



PF LEGGE

THE
FIRE

TALES
FROM THE
SOUTHLANDS

PF LEGGE

Tales from the Southlands

Short Stories from the world of Almost a Myth

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*This work is dedicated to the small, hardy band of followers of the
Adventures of Conor and Gray. You know who you are.*

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Preface

The short stories in this book were not planned. But, since the narrative of both the Conor and Gray novels, 'Almost a Myth' and 'Slaughter by Strange Means' concerns the experiences of the main characters almost exclusively, it seemed natural to give the reader other perspectives on the world they inhabit. So, the people in these stories live, work, love, fight and sometimes die in the Southlands. They may encounter Conor, or Gray, or the Believer himself in these stories. But they will do so without knowing how important they are, what is coming or how close the world they are in is to a disaster beyond their comprehension.

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Thanks to all who continue to support this journey. Friends Matt Ryan and Colin Bennett, my sons Tom and Ben and my daughter Amy. All my brothers, sisters, cousins (and relatives who showed up at Indigo to support me), and especially, my wife Kelly.

I

Tales from the Southlands

Rasede

I

He felt his nose crunch as the black-gloved fist smashed into it. He saw stars and tasted metal. Then the room wheeled above him and he felt himself fall. The hard mat jolted him again as he hit. All was still for a moment as he tried to piece his mind back together in a muddy black fog. He heard a noise. Someone was saying something. No, they were screaming.

“Rasede!”

“Rasede!”

That guy should answer them, he thought. Rasede. *That screaming is irritating. Fuck man shut up. No, wait. Shit. That, that’s me. Rasede. Me.*

Rasede rolled over and coughed out blood. He was in a fight. He was losing. He was training to fight, at House Vlaton. And he was losing. That was bad. Those fuckers will kick you right out if you lose. The screaming got louder.

“Rasede! Get up!”

“Ok, ok.” He mumbled through his mouthpiece.

“Rasede!”

“Ok!”

He was on his hands and knees now. Head clearing, nose hurting, his eyes were coming into focus. He saw his blood as it dripped onto the mat. If he didn’t get to his feet, they would haul him up to finish and if he lost this fight he’d have to fight someone else within the hour. Then he would probably lose again, and they would throw him out on the street.

Rasede got up and wobbled to the ropes. He put both hands on the top one and tilted his head back. Blood flowed down his throat and he coughed and choked, spraying red liquid into the air. When he looked down he saw the angry face of Skorny, one of the master trainers. His striking trainer, Dilisi, was behind him. His look was one of pure scorn.

Losers didn’t get credit for trying hard at House Vlaton. No moral victories Not here...

Water splashed on his face and a rough towel scrubbed away the blood, sparking a searing pain in his nose. He felt a hand grab his chin and push his head one way and then the other.

“You’ll live. It’s not badly broken. We’ll set it after. Now get back out there and finish that bastard.” Dilisi croaked out the words. He was punched in the throat or something, years ago. Then his trainer slapped Rasede’s face. His nose stung and his eyes watered.

“You in there Rasede? You going to fight?”

He nodded and brought his hands up.

“Then go do it.”

He nodded again and turned to face the other fighter. He was a big flat nosed northerner. Huge and hairy as a blonde bear. He looked calm. Wasn’t even breathing hard. Bastard. Rasede edged in, gloves high. He kept his eyes on the northerner’s

hands. Ready to dance away. He pawed out with his left, into the air. The northerner swayed to his right slightly and then stepped that way. Bastard was good at this. But Rasede had fought many times as well. Working his way up from tavern sponsored street brawls, to smaller Houses and now to Vlaton, as big and as rich a fighting House as there was in the Empire.

And I'll be fucked if I'm going to let that yellow hairball punch me out of this place.

Just watch his hands, Rasede said to himself. Watch his hands. He heard Skorny hiss,

“Get him.”

Did he see a slight smile on the Northerner's face?

How did he put me down the first time? Right. Counterpuncher. Hit and move then. Quickness. My style anyway. Stay away from that big right hand.

Rasede flicked out the jab. Feeling sharper, and more solid on his feet. It landed on the surprised face of the Northerner.

II

Rasede sat with his feet up on a chair with an ice-cold towel folded onto his face. His nose had been set after he had out-pointed the blonde bastard and it hurt like fuck. It had been a close fight and Skorny was not pleased. He thought that any Eliton who trained at his House should shit lightning and fart thunder. He had been at his corner, glowering at Rasede as he followed the priests and the tall green flags out of the ring. No hearty back slaps. Dilisi had rolled his eyes at the decision. Rasede had heard Skorny stomp by a couple of times, muttering curses but he just sat, kept the towel on and ignored him. His mind wandered as his face pain lessened into a dull ache. He had won. So, no immediate order to leave. The House might pull their sponsorship in a day or two but let him stay if he paid.

He wasn't good with money, so he didn't have much.

Maybe a month here and then back to the bar fights, or worse.

Rasede pulled the towel off. His entire face hurt. It was late in the evening and the barracks were lit by old-fashioned torches, casting an orange flickering glow. He walked by the beds of the other fighters. Emen and Conor were on either side of him. One was there, the other wasn't.

Conor was a big fucker. Don't want to even train with him. Fast and creepy calm. Just playing with everyone here. He was beyond good. But he was a southerner, so Skorny and Jennis didn't like him. And that was that.

Rasede went downstairs and ate in the kitchen that was always open for sponsored fighters. He still had a few hours before his curfew, so he walked out the huge main gate and looked up and down the dark street. It was mild and wet. The tapestries on the buildings hung still and ominous. Rasede wasn't nervous. It was a good neighborhood. He was a fighter and the mother's guards were everywhere. There was a place down to his right. Not too far.

Just get a drink or two and then sleep. Maybe a roll in the sheets.

He jingled the coin in his pockets.

Not enough for that. No woman then. None would look at me without money to help them fake interest, with my nose the size of a ground fruit. Just drinks then.

He heard his trainer's voice in his head,

"You fucking drink too much Rasede. One day it'll cost you."

Just a couple. Then back to sleep.

The bar had a small sign out front; The Mother's Arms. He pushed open the door and smelled cooking meat, wine and sweat. It was a tiny place and it was full. Some of the other men from the House were here. When he came in they turned, and

some raised their glasses. He looked for mockery and saw none. These guys were like him, right on the edge. The real talent had the drinks and women brought to them. And they were Eliton and glad that he had won. He nodded and then winced. His nose hurt and his eyes watered. That made them laugh. He ordered wine when he got to the bar. The bartender poured it into a silver goblet.

Probably tin.

he thought as he picked it up. He held it up to the surrounding crowd and then took a deep pull. They didn't notice either event. While sipping on his second drink, Rasede started to listen to the talk around him. The war was the main topic. The older man next to him was drunk and talkative,

"The war is just the beginning. Just the start. You don't know. You don't." He shook his head slowly.

The man on the other side of Rasede was drunk and also, belligerent.

"What the fuck are you on about?" he said.

Rasede answered for him, just to stir things up.

"I think he's religious. And I think he thinks that this war is bringing the end, of the world." He slapped his hand on the bar. "Right grandfather?"

The man's white hair jounced as he nodded. "I heard it." His face was animated and flushed. He thought Rasede believed him. "I heard it all as a boy in my village. Better settle up boys!" The man was grinning like an idiot.

"Then what the fuck are you so happy about?"

The other drunk asked.

He shoved Rasede and poked the old man in the shoulder with his index finger once, twice and then the third poke missed, and he stumbled into Rasede. The pain in his nose flared again

as he lurched and then caught his balance. Rasede caught a glimpse of the hired muscle making his way through the crowd from his seat by the door. He moved away from the arguing men, holding his cup high and away from them. He didn't want to risk getting thrown out. He wanted another drink or two. Then he'd go back. Rasede found an empty stool and quickly sat down.

Beside him sat a young man. His face and hands were weathered and brown. He wore the ring of the Eliton army. Their eyes met. Rasede nodded slightly and raised his cup off the bar a fraction. The soldier smiled but his eyes didn't. The man spoke,

"You're a fighter?"

Rasede pointed to his nose and nodded.

"What house?" the man asked.

"Vlaton."

The soldier's eyes came to life briefly.

"Nice." The soldier said and took a drink. "If I ask you about the fight are you going to say, 'You should see the other guy?'"

Rasede chuckled. "I might have... But I didn't break his nose if that's what you mean."

The soldier shrugged, "As long as you won."

"I did," Rasede said.

"Then," the soldier raised his cup, "to your House."

Rasede did the same and they both drank. "To your mother," Rasede said. "And to yours," the soldier replied, and they drank again.

This went on for a while. They toasted to everything they could think of. The soldier wasn't a serious drinker. He ran out of ideas after only a few more. Rasede was ready when that happened though. He toasted his dog, cat, sister, brothers,

father, birth mother, the wine, the bar the city, the Empire and then his dog again. She had died many years before, but the wine had worked its magic and Rasede was heartbroken and weepy the second time he raised his cup to his old companion. He had to wipe his bleary eyes.

The soldier clapped him on the shoulder and whispered to him, "I've seen a dog."

"Really," said Rasede. "That's amazing."

"No, not just a dog. A Hound."

Rasede laughed. "Oh yeah?"

The soldier leaned in. "We were fighting the savages and we were ordered down the south road. And the Hound just walked up to us."

Rasede feigned surprise and interest, "No shit?"

The soldier nodded ponderously. "Yup. He was grey black and big. The Hound and his Lord was too. Big as fucking houses, both of them."

Now Rasede was interested.

"They caused no end of trouble. Our regiment split right down the middle."

Rasede was shocked. Trouble in the army. Unbelievable. Suddenly he wished he hadn't been so creative with his toasts. He was really feeling it. The bar was loud, and it seemed as if the soldier wanted to keep his news for Rasede only. And he was having trouble concentrating. He watched the lips of the soldier and listened hard.

"The country boys were, 'It's the Lord and his Hound! It's the end of the world!' and the rest of us were like, 'what the fuck?'"

The soldier took a drink. "Then there was some kind of fight at HQ and most of the fucking division went with them."

Rasede hadn't heard anything about this. No one had. I mean

everyone knew about the war with the savages. And then the Chan. To stop them from getting too close, it had to be done. But rebellion?

"Why?" he asked. "Where did they go?"

"To fight the Believer, or the Bonded or some shit. I didn't go, and I was told not to talk about it." He raised his cup again slightly and gave a wry smile. Then he drank and considered the empty cup.

"Fucking country boys."

"My round," Rasede said and he waved at the bartender. But the soldier shook his head.

"I'm going." Then he looked at directly at Rasede and said, "I don't know why I told you. Fucking wine. But you better keep your mouth shut." Despite the drink, his eyes were focused and intense. "The mother's will find you out if you talk."

Rasede put his hands on his shoulders. "No, no I won't say a thing. Silent as the gates."

Then he put his hand out and the soldier shook it solemnly.

"Good luck," he said. Rasede replied, "You too." And then the soldier slid through the tightly packed bar and out into the night.

III

Rasede drained his cup and worked his way into the cramped bathroom. He pissed in the trough along the wall. When he came out, the bar was suddenly too noisy. He wanted fresh air. The soldier had unsettled him. His usual happy, easy drunkenness had turned. The old stories were fairy tales. No one in the capital believed that shit anymore, Lords and fucking Hounds.

But mutiny in the army! And the mothers had kept it secret. That was new and fucking alarming.

Rasede pushed his way out the door.

The street was empty and silver black in the right. It was also rotating slowly, and canting to the right. No, the left. Rasede had drunk more than he should have. Again. He made his way slowly back to House Vlaton's enormous compound. He climbed the stairs and went up to the third floor and his bed. When he lay down his nose hurt more but the pain felt distant and detached. He closed his eyes and the bed began to move. He opened his eyes and it eventually stopped. He felt sick. He got up and went into the bathroom and stuck his index finger down his throat. The wine came cascading out of him in an acrid rush. One, two, three times. When he finished he spat into the toilet, drank deeply out of the pitcher of cool water that was left for him and went back to bed. His ears rang with the silence and the bed still moved. He opened his eyes again. He looked to his left and saw Conor's bulk on the bed next to him.

He is a southerner. I'll ask him tomorrow. Not a talker but he may know something. And maybe if I'm polite he won't hurt me the next time we train. He is a big fucker. Big as a fucking house.

Rasede fell asleep and dreamed of women and wine and the end of the world.

2

Lawman

I

Viglis gently pressed his right index finger on the side of the woman's neck and held it there. He felt nothing. He looked around the room. There were clothes on the floor, the sheets were pulled off the bed and the small mirror over the plain wooden dresser was tilted markedly to the left.

Viglis stood up. He talked to himself on these occasions. It helped him keep his thoughts organized and to remember details. And he could not read or write.

"Looks like there was a struggle. She isn't bleeding and I don't see any bruises."

He crouched back down and examined her face closely.

"We need Mellis, the healer. He needs to take a look. Have to question to the servant girl who found her as well. She got here this morning. Saw the body. Panicked, ran out into the

street and one of our guys happened to be on patrol. Came and got me, so here I am. No reason not to believe her, so far. I've sent someone to speak to her people.' He hesitated and looked around. "Weird one. I have to see what the healer says."

At that moment a man came running into the house. He was out of breath. Viglis cursed to himself that he had not set a guard against that possibility.

"What happened?" The man said in a rush.

Viglis moved towards him with his hands out,

"Let's move outside."

"No," the man said. "No. What happened? Is she alright? Is Marleena all right?"

His blue eyes were wide, and he was sweating. His hands and face were black with soot. He tried to move around Viglis but he wouldn't let him. He could mess up the scene and Viglis needed more time to look.

Viglis spoke, "No. She's not. Let's step outside and talk about it." Viglis took the man by the arm and forced him out of the small house.

"She's my wife. I'm Achi. I work at the blacksmith's, down the street," the man said. "Is she all right?"

There was a bench on the outside of the house. It was placed

along the front wall, near the door. Viglis imagined that the setting sun would warm it during the summer months. He sat the man down. Achi suddenly quiet, did not resist.

“Your wife, Marleena, is dead Achi. I’m sorry.”

“What?” The man said. “How?”

Viglis looked at him directly. The blunt talk was the only way in these situations.

“We don’t know. We will try to find out.”

“What? Oh no.”

The man broke down, put his head in his hands and started sobbing.

Viglis shut up. He waited a few minutes and then spoke,

“Achi look at me.”

The man glanced up, his shoulders shuddering as he tried to swallow another of the sobs. His reddened blue eyes were wide open, and tears were flowing freely.

“You need to get to your people Achi. If you can’t, tell me where they are and I’ll send one of my men for them. I want the healer to look at your wife, so we might be taking her body pretty soon.”

"What?" he said. He had been looking right at Viglis but he could not understand what was being said to him.

"Your people Achi. Do you have family in the city?"

Viglis said it slowly and firmly. The man nodded, his red face suddenly bleak.

"Can I see her?" He asked.

Viglis hesitated, then said,

"Yes, but you cannot touch her. I'm sorry Achi, but until we know more, you can't."

Viglis waited outside but watched as the man knelt by his dead wife and cried some more. Another of Viglis's police troop appeared on the step. Viglis gestured for him to wait there and then spoke to the grieving man,

"Achi? Come see me at the police station tomorrow please."

He turned. His face was a ruin. Viglis motioned to the policeman who was standing in the doorway.

"Soliti, make sure he gets where he wants to go."

"Yes boss," the man said.

Soliti moved to the man's side and stood awkwardly, waiting for him to gather himself. Viglis went back in the house and

taking a blanket off the bed, covered the body.

“Okay,” Viglis said, gathering himself but not looking away from the body on the floor. “Murders are rare these days but the Bonded have people here worked up. Think I’ll wait outside. May help calm things.”

Viglis went outside and told one of the two men waiting for orders to go get the healer.

The man saluted and trotted off. The other policemen went the other way, back on walking patrol. Down the street, Achi’s escort was trying not to get covered in tears and snot. Viglis was suddenly alone. With the body of the young woman. He decided to sit on the bench outside the house.

As he sat in the sun Viglis went over his next steps. He needed to find out where the dead woman was supposed to be. And who she was supposed to be with. And where those people were if they weren’t around. And if she hadn’t been there, where had she been. Something had gone very wrong and he needed to know what was right in order to find out exactly who did the wrong. He also knew with depressing finality that if none of these people had strayed from their regular paths, the death of this young woman might go forever unsolved. He had seen enough of these incidents in his role as a policeman. If there was no family friend or acquaintance who leaped to the front of the investigation pretty quickly, it probably wasn’t going anywhere.

It took a long while for the healer show up. Viglis was getting

restless by the time he arrived. Another lawman, Lif, Viglis remembered his name was, had gone by during his patrols. The second time, he rolled his eyes at Viglis sitting on the bench, doing nothing. Viglis just shrugged his shoulders as if to say, “what can I do?”

The healer came a few moments later. He was a young man, not long out of the academy. He was tall, plain-faced, with a shock of black hair that stood up on end. Viglis knew him only by name but had heard he was thorough and precise.

“I cannot stay long,” the man said before Viglis had even had a chance to say hello. “It’s very busy at the infirmary.”

“Okay Mellis, okay. I just have a body I want you to take a look at.”

They entered the house, Viglis and Mellis knelt down and pulled the cover back. The woman’s features were distorted. Her jaw had dropped and her lifeless eyes were open. The healer asked Viglis, “Are you interested in the cause of death?”

Yes. And how long she’s been gone. If you can tell.” Viglis replied.

“Then I must look at her entire body. Please help me.”

They carefully removed the woman’s clothing. Viglis had been a policeman for many years and a soldier so the task wasn’t shocking to him. He didn’t like it, but he wasn’t upset. The healer was all business, running his hands over the woman’s rib

cage neck, head, stomach. And, flipping her over as gently as he could, doing the same for her back and legs. He nodded to Viglis and they covered her up again.

Then he stood up and moved to a basin by the wall and washed his hands. He indicated to Viglis that he should do the same. He did. Without talking the healer walked out into the evening sunshine took a deep breath and arched his back. Then he turned to Viglis and said,

“There is no outward sign of injury. She seems young and healthy. Have to cut into her and take a look to be sure about that though. She wasn’t strangled, stabbed or beaten to death, I can tell you that.”

“Right”

“She’s been dead for a few hours. Can’t get more precise I’m afraid.” Mellis pointed into the air, “She’s stiffening up and the heat speeds up the decay.

“Thanks. Should I give her to her family or...” Viglis trailed off.

“I’ll send someone around to pick her up and put her on ice. I should have a closer look to see if she has anything contagious, or if it was something she ate. We’ll release her body in two days if you want to tell her people.”

Mellis said this as he dried his hands on a small towel he had tucked into his pants.

Viglis nodded, "Thanks again."

"Yup," Mellis said and put out his hand. Viglis shook it and the healer walked away.

Viglis walked through the house several times. No blood. No weapons. No bruises or cuts on the woman's body. Maybe she just died. It happened. But it didn't seem likely. Something had been done in the house, to this woman. That was going to be the starting point. But this was going to be a bitch of a puzzle, he thought. Not enough pieces here. He sat in a kitchen chair and thought, but nothing came.

He figured he had spent enough time at the scene of this crime, but he had to wait until one of his guys showed up to leave the house and the body. He needed to reorganize his crew as well, that was clear. This neighborhood didn't pay enough to have policemen for dedicated roles. They all had to kick in no matter what happened.

'Murders,' Viglis thought. 'They took time and lots of questions.' Viglis would be in charge but he would need a couple of men to help. 'Smart men, who could be trusted. The patrons would want these murderers caught, yesterday. Tingish and Braatu' he thought. 'Were they working right now? Or were they on the night shift? I made the roster, I should know. Damn. We have to start with questioning everyone on the street.'

He wanted to begin but it just wasn't right to leave the house with the body in it unguarded. So, he waited. He knew that Lif would be around again soon if nothing was happening on his patrol. Again, Viglis sat on the bench outside. Eventually, Lif came by. Viglis told the policeman to wait at the house until

the healer's guy came by to pick up the body. Then Viglis said,

"I'll be around knocking on doors and I need someone here."

Lif said, "Sure thing boss."

Viglis walked towards the house to the right of the one where a woman, Marleena, lay dead. He knocked on the door and a little girl answered. She appeared to be 8 or 9 years old. She opened the door slowly and peered up at him. Then she tried to see around him like she was looking for someone else.

"Hello," Viglis said. "My name is Viglis. Is there an adult in the house I could talk to? Your mother or father?" She shook her head slowly and said

"No," very quietly.

Viglis thought that was odd. It was early in the evening and she was young to be on her own. "An older brother or sister?" he asked.

Again, she said "no".

Viglis got a sick feeling in his stomach. He kneeled and said softly, "Do you know where your mother and father are?"

The little girl nodded yes, her dark eyes starting to fill with tears.

"Okay honey, okay," Viglis said and he put his large hand on her shoulder, "It's okay." Another small child, this one a boy,

showed himself, edging slightly out from a hallway that led through the door. He had sad, dark eyes as well.

"What's your name little one?" Viglis asked the girl.

"Irees."

"And your brother?"

"His name is Birkin."

"How long have you and Birkin been here, on your own?" Viglis asked the questions slowly and softly.

"She looked confused and then said, 'A while, days.'"

Viglis stood up. She was too young to be answering these questions. And he knew where her parents were. They had been Bonded. And when that happened, the kids got left behind. He had to speak to the patrons about dealing with situations like this. They were getting more and more frequent.

"Are you hungry?"

Irees looked at him blankly.

"Stay with your brother," he told her. "I'm going to get some food for your dinner. The man who brings it will knock three times. Okay?"

Irees nodded and said "Okay." Birkin had disappeared.

“Don’t let anyone else in Irees,” Viglis said this as he closed the door behind him.

Once outside, he took a deep breath. Then he walked by the house with the body in it and knocked on the door of the building directly to the left. Despite the fact that the sun was setting it was still warm. Lucky for those kids he had found them. The orphan home was pretty full he knew, but he wouldn’t let Irees and Birkin go to bed alone after tonight. The home was more than a few blocks away, so he had to get someone to escort them there in the morning. Another task on his growing list of things he had to do.

He knocked on the red door. Then again, and again. Viglis’ hand was reaching for the door for the fourth time when it opened abruptly, and a large unshaven face loomed out of the darkness.

“What?” The man said loudly.

“Police business,” Viglis said

“Fuck off,” the man said and started to shut the door. Viglis jammed his foot in the opening and stepped forward. The door stopped. “I need to ask you a few questions,” Viglis said.

“I said, fuck off.” The man hissed out the words as he struggled to close the door on Viglis, who put his right hand on the door and pushed hard. The man stumbled back and hit the floor with a grunt. His robe flew open and as the light came in Viglis caught a glimpse of a flabby stomach and skinny legs. Viglis let

him get up.

"I'm Viglis. I run the police in this neighborhood. Just a few questions and then I'll be on my way."

The man scrambled to his feet awkwardly. "You'd fucking better be," he said, without much conviction

"Sure," Viglis said, ignoring the weak provocation. "You know your neighbor's next door?" Viglis asked as he crooked a finger to his right. The man nodded,

"Yes. Marleena and Achi."

"Get along with them okay?" Viglis asked.

"Yeah. Why?" The man was immediately suspicious.

Viglis wondered if he should tell him that Marleena was dead. And that she had been murdered. Just to see his reaction. He couldn't decide so he changed his line of questioning. "What is your name and what do you do?" he asked the man.

Police power was not well defined in this city. If he was rich or connected, this man might refuse to answer and the people who hired Viglis wouldn't let him force it too far. If he wasn't, he probably knew well enough that it was better to cooperate. It was the most logical course of action for ordinary people, workers and the poor. And Viglis had the advantage of being armed, very tall and very muscular. He waited,

“My name is Samtisi and I, I am a, uh, businessman.”

Viglis thought of the sagging belly and thin legs. ‘Criminal.’ Viglis thought. ‘Not an enforcer though, that’s for sure. Smug-gler, thief, pimp or fence then,’ he thought. But Viglis didn’t recognize him from the inns and bars on his patrols, knew he was just making educated guesses, so he just smiled and said,

“Samtisi. And how long have you lived here?”

“Two, no, three summers.”

“And how well did you know Marleena?”

Samtisi’s eyes narrowed and he stepped back, put a hand on a wooden chair and sat down heavily. ‘Did’ was the keyword Viglis realized. Samtisi knew she was dead.

“Not well. I, uh, work a lot of evenings and she didn’t, I don’t think. I mean I didn’t see her much.”

“When was the last time?” Viglis asked. “Did you see her today?”

“No, I was sleeping. Late night, you know.” He tried a knowing grin but Viglis did not respond in kind. The man looked faintly irritated. “So, no. I didn’t. Is there anything else?”

“Yes,” Viglis said. “There is. Do you remember anything about Marleena or Achi? Did they get along? Did they have visitors? Were they loud? Did they...?”

“Look, I said what I said. I didn’t know them well. Ask them about me. They’ll say as much.”

Viglis looked around the place. It wasn’t on a bad street. Good dishes. Solid, well-made furniture. Some glasses that looked like crystal. Lots to drink and eat, but a mess.

‘So, he’s a fairly successful pimp, thief, fence or smuggler. They usually live something like this. The farther up that ladder you go the more like the respectable people you want to live. Does this idiot think he blends in?’ Viglis thought.

“Well,” Viglis said to him, “Marleena is dead. So, she won’t be able to vouch for you. And Achi is in no shape to talk about anything.”

The man’s expression did not change. Viglis decided he wasn’t done with this guy.

“So Samtisi, check in at the station tomorrow afternoon please.”

“What for?” Samtisi said. “I told you...”

“I know what you told me,” Viglis said, cutting him off. “You are required to make an appearance.” With that, Viglis turned on his heel and walked out.

He won’t like that,’ Viglis thought. ‘Word will get out that he was in the station. The people he works for will be curious. He will have some explaining to do. Never a bad thing to have the people who own the pimps, smugglers, thieves, and fences

wondering how much you know.'

Even if that particular piece of action happened somewhere else in the city, outside of Viglis's paid jurisdiction. He didn't know if Samtisi was involved in Marleena's death. Probably not if he had to guess. But rousting him might produce something.

As Viglis came out he saw the healer's people taking the body out of the house. It was on a cart, covered in a white sheet. Some of the neighbors had gathered outside their small neat wooden houses. Men behind the women in most cases. In the heat of the summer, these people spent the hours after dinner and before sleep outside in whatever breeze they could get. And all the police activity had their interest. Death was a familiar thing here, but murders and police not so much.

No one looked directly at him. Viglis had been up and down this street dozens of times. And mostly he was ignored. The people who lived around here knew the rich merchants and traders paid him. The patrons they called themselves. And they assumed he was one of theirs, like the soldiers who belonged to the nobles in their castles in the countryside. Viglis was relatively new to the city. Neither of these groups knew that he served the law. No one outside of his crew knew that. But his men recognized that theft, rape and murder would be investigated no matter who was involved. And the traveling High Court would hear the cases Viglis brought. Rich or poor, powerful or weak. He would drag them there if need be. They had seen him do it before.

The policeman who had waited for the healer's people was

now looking at Viglis expectantly. Lif was a young guy with a severely broken nose that had not been reset properly. It almost whistled when he breathed. He was dependable though. Viglis liked him. His shift was over, and he wanted to go home. Or get a drink. Viglis told him to go.

"You sure boss? I can stay," he said.

"No, thanks anyway Lif," Viglis replied. "Shutting it down here. See you tomorrow bright and early."

Lif left. Viglis sat on the bench outside Marleena's house for a while. It was dark and finally cooling off. People had disappeared into their houses. Knocking on doors right now probably wouldn't be popular or useful. No telling exactly what the crime situation was before he got the contract to patrol here. But in most of the places he had been, once the sun went down the law-abiding types went indoors. Might unnerve them to barge in. Then they'd just want him to leave and he wouldn't learn a thing.

His guys were walking these streets, all night long. They rarely saw anyone. The inns were full of workers and travelers a couple of streets over, but this neighborhood was like a cemetery.

"Shit," Viglis said out loud. He thought of Marleena and her last trip out of the house under the dirty white sheet. Viglis looked at the closed doors of the houses along the street. He took a deep breath again to calm himself and looked up. The stars jumped out of the black sky. "No more work tonight", he

said quietly. "Get an early start with Tingish and Braatu in the morning." He hitched his sword belt up a bit and started to walk back to the station. He would stop along the way at an inn and send some food to those kids. "Damn it all. Those kids." Then Viglis' thoughts were interrupted.

"Done already?" The woman's voice called out. He turned and saw a slight figure in a doorway, outlined by the firelight behind her.

"Yes", he said.

The woman's scoffed audibly. Viglis decided not to react. He just kept walking.

"Not the right street for a real investigation?" She said sharply.

Viglis stopped at that. He walked over to her. "Just thought the street could use the sleep. I'll be back in the morning."

"I'll bet," she said.

"You'll see," Viglis said simply. "I'll knock on your door first thing if you'd like."

"All right," she said. "I'll be up." Again, she spoke like it was a challenge.

He moved towards her. "I'm Viglis. I head the police unit in this neighborhood. And you are?"

He stopped on the street a good five paces from her. She could now see his face clearly. He knew he was an intimidating presence and he did not want it to seem like he was trying to frighten her.

“Wallinisa,” she said.

“Wallinisa,” he repeated. “It’s nice to meet you, but it’s been a long day. Our patrols will be going all night, but I need to rest. I will be back in the morning, and we will talk. Maybe you can tell me a little about this place.”

He saw her head tilted to the side like she was a bit puzzled by him. “If that’s what you want to talk about,” she said more softly this time.

“Oh, I’ll have some police type questions for you, but yes, I’d like to hear about the neighborhood. I’m not from around here.”

“All right,” she said.

“All right,” he said. There was an awkward silence.

Then Viglis said “Goodnight Wallinisa.”

“Good night,” she said, and she stepped back into the house and closed the door.

Viglis felt a little more hopeful after that conversation. He had had little interaction with the ordinary people here outside of husband and wife altercations, drunken bar fights and petty

theft. 'Be nice to just talk,' he thought. 'Get the perspective of a native daughter.' And he wouldn't feel so much like a soldier in occupying army, which he had done and not liked. Viglis turned towards the station and walked to his bed.

II

Viglis woke up in a sweat. The sun had already risen, and it was hot. He rolled out of his bed, put his elbows on his knees and his head in hands and thought, 'what's first?' He knew he had to go back to the scene of a murder obviously. First though, he had to hear about what happened on the night shift. Then get Tingish and Braatu replaced on their patrols. Then check in at the orphanage. And then, Viglis stopped himself. First things first. Workout, wash, rest, eat. Then the workday could begin.

Viglis got the administrative stuff done quickly and was out of the station in under an hour. Nothing had happened during the night. Tingish and Braatu had heard that he might need them and were there early. Other men had come in when word got out about the murder, interested and ready to pitch in. Viglis felt grateful for his crew. They were rough men as a group. He dealt with some of them as a lawman and a judge, but they had a line they wouldn't cross. The murder of a young woman that brought that out clearly.

Tingish and Braatu walked ahead to get a start on working the neighborhood. Viglis went to the orphanage. It was a large square brown stone building on the edge of the neighborhood

they policed. His patrons had bought it as the Bonded had spread and the number of children who had been left multiplied. The yard out front was full of them, climbing over the wooden structures, swings and slides the orphanage had put up. The two women who were watching the children stood silently with crossed arms. They looked up at Viglis with blank stares. When he got close to the gate one of them scurried up.

“Can I help you?” she said almost aggressively.

“Yes,” he said. “Good morning. Can I speak to the person in charge?”

She squinted at him. It wasn’t the first time he had been here. But there was a lot of turnover at the place. He didn’t know her, and she was taking advantage of his manners. Because she could. The pay wasn’t very good, and the job just kept getting more difficult. ‘Not a happy gal’ thought Viglis.

“Why?” she asked.

Viglis’ smile left his face. “Police business,” he said flatly. No longer trying to be pleasant.

She looked at him more closely and took a step back. ‘She didn’t seem to like that word very much, police.’ Viglis thought. She recovered enough to say,

“Wait here,”

curtly and she walked back up the stone path and into the

building. Viglis looked around. Some of the children looked back at him. They all seemed to be under the age of 5 or so. And they all were relatively clean and well-fed. Not like in some other parts of the city. Viglis knew that even though his patrons were insufferable snobs, they'd spent the money needed for this place. And he wasn't cheap either so somebody in that group had a brain as well as a heart. And some sense of the obligation they had to the people who they lived with. Either that or they just didn't like the general disorder that was spreading in other parts of the city with the roving gangs of semi-starving children.

One of the little ones walked up to him with a yellow ball. It was a little girl. She showed it to him. He smiled and said,

"Very nice."

That seemed to satisfy her, and she turned away after smiling shyly back at him. Soon he had more children showing him things like wagons, balls, blocks, sticks, even a few shoes. He smiled patiently and spoke to each one of them.

"Aren't you lucky?"

"It's a stick!"

"You should put that back on, your foot will get dirty."

The person in charge came out a few minutes later. She was short, round and dark with an open, friendly face. Viglis thought he might have seen her before at a meeting with the patrons. Before she got to him the other two women herded the

children away from them both. Viglis waved and the children did too. She laughed and then said,

“Hello Viglis,” she said. ‘So, I have met her.’ Viglis thought. ‘What was her name again?’

“Good morning. I’m sorry, I have forgotten your name.”

“Shernal,” she said. “And I’m not surprised. You spoke to the patrons, I didn’t.”

“Right,” Viglis said.

“What can we do for you?” Or do I have to ask?”

“More children, I’m afraid. Can you take two? A girl and a boy, maybe eight or nine and four or five.

She sighed. The yard was crowded. She and Viglis looked at it together. “And this is only the first of three shifts,” she said. Viglis said nothing. He had nothing to add and no way to help. The Bonded were spreading. No one seemed to be able to stop that. And they didn’t like children. When they converted, they just left them. He waited patiently. Then she said,

“Where are they?”

He gave her the address.

“I’ll send someone around as soon as I can. Noon at the latest.”

"Thank you," he said, with a sigh of relief.

"I can tell you Viglis, we are getting close to our breaking point. If any more people convert, we won't have enough food or beds. It's simple."

He shrugged. "The patrons just tell me to keep them out of the neighborhood. That's all I can do."

"Where will it end? What do they want?" She asked.

It was a rhetorical question. Viglis shrugged again and shook his head. He wanted to get going. She sensed it and said,

"Okay. Well, maybe you can tell the patrons. They might listen to you."

"I will Shernal," he said. "Next meeting, I promise."

III

The sun was even hotter by the time Viglis worked his way to back to the scene. The street where they had found the body of the dead woman was busy. There were two carts out front of Wallinisa's house, with their wheels blocked selling different kinds of food, Viglis guessed fish and some kind of bird by the smells.

'More people to talk to,' he thought. 'Big job this.' Viglis saw Tingish come out of a house a few doors down from him. He

saw him and headed his way.

“Hey boss,” Tingish said.

“Tingish,” Viglis replied and they shook hands briefly. Tingish was of medium height, with brown hair and brown narrow set eyes. He was from the countryside, but he had been a Fighter and that had led him to the city. Few of his size lasted in that kind of work very long. Police work was not much safer, but the pay was steady. Tingish had a wife and three children so he changed careers. His people were just outside of Dece, the next major city south, down the main road built so long ago by some other civilization. That place really didn’t have a legal system to speak of, so he had to leave them and work here. Viglis was glad of it. He was a steady hand.

“Learn anything useful?” Viglis asked.

“Not much,” Tingish said. “The dead woman...”

“Marleena. Her name was Marleena.” Viglis said.

“Right, Marleena was well liked on the street. Her husband, Achi is his name, was not.”

Viglis raised his eyebrows and waited for Tingish to continue.

“Just a feeling boss. We’ve talked to most of the people on the block.”

Tingish took out a stiff piece of paper and looked at it intently.

His wife had taught him to read and write and he was proud of that, but it was not easy for him still. He often took simple notes and Viglis was glad he was doing it today.

"They were being respectful, you know, but, Achi, the husband? He's got a temper and he talks about getting Bonded."

"What?" Viglis said.

"Yeah," Tingish replied, "he has mentioned to a couple of people on the street. Defended them. Complained about how we are keeping them out."

Viglis did not reply at first. "That is a strange turn of events" he thought. It didn't make him more of a suspect directly, but it didn't help him either.

"Ok," Tingish said, "was he at work when she died like he said?"

"Yep," Tingish said, without checking his paper. "First place we went. They like him there, seems like. At least how he works. Just that Bonded thing. Talks about it there too."

"What did she do?" Viglis asked.

"Wife and she did a bit of sewing at home for the tailor down the way. She wasn't expected there when she died. She was supposed to be home." Tingish said, looking up from his paper.

"What do you think?" Viglis asked. He always asked his men what their thoughts were on each case. He didn't always agree

with them but he liked getting different perspectives. His men appreciated it as well.

Tingish shook his head. "I don't get a good feeling about him but as far as we know, he couldn't have. He..."

Viglis cut him off, "Ok. Let's move on then. We'll come back to him later if we have to."

"The next door neighbor, he peered at his paper for the name, "Samtisi, he's a greasy fucker."

"Yeah, I know," Viglis said. "I talked to him."

"Yeah," Tingish said with a grimace. "He's bad news. One of the boys says he's seen him with Tlanias."

"Tlanias?" That surprised Viglis. Tlanias was as close to a criminal patron that this city had. Viglis had been to his sponsored Fights and had met him a few times. Big, hard and laconic. 'Sensible though, for a criminal' Viglis thought.

"Achi in debt? Or Marleena? Any issues there?" Viglis asked.

Tingish shrugged, "Not that we've heard about so far. But its early."

Viglis nodded. "Right. Finish up. Two blocks either way. Then get to Achi's people and Marleena's, if they are in the city anyway."

Tingish scratched his chin and looked up at the hot sun. He was sweating through his shirt.

“Are we going to get some help? I mean it’s just Braatu and me here.”

Viglis was not surprised by the question. He had been thinking about it himself. They needed as much information as they could get as quickly as possible Viglis knew that. But more men here meant fewer men on the street, on patrol. He knew though, he had to risk it,

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ll send a couple more guys over as soon as I figure out who we can do without out there. And I’ve got one stop to make.” He pointed at Wallinisa’s house.

Tingish, “Thanks, boss. Got it.” He smiled at Viglis who scowled back at him. He didn’t like the innuendo, even though it made sense.

Viglis walked up the path to the door and knocked lightly. He waited a few moments and then the door opened. The woman Wallinisa was younger than she had sounded the night before. She had her hair pulled back off her face. She had large blue eyes and a small pointed nose. She was short, much shorter than Viglis. She was wearing a loose white smock that seemed to be painted different colors.

“Good morning,” he said. “I’m Viglis, the head of the police unit around here. We spoke last night?”

Viglis was tall, lean and dark with the sun. He was well muscled and his grey eyes were clear. Although he had an eye for women he did not care about the impact his appearance had on them or men for that matter. He had been a soldier and knew men and women were just bags of blood, guts, and bone. Ranking personal importance on what someone looked like was folly to him. He also knew good looking men who were bad at being people and vice versa.

“Viglis, yes, hello,” she said, somewhat taken aback by the physical attributes Viglis had that he cared so little about in others. “You’re here.”

“I said, I’d come by,” Viglis said. “Do you have a moment to talk?”

“Yes, yes,” Wallinisa said. She wiped her hands on her smock quickly and then on a rag tucked in a front pocket.

“I’m sorry if I am interrupting but...” Viglis said.

This annoyed her. “I said I had time,” she said, a little sharply.

“Ok,” Viglis said.

Then she said, “come in and sit down.”

He followed her down a narrow hallway into a room full of light and color. There were paintings everywhere, some finished, some not. Sunshine through two large windows showed paintings of bowls of fruit, bunches of flowers and

portraits of both men and women. She gestured at an empty chair and he sat. She did the same in another opposite him across a small wooden table.

“An artist,” he said.

She shrugged, “The patrons pay well,” Wallinisa said. “They especially like the ones of themselves and their women. Their women seem to like flowers, most of them anyway.”

“Which do you like?” Viglis asked.

She looked at him intently. “Some of both, if I do well.”

“Ah,” he said. And he looked around the room more carefully. Viglis had little background in art but the portraits were remarkably lifelike. He slept with a woman who had modeled for a painter when he was younger. She had hated the man but adored his paintings. He was successful, or so she said, and his paintings were not as good as these.

“They are good,” Viglis said. “In my opinion.”

“Thank you,” Wallinisa said and she smiled thinly. His approval was not what she needed.

“Down to business?”

“Of course,” he said. “Did you know Marleena?”

She nodded. The mention of the name seemed to anger her. She shifted in her chair and crossed her arms. Viglis waited.

"It's not right," she said.

"What's not right Wallinisa?" Viglis asked.

"Oh, call me Wally, everyone else does," she said, again annoyed.

"Ok, Wally," Viglis said carefully. That pissed her off even more, he thought.

"She had a right to live, you know? She was a person," she said.

Viglis knew he had to just sit and listen.

"She was ..., he was such an asshole," she said. "Achi, I mean. Her husband. Such an asshole."

Viglis did not respond.

"Have you arrested him? He did it. He treated her like a slave. She walked behind him on the street you know. Like a dog." She stabbed her finger at Viglis as she said this.

Viglis knew that wasn't unknown in the Southlands, especially in the more traditional families. It was a man's world. But Achi was gutted when he learned of Marleena's death. And there were no slaves anywhere in the Southlands.

"Wally..."

"Well have you?" she asked, interrupting him.

“Wally, he was at work. The men at the blacksmiths have vouched for him.” Viglis said softly. “He wasn’t there when she died as far as we know.”

“Work?” she said weakly.

“Yes, work Wally. It was the first thing we checked.” Viglis waited as Wally fought back tears. She was stunned.

“She was so, lovely. Such a good person.”

“Yes, we have heard that from everyone we have spoken to,” Viglis said, leaning forward and placing his forearms on the table. “Wally, did you notice anything yesterday? Out of the ordinary that is, on the street.”

Wally sat back, away from him. “I was working here,” and she waved at the paintings leaning up against the walls. “I am a bit behind. I was in here all day.”

“So, no?” Viglis asked.

She sat for a moment, thinking. “He talked about the Bonded you know,” she said. “He talked about them all the time.”

Viglis nodded and said nothing. He wondered where she was going with this.

“He went to meetings, she was frightened of them...”

“Were the Bonded here yesterday? On the street?” Viglis asked.

"The patrons have told us to keep them out. We try to."

She eyed him warily, "The patrons? Bunch of bastards."

Viglis did not comment on that and he kept his face expressionless. Instead, he asked her another question, "They aren't preaching here are they Wally? And if they aren't, how do you know they are Bonded?"

"I can tell. They are dead in their eyes and that's where I look for life. Dead. And I've seen them at Marleena's."

Viglis sat up, "Yesterday? Did you see them yesterday?"

"No," she admitted. I can't recall seeing them yesterday. But they have been around. Achi invites them.

"How do you know that?" Viglis asked.

"Marleena has told me. She's scared of them. She said their faces are strange somehow and the young ones are just crazy. She says... she said..." Wallinisa changed the tense. "She said she was afraid of them and how much they meant to Achi."

"Was Achi Bonded?" Viglis asked. In his experience, once a person was Bonded they moved into the communes that had taken over entire neighborhoods in the city, but maybe that was changing.

Wally replied, "I don't think so. Marleena said she wouldn't go with him if he did."

Viglis settled back into his chair. This Bonded involvement in Achi's life was curious but he wasn't sure how relevant it was to the death he was investigating. And Wally lived right beside them and she hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary, even if they were around. Viglis didn't like it but that wasn't bringing him any closer to finding out a healthy young woman died. Wally asked him,

"What will you do now?"

"Keep asking questions," he said. "We need more information than we have."

"Right," she said. "If you think of anything I can do, ask."

Viglis stood up, "Thank you for your time Walli."

"You're welcome."

Viglis started to go and then he stopped, turned and said, "Walli, can I come and speak to you again?"

There was a moment of awkward silence. The request hung in the air and suddenly felt odd to him. It was natural in the sense that they seemed to be able to be honest with each other and he needed a friend here. But what kind of friend? And maybe he was asking her to be a secret source of information for Viglis the lawman and the neighbors might resent her for that. He thought she might be thinking the same thing. She was looking expectantly at him. He continued,

"Just to check in and maybe you can tell me something about this place. I need a better feel and..."

"Sure," she said. "Sure."

Viglis smiled briefly and broadly and Walli almost smiled back.

"Thanks," he said and headed up the hallway to the door. She followed him. He opened her front door and walked down the short path to the street. He turned again as he reached the road and looked back, but the door to her house was already closed.

IV

Viglis stood in the sun. It was blazing down. He saw Tingish come out a house a few doors down from him. He saw Viglis and shook his head. Then he walked up the street a short way and started talking to the two dark-skinned men manning a food cart.

Viglis walked back to the station and left word for Mesil and Isande to help Tingish and Braatu when they reported in. Then he asked the desk clerk whether he had heard from Mellis, the healer. He said no. The clerk was a short, thick-bodied man by the name of Reege. Viglis told him to follow him into his office and write down what he said. When talking to himself wasn't enough, he did this. And the judges of the High Court liked reading these notes before they heard his cases, he knew that.

Viglis sat in the padded leather chair in the corner of the room. Reege at his desk.

“The developments in the death of the woman Marleena.”

Reeger started writing on the thick paper he had brought with him. Viglis kept on,

” The woman was discovered by a servant girl in her home. She was approximately 25 years old. No visible signs of injury on her body although the home itself was messed up. Husband, whose name is Achi, was not on the scene and when he arrived seemed distraught.”

At this word, Reege looked up at Viglis.

“Sad, upset,” he said and Reege nodded and went back to his writing.

“Body to be fully examined by Mellis, the healer, later today. Next door neighbors are Samtisi, a low-level criminal type who is a suspect, for now. The other, Wallinisa is a woman and a painter who is not. She says that Achi said nice things about the Bonded and treats his wife like shit. So, he’s like every third man in this city. And she says she has seen Bonded in our neighborhood. But not preaching as far as she can tell. We haven’t noticed them at all. We have to look closer.”

Viglis stopped and thought for a moment, “I’m not sure if the Bonded are part of this or not. I don’t know, but I don’t like it. I wish I could talk to their leadership but we all know they won’t

talk to us. The non-believers.” Then he changed the subject, “I will have to talk to Tlanias.”

This made Reege hesitate. Viglis kept talking as if the judge was listening,

“He is a criminal patron in the city. It’s his guy who lives next door to the victim, Samtisi. I don’t think he’s directly involved but I figure Tlanias won’t want to get mixed up in this, so he might at least talk to me. He’s mean and tough but Tlanias isn’t an idiot. I can’t scare him, but I know he wants to stay out of the firelight.” Viglis stopped as Reege finished writing. He looked up at Viglis again, his eyes black under thick black brows. “That’s it. I’ll continue later.”

“Ok Viglis.”

Reege got up slowly and went back to his desk by the front door of the station. Viglis sat for a few minutes and then went to find Tlanias, the most powerful and dangerous criminal in the city.

V

There was a heavy, dry wind blowing through the streets of the city. It came from the north, across the desert and if possible, it was even hotter than the day before. Viglis walked across the city, out of the neighborhood his unit patrolled. Once in Tlanias’ ‘hood he quickly gained two obvious tails. He had only been in the city for a month, but Viglis had earned a reputation

as a hard man. He didn't know if they were from a rival police unit or were Tlanias' men. Not that there was probably much of a difference here, he thought.

The two men fell back as he approached Tlanias' home. It was large and imposing with high white stone walls and a large group of armed men milling about the thick wooden door studded with iron that served as a gate. The city government did not actively discourage the private armies that grew up around money and power. If push came to shove they would probably be outfought by them anyway. 'Not ideal,' thought Viglis, but it worked reasonably well if there was no good reason for them to attack each other.

One of the men walked up to him. He was as tall as Viglis, with broad shoulders, an unshaven face and long dark hair pulled back by a gold chain. His voice was deep and raspy,

"What do you want?"

Viglis spoke, "I would like to speak to Tlanias."

"What's this about?" the man said. Some of the others started to drift closer.

"Police business," Viglis said.

"Not our police," the man said. Some of the others laughed.

"No, not yours," Viglis said.

"This neighborhood?" the man asked.

"No," Viglis replied, "not this neighborhood."

"Not our police, not our neighborhood, not our business," the man said quickly. "Fuck off."

Viglis thought for a moment. He was pretty sure he could take this guy out. But there were a lot of them. And, his patrons weren't paying him to fight in the street with soldiers from Tlanias' small army. He just wanted to talk.

"Alright. Tell Tlanias that Viglis was here and he wants to talk about a murder that took place in his neighborhood. He can ask Samtisi where to find me."

The use of that name raised some eyebrows. The man's face went grim. He nodded, walked away and Viglis turned to go. One of the others called out,

"Run along lawman."

Viglis stopped. He heard someone walking up to him. When he turned the man was close to him. His sword was out and very near, pointing at Viglis' face.

"Run, along," he hissed his breath sour-sweet with alcohol.

Viglis slapped the sword aside, kned the man hard in the groin and then again in the face when the man doubled over reflexively. His head rocked back with the force of the blow and

he fell, flat out on his back. The sword clattered to the ground. The bleeding man moaned and tried to get his hands to his face and his balls at the same time. The rest of the man stood with open mouths. The viciousness and speed of Viglis' attack stunned them. They started to recover and move towards him when Viglis, standing over the writhing man on the ground said loudly,

"He deserved it and you know it. This isn't Dece. I'm a paid lawman and if you touch me my unit will be here in force within the hour. Do you think Tlanias wants a brawl just because this guy acted like a prick?"

The unshaven man nodded and put one hand up, palm open. The men grumbled but stopped.

"Leave," he said, "while you still can."

"Just give Tlanias the message," Viglis said and he walked away.

VI

Late in the afternoon, Viglis sat in the heat of his office. The building was made of the thick white stone found throughout the city, but the coolness had been baked out of it by the relentless sun. The water he drank was also warm, but he drank it anyway. Mellis the healer, came in before dinner. Reege gave Viglis a head's up as he approached,

"Hello Mellis. Have a seat," Viglis gestured at an empty chair.

The tall man sat, Viglis poured him some water unasked, and he drank it. Viglis waited for him to speak.

"The woman, Marleena. The one you asked me to look at?"

"Yes," Viglis said.

"Well, I did. And, she wasn't...her heart was not, right." He looked troubled.

"What do you mean?" Viglis asked.

"It's hard to explain. Her heart..." he paused and kneaded his forehead.

Viglis leaned forward and quietly said "Yes?"

Mellis took a deep breath and said, "The heart is a muscle. One of the strongest in the body. Very dense."

Viglis knew this. He had seen bodies burned almost to dust in war with the heart still visible in the blackened ribcage. He nodded to Mellis to show he understood.

"Her, Marleena's heart is a lump of dark hardened flesh. Like a tumor. The entire thing. And the tumor follows the major blood vessels. It's like a stringy..." Mellis stopped and looked at Viglis almost pleading with him. "I've never seen anything like it."

“Did it kill her?” Viglis asked.

“Undoubtedly. But...but there is no chance that this happened overnight. This kind of decay would take months, years even. She would have been bedridden for most of that time. Her blood system was not...its...” The healer stammered into silence.

“Well she has only been dead for a day,” Viglis said.

“I know that.” Mellis was now on firmer ground, “I know what a day-old body looks like.”

Viglis sat for a moment and then said, “No one said anything about her heath being bad. She was fine the day before, according to all the people we have talked to. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

Mellis looked shaken, “Yes, somehow I’m not surprised. Her overall muscle tone did not indicate blood flow issues. Her skin, hair and fingernails showed the same. She was perfectly healthy in some ways, and horribly ill in others.”

‘We need to talk to the husband again,’ Viglis thought.

“Anything else you can tell me Mellis? Should we inform the patrons? Is it, will it spread?”

Mellis’ eyes were unsure. A very different man than the calm, quick and efficient healer Viglis was used to.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen anything like this. I need to speak

to Drallux. He's the senior healer in the city. He may know more. I just don't know."

"Right, thank you Mellis."

Viglis decided quickly that he was going to use the plague protocols. Lock the surrounding streets down for a few days. Plague was rare but not unknown in the Southlands and if this was a new type, Viglis wasn't going to be caught with his pants down.

"What are you going to do?" he asked Viglis.

"The plague protocol will be put into place. Three blocks each direction. I will bring in all my men and tell the patrons, so they can talk to the city officials."

To Viglis, Mellis looked a little relieved. Almost as if he thought if we act like its plague, then it might be plague, instead of the terrible unknown facing them.

"The water is clean in the neighborhood?" Mellis asked.

"Yes, as far as we know the spring is untainted. We'll check it of course." Viglis said.

He didn't know exactly why clean water was important, but he knew it was. Mellis could explain it but he just had to make sure it was clean and flowing. The city should have a guy for that, he thought, not for the first time.

Viglis escorted Mellis to the door and when he had left he mounted the stairs to the roof of the station. Once there, he grabbed the large wooden mallet left by the door. Shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun on the roof Viglis walked over to the huge bell that hung in the middle of the roof and thumped it three times. The sound boomed out over the entire south end of the city. It was a signal to all the men he had hired to come in. Immediately. The two-man patrols on duty would send one man as well. They had work to do.

VII

The people on Marleena's street weren't happy with the lockdown or the idea it might be the plague that caused it. Some of them even tried to resist but Viglis made sure they were firmly put back in their homes with a minimum of force. He also told the men to leave the markets and shops inside the three-block radius open for the rest of the day. Other traffic in and out was stopped.

"Stock up if you can, it will be three days at least," was all the people were told.

Viglis spoke to the patrons, two of whom had come to the station when they had heard the warning bells. Viglis kept the details of Marleena's death to himself. He told them it was a possible plague outbreak. The two men, Circul and Grindrod, went white and looked at each other in panic. Plague could decimate a city in weeks. Neither of the patrons lived in these

close streets full of small homes and shops but Viglis knew they would probably flee to some castle in the countryside anyway. Some nobleman who owed them money would put them up.

They signed letters of credit for the extra hours, food and other supplies his little force needed without a question. They were grateful that someone else was handling it. Viglis just hoped a panic wouldn't start when they packed up and left town.

Achi had come to the police station in the afternoon. Viglis had Reege take notes but the interview was no help at all. Achi was incoherent with grief. He could barely stand never mind answer questions. His father was with him, a small quiet intense man. He lived close to the station and he promised to keep Achi at his home for the next few days. Viglis thanked him and let them go, now working on the assumption that perhaps Marleena had died of a strange illness.

Samtisi came as well. He squirmed under hard questioning, but he seemed more worried about Tlanias finding out he was there than being found responsible for a murder. They got nothing from him and after the interview Viglis did not believe he was involved at all. But he wasn't ready to let him off the hook so Samtisi was told to stay at home the next few nights and that he would be monitored. He was angry but Viglis did not care. Until he spoke to Tlanias, Samtisi was a suspect.

That evening Viglis inspected the roadblocks. His men were pulling extra duty, but they seemed to accept it. The ones who live in the area were nervous but Viglis said, "You'll do your family more good here than at home." No one argued with him.

The night was warm even without the sun. The heat radiated from the streets and the brick homes. Tingish joined Viglis as they walked the neighborhood.

“So, it’s a new plague, not a murder?” Tingish asked.

“I don’t know,” Viglis said. “The healer looked worried and nothing and nobody else has turned up. Got to be safe.” After a few more steps together Viglis asked, “Did you ever speak to Marleena’s people?”

Tingish shook his head, “She has none around here. Country girl as far as we can tell, she didn’t speak of family to anyone in the neighborhood that we spoke to.”

“Ah,” Viglis said.

“Samtisi?” Tingish said.

“Only loose end really. Talked to him, got nothing. Went to Tlanias’ place today but he wouldn’t see me.” Viglis said.

“Yeah, not surprised about...”

At that moment a man came around the corner of the street, bracketed by two others holding lanterns. All three men were large and two were armed. Both Tingish and Viglis reached for their weapons. Then the man in the middle called out,

“Viglis!”

“Speak of the demon,” Viglis said quietly to Tingish.

“Tlanias,” he said to the approaching man.

“Yes, yes. How have you been? You look like you could still serve. Lawman now eh?”

The man’s voice was high and oddly soft. Viglis walked over to him. Tingish hung back as did Tlanias’ escorts. Tlanias was solid all over. His eyes were wide set and dark. His grey hair was close cut and he was clean shaven and well dressed. The gold rings on his fingers caught the torchlight.

“Yes. And I’m well Tlanias, all things considered. Did we catch you inside the roadblocks?”

The man laughed, “Now I wouldn’t be much of a patron if those could keep me from moving around.”

Viglis grinned slightly, “I don’t think you’re much of a patron at all are you? I don’t think I’ve seen you at the meetings.”

Tlanias returned the smile, “Well, there are meetings and then, there are meetings.”

Viglis wanted to ask him about that, and how he got around his men, but he wanted cooperation more, so he left it.

“You may be right. You good to talk here?”

Tlanias waved his men back even further. They and then

Tingish retreated a few steps. He said,

“Sure, what’s on your mind?”

“I thought a murder, but now I’m not so sure,” Viglis said.

“Murder? Who and where?” Tlanias asked.

“A young woman, just up the street there.” Viglis pointed.

“Ah,” Tlanias said. “Samtisi.”

“Yeah. Next door neighbor.”

“Samtisi didn’t kill anybody,” Tlanias said flatly. “He’s not the type”

“There’s a type?” Tingish said under his breath, but they both heard it.

Neither man said anything in response. After a moment Tlanias said,

“How did she die?”

Viglis tried to remain impassive but his face must have shown something to Tlanias. He peered at him and took a step closer.

“What have you found here Viglis? Is it really plague? Something new? I thought you were just using the protocols. How did she die?”

Viglis shrugged. Tlanias' curiosity was unexpected. "You don't know do you? You really don't."

Now Tlanias was really interested. Viglis did not want to discuss it so he tried to change the subject.

"So, I don't need to worry about Samtisi?"

"Samtisi? No. He's a useful man, but not a violent one." Tlanias said.

"But between a man and a woman, it's harder to say," Viglis said.

"True," Tlanias said. "Do you have any evidence..."

"No. We don't." Viglis interrupted him. "But I thought talking to you might help. You've always been straight with me."

Tlanias clapped Viglis on the back and said,

"Always will be. Bet you were a good soldier Viglis." Tlanias smiled hard at him. "Could still be one."

Tlanias was hinting at a relationship of some kind and Viglis wasn't interested.

"Got a job Tlanias. Good one too."

The smile faded as Tlanias sidled in close to Viglis. He spoke quietly,

"You know, things are coming apart here Viglis."

Viglis raised his eyebrows, "I hadn't noticed," he said.

"I have more meetings than you, my friend." Tlanias was whispering now, "I hear many things. Many strange and disturbing things." Then Tlanias smiled without humor, "Isn't that why you asked me here? To tell you what you don't know about this place?"

Viglis did not reply immediately. It was true of course, Viglis thought. I need to know more.

Tlanias spoke again, "The Bonded are getting bolder, as you probably know. And they have an army I hear. Somewhere out in the badlands. They are getting restless, waiting for it to come."

"What does that have to do with the death of the young woman?"

Viglis asked, anxious to get the conversation away from the inexplicable rise of the Bonded and unsure why Tlanias had brought it up.

"Nothing or everything. It doesn't matter. Come work for me Viglis. I'll pay you more than the patrons. And we'll be long gone before the Bonded army comes."

Viglis had long avoided working on the other side of the law. Other ex-soldiers did it when they couldn't hack the training anymore or wanted more than a patron, city or a castle lord

could pay. The Southlands were full of men who worked for men like Tlanias, who did what the patrons couldn't, and the city government wouldn't. And all these men carried on as if there was no difference between them and the people they lived among. Viglis wasn't like them.

"Thanks for the offer Tlanias but I am committed to being the lawman around here. I think I'll stick to that."

"Alright Viglis, alright. But if you change your mind..." Tlanias said. "You can even bring him."

He said as he pointed to Tingish and laughed.

Tingish exploded, "Not fucking likely!"

Tlanias took an exaggerated step back and threw his hands up in mock horror.

"Or not,"

he said, and he laughed again. Tlanias turned and took two steps back to his men. But then he came back, light on his feet for such a big man. He whispered to Viglis as he put his hand in his arm,

"One last thing Viglis. Your victim. How did she die?"

"We are not sure," Viglis said coldly, wanting this talk to be over.

"Ah, not sure eh? Alright. But, it wasn't her heart, was it? Black

and twisted? Like flame stone?”

Viglis was stunned, and it showed. “We don’t know,” he said slowly.

Tlanias looked satisfied, “Alright, well, a tragic end in any case. Good night Viglis. And good luck.”

And with that Tlanias walked back into the warm darkness of the southland night, his two guards in tow.

VIII

Viglis and Tingish stood in silence for a few minutes. Then Tingish said,

“Heart like flame stone? What the fuck did he mean by that?”

“You heard that did you?” Viglis asked, obviously disturbed. “The healer who examined her told me she had something like that. Her heart was damaged in a way he has ever seen before. Blackened somehow... and I have no idea how Tlanias knew.”

“Maybe one of those meetings he was talking about. And I thought we were working on a murder. Shit boss. Now she was just sick?” Tingish asked.

“Yes and no Tingish,” Viglis said. “I mean the healer said the process should have taken months and she would have been bedridden for most of it. And there was no evidence of that.”

“No, we didn’t hear any stories about her being sick,” Tingish admitted.

“Yeah. I’m a bit confused, to be honest. Mellis is going to see a Drallux, the senior healer in the city. See if he has any experience with something like this.” Viglis hesitated and then asked Tingish, “I think we need to talk to Achi again. He’s the only one who could really tell us if she was sick. What do you think?”

“Let’s go,” Tingish said.

Achi’s parents were not happy when Viglis knocked loudly on their door deep into the night. They didn’t ask them in and when Viglis asked to speak to Achi his father replied,

“He’s asleep, finally.”

“Well, wake him up,” Viglis said. “It’s important.”

Viglis stood in the doorway, tall and straight with Tingish glowering in the background. After a few moments Achi shambled into view, his face a puffy red mask. His eyes were nearly closed from crying and then sleep.

“Yeah?” he said as he raised his hand to shield his eyes against the torchlight.

"How did your wife die Achi?" Viglis asked. "Was she sick? What killed her?"

There was a moment when the man's eyes flickered open and Viglis saw fear in them. Then they closed and the man whined,

"Why are you asking me? I wasn't there. I was working. You are the lawman, you need to find out."

"We know how she died, but we don't know why," Viglis said flatly. "But I am thinking maybe you do."

"No, no I don't," Achi said.

Achi's father stepped forward. "My son was working when Marleena died. He wasn't there. You know this."

"No one was there," Viglis said sharply. "And she died anyway."

Achi's eyes opened a little and Viglis saw something in them, like recognition and then fear, again. It echoed in his mind and then he changed the topic quickly,

"We hear that you were to be Bonded Achi," Viglis said. "And Marleena stopped you. Is that true?"

The question startled the man. Achi's mouth opened and closed once and then twice. His father's eyes narrowed and stared at Viglis with renewed distaste. But Achi said nothing. Viglis persisted.

"You know we were ordered to keep them out. We posted notices. But you had them at your house, and Marleena didn't like it." Still nothing from Achi. "And now she's dead Achi."

He started to speak but his father tightened his grip on his arm and shook him slightly. Tears leaked out from reddened eyes and his knees wobbled. He looked at his father. The older man steadied him, his face stern. Viglis started to wonder about the father. 'What do we know about this guy?' he thought. 'Not very fucking much.'

Maybe these two were Bonded already, but not living in the communal neighborhoods. A new type of fanatic, sneaking around, injecting their beliefs into the city like a disease until they had enough converts to hold their strange ceremonies with the golden flags and banging drums and the awful silences. Normal people just left when it happened. And they could take over the city piece by piece, without any conflict at all.

Viglis looked at the two men. He was still in the dark as far as the case was concerned. A woman was dead who shouldn't be. But there was no weapon or injury for that matter. They had discovered that she was horribly ill, but that had happened too fast. A matter of hours. Tlanias had linked the Bonded and the cause of her death with his cryptic comments. And now Achi's father was giving his son the 'just shut up' look when asked about the Bonded. Viglis thought for a moment and then tried another tack,

"I could charge you under the old witchery laws," he said. "Tell the courts that you cast a spell. That's still illegal."

The older man spluttered, "The High Courts won't recognize that. You are groping in the dark lawman."

"Maybe," Viglis said, "maybe not."

Achi gathered himself. He stood straighter and the look on his face got closer to anger. An expression he shared with his father. He sniffed and then spoke,

"We don't have any answers here. Maybe you should work a little harder lawman, and find out what and who killed my wife."

Viglis got mad. Something told him this man was part of the reason why his wife was dead. Viglis didn't know what the link was but he felt it in his gut. And the Bonded were involved too and but he had no proof of that either and that pissed him off.

"You will stay in this house Achi. In the name of the patrons, I order it. You will be monitored here. My men will check on you, any time of the day or night. If you aren't here, I will find you and arrest you myself. You will be held in the cells until the High Court convenes in the fall. We consider you a part of this investigation. Do you understand?"

"But we need to bury Marleena. She must..."

"Her body will be held at the healers until further notice," Viglis said, cutting him off.

Achi took a step towards Viglis and his father stopped him,

"You're a bastard lawman," the older man said. You have no respect."

"Shut up," Viglis said to Achi's father." You don't get to comment. One more word and you'll be in the cells too."

He pointed at Achi and said, "Stay put."

Then he turned away and walked with Tingish out into the dark streets.

IX

As they walked Tingish asked Viglis, "How long are you going to keep the roadblocks up?"

Vilsi sighed, "I don't know. A couple more days probably. Just to make sure we aren't dealing with plague,"

"Which we aren't," Tingish said.

"No, probably not," said Viglis.

Back at the station they reviewed all the notes and heard all the lawmen speak of their fruitless questioning of everyone in the area around the dead woman's house. Marleena was friendly and well liked. No known issues. Achi was a prick but he wasn't there when she died. The quick resolution Viglis knew they

needed was slipping away.

After a few hours of restless sleep on a cot in a stifling room off his office, Viglis woke to another day. He exercised, washed and ate. Then he headed out on patrol alone. He soon found himself back at the house where the woman died, standing in the sun and squinting at the place. Viglis was hoping that something would come to him. That wasn't how crimes got solved he knew, but he was stuck. He thought of knocking on Wallinisa's door but he didn't because it was only because he wanted to see her again.

Viglis went over what they knew in his mind. The only open questions seemed to be how Tlanias knew about what had happened to Marleena's heart and what Mellis had found out from Drallux about the same thing. He didn't have anything immediate to do so Viglis decided to try to see Mellis at the healer's place. Maybe Drallux had told him something. And then talk to Tlanias about what he had said earlier.

Viglis had to pass through one of the roadblocks to get where he was going. He stopped a half a block away and observed for a few moments. The men on duty looked bored but they were efficient, calm and firm in keeping the blockade in place. When he moved closer they saluted smartly, something he did not insist that they do.

'They are good bunch', he thought.

The healer's place was a non-descript white stone building two stories in height. The front doors were wide open.

The windows on the front were tall and narrow. It wasn't particularly busy but it was early in the morning still. 'No plague rush,' Viglis thought.

Viglis found a man seated at a desk just inside the doors. It seemed like an official sort of arrangement so he asked if he knew where Mellis was. The man asked Viglis if he had an appointment. Viglis said no, but that if the man would tell Mellis that Viglis was here to see him, he would have one. The man did not look impressed but he got up and walked down the hall behind and entered into the second door on his right. A few moments later he came back down the hall with Mellis two steps behind him. Viglis smiled patronizingly at the man. He ignored him.

"Good morning Mellis," Viglis said.

Mellis just pointed out the front doors and kept walking. Viglis followed him out onto the street. When he stopped and turned to Viglis his face was set and serious.

"I was going to come and see you today. I spoke to Drallux."

"Yes?" Viglis said.

"I described the event to him and the aftermath..." He hesitated.

"Yes?" Viglis said, trying not to show his impatience.

Mellis took a deep breath and then said, "Drallux has seen this before,"

“He has? Where? When?”

“Recently. One a month ago and another last week. One male and one female. Previously healthy individuals who succumbed to this, illness, in a single day.”

“In the city?”

“Yes.”

Viglis didn’t know whether to be relieved or alarmed. Two deaths weren’t enough to be a new type of plague but any more than one was too many.

“Does he know of any other incidents?” Viglis asked. “Along the road, or in Dece?”

“No, ” Mellis shook his head. “I asked him that. Just here.”

Viglis thought for a moment. Only two. But if an elderly or already sick person had succumbed to it, how would they know? But if one of the deaths was a month ago, then it couldn’t be plague. And the police in charge of the western quarter hadn’t put up roadblocks or even asked around about the deaths. People died in the city, in all kinds of ways. The lawmen hired by the different patrons didn’t collaborate much so even two weird deaths didn’t add up to enough.

“So what does he think?” Viglis asked.

Mellis shook his head, “You don’t want to know.” He looked

nervously at Viglis.

Viglis thought, 'what do you know about what I want to know?' but he said calmly,

"Mellis...I, we need all the information we can get."

Mellis looked at the ground. Then he said quietly, "I know I didn't."

Viglis just waited. After a few moments, Mellis started talking again,

"Drallux is northern born. He knows the old ways."

Viglis tried not to roll his eyes. Southlanders were parochial, and not religious or superstitious. Myths and legends from the other thinly known parts of the world made them scoff or laugh. Mellis kept on,

"And the old northern stories tell of Itax, the demon, the Traitor."

Viglis lost his patience with Mellis. He spoke sharply,

"Mellis, you are a healer. I am a lawman. We deal in facts. When are we going to get to them?"

"I know but Drallux..." he ran his hands through his stiff black hair. It stood straight up on his head. "What he said about it wasn't really factual."

“Ok,” Viglis said. “Ok. Just tell me straight, and I can decide whether it’s useful or not.”

“Alright.” Mellis cleared his throat dramatically. Viglis raised his eyebrows. “Drallux said that the northerners believe that Itax, the Traitor, rules the world below us. And he will come someday, as a demon, or in disguise as an old man, a beautiful woman or a warrior, to pull the world down into chaos and darkness.” Mellis looked closely at Viglis. He tried to keep face expressionless.

“He’s a powerful demon. And if he chooses you, and you reject him...you pay with your life.”

“How?” Viglis asked. “How would a demon...” He stopped and looked at Mellis. They were both thinking the same thing.

“No.” Viglis breathed it out. “It’s...”

Mellis cut him off. “Drallux says the description is uncanny. In the stories, Itax, the demon, turns the heart of the victim into flame stone and stops their blood.”

This angered Viglis. “How does he do it? Does he poison his victims? Does he get someone else to do it?” Viglis rattled off these questions.

Mellis scratched his nose and looked down. “No. He has powers. They say. The northerners.”

“And Drallux believes this? Believes in Itax the demon? Is he

here?" Viglis asked.

"I don't know. I mean Drallux doesn't know. But he thinks," Mellis looked from side to side, like a conspiratorial child, "that the Bonded might have something to do with it."

Viglis was confused as well as irritated. But, he had to admit to himself that he thought, no, he feared that was where this story might be going right from the start.

"I told you that you wouldn't like it," Mellis said.

"And," Viglis sighed, "you were right."

Mellis continued, "Both of the dead Drallux examined had partners who were drawn to the Bonded. And they weren't. Drallux knew that there was a problem between them."

'Just like Marleena and Achi. Except Mellis and Drallux did not know that part of the investigation. At least as far as I know he doesn't.' Viglis thought.

"Did Drallux say anything about stopping this demon? Was that in those northern stories?"

Mellis shook his head, "Just the usual stuff. Honor the gods. Sacrifice some animals." Here he was on firmer ground, disregarding the strange religious beliefs of the people from outside the Southlands.

"Anything else?" Viglis asked.

"No, I don't think so," Mellis said.

"Would he speak to me if I went to see him?" Viglis asked. "I need some details."

"No," Mellis said. "You can't speak to him. He's gone."

"Gone?" Viglis almost squeaked. "Gone where? For how long?"

"Gone gone. Permanently gone. He said it was time. And that the Southlands are coming apart. And that he has relatives who live on the Near Sea coast."

Mellis did the hair thing again. That's a long way,' Viglis thought. 'What the fuck is going on?'

"He told me to get out too. While I can," Mellis said.

'Northerners are a superstitious bunch. Maybe it was just that' Viglis thought. Or does Drallux have a point? And Tlanias? What am I missing here?'

Mellis coughed lightly, bringing Viglis back to their conversation.

"Right. Alright Mellis. Um...any more cases around here?"

"No," Mellis said firmly. "None that we know of."

Viglis hesitated and then said, "Are you leaving?"

Mellis shook his head, "No. I don't see this, 'coming apart' Drallux was talking about. And, I have nowhere else to go. My people are here."

Viglis nodded and then he said, "Healers as good as you are welcome anywhere Mellis. You could put up a sign in any village or town in the Southlands and make a living. I appreciate you sticking around."

Mellis looked embarrassed. He waved his hand in front of his face dismissively.

"I'm just going to keep working," he said.

"Still... it's a help." Viglis shifted his weight from one foot to the other while he was thinking, "I'm going to have to release Marleena's body soon. Any time better than another?"

"Yes," Mellis replied. "Early in the day, I have more help. Before noon would be best."

"Alright," Viglis said and then men shook hands and parted.

X

While he was walking toward his place, Viglis thought if Drallux was going Tlanias wouldn't be far behind. When Viglis got

there, he discovered he was right. There were loaded wagons and a large contingent of armed men on horseback on the broad street. The men looked at him with hard faces. Tlanias came through the armored gate just as Viglis reached for it.

“Sorry Viglis,” he said as he clambered up on the lead wagon. “Love to talk but I have business in Dece. Got to go.”

“Just one thing,” Viglis said. Tlanias stopped and turned to him. “How did you know how the young woman died? Marleena. How did you know?”

Tlanias’ easy smile disappeared. “Don’t hang around here longer than you need to lawman. It’s going bad.”

“Answer the question,” Viglis said loudly.

“You have skills you could sell,”

Tlanias said with a humorless grin. Then he got up on the seat at the front of the wagon, looked up the road, patted the man beside him on the shoulder and the wagon pulled away. Horsemen shouldered their way past Viglis, pushing him roughly aside. He had no way of stopping this man and his small army of criminals. All he could have done was start a fight, make a mess and perhaps lose his life. Viglis felt like kicking the wheel of the last cart as it clattered by him, but he didn’t. He stood still, looking at the bobbing back ends of the horses that brought up the rear of Tlanias’ caravan.

‘What next?’ he thought to himself. He didn’t really know. Then

he noticed someone at his elbow. It was Lif again, one of the bigger members of his crew.

"Tingish told me to find you." The young man said. He looked excited. "I thought you were going to get into it there," Lif said.

"Yeah," Viglis said. "I thought of it."

They watched as the wagons and horses disappeared around the corner in a dusty haze.

"There's no reason to stand around here now. Let's go."

They walked in silence for more than a few blocks, the afternoon sun searing their shoulders and necks.

"How long are we going to keep these up?" Lif pointed and asked when they saw one of the roadblocks on the perimeter of their neighborhood.

Viglis thought for a moment and then said, "We are going to take them down tonight after sunset. And pull the guards off the murder site as well."

"Ah," Lif said.

Obviously, the investigation had hit a dead end. But he wasn't in charge or particularly curious so he left it that. He'd hear the story eventually. They weren't far from headquarters when they saw a crowd of people approaching on the other side of the street. When they saw Viglis they crossed over to meet them.

“Patrons,” Viglis explained to Lif. “Well, two of them anyway.”

They walked a few steps ahead of the rest, their servants vainly trying to keep the colored umbrellas over them as they did. Both wore gold rings on their fingers and extra pounds around their waists. One, Kennisil, had his dark hair pulled back and up. He was tall, erect and his dark eyes were alert. The other, Tambon, was short and slight. He was dressed formally but still managed to look unkempt. His hair was thin and obviously dyed a dark brown. His blue eyes were large and watery. His rings were larger than Kennisil’s. Both were dressed in the red robes and white sashes of the patrons.

“Good afternoon, ” Viglis said with a slight nod of his head. Southlanders, at least those in the cities, were deliberately informal with those who considered themselves their betters.

“Good afternoon Viglis and ...” Kennisil hesitated as he looked at his companion and then Lif said,

“Lif. My name is Lif.”

“Lif.” The man sniffed. “Yes, well we’ve been looking for you.” He said to Viglis.

“Yes, well, I’ve been busy. Working.”

“And thank you for that,” Kennisil said, smiling while his eyes stayed cold. “Have you been able to find those responsible for the death of the young woman?”

'Right to it,' thought Viglis. He wondered how much of what he had discovered he should tell these men. They were paying him, and he was honest to a fault. But blackened hearts and Itax, a Northern demon? And the departure of Tlanias and Drallux and who knows how many others weighed on him. These men had the money and the places to run to, unlike most of the people in the neighborhood, or the city for that matter. He could start a panic if he told them everything and they bolted. He decided to keep his cards close.

"It looks like she died from a rare disease," Viglis said. "Not murder at all."

"Ah..." Kennisil said. Tambon squinted hard at him and said, "Is it...catching?"

"We weren't sure at first, so the blockade made sense."

Which is what they were actually worried about, he was sure. The blockades were bad for business.

"But now we don't believe so."

Both the patrons relaxed visibly. "So are they coming down soon?" Kennisil asked.

"Tonight, after sunset," Viglis said.

"Good, good," Tambon said. "So, no continuing issues?"

"Not that the healers know of," Viglis said. "If it shows up again,

that will be a different thing.”

“You will speak to us first if that occurs? Before the blockade goes up again?” Tambon said sharply.

“I will try,” Viglis said just as curtly. “But you hired my judgment as well as my sword. If it needs to be done I cannot wait until you can be found.”

The three men looked at each other. Viglis was not intimidated by their position or their wealth. The pause lengthened and then Tambon gestured slightly with his hand. Kennisil spoke,

“But we will be consulted...”

“When I can, yes.”

That seemed to satisfy them, although Viglis hadn’t given in. He thought that the entire conversation was done as much for the entourage as the good of the neighborhood.

“Good,” said Kennisil. “We will let you, ah, continue.”

With a curt nod, and then one from Tambon, they continued up the street. The men trailing them stepped around Viglis and Lif like they were animal scat.

“I don’t like the look of either of those guys,” Lif said after they were out of earshot.

“Yeah. But the pay well and stay out of the way most of the

time.” Viglis said.

“Oily fuckers,” Lif said under his breath.

“Probably. Assholes undoubtedly.” Viglis said with a grin. “But they are as close to a reasonable authority that the city has. And they seem to like the job we are doing.”

“And they pay well,” Lif said.

Viglis laughed. “Yes, they do that.”

They walked in silence, heading inexorably back to where the young woman died. Viglis had decided that he had to let the body go. And Achi and his father. No reason to keep them under house arrest. No legal one anyway. Viglis didn’t trust them. Their shared looks and furtive defensiveness raised alarms in his mind. There was something there, but Itax or not, he had no definite idea what it was. The lines of authority and legality were blurry here but that didn’t mean there weren’t any. He didn’t have the right to hold them or manpower to assign someone to watch them. But he knew where they both lived and worked. Achi would know they were aware of him. There were limits to his power. It was the best he could do.

When they got to the Marleena’s house he ordered the guard on the house to Achi’s father’s place to give them the news that they could take her body from the healer’s in the morning. He held on to the fact that he was no longer investigating them. One more day, he thought, just because I can.

He stood in front of the empty house. He looked left and saw that Samtisi's house also looked abandoned. The front door was slightly open. He probably left with Tlanias. He looked right and saw Wallinisa standing on her front step, head cocked and hands on her hips. She had seen the guard leave. Viglis walked over to her,

"Hello Walli," he said with a smile.

She smiled too, despite herself it seemed,

"Hello Viglis." Then her face hardened, "I see the guard has gone. No need to look too hard for the killer of a woman?"

"I actually wanted to speak to you about that. May I come in?"

She hesitated and then said, "Of course."

Viglis got the impression that she was acting against her instincts by inviting him. The main room in her small house was still in colorful, creative, disarray. The largest work in progress was a portrait of Tambon. It was good, he thought. Uncanny. The man might not like it. His venality was somehow evident, despite the finery draped over him and the 'look into the future' pose he was attempting. Walli saw him looking at the painting,

"What do you think?" she asked.

"It's good. You have caught the man inside him."

She raised an eyebrow. "You think so?"

"Yes," Viglis said, "And if he has any brains, he won't like it."

That made her laugh, "Oh, I hope you are wrong. He's made me quite comfortable with that one." She moved in front of the painting and studied it for a moment. "I'd like to do one of him every year."

Her remark about the future sobered him. Tlanias and Drallux had left the city, warning of a coming collapse. What would a year or even the next few months bring? How would a woman like Wallinisa survive the upheaval if it came? Should he tell her? Was it more than the panic that lurked close to the surface of all those who lived in this age? They hadn't had war in years, but plague, flood and famine were all familiar to those who lived in the Southlands. And now the Bonded were here. When the precarious balance of was upset people got hard, and mean. Wallinisa seemed tough, but was she? And she was on her own it seemed. A rarity in a place dominated by rich men. First things first, he thought. And maybe it will just come up.

"About Marleena," Viglis said abruptly.

"Yes?" she said.

"The cause of her death is going to be designated, illness."

"What?" Wallinisa said. Her hands balled into fists and Viglis thought she might strike him.

“Walli, the healer examined her. Mellis took her body to the house of healing.” Viglis put his hand lightly on her wrist. “Her insides were damaged. Her heart was...”

Viglis did not know how to explain it still. It didn’t make sense to him either.

“She was fine,” Wallinisa said. ‘I saw her the day before. She was healthy but she was scared of Achi. Of what he was becoming.”

“Walli, there was no sign of injury on her body. No cuts or bruising. You have to know I would not let things go. I have told you more than I should have. But we have no evidence to support a charge of murder. None.”

Her expression changed to one of alarm. “It wasn’t plague was it? I saw the roadblocks. Was it a new kind of plague?”

“No,” Viglis said. He kept his hand on her arm lightly, to reassure her. “Mellis consulted with Drallux, the city’ finest healer. There are no other cases like it. At least not in recent times. So, no, and the roadblocks are coming down tonight.”

Wallinisa’s hands unclenched and she turned away from him.

“What do you think Viglis?” she asked.

Viglis tried not to show his hesitation. He had no answers. Just a sense of dread and perhaps fear. Not so much for himself, but for the people of the city. For Mellis, and for people like Shernal, and the children of the orphan home. And for Walli.

What to tell her?

"I don't know Walli,' Viglis said. "I have heard things that raise doubts in my mind. But there is no evidence of a crime in the way we lawmen understand it. I can't take Achi before the High Court. And I can't hold him."

Walli was smart and curious. She wasn't about to let him off.

"What do you mean, 'heard things'?"

Viglis thought carefully before he spoke, "Some people think that the Bonded are coming."

"They are already here," she snorted.

"Yes, I mean, they are threatening the city somehow as well as undermining it. And there may be a Bonded army north of here, somewhere beyond the desert." Viglis gripped her a little tighter. "Some say things are going to change around here, and not for the better."

She was not sure what he was talking about. "What does this have to do with Marleena?"

Viglis decided to tell her what he had been told. "The healer that Mellis consulted, Drallux, is a northerner. He said that Itax, a demon from northern mythology terrorizes people, in their legends. And Drallux said that he could do to people who rejected him something like what happened to Marleena. Injure them without touching them. Turn their insides into something

like flame stone.”

Walli’s expression changed to one of anger.

“Drallux also said he had seen two other cases in the city.” Viglis continued. “Both previously healthy people who rejected their spouses’ desire to become one of the Bonded.”

Walli was now clearly furious. “What the fuck Viglis! What are you going to do about it?” she said, her chin up, challenging him.

“About what?” he asked her.” A mythical northern demon? Do you want me to arrest him? Where is he? Weird fatal illnesses? What can I do about those? And asshole husbands who happen to be religious fanatics? Shitty for the wives but not a crime.”

The words came out of him in a staccato burst. His frustrations had boiled over in front of this woman, who, he realized quickly, didn’t deserve to take the brunt of it. He apologized,

“I’m sorry Walli. I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that. I don’t know what I will do.” He managed a slight grin. “My job I guess.”

She did not respond. Her face was grim. He took a step back and his hand left her arm. Then he asked her,

“Do you have anywhere to go?” he asked her softly.

“What do you mean? In the city?” she replied harshly, still angry.

"No. Farther away."

She swallowed and looked hard at him. "I have family in Dece," she said. "And people in a village off the main road, near a small castle. Belder is the Lord there."

Viglis nodded and then said, "Sell some paintings, Walli. Settle up and go. Something might be coming, and you'd be better safe than sorry."

"Safe? A single woman on the road?" She pointed a finger at him. "How could I be safer there than here?"

"Buy some security," he said. "I know some men I trust who might do it. You could afford them, for a few days anyway."

She turned away from him, clearly skeptical. He persisted,

"Go to that castle Walli. Offer to paint the Lord. He's probably vain enough to want a portrait, and if you take him something you've already done he'll go for it."

He was pleading with her now, his hands outstretched and he didn't quite know why.

"Or your people in Dece, it doesn't matter. Trust me Walli, you won't be the only one. Some of the smart money has already left."

She looked around her little house. It was small but filled with light and color. There were paintings on the walls, paintings

leaning on chairs and paintings on two different easels. Viglis asked himself why he was urging her to leave. He liked her, and the conversations he had with her were the first he had with a woman since coming to the city as a lawman. He thought he had been looking forward to knowing her. Now, circumstances and his fears had changed that.

“If I’m wrong, come back and say, ‘I told you so,’” Viglis said. “I’ll buy you dinner.

From that nice cart outside”

Her expression softened, “Oh thanks. How gallant of you. Street food. But how could I leave all this?” she said and then she laughed.

Viglis joined in the laughter and then said,

“I’ll keep an eye on the place...I’m staying.” Her head turned sharply toward him. Her blue eyes bored into his. “For now.”

“I appreciate the advice,” she said. “I’ll think about it.”

Viglis shrugged and said, “Your call of course.”

He stood there for a few moments, then realized she was waiting for him to leave. He didn’t want to, but she had work to do no matter the decision she made. He bowed slightly and said,

“Wallinisi,”

like a courtier out of the old stories. Then he turned and walked

down the hallway, opened the front door and left. He had gotten to the street when he heard her say,

“Thank you Viglis.”

He turned, smiled and waved and she did the same. And this time she stood in the doorway and watched him go.

XI

Marleena's burial took two days later. There was a procession from her marriage home to the cemetery just outside the western gate in the city walls. Viglis and Tingish watched from a distance. He didn't want to intrude but Viglis did want Achi and his father and whoever else was linked to them to know he was around, and he was watching.

When it was over Wallinisa walked by them and gave Viglis only the briefest of glances. They hadn't spoken and she had not left, yet. After some investigating and discussion with the other lawmen in the city, they had discovered no other recent strange deaths in the city. One healthy looking elderly woman in their neighborhood had died suddenly the day before and Viglis had Mellis take her body for examination, much to the dismay of her family. But he had the power to do it, so he did. There was no trace of the black disease inside her. Her resentful relatives told him he was a monster. Viglis said nothing.

Every day his troop patrolled and Viglis walked with them. The neighborhood was quiet. It seemed as if the death of the young woman and brief quarantine had unsettled even the regulars at the inns and pubs. The patrons paid him and his men on their usual day. It stayed hot. Walli didn't leave. She told him that when he started packing, she would too.

One morning Viglis was warned by a city courier of a huge Bonded rally in the north end of the city. He called in all his men and had the streets of his neighborhood locked down. When it came he heard the rolling drums and awful braying sound large numbers of Bonded together somehow produced. His men looked nervously at him and each other. They were unnatural sounds, brazenly so. Viglis kept his face expressionless despite his unease. He knew this was a bad sign. The Bonded had never been so bold. Maybe Tlanias was right to leave, after all, he thought.

But the day passed without anything worse happening. And the next. The Bonded kept to their enclave in the north end of the city. Viglis maintained his routine and made sure his men did the same. He was about to get bored when he got word of a meeting of all city lawmen, at a large inn in the north end. Conor had called it. Viglis had heard good things about that huge bastard. Honest, solid and dependable. Long undefeated career as a Fighter. Vicious and quick in a tussle. And he had a Hound, a creature from legend, an enormous black, bear wolf mix that appeared only rarely in the Southlands. Some kind of link between them made them fight and think as one. An intimidating pair. Viglis decided he would attend right away.

Maybe this guy knew something they didn't.

The meeting was alarming. Conor had come across two desperate soldiers from a northern army in one of his pubs. They were, he said, survivors from a defeated force who had come across the northern desert. They had been beaten by the Bonded, and he said, that army was coming here too, and soon. He wanted to know what the other lawmen were going to do.

Viglis heart had jumped in his chest when Conor spoke and then asked the most important question. What was he going to do? Tlanias and Drallux were right, it would all come apart. His years in the military came back to him. The memories were almost physical in their intensity. Dust, heat, thirst, blood and sheer terror. Large armies and large cities don't mix well. Assault or siege, it didn't matter. It would be horrific.

From his experience, the northerners were good at war. Yet Bonded fanaticism had been too much for them. And the city government had no tools to marshal the needed force to oppose a serious foe. Despite what he heard from the others about staying and Conor's obvious calm strength, Viglis knew what was going to happen and it wasn't going to be good. The patrons would run away as soon as they got wind of this. The city officials would not be far behind them. Then would come the breakdown of order, the riots, the looting, the rapes and other savage crimes. He thought of Walli, got up and left the room.

He knocked on her door. It was deep into the night and she did not answer. He knocked again, louder and spoke her name,

“Walli!”

Nothing. So he said it again, “Walli, its Viglis. Open the door Walli, it’s important.”

“Alright,” she said. Her voice muffled. She sounded annoyed. “I’m coming.”

She opened the door a little and peered out at him. She was one of those women who woke up looking radiant. Her features were soft in the candlelight and her eyes were luminous in the dark. Viglis was temporarily stunned. Then she said,

“What?” and he snapped alert again.

“Walli, you need to go.”

Her eyes narrowed, “Have you been drinking? You already told me this. It’s the middle of the night.”

“No, and I know, I know. I... can I come in?” Viglis was uncomfortable.

She shook her head. “No. Say what you have to say.”

Viglis tried to formulate what that was. He hadn’t really thought it through.

"There is news." He said. "There is a Bonded army and it is headed this way. They'll be here soon. You have to go."

Her eyes widened. "How soon is soon? Tonight?"

"I don't know. It's just certain that they are coming. You have to get out before they get here. When they get in..."

She was waking up and her stubbornness was reappearing, "Won't the city fight? What about the militia? And the patron's all have ..."

He cut her off with a wave of his hand, "Trust me Walli, they won't. You must believe me. It will come apart like an ant hill under a boot."

She stared at him. Viglis stared back, almost defiantly this time. He knew his motives were not entirely pure. He was attracted to this woman. He wanted her safe because he liked and respected her, but he also wanted her protected for him. The orphan house would have been a better first stop, but he came here. She knew it too and was grateful and yet resentful. Their relationship wasn't strong enough for this kind of gesture. There was an implied pressure here that she didn't like.

"Now?" she asked him. "I have to leave now?"

"No. I mean, in the morning would be fine."

Viglis ran his hands over his face, a gesture of frustration and weariness she had never seen. She realized he carried an

immense burden and was perhaps not as sure of himself as he always had seemed to be. And he had come to her first. Her heart opened, just a little.

“Alright Viglis. I will get ready and, in the morning, I will hire transport and go south.” She put her hand on his forearm, looked up at him and asked, “Are you going to stay?”

“Yes,” he said quickly, then, after a moment he said, “Not for long though, there’s no point. This city will fall and I can’t stop that.” He smiled at her. “I’ll try to help get my guys out and then, I don’t know.”

“Ah,” she said. “how long will that take? To get things wrapped up in the city?”

‘Couple of days maybe. Some guys won’t go, they will have family here or property or a girl.’ Viglis stopped smiling. “I hope I can convince them. Walli, I think it’s going to be very bad.”

For the first time since he had met her Walli looked scared. He took her in his arms and held her close. She rested her head on his chest and her arms reached around him. They stood that way for a few moments. Then Walli tilted her head back and said with a hint of a grin,

“I am in the market for a security chief.”

Viglis looked down at her and smiled back, ‘I was just thinking that.’

3

The Fire

Chricus didn't know how it started. But when it was over, his home was gone. All he had worked for. All his things, gone. He could see only black charred lumps. No hope of a wife now. No children, no place in good society. Well, not until he had rebuilt. His brothers would help him. But how would he pay for the stone? He had no savings. He had a job but guard duty in this city did not pay well.

Looking around he realized his wasn't the only place that had burned. It had started going hard downhill when the refugees starting piling into the city. He had been ordered off the wall when that had happened, which made no sense. And while he was sitting in the barracks wondering what the fuck was going on, his captain had told him about the fires on his street and now, this. He was standing on a reeking black pile of shit that was his life. He felt a spasm of pure rage. Hands clenching and unclenching, breathing hard, he looked for someone to blame. But all he saw were streams of people. Frightened, nervous,

shocked people. A few looked angrily back at him, which was infuriating until he remembered he was still in uniform. And not on the wall. They were fleeing from homes he was supposed to protect. "Fuck!" he said savagely, spitting out the consonants. "Fuck!"

Some people turned their heads at the sound. But not many. He spun and sifted through the rubble with his boot and his spear. It was still hot in places, and it had burned fine. Nothing left larger than a man's fist. He found his lockbox, no, he found the metal frame of his lockbox. The insides were ash. No mementos. No letters from his mother. He felt empty and in sudden pain, as if a hole had been kicked in his stomach. He looked bleakly at the gritty ash heap that had been his home, at the crowds hurrying by and then at the light blue sky above it all. He wondered what to do. Then he shouldered his spear and started marching back to base. His home was gone, and he would rather be waiting for orders in the company of others, than waiting for nothing by himself.

The barracks were a mess. Hundreds of city guards milled about talking and cursing. No one knew what they were supposed to be doing. A few of the men were loudly proclaiming that they should go back to the wall. Defend the city like they were being paid to do. Others were starting to move to their lockers and get back in civilian clothes. He found a few of his guys in place and stood with them on the ready line. One of them, a young one, Thed, spoke,

"What the fuck Chricus? Where were you?"

He spat on the ground, "Watching my fucking house burn down."

“Holy shit,” Thed said. “How did that...” He stopped as Chricus glared at him.

“Ok, ok. Sorry brother.” He held his hands out, palms down, trying to calm Chricus as he apologized. He changed the subject, “What are you going to do?”

Chricus was feeling loose and angry. He didn’t care at this point which choice was made, he just wanted to be told what to do. He was a soldier from the Southlands, not some fucking officer from some noble family.

“Wait for orders Thed,” he said. Then he said “dumbass” under his breath.

Thed heard it and ignored it. “From who Chricus? Huh? No one has seen a captain in hours.”

Chricus didn’t reply. He tightened up his cuirass, adjusted his sword belt, regripped his helmet, stood on the line and looked straight ahead.

An hour later there was only a few of them left. Thed had taken off with most of the men after someone had run into the barracks yelling that the Bonded were on the way and that the city patrons had bolted. Chricus hadn’t even blinked when the barracks emptied. But now he wasn’t so sure. The way it looked, he had made the wrong choice. He chose not to blame himself.

“Fuck,” he said. “Fucking snot-nosed fucking officer class left us fucking high and fucking dry.”

Just at that moment, his captain reeled into sight. Chricus felt a leap of hope in his chest. The captain saw the few guards lined up in formation on the wide parade ground and snickered. He was drunk. Chricus’ heart dropped.

“Dismissed!” the man yelled out, slurring his words. Then he staggered back out again, laughing.

“Fuck it,” Chricus said and he followed the officer.

He stumbled as he started, his legs wooden from standing still for so long. The city he walked out into was not the one he remembered. His house fire, as large as it had been to him, was nothing compared to this. In the few moments of walking from the barracks, he saw entire city blocks burning. He put his hand up to his face to ward off the heat. There were few people. He saw some men in black robes looting a shop. They saw him as well, stopped for a few seconds, and then kept piling clothing into each other’s arms as he moved on.

He headed south away from the desert and the wall. Because if the Bonded were on their way, the North is where they were coming from. Chricus knew there were millions of crazy fuckers up there. There were more people around him now, running when they could, stumbling forward when they couldn’t. Burdened by their possessions they kept their eyes fixed on the road ahead. He didn’t have that problem, possessions to slow him down. So, he passed them by.

After walking for ten blocks he saw a bar still open and serving. The crowd was out the door. Still, coin to be made apparently. Chricus went in. The security took his spear and sword and laid them against the wall. There was quite a pile. He saw drunk men and women. It was very loud. The grabbed his arm.

“Chricus! You’re here!”

He nodded and smiled. It was good to be with one of his unit. Even if it was The.

“Let me get you a drink! You need a drink!” Thed yelled in his ear.

He grinned and nodded again, “Yes!”

He had time, he was sure. The city was large and maybe, well no one had seen any Bonded yet. One drink and then he’d get moving again. Maybe Thed would come along. He was good company, if inexperienced and a little dense. Chricus saw him weaving through the crowd, drinks high above his head. He drank most of his in one gulp. Thed laughed and did the same with his. They were on their second and talking to a very drunk barmaid when they heard a disturbance outside. They pushed their way to the window.

In the street, they saw a tight formation of armed men with an enormous black dog and an equally impressive man in front. It was Conor and Gray. Chricus stepped back slightly, instinctively hiding from the leader of the best, that is, most honest, police unit in the city. The square outside was packed with people though, and Conor and Gray had problems as they had pissed somebody off. The air was full of flying food, cups even chairs. All aimed at them. Chricus relaxed and then giggled as he saw someone chuck an empty glass out the door and then whoop and scream as his friends did the same. It really was going to shit in this city if Conor and Gray didn’t scare drunks. The confrontation was going to be a riot very soon. Then something sharp flew out of a window across the street. Conor dodged it. Impossible, but he did. There was a moment of stillness then Conor barked out an order, his men started chanting and marching and he killed the man closest to him with his sword. Neat and easy as you please. Chricus heard

Thed say,

“Fuck. Did you see that?”

Chricus turned to face him. Thed was stunned,

“He just murdered him.”

Chricus was suddenly very uneasy. Conor was a straight arrow. The straightest. And he had just killed a man in cold blood in front of hundreds of people. That meant he knew it didn't matter. That survival was the rule. The only law left in this shit town.

“We gotta get out of here,” he said to Thed. “Right fucking now.”

“What about my drink?” Thed said. “And...” he gestured towards the swaying woman beside him. Her eyes were struggling to stay open.

“Are you fucking kidding?” Chricus hissed at him. “Conor knows it's all gone. Did you see what he did? Everything. It's gone. We need to go.”

Thed looked confused. Chricus realized he was drunk. More than he had realized when he met him. Thed couldn't make what he had seen make sense. Chricus gave him the rest of his drink, patted him on the shoulder and headed for the door. He said something as he left but Chricus couldn't hear what it was.

Chricus had to fight his way out of the bar as the brave glass throwers were now desperate to get away from Conor's sword and Gray's teeth. He slid out the main door sideways, keeping close to the building. His hands were empty and up as he had no chance to get his spear or sword. The square had cleared out in a hurry. He held his breath as Conor's glance flitted over

him, assessed that he was no threat and passed on. Chricus said, “shit” quietly. He was going to live another day. He watched as the great armored beast of shields and spears that was Conor’s unit marched off, leaving bodies and blood in its wake.

Chricus waited. He heard crying and muted shouts. People began to come out and huddle over the dead and wounded. Some were ministering, others were clearly robbing. He swallowed and looked down the street. Conor’s unit was clearing a path south. Right behind them was good a way as any to make the journey. And he had nothing keeping him here. It had all gone up in flames. He stepped out into the road and started walking behind them.

Horses

The horses started and whinnied and tried to run away from the noise. It came from far away, but it was immensely loud, like a breaking wave that came over the horizon and cascaded across the sky. It didn't make sense to him. Thunder, no matter how monumental only rumbled when heard at a distance. This, this was a noise that had an almost physical presence. It was frightening to think of being where it started he thought. It was unnerving to hear it at all, especially so far up the road from Dece, where it seemed to be coming from.

It took Trecoli the better part of the night to calm the horses down. They could sense that he wasn't calm either, so that didn't help. When he finally closed the barn door it was nearly dawn. This was twice now. Twice that awful physical noise had shattered the countryside. He wasn't sure he could take another. His ears, no his head was ringing.

Trecoli looked at his dark empty house from the yard. The candles and the fire had burned out while he was out here as there was no one to keep them alight. He walked along the dirt path carved by years of going back and forth. He opened the front door, took off his boots and restarted the fire. His eyes were gritty and heavy. Loosening his belt, he lay down on the bed against the wall. He squirmed under the thick wool blanket and was asleep in minutes.

He didn't stay in bed long. He hadn't been able to since he had come back a few days ago. How could he? He was used to noise. Used to his neighbors arguing. The chickens squawking and the boys fighting and playing. Now it was silent. He got up, relieved himself, put his boots back on and checked the horses again. They were calm, although when he had opened the barn door the creak from the hinges had made them stir and a couple had rolled their eyes, stamped their hooves in alarm and pulled hard on their bridles. He settled and fed them and then went back to the house and ate.

Sitting at the table he looked out the window, across the green fields. His neighbor's fields. Ready for harvest in a week or so it looked like. He was a horseman and wasn't exactly sure, but the wheatgrass looked ripe, or ready. Strange with no people around. All that verdant fertility seemed kind of pointless. He had seen a few deer wandering through and feeding yesterday. That would get worse he thought, if someone didn't show up soon.

Why had he gone hunting? Riding east into the empty grasslands, just to get away. He tried to do it every two or three

seasons. Clear his head. Breathe free air with no wife to listen to, no sons to command, no horses to feed, no chores at all. His wife, Nela, had understood it. She was probably just as happy to have him somewhere else for a while. She was competent, and the boys could handle the horses. It wasn't that much to ask really. A couple of days every two or three moons. But it felt bad right now to Trecoli. He hadn't been here and now they were gone. Who knows where? He did not know what to do. Which direction would he go if he went looking? Their entire life savings were eating hay in the barn. He couldn't just leave. But if he stayed, how would he find his wife and his sons?

There was no sign of a struggle. His years as a bowman for Lord Vik had taught him that war was chaos. And it made a mess. He had found nothing but a body a few hedgerows over. It was no one he knew. He got up from the table and went back into the barn. Once inside he climbed up into the rafters and looked out the small rectangular hole in the roof he had promised himself he would fix a long time ago. His head felt cool in the morning air. He scanned the fields of grain and the surrounding stands of trees. The only movement he saw were the stalks waving slightly in the breeze. But when he looked north he saw smoke. Black, billowing and angry. Coming from Dece. 'That shit hole,' Trecoli thought.

Dece was exciting and dangerous. Fights, gambling, whores, the whole deal. His neighbors went every winter. He had done it as well. The last time it went bad though. He got talking to some barmaid in a gambling house. She was short, trim, fresh-faced and less jaded than he expected. Her service was good, he tipped heavy and he lost track of his drinks. Maybe

she was being friendly by making them stronger, maybe not. He was winning at the tables. His neighbors left as he was an obnoxious drinker. But he wasn't so drunk that he didn't know when to quit. He walked out with quite a lot of money. Such a smile she had given him, that young woman. He walked three blocks before he got hit. Never even saw who did it. Trecoli woke up lying under a hedge with a sore head and no money. Then he staggered home to a very pissed off wife. Part of him was glad Dece was burning. Though he hoped she was okay even after it all, the young barmaid.

Snapping out of his daydream Trecoli had a moment of panic. What was he going to do? Then he saw a troop of cavalry coming across the field, from Dece. They were clad in dark armor. They rode quickly and in tight formation, trampling the grain, leaving a sharp, straight dark path, an arrow aimed right at him. He counted probably fifty riders. He looked around. There was nowhere for him to go. He could hide but then they would take his horses. Maybe they would not want trouble, maybe they would pay. He would keep one or two, so he could ride and search for his family. And he would have silver to hide, buried in his safe place. Maybe. Lord Vik was usually easy to bargain with. Maybe it was Vik, although he didn't have cavalry that well trained. The formation was very tight. Those guys could hold hands as they rode. No, they weren't from the castle.

He scrambled down onto the barn floor. He had twelve horses. No foals right now, so he could sell ten. He would keep Triumph and Nela's Star. One for him and Nela, the other for the boys. Hopefully, the cavalymen were not as good at recognizing the value in horses as they were at riding them. It didn't matter

where they were from. He had to sell, and he figured they had to buy.

He hurried to the house, grabbed his longbow, strung it, put a handful of heavy-headed arrows in a quiver and slung it on his back. 'Better to be some sort of threat than none' Trecoli thought. Maybe that was wrong, but he'd be damned if he was going to be robbed and killed and not take someone with him. 'Damned.' That thought frightened and excited him. He had seen war with Lord Vik's army. Most of it was just posturing but not all, and he had seen it.

He notched an arrow and stepped out the door just as the cavalry galloped into his small yard. They were in red gold armor. They were weathered men, big and solid looking. Their helmets were slung on their saddles, long swords sheathed beside them. Their faces were strange though, empty somehow. Eyes flat and emotionless with skin slack around them where it should be tight.

"We need horses," one said. "We know you have them."

Trecoli nodded. "I do."

The soldier's eyes flickered to his bow, then back to his face.

"You don't need that."

Trecoli shrugged, "I think we have yet to see if that is true."

The soldier turned and gestured to one of the soldiers behind him. A horseman came out of the formation and he had his sword drawn. Trecoli's bow came up smooth and fast and he put an arrow whistling past the leader's ear and into the barn door with a thunk. Before the soldier could move he had another

notched and aimed.

“Tell him to back off or the next one goes between your eyes.”

The leader’s hand came up in a fist and the horseman stopped. His eyes showed no emotion still. Even after the arrow. But it seemed like he didn’t want to die here. Not yet anyway.

“We are the Bonded. We need horses. The Believer will pay.”

‘Bonded! Those crazy fuckers.’ Trecoli thought. He had heard rumors of a Bonded military. Never seen them though. Till now. They looked all business. And they had the same stare. Like they were all used up inside.

“Alright,” Trecoli said. “I am sure we can make a deal. Come to an understanding if you will.” He gestured with his bow, still aimed. “If you want to get down and tell those guys to wait, we can talk.”

The soldier nodded and barked an order to his men. They filed out into the field beyond his house and dismounted.

“If I am not back in five minutes, they will kill you and burn down your farm.” The soldier said. The threat seemed more real when made by a man who looked in some ways like he had already died. Trecoli nodded and turned to the barn, his bow still held tight in his hands,

“Shall we?”

Once they were in the barn the soldier's attention turned to the horses. To Trecoli's dismay, the soldier ran his hands over his herd with a practiced air. He knew what to feel for and how to calm them with a word or a stroke. He pointed to Triumph right away, his eyebrows raised.

"Yeah, not for sale. I need him. And that one." He pointed at Nela's Star. "Everything else can go."

"Why do you need him?" The soldier asked. Trecoli almost didn't hear it as a question, the voice was so flat. He answered though, without thinking.

"Got to find my wife, my family. They are gone."

The soldier looked at him with his fish eyes,

"You don't need them."

"Yeah," Trecoli said. "I do."

The soldier shook his head.

"She is Bonded. She is one of us. So are your sons."

Trecoli's mind went blank. Nela? Bonded? Maril and Noris? Bonded? The Bonded were in the city, far to the north. Not in the country. Not here. And he was only gone for a few days. Nela?

"How?" Trecoli said. "What?"

The soldier looked at him. A blank.

"She told us you had horses. The Believer helps us all. His love bonds and keeps us. She is Bonded."

"What?" Trecoli was incapable of thinking. He had been with Nela for twenty winters. She, wouldn't leave, they loved each other. She wouldn't just leave. She wouldn't. Trecoli looked at the soldier. He said in a monotone,

"She is gone from you."

And his sons. Straight backed and strong. Both wanted to

get into the business. Wanted to be horsemen. They could ride like they were born to it. Now Bonded?

"You lie," Trecoli said and he raised the bow and aimed at the soldier's face once again.

"No," he said. "The Believer is strong. Stronger than the world itself." The soldier squinted at Trecoli, his eyes showing life for the first time. He spoke,

"Our orders were to take, not buy, your horses. But I am still man enough to know that we have already taken everything from you. I saw your wife and sons. Soon the Believer will have the Southlands, then the Chan will fall, then the Eliton. All will be Bonded. And the Believer will rule."

The last sentence was the closing a door in Trecoli's mind. 'Not me' he thought. But he lowered the bow.

"You can have them all for 50 pieces. Except for the big one. He's mine."

It was cheap. He knew that and so did the soldier.

"After having done what I have done, I should have liked to die. You could have killed me. But then you would have died as well." Then the soldier shrugged, and the light left his eyes. "Now the Believer will have my soul, or it will be lost for him on the battlefield. Come."

He walked out of the barn into the cool autumn day. Trecoli tied the horses together and followed him. The soldier was mounted and surrounded by his men. He threw a bag of coins at Trecoli's feet.

"Ride west. Ride and don't look back. Your wife and sons are dead to you. The Believer has tasted them and will not let them go. They will never come back. Never."

The soldier took the rope from Trecoli's proffered hand and

looked into his eyes. Trecoli thought he saw a faint plea for understanding, for life, and then it was gone, replaced by nothing. The troop wheeled around and galloped away in a thunder of hooves on the grass.

Trecoli went into his house and packed a few things in his saddlebags, slung his bow and put on his short sword. He closed the door firmly behind him. He buried the coin in the safe place in the barn. He saddled Triumph, sat on the powerful horse and looked around. The farm looked peaceful. The grass and surrounding fields were several shades of deep green. The sun was shining but with less force than in the middle of summer. The light seemed thinner, faded even. He should ride to Dece, find his wife and sons there and bring them home.

Then he heard the sound, like a shriek and a groan, amplified a million times. The air reverberated with it. Trecoli's hands clapped over his ears reflexively. Triumph reared and bucked, and he nearly fell off. After a few endless moments, it stopped. The silence was a gift, a release from the agony of that noise. Trecoli's head hung and his horse sagged, nearly to the ground. He looked north towards Dece, saw the black smoke piling up above it, spurred his horse and rode west.

5

D'ael

Rosh had been wounded before. A knife cut under his right arm last winter. That had really hurt. The skin was so soft there. Took forever to heal. Every time he lifted his arm, it opened again. But he was not yet thirty summers, and he was a fast healer. The nick from an arrow on the outside of his thigh was nothing compared to that cut. That was not a good memory.

He looked down at his bleeding leg. A little bit to the right and he'd have been limping the rest of his life. When he got back tonight his clansmen would ask him about it with exaggerated concern, mocking him because it took him out of the fight. No matter how briefly. Rosh had been sent, with ten other D'ael to capture an Eliti general who had been brave, or stupid, enough to come and see 'what was really going on' at the edge of the Grand Forest where the civil war between the Empire of Eliton and the free people of Eliton was the fiercest.

One of the scouts watching the camp had recognized the general's uniform insignia and reported it to the clan leaders.

They wanted to know what he knew, so, they called in the D'ael, the clan tasked with covert assaults, murder in the dark and kidnappings.

Rosh peeked around the tent he had sat down behind. He could see the broad backs of the men in his unit. Their long black hair hung tight in long tails. Their heads were covered in grey caps and their shirts and pants mottled in the same color. They were in a line beside one of the sturdy white Eliti tents. Something was holding them up. He struggled to his feet and limped up to join them.

"You, all right?" The last one in line asked as Rosh put his hand gently on his back. He nodded quickly. The man turned to look forward without replying. The unit leader's hand went up and he signaled for 'four throwers and silence'. Then, 'two right, two left, on me', and he eased around the corner of the tent and was gone.

The men followed one by one until it was Rosh's turn. He saw two men gliding across the dark, slick grass in front of him, so he waited the usual interval and then followed a few paces behind. They had slept all day the day before, eyes covered in black cloth, so they could see in the cool, moonless night as well as any man. And Rosh was D'ael. He smiled to himself and said, '*We see better.*' They ran on.

The soldier who had shot him had been killed by a knife in the throat, thrown by his unit leader, Eris. He had not made a sound louder than a sleeping baby's gurgle. The general alarm had not been given. But Rosh knew that if some sleepy soldier

blundered on to their assault unit, the shit would fly in the wind. Really fly. Down the straight path between the tents they ran. *'Man are these guys organized.'* Rosh thought about his enemy. *'I mean the care they took lining all the shit up. It isn't natural.'* He hoped they stayed undiscovered. There were a lot of Eliti in this Camp. D'ael or not, if the alarm was sounded they weren't going to get out.

Eris' hand came up. 'Stop. Down.' And the nine men in front of Rosh melted into the ground in unison. 'Patrol'. Moments later two Eliti soldiers crossed in front of them, walking the path perpendicular to theirs. They were tall, clad in black with broad rectangular shields and long spears. *'Thank the gods they didn't have Hirashu with them.'* They had slipped by them once already on their way into the camp, after watching and timing the patrols. Rosh didn't want to get close to one of those monsters. Big, fast, vicious and hard to kill. And very noisy. They would bring the whole camp down on them.

Rosh knew the command tent was dead in the middle of the camp. Exