping past limestone boulders. Kovik's heart lurched with each hoof beat. What would happen, what would Jenner do when they got into town? Would his brother demand they end this? Those were the thoughts that raced through his mind as they pressed upon the mountain.

It was a terrible journey. The forest was frighteningly silent. No leaves rustled. No birds called. No squirrels sprang from tree to tree. Yet the shadows lengthened, the temperature fell, and the sky darkened. Grey clouds turned black. When they reached the Man main road, the sun was a receding star. The world felt remote and empty and the horse was panting and soaked with sweat.

To their dismay, they found the East Gate guarded by one of their more inquisitive men. The moment he saw them, he leaped up, full of questions. "My lord, is that you?" he exclaimed. "How can I be of assistance to you?"

"You can help by making sure we're not disturbed," Kovik snapped. "I'm not in the mood to deal with people right now."

The guard fumbled with his keys. They slipped about in his puffy red hands. "I'm sorry to hear that. Let me know what I can do to make the rest of the night pass smoothly for you."

"I sure will." Kovik grimaced. They had an overwhelming amount of work to do before they left for Jenner's wedding.

"Come on in. I've got the gate."

The brothers hurried inside. Kovik dismounted and walked in front of his horse, silently taking note of their surroundings.

They entered an area he hated called Craftsmen's Row.

Craftsmen's Row was a mindboggling maze of shops, smithies, and storehouses. The wooden buildings were all identical and the air reeked of charcoal and burning faggots. Villagers and indentured servants murmured as they wandered down the Row.

"My lord, might I suggest a short cut?" the gatekeeper proposed. He grabbed the bridle and guided the horse to an entryway guarded by two silent soldiers clad in armor with swooping, segmented plates. Unevenly cut spikes were set in their helms, and jagged studs protruded from their cheek guards. They were the vordr, the best of the brothers' men.

"Does it go passed the Heartwood Inn?" Jenner asked. "We'll stay there tonight."

Kovik looked sidelong at his brother. Stringy strands of pus covered Jenner's fingers, and the bone in his left wrist tilted upwards. "Why?" he whispered. The only reason he could think of was to avoid creating a scene at their house.

"Because it's what I wish." Jenner took a hesitant step forward. Then another. And another. Using the fence post to support himself, he headed for the door. "Now, I am going inside to request a room."

Kovik loped up the stairs after him. "Wait! Let me get the room for you. And find a doctor for you."

Jenner beat his chest for emphasis. "No, you won't do that. I'll take care of things myself. I haven't forgotten how to set a bone or staunch a wound."

And with that, he stormed inside, leaving Kovik shaking with confused rage. How many minutes now lay between them and the hammer stroke of doom?

“What happened to you out there?” the gatekeeper ventured.

“We had an unfortunate run-in tonight.”

“Dreng?” the gatekeeper’s restraint gave way.

“No. We got attacked by a mad dog. Don't worry, it's dead.”

“That’s good. But it’d still be worthwhile for me to go out there and look around.

Can't take chances, can we?"

No. They could not.

“Can you take a message to Iliya Royce for me?” Kovik asked. He was thinking about a man who had been shot down by dreng at the border a fortnight ago.

“Of course, my lord. What would you like me to say to him?” Adrian said.

In hushed tones, Kovik recounted what had happened. “Tell him to double his men.”

“When do you plan on striking back at them?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

“I won’t dishonor Jenner by killing people on the eve of his wedding,” Kovik said.

“But those people...”

“Will have justice. There may not be a revenge raid, but I *will* do something, and you have my permission to avenge your friend, as you see fit.”

“I’ll be honored to do so, Lord Durbar.”

“You shouldn’t call me that. I’m not Lord Durbar.”

“To me, you are. You’re the one who gets stuff done around here.”

Sadly, true. Jenner was marginally talented as a leader.

“That's quite a claim to make," replied Kovik.

The gatekeeper studied him, as if trying to see into his soul. “Take care, my *lord.*” he said, visibly disappointed.

Kovik left him with the horse and headed after Jenner. As he set foot on the stairs, wind struck him in the face, bringing with it the scent of dying leaves and impending mourning. The rotted gardens lay as still about him as burial plots and the wall enclosing Helgen cast purple shadows. The town had attuned its music to his discordance.

Gingerly, he pushed on the door. It slid open with a loud creak.

Dozens of eyes locked upon him and a hush came over the room. To his consternation, the partygoers put down their ale mugs and the singers ceased plucking at their instruments.

“Master Kovik, what brings you here?” the innkeeper exclaimed. “How can I be of assistance to you?”

“I'd like a room for two, if my brother hasn't already paid for one, and I would like for that room to be *private* and far away from other people.”

The owner nodded giddily. The purse Kovik threw on the table bulged with gold coins and bystanders were pouring in, all hoping to approach the young lord and present him with their problems. The brothers were good for business. “Master Jenner requested the gamekeeper's room. It's right this way.”

Kovik followed his host down a dim corridor. The innkeeper attempted to engage him in conversation, but the best he managed to do was mumble some comment about the new shelves on the wall. The carved doors and the exquisite black and gold carpet about them shook him. The deeper down the corridor they went, the more displaced he felt. The orderliness of the passageways served as a reminder that his world was spiraling into an ugly, chaotic hellhole.

His survival instincts kicked in as they approached his chosen quarters. Desperately, he racked his brains, scheming of ways to prevent Jenner from harming Kepha and Majn. *If they were to have any hope of annihilating the dreng, they would need them...*

Before he could think of a solution, the innkeeper came to a stop. “We’re here,” his host announced.

Doom awaited him.

CHAPTER THREE - KOVIK

Kovik shuffled into the gamekeeper's quarters like a person headed to the execution block.

Jenner sat by the fireplace, bandaging his wounds. An ewer filled with bloody water steamed on the table beside him. His brows were rigid black bars, but the corners of his mouth were relaxed and at ease. His mood was unreadable.

Kovik's insides roiled. What was Jenner thinking? What was he feeling? Did he plan on letting this terrible incident go or would he break the bonds that lay between them?

Brothers. That must mean something to him, right? Right?

"How are you doing? I hope you're well?"

"As well as I can be, given the circumstances."

Kovik bit his lip. *So much for hoping they could put this behind them.*

"They didn't mean to attack you," he whispered.

The ewer trembled on the table. "Excuse me?"

Jenner's shoulders became rigid. "I can't believe you just said that. You're not serious, are you?"

"Yes, I am," Kovik choked. His tongue felt thick in the back of his throat

"You did aggressive things, too, in the past."

"I'll agree, I made a few mistakes," said Jenner.

“So, in the future, don’t repeat what you did. Let’s put this behind us and deal with other matters. I’m concerned about Sulih and Curran.”

Jenner sighed and ran his knuckles down the shutters. Torchlight spilled through the cracks to cast barred shadows on the hardwood floor. In the street, horsemen gathered around fire pots and a body, hanging from the stockades, twirled like a top. “Who is that?” he asked, stroking his beard with the side of his hand.

“Ask again when there’s daylight—I don’t remember. I sign *so* many death warrants each week.”

“I should’ve checked the view before requesting this room,” Jenner commented. “Oh well, now it’s too late to do anything about it. Here we are, so here we’ll stay.”

“You have no stomach for death.”

“No, I hate having to decide who deserves to live and who deserves to die.”

“Well, that’s why you put me in charge of making sure everyone’s a good, law abiding citizen.”

“You’re good at hardening your heart, I’ll give you that. I hope you’re able to harden it tonight. I have a difficult thing to ask of you,” said Jenner. He made for the nightstand and poured himself a cup of water. With one big hearty gulp he downed half the liquid. Whatever he had to say was so foul, he wanted to wash the taste of it from his mouth.

“Of course, I’ll be able to block my emotions,” Kovik said. “Who do you want me to take care of for you?”

His tone gave Jenner pause.

“Do you still have your poisons?”

“I never got rid of them. What do you want me to do? Poison Curran? That’s quite a task you’ve got for me.”

“No, I don’t want you to kill him.”

“Then what do you want me to do?” Kovik exclaimed.

Jenner gestured helplessly with his hands. “After the wedding, I want you to kill a deer and leave it where your bloodthirsty beasts can find it. Bring me their bodies after the deed’s done, so I know you obeyed my orders.”

Dead silence descended on the room. Red sparked in Kovik's vision like wildfire on a plain that hasn't tasted water in years. Jenner’s demand felt as surreal as Sulih surrendering to them and begging for mercy.

He flexed his fingers, just to prove he was still alive, and he was indeed experiencing this vicious pain.

Jenner moved through the room, rambling. “You can’t control them. I was a fool to think you could. Next time, it could be a child.”

“How often do you see children in the Kremloch?”

“You know damn well, that’s not what a meant. Sooner or later, Kepha and Majn will come here. And then what do you think will happen?”

Kovik’s chest heaved. “I think there’ll be a lot of dead sheep and cows, and that I’ll have a lot of angry people coming after me. I promise, I’ll compensate them, and all will be well.”

“Eight thousand silver pieces will be small consolation to the parents who lose their children.”

Kovik thrashed his head. “And I’m telling you there won’t be *any* dead children. We’ll seal off the valley.”

“How will you contain them when they’re full grown?” Jenner countered. “These monsters can grow to be over eighteen feet long.”

There was no contesting that.

“I’m aware of what I’ll be getting into. I always research everything in advance.”

“No, you didn’t.” Jenner challenged. “I don’t know why I went along with this.”

“Look.”

A thunderous boom drowned out Kovik’s whispered reply. Then a loud scrambling sound, like that of clawed feet on stone, came rolling over the rooftops. Silver light flashed outside the inn, and a throaty voice cried out, “Rain! Rain!”

“We need them. Eventually, Sulih and Curran are going to attack us. You want to keep people safe, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do, but these are the most dangerous animals on the continent. They can’t be taught loyalty or tamed.”

Jenner showed no fire now; just weariness and sadness, and the sight made Kovik think back to the day their father renounced his lordship, and passed his title down to Jenner. His brother seemed just as out of place now as he did then.

“Do you remember what you told Dad when you took over? You promised you’d act in Helgen’s best interests. God damn it, do so,” Kovik spat.

Jenner's throat muscles contracted. "And I am now."

"We need them."

"We'll come up with another way to protect Helgen."

"Time as you know, is not on my side." Kovik said, and in the future, it would only become harder. He now spent a quarter of his afternoon coughing up his lungs. Tuberculosis brought on a slow, gradual decline... "I'm afraid of what's going to happen."

"So am I," Jenner agreed, "but we need to find some other way to protect ourselves. My mind's made up. Do you hear me?"

Outside, the rain was coming down hard now. It rattled their roof like gravel being poured down a pipe, and turned the world to melancholy, discolored runny streaks. Kovik shook; not from the cold or shock. But because the rain had its voice and showed more strength than he in this moment.

All he could do was look, beseeching Jenner not to do this to him.

"Will you do it?" his brother asked, opening his arms, placatingly.

The sight filled Kovik with revulsion. Jenner was not doing this out of concern for him, but because he needed to preserve his delusional conception of himself as a caring fatherly figure.

"You have to do it. You're the only one who can get close enough to them. I can't. They'll maul me."

That put them in quite a predicament, didn't it?

Kovik turned, the pain in his face desperate and terrible. To cave in and do what Jenner wanted would be as unforgivable things Sulih had done. His people deserved to

live in a land full of order, cooperation, and prosperity. Murdering Kepha and Majn would condemn them to fifty or more years of hardship...

Kovik thrust his jaw out. "The answer is no," he said. He had found his voice again. "I would sooner cut off a limb than lay a hand on them. Find someone else to do it."

"So, no is your decision?" Jenner questioned.

"Yes. It's final," he hissed, raising his voice for the man and the woman he could hear in the corridor.

Let them know how greatly he wrongs me and how little he cares about you.

He hoped Jenner would take the bait and lash back. But he didn't, even though he was undoubtedly angry. "Very well."

Ice avalanched in Kovik's stomach. The man and woman were silent. Listening. Probably thinking he was the aggressor, because he was the one doing all the shouting. "So be it," he quietly seethed.

Jenner glanced at the door, realizing what he'd tried to do. "I will give you until we return to think about it. And if you still refuse to do it, then you will no longer be welcome in my house, and I will have no choice but to relieve you of your duties. I won't have someone around me who I can't trust."

His words came crashing upon Kovik like a branch struck by lightning. The boy gaped at him, struggling to believe what he'd just heard. For what seemed an eternity, he just stood there, wishing that he could throw himself on the bed, sink into sleep, and dream away this terrifying reality. Being disowned he could live with. But losing

everything that he'd worked for was just...incomprehensible to him. Without his powers, there'd be no hope of containing the Vulfier.

Panic rose in his throat, but he choked it back down.

"Please consider this," Jenner pleaded. "I'm not asking for an answer tonight. You have two weeks..."

"And then what? Kill them?" Kovik exploded.

The bands about his heart cracked. He let rip, tearing into Jenner. Relief surged through him as he released his pain. He felt hopeless and hollow and on the verge of destruction. "I can't believe Father left you in charge. You wouldn't be able to manage this place without me propping you up, you goddamn cripple."

He bowed his head, letting his curtain of hair fall forward to hide the red pinpricks in the corners of his eyes. Jenner just blinked back at him. He didn't look sad. Or furious. Or like the accusations he'd just hurled at him had even registered.

Kovik gave up. "I'll see you in the morning. I don't sleep under the same roof as invalids," he cried, and with that he walked right out the door.

He was grateful that Jenner made no move to follow him and that the corridors were clear.

He stormed down to the main area and demanded to speak to the innkeeper.

The owner had the common sense not to ask Kovik why he wanted a different room and promptly found new accommodations for him in the master suite.

Once there, collapsed onto the mattress and piled the sheets and pillows on top of himself to muffle the sounds he knew he'd make. For the next two hours, he hacked up

his lungs, rinsed the tangy taste of crap out of his mouth, and thought of a lovely maiden he'd had his heart set on marrying. He examined the room through his gummed up eyes, wondering if this was where they had come the night he took her to bed and his pained coughs sent her running to the door, sobbing. The hair brush with the tarnished metal handle could have been hers. And so, could the thin, sheer dressing gown on the table. He thought of the promises that he wouldn't fulfill to her, the children that he would never have the chance to love, and the dreams that would never be. And then, seeing the deep, dark blue glow of morning behind the sharp, white stars in the sky, he stretched himself out on the bed, and wrapped himself in the unfeeling, unconscious, mercy of sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR - CURRAN

Dawn broke over Helgen with a fury. Winds from the night before raced over the cliffs, lashing at the sleek grey horse plodding up the mountain towards the town.

Curran clawed at the mane, twisting the coarse hair around his fingers. He feared at any moment he might topple from the animal's back. Ice cold gusts raced up his nose, shooting straight into his skull. Riding without rest was beginning to take its toll on him. He bared his teeth in defiance and straightened himself up.

Helgen rippled below him, stunning in its beauty. Well-tilled fields ran on for leagues in the lowlands and ancient oaks crowned the highlands. To the north, the River Fleet twisted through the valley, carving out sheer gullies and islets. And to the east, a castle rose above the purple-gold pools of sunlight hanging suspended between heaven and earth.

Curran brought the horse to a halt. He dismounted and left the beast standing there, on the slope. It would be too dangerous to ride into Helgen on the back of stolen property.

Memories of his terrible journey swarmed in his head as he headed towards the Durbars' home. In the darkness, he had seen horsemen shuffling along the shoals of the river.

He pressed on, pondering the situation. Why had there been so few of them?

The wedding must be keeping them busy, he mused. Jenner would have to travel hundreds of miles to marry the Blackwood girl...

A trail of smoke streaming from the cliffs caught his eye. He had come to a guard tower. Great wooden trebuchets sat throned on mighty stone pillars and guards perched upon the limestone ledges. Heavy crossbows were in their hands and terrible barbed arrows rested in their quivers.

At that moment, his heart misgave him and he turned and veered into the brush. He didn't feel he could pass himself off as a traveler to them. Not when his mind full of doubt and he was struggling to rein in his emotions. It had been an agonizing decision to abandon his lord and his dreng shield-brothers. But this wedding left him no choice. He had to see for himself how much stronger the Durbars would become with Lord Blackwood's men at his command. Find out whether there was a chance Vulenfier and Helgen might someday be able to co-exist. Prisoners who'd been brought before him had sworn Jenner wanted peace and Kovik could be restrained.

He collapsed in the thicket. Moonlight gave way to daylight as he lay there, shuddering at the glory of Helgen, and delighting in the earthy fragrance of pine nettles and the feel of damp moss against his chest. The air ghosting across his face was pleasant, and reminded him of his king: forceful and wild, with a hint of frost.

Gradually, his muscles uncramped, and his heartbeat returned to its usual rhythm.

His mind once again clear, he contemplated the task at hand. Kovik's vordr guards would pose a constant threat. But they had no idea what he actually looked like, because he had always carried out his king's orders from the shadows...

He unsteadily set off down the path. For five miles, he looped through lichen-covered trees and dilapidated homesteads rotting on the mountain. The further down he

went, the more difficult travel became. Sinkholes opened before him and brown slush oozed into muddy hoof prints, too many to count. It looked like an army of soldiers had ridden forth recently and torn the road to pieces.

“Do you know what happened here?” he reluctantly asked a man leading a pair of oxen up the hill.

The farmer squinted at him through weepy, deep sockets. “Lord Durbar’s paying a visit to The Woods. He’s going to bring back his lady.”

Curran hesitated. Those drooping holes were bending down on him, black and heavy. “Do you know how many men are traveling with him?”

“Some four thousand I’d say,” the farmer puffed up with pride.

“*Four thousand...*” Curran murmured. Doubt was in his mind. This was the first time he’d ever heard of such a large wedding escort.

“Do you have an idea how long they will be away?” he asked.

“I am not sure.”

Curran somberly considered this news. He would learn more about the Durbars if he could observe them, first hand. And how many men they returned with would reveal much about their strength. But leaving his master alone for so long did not rest well with him.... The wretch he served possessed a brilliant mind and commanded respect, but lacked temperance and judgment. Would he return home and find their fortress reduced to mortar and rubble?

“Do you know when they will return?” Curran said.

“I don’t know. But I think they’ll be back soon. Lord Kovik, you see, doesn’t like to stay away for long.”

CHAPTER FIVE- SULIH

Hundreds of ravens poured into the sky, flocking over the ruined city of Vulfier. A terrible cry was coming from the ruined fortress hewn into the side of the mountains, and the frightened birds wanted nothing to do with it. They fled through the rubble, leaving the lord of the ruins clutching his forehead and breathing heavily in his sanctum of solitude.

Sulih's confidant had passed beyond his sight, and that shook him to the core. Curran was his eyes and ears, the moving voice who gave wisdom and reason to his thoughts, and inflamed the passions of his men. What if some grisly fate befell his trusted servant in the lawless Sundered Lands?

