

# Prologue

When they found him he was cold. Despite his strange appearance they carried him inside and placed him by the fire. He didn't move. He didn't wake. He definitely wasn't one of them. The farmer's wife debated with her husband about what to do. Finally, after a long discussion, they decided to ask the priestess what to do. The church was only just down the road. She or the priest would know what to do.

When they came they looked concerned. No, they didn't know what he was. Yes, they did the right thing about calling them and they blessed them for having done so. With help they took the man into the back of the cart they'd taken down to the farmer's house and they left into the twilight. The farmer's wife hugged her husband and kissed him on his cheek for having done a good job.

The priest didn't know exactly what the man was, but he'd seen something like him before. He took his cart to the chapel and hurried the man inside under the cover of darkness. They sent off a letter to the priest at the duke's palace. If anyone knew it was him. He was a member of the Council of Elders, or at least they were pretty sure of it.

The courier left, his horse casually trotting along. The next day he returned to the sound of the thundering hoofs of the duke's soldiers. They were ordered to make all haste to bring the man to the duke's palace, and to not tell anyone of what they saw. They didn't tell the soldier that a farmer found the man as they rode away to the duke's palace.

The priestess prayed to her goddess to protect the man as they carried him away in the carriage. The priest fumed about how rude the soldiers were about saying they could tell no one and prayed that the farmer wouldn't tell stories.

# One

Susanne saw him when he arrived. He was unconscious as they carried him through the Duke's hall and into a room near the chapel. Padraig, the priest, caught her watching in almost dumbfounded amazement and suggested that she hadn't seen anything. She knew what he meant and swore to Vipil that she wouldn't tell anyone what she saw.

The word got around anyway. Not that she had seen, but that there was a strange man the Duke was hiding away in a room near the chapel. To make matters worse, he'd posted two guards outside the room to deter curiosity among the palace servants. The only one allowed even near the room was Susanne, on Padraig's orders. He'd have her bring them meals as they sat vigil waiting for the man to wake. And, despite having seen him already, they never let her in the room. Instead he or Rachel, the chapel priestess and Padraig's wife, would take whatever she'd brought at the door and politely ask her to leave before they returned inside. And that peculiarity wasn't lost of any of Susanne's friends who would ask her not-so-subtle questions about why she was allowed to go anywhere near that room.

Theresa sat next to Susanne after she'd returned from taking Rachael dinner one night asking, "So what are they hiding in there?"

"Nothing," Susanne said and counted stitches on the dress she was making for Final Harvest.

"You're lying," Theresa said, "Your scent changed."

"I'm not lying," Susanne hated being a Vulpid. Everyone knew when her mood changed and it didn't help her at all when she tried lying. Still, that's what Vipil, the Goddess of Vulpids and wild foxes, had 'blessed' her with.

"Well there has to be a reason they let you in there and no one else," she said.

"I guess I'm just lucky," Susanne said.

“I doubt that,” Rebecca said from across the table, “my aunt hates you, why would she have you do it if she didn’t have to?”

“They’re not letting me,” Susanne put her sewing down and looked at them bearing down on her. “Do you think I really want to walk all the way to the other end of the palace just to do whatever they want?”

“No,” Rebecca, “but I never said you wanted to. So you must have seen something. What did you see?”

“Nothing,” Susanne said, trying to sound firm, “Maybe Nell wants me out of her hair so she send me way over there so she doesn’t have to see me.”

“She’s got a point,” Theresa said.

“That’s not it,” Rebecca said, “I asked her, she said Pdraig is making her.”

“Ohh,” Theresa looked at Susanne even more closely, “so what did you see? I heard it’s a man that looks like a hairless Canid.”

“I heard the same except a Chiropid,” Rebecca replied.

“Well I don’t think it’s anything like that,” Susanne said, trying to calm them down. The three of them had picked up the nickname the Weird Sisters by the rest of the palace staff. Susanne was 20, Rebecca six months and a week younger, and Theresa a year younger than her: but none of them acted over 12. *Nor do some of us look over 12*, Susanne thought holding the top of the dress against herself to see how it would fit.

“Well what do you think it is?” Rebecca asked.

“I think the Duke doesn’t want us talking about it,” Susanne said, “at least that’s what Bruce said.”

“Since when do you listen to Bruce?” Rebecca asked.

“Since he’s the closest thing I have to a father,” Susanne said, trying not to get angry. “So why don’t you stop asking questions.”

“I’m sorry,” Rebecca said and both of them got quiet. Susanne breathed a sigh of relief and returned to her sewing. She wasn’t kidding about Bruce. Despite him being an Ursid she really did love him like a father. She could barely remember the day her parents gave her to him to bring her to the palace. He treated her exactly like she was, a scared little girl who had just been abandoned by her parents. Over time she’d forgotten even what her parents looked like, other than the occasional remark from Bruce that she looked like her mother. She’d stop missing them a long time ago, though sometimes while in town she’d see a Vulpid with a familiar face, though she was sure she didn’t know them.

Susanne looked up at Theresa who had turned to her stein of short ale for company. She went back to her sewing, making sure the stitching was tight. Rebecca finally broke the silence saying, “Is that for Final Harvest?”

“Yeah,” Susanne said, not looking up from her stitching.

“Gonna take someone?” Rebecca asked.

“Maybe,” Susanne began actually stitching again, “depends if I can find anyone in time.”

“That shouldn’t be hard for you,” Theresa said sullenly.

“What does that mean?” Susanne glared up at her.

“You just seem to always be able to find someone,” she said.

“Yeah,” Susanne decided to let her comment pass, “I guess you’re right.”

“I think James is going to ask me to marry him,” Theresa said.

“Why do you say that?” Rebecca asked.

“I just do,” she said, “we’ve been going out long enough, I think it’s time.”

“You’re only 18,” Susanne pointed out.

“You’re just jealous,” she shoved Susanne’s shoulder, making her needle miss and jab her hand.

“Sorry I didn’t mean to.”

Susanne pulled the needle from her hand without a sound saying, “That hurt.”

“I didn’t think —”

“You never do,” Susanne said, “and I’m not jealous, I just think you need to think things through a bit better. How long have you known James?”

“A year,” Theresa said.

“And he’s 23,” Susanne said, “and a soldier in the guard. How do you know he wants to be with you forever?”

“He told me,” Theresa said proudly.

“Men will tell you anything to get you into bed,” Susanne replied, “trust me. Plus, I didn’t want to say it, he’s a Canid, you’re a Murid. Are you really sure he wants to be with you?”

“That’s mean,” Theresa said, “you’re a Vulpid, as if that’s any better.”

“I know,” Susanne said, “and I’m older than you. Trust me, Privos don’t want to marry Temnere.”

“Just because a Privo didn’t want to marry you doesn’t mean they don’t want any Temnere,” Theresa said.

“I’ve never wanted to get married to a Privo.” Susanne laid down her sewing, “The last man that I really —” She tried not choking up, losing her only real love was still a tender subject to her even five years later. “Look I don’t want to talk about it, OK? Just trust me.”

“Well James loves me,” Theresa said with finality.

“Just don’t be surprised if he doesn’t ask you,” Susanne stretched. Nell was sitting by the fire absently stirring the pot of stew they had for dinner. She knew what was in her other hand. Every night Nell poured herself a large mug of the cheap wine she bought by the barrel. Usually she had just the one, but when she’d had a bad day she’d pour herself another and those were the nights Susanne dreaded. Nell was an angry drunk and to say she didn’t like Susanne was an understatement. The only reason Nell put up with her in the kitchen was because by the time Nell had decided she outright didn’t like Susanne she was already a scullery maid. Changing her to do something else would have been too

much trouble, Nell just had to put up with her.

“What do you think Rebecca?” Theresa asked.

“I’m with Susanne on this, I couldn’t imagine myself married to a Temnere,” Rebecca said.

“You have high standards,” Theresa chimed.

“No she doesn’t,” Susanne added quickly.

“Well if I don’t have high standards, you don’t have any,” Rebecca fumed.

“You think that would make me angry,” Susanne stood, gathering her sewing as she did, “but mostly I take it as being petty. I need to get some more thread.”

“Fine, go do your thing,” Theresa teased, “and when you get back you can tell us about that thing they’re hiding back there.”

Susanne rolled her eyes and left the kitchen. She followed the halls until she found her room and took another spool from her chest and closed it. She sat in her room for a moment, measuring and cutting the thread when someone knocked on the door. She looked up to see Pdraig opening the door slightly. “May I talk with you?” He asked.

She set down her sewing and said, “Of course.”

He came the rest of the way in, shutting the door behind him. “I’m proud of you for keeping what you saw the other day a secret.”

“Thank you,” Susanne was almost embarrassed.

“The man you saw is probably going to be waking soon and once he does we won’t be able to keep the secret much longer,” he explained, “but you need to keep it a little bit longer.”

“I understand,” she said bowing her head slightly in respect. “My friends won’t stop asking me about him.”

“I’m not surprised,” he chuckled, “it’s not a very well kept secret, but for now we need to keep it so.”

“May I ask what he is?” Susanne asked, letting her curiosity get the best of her.

“I don’t know,” he said quietly, “and that bothers me. What have your friends asked you?”

“Well they think he looks like a furless Canid or Chiropid,” Susanne tried to remember what else, “I didn’t see him well enough to know one way or the other.”

“I’m sure you’ll see him soon enough,” he said sitting next to her, “is that for Final Harvest?”

“Yeah, I mean yes sir,” Susanne tried laying the pieces out so they looked more like a dress, “I haven’t made a new one since just after Susan was born.”

“How are you dealing with that?”

“Susan?” Susanne looked at her dress for a long moment, absently re-arranging the pieces to fit slightly better, “Better some days than others.”

“It’s tough losing a child,” Pdraig took her hands to stop them moving. Susanne looked up at him. He was an ermine Mustilid and this time of year he was growing his snow-white winter coat, which helped hide the gray that was forming around his temples and nose. “She was like a granddaughter to a lot of us.”

“I know,” she simply said.

“I worry about you sometimes,” he continued, “You seem to be taking it harder than most.”

“It was my fault,” Susanne nearly whispered. She didn’t want to tell him the truth. That everyone she’d ever loved in some way had left her. Bruce, sure, he was still around, but her birth parents weren’t. Nor was Susan’s father who swore he loved her. Or William, who vowed to take her away with him while she was still pregnant with Susan. And Susan . . . She thought having a child would give her someone she could love forever and who would love her back. Instead it was just heartbreak, like everyone else.

“It was not your fault.” Pdraig said firmly, “Accidents happen, even terrible ones, and that’s all it was.” he let go of her hands and stood from her bed. “If you’d like I’ll speak to Nell about allowing you some time to yourself once the dealings with our guest have subsided. So you can grieve properly.”

“I, I don’t really need that,” Susanne looked at the pieces of her dress, ruffled up by Padraig sitting.

“Well just remember that Vipil and Vulpus still loves you,” Padraig said, “As do all the gods.”

“I know,” Susanne said as he crossed her small room to the door, “Thank you.”

He turned back to glance at her, “You’re welcome. And I will talk to Nell for you.”

“Thank you again,” Susanne said as he left. It wasn’t that she didn’t want a break from working in the kitchen, it was just that work was the only thing keeping her mind off of how terrible her life had gotten. She gathered up the dress and carefully placed them in the chest at the foot of her bed. She knew he meant well, and she really needed a break from everything. She just wasn’t sure what she’d do. Visit Susan’s grave more often, she knew that. She had her buried under a tree that Susanne play around when she was young and Susan was learning to like as well. It and the pond next to it was her refuge from everything happening in the small world of the palace. She knew Bruce knew about it, but she also knew he swore never to tell anyone else.

And there was still that man she wondered about. She knew more about him than nearly anyone else in the palace, but she didn’t know everything about him and she was still curious. She knew he wasn’t Genah, just from what little she saw she knew that much. And despite him being carried and manhandled by the two guards, the same ones posted by his door, he didn’t wake. She hoped he was even alive.

She curled on top of her covers, not really wanting to go back to the kitchen and be interrogated by her ‘sisters’. Other things bothered her too. Things well outside of her control. Talk that the king was ill, but no one dare say dying. Talk of the dukes he’d brought under control during his campaigns becoming restless. She’d even heard mumbled talk of open revolt among those dukes. But it was all rumor. No one would say anything openly and what little she knew she learned from eaves dropping on Bruce talking to the duke while she helped with the banquets he called a meal. All she cared was the something was going to change soon and she worried it wasn’t for the better.





# Two

Brian was tired of sleeping. He wasn't sure how long he had been, anywhere from hours to days, but he knew even in his unconscious mind something wasn't right. His dreams were bizarre, ranging from Hara, his wife, or a reasonable facsimile of her, dating the University of Louisville basketball coach on a passenger jet to a mouse having a tea party with a cat. Even the more mundane dreams of everyday life that made him forget he was dreaming at all, weren't pleasant. They were often of the last time he saw his wife. Their argument over her infidelity and ultimately her leaving. That dream would often just fade to the swirling black of a wakeful mind in a sleeping body.

They'd been together for seven years. Ever since she asked him on a date shortly after he wrote a brief article on her promotion at her law firm for the business section of the newspaper he worked at. The date turned into marriage a couple years later. Even his friends doubted they'd be together long. She was well outside of his self-prescribed league. Not that he was a bad-looking guy, it was just that she was outright beautiful. Not in the fashion-model glamorous sense, but in the more realistic way that would turn heads on the street, but not look out of place in jeans and a T-shirt at the Kentucky State Fair.

Maybe they were like Othello and Desdemona — doomed from the start. To say her father, an engineer from India, hated him would be to misunderstand the depth of his dislike for Brian. This also spread to nearly all of her family, save her maternal grandmother who, almost scandalously, had married a British gora which resulted in Hara's mother and siblings. She saw Brian as a wonderful man who made little Hara happy. And Hara was the baby, and the only one of her immediate family to have been born in the United States.

And like Othello he had an Iago, though he seriously doubted Mike said what he did out of any

kind of malevolence. Probably more out of friendly advice. Hara had always worked long hours, whether at home or the office, but she'd been spending more time away lately. She even claimed she'd taken a case that took her to Indianapolis several times. That's what set off the alarm bells for Mike who kindly suggested he check her odometer when she got back and that 400 mile round trip turned out to be a 20 mile run to the airport. Brian did his job, asked pointed questions around her office and that's when she confronted him. Before he'd discovered anything for sure, just his suspicion was enough for her to tell him the truth. The entire sordid truth. By the end of it he simply didn't want her in his bed anymore. Nor his home, or even in his life. Before he'd met her he had almost resolved to be single for life and at this point it didn't look like the worst decision to have made. So she left him. Methodically emptied her closet, and drawers and told him she'd take the rest of her stuff when the divorce was final. Not mean-spiritedly, just in the way someone who'd helped with dozens of divorces knew it would play out.

Something nudged him into wakefulness. He wasn't sure what. Maybe a change in the air current, or people talking near him, but something took him from the deepest sleep he'd known to drowsing and the near-sleep of someone who wanted to be awake, but wasn't quite ready just yet. The talking turned to nothing and the darkness of the room turned to a red glow behind his eyelids. Slowly he woke, realizing he was something besides a mind floating in nothingness and a whole person laying in a bed. And the bed wasn't what he expected. He was used to sheets with an obscene thread count that Hara insisted on, and now he was lying beneath what felt like woolen blankets and on a bed that was only marginally softer than the floor. Finally he found himself looking at exposed wooden beams on the ceiling in a room smaller than his bathroom.

He didn't feel out of place, despite this obviously not being his home, more of a wonder of how he'd managed to get there. He began looking around the room. It was a doubtlessly a bedroom of some sort. There was a small bureau, an end table, tapestries on the wall, a weasel-looking man in a

chair next to the bed and a tray with some kind of bread and cheese on it. Something, was out of place though. Most likely the man who despite being just dozing by the bed looked entirely wrong. The man opened his eyes and shook his head, turning to look at Brian.

They stared at each other a long moment, apparently both trying to figure out what to say. That man did look like a weasel. Not in the untrustworthy sort of way, but an actual flesh-and-blood weasel. Finally he broke the tension, saying, “Good, you’re awake.”

Or at least that what Brian thought he said. Everything about his speech was different. A heavy lisp, different vowels and the strange way he said every letter in the words. Finally Brian simply said, “Yeah.”

“I won’t hurt you,” the weasel said. “You’ve been sleeping here for going on nearly a week. You were found in a farmer’s field not too far from here, and he rightly brought you to my attention.” He pronounced the ‘g’ when he said ‘rightly’. “The Duke has agreed to keep you here and safe until we can figure out what to do with you. Do you understand?”

“I think,” Brian said, hoping the weasel would understand him, “it’s hard to make out what you’re saying.”

The thing chuckled, “I suppose that makes sense. I am Padraig Simm, the Duke’s priest, what is your name?”

“Brian,” he almost had to think to remember the rest, “Brian Unis.”

“Well Brian it’s late here,” Padraig said, “though I doubt you’re in any mood to rest. Are you hungry?”

“Starving,” Brian said, “and thirsty.”

“I have bread and cheese here,” he said, “and I can get you wine and beer, which ever you’d prefer.”

“Water?”

“Of course,” Padraig said, getting up, “though I should warn you, there’s been an outbreak of

bad water lately. Typhoid. The palace's well is probably safe, but you might be better off with something else."

"Of course," it's not that Brian didn't like beer, it's just that it wasn't his idea of a good thing to be drinking at this point. "I'll chance it."

"I don't blame you," Padraig stood, "sometimes drinking spirits all the time begins to make you think less clearly than without." He smiled, showing way too many teeth, "And I don't mean drinking until drunk either, that's totally different matter."

Brian sat himself up as Padraig placed the tray with the hunk of bread and a strong, soft cheese in his lap before opening the door a crack and speaking to someone outside. "I'll have someone bring water. Now, I have a question for you that everyone here has wanted to know, what are you?"

"What am I?"

"Yes."

"Human."

"I see," he said almost clinically. "And where are you from?"

Brian laughed. "I don't know whether to say my city, state, country, world, or what."

"How about nation, for starters."

"The United States of America," Brian said feeling strangely patriotic for saying the full name. Normally he'd just say, "the U.S." and be done with it.

The weasel went back to straightening things up around the room for a bit. After a moment he said, "I've heard of your race, though I know almost nothing about them. I'm afraid to say I've never heard of your nation. Currently you're in the palace of his Majesty Duke Mikael Andago, Duke of Enanda. The palace is ostensible in Enandoplas, the capital and seat of Enanda. Our nation," he paused as he opened the bureau, "is Normar on the globe of Terrae." He turned back to Brian holding a long tunic, "I suppose that might give you meat for thought. If you don't mind, and you are able, it would be good if you dressed."

“Yeah, of course,” Brian said taking the shirt as it was tossed to him. He struggled into it. Whatever had kept him asleep so long had made him weak. “Am I going somewhere?”

“No,” Padraig said, “You just need to be presentable.” He handed Brian a pair of what he was afraid were hose. “I’ll leave so you can put those on. Would you be up to the duke gracing your presence tonight?”

Brian knew he couldn’t say really say no, “Tonight?”

“Either that or morning,” Padraig said, “depending on if you need to rest more. He’s . . . anxious to see you.”

“Uh,” Brian looked at the knit pants, “Yeah I suppose tonight.”

“Good, I’ll get him while you put those on,” Padraig opened the door and looked back at Brian for a second, “You might want to be prepared, he’s a Leonid and some would argue fearsome looking.”

Brian nodded as he gathered up the hose, finding the waist of them. “I’ll be ready.”

Padraig closed the door and prayed a silent prayer to Didel, the god of Didelphids and fools, that Brian really would be ready for him. “Make sure no one comes in or out,” Padraig ordered the guards, “other than myself, the priestess or the duke.”

“Yes sir,” the Felid guard said and sat up straighter, as if to belay the fact he was nearly asleep.

Padraig followed the path he knew quite well to the duke’s chambers, following the halls to the central hall, then up the stairs and around to the duke and his family’s apartments. He rapped on the door to the duke’s room, waiting patiently for a reply. “What is it at this hour?” The duke growled as Padraig heard him walking across the room to the door, “I’m busy right now.”

“The man is awake,” Padraig said in his most humbled tone. “You told me to get you when he was.”

The door opened slightly and the duke peaked out from behind it wearing a night robe, “He’s awake? Has he said anything?”

“A bit,” Padraig said patiently, “his name, his race and his homeland.”

“For Leonous’s sake, tell me,” the duke said opening the door further.

Inside one of the chamber maids, a young Felid girl, was hastily putting on her clothes. “If I may leave, your majesty?”

“Yes, yes go,” he said as Padraig followed him inside. The maid left in a hurry, not even fully lacing her dress as she ran out.

“An indiscretion?” Padraig asked after she’d left.

“I’m a widower,” the duke said, “but I still have needs, as you well know.”

“I understand. The man’s name is Brian, he says he’s a human from a Nation called, I believe the United States of America.”

“Interesting,” the duke rubbed his chin impatiently, “so he speaks our language?”

“He does, but very strangely. He seems to swallow sounds we speak,” Padraig struggled to explain everything, “and appears to speak much more rapidly than us.”

“Like someone from Europa then?”

“Somewhat,” Padraig said, “only different. He’s expecting you to see him tonight, but if you wish I could always ask him to wait until morning.”

“I’ll see him,” the duke rubbed his forehead, “the night’s ruined anyway.”

“I apologize for that,” Padraig walked to the door, “I will go down and prepare him for your arrival.”

“Does he know who I am?” The duke asked.

“I told him your position, I doubt he understood the significance of it.”

“He’ll learn,” the duke stretched to his full height, “now go, I’ll be ready in a moment.”

Brian sat on the edge of the bed, worrying how one should greet a duke. The weasel used the words “his majesty” which made as much sense as any. He understood he should act humble to him,

that was more or less common sense when dealing with someone of authority. He supposed that would be enough for now. If he slipped up he could probably explain an ignorance of their customs and be safe. He stood and paced, weak legged. He knew he'd been asleep for some obscene amount of time and whatever had caused it had left him weak. Or maybe it was just being asleep for so long, he wasn't sure. Either way he felt odd.

He paced back across the room and looked at the door. It was heavy wood with large metal hinges almost covering the width of the door. He'd heard Padraig's order as he left and didn't want to chance it with whoever could be out there. The room was small, about the size of the bedroom he had growing up. Barely big enough for the bed, dresser, desk and chair. He supposed this was probably some kind of lower-class guest room. Like for the servant of a visiting noble, or something similar. At least assuming their world was anything like the pulp romance novel that was his wife's guilty indulgence. Ex-wife, Brian corrected himself mentally, and most likely he'd never see her again.

He sat on the bed hard on that thought. He'd never see her again. Not that he wanted to. He knew the next time he'd have seen her was in court. But not seeing his wife also meant not seeing his friends, co-workers, family, everyone. They're all gone. Maybe not dead, but certainly gone. The fact he'd never see another human face began to sink in. He'd heard, "Man is the joy of man", or something similar once. The wisdom of a god he'd forgotten the name of. The smart-ass portion of his brain quipped, And so is a dog, which wasn't as funny as he'd thought it was. It was almost disturbing at this point.

There was a knock on the door and the priest returned. "The duke will be down here shortly. Are you prepared?"

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be, I guess," Brian said watching Padraig's slippered feet.

"He'll be here in a moment," Padraig sighed, causing Brian to look up at him, "I'm sure this is rough for you. I promise I'll do everything I can to make this easier, but I can't promise a miracle. I leave that to the gods."



“You’ve heard of us? Are there like humans living here?”

“We’ve heard of you, nothing more.” Padraig said, though Brian knew he wanted to say something else. “Not as much a myth as a people long forgotten,” he added sadly, “I honestly don’t know more. I’ve sent word to the rest of the Council of Elders about your appearance, but I’m yet to hear back. It could take months, but I think they’ll call a conclave to discuss you.”

“Oh boy,” Brian said, “I’m not the religious type.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t try to convert you,” Padraig said getting up after a knock on the door, “we let the gods choose their own, and I’m sure you have your own gods you revere. Ah, Mikael,” he opened the door and a huge lion-man entered, “Brian, this is Duke Mikael Andago.”

Brian stood and coughed out, “Your majesty.”

“You can sit,” the duke looked beleaguered, like he didn’t want to be here but was making an appearance anyway, “Padraig says you call yourself a human.”

“Uh, yes . . . sir.”

“He also says you’re from a nation, which I apologize for forgetting the name of.”

“Uh, the United States.”

“Yes,” he said like he’d just remembered it, “you understand where you are?”

“Not really,” Brian said honestly, “I suppose it’s simply because I’ve never heard of any of the places, uh, Padraig spoke of.”

“As I’ve never heard of your nation. Do you have a king?”

“No,” Brian said quickly, “my government is elected. It’s, um, a lot to explain.”

“I see,” the duke looked confused, “you’re aware of what a king is, right?”

“Yes.”

“Good, I am the king’s nephew, by his second youngest brother.” Mikael watched Brian closely. “My father is dead and I have inherited his duchy. That makes me a very powerful, and influential, duke.” He stopped pacing and looked Brian in the eyes, “It means I can either be a good

friend, or a very poor enemy. The choice is yours, but I advise staying on my good side.”

“I have no reason not to,” Brian understood a less-than-veiled threat when he heard one.

“Good,” he straightened up, “I’ll leave you now.” He turned with a flourish, “Padraig, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” Padraig said following the duke out.

“He looked scared,” Mikael said as they left the room. “Does he have any reason to be?”

“If you saw how you looked, you might understand.”

“What do you mean?” Mikael raised an eyebrow to look at him as they walked.

“You’re exhausted,” the priest said, “your clothes are disheveled, you generally look less than yourself. Do you sleep?”

“I try,” the duke said as they found their way to the central hallway.

“I’ll give you something to help with that,” Padraig said, “Might I have a suggestion for how to deal with Brian.”

“Of course.”

“The kitchen girl who saw him the day he was brought in,” Padraig paused to let the duke remember who.

“Which one?”

“The Vulpid,” Padraig suggested but he could tell the duke didn’t remember, “the fosterling.” He thought for a moment, “The promiscuous one.”

“Yes, her. What about her?”

“We can’t keep him in that room forever. Perhaps we could have her keep him company. Show him around the palace. Just generally be his friend.”

“Isn’t that what you’re for?”

“Your majesty, I’m a priest, not a consort. Plus I doubt she could hurt herself, much less

another person. She would probably put him at ease.”

“I don’t like the idea of him becoming close to a Temnere, your company excluded.”

“Your majesty, if I may, but your uncle might have a different view on the matter.”

“I know,” they arrived at the door to his chambers, “Fine, as long as they don’t become too close.”

“I can’t promise that,” Padraig said honestly, “he’s a man and she’s apparently a very persuasive woman.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” the duke leaned back against the door and closed his eyes, “I suppose you’re right. What might you think a human is? He doesn’t look Temnere, and he’s certainly not Panthrus.”

“If you wish to call him Privo you may,” Padraig said uneasily, “I’m not sure he’s any of them. Nor does he even know they exist.”

“You’re probably right,” Mikael opened his eyes, “make me that potion you spoke of. I need rest.”

“As you wish,” Padraig said and neatly turned to go.

# Three

Susanne leaned back against her tree and watched Susan play in the water. It was a beautiful summer day and the sun was just about to creep below the horizon. She shouted out to Susan to come back in so they could go home she realized she wasn't moving. She stood up and shouted her name again. Susan didn't move. She ran into the water, swimming until she could get to her, shouting her name when she got to her, then dragging her to shore.

She wasn't breathing. She tried everything she could, but she still wasn't breathing. "Please, baby, breathe for mommy," she cried and gave a silent prayer to Vipil to save her daughter's life.

It was an accident. A terrible accident. And it was her fault.

Susanne woke suddenly, taking a moment to realize she was in her bed. She curled up and cried like she did nearly every morning since Susan died. She hated herself for being so weak. For letting her nightmares get the better of her every night, but they never stopped. And they never got better.

She wasn't sure whether she fell back to sleep, but when she looked up again the sun was barely over the horizon and the sky still had an orange glow slowly fading to the pale blue of the day. She sat up slowly, stretching her legs and pulled her meager covers off. She'd slept in her clothes again and that was always the sign of a bad day coming. She adjusted her corset to more properly show off what little she had. She prayed a short prayer to Vipil when the halls were clear on the way to the kitchen. She didn't want to start working and she knew she was already late; she smoothed her hair down before opening the door and facing the fury of Nell.

Except Nell wasn't angry. Instead, with a patient sigh, she told Susanne to talk to Bruce. She'd never not been angry at her being late and telling her to speak with Bruce only worried her more.

Bruce was in the pantry counting the supplies when Susanne cleared her throat to get his attention. He told her to wait a moment as he finished counting. “Rachael talked to me about you, on behalf of Padraig.”

“Oh,” Susanne felt uneasy. Not that Padraig and Rachael didn’t mean well, it’s just that they’d never gotten this involved in her life.

“She said you needed a break from the kitchen and the Duke agreed for you to take a little break as well.” The Duke was involved, this was bad. “She told me to have you go to see her when you got up and for you to put on something nicer before you went to see her.”

“Did she say why?” Susanne asked.

“No, but knowing what’s been going on around the palace, I have my guesses,” Bruce said, “You should probably be ready for anything.”

“OK,” Susanne fidgeted with her hands. “Do you want me to go now?”

“Yeah,” Bruce said then stopped her with, “Wait, she also wants you to bring breakfast.”

“Alright,” she said and walked slowly for the kitchen. Supposedly she wanted this, so why did she feel so bad about it? Maybe it was the uncertainty of what exactly was going on. She pushed the swinging door to the kitchen open and almost forgot what she came back for.

“What did Bruce want?” Nell said in the nicest tone she’d ever heard her use.

“Uh, I’m supposed to take Rachael breakfast,” she said absently.

“Alright,” Nell said and picked up a loaf of yesterday’s bread, “Take this and this,” she placed a hunk of the creamy white cheese that smelled like feet onto a plate, “and find out if Rebecca has milked the cows yet.”

“I don’t know,” Susanne said.

“That’s why I said find out!” Nell snapped. “Merciful Porcis you can be dense sometimes. You know where she puts it.” Susanne recoiled away from her before trudging to the door near the edge of the kitchen. Two pails of milk were there and Susanne knew Rebecca was busy getting the other two.

She lugged the pails into the kitchen for Nell, who picked them up and put them on the table. Nell looked like something was bothering her and she poured the milk from one of the pails into a clay pitcher. “You know why I’m so hard on you sometimes?” Nell said in the same nice tone as earlier.

Susanne didn’t want to just say, “Because you’re mean,” so she said nothing.

“I’m hard on you because you remind me of myself,” Nell said placing the pitcher on the table next to the plate. “I had a girlhood just like you did and no one gave me any direction. And look at me now: I’m still in the kitchens, unmarried and too old to get married. I don’t want you to end up like me.” She looked at the embers in the fire, “I want you to do whatever it takes to not be where I am when you’re my age. I know it might be hard since you’re a Temnere, but you still need to.” She glanced over at Susanne, “I guess I’m getting old. You need to run off and take this to Rachael.”

Susanne nodded in amazement and did exactly as she was told. Nell had never opened up to anyone in her entire life. Not even to Rebbecca, who was her closest relative in the palace. Maybe she was getting old and beginning to feel guilty for treating Susanne like the dirt off her heel. Or maybe she really did like Susanne.

Rachael’s personal room was beside the palace chapel and across from Padraig’s. Despite their marriage they kept to themselves most of the time. Susanne tapped on the door with her foot. “You can come in,” Rachael said from behind it.

“My hands are full,” Susanne half-shouted.

“Oh, Susanne,” Rachael opened the door, “Good, you came. Come on in, we need to talk.”

Susanne followed her in, “Remember the man you saw?”

“No?”

“Yes, you do,” Rachael said, “I know Padraig told you to keep that a secret, but he told me. The man is awake now and we’d like you to meet him.”

“Why?”

“You have qualities that make you seem like someone who he might open up to,” Rachael chose

her words carefully.

“Oh,” Susanne set the plate on the small desk in the room. “I brought this for you.”

“You brought that for him,” Rachael corrected, “you should know he’s not a Genah, and he’s not even from our country. He talks . . . strangely, it’s hard to describe until you hear it. I haven’t even heard it for that matter.”

“Does he speak Normaran?”

“Apparently yes, but it’s just strangely. Do you think you can handle that?”

“I, uh, yeah, I guess.”

“Good,” Rachael smiled, “I want you to be brave for me. This might be the most important thing you’ve ever done. The Duke will be looking forward to hearing from you about him.” Susanne nodded. “Are you ready to go?” She nodded again. “Good.”

Brian wasn’t sure if he slept or not the rest of the night. He lay down to sleep, but everything was on his mind. Where was he? What were they? Was he even safe? The last question bothered him the most. The Duke’s comment last night rattled him a little. He certainly had no reason to be on his bad side, and he was right about being a very good friend to have, but the fact he mentioned it at all . . .

The sun had risen slowly that morning. The sky stayed shades of dark blue until, in almost one instant, yellow light streamed into the room. He looked outside the window expecting to see a moat or something; instead it was a grassy field and gardens off to one side. There was something too normal about it. Like somehow he didn’t expect them to live like that. He heard the latch click and he turned from the window to see a tawny rabbit-woman wearing a deep red dress enter. “I hope I didn’t startle you.”

“No, you didn’t,” Brian studied her for a moment, then turned to look back outside. The fact that she’d have had a nice body, assuming she were human, disturbed him a little.

“Good then,” she hesitated for a moment, “I’m Rachael. I’m the priestess at the palace and I’ve

been taking care of you since you got here.”

Brian looked back, wanting to be polite, but not really wanting to see her either. “From the way ... Pdraig is it?” Rachael nodded, “Well from the way he talked it seemed I was someone important to you all.”

“Yes, it would seem that way,” she said, laughing to lighten the mood, “There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

Brian walked away from the window, sighing, “Who?”

“She’s a kitchen girl who we think you might be able to relate to,” Rachael said slowly.

“I was a writer in my, um, other life,” Brian said wanting to oversimplify his job, “I’m not sure how much we’d have in common.”

“She understands loss,” Rachael added, “very intimately.”

Brian’s heart shrank when she said that. She was right, he didn’t feel it now, but he’d lost everything and everyone. After a long moment he said, “Alright.”

“Her name is Susanne,” Rachael said quietly, “Would you like me to show her in?” Brian nodded. Rachael went to the door and opened it, “Susanne, you can come in.”

Susanne, it turned out, was a petite fox-woman who had nearly the opposite build as Rachael. She came in carrying a tray of food and curtsied awkwardly. Brian waved his hand, “You, don’t need to do that.”

“I’ll leave you two,” Rachael said opening the door, “If there’s anything you need, Susanne can get it. You may leave the room, but I’d advise waiting until Pdraig comes back by. The Duke might want to place some restrictions on where you may go.”

“OK,” Brian said, “I’m fine for now.”

“Good then,” Rachael closed the door behind her.

“So what are you?” Brian asked. Susanne stood there, speechless, holding the tray like it was a lifeline. “You can put that down.”



She put it on the table near the bed, "I'm, uh, a, um, Vulpid."

"I suppose you've heard I'm a human."

"No," Susanne whispered, "does that mean you're not a Genah?"

"What's that?"

"We're all Genah," Susanne said quietly, "I'm Vulpid, Rachael's Leporid, um, I don't know who else you've met."

"Vulpid? Is that like the, uh, fox-whatever?"

"I'm not a fox," Susanne said sullenly, "but yeah, I guess."

"This is just strange to me," Brian said, "I mean you look like a, um, you know, and well, everyone I've seen so far looks like an animal. Am I wrong to assume everyone does?"

"Yes, but don't talk like that, it's not nice."

"To say you look like animals?"

"Yeah."

"I won't then," Brian hated it when people wouldn't let you call an apple an apple, just because it would offend them. "You're a kitchen, um, you work in the kitchen?"

"Yeah," Susanne stood uneasily, "I'm supposed to be learning how to bake, but mostly I clean everything."

"Oh," Brian looked at the plate. More bread and cheese, plus a pitcher of milk. "For me?"

"Yeah," Susanne didn't move, "It's not much, but I—"

"Good," Brian tore the piece of bread in half, "do you want some?"

"No, I'm OK," Susanne was almost shaking, "can I sit?"

"Of course," Brian sat on the edge of the bed and poured some of the milk into a wooden cup from last night. "How old are you?"

"Twenty."

"I'm a lot older than you," Brian said dipping the hard bread into the milk, "Thirty-four."

“That’s not old.”

“It’s not twenty,” Brian laughed, “How old are your parents.”

Susanne tensed, looking at the floor. She whispered, “I don’t have any.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Rachael had said she understood loss intimately, “when did they pass?”

“They didn’t, at least I don’t think, they just,” Susanne sniffed, “I don’t want to talk about it, OK?”

“I’m sorry,” Brian mumbled, “My, uh, father’s dead. He killed himself when I was a baby. My mom remarried before I can remember, it’s just something about me though. I look nothing like the rest of my family. Then again none of us looked alike, but you know what I mean.”

“Not really,” Susanne leaned back in the chair not wanting to even be there, “I don’t have a family. I don’t have a daughter. I don’t even have a man. And I really don’t want you to ask about it, alright?”

“Sorry, I didn’t know they were something sensitive to talk about,” Brian looked at the plate, trying not to make eye-contact with her.

“Well they are,” Susanne said, “and can you please talk slower, you’re hard enough to understand anyway without you running everything together.” Brian hated talking to people in a perpetually bad mood. “My life is shitty and just a few minutes ago I find out the woman who’s been making it that shitty my whole damn life was doing it because she claims to have liked me.”

“I didn’t, I’m,” Brian knew to shut up.

“I don’t want to be here,” Susanne said, “Padraig said he was going to get me some time off so I could grieve over my daughter and when he does I’m stuck with you,” Susanne’s raised her voice as she said it, “I don’t want to be here I want to be in my room and able to cry in peace, OK?” She sobbed for a moment, “It’s not that I don’t like you, I don’t even know you and I don’t want to be doing this in front of you, but they’re making me.”

“You don’t have to be here,” Brian said in his most comforting tone, “I can take care of

myself.”

“No I do,” Susanne said, “Rachael said the Duke would want to hear from me about you.”

“I don’t like being spied on,” Brian said.

“I’m not spying on you,” Susanne said, “I don’t even want to be here.” They sat in silence for a while. Brian pushed the plate away, not wanting to try the cheese and the fresh milk wasn’t sitting too well with someone used to skim. Susanne leaned forward with her arms crossed over her chest, “Tell me about something.”

“What?”

“Anything, I hate silence like this.”

“I’m from a kind of small town in a state called Indiana,” Brian began, “I was married, no kids, and not even really married anymore.”

“Why not?” Susanne asked.

“She cheated on me,” Brian said, “Actually she’d been cheating on me since before we were married. I, uh, was a writer, actually a newspaper reporter, though I doubt you have anything like that here from what I can assume. I worked for a paper the next town over which had about three-quarters of a million people living there. I spent my spare time reading, camping, though my wife hated camping. She thought roughing it was a Holiday Inn, and I liked just a tent, sleeping bag, that kind of stuff. What else ...?”

“What did she look like?” Susanne said.

“Who?”

“Your wife?” She straightened up, “Was she pretty?”

“Beautiful,” Brian corrected, “she was Indian. She, uh, had such dark skin that some people thought she was black, short hair, cute nose, she had it pierced, though she only kept a tiny stud in it.”

“That would have to hurt,” Susanne said.

“She said it didn’t, but she’d done it years before we met,” Brian said, “she was almost perfect,

except for the cheating part.”

“I don’t see how people can do that. It’s hard enough to find one guy, much less another.”

“I don’t either,” Brian said, “but she worked with a lot of men.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Tell me about you,” Brian stretched and headed to the window again.

“Like what?”

“I know nothing about you.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Susanne sighed, “My parents left me with Bruce when I was four.”

“Who’s Bruce?”

“He’s the, um, seneschal here,” Susanne said, “He’s an Ursid.”

“Like a bear, I suppose?”

“Yeah. I guess he’s like my father now. When I got old enough I started working in the kitchen, just sweeping and stuff like that. Now I do just about everything in the kitchen. I mean they don’t let me try to cook or anything, but they’re teaching me to make bread now.”

“That’s good,” Brian watched as a woman, he couldn’t quite tell what she was exactly, just that she was yellowish colored, crossed the field to the garden. “Do you have any friends?”

“Yeah,” Susanne sounded happier now, “Rebecca is probably my best friend, she’s uh, Nell’s niece. I don’t like Nell, but I like Rebecca.”

“What is she?”

“Porcid, a, um, pig,” Susanne all but whispered “pig”.

“Nell, too?”

“Yeah,” Susanne snickered, “she really is a pig though. I hate her.”

“I can imagine,” Brian turned back to Susanne, “Do you spend a lot of time with them.”

“Yeah,” Susanne smiled, an act that showed way too many sharp teeth, “All the time. I mean if

I weren't here with you I'd be in the kitchen with them."

"Any other friends?"

"Yeah, Theresa. She's a Murid, um, a mouse I guess you'd say."

"So just you three?"

"Yeah, they call us the Weird Sisters."

"Like from Macbeth?"

"From where?"

"It's a play," Brian forgot they wouldn't have things as ubiquitous as Shakespeare, "there's a scene in it with three witches they call the Wyrd Sisters."

"Yeah, it's like that," Susanne said almost innocently, "it's not a play, but yeah, three witches."

"Oh," That kind of surprised Brian, then again he supposed maybe an archetype of three witches was more ingrained than he'd thought, "well, you're not witches are you?"

"No," Susanne laughed, "I wish. I'd put a spell on Nell if I was."

"I want to get out of here," Brian said. "I'm tired of this room."

"Rachael told us to wait for Padraig," Susanne said.

"Then go find him," Brian said. "I want to see more of the palace."

"Oh, OK," Susanne got up and smoothed her dress. "I'll be back."

# Four

Duke Andago set down the letter. “Is that it?”

“The courier was in a hurry,” Padraig said, “but he was very clear this was the entire message.”

The duke sighed, “So the rumors are true.”

“Apparently,” Padraig took the letter from the duke and reread it, “I would guess he has until the end of the winter, if that long.”

“This doesn’t bode well,” the duke took the letter back, “the Parliament will have to meet in the summer to decide then, assuming your estimation is true.”

“Cancer is a disease that can be quick or slow, the fact he’s lived this long with his sickness merely being a rumor is a testament to his fortitude. It also means it’s progressed to the point of no return.”

“There are no treatments, are there?”

“Surgery, sometimes, but that’s a risky proposition at best,” Padraig explained, “before the Fall there were innumerable ways to treat it, but of course those are long lost.”

“What can they do now?”

“Nothing,” Padraig said simply. “Make him feel better, there are herbs that can help with the pain, but other than that, nothing.”

“So it’s just a matter of time?”

“It’s just a matter of time,” Padraig concurred. He took a deep breath before continuing, “You might want to begin considering his successor.”

“You think I have royal aspirations?”

“Begging your pardon, but I wasn’t considering you. I believe the choice will likely fall to his

daughter, Joan, his brother Dmitri, and perhaps Duke Willem in the Midland Plains.”

“I don’t see any as the lesser evil,” Mikael said grimly, “Joan is too young, by any measure, Dmitri is a bit jingoistic and Willem ... I just don’t know him too well.”

“Perhaps you should get to know him better,” Padraig hazarded, “It wouldn’t be asking too much to invite him for Final Harvest.”

“Or perhaps me going to him,” the duke suggested, “I hardly think my holdings would seem impressive to him.”

“But you have influence,” Padraig reminded him, “You are of royal blood.”

“As is he.”

“But not as directly as you. You yourself could make a very creditable claim to the throne.”

“I could,” the duke mulled this fact over for a moment, “I just don’t like the idea of going into a royal election with four possible candidates.”

“There will be more,” Padraig said, “I suggested Willem only out of his reputation. His claim is indirect, the nephew of the king through his wife’s brother. You are the son of a prince.”

Duke Andago didn’t want to admit that the kingship was beyond what he wanted for himself. He had himself in a comfortable position within the kingdom, a major duchy sharing a border with the royal estate and a position as a close advisor to the king. The simple fact was being king meant more responsibility, power and prestige than he wanted. His current position in the Parliament of Dukes offered him a substantial amount of power as well, with substantial less risk than being the king.

Someone knocked weakly on the door. Padraig answered it, seeing Susanne standing with her hands clasped in front of her. “I hope I’m not bothering, um, Brian is wanting to leave the room.”

Padraig looked back to the duke, “Our guest wants to look around.”

“Then let him,” the duke replied, “is that the Vulpid girl?”

“Yes.”

“Tell her he can go where she’s allowed,” the duke said and Padraig repeated.

“Could I take him to the kitchen?”

“If he wants,” Padraig said. “If you don’t mind, we’re having an important conversation.”

“Oh, um, of course,” Susanne said and hurried away.

“That’s the girl?” The duke said as Padraig shut the door.

“Yes,” Padraig said, “she’s a little meek, but I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

“What should we do about him?”

“That’s up to you,” Padraig said, “not to say the Council won’t want to see him, which would force your hand.”

“Do you see him as an omen?”

Padraig looked at the duke strangely for a moment before saying, “I see his arrival as being strange, but whether it’s ominous I wouldn’t want to try to say one way or the other.”

“With the king openly declaring his sickness the day after he wakes, it just seemed very portentous.”

“A coincidence, nothing more.”

“Let’s hope,” the duke said. “Do you think I should present myself as a possible successor to the king?”

“That’s up to you and how you feel about it,” Padraig replied, “I think you might need to do some soul-searching before you decide anything like that. Perhaps,” Padraig shook his finger as he thought about it, “you should talk to the king himself. Visit him and see who he suggests to replace him. His words would hold weight when the time comes.”

“You’re right,” the duke folded the letter back into its envelope and tossed it onto the table, “I’ll send a reply letter of condolence and request an audience with him.”

“I’m sure he’d enjoy a visit from his nephew,” Padraig smiled.

Susanne got back to the room to find Brian looking out the window again. She closed the door



gently and asked, "What are you looking at?"

"Everything," Brian simply said. He sighed, "It's like I was transported in some kind of time machine from hell and deposited in the, well, I dunno." He turned back to Susanne, "What year is it, for that matter what day is it?"

"It's the third of Harvest Moon, um, 1045 years after the Fall."

"That doesn't tell me much," Brian said.

"You asked."

"I know."

"They said you can go anywhere that I'm allowed to go."

Brian sat hard on the bed, "That's good, I guess. Where can you go?"

"Well I mean I can't just go anywhere, but I can go plenty of places," Susanne said, "what would you want to see?"

"You know the palace better than I do, where do you want to go?"

"I've seen everything worth seeing here," Susanne said, "I'd kinda like to see my friends."

"Well I suppose we can go see them then," Brian stood again, "Are they your age?"

"No, they're younger. I mean not that much younger, but yeah I guess."

"Let's go then," Brian said.

"OK," Susanne said and opened the door.

The palace wasn't quite what Brian had expected. Rather than opulent tapestries on the wall, or maybe tile frescos, they were simply painted white, with deep-colored wood moldings. Occasionally at the end of a hall was a painting of a pastoral scene or what Brian assumed was a former occupant of the house. The closer they got to the kitchen the more rough the architecture got until Susanne opened the kitchen itself to see red brick walls and open joisted ceilings.

"What are you doing back here?" A woman said angrily as Susanne came in, "I thought you were doing something special for the priestess."

“I am, uh,” Susanne yanked Brian into the kitchen, “This is Brian.”

“Oh,” Brian saw the boar-woman as he entered, “is that what they’ve been hiding back there?”

“Uh, yeah,” Susanne said, “Brian this is Nell.”

“Hi,” was all Brian could say before Susanne pulled him inside further toward what Brian could only assume was a couple of her friends, “and *this* is Theresa,” Susanne pointed at a mouse-girl, “And this is Rebbecca,” this time a boar-looking girl.

“I knew you were lying,” Rebbecca harped. “I win, pay up.”

Theresa wiped her flour-covered hands on her dress and pulled a coin from a pouch on her belt.

“I shouldn’t have taken that bet, I knew she was lying, too.”

“So what is he?” Rebbecca asked.

“He’s a hu-man?” Susanne tried to remember.

“Human, yeah,” Brian said, suddenly feeling like the old-fart around a bunch of teenagers.

“Ooh, that accent,” Theresa said. “Say something else.”

Brian looked at Susanne who shrugged. He rolled his eyes before saying, “So you’re Susanne’s friends?”

They both giggled. “You can say that,” Theresa said. “I like to think we just put up with her whining.”

“I don’t whine,” Susanne looked helplessly at Brian, “just, this is him. And I wasn’t lying, I was doing what I was told to do.”

“Ohh, by who Rachael?” Rebecca asked.

“Padraig,” Susanne corrected, “and now the duke himself is wanting me to be with him.”

“Yeah, I bet you will ‘be’ with him before too long,” Rebbecca chimed.

“What does that mean?” Susanne snapped. Brian suddenly felt like talking to some grown-ups.

“Nothing, we just know you,” Rebbecca said.

“I’m not going to do him,” Susanne hissed, try not to be overheard by Brian.

“Sure,” Theresa said.

“I’m ...” Susanne looked back at Brian then back to them, “just shut up.”

“So you’re the little secret the duke’s been keeping,” a man said from behind Brian. The ‘man’ turned out to be a large bear with his arms crossed. “I’m Bruce, the duke’s seneschal.”

“I’m Brian,” he said, “I suppose I’m that little secret.”

He motioned Brian to come closer. “I take they’re going to have our little Susanne staying with you.”

“I guess so.”

“Tread lightly,” Bruce said, “she’s been hurt very badly, I don’t want you to hurt her anymore.”

“I don’t plan on it,” Brian felt uneasy.

“Just don’t do it.” Bruce said. He backed up a little, “So what do you think of our little world?”

“I haven’t seen much of it,” Brian said, glad that Bruce backed off.

“I’m sure you’ll see more of it,” Bruce chuckled. “So what brings you to our humble kitchen?”

“Susanne wanted to see her friends.”

“She’s close to them,” Bruce said, “probably too close. So where are you from?”

“Um,” Brian wasn’t sure what was most important, so simply said, “a land called America.”

“Is it far away?”

“I have no idea where it is right now. If I did, I’d be trying to go home.”

The bear laughed, “At least your honest. I can’t say I blame you. If I were surrounded by people who looked like you I’d be trying my damndest to get home.”

“So what are you called?”

Bruce mulled over the question before saying, “I’m an Ursid. Susanne there is a Vulpid. Um, Rebecca and Nell are Porcids and Theresa and Minka ...” he looked around to point at her, “Minka there are Murids.”

“Are they family?”

“What? Oh, yeah, they’re family. Most everyone here has some kind of family here, except me and Susanne. Well at least in the kitchen. The guards are often single men from the farms, and there’s a few other who don’t have relatives here, but most of us do.”

“I suppose you’re all kind of one big family here.”

“Very much so,” Bruce said, “the duke is good to his staff. He makes sure we’re happy and in return we’re loyal and do a good job. Everyone wins. You look like you’re about to faint.”

“Yeah, I need to sit,” Brian said.

“Here,” take this seat, “want me to get you anything?”

“Water or something. I feel like I’m dehydrated.”

Bruce nodded and said something, Brian couldn’t make it out, to Nell. She left, returning with a green bottle and a wooden cup. “It’s not the fine wine that the duke might drink, but we made it ourselves we’re quite proud of it.”

“I, uh,” Brian didn’t really want to drink this early, but he didn’t want to refuse their offer, “thank you.” Brian wasn’t a connoisseur of wines, his wife could be outright snobbish about them, but this wasn’t bad. It was a bit sweeter than the ones his wife preferred, but still good. “So does everyone just drink all the time?”

“Alcohol?” Bruce said, pouring him a cup too, “I suppose so. I rarely trust the water, and there’s supposed to be an outbreak of bad water in Enandoplas. We’re all safer drinking wine.”

“Or beer!” One of Susanne’s friend’s shouted from behind them.

“Or beer,” Bruce agreed, “Theresa is our beer expert. She’s young, but she knows them pretty well.”

“I actually kind of like a good stout,” Brian admitted. “They’re kind of nutty.”

“Agreed,” Bruce said, “sometimes I’ll be satisfied by an ale or pilsner, but nothing beats a good strong stout. The drink of Taurusus.”

“I suppose Taurusus is your god?”

“He’s a god,” Bruce corrected, “not my god. I’m old-fashioned that I worship Urs. Some younger people have taken to revering a god besides their own as their patron. I suppose there’s nothing wrong with it, but they forget their heritage.”

“Well I don’t know,” Brian joked, “I was never that religious and I know nothing about your gods.”

“Well I won’t bore you by talking about them then,” Bruce said, “if you ever want to know about Urs I’ll tell you, but other than that it’s your choice.”

“That’s more comforting than the church I went to back home,” Brian said, “early on they gave people the choice of convert or die. Very early on.” Brian didn’t feel like recounting the history of the Catholic church.

“In Europa they can be like that about their god,” Bruce said, “but anymore they’re more passive about it. Hoping their so-called ‘good news’ will make people want to convert.”

“Tell me about it,” Brian sighed, “Everything here is so strange.”

“How so?”

“I’m from a place here everyone looks like me and where, shit, just everything’s different,” Brian didn’t know how to explain it. “So this is the kitchen of a palace? I thought it would be bigger.”

“It is,” Bruce said, “There’s two kitchens, this is the smaller one, back there,” he pointed to a door opposite the one they entered, “is the main kitchen, but we only use it when there’s a feast.”