He had been against him going from the very beginning, but Curran had kept pushing. And so, he had reluctantly given his permission, and Curran had departed at dawn. "Don't worry, I won't be gone long, my lord," he'd promised.

But now, many nights had passed.

As if sensing his agitation, the ground tremored softly...

Sulih sank his toes into the soil about his throne and dug his fingers into his moldering garments. The damp grime felt good against his skin, and the soothing pulsations beneath his feet took the edge off the gouges he felt in his soul. It was impossible for him to think about Curran being injured without being reminded of his own injuries.

He reassessed his mental wounds with the same detachment with which he interrogated prisoners. The damage to his spirit remained deep and extensive, and there appeared to be no signs of improvement.

He squeezed his palms shut and admitted to himself that the lacerations probably never would heal. His mind just couldn't come to terms with some of the terrible things he had experienced. His nights were filled with the terror of being hurled on his face and pierced by arrows and blades.

And by day, there were the doubts and the never-ending questions. He spent his time alone obsessively revisiting the past, retracing the footsteps leading up to his ruin. Reacting too soon—not taking the time to isolate his enemies—and thinking massive numbers would bring him quick and easy victory. The length of his chain of mistakes obliterated him. How could he have shown such poor judgment and failed to see the bigger picture?

He held a sliver of glass up and inspected his appearance. A pale face rent with agitation, putrefied with paranoia, and aged with weariness stared back at him.

Wearily, he brushed the straggly strands of hair floating around him and straightened the spiked crown sitting upon his forehead, so that he looked more like a noble lord shining with glory, instead of a wretch cowering in the shadows.

A vision of what used to exist unfolded before him as his neck bent beneath the weight of the heavy piece of metal. For a second, he saw magnificent plate armor and bright grey eyes burning with a hunger for life; and then that vision was mercifully rolled away, as the scrape of sabatons on cement snapped him back to the present.

He pulled himself together and sized up the bronze-skinned dreng skulking in the doorway of his throne room.

Grusha was scrawnier and shorter than he, but more than a match for him in his present condition. He had muscles like steel, moved with perfect balance, and had a cold air about him.

The tarnished coins in his visitor's hair caught the sickly man's attention. Grusha displayed his trophies in the style typical of the brave nomadic men from the uttermost East. Gold looted off defeated foes was woven into his thick dreadlocks and bits of shell dangled from his leather tunic. He wore three silver collars about his neck and bore a formidable flanged mace.

Curran's master side-eyed the giant club. "You should switch to a war hammer, Grusha," he said. "You'd get better range. Have you considered it?"

Grusha smiled terribly. "I'm not agile enough to fight with a hammer, my lord, and to cast aside this fine mace would bring me dishonor. It would be as if your men tossed away their shields...or you lost your hand," the dreng replied, casting a crafty glance at a tarnished broadsword lying atop a stone tomb along the wall.

Glory, the King Slayer. A terrible weapon that held no loyalty to anyone.

Sulih's lips tightened. The bite of steel and the haziness of death flickered in his consciousness. He knew better than anyone what Glory could do. "Very well, keep your mace, Grusha," he told the dreng.

The chieftain bowed, but not out of submission or respect. He was tilting his head so he could better see. The broadsword held him riveted.

“Is that your sword or does it belong to the man who lies buried there?” Grusha inquired.

Sulih said nothing. Words right now were perilous, and acting as if he didn’t care was too. “These days I use Crescent to carry out justice. “What brings you here, Grusha?” he coolly said. Great lords, he reminded himself, do not retain power by tearing down their soldiers, and all reports contain merit. “I assume you came to me because your master’s unavailable. Tell me what is going on in my lands.”

Grusha hesitated. The foulness of the throne room turned heads and stifled senses. It smelt of wet earth and dust, and the chilling man on the dais was even more overpowering. He evinced mania and righteousness, and resembled a corpse on its way to its final resting place, with meters of wool mummifying his body and precious beads scattered throughout his hair.

“Nayhu’s band was ambushed. There were no survivors.”

“Tell me what happened.?”

“There’re archers hiding in the cliffs. They shoot everything in sight. It’s become very dangerous to move around. It was difficult to get here.”

Sulih froze. “Do you know how many?”

“I can’t tell.”

“Go close the door for me, it’s getting cold in here. I’ll have orders for you shortly,” Sulih said, maintaining his appearance of total calmness. He choked down the anxiety in his chest as the dreng put his back to him and started walking away.

“Grusha, are you good at tracking?” Sulih asked.

“We dreng are very good trackers.”

Sulih spoke with alarming fervor and his voice contained an edge. Every syllable resonated. “One of our own has gone missing. I need you to follow him and send me word of his fate.

“You are to follow hi tracks and send me word of his fate. If the trail goes down into the Sundered Lands, you are to follow it over the border. I *must* know what’s happened. Do you understand me?”

Grusha stood there, listening incredulously to these orders. This rider his master wanted him to find must be a person of extreme importance. “And this man you want me to find...who is he?” the dreng asked.

“None other than Curran, himself.”

CHAPTER SIX - GRUSHA

The light was waning when the dreng finally departed from Sulih's lair.

Grusha insisted on spending the afternoon researching what they were getting into, because their missing man had come and gone by a route of ill repute. The dreng accompanying him spoke enthusiastically, at first, about their mission, but changed their minds once they reached the catacombs. Loose gravel, false walls, and cracked floors filled the subterranean passages. The damp air sickened them and Curran's trail wove through unmapped rooms and doubled back on itself. For two days, they marched through crumbling chambers that led to nowhere.

There were few chances to rest. On the third day, they decided to make camp in an empty room they'd found. They were spreading out their bedrolls and fixing themselves a well-deserved supper when Stiva discovered foot prints, too large and too deep to be their own.

"Vordr," Grusha spat.

And so, they kept going.

The dreng mustered their courage and made a push for one final march. They tramped down a steep tunnel that wheeled and pitched in unexpected directions. The passage was so dark and narrow, they were forced to bow their heads and grope at the mildewy walls. They tripped, tore themselves on jagged stones, and inhaled cobwebs and dust. But they kept going and at the end of the hour were rewarded.

Suddenly, the tunnel opened up.

The dreng found themselves in a wide hallway with stale air and light pouring in through cracks. Shattered shields and slashed pieces of armor lay strewn across a weathered floor. And in the corner, they saw a great arch with stairs glowing inside it.

Grusha released his breath. Curran's tracks ran across the tiles. The hunt underground had come to an end. But the quest remained unfinished.

Stiva started to unpack.

Grusha picked up a hewn helmet and pounded it to attract his attention. A soldier had crudely carved a snarling bear into the leather. A gift left to remind them who truly ruled the Sundered Lands. "Don't make yourselves too comfortable," he said between clenched teeth. "We don't stop to rest until nightfall."

"What's this you say now?" Stiva sputtered. "This place isn't ideal, but it'd be good for refueling. It's..."

"It's known by our enemies and there's something about it that really bothers me."

He put the helmet on a ledge and looked down the hole they had come through. The tunnel appeared cold and dead, but there was a feeling of malice and wildness to it that unnerved him. It felt as if there was a second darkness within the one enclosing him, and that this one was cannibalizing the other from the inside out.

"Did you see signs of anything in that tunnel with us?" he whispered. His eyes had adjusted to the light and he could now see deep gouges in the rocks and rusty-colored splashes on the walls. There were handprints too and they were the same color.

"No, I didn't," Agmund rasped, catching sight of the splotches. "My god."

“Out, now,” Grusha commanded. He retreated, dragging Agmund with him.

“Don’t go in if you haven’t seen.” Agmund said. "Do any of you still want to stay here?"

Nobody answered him. They gripped their traveling bags and moved away from the tunnel. They were listening intently, expecting to hear feet racing after them or some monstrous predator snuffling the air for their scent.

Agmund made for the stairs. “Lead us on!” he whispered. “And don’t call a rest until we’re fifty miles from here.”

The dreng hurried out. Grusha brought up the rear to make sure nothing followed them.

But nothing came.

CHAPTER SIX- MAY

It was mid-afternoon and the sun was already sinking behind the steep, massive walls of Blackwood. The battlements stood like living trees in the dwindling light and soldiers patrolled the battlements, armed with bows and throwing spears.

Seventeen-year-old May Blackwood sat in her window, watching them crawl along the white bridges. There were more men out today than she had ever seen. Her grandfather had turned all of his knights out to receive her future husband and to have them on standby in case any trouble arose.

The screams of a raven made her heart jump. She stood up, just in time to catch him come wheeling and spinning by her chambers. Behind him, an orange light flashed, and a winding trail of smoke climbed into the heavens. Someone was being burnt again.

She wondered who had died this time. The townsfolk no longer came together to mourn for their dead and her grandparents refused to discuss the fallen.

The farmer who had come to their door demanding compensation for his son's death had been ordered flogged and thrown down the stairs. Wendolyn kicking and screaming, "What do you expect me to do? What do you expect me to do? I'm doing all I can!" would be an image forever burned into her mind. She never expected her grandmother would beat someone in the face with her wooden mules!

Nor, she thought, did she ever expect her to marry her to Lord Jenner. His house was considered the strongest in the region. He did not need her grandparents' men or their resources.

"Girl, what are you doing up there? Do you wish to fall to your death?" an all too familiar voice called, startling her.

May plastered her hand on the window frame to steady herself, and looked up. Her grandmother stood beside her bed with a such a severe scowl on her face that jumping down to the street below seemed like a much more appealing option than owning up to what she had done wrong. The plump lady hobbled forward, taking short tripping steps in her massive black dress and cloven shoes. They were the same pair she'd used to turn the farmer's nose to pulp.

"I'm sorry, Grandmother." May said, demurely. Cautiously, she stepped down from the sill. Her strappy bridal sandals and ruffly, golden gown made this no easy task. She felt the hem catch on her heels and her hoop skirt bump against the wall. "All I wanted to do was look."

Wendolyn craned her neck out the window. "At what?" she cried, before studying her granddaughter critically.

"At the men. I thought I might see Lord Jenner. I can't wait to meet him," May lied.

Wendolyn was silent for a long moment. A very long moment. "Is that so? Matias tells me you got down on your knees and pleaded for him to break off the engagement."

It was true. She had done that. She did not want to be Jenner's wife. Matias said that he was a brute of a man and that he had a horrible brother named Kovik.

"I'm not on his level. He deserves to marry a perfect girl. I'm not her."

Wendolyn circled her. "You're right. You're not. Your sister, Shara. She was perfect - obedient, beautiful, and a delight to listen to."

She should be the one down there, marrying him...

But since Shara had run off to be with their father, they had to make do with what they had, and sell her to Jenner instead.

"I'll try do better," May promised. "I don't want to let you down."

"You could start by taking better care of your hair," her grandmother commented. "It's a rat's nest now. Come here. Head up. Hold still. I'll comb it out for you."

"Yes, Grandma," she replied, doing exactly as told.

Wendolyn roughly dragged the teeth of her brush through her hair. "You don't sound very happy. What have I told you about smiling and being cheerful? Do you think he wants to marry a gloomy girl?"

"No. I'm sorry," she meekly said, answering in the silly girl voice they taught her to use. "I was just thinking."

About the mother who died giving birth to her. The father who squandered all his money-making bad business deals and came crawling back, destitute. And the sister who was becoming harder and harder to remember with each passing day.

"Well, try not to do that either. Men are not fond of women who think. Leave all that to your husband. You got that?"

"Yes, I do." she squeaked.

"Good. You don't want to be by divine wrath."

May said nothing more. She straightened her shoulders and wondered what the gods thought of Wendolyn signing papers for her grandfather. They had yet to hurl a lightning bolt at her.

The old boar braided her hair, then stuffed it into a see-through snood. The netting was encrusted with lacy flowers and shiny seed beads, but the piece was very uncomfortable to wear. Her curls snagged on the beadwork and Wendolyn fastened her down so tightly, her hair felt like it was being pulled.

After she was all pinned up, her grandmother anointed her arms with perfume and crowned her brow with an antique tiara. Metal leaves arched around rose-gold lilies and hibiscuses, and citrine stones were set in the center of each flower.

Wendolyn tilted the mirror so she could see what she had done and said, "There. Much better. You look like a girl he would want to dance with now."

"Thank you," May gasped.

Wendolyn touched her arm. Warningly. "Don't take being all princessed-up for granted. There's more to captivating a man than making your face pretty. The most important things to a man are fear and respect. Don't you dare come downstairs with your head held high. He will take his boot and trod you into the ground."

"I understand."

Wendolyn pulled open a drawer and started rifling through her soiled clothes. She flipped the dresses inside out and shook down her undergarments. "It doesn't appear like you've menstruated this month," she said. "When do you think it'll happen again?"

"Soon."

Her grandmother smiled at her. "Good. I am glad to hear that. You want him to get you with child, as soon as possible. Your future's insecure until there's a baby on the way. Your life—*and our fortune*—depends on it.

"Now, I'm going downstairs to see what progress they're making. You are to stay here. It's unfitting for a young woman to go wandering around a house full of unfamiliar men. Matias will come get you when we're ready to begin, and you better not do anything to mess up your hair or wrinkle your dress."

And with that, Wendolyn Blackwood stormed out and slammed the door.

May waited until the clomping sounds she made were gone before sliding down against the wall and releasing the tears scalding her eyes. She rocked forward on her sandaled feet, recalling a time when things were different.

This never-ending struggle between Helgen and Vulenfier. The heavy makeup that smothered her identity. All these things frightened her and made her want to ride down to the wharf and sail away to a far-off country where she wouldn't be forced to live this tumultuous existence.

She covered her face with her hands and the room became like land one views from the deck of a departing ship—fading in and out of consciousness until it completely passes away

The clanging of the big bell roused her. She wiped her wet, bloodshot eyes and pulled herself up. By now, it was evening. The candles in the room had burned out and the sun was gone. The only light was that of the lantern hooked to her window. She climbed onto the divan and looked down.

The pavilion below had been transformed into a magical place. Tables sat upon the lawn, decorated with yellow and white roses. Ripe fruit, salted nuts, and fresh fish lay beautifully plated upon them. Pictures from the gallery were mounted on upright frames, giving the feast a touch of antiquity, and the lanterns roosting in towering trees were stars shining through the branches.

The flesh on May's arms rose. Tonight, it seemed as if there was no ongoing conflict with Vulenfier. The mountains in the distance shimmered a soft, light blue, and the plains of the valley a fresh and regal purple. The men milling about were garbed in simple, everyday wear, and bore no weapons. Lord and Lady Blackwood sat in the seats of honor at the big, long table and all was well with them. Wendolyn was having an engaging conversation with a family friend, and her grandfather was awake and alert, not dozing in his wheelchair.

There was no sign of Jenner. It was like the wedding had been called off.

A tap on the door dashed her hope that her future husband had decided not to show. She rushed away from the window, grabbed a picture book, and flipped to a random page.

Matias came in, dressed to impress the wealthy men at the feast. He wore a burgundy doublet trimmed with gold and had his sandy, shoulder-length hair tied back in a silk ribbon. He stopped and studied her. "I don't know what she was thinking putting you in that dress," he sighed. "Do you have anything else you can wear?"

May felt naked again. "Let...let me see," she said, leading him to her wardrobe.

Her uncle laid out a black dress with a dark veil, a sleeveless blue and white gown that left her shoulders and much of her chest exposed, and a red, lacy piece. His expression was that of a man who has seen a ghost. "We have got to get you more clothes. This one's something a prostitute would wear. This one's only good for a funeral, and this is not appropriate for this type of event. I suppose we'll have to make do."

"What's wrong with my dress?" she asked, against her better judgment.

Matias sighed. "With your hair and your dress, you're the spitting image of a famous whore. Hopefully, he won't make the connection."

Crossing back to the window, she spied a young man. "Who-who's that?" she murmured. *It's my husband, isn't it? He'll see me, think I'm disrespecting him, and beat me.*

"Kovik Durbar," Matias told her. "He is obsessed with Prince Sulih. All day, I've had to listen to Sulih this, Sulih that. The way he talks, I think he must be drunk."

May broke down. "Tell them I'm sick, Uncle Matias. I can't go down there dressed like this. It'll make him mad."

Matias caught her wrists. "Hiding up here in your room is what will make him mad, my beautiful niece. He'll take it as an insult, and you know what will happen? He'll take back everything he's promised us and you'll disappoint me."

He eased his grip and made his ooze honey. "You don't want to disappoint your uncle, who'll soon be the only person you have left? I swear, I'll keep it all under control. I'll look out for you."

A deluge of remorse flooded her soul, drowning out her fear. Matias was right. Lord Henry was sick and Wendolyn would turn sixty-three this year. They wouldn't live forever. And they couldn't, at any rate, be expected to come to her aide if Kovik got violent with her. What could they do? Threaten to break the Jenner's door down with her grandfather's wheelchair? "I...I believe you," she said.

He laughed. "Let's not keep them waiting then. They're expecting the Queen of Hearts."

Trusting in him, she followed him out the door.

Immediately, it became clear that he was thinking only of himself. His promise to take care of her evaporated as soon as they were in the corridor. He insisted she walk in front of him, rather than beside him, on his arm, as was deemed proper, and he guided her like a dog on a leash. He trod on her dress when she went too slowly and held his cane out to discourage her from escaping down side passages.

At the end of the great corridor, they passed through a curtain of sheer, rainbow-colored silks. The aroma of incense and perfume were in the air. Candles burned on the tiled sills and fat merchants lounged lazily on cushioned couches.

They entered the pavilion from the balcony staircase. The courtyard below them pulsed with wealth and power. Mighty columns wrapped in ribbon and roses stood guard over the bustling lawn, and a hexagonal arch swept high above their heads; atop it, an iron bull burned inside a fire pot. The tables were covered with glossy Damask cloths and fine china, and the guests were handsome and well-mannered.

May marveled at them. There were tall, sea-burnt sailors; dark-skinned merchants from the far South; noble knights wearing sashes, showing the sigils of their masters; and golden-robed priests.

"Over there." Matias smiled. He pointed to a table set apart from the other guests. "There they are. Ferocious, aren't they?"

May looked. Jenner sat in a massive chair big enough for two men. His hair was the color of wheat and his beard was coarse and peppered with brown flecks. Thick black pelts cocooned his impressive body and scabbing scars marred his jowly face. He was old enough to be her father.

"Why is he dressed this way? It makes him look like an animal."

"Because the cave bear is the sigil of Jenner's House. His family has the blood of the bear in their veins. Long ago, they used to keep grizzlies in their moats. I hear they used to toss them wicked girls who don't know how to behave. Something to keep in mind once you're married to him."

May quivered. This giant could crush her as easily as a bear in those huge arms of his, and men his age were good at wringing the life and spirit from their wives.

"What do you think of him, little lady?" Matias said.

May buried her face in her uncle's shoulder and pawed at his doublet. A boy of about eighteen summers sat beside the big man. Jenner slapped him on the back and ruffled his unkempt hair lovingly. The young lord frowned and May's gut tightened. A man who had fathered children was bound to want more.

"Who...who is that boy?" she asked. "I didn't know he had a son."

“Son? Are you referring to...do you mean...?” Matias cut her with his amused look. “That’s *not* his son. That’s his brother, Kovik. He's ruthless, a brilliant tactician, and very popular. Everyone loves him. I don't know why. I suppose it's because he gives away large sums of money each week to the poor.”

She noticed the boy was talking very animatedly to her grandparents and that both of them were glowering back at him. “What's going on? Are they arguing?”

Matias shrugged and waved his hand in a semi-circle. “When I left them, they were having a friendly little conversation. He wants to leave some of his men here. He claims it's for our protection, but I think he wants to setup a garrison and make sure we don't go stepping out of line.”

May didn't know what to say to that. Politics and soldiers were parts of a man's world...

At that moment, Wendolyn spotted them. She heaved herself onto the barrels that masqueraded as her legs, and let out a delighted squeal. All the people at the table gawked at them. Jenner turned yellow and stabbed at the pork belly on his plate. Her grandfather's double chins wiggled like a rooster's combs as he mouthed something inaudible in his excitement. And Kovik Durbar smiled at her with complete, mocking assurity.

Matias licked his teeth. Something that he did when he was negotiating a tough business deal. “My lords, let me present my niece to you. May Blackwood.”

May respectfully lowered her eyes. *Fear and respect*, she thought. *That is what you must show him.*

CHAPTER SEVEN- CURRAN

Curran lurked in a corner, observing the hustle and bustle about him. Diners sat on wooden benches around him while the barmaid went from table to table, refilling empty glasses.

Silently, he congratulated himself on finding the Heartwood Inn. The patrons loved to run their mouths and that made for excellent information gathering.

The wedding, of course, was the talk of the town, but the other big topic was a scuffle that occurred the night the brothers left town. The imaginative suspected a run in with an animal who'd been killing their sheep.

"A cougar? Really? We haven't had one of them come prowling around these parts in years," the soap maker said.

The innkeeper put down his dish towel and stopped drying beer glasses. A yellow light tinged his brow, giving him a sickly, creepy hue. "These woods are not as safe as you think, John," he said. "There's something foul out there. A friend of mine got stranded just outside the Kremloch. When he woke up in the morning, his otter hound was gone. He called for it, but it didn't come, so he walked along the river whistling for it, and do you know what he found?"

"No, I don't," the soap maker said.

"His dog's head. Everything else'd been eaten."

"That's a big dog. Wolf couldn't kill something that size."

“Wolves don't scream, either,” the inn keeper said. “John said he heard it shriek. Told me it sounded like a crying bird. And you know what’s really scary about this whole thing? Not five seconds later, he hears another scream.”

“Maybe he ran into some dreng signaling to each other?” a soldier offered.

There was dead silence.

The soap maker swished his beer around and the people sitting next to him looked at the big window behind the counter with alarm. The road outside was dim and desolate, and wound away into black pines and a line of bushes. The wind smashed into them, making them seem alive, and the mug shaped sign hanging by the window sill thrashed about violently on its chains. A shadow of fear hung over the room. None of the patrons liked imagining dreng coming down that road.

“It’s getting cold in here,” the barmaid complained.

“Why don’t I do something about that?” The innkeeper closed the window and latched the shutters. Several of the patrons gave him appreciative nods.

“Thank you,” barmaid said.

“When will we get our hands on that pig, Sulih?” the soldier whispered.

The horseman beside him crinkled his nose. “When we get a leader willing to declare war on him. Jenner believes containment’s the best policy until he does something to warrant having that place burned. But if you ask me, I think we should just go ahead and do it.”

Curran scraped his plate anxiously. He wanted to hear more about Jenner's policies. But it seemed unlikely he would hear anything any time soon.

The noise level rose to unbearable levels. A grotesque three foot tall man leapt on a table and struck up a song. The dwarf frolicked about like a calf and kicked his legs in the air.

“A song! We want a song!” the diners shouted.

Curran gathered up his things and proceeded to the counter. “How long before you close?” he asked. “I don’t want to get locked out.” He could do without all the last minute speeches and songs.

“Hmm, I’d say another hour, but I wouldn’t recommend going for a walk this late in the evening. The village can be dangerous after dark.”

“Thank you for warning me,” Curran said. He threw a few additional coins on the counter for the inn keeper, and hurried into the night.

The moment he stepped outside, he saw he would have to make a choice. The Heartwood Inn sat at a fork in the old cross-country road. The right way led to shops and stables, while the left one led to ridges and a black belt of trees.

He stood in the middle of the path and stared at the wretched inn. The thatched roof rose above him, like a long, arching cathedral window, and the magnificent slopes of Helgen loomed mountain-high over it, steeper and more precipitous than the battlements of his fortress. Charming little stone houses and vegetable plots dotted the sheer hillside, and buildings with spiny points were scattered amongst them. From a distance, the hills of Helgen resembled a sleeping stone monster.

Curran tore his eyes away from the hillside and took the right path, thieves and muggers be damned. Standing beneath the slopes made him think of himself as a shadow trapped within a shadow, or a cloud stranded between heaven and earth.

His stroll to the gates of town was pleasant. The wind had died and the world was calm and peaceful. He passed a flock of sheep grazing happily in a pen, and stumbled upon some chickens playing hopscotch with cart tracks; the sight was so amusing he wasted five minutes watching them jump in and out of the deep grooves. Grey stream water twinkled at him as he moseyed across a foot bridge, and a celestial silver light lay upon the rooftops.

Soon, Curran began to feel the presence of guards. Fire pots smoked alongside the road and there was the unmistakable odor of horses in the air. He heard the creak of wagon wheels, beheld banners flapping about, and saw iron cages swinging from steel chains.

The contents of the cages made him glad he had eaten before venturing into town. Dead men with purple, leathery skin slouched inside the wicked torture devices; iron stirrups and collars were the only things keeping them from toppling through the bars. The bottoms of their prisons were solid to prevent waste from escaping, and tar was smeared on their rotted bodies. The Durbar brothers wanted to keep their lawbreakers preserved for the entire town to see. If this was the kind of compassion, they showed their own people, what hope was there that they would be willing to live in peace with dreng?

He pressed on. Beyond the cages, the guards had erected a barricade. Everywhere he looked, he saw men milling about dreary little huts and roasting meat. Their horses

whipped their tails agitatedly about, and ravens hopped from table to table, ready to pounce on any food that fell. The entire campsite was disorganized, cluttered, and messy.

The guards of Helgen were broad-shouldered and grim. They sat with their shields and swords beside their plates, and glared at the handsomely dressed stranger in their camp. The hoods drawn over their heads made them seem as though they were full of dark, evil intent, and their mumbled murmurs permeated Curran's skin like freezing air.

He passed by the barracks with a sense of doubt hanging over him. Their vigilance impressed him.

As he strolled along the cordoned off area, a wagon packed with supplies pulled into the campsite. Swarthy-skinned boys rushed to help their masters. Before his eyes, they unloaded crate after crate of arms and armor.

Curran flinched. Their weapons rivaled his in quality.

"You in white over there! Is there something we can help you with?" a soldier called out to him.

Curran decided it was time to be gone. The man leaning against the partition was regarding him curiously. Travelers don't usually choose to walk amongst the dead... "No, there's nothing. I got sidetracked."

He wheeled round to leave, and found himself reeling back in surprise.

The skeleton of a dreng warrior was chained to the gates of Helgen. It measured over six feet in length and still wore its leather armor. Candles had been placed inside its battered eye sockets and its mouth had been stuffed with rotted vegetables.

Curran froze. His first thought was it couldn't be a dreng warrior. The body seemed too long; the shoulders too broad. In shock, he jabbed at the remains with his word. The skull and arm gave way, collapsing. The reason it seemed extra long was whoever had put it together, had used several bodies to create one horrifying spectacle.

A guard hollered at him to stop. The man's words were distant thunder in his ears.

His breathing accelerated. Questions gnawed at him. Was this what he could expect from the brothers? He had been debating whether he and Sulih should send an emissary to make overtures to Jenner. But now blinding white flame was searing his vision.

The guard thrust a fist in his face. "Well, well, what's going on over here? I'd like to know what you are up to. Are you looking for trouble?"

Curran sheathed his sword. "No. I'm not. I just wanted to find out who it is."

The guard gave him a challenging look. "It's a dreng, you fool. What is your name? You're not from around here, are you?"

Curran licked his teeth nervously. How had this man figured out where he came from? Did his accent give him away? "I come from the West."

"No, you don't. Don't lie to me."

Heat tingled under Curran's collar. The guard had spotted his maimed ears. The cartilage of his ears had been ripped open, rolled over, and sewn down to create a pointy appearance.

“My name is Kiernan. And you people sure know how to make a traveler feel welcome,” he said, shame flaring inside him. His master had mutilated him in a fit of rage.

The guard sneered. “The only people who feel uncomfortable here are folks who’ve committed crimes. Perhaps you’ve seen the charcoal burner who lives right outside town? He don’t feel too welcome here because we cut his hands off for stealing milk.”

“Why did he have to resort to stealing? I was told Kovik Durbar enjoys helping the poor? Did I hear wrong?”

“What do you know about Kovik Durbar?” the guard spat.

“That he’s a damn fool. Now, I will be going.”

The guard made no move to follow him, but burst out, “It’s not for show, you know. It’s to make troublemakers, such as yourself, think twice about stirring things up.”

He shambled back to the inn with ice water seeping into his veins. The skull hanging over the gate cut into his confidence like a chisel piercing stone.

Enough! Curran fled the scene, his heart battering his chest.

When he reached his room, he was shaking. He collapsed on his bed, emotionally overwhelmed. This was the scenario he had feared. He saw little hope now in making overtures to the brothers, but only by hanging around a little longer would he know for sure.

With a slow breath, he drew his sword. It glittered with silver flame. Long he sat up, plotting how he could get close enough to drive it into Kovik Durbar’s chest.

CHAPTER EIGHT - GRUSHA

That evening, the temperatures dropped lower than they had all year long and a harsh wind roared through the Grey Mountains. Grusha and his party were searching for their target's trail when things took a turn for the worse.

It was day eight of their hunt, and Curran had taken a route that placed them in even greater peril. The dreng found themselves wandering along the river, hoping they would find the point where he had crossed the water. They kept their bows and arrows ready as they searched the shore for signs of him.

The light was almost gone when Tarmak made the crucial discovery. "Do you think this could be him?" he cried.

"Show me," Grusha ordered.

He examined the spot. The leaves on the branches of a fir tree bent unnaturally. The damage was right about level with where a horseman's head would be.

"Very nice work," he said. "Spread out and search for more clues."

He turned back to his men. Agmund had fallen behind to investigate something.

"How goes the search?"

Agmund quickly brought him up to date. "I've picked something up down here, but following it'll be frustrating. This area gets a lot of wind, so everything's blown around. I fear we may have a rough night ahead of us. I smell rain in the air."

"Then let's not linger here."

The trackers left the river and followed the prints down into the woods. They moved slowly, taking care not to miss anything. The Curran had chosen was loaded with pitfalls and played hell with their senses. Pungent pine nettles clogged up their noses and Tarmak nearly broke his ankle on an invisible tree root.

Grusha called frequent halts and aimed his bow at anything that moved or cast a shadow. The woods were too quiet for his liking and the knots jutting out of thick grey tree trunks resembled deformed faces. He felt as if the trees were watching and whispering to each other about them, and the sight of Mount Freajhorn shining like a diamond against the blue-black sky put him on edge. The white peaks meant they were getting close to the border.

Eventually, the party came to a dell. Grusha was dismayed to find Curran's tracks ran through the open area. "Something tells me there's vordr down there." Stiva sighed. "What do you want us to do?"

"I want everyone to hold here. I'll go take a look. Should you encounter any trouble, get out. Agmund, you're in charge while I'm gone."

Grusha left his men hiding in the woods and crept towards the dell. He approached it in a prone position, alternating between moving forward and lowering himself flat.

As he wormed his way in, he realized that the route he was taking was one other trackers had used to spy out the dell. There were occasional leaves where there shouldn't be, and scuff marks on the rocks.

He stayed on course, though, despite these ominous signs. Letting his tracks crisscross with those of his enemies had served him well in the past.

His peril increased the closer he got. The ground dipped low, the vegetation thinned, and a crescent moon shone over the shelterless slopes. Its white beams roved over the landscape, bringing to light rotting branches, empty spaces, and narrow crevices.

Grusha darted from shadowy pool to shadowy pool as it past him. He could feel the light bending its will towards him. Like a finger seeking a specific spot on a chart, it homed in on where he hid. Soon, it would find him and reveal him to his enemies.

He raised his head and gazed intently at the circle of trees in the center of the dell. Their branches were covered with thick, brown moss, and they jutted into the sky like watchtowers. Shadows as long as mountain peaks stretched from their arms and a mist lay over the ring. Someone had to be down there, using that cluster of trees as a refuge. But there was no telling whether that someone was a vordr or Curran unless he investigated further.

With new resolve, he resumed his crawl.

The most perilous stage of the journey had come. There was scarcely any cover and the dell was filled with noisy and easily alarmed animals.

Grusha's attention turned to a doe and her fawn nibbling on grass. Perhaps he could use them as a lure to entice the enemy into showing itself? Spooked deer always attract notice.

He clasped the spiky trunk of a berry bush and jostled it.

The doe's head jerked. She pricked her ears back and sniffed at the air. A second thrash made her sway about, and a third caused her white-tipped tail to shoot up. Then, her hackles rose and her legs began quivering.

The dreng stopped shaking the bush. He inched along in a crouching position, letting his scent travel to her. Twigs snapped beneath him as he crab-walked down the slope and his foot wraps crinkled unpleasantly.

The doe's nerves snapped. With an anguished bleat, she sprang away. Her fawn limped after her, and the wold quickly swallowed them up.

Grusha slid onto his stomach and craned his neck just high enough to peer over the large branch blocking his view. The tree fortress was as frozen as petrified wood and the dell was deader than the catacombs.

The desire to shrink from view came over Grusha. He wrapped a dark scarf around his nose and faded into the darkness.

His timing couldn't have been better. The dell awoke.

A gold-black light sprang up inside the circle. The shadows of horses filled the trees and then the next thing Grusha knew, two wary soldiers had emerged from the ring carrying metal pikes. One was dressed in black iron armor and furs. The other wore a thick coat of rings and bore a lantern. A roaring bear blazed on his chest in beautiful golden inlays.

Vodr!

Grusha flung himself on his face as the man swept his lantern about in semi-circles. Flame flickered above him and shadows shaped like long spikes fled across the ground around him.

With shaking hands, Grusha drew his flanged mace.

The soldier with the lantern came to a stop right beneath the slope. "Have you found anything?" he said.

"No, nothing."

"Then, perhaps we should go back?"

The second man stabbed at the brambles. The branches crackled. "No, not yet. Did you see how she took off? I want to take a quick look around and make sure we don't have a cougar loose. I don't fancy waking up and finding teeth in my throat, do you?"

"No, I don't. But I think there're better things we could be doing. The horses will alert us if anything like that gets close. They can't stand wolves and nasties like that."

"I'm willing to look around some more," the man with the lantern said, spinning around.

Just missing Grusha.

Quickly, he notched an arrow in his bow. He pulled the string taut, struggling to keep his shoulders steady and hold back his breath.

The man in plate suddenly stopped and pointed at the slopes. "Do you see that path over there? It looks well-used, don't you think? Might be worth checking if anything nasty came down it."

“You go left, I’ll go right,” his companion said. “This way, we’ll get it over with faster. Good luck seeing anything without a lantern.”

“I can see in the dark like a cat. Good luck going up that route. The path’s uneven. I’m going to poke around now. I’ll be back soon,” the man gruffly replied. Then he turned and began to briskly walk up the slope.

His noisy approach thundered in the dreng’s ears. Twigs snapped on his armor and his broad-shouldered body rustled the pine needles. He failed miserably at being stealthy and silent.

Grusha huddled in his furs, not sure what to make of the southerner’s sloppy behavior. His gut told him to stay put and wait for the man to come to him, rather than go in for the kill. The dog’s incompetence could very well be a ploy to draw him out into the open. Hunters ensnare wolves by using chicken or sheep as bait.

He listened for the second soldier’s footsteps, but the only thing he could make out was the careless soldier stomping about. The other man moved as quietly as a mouse, and even more disturbing, the light had ceased moving. With the lantern sitting on the ground, he had no way of telling where his foe was going.

A chill ran down Grusha’s spine. He saw what they were up to. *The clumsy soldier creates a distraction while his friend comes in from another direction...*

Grusha’s throat constricted. How could he have let them throw him off guard like this?

He grabbed his weapons and backed up the slope. No choice. He needed to act, lest he be discovered. His hiding spot would probably be among the first places they checked; the lantern man undoubtedly knew about it.

His eyes ran circles around the dell as he retreated. He saw the armored soldier skulking on a ledge. Hatred smoldered in the wolf's sunken sockets and he surveyed the dell with the wariness of an owl. The lantern sat abandoned on a tree stump and dog number two was nowhere in sight.

Where are you? Where are you? the dreng let out a shuddering breath. Had the unaccounted-for soldier managed to slip behind him? Or was he lurking somewhere below covering his friend?

Grusha dashed to a mound of dirt, beseeching his gods to reveal the soldier's location to him. The success of his plan depended on picking off his first target without tipping the second one off. If the other soldier saw his comrade fall, then he would rouse the entire camp with his squalling. And rousing the camp would stir up the mountain...

Is that you? Grusha's gaze swept from the desolate trail to an alarming looking boulder. The rock was shaped like a crouching man.

Yet another false lead...

Grusha clenched his teeth. Sweat beaded his brow and haze swirled in his head. This was far worse than being hunted by archers, because lives other than his hung in the balance. Tarmak, Stiva and the rest of his men deserved the chance to sire children and prove their worth to their chieftain.

He scampered off to a fresh hiding spot with the fear of his friends dying rankling inside him. Anger flared in him as he slid through the grass, timing his movements to the footfalls of the iron clad dog pursuing him. He was so sick of losing people he loved to these animals, and so tired of having to spend his days holed up like an outlaw while they walked blissfully under the stars. When would this persecution end?

A book-sized rock glittered at his feet, as though it wanted to supply him with the answers.

Grusha's bow fingers slipped. His arrow fell. He picked the projectile up, laid it aside, and put the shimmering stone in his palm. The rock felt massive. He was about to set it down when he heard the sound of clomping feet. They clapped like distant thunder and stomped like horses. The dissonance of metal grinding against gravel accompanied them, and the jingle of chains faded in and out around them.

Grusha snatched up his mace and lurched into the dead wood. He had nowhere else to go.

He somersaulted over a heap of branches and landed uncomfortably beside a splintered tree. There, he flattened himself against the trunk and clamped his hands over his mouth to prevent his breath from steaming. His features contained shades of anxiety and impatience. He wanted closure and wanted to know which southerner he faced.

The combination of rattling rings and throbbing footsteps was throwing him off. He regretted not paying closer attention to whether the armored soldier wore any pieces of chainmail.

His gaze darted to the nearby rock wall. The shadow cast by the approaching soldier bled from one side to the other. It warped its owner's arms into tree branches, head into boulders, and body into moving blobs.

Useless. It revealed nothing to him about his mysterious antagonist's identity.

Impulsively, he stuck his head out. Silver flashed in the extreme-most corner of his vision and he saw dark woolen folds sliding along the ground. The soldier stalking him had pulled his cape over his armor and cloaked and hooded himself. A horn carved from elk antlers swung from the man's wrist and he held his pike out menacingly. Grusha recognized the stance. It was one hunters used to bring down boar.

A blast of wind struck the brush about them and made the dry leaves whisper. The man turned. Darkness and thick cloth masked his features.

Grusha rolled behind the tree, striking it with bone-bruising force. His chest rose and fell as adrenaline and doubt flooded him. Subconsciously, he tightened his grip on the handle of his mace. A horrible thought wriggled in his mind: *A lantern acts not only as a guide, but also as a signaling device.*

His breath hissed. One against two was possible. One against three was not and there was no time now to determine whether this man was a reinforcement or a soldier from the original duo. Nor was there time to figure out his enemies' movements.

React or die. He had no other choices.

Snap, snap went the sticks. Crunch, crunch went the leaves. Grusha judged from the thud of the soldier's footfalls, his target was fifteen—no—ten feet away.

He shifted into a springing position. His heart was bounding over rivers and mountain ranges, and his cheeks were flushed with anticipation. Just a few steps more, and the man would be upon him. *This* was the pivotal moment.

He threw his arms about the southerner's legs as his foe came around the tree. The two of them went crashing into the mud in a heap of wool, iron armor and furs. The dreadful pike flew from the soldier's hands and struck the rocks.

Grusha let out a soundless cry and slashed. The pointed tips of his mace tore into the hands that clawed at him, and his iron knuckle guards ricocheted off his foe's windpipe. The scream in the southerner's throat gurgled away. And then everything blurred.

Grusha swung, aiming for his target's temples. The soldier rolled to the side, and his mace bounced off the man's head with less impact than he desired. He lashed at the southerner again, and this time his foe countered his blow with steel.

He dodged to the left, too slowly to avoid feeling its bite. Sharp, stinging pain shot through his limb as the soldier drove his dagger into his arm at the point where the elbow bends. He reeled, and his opponent pulled the knife out and stabbed at him again. He felt the blade pierce him between the armpit and the collarbone. His enemy was going for his throat, and had missed by mere inches.

The soldier darted forward, determined to get his killing blow. Thrumming steel sliced through the air, and bore down on the dreng. Grusha twisted to avoid the strike, flipping onto his uninjured side. Blood flew from his tattered shoulder and splattered all

over the soil. The droplets shone brown-black against the wet tree bark. The soldier lunged after him, roaring.

Grusha met the man with fire and fury. He caught his adversary by the arm, and threw all his weight against him. The soldier staggered and Grusha smashed him to the ground. The last thing the soldier saw was a dreng sitting on his chest with an enormous rock in his hand.

Grusha struck. Within seconds, it was over.

The first blow caused the southerner's nose to cave in. The second shattered the bone around his eye sockets, and the third pierced his temporal lobe. He died before his assailant could deliver a fourth blow.

The world became solid again. Grusha dropped the rock and looked at the man. The soldier's face resembled tomato soup mixed with porridge and couscous. And his eyes were like half-cooked eggs that still have moist yolks dripping from them. His head was in ruins.

Grusha knelt beside him and lifted his cloak. The chain vest he wore shimmered in the moonlight and its elaborate inlays glinted. The eyes of the cave bear on his chest blinked. Then stopped moving forever.

Relief swept through the dreng. It comforted him to know that there were no reinforcements combing the slopes for him. After that grueling battle, his spirit and his strength were exhausted, and he was torn up.

He did a quick evaluation of his wounds. His shoulder was a mess and the blood kept flowing from his arm. He was in no condition to hunt down the dead soldier's

companion or play an elaborate game of cat and mouse with him. He needed medical attention and help from his men.

Tarmak and Stiva can finish the remaining soldier off, Grusha reassured himself.

He tore a strip of fabric off the dead man's cloak and clamped it down on the gouge in his elbow. The blood welled up and seeped into the wool, blossoming across it. He wound a muslin cord about his arm, a few inches above the cut, and tied it as tightly as he could. Hopefully, it would slow down the bleeding. It made a terrible tourniquet.

The return trip turned into a pure test of willpower for Grusha. The blood continued to ooze through his bindings, and he found himself stopping frequently to listen for the footsteps of his enemy. The other soldier had ceased moving about, and that was very worrisome. The southerner was either lying in wait to ambush him or hurrying back to the tree fortress to alert his friends.

The first scenario seemed the more likely of the two to the dreng. There was no movement in the dell. The woodland once again stood as still and quiet as the catacombs.

The deep silence made Grusha all the more eager to leave this horrible place. He staggered through the gloom, moving briskly to frustrate any soldier who might have his bow trained upon him. The branches that had previously concealed him now bent against him. He glanced uneasily at the gnarled pieces of wood, treating each pile as though it hid his enemy.

He stumbled into the firs, hoping the dead soldier's body would be found by the next pack of dogs who sought out the dell. Let it serve as a lesson to them, he thought, as an aged head and hunched torso came into view. Agmund.

"I'm back, elder father," he said.

The old man turned and lowered his crossbow. His brows were creased and his shoulders sagged. He had the look of one who has not slept in hours. "Grusha! I'm so glad to see you. I was just about to send Stiva to search for you. We must call off the hunt and get out of here immediately. There's a camp of soldiers nearby."

Grusha held out his tattered limb. "I know. I ran into some of them. How many soldiers did you see, Agmund?"

"Just one," Agmund said, "and he's no longer a threat. He's dead."

There was a short pause. Then Grusha said, "Show me."

Grimly, Agmund led him through the maze of trees. The elderly dreng pawed at his bleeding limb and begged to let him steady it. He set his jaw in a straight line and rebuffed the kindly creature with ambivalent stares. Treatment could be postponed until he identified the person Stiva killed.

"Right over here. Be careful. It's gotten slippery."

Agmund pointed to a patch of a mud. The dead man lay in the middle of it. His neck twisted at an impossible angle and he was missing half his clothes. Grusha rolled his body over and touched his ripped open throat.

"I take it you've seen this soldier before," Agmund said.

"Yes, this the other man..."

...who hunted me.

“What happened to his armor?”

“Stiva took it.”

Grusha had heard enough. “Bring me some flint,” he replied. “We need to do something about these wounds. Do we have the tools to burn it closed?”

“Yes, and I found a fire pit down by that fir tree. We can use that. Wait by it. I’ll go get Tarmak now. I’ll be right back.” Agmund said. Then, quick as that, he was gone.

Grusha walked uphill and examined the pit his men had discovered. What he saw pleased him: The base of the chamber extended outwards, giving him extra room to squeeze in larger pieces of firewood, and the airway tunnel was flawlessly constructed. The fire would give off very little light and no smoke whatsoever. Whoever had made it knew what they were doing. It was surprising that such an ingeniously-crafted thing was built by a southerner.

The other dreng returned to find Grusha chipping bark off logs to get at the dry wood inside. With an alarmed cry, they swooped down, and snatched the hatchet away.

They forced him to sit on a bed of nettles while they filled the pit with branches and ferns. Agmund brought him a rag to stuff in his mouth and a flask of cold beer. He swirled the liquid about in his mouth and spat it back into its container when his companions had their backs turned. He refused to let them knock him out for the procedure. There was too much at stake for him to be semi-conscious.

Grusha briefed his men on what he had seen and gave Tarmak orders during the prep. “Two hundred yards from here, you’ll find a soldier with his head caved in,” he

said. “I need you to wrap yourself in his cape and go down to the dell. Pick up the lantern on the stump and wave it around. Signal to that clump of trees that all is well, and if someone responds, put it down, and walk back up the hill. We need to know if there’s anyone else here.”

“When it’s daylight, we pick up Curran’s tracks. We follow them, wherever they go...”

Agmund clamped a pair of tongs around a small iron knife. He carefully lowered the piece of metal into the pit. “And what if he’s been captured or crossed the border? Will you follow him?”

“I have to. I have orders. I know it is perilous and I don’t ask any of you to follow me.”

“You’re too hurt to even attempt the border crossing,” Agmund said. “You should go back and delegate this task to someone else.”

Grusha sighed and squeezed the rag in his hand; the water in it ran. His brothers spoke the truth. His wounds made it dangerous for him to travel into enemy territory. But to send a selfless, sixty-five-year-old man, like Agmund, in his stead was unconscionable, and to send Tarmak was unthinkable. The young warrior lacked the experience.

Agmund removed the knife from the pit and held up the blade. The metal gleamed faintly. It was right on the verge of turning red. “Tarmak, put the gag in his mouth. Grusha, I’ll try to make this quick, but I may have to repeat the procedure. Are you ready?”

Grusha made a muffled sound and bared his wounded arm. Piercing, penetrating pain shot through his injured limb as the knife touched him, and his thoughts fled like crows. Every nerve in the immediate area felt as if it was being nipped at by a slow-burning fire, and a dagger was being twisted into his muscles. The pungent smell of cooked flesh permeated the air, and the damaged skin reddened and crisped. Tears appeared in the pinpricks of his eyes and his shoulders and legs buckled. Tarmak ended up having to hold his feet down.

Agmund lifted the knife. "I'm sorry, but I'll have to do this again," he apologized. "Are you okay, Grusha?"

Grusha grunted. "Press on," he stubbornly said. Compared to how the vordr treated their prisoners, this was nothing.

CHAPTER NINE- MAY

CHAPTER NINE - MAY

The ceremony took place over a week after the Durbars arrived in Blackwood, because Jenner wanted to be married beneath the stone bridge of Rhys. One thousand people attended the wedding, and more would have come if the event had been held within the city. The journey to the gorge was too difficult for the very young and the elderly, and they could not accommodate all the women who wanted to be there. Jenner took no more than necessary to attend to his wife's needs.

May wanted nothing more than to escape from the handmaidens he had assigned to her. Every time her tent flap opened, the visitor was always a woman wanting to wash her, groom her, or examine her. She forgot how many baths they gave her and how many times they undressed and re-dressed her. Her servants seemed determined to have her run through the chest of beautiful clothes she'd received as a wedding gift.

She asked if it was a custom to have the bride appear in so many dresses before her husband, but the women wouldn't tell her. They deflected her questions with laughter and smiles, and never broke from their scripts. Ylayne extended the length of her days with silly, pretty stories, and Claudia bewildered her. The servant girl ceaselessly praised May's father for being gallant, inspiring others to do good deeds, and offered her wisdom in quantities she did not possess.

May shrank away from this mad young maiden. She pleaded with her grandmother to replace Claudia, so the old woman took action. On the eve of the wedding, Wendolyn Blackwood smashed a wooden spoon across her ear, and added

another disagreeable hag to the flock. Claudia stayed on, and May spent the night being instructed by the new doughy-faced one in the ways of marriage.

It was not long before she was shivering. The art of congress was more intricate than she imagined; the steps she must take to remain desirable to her husband steeper than she thought she could climb. How would she know, she asked herself, when to speak and when not to speak when Jenner took her? Who would she become if she sealed her emotions in a box and died to self?

She went to bed strangling on sobs. Her body trembled with tension inside the sheets. The sight of wax bubbling down the candle beside her cot was staggering to her. With each drip, she felt a part of her being swept away. She crossed her arms over her chest to hide the rips and tears in her spirit, and tried in vain to turn her head towards the wall, so she wouldn't have to watch the flame burn out. When morning came, she was spent.

Her handmaidens poured into her tent at dawn and lifted her from her bed. They hauled her to the large basin in the corner, and poured steaming water over her. The temperature made a rash break out on her stomach. Ylayne prattled on until her ears also burned and the detestable old hag scrubbed her so roughly, she wanted to cry.

But she didn't.

Shortly after, a new dress was brought in. May touched it with baited breath, enchanted by its beauty. She wove her fingers through the folds of the royal blue gown as they rippled around her, deep and dark as ocean currents at night. The panels of the corset were embellished with embroidered roses. White seed beads trimmed the leaves and tiny

pearls were set in the center of each blossom. A light translucent cape flowed down the back of the dress and soft silks lined the insides. “This can’t be for me!” she said. “This dress is fit for a queen.”

“Your husband holds you as highly as a queen,” the hag crooned. “He bought this dress for you.” In truth, though, it had been purchased by Kovik to spare his brother the embarrassment of showing up without a fitting bridal gift.

“It’s beautiful,” May said.

They wrapped her excitedly in the blue dress and piled more jewelry onto her than she’d ever worn before. Silver armlets adorned with poppies constricted tightly about her arms and ivory brooches fastened her fairy cape in place. The women let her hair down and pinned a heavy crown of thorns to her head. They crowded around her dressing table, commenting on the intricate metal vines and blossoms in her hair. May tugged gently on the strings of pearls hanging from her crown. The hag slapped her hand away and quickly re-arranged the loose strands. “Don’t start getting distracted now, girl!” the old thing spat. “Your husband will soon be here.”

Her handmaidens led her outside to await her wedding party. People had already begun to gather on the withered lawn. Steel pauldrons and ringed hauberks gleamed in the blue-gold light of dawn, and glossy-coated horses grazed in the grass. Rickety carts packed with hunchbacked men and women dressed in muddied tatters pulled up, and the wretches threw birdseed and wheat at her. Ruddy-faced boys stood in the brick rectangle on the lawn and a palanquin carved from cocobolo trees lay next to them.

May glided forward as if in a dream, her heart slamming against her chest with each step she took. Her arms hung taut at her sides and her vision wavered, hemmed in and panicked. Faces, so many faces, leered at her—all wanting to get a look at her, all wanting to be the first to spot the gaps in her flawed package—and shriveled hands reached for her. She jerked away from them and her cape unfurled and whipped out behind her, like the wings of a stricken bird.

Her attention shifted to the blue standards. The cave bear of House Durbar lashed and twisted about atop the soldiers' spears, running against the wind.

A bannerman felt her gaze upon him and stumbled up the slopes, vainly trying to raise his standard higher than he could lift it. Her cheeks flushed with heat at the sight, and feelings she had kept at bay surged to the fore. Her soul simmered, hotter than her bath water, and her limbs filled with strength. She realized she was not the only one terrified of this impending wedding. Here, before her, was a man so frightened by it he fell short in his duty. The corners of her mouth turned up in a smile and her chin rose an inch. She would do what he could not, and walk boldly to that palanquin and embrace her fate.

She floated down the hill with her head held high and her eyes as clear as the sky on a perfect day. There were no outward signs of her emotional ordeal.

The soldiers began stomping their feet and clacking their spears together. A huntsman put his horn to his lips and let out a deep blast. The echo shook the tents and rumbled through the moor, and then everyone was parting before her, but not for her. A great army was approaching.

A herd of horses thundered up the slope. Grim men with fierce eyes and strong arms perched upon their backs. Feather-shaped scales snaked up their bodies, and dark mantles were wrapped around their necks. The wedding guests dropped to their knees as the vordr circled them.

In the middle of them rode the Lords of Helgen. The face of Jenner was grave and noble on this blessed day. Wisdom and sadness were written into it, and an aura of kingliness radiated from him.

Kovik rode beside him, blazing with glory. The boy wore a green robe woven from rare wool and Basilisk skin bracers from the Far East. A steel collar engraved with braids and knots encircled his neck, and over that he wore a smaller leather collar trimmed in roses and edged in steel. The lofty crown upon his brow was wrought of silver and ivory, and he carried his long staff.

Jenner brought his horse to a halt, but did not dismount, as was customary. Instead, he ran his hands over the silk curtains of the palanquin and gazed long at the fabric.

May curtsied and waited for him to speak to her. The fears that had been dispelled by the shaky bannerman came racing back as his eyes strayed from the fabric to her. The glow in them was warm and inviting, but the emotions in them seemed to extend to more than her. Frantically, she scanned him, trying to unearth where he was putting the weight of his feelings. Not knowing what part he assigned to her maddened her, and finding thick, impassable walls sent her reeling. A faint voice in the back of her mind whispered that he would ride her into the ground like he had his panting, wheezing horse.

Behind her, the guests stirred. One of them was an elderly soldier. “I haven’t seen an army this splendid or a weapon so fell since we marched on the Black Fortress,” he croaked.

The whispers increased. The silence was broken and so, May sensed, was something else.

Suddenly, hands were being laid on her and servants were guiding her towards the palanquin. In the periphery of her vision, she saw Kovik wheel his horse around. His gentle features twisted as he galloped past, warping into the uncompromising and pitiless visage of a heathen prince. And then she heard Jenner say, “What’re you waiting for? Put her in!” in his baritone voice.

They loaded May into the litter and set off at a good gait. The stone bridges were half a day’s march, but the land felt as if it passed by swiftly. The hills of Blackwood dwindled into the distance all too quickly, and the trees became scarce. Paths began to rise and the slopes became stony. As morning waned, they found themselves weaving through crumbling boulders and shimmying under weathered ridges with serrated teeth.

May was bumped and jostled, ducking down every time the canvas ceiling of her palanquin scraped against the rocks. She wished she knew what significance this remote and treacherous place held for Jenner, but she dared not ask him, even though he rode next to her. How could she ask him a question like that when he ignored her?

She curled up miserably in her silks and tried to rest.

The land they were in now made her thoughts wander, and induced a state of forgetfulness. Stately beechwood trees towered over them and the River Vildé ran

alongside, sloshing quietly. Grey vapor rose from its waters and vibrantly plumed waterfowl hopped about its shoals, plucking at fish and picking at reeds. Here, in this small valley, remained one place that had never been touched by Sulih.

Kovik fell back to join Jenner as they marched along the river bank, starting a conversation with him in *èildemál*, the language of the mountain lords. Harsh exclamations, sharp tongue clicks, and unlovely sounding words rang out around her, piercing her ears, and when she turned to look, Kovik was pointing dramatically at the landscape. His face was angry.

“Kovik,” Jenner said, in common speech, “forget about Vulenfier just for once—please remember that today’s a wedding day.”

The brothers resumed their conversation, speaking in hushed tones. There were no further confrontations. May dozed and the company continued on.

She was roused from slumber by her handmaidens yanking on her arms. She groggily sat up and saw they had come to a halt. Her escort had made camp on the riverbank. White cliffs flanked both sides of the Vildé and a narrow stone bridge spanned the chasm. Behind the long slab of rock, the sun was dimming.

Jenner was in the grass, kneeling before a pillar carved in the likeness of a warrior. He held out his sword in silent offering and the great figure stared back at him with empty sockets. Marauding dreng had come by and disfigured the eyes and snapped off pieces from its crown.

May arched forward. “What is he doing?” she asked the women affixing silk veils to her tiara.

Kovik answered. “He is taking an oath to protect the blood in your fine city.”

“Will you take the oath after him?”

Kovik raised an eyebrow. He sneered at the sculpture and tilted his long staff so she could see the base of his weapon ended in a sharp steel tip. Not a rounded-off piece of metal. “No, I won’t, dear. I’ve already sworn to nail Curran’s hide to the gates of Helgen. I see no need to take anymore oaths.”

“Lord Jenner rises!” a young squire exclaimed, mercifully bringing the conversation to a close.

Jenner turned and set his eyes upon the palanquin. This was Kovik’s cue to take May and present her to him.

Kovik grimaced and set his long staff aside, conscious enough to realize that it would embarrass Jenner if he approached him bearing such an ill-looking weapon. “Are you ready to unite our two houses, brother?”

May gasped as he pulled her from the palanquin with a tug so strong that it almost wrenched out her arm socket. She gaped at him, but he offered no apology; just laughed at her and started dragging her behind him.

She followed him timidly, cowed by his cruelty and distracted by fears she could no longer hold at bay. This time, however, the terrors didn’t overwhelm her, as they had the night before. Now, instead of a crushing weight, there was a sense of confused sadness. As Kovik placed her hand in Jenner’s, she grappled with the sources of her sorrow.

To Wendolyn, standing haughtily in the front row, it looked like it was sadness for the light of her spirit that was burning low. To Jenner, sadness for the handsome husband who could see her pain, but did nothing. And to Kovik, sadness for having to place Blackwood in a stronger House's hands.

The feel of fabric shifting around May made her mind focus. It would not do to have Jenner lift her veils and reveal her distress to all these people. In order to make the alliance between Blackwood and Helgen work, she must make Jenner appear to be the life of her eyes, and show she trusted him unconditionally.

She blossomed into smiles as her silks were brushed away, smiling so widely and exaggeratedly that it looked like someone had once taken a knife to her mouth, and carved it up from ear to ear. The wedding party murmured. "Oh, my, I don't know what to say," she stammered. "I always wanted a moment like this! I feel so blessed! This is a happy, happy day!"

Jenner drew close and moved to touch her. His fingertips fluttered hesitantly over the planes of her cheeks. "From this moment on, you and your blood are under my protection," he said. "Priest, come bind us."

The priest unwound a silver cord and placed it in their hands. May braided it into a knot while her husband held onto the ring on the other end. She was trembling so badly she needed Jenner's help to finish tying the knot.

Kovik took the completed cord and launched it over the crowd. The wedding party cheered, and the soldiers sprang into motion. Within an hour's time, they had the gorge transformed into a bustling and festive campground.

May and Jenner were seated at a long wooden table and offered fine dishes. The servants piled fresh fruit, platters of sweets, and roasted duck dripping with fat before them. Kovik immediately helped himself to the mountain of food, loading his plate with so many goodies it was a miracle that he didn't spend the evening throwing up. Jenner ate more sparingly and May struggled with every bite that she took. She slid her dinner around, appalled to be surrounded by picnickers eating dried pork and bread on the ground. Why couldn't they have held the wedding in Blackwood and given all these soldiers access to taverns and inns?

The talk at the table also made it hard for her to enjoy her meal. Wendolyn assured Jenner she would bleed again soon and bear him children, and the brothers got into a heated discussion. Back and forth they went over how many men to send abroad to blockade the passes to Vulfier. Jenner was against stretching their forces so thin. Kovik wanted to step up the pressure on Sulih. "He needs to see there's fire in the hearts of our men, and we're not afraid of his iron crown!" he said, beating his fist against his chest.

The soldiers near them heard him and clapped loudly. "Spoken like a king!" they shouted, goading Kovik to say more. And he did.

Jenner leaned across the table and touched his bride's hand. May's fingers curled. He reeked of wine and gave off a frightening intensity. "I'm sorry our dinner's being interrupted this way," he told her. "Kovik just wants to boost morale. Change can be scary and this is no small transition."

"Your brother has a silver tongue," Wendolyn said.

Jenner gazed at a mountain ridge to the north. He was silent for a long moment. “He has a bigger heart than many of the people out there with silver tongues,” he said. “I’ve never seen someone as strongly affected by this conflict as Kovik. He will do anything it takes to undo all the harm Sulih’s caused!”

May bit her lip. Jenner’s hands were crawling up her arm. “Have any of your men ever fought this fake king?” she blurted out, her discomfort visible.

“Yes, they have,” her husband sighed. “But don’t worry, we’ll have our victory soon. Now, singers, give us a song!”

The musicians struck up their instruments and started playing a well-loved ballad. Jenner poured himself another cup of wine and drank to their health, and the celebration resumed.

The feast dragged on into night. The servants took far longer than expected to get the tents set up, and none of the guests desired to bring an end to the revelry. The wedding had given the dreng-weary people of Blackwood a feeling of excitement and new hope, and having a mighty House add to their strength inflated the pride of Kovik and his followers.

Finally, after nine, the rowdy fun came to an end. The musicians lapsed into silence and the servants cleared the broken food off the table. Jenner left his seat of honor and held out his arm. May reluctantly linked her elbow around it—the moment she dreaded had come.

Jenner led her down the lawn to the tent the servants had prepared for them. He held the flap open for her and dismissed the guards. May was grateful. This was going to

be hard enough, as it was, without watchmen standing outside making lewd comments about her.

She crawled onto the horse hides on the floor of their tent and whimpered. Her tear ducts ached and stung so badly, she couldn't bring herself to cry. Her muscles felt leaden. She had reached that point beyond fear where she was so exhausted and so miserable, she no longer knew what to think. All her emotions were dead.

Jenner plopped down on a stool beside her and removed his armor. He kicked off his leather boots and then set about fumbling with his buckles and buttons. His imprecise and clumsy movements made May clamp her legs shut and hold them together. Was he drunk? "Do you want me to help you with your clothes?" she asked him for courtesy's sake.

"No, I can get out of my own clothes and I think you should start removing yours," he laughed. "It'll take all night if you don't start undressing. Yours are more complicated than mine."

"Yes, my lord," May said.

She clambered onto her knees and picked at her bindings. Her cape came away easily, but her tiara was pinned so tightly to her, she couldn't remove it on her own, and her bodice and bustles clung to her.

She heard Jenner slip into bed behind her and then felt his hands on her shoulders. He loosened the pins with a gentleness that amazed her and skillfully undid the suffocating laces. When he slid the corset over her head, she let out a deep, relieved breath. "What happens now?" he said.

May stiffened. “I—I please you, my lord, however you want me to.”

“For now, just let me look at you. I want to see what I’m getting,” he said. “They were in such a hurry for us to get married, I didn’t get the chance to do things I’d have liked to do. Like get to know you. Aside from your name, I don’t know who you are.”

Jenner sprawled out on the bed to watch her. He propped himself up on a pillow and stared at her slender legs, bent neck, and tense shoulders. Unconscious of where his eyes were actually roaming, she drew her knees up to her chin, denying him the sight of her breasts and stomach. The tips of her feet vanished under the covers. He murmured, “Ah...”

“You make me think of my brother,” he said. “Strong-willed and intense. You let your emotions show, but unlike him, you don’t let them overpower you.”

“Strong-willed” was not a word she wanted to hear. “I don’t understand what you mean by ‘strong-willed.’ I am here to do as my lord wills.”

“What *I* will? I don’t will anything right now. Just for once, I don’t want to think about giving orders to anyone or having orders given to me! I might be Lord of Helgen, but it’s my brother who...if you want to know my desire, it is to hold you and for you to show me who you really are. Let’s try it and see what happens? I promise I won’t hurt you.”

May nodded meekly. What choice did she have but to obey? She unlocked her legs and let Jenner put his hands on her.

Jenner grew bolder, sensing that his touch was not unwelcome. He covered the soles of her feet with kisses and tugged on her toes, stretching the joints. His fists

bounced off her shoulders, gently drumming against them, and when she arched her neck to the right, he leaned in and traced the line of her clavicle.

May writhed against him, terrified of the force of her emotions. She'd gone into this marriage expecting to suppress her feelings, not to have her husband insist she give reign to them.

How should she read what he asked of her? Should she treat it as a command or as an offer of freedom?

"I'm afraid I don't know what you want me to do, my lord," she quaked.

Uncertainty was the king of all demons.

Jenner pressed his forehead into her ribcage. His breath gusted lightly against her skin and his fingers knuckle walked slowly down her back.

"I just want you to be you," he said. "When it's just you and me, together, I want you to be you. But other times...when there are people around...you've got to be Lady Durbar." He trailed off and made a sound like a sigh. She was glad he didn't finish.

May lifted her eyes and saw his broad shoulders and arms eagled over her. They were strong and terrible and his features were stern and cold, but his voice and soul were deep and throbbed with protectiveness and devotion. Ambivalence spiked inside her. The intimacy, closeness, and conflict he generated were maddening.

Hesitantly, she bared her neck, letting him claim it. His kisses made her body prickle and tingle. She sank into the covers, overcome by the love that was calling to her and the discord still waging war inside her.

CHAPTER TEN - GRUSHA

Things were bleak at the border. Slimy rain water soaked the pine needle crusted forest floor and the air tasted salty and stale. Rotting trees threw deep shadows upon the slopes, and the wind relentlessly pummeled the tent the dreng had seized from the dead soldiers' camp site.

Grusha lay on a bedroll within the shelter, listening to the panels crinkle and slap against each other. Yellow lines streaked his cheeks and purple circles ringed his watery sockets.

"How are you feeling, elder brother?" Tarmak asked.

"Better," Grusha lied. Hesitantly, he slid his thumb down his blistering red limb. "I notice an improvement each day."

"We should leave soon," Stiva commented. There was no good reason for them to stay any longer.

"What are we going to do about the quest?" Tarmak asked.

Grusha twisted his arm, concealing it from everyone's view. "I will go on alone and try to find out what happened. The rest of you must go back. I am the best person. I know Curran's ways."

There were worried murmurs and blank looks, but none of them questioned their leader further. Tarmak started stuffing bags with food and Agmund filled a bowl with Siberia bark and tobacco. While his shield brothers put their things in order, he ground the mixture into a grainy brown residue and chanted to himself in a deep, sonorous voice.

Grusha listened solemnly to the melodic words, and reverently passed his hand over his face. Agmund sang to pull *moana* spirits to him and mashed the bark to powder so he could blow it up his nostrils through a bone pipe. The powerful grains, the old man said, let him see the moana as they emerged from the trees, and pleased the fickle beings. I will weave a spell of enchantment over them to draw them into your chest, he promised. A chieftain's body is a cosmos full of light, the metals of the earth, and song. The moana will dwell inside you in great happiness, and make you well.

The dreng put down their work and watched him with a mix of curiosity and suspicion. The younger knew little about the rites being performed. Their generation had no patience for the months of fasting and years of training it took to learn how to become a shaman. Instead, they spent their days turning the mill wheel, blacksmithing weapons, and sowing fields. And in return, their master gave them silk ribbons, sheep and goats, and vegetables to grow.

Agmund sang and sang, until he could sing no more.

Grusha went to bed, tired and greatly pained. He kept his arm held right side up, because it was the only bearable position, and lay awake plotting how to slip into the Sundered Lands. All but Stiva were sleeping when he settled on a route, and Stiva was so exhausted, he kept nodding off against his tree.

The next morning Grusha glided from his tent and seized a bag Tarmak had filled. His water skins went in first. His blankets followed. Then a cooking pot and a fishing kit. He shoved his hunting knife into its sheath and grabbed the mace he so proudly showed

his king. He crept across the campsite, carefully dancing around his brothers' sleek, shadowy forms.

The pine needles rustled. The wind stumbled through the trees, tripping on branches. Agmund mumbled something unintelligible and stretched his leg out. Grusha became like a deer stalked by a hunter. He froze. He watched. He listened.

Agmund snorted and smiled, caught up in some pleasant dream.

Grusha unclipped a chain of beads from his wiry hair and folded it in Agmund's blankets. A gift to thank him in case the quest failed and he didn't make it back. There was a strong chance of that happening. He felt feverish and he was developing a sick animal smell.

He slipped away unnoticed and made for the pines.

The wind lashed at him, roaring in his ears and cutting him to the quick, and the blue-black light of the not-so-distant day flared to show how far ahead it was. Branches dropped down on him to hinder his movements. The sharp teeth of rocks stabbed through his shoes and the mud cleaved to him. There was no hope of not leaving tracks when the world was a wet, rainy curtain. In panic flight, the world rushes by like ghostly faces in a dream.

It wasn't long before, fear set in. The mountains were filled with the filth of horsemen. Scratched off bark on the trees marked spots where soldiers had stopped to investigate. Grass that had been trampled by their horses strangled in the choking, soupy quagmires, and heaps of burned dirt and slag sprawled out beneath the frowning rock

walls. The stench of garbage stifled Grusha, and far away, chimneys of smoke steepled into the heavens.

The dreng shook. The smoke trails spread across the land. All passage ways were being watched.

Grusha took a step forward. And then, he spotted it. A feathery, black cloud driving through the sky at remarkable speed. It swooped low, wheeling for the trees.

Grusha jolted against the stone wall and backed into the shadows. Flinging himself facedown into the thicket was not an option. It would hone in on the sound. The night owls heard everything, and when they sensed danger, their deep hoots boomed throughout the forest.

The border patrol loved them. Grusha hated them. A watchful owl almost got him killed once.

He sucked in his breath and forced his eyes to be still. Even blinking could give him away. He could see its clawed feet and feel its pinning gaze.

The cloud swept over his hiding place, sinking lower, lower, lower. It passed directly above the cleft where he lay hidden and plummeted, dropping from the sky as an anchor into the ocean. He heard an agonized, shrill scream and the rush-thrush of wings. And then—it was all over.

The black shape launched itself into the sky. A dying rabbit kicked and thrashed in its grip. It shot towards Mount Hring and quickly became lost in the mist rising from the mountains.

Grusha emerged from his hiding place and resumed his journey. He threaded his way through a graveyard of boulders where his presence would be difficult to track and splashed across the slow-moving Tawton River. The freezing water turned his toes pink and stung his ankles, but scattered ashes and cart tracks left him with no other choice. The enemy was moving.

For three more uneasy hours he pressed on. The daylight came all too suddenly, obliterating the concealing shadows and piercing the dark thickets. The sun rode high in the sky and the mists evaporated. There were no bushes to crawl into or holes to hide in. The only place where a dreng might seek refuge on this bright and clear day was up in the branches of a tree.

The climb into the trees sapped Grusha's energy. His damaged shoulder buckled. The bark came loose every time he dug his shoes in and his traveling sack unbalanced him and made a mess of things. It repeatedly slipped off his shoulders and caught on his elbows. He gasped in anguish when it lodged in the crook of his arm and the strap sandpapered the reddened skin. It took him putting weight on both arms to push himself onto a branch less than two feet wide.

Grusha wound a cord of rope about the trunk of the tree. He took the two ends of the cord and tied it about his waist, strapping himself in. Then, he spread a blanket over his legs and prepared himself for a hard day of watchful waiting.

He sat up for most of the morning, nibbling on dried figs and looking out over the land. The sunlight fell through the autumn foliage and the leaves rustled softly. The air up in the trees was fresh, not stale, and down below, there were fragrant smelling firs and

colorful stonecrops growing on rims and ledges. Here, with winter lilies blooming about him and squirrels trapeezing from branch to branch, one longed to believe the years of war lay long behind him. He nodded off, dreaming about his shield brothers and his home in the far East.

At around noon, the dream ended. He woke to find the wind blowing on his tree. The leaves moved like fingers of sea weed trapped in a strong current. The mountain shadows obscured the speckled ridges, and to his horror, there came a muffled stomping sound. Drawing near.

There was nowhere to go; no better place to hide than the shadowy canopy of his tree. Grusha made himself small, tucking his arms and legs in. He swaddled the sable blankets about himself and blended in.

An army on foot came tramping up. Wary. Implacable. Armed with spears and dressed in jingling ring maille. Their helms were fanged. Their standard a piece of white cloth with many red handprints on it, and scruffy mutts spun about them, yapping excitedly. They stopped beneath his tree. One of the men broke away and walked around it. He examined the bark and bent down and crept along the ground, fingering the rocks and the soil. He let out an exclamation and grey smoke poured through his mask. He shouted something that sounded cruel and unlovely to the dreng.

And then, he fell back into line, and the army moved on.

Grusha stared after them, alarmed. They didn't wear Helgen colors. Nor did they speak the dog's tongue. Who were they? What did they want? Would they come back?

Grusha unhooked himself and climbed to a branch where the boughs were thick and leafy. He piled needles and seed pods upon his blanket and squatted in the shadows, waiting for the horde.

But they did not return and the day waned.

When the dreng stirred again, the shadows were deep, the road cold and desolate, and dozens of fires starred the shoulders of the mountains. The firelight had moved to the West, away from Khardul, but Grusha remained uneasy. His wound had slimed during the day. His dressing needed changing, and the stillness of the forest made it seem as if the trees were listening and growing more and more wroth with him.

That night, Grusha covered twelve miles. He had no more close calls with the enemy, but every step of the journey was excruciating. The air filled his lungs with fire. His shoes fell apart and had to be tied onto his feet, and the sense of being followed by a hostile will occupied his thoughts.

What made it so disturbing was how familiar the force behind the Shadow, as he came to call it, felt. It felt as chiseled as the tool of a gem cutter and unwavering and lacking in pity as last year's killer frost. It brought to mind strange things, like heaps of precious metals and secrets buried deep in the earth. Agmund, quite possibly, could have identified the name of the fell power for him. But Agmund was miles away. Likely hunkering behind a rock as soldiers combed the Kremloch. *What have I done*, he thought. *Have I sent him to his death?*

During the day, he rested on a bed of leaves inside a thicket of briars. He longed to hide again in the trees, but to do so could imperil his mission. His arm couldn't take

another climb. It hung at his side, sticky and flecked with corruption. That afternoon, he had nightmares about swords and his limbs being hacked off. Would he find himself forced to amputate?

The day drew to its end. The light drained away. The birds fell silent. That evil feeling of having enraged someone returned. Grusha left his hiding place and limped down the road. Khardul lay only mere miles to the southwest, but it might as well have been a hundred miles with the uneven path he must take.

Well into the night he trudged through decaying troughs and scrambled over ledges. The road to Khardul was a ravine full of grey, powdery dust and slippery stone bridges and slabs. The rocks see-sawed under his weight. The precarious footing frequently forced him to backtrack. Every few steps, he paused to check his surroundings. He felt like a moving target. There was no cover. It was too dark for him to see anything that lay in wait for him or anything that stalked him from behind, and listening for noises in the dark did little good as the wind howled forlornly down the steep passage. The brown thistle bushes crunched and crackled and an owl hooted *thoooo, thoooo*.

He kept a death grip on his mace. *There must be someone up ahead. There must be. Durbar doesn't make mistakes.*

However, no one showed up, and at last, he saw it: An impenetrable tunnel of downed trees, baked mud, and rotting woody vines with a hole just big enough for a man crawling on his stomach to enter. Birds made their nests in it. Soldiers tossed their trash into it, and black bears and poisonous snakes made their dens within its confining chambers.

Khardul was a place you wanted to avoid at all costs; the walls were weak and unstable. Bumping into them could cause rocks and filth to come raining down on you and make stinging insects swarm you in the summer months. There was only one way out. No room to turn around. And if your enemy discovered you hiding in there, you were dead. The skeleton of a man who had been shot to death by archers from up above rocked itself to eternal sleep in a hammock of branches and thorns.

Grusha crouched ten feet from the mouth of Khardul. One final check before he went in...

The damp earth shone slick as smoothed-out butter. There were no boot tracks. Nor bear tracks. And grey feathered grouse meandered about the gravel beach, cooing contentedly. Everything *seemed* okay. But it didn't mean there weren't enemies patrolling the cliff tops. Animals can become habituated to human beings and Durbar's soldiers moved as silently as shadows. These gloomy shadows offered the perfect cover for them.

Still nothing. Grusha decided to chance it. He scuttled up to the tunnel entrance, keeping his eyes tight on the line of rocks overhead. The grouse fled from him, scattering into the sky with frightened clucks. *Apparently not habituated.*

The dreng's heart skipped a beat. Would someone come down to investigate? Better not wait and find out.

Grusha rolled onto his stomach and crept inside. He slid along the rough floor, using his elbows to push himself forward. White hot pain lanced his limbs. This hurt even more than climbing a tree. No other alternatives, though. The other routes brought him

too close to his enemies. He didn't stand a chance against them with his arm crippled. But he could beat Khardul as long as he kept up his courage and conserved his energy.

Two feet, three feet, seven hundred more to go... Gasping and grasping, Grusha pushed himself over bumpy stones and thorny growths. They ground into his ribs and flayed his elbows open, and every move the dreng made dislodged refuse from the ceiling. Pebbles and filth rained down on him, collecting in his collar and the folds of his cloak. A large branch fell in front of him, almost braining him. He was forced to snap off twigs and twist his body into unnatural positions to get around it.

He kept crawling. Each inch felt like a league. His mouth tasted like cotton. His throat screamed for water. He uncorked his water-skin and swallowed a few drops. Regretfully, he stuffed the skin back into his bag. It might be a day or more before he got an opportunity to refill it. It all depended on how long the border patrol forced him to hole up once he reached the Sundered South.

How much time had passed? Was it almost morning? He could not tell. The moon bobbed precariously on the thin clouds above him and the stars shone bright. Yet there was that stale whiff of morning, and the slag and powdered vines were becoming sharper and clearer. There was change in the air and it was overtaking him.

Just then, there came a thumping sound. Tilting his head at an angle that made his neck throb, he turned, and beheld a skeletal leg spilling over the mud nest of branches. The bones were browned from being exposed to the elements for so long. The feet bare and the toes chipped. He had reached the part where the poor traveler who came before him met his fate. He was almost through.

Faster! he urged himself. *Faster!* He lunged forward and dug his elbows into the damp floor.

Using the last of his strength, he wriggled through the dirt and belly flopped onto pebbles. From behind, there was a creak, and then a crashing sound, like that of a board giving way beneath a body. Pine needles and grassy particles exploded about him, ravaging his senses, and something round, leering and hard struck him between the shoulders and rolled under him. The tunnel had collapsed.

Grusha took a deep breath. *It's just a cave in. Not someone shooting arrows at you.* But it had made a lot of racket. Anyone on patrol was bound to have heard it.

Four minutes passed. Then eight. Then ten. The world made no sounds and no one came. Strange. Surely Jenner must know about Khardul. Where were his soldiers? The dead man's bones whispered: *All abroad, running down your shield brothers...*

Grusha continued, shaken. Stiva could outrun the border patrol, but Agmund and Tarmak could do nothing if they got hemmed in from both sides.

Panting heavily, he pushed aside a leafy fern. The darkness receded and a faint light blossomed up ahead. There, no more than two feet from him, was a corkscrew shaped, burrow like opening. The rotted grass in the tunnel blew softly and the fungi overhanging the exit released refreshing, earthy smells. Quartz rocks, bathed in moonlight, sprinkled the road right outside. The oppressiveness of Khardul was lifted.

Freedom. Grusha pushed himself towards the mouth of the tunnel.

Then threw himself onto his side, crushing his bad arm.

He lay on his wounded side, wheezing. The serrated fangs of a steel spring trap sparkled in the dead leaves, and a cleverly concealed chain of bells stared blankly back at him. They had been strung to drop down on anyone who brushed against the fungi and do more than just cause commotion. Nails and tacks were embedded in the bells, their spikes pointed outwards. Khardul was being watched after all.

Panic gripped Grusha. Should he stay holed up inside or make a run for it? What if some soldier was hiding in the rocks with a bow pointed at the exit?

Fool, what're you thinking? Grusha shoved that thought away as his muscles seized. Doubtless, there were soldiers around, but likely not hovering above Khardul. The bear trap suggested they didn't keep a constant watch on it, and since nobody had come down to investigate that ruckus he made, they couldn't be that close.

Before he emerged, Grusha disabled the dangerous devices around him. He tipped the spring trap so it stood vertically along the sides of the tunnel and rammed a stone against it to prevent it from toppling over. He then hooked the strand of bells with a twig and lowered it down from the mushroom ledge. He left the chain swinging over the tunnel and slid under it, keeping his face close to the ground to avoid being impaled.

Grusha thrust his head through the hole and eyed his surroundings. In the sky, the stars grew dim. The thorned plants were soaked with dew and a blue-grey stream of light spilled from splattery storm clouds. There were no soldiers. No sign of anyone camping in the channel, but something didn't feel right.

The dreng picked up a twig and stirred the leaf soup, checking for any additional surprises. His poking and prodding turned up ten wooden stakes hidden in a leaf pile and a cord that ran up into the trees. *A deadfall trap. Almost invisible at this time of night.*

Grusha wriggled into the shadows of pre-dawn. He shimmied around the spikes and shifted along the stone walls, far out of reach of the massive sack of bricks his enemies had strung up to crush him. His eyes darted to and fro for soldiers and his ears listened for the *twing* of bows. Nothing. Nothing at all.

Inch by inch, he crept down the ravine, keeping to the shadows. Steadily, the crimson leafed trees of the South grew closer, and the mountains swelled and overshadowed him. At length, he came to a sheer slope with a mass of tree roots encasing it, and many agonized bark faces jutting from the hillside. Atop it, rose a figure with severe stone brows and armored hands swinging a giant war axe.

Rousing himself for one final push, Grusha pulled himself onto the rock and started his climb. He had reached the Sundered Lands.

CHAPTER ELEVEN- JENNER

The wave-like motions of a blackbird stilt-walking across the top of his tent awoke Jenner from a dream of feathery kisses and tongues that tasted like strawberries. Groggily, he rolled over and admired the naked woman sleeping next to him.

She lay on her side with the sheets entwined about her legs. She had her arm stretched out above her head, granting him a splendid view of her voluptuous pink breasts. Her stomach was bared and a tuft of pubic hair peeked over the edge of the sheet. To his dismay, the blonde strands were matted with dried blood. Their lovemaking from the night before had been rough on the girl.

No. His wife. The realization crashed down on Jenner like the ice-cold water the rowdy bachelors threw over his head at his wedding feast.

He crawled out from the blankets and hunkered on the balls of his feet beside the bed. The tightness of the confining space pressed him in and the silhouette of the bouncing bird bore down upon him.

What was he to do? In the heat of passion, being married to a nubile, eager to please young girl had seemed absolutely wonderful. But now, it felt anything *but...*

Jenner held his head in his hands, overcome with weariness. He couldn't imagine getting up and having breakfast with her, much less sharing his life with her.

She was sweet and pretty. She smelt nice and had a pleasant voice. But she was so damn clingy and her personality drove him mad. She constantly sought approval from everyone, and she ignored people who told her to let down her guard. His attempt to get

her to be her true self had failed miserably. She had just looked at him blankly, and lied down and let him do whatever he wanted to her. *Is this what fucking a corpse is like?* he thought.

The bobbling bird let out a throaty caw and kicked off into the sky. The girl stirred, but didn't wake up.

Someone here? Jenner's head snapped up. Through the tent, he could make out the silhouette of a man on a horse. *His brother?* Who else would show up so audaciously?

The rider dismounted and stomped up to the tent. Jenner was putting on his pants when Kovik Durbar and the murky, pre-morning sky spilled into his private space. He glared daggers at the amused boy. "What're you doing here?" he said.

The girl's eyelids fluttered, then flew open. She saw Kovik in the entrance and let out a breathy, "Oh!" She blocked his view of her breasts with her arms, and then pulled the sheets up to get more coverage.

The mortified husband threw his fur coat over her now exposed legs. But the damage had been done. Kovik had gotten a clear glimpse of his wife's naked body. Best, he decided, not to make any mention of it. "Is there something you want to discuss with me, Kovik?" he said, visibly frazzled.

Kovik looked around the tent, then looked outside. "No, there's not. Why would I want to discuss anything with a bastard like you?"

CHAPTER TWELVE - GRUSHA

Leaves the color of rotting banana peels clung to the dreng hiding in an alcove beneath Mount Amales.

Grusha tugged on his cloak, tightening it about his shoulders. Rain drizzled around him and wind clawed at him, burning his skin and making his fingers leaden. Tonight, the weather was extremely vicious.

Might have something to do with sitting practically at Kovik Durbar's doorstep. A person that cold could surely freeze the air around him.

Grusha smiled bitterly. Holing up under the cliff beat camping in the forest and being blasted from all four sides. Finding this nice little cubby hole had been a stroke of good luck after a long and harrowing day.

It had been among his worst, he reflected. He had spent all afternoon dodging vordr and avoiding hunters, whose presence had caught him completely off guard. While strapped to a branch, he overheard them mention lambs and ewes with their throats ripped open. They must be having problems with a sheep killer. Cougar from the looks of it. Why else would they raise traps into the trees?

Good thing cougars are afraid of humans, Grusha thought. His ever-worsening wound had a dead carcass smell to it and he found himself shuffling along like a sick animal. The corruption in his arm had spread. His limb was a swollen eggplant of purple and black and his entire body ached with fever.

An entrée on two legs for large carnivores. That's what he was, and if he didn't get

treatment soon, he'd end up as fodder for maggots and beetles.

Fear took hold and wormed inside the dreng. His life now depended on finding Curran. His king's confidant *knew* how to bring people back from the brink of death.

But where can such skill be found on earth, he wondered.

Boot prints. The remnants of a campsite. He should've turned up something after crossing the border.

Grusha blinked stinging, weepy eyes, runny as noodles that have turned to paste. He saw that the flames in the fire pit had dwindled to embers and melting water danced on the slimy forest floor.

Unsteadily, he unstoppered his water-skin.

The cap came off with a loud *pop*, but that was not the only sound he heard. Overhead, there came the shaking of leaves and the *thwush* of a bent-down branch springing up.

The dreng shot up and slammed his water bottle down. He stared, his breath coming out in raspy, alarmed huffs. The chainmail rattled against his bruised skin. His feet and hands involuntarily twinged. It was not the wind. She had cried herself to sleep. And it was neither a squirrel nor an owl. He knew what those sounded like. This animal weighed more and moved with less stealth.

Raccoon, maybe? Those animals were about as subtle as a rooster, crowing in the wee hours, and they had a habit of popping up where they weren't wanted. They raided the pig slops every morning and prowled audaciously down the streets of Vulenfier, begging for handouts. Must be a coon. His pack contained wild strawberries and the can

floating in the nearby stream held small fish he'd caught for breakfast. Fortunately, for him, coons take fright easily. It wouldn't take much to send this one running for its burrow.

The dreng retrieved his frying pan from the fire pit and struck his knife blade against it. The utensils clattered, clashing together. The metallic noise echoed throughout the cliffs. "Hey you! Go away! Get out of here!" he yelled.

A ptarmigan who had been roosting in the rocks squawked, fluttered to the ground, and tore off into the night, leaving behind a trail of floating grey-white fluff. Regretfully, he watched it go. A bird that plump would've made a fine meal. Damn shame he hadn't detected its presence.

Silence. Sweet, lovely silence.

He tossed the frying pan on the bedroll.

And that's when he heard it: a low, warning hiss. Then, rustling leaves.

Grusha drew his knife. This was no coon. Too heavy. Too bold. Predator of some sort, he guessed. Black bear, maybe.

The dreng stood his ground. *Head up, body straight. Let her see how tall you are and keep your eyes locked on where the noises are coming from*, he told himself. That usually did it with bears.

The creature hissed at him; a deep, venomous hiss, like that of a snake or a spider and filled with dark malice.

Not a bear. Cougar? Must be.

Grusha stood still as a mountain and kept on staring. Nothing else to do. Turning to grab his weapon from beside his bedroll would expose his back to the creature, and make him vulnerable to an attack. And he couldn't do anything with fire. There wasn't enough left in the pit to even light a candle with. Puffing his chest and shoulders out, he boomed, "I said go away! Get outta here you!"

No sound of retreating feet. Nothing. Was there anything, even there?

Yes, there was. *Movement.*

A bulky, two-legged shape wearing a headdress of spikes gliding through the trees like a ghost.

Grusha wheeled around, hoping to catch where it had gone, but there was no way for him to tell. The leaves shuddered, drowning out any noise the animal made, and the pebbles under his feet scraped against his shoes.

All sounds were magnified by a thousand. All shadows looked alike.

All he saw was a living wall of endless night closing in around him.

Grusha backpedaled, the trees never leaving his sight. He cast his knife aside and snatched up his sword. The iron hilt felt like flame against his cracked and bruised palms. He planted himself dead center in camp and held his weapon at waist level, so he could slash up or down with it.

He didn't know what the creature would do, whether it would launch itself at him or burst out of the bushes and charge him.

What was it? It was fast. Too fast for him to follow. What would it do? How could he fight it?

He recited the names of the gods under his breath.

Praying.

The odds were not in his favor. The pebbly surface kept shifting under him. He couldn't get secure footing. His hold on his sword was weak. He mistrusted his grip and his situational awareness felt off. Jumpy. Unfocused. Failing to see key details. Those small oversights were what could get him killed.

"What are you? Where are you?" he whispered. "Let's get this over with. Show yourself."

His foe complied. A pair of eyes appeared in the gloom: slitted, veined, and the color of melting gold. They were feral and gluttonous, yet they radiated intelligence and cunning. Very human-like they were, but the aghast dreng had never, in all his years of existence, seen eyes so filled with malice and wanton cruelty.

Gathering his courage, Grusha held his sword out. "For my king," he cried.

The creature emerged from the gloom, ambling towards him on two scaly legs and the spiked fingertips of its elastic bat wings. Its body was clad in black armor, rough as fossilized bone, glossy as a chitinous cicada shell. It had a mouth curved like the beak of a carrion bird and a metropolis of towers sat upon its dark head. The scales on its neck glowed orange as flame seeped through them. Within its throat, fire kindled.

Basilisk!

The dreng stared, scarcely trusting what he was seeing.

The lizard advanced, hissing at him and baring its fangs. The monstrosity stood as tall as a fully grown boar and must have weighed nearly as much.

Desperately, Grusha thrust his sword at his enemy.

It did no good. The Basilisk kept coming forward. The dreng's flesh-biting sword didn't daunt it. His thick ringmaille coat didn't discourage it. This was an animal whose kind once reigned supreme over all the other carnivores on the continent. A man pointing a stick at it was no more threatening than a cow taking a lick at it.

Grusha lumbered about the fire pit, his eyes never leaving the wyrm. He must slip past and make it into the woods. His fate was sealed if the creature trapped him against the cliff.

The Basilisk bounded after him, springing over, rather than going around the pit as Grusha had hoped. Its spindly feet kicked out in front of it. A note of terror caught in his throat as its sickle shaped claws bore down on him and its veined wings aimed for his shoulders.

Frantically, he threw himself to the side. His legs gave out beneath him and he went tumbling into the gravel.

The monster slammed into his cooking utensils and the big stones lining the fire pit. It let out a raspy, croaking scream and spun its body around. The massive jaws snapped at him, just missing by mere inches.

Grusha saw a chance and stabbed at the one part not protected by the beast's impenetrable scales: its lustful, hungry eyes.

His sword missed its mark, piercing the Basilisk's snout instead. The great black hole in the lizard's nose sucked in the tip of the man's blade. The monster writhed and the

weapon was torn from Grusha's grasp and flung away. A bloodcurdling scream ripped through the night air. This was the creature's first taste of pain.

Grusha bolted. He thudded across the ground towards his sword. The Basilisk pursued him, hissing and spitting. Its noisy footfalls thundered in sync with his heart, which was about to burst. The beast was fast. Fast as a greyhound running down a rabbit.

The dreng tore off his cloak and flung it over the Basilisk's head.

The predator lunged at him, plowing through the cape. He tumbled, landing on his belly with his hands crushed beneath him.

Crack. His wrist popped and his world exploded in pain. He lurched for his sword and tried to hook his fingers around it, but they refused to bend. The fall had broken them.

Despair fell on him. It took two good hands to wield a sword. The weapon was useless to him now. He couldn't fight. He needed to hide.

The shrubs behind him burst into flame as he raced off into the forest, and heat from the blast nipped at his back and shoulders.

Close. Too close.

He sprinted towards the east, reeling from pain and panting heavily. His throat seared with every raspy gasp he took and the squelching squish of his shoes flapped mercilessly in his ears. The slowness of his gait infuriated him.

He wove left, right, left, left, right, without any sense of where he was going. Fear and fever muddled his judgment.

Impossible to think straight knowing the damn monster wasn't too far behind him.

He could feel its shadow in his mind—long, oppressive, and cold as death—and its keening, mournful cry carried over the rotting trees, filling the mountain air with the music of hunting Basilisks.

The night answered its challenge. A wild pig squealed in terror. Escaped domestic fowl gobbled. Something large and bulky sprang away, crashing into the thicket.

Doe? Basilisk? Grusha skirted from the noise.

The trees ghosted by. Roots clawed out of their muddy barrows to trip him. Conifer plumes raked him with their spines, and moonlight bounced over the quartz rocks piled along the trail, giving life to the sleeping shapes.

The dreng burst past them, half expecting them to coalesce into his foe.

He skittered into a cluster of firs, so dark and thick that even the most farsighted predator would have trouble piercing its mire of shadows. He threw himself against a tree and fought to regain his breath. His eyes shot heavenwards, searching for a compass.

The cluster of stars that the North men had named Sulih's Belt shone white and fair. An embankment rose steeply beneath it, cluttered with woodland tangles, heathers, and debris. Splintered wagon wheels and rotted burlap bags rested amongst the shoots and beds of ivy.

The dreng shuddered with relief. He was going East. Approaching the farmsteads. Perhaps the Basilisk would not follow.

Quickly, he checked the sky again. No Basilisk, but the beast was closing the distance between them. Its shrill cries rose. Time to make his move.

He crept up the slope and parted the bushes. The road snaked on by, desolate and lonely, yet far from safe. Fresh hoof prints dappled the highway. There were scent hound tracks, too, and no cover.

Quiet as could be, he slunk into the open. He sped across the road, crouching low, and then ambled along its ditch. Impenetrable briar bushes prevented him from seeking refuge amidst the trees as planned.

A lucky break for him? Unkempt land suggested abandoned property.

Clinging to the shadow of the dense thicket, he approached what appeared to be an old house.

As he drew closer, he found himself scaling a broken wall with stained bricks. The stables on the far side of it were in no better condition and had small holes in their walls that opened into empty sockets. Rusted digging tools littered the paddock and the water in the drinking troughs was brackish and polluted.

Seated atop a hill of bronze stood the house, even more bleak and forsaken than the road. Iron spikes barred its crumbling windows and metal spears jutted from its four towers. A flimsy wire fence enclosed it. Its edges were barbed and so were the railings of the steps leading up to the front door, which was boarded and nailed shut. No light illuminated the dwelling. The moon bent away from it.

Grusha turned back, dismayed. His hands were too weak to attack the boards and he couldn't afford to risk making so much noise with the wyrm hunting him.

The stables would have to do. But would they be enough to deter a Basilisk?

Silently, he passed down the dirt trail to the stables. Fear pricked at him. The putrid stink of Basilisk strangled the air and the road up ahead glimmered with the cindery glow of its breath.

Keep going, keep going, he breathed, cursing his slow-moving legs.

Pain scoured every inch of him. White dots poked his vision and each second seemed endless. When the stables appeared again, the distance between him and its door felt like leagues, not feet.

Keep going. Keep going!

Adrenaline pumped through him, giving him the strength to make one final sprint. He crashed into the feed and watering area right outside his goal. He skidded to an abrupt stop that almost caused him to lose his balance. He jerked up, panting and steaming.

And then, he saw it—crouching twelve feet from him in a wagon, with its webbed wings flared out and the swallowing muscles in its neck rippling. The rigid pillars on its shiny head rose in challenge. The barbed tail thrashed. The fanged mouth opened and yowled. Its mournful, whale-like cry penetrated the vast black hills.

Grusha barreled by. He seized the door handles and pulled hard as he could.

Nothing budged. The tall sliding door was rusted in place. But the wyrm wasn't.

The monster sprang onto its prey, shrieking like there was no tomorrow.

Grusha went down with a crushing ball of writhing wings, slicing raptor claws, and flashing shark teeth latched onto him.

He raised his hands to push the snapping jaws aside. Both of his boots kicked, beating at the Basilisk's wrinkled belly. The first blow missed, the second one connected, wounding the sensitive wing lining.

The foul thing snarled and ravaged his shoulders. The curved toenails stabbed through his chainmail, shredding the skin underneath. Blood blossomed within the rings. An upward punch caused it to spray, splattering across the ground.

The Basilisk's mouth closed around his hand. The fangs sank in deep, snapping bone and piercing tendons. For a second, they released. And then they clamped down once more.

The teeth scissored, pulling flesh off him. The throat gulped. Eating him. The dreng's horror knew no bounds.

His legs swung out. His body bucked up and down. Staticky, grainy shapes ebbed into his brain, dulling his thoughts, dulling his senses. He screamed into the Basilisk's mouth, shouting a potent, much feared name. "Sulih, Sulih, Sulih!" he cried.

He whipped to the right and ripped an old garden tool from the soil with his good hand. The Basilisk dove for his neck.

Barely able to comprehend what he was doing, he swept the spade up, driving it down the cavernous gullet. He slashed wildly, stabbing at the bloated tonsils and mashing the tip against the snagged teeth. The Basilisk reeled, lurching at him, as if to vomit. Its scales sparked as molten light bubbled behind them.

Grusha let go of the spade and twisted away.

The weapon disappeared, inhaled in its entirety. The Basilisk gave an anguished, choking shriek.

Grusha regained his feet and swooped upon the shovel propped against the wall. He swung, delivering an unsteady, bludgeoning stroke to the animal's skull. The blow knocked the Basilisk to its knobby knees, and a second blow across its wing blades grounded it. The stunned Basilisk staggered.

The shovel fell. Too heavy to hold.

Grusha bound his hand in his sleeve and hopped along the stables, unable to run. Blood dribbled in streams down his arms and chest. The yellow tendons in his maimed hand glistened.

Silver light beamed, arcing over him. Grusha spun. There, right behind him, was a second door of wooden bars with gaps big enough to put a hand through. It stood wide open, a gaping well of deepest, darkest night.

His only hope.

With the last of his strength, he dove into the stables. The pursuing Basilisk lunged, catching his boot.

Grusha wriggled, shaking his foot free. The monster wobbled back. Its crazed cat eyes blinked stupidly at the shoe hanging in its mouth. Its shock lasted only a second, but that one second of indecision gave its prey enough time to hook the bars with his feet and slam the door closed.

The dreng shuffled along the floor, dragging himself to a corner. Straw whispered beneath him and adhered to his sticky, mangled hand.

His timing was perfect. The Basilisk attacked, ramming the door. It managed to get half of its bulbous beak through the bars. It buffeted the columns with its wings and unleashed screech after screech. The animal clawed uselessly at the stables, as though it believed it could dig its way in.

Grusha covered his ears and tried to regain control over his jittering body. The gooseflesh rose on his arms and his teeth chattered. The Basilisk could still spit flame at him or set the stables on fire. The creature seemed completely befuddled by the horse enclosure, but at any time that could change. All it would take is one spark for the monstrosity to realize that the door was no different than the grass it set ablaze, and then that would be that.

Resigned to his fate, he propped himself against a moldy bag of horse feed and let himself adjust to the darkness. Just barely, he made out boxy bundles of hay, great mucking tools, and hooks strung from the rafters. Revolving from the highest one was a piglet. Dead and festering with maggots. That was what made the horrid smell.

Scarcely had Grusha laid eyes on the pig, when there came a roaring blast that rattled the chains in the rafters and shook the thin walls. The horn of a vordr blew. Hunting dogs joined it, and a cacophony arose of raging cries and confused braying. The poor folk who lived outside Helgen had seen the glow of Basilisk fire, and raised the alarm.

The Basilisk spun and pounced upon a shadow. It took another agitated leap, this time landing on an unlit firepot. The stand collapsed under its weight and went rolling.

The howls of the pack drew closer. The Basilisk puffed out its cheek pouches and fully extended its wings, trying to make itself seem larger as it gauged this new threat.

Grusha bolted up, turning indecisive eyes to the door. Stay hidden or attempt to get out? What should he do? He'd be discovered if he stayed. No hiding a blood trail from hounds, and no hiding from the Basilisk and the vordr if he fled. Little hope of passing himself off as an ordinary person if picked up by Durbar's men.

I must choose.

Before he could make his decision, the pack reached the stables. Over a dozen red and brown shapes poured around the building, baying. Great hounds and muscular mastiffs descended on the wyrm, burying it beneath a menacing wave that roared and shook. The Basilisk flailed and struck at them with its wings and fangs. Dogs toppled and the slathering jaws tore open the throat of one of the pack leaders. The black talons scored another mutt's hide. The pack scattered and the agile Basilisk leaped. The bat wings flapped, pushing it into the air. The creature somersaulted and exhaled, blowing a great bloom of fire at them.

The dogs went mad. The ones engulfed in flames took off, filling the hills with their cries of torment. The ones who were still unscathed jumped on their hind legs and bit in vain at their quarry. Branches smoked about them, too damp to nourish the fire.

Grusha tried to look away. Dogs dropped, their fur smoking and their eyes witless. The Basilisk shrieked back, mocking them. It bobbed above them, gorging itself on their suffering.

A clamor of roars and voices broke its song of carnage. More dogs and these had men accompanying them.

Grusha crawled to the door and pushed on it with his body. Now he must flee. The men were bound to investigate the butchery and the fire.

The door groaned and creaked. But did not move. His weakened self lacked the power to pry it open.

He tried again. And again. Still no luck.

He stared at the door, disbelieving. Faces and sounds flooded his senses. His father's wives laughing and playing with their children. Lord Curran weaving words and music. His king rising from his throne, imploring him to return. He had let them all down.

He collapsed at the foot of the door. The Basilisk hovered just outside. It was quiet. Listening. The cries of the approaching pack rose, resonant, bloodthirsty, and terrible.

The Basilisk swept down to meet them. But as the glow of torches appeared and the shouts grew louder, doubt came into its hellish eyes. Step by step, it retreated, until at last its courage failed it, and it wheeled and fled back to its lair to nurse its wounds.

The weary dogs chose not to pursue it and turned on the imprisoned dreng. They threw their weight against the door and attacked the bars. The metal pieces rattled. The clomp of horse hooves contended with them, striving to be heard over their yowls and bellows.

A black stallion galloped up to the stables, running with wings on its feet. Its glossy coat rippled in the moonlight. The rider reined it in and dropped down, landing with catlike softness.

The man chained his steed to the rack and waited for his friends. His cloak and scarf were no less dark than his horse's skin, and the two southerners who joined him were also arrayed in sable colors. They threw their hoods back and Grusha saw that scarves masked their faces and they had quivers strapped to their shoulders. Rangers, not vordr. But no less deadly.

The men slowly approached the stables. Their swords slid from their scabbards. They mumbled to themselves.

Grusha curled on the ground, his eyes closed. He clung tight to a chain of beads given to him by Curran. He had no sword or mace to hold. He heard the slugs whistling to get the hounds' attention and the barred door whining. Then, a biting voice said, "What's going on here? Adrian, there's a man in here, all torn up and bleeding. The dogs took a good chunk out of him."

"Say what now?"

Light boots tramped over to the stable door. Grusha squinted and beheld a wraith of a ranger, grey-skinned and cruel-eyed, with clawed finger plates on his gauntlets. The southerner's expression became ghastly. "Not a man. It's a nasty, half-wit *dreng*. And one with fangs! Look at this carnage. Bastard burned my dog." He spat. "I'll slice this one..."

His companion shone his torch on the dead hound. "Savage didn't do this. Check out these teeth marks. I'd say this's the work of a wolf."

"Well, there's no wolf around here. Freak must've sent out his animal spirit."

The rangers hauled open the door. Grusha put up his slashed arms, just like when he had the Basilisk on him, biting at him. His breath came out in stertorous rasps and tears bled down his cheeks. He lay there pliantly as they swarmed him and the one named Adrian put a sword to his chest. He never dreamed of dying this way. On his feet, fighting a champion who'd never lost a battle, that's how he'd always planned on leaving this world.

"Or maybe this is our wolf. They supposedly have skin changers in their midst, although I've never encountered one," the Adrian fellow whispered, seizing Grusha's braids and drawing his head back by the hair.

The ranger raised steel to his throat and mimed sawing motions. "A werewolf or a witch. Which are you, you unclean creature? Speak, goddamn it, or I'll hang you from a hook and chop you up, piece by piece."

The other man's patience snapped. "You'll do no such thing until I've gotten some answers from him. I want to know where the rest of them went; it takes more than one sneak to create this much trouble."

"They're probably back in the woods, Captain. The spineless worms must've abandoned him." Adrian said, sneering. He sheathed his sword and made a show of doing it against his will.

His superior officer threw him a contemptuous gaze. "Then ride back and check on the fire band. Make certain they're safe and get some of them down here to help put out these flames. We're lucky we stopped them from torching the stables."

"They bungled burning the woods, too. The whole lot of 'em must've been kicked in the head by horses at some point in their miserable lives. Kovik must be desperate resorting to recruit the likes of them."

The officer watched him, warily. "Go, and bring something back with you we can carry a crippled dreng around in. Hew the feet out from anyone you find. I want them alive in case this one doesn't talk."

"I'll try, but you know how those dreng can be," Adrian replied.

He strode out and shrank into the shadows. The bloodhounds went with him. The mastiffs fawned around the door, urging their master to mount his horse, and follow the Basilisk trail.

The captain ignored them and set his torch in a rusted sconce.

The dreng scooted from him, fumbling for a hammer or horse shoe in the straw—anything sharp or heavy he could use to keep this man from binding him. A last ditch attempt to die with dignity.

His captor sighed and made ready to open the door. "These bitches haven't eaten in four days," he said, in a friendly, conversational tone. "I starve 'em to make them more aggressive. I'd prefer not to feed you to them, but I will, if you don't hold still and let me do what I got to do." Grusha looked at him as though he was mad. Hate churned in him, but he felt too sick and too hollow to spend his final moments on earth laying into this snake. "Open that door and I'll call forth my wolf spirit and unleash it on you and your pups," he breathed.

The officer smiled lopsidedly. The lines of his mouth stretched further than they should. A mass of scar tissue started at his right lip and extended up into his cheek bones. "That threat of yours would scare a lot of people, but it doesn't have any effect on me. I don't believe in dreng sorcery. I've never seen it save any of them I've killed."

Then this bastard wouldn't believe a Basilisk had taken up residence in Helgen either.

"What do you plan on doing to me?" Grusha said, his eyes alighting on a chisel and some blacksmith tongs.

"Finding out, to begin with, what mischief you're up to. Let's start with a simple question, first. So tell me, what are you doing here? You planned on razing these buildings, didn't you?" the officer asked, in that infuriating, friendly drawl of his.

"Yes," Grusha told him, sans emotion, to keep the hopelessness pressing his insides from spilling out. "I wanted to see them burn."

"Oh?" the man cried, taken aback by his prisoner's indifference. "And why, may I ask?"

What kind of question was that? "I did it because I loathe Kovik Durbar. I dream about sticking him on a spit, mouth first." No lying required for that answer.

The man scratched his beard stubble in perplexion. "Kovik would have no quarrel with your kind if you'd just stay on the other side of the border where you belong. I've heard him say so, myself. I was sitting right next to him at his banquet table."

"Directly beside him?" Grusha said, letting his thoughts slip out loud.

"Yes. I'm an important person and I'd guess you are not, because your friends abandoned you. Now, how about you tell me about them? Where have those cowardly worms gone?"

"Nowhere," he fired back over the throbbing of his heart. "I acted on my own. I'm in exile for striking my father. I'm sick of wandering and having nowhere to go. I hoped they'd let me return if I accomplished something nobody else's done and razed your homes. I shouldn't have..."

The southerner's lips pressed together so tightly his cheeks got sucked in and his stern face grew even more severe. "Do you expect me to believe a story like that?"

Grusha's vision swam from the blood loss, the rawness of his wounds. "No, but your men won't find any other tracks but mine. Check the road. You'll find my prints," he murmured, hardening his will.

The clip-clop of horse hooves brought the interrogation to a close. The mastiffs roared and circled round the merle-colored stallion, kicking up sprays of pebbles.

The ranger got up and brought forth his sword. He kept it pointed at his prisoner while he righted his head to see who was coming. The subordinate he'd sent off to check on the fire band dismounted and behind him came people carrying buckets and a long hide tarp with leather handles. There were no other prisoners with them.

"How's the savage? Still alive? Did you find out what you wanted, Royce?" Adrian smirked and smushed his pug face against the bars.

"What did the savage say?" Adrian asked, eagerly, hungrily.

Royce moved aside so his comrade could squeeze in. Adrian entered noisily, grinding his shoes on some bricks. Black mud sloughed off. The ranger and the fire band had come via the road, trampling over Grusha's tracks.

"We made some progress while you were gone, but we didn't get around to the important part. I want to know who put him up to this, whether it was the Sun or the Moon."

The Sun or the Moon. No. They couldn't mean... For a moment, Grusha's shock was so immense, he thought he must be experiencing one of those hallucinations warriors on the verge of death have.

Disbelief led to panic. How much did they know? Panic turned to desperation. Had they discovered the connection between Vulfier and his King? Did they have soldiers excavating the catacombs, searching for his master's lair?

His face went blank, becoming as expressionless as a porcelain doll's; no emotions. No understanding of anything they'd just said. Let them think him a witless savage incapable of forming any loyalties to anyone.

The men noticed the change that had come over him. "Look at the freak. He's afraid we'll beat him within an inch of his life to get the truth out of him. Want me to lash him to my horse?" Adrian said.

Grusha made up his mind at that point to endure any torture they put him through.

Adrian's blue eyes sneered at him.

Royce said, "No. Don't do that. I don't think he can take any more abuse tonight; he's near gone. So this is what we're going to do to prevent him from dying on us."

He beckoned to a guardsman assisting the villagers. The soldier stopped cranking water from the pump and came inside. He whispered something and the man drew a deadly recurve bow. The captain took a hatchet and held it over his torch. The flames engulfed the blade, springing around it unabated. "Dillon, you and Adrian hold him down. Bryn, get that litter in here, so we can get him back to Helgen. Dreng, lay down, put your hands out flat on the ground and hold still. We'll make this part quick."

The dreng was mercifully delirious when the axe fell across his maimed hand and completely unconscious when they transported him back to their stronghold.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN - CURRAN

Curran returned from his wanderings to find Helgen mired in mists. With a soft *humph*, he passed under the dead man's gate, as he'd come to call it. He gave his surroundings a disdainful, resigned look.

He meandered through the marketplace on his way back to the inn, and drank in the sights. The Shopping District teemed with life. Fine carpets and ivory tusks adorned the Bedouins' caravansaries. Walnuts, pistachios, and almonds lined the nut vendor's bins and fresh pastries steamed on trays.

He stepped inside a farmer's stall and perused the merchant's bins. Scented candles lined the shelves and paper lanterns gyrated on hooks overhead. The ambiance was inviting, and the man had his lord's bent brows and reserved demeanor.

"How much for two bags of fruit?" he asked the merchant, with a sigh. Gods, he missed his king and Vulfier flaming as the sun set behind it.

"Fourteen pennies," the owner said, his eyes skating over his walls.

Curran detected an agitated timbre in the seller's voice and an aggravated twitch in his long, fine fingers. Not content with what he had. Just like Sulih.

"These are fine candles," he commented. Depending on how much they cost, he might be tempted to buy some. "Where'd you get them from?"

"My son makes them."

He took a guess. "Does he own a shop in Crafter's Row?"

"Yes."

"I see," Curran muttered in a low voice. This, too, hit close to home; his master had once wanted to have a boy. Then, his wife had died, and with her, all hope of having any children. "What'll five of those candles cost me?"

The shop keeper blocked his reaching hand. "I'm sorry. I can't sell these to you. I'm holding them for Lord Kovik, but if he's not bought them by close of business, then I'd be willing to reconsider."

Immediately, the candles were forgotten. A wave of emotions rippled through him. The merchant stood still, watching him as the meaning of this news registered.

"Kovik is back?"

"He is returning today."

"When do you suppose he will come by your shop?"

The man guffawed. "You want to intercept him and try to talk him out of buying these candles? You've got a lot of courage."

"Eh, I'm just determined," Curran said, his fingers brushing the dagger concealed beneath his midnight blue sash. "Tell me what time you expect him."

"There's no telling," the merchant explained. "The vordr travel fast, but they'll have a woman with them. You should listen for the bells. They'll ring them as Lord Jenner approaches and light the beacons."

"Which direction will the lords come from?" he asked. "I'd like to see the lord arrive."

"Eh, would you now? His train will be passing under the Rhuns," the merchant whispered. "Good spot to watch the procession. Few people think of sitting up there. They all gather along the road and squish together. Mighty tight and uncomfortable."

"Thank you, I'll keep it in mind," Curran said, and then he collected his bags and departed.

He was less than a block away from the Heartwood Inn when he spotted servants carrying loads of branches up the ramp leading to a lonely watch tower. At the top, there was an open balcony, surrounded by many black bars. Inside the cage, orange-white light shot up in violent bursts, and swirling smoke swept about, as if caught in a whirlwind. Far off, he glimpsed another trail of smoke, this one coming from the opposite side of the city. Then the bells began to ring, ding-donging so deafeningly that it seemed to him that he was trapped in a raging storm of violent dirges and clamoring cacophonies.

A dusty street sweep flung down his broom and hollered, "Lord Kovik's come back! And he's brought lots of nice stuff with him!"

"Bless him," an old crone gushed.

"I wouldn't say no to a little extra food on the table," the vintner said. "Follow me if you want to eat well tonight!"

Everyone took off, heading for the North East Gate. Curran went with them, clenching his dagger. Silently, he thanked the merchant for recommending the Rhuns to him.

The Rhuns was a chicken coop that lay under the great wall. The farmer who owned it had passed on and the building was now a shadow of its former self. The wire

had torn away from the beams, leaving large holes for sparrows to fly through, and the seed and straw had been looted. A stack of stones behind the Rhuns made it possible for a person to pull himself onto the partially collapsed roof, and get a decent view of the area.

While the vordr cleared the street of people, he climbed onto the wobbly looking stones, testing his footing. The heap shifted beneath his weight, forcing him to grab the siding to steady himself. Balancing on the toes of his boots, he grabbed a hold of the roof, and pulled himself up.

He struggled to his feet as a black and gold stream of vordr, hussars, and archers surged through the gates. Banners flew proudly over their heads and light flowed down their dark maille, like sun reflecting off fish scales. Each soldier carried a sword and wore an embroidered garment to designate which lord he served. The ones belonging to Jenner had bronze roses on their tabards, and those who followed Kovik had silver serpents emblazoned on theirs.

A man who seemed important rode at the head of the train. The bear of House Blackwood adorned his cloak, and his pants and doublet were good, expensive clothes. Curran thought he might be a spice seller. Alongside him, trotted a noble lord with a brown-gold mane and fair features. The two of them were surrounded by armored knights on warhorses, about sixteen in total.

There was no hope of approaching him or Jenner.

Jenner was not the man Curran imagined in his mind. His big hands and giant frame radiated power, but his face was as old as that of a king who's seen many, many winters. His hair was rich and thick, his eyes suspicious and alert, and his clothes

extremely simple. The plain white shirt he wore could've come from any tailor shop in Crafter's Row. The merchant from Blackwood outshone him. Even the horse he sat on seemed like it had higher pedigree.

The crowd murmured. Breathing with him. *Loving him*. Jenner responded, giving them half a smile. Curran couldn't tell whether he felt embarrassment or contempt for them. He took a hearty gulp of stale mountain air and said, "It's good to be home. I missed all of you." Very mechanically. Very rehearsed.

The wedding party kept pouring in. A black carriage rolled through the gates, rattling and groaning. Inside sat a girl of unsurpassed loveliness. Her skin was pink and flawless, her lips anemone red, and her hair the color of spring buttercups. Behind the carriage rode a boy, dressed for the coronation of a king. The cream-colored lining of his cloak was made of expensive silk from the Far East, his runed shoulder guards and clawed gauntlets forged by the best armor smith in Helgen. His eyes were a venomous snake green, his hair dark brown, and his expression severe. He carried a sharpened staff and had no less than fourteen vordr flanking him.

"Lord Kovik, over here!"

The townsfolk whispered excitedly and dropped to their knees again, and a feeling, like that of fire, burned through Curran's veins. He had expected Kovik's arrival to enrage him, but not to the point where his entire body felt suffused with anger and hate.

Kovik leaped from his horse and slapped the reins into a bewildered soldier's hands. Servants rushed forward to help Lady Durbar with her luggage, and Jenner

embraced the blonde officer, who came out to greet them. Curran found it all very strange, and Kovik must have, too, for he tersely said, "Hello, Ilya. Strange place to see you. We were expecting you at Fair Gate. Is there something wrong?"

"No, my lord. All's in order."

"It doesn't sound as though it is, listening to you talk," Kovik sighed. "Out with it, Captain. What *is* going on?"

"Something insignificant. It would be better, I think, to talk about it inside."

"If it's truly insignificant, as you say, then you can tell me, right here."

The captain winced as all focus shifted to him. "Last night we captured a dreng. We apprehended him before he could carry out his nefarious plot."

"And do you know what exactly that was?" Kovik sounded angry. Ilya was right. This was not a topic that should be discussed in the streets. No undoing the damage that had been done, though. The spectators were mumbling amongst themselves, daring him to neutralize the threat.

"He tried to start a fire. But I don't believe him. There's not much glory in setting a few houses on fire!"

Kovik smiled, ever at ease. "There is if your fire spreads and kills people. Where is this bastard? What have you done with him?"

The malice in his voice made Curran wish he was miles away.

"Kovik, we can deal with this matter later," Jenner broke in.

"No, I want it dealt with now. Where is the dreng?"

The captain flicked his wrist at a somber wall flecked with water stains and tipped with a row of jagged spikes. Rotting heads soaked in pitch frowned down from the speared points and sparrows hopped about the stones, picking at the pine needles that had accumulated around them. Behind them, the sinking sun kindled blood red in a haze of stormy clouds. Curran had always wondered what the Fellspire Keep looked like. Now he knew. "My god," he whispered.

Royce explained, "He's been in his cell for most of the day. Except for when we took him out to interrogate him."

"And how did that go? Were you able to learn anything useful from the freak?"

Curran felt a stabbing bite pierce his heart; it was blistering, burning, what he always imagined a crab must feel as it seared to death in a cauldron of chowder. He had a hunch about what Kovik Durbar would do with the prisoner and he wanted out of there. He stepped towards the sea of people with distaste. Surrounded. Nowhere to go but over the wall...

"No, nothing. All he would do is give me lies. Shouted out that a Basilisk had ripped him up at one point."

No one spoke. Jenner 's eyes moved to the skies, searching.

Kovik acted as though all were well in the world. "I don't care what he said. This is our chance to teach Sulih and his dogs a lesson." The crowd listened, riveted.

"I see no reason to keep the rat alive. Bring him out. Let justice be done upon him."

Guards rushed off to fetch the prisoner. Jeers erupted from the side of the street. People toppled over themselves in their haste to grab rocks and sticks—anything pointy and heavy they could get hold of to throw at the dreng.

Down below, Lady Durbar fluttered about, surrounded by servants and the advancing crowd. Even her foppishly dressed kinsman seemed to have lost his courage. Jenner whispered something to his servants and the two were gathered up. He climbed the steps as they were driven inside the Keep and the prisoner brought out.

Curran stared stupidly at the gaunt, dirty dreng who was dragged through the arches, supported by three men. He wore a rough smock smeared with mud. His arms were purpled with bruises and his nose swollen to the size of a pig's snout. One hand was missing, the other was a piece of bloody meat.

"No," Curran gasped.

Grusha.

Soft light pooled across the platform the lords were standing on, creating a pool of animated gold. The dreng was shepherded into the middle of the ring and the vordr closed in behind him. A soldier lugged out a chopping block. The Rhun roof boards shook with the screams of the crowd and the light streaming from Kovik's long staff coursed over Curran's face, burning like hot oil.

What're you doing here? This shouldn't be happening. His stomach tightened, crushed by the squeezing emptiness in his chest.

The observers clamored.

Kovik positioned himself prominently before everyone and cried, "Dog!"

The prisoner fell to his knees. The crowd shrieked and screamed. Kovik raised his hands, commanding everyone's attention. "This pitiless creature has killed your sons, burned your lands, and lusted after your women," he shouted. "The punishment for his crimes is death. Captain, do your duty."

The vordr seized the dreng and flung him across the chopping block. Royce stepped up, carrying a studded mace. Kovik gestured to the knights hemming him in and they removed a giant basket from a cart and unloaded bags of food from the backs of their horses. *To celebrate the execution.*

Curran turned violently, leaping off the side of the coop, crashing to the bricks below. At the same time, a splintering crack echoed from stone to stone. He pulled himself up and beheld Royce sawing at Grusha's throat. The mace used to crush the prisoner's skull lay discarded on the steps. Lord Durbar looked on, mute, and Kovik was circling the body.

Damn them! Curran pushed a wide-eyed spectator aside and forced his way past a child. He stomped on a woman's foot and slammed his elbow into someone else's shoulder. People swore at him and shoved back. And then, an indignant person cried, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Where do you think you're going?" and Curran found himself falling.

He pitched forward, landing ribs first on the pavement. Iron-clad fingers grabbed hold of his arms as he attempted to get up and men hurried to ring him in. Angry boos hissed in his ears and his confidence plummeted. The vordr held him so securely he couldn't move, and a hundred thousand eyes were upon him: judging him, testing him.

He met their gaze, telling himself that as long as they didn't know who he was, he'd be safe, and that none of them would ever guess his true name. Not even the livid Durbar boy, pointing a fat finger at him.

"We're not finished," Kovik said, beckoning to the guards.

The vordr had to practically drag him up to the Durbars.

"Why are you in such a hurry to leave?" Kovik asked. "Do you have no respect for what we do around here? I'd like an answer. Now!"

Curran hunched in the hands of his captors, his hope of walking away from this dissolving into those accusing green eyes. It was futile. The most contrite apology in the world wouldn't appease his enemy. The boy wanted to make an example of him and Jenner showed no interest in intervening and wresting control away from him. In that instant, he realized why everyone loved Kovik so much; the younger Durbar desired to rule. The older brother did not and let his brother make all the decisions.

"Speak loud enough so we all can hear you," the vordr restraining him whispered. "You've insulted us all."

In Sulih's name, Curran thought. Inwardly flinching, he tipped his head and let some humility and innocence seep into his features. "I'm sorry you feel offended, my lord," he said, visibly struggling. Each word must be treated like a cut to a gemstone... "No disrespect was intended. A crowd is no place for me to be; I am ill."

Kovik smiled. "I'm sorry to hear that. Come here and help cut up this dreng. The gods bestow health and happiness upon people who do good deeds. "

It took several seconds for his mind to register what the lord had said. When it did, the aghast looks on everyone's faces told him he'd processed the information wrong. The vordr were twitching, fighting the urge to rough him up, and dozens of lines creased Kovik Durbar's brow. "My lord, blood of Helgen," he burst out. "I love you, but I am —"

"Seize this insubordinate fool and throw him in the Keep," Kovik called out.

"Hold him under lock and key until I decide what to do with him."

No! Curran's mind screamed, as Kovik's guards moved to carry out the orders. He could ill afford to be buried in the Durbars' dungeon. His king needed him. His dreng needed him.

Panicked, he pushed, trying to shake the vordr off him, but it was of no avail. The men held him firmly in place and every soldier in the street had their weapons leveled at him. Guards crowded him.

Blocking his escape.

Trampling his hopes and dreams.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN - JENNER

Dark clouds crested the roof of the brothers' guest house. Matias hung out the window, his grey hat creating a cap of snow on the mountain of sky deepening above him. Jenner could tell he was agitated, even though an entire courtyard stood between them.

After what had happened in Helgen, he thought, who could blame him for not accepting their invitation to come have dinner with them? The man probably hoped he'd never have to see his brother again.

As for Kovik, he was at work in the next room, busily banging his inkwell on their father's writing desk. A letter detailing what was to be done with the dead dreng lay in the pile of paperwork surrounding him. Jenner wasn't sure how much progress he'd made on it since setting it aside to go "attend to some personal business," but finishing it could wait awhile longer. It was way past time they addressed the issue with Kepha and Majn.

Jenner stole from the window and entered the study, sliding through the flimsy blue curtain above the doorway.

Kovik knelt over a tray of earth, his hands stroking the sides of the box. His face was drawn in pain and his skin flushed. Something was terribly wrong with him; however, the room didn't smell of vomit and there were no soiled cloths on the table. "I did as you commanded," he choked.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Jenner murmured, absently tracing a knot in the woodwork. He felt soiled. Those beasts meant the world to Kovik...

Kovik shook the box, unearthing a sliver of bone. "Before we left, I rode out to the Kremloch, and left a sheep for them. Kepha must've eaten it the morning of, because he'd been dead for a long time. I found Majn nearby, sick. She'd resorted to eating him."

"You went this afternoon?" Jenner whispered, incredulous. He tried to recall how many hours Kovik had been gone. Four hours seemed like hardly enough time to ride out to the Kremloch and bury two Basilisks.

"Yes, and it was wretched."

"Where's Majn's body?" he wondered, flinching. She was the more aggressive of the two.

Kovik gave him a bleak look. "I miss her. I want to put my fingers in your eyes for making me kill her." He shifted to grab the bottle hidden between his legs.

"I'm sorry, but it had to be done. She attacked me." Jenner caught his brother's hand before he could swallow. He could only imagine what sort of sentences Kovik would dole out if he became intoxicated.

Kovik put up no resistance. His papers were all he had left. "Good thing, if you ask me." he said.

"May I see what you have in here?" Jenner hated having to ask this.

"Be my guest. I'm sure you'd help yourself anyway, regardless of how I feel." Kovik said, and passed the box to his brother. He twisted in circles in his spinning chair, fighting off tears. He appeared he'd had all he could take of loss.

Jenner quickly went through the box. He overturned the soil and came up with a black, two-inch-long talon and several leg fragments. The bones were very brittle and oddly shaped. He tried putting the leg pieces together and had no luck. Nothing fit. He suspected there might be other creatures mixed in with the Basilisk bones, but what did he know about dead animals?

"I assume this is Kepha?" he asked.

Kovik muttered something, too soft for him to hear. An epitaph maybe. Then he put his hands on his chest. *Covering a rip in his soul.* "Yes, and all the animals he dragged back to his den to eat. Majn's at the bottom of the Randell. I rowed down the river and threw her overboard," he tried to explain. There was a tremor in his voice, a clacking of the teeth. "I sank her body."

Jenner's eyes went to Kovik's shoes. Soupy mud gooped up his boots and he had a damp fern stuck to his sole. So far his story checked out, but only a trip to the forest would prove for certain whether he spoke the truth. "Why did you do that?" he breathed.

"Because I don't want to find her for sale in the marketplace." Kovik grimaced, holding his hands close to his face to protect himself from further hurt. His agony felt so terrible and so real, Jenner wanted to believe him.

Kovik put his hand on a wrinkled white bundle of fabric on the table. The sleeves were embroidered with silver leaves and roses and the collar trimmed with masterfully engraved metalwork.

Jenner fingered his brooch nervously. "Those aren't your clothes. Whose are they?"

Kovik sat on the clothing. "I've ordered the vordr to take them North and drop them off at Vulenfier. They belonged to a boy who died from measles. I hope they're brought to Sulih."

Jenner had heard enough. "What are you going to do with the man you arrested today?"

Kovik picked up the stack of warrants. "I'm going to let him rot in Fellspire Keep and I'm going to find out who he is. He's failed to produce any papers and his ears are torn to pieces. Wouldn't you agree that's suspicious?"

"Yes, it is." Jenner had nothing more to say about the prisoner then. And really, there was no reason to have any further conversation, at all. Kovik required time to grieve and he should go to his wife and get her settled in. Handmaidens and silly servants make poor substitutes for a responsible husband. "I should check on Lady Durbar. I'll be with her, should you require me."

"No, that's okay. You've done enough for me, lately." Kovik waved him away, his words skipping over the coarse, skin-tearing stone floor.

He stomped over to the doorway and tugged so violently on the privacy curtain, it almost tore off its hook. The candlelight illuminated the feathers embroidered on the material, making shimmers of gold coruscate along the threads. A round of coughs took him as he returned to his desk.

Jenner felt heartsick. The gurgles and gasps that came from that room made him want to go comfort Kovik, but he dreaded what his eyes would reveal.

How do you tell someone they're dying? he asked himself, as he passed through long and lonely corridors, filled with passageways that opened into black holes and candles that were drowning in pools of runny wax.

He found his wife waiting in bed for him. She lay under the covers, wearing nothing but a sheer white night gown. All of her clothes hung from hangers in the wardrobe. Her servants, at least, were efficient. "Good evening, my lord," she said, in that child voice of hers that drove him crazy. "I am yours. What would you have me do?"

"Be beautiful and say pretty things to me," he said. Visiting with her did nothing to deaden the pain. It just further deepened the shadow of Kovik's illness.

"Yes, my Lord Jenner," she spoke, trying to show her courage. Someone had been counseling this woman. He thanked them, whoever they were. He'd had enough of death. "Would you like for me to hold you?"

"Please," he sighed, too tired to refuse.

Hesitantly, he touched her. Her lips were spring roses, her eyes the amber of wilting, autumn leaves. She carried the seasons within her. He traced the curve of her shoulder, all the while looking out the window at his brother's wing of the castle. Would Kovik make it through the winter?

Lie to me. Tell me it'll all be all right, he implored her, terror flooding his mind. Life without Kovik was as unimaginable to him as a life with her.

His wife put her arms around his shoulders and embraced him while he unlaced his pants. Her finger brushed against a scar left by Kovik's Basilisks. She rubbed her hands over the blistering surface.

Gently, he lifted her onto his lap and rolled his fingers around her jaw and down her neck. He ran them under her eyelids, feeling for tears. He wondered what it had been like for her, growing up without a sister. Had she felt like he felt now, lost in a vast, dark plane?

Make me forget, he begged her.

He leaned into his wife, stroking her thighs. He couldn't bring himself to do more than that. Seeing what lay beneath all that beauty would make him rage and he could only share his demons with someone he loved. Not some naive, silly girl, who would go to her uncle and ask what her husband's strange emotions meant.

He fell asleep, clawing at his pillow. Instead of her hair.

BIOGRAPHY

Christiana Behringer graduated from Mount Vernon High School in 2002. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Johns Hopkins University in 2006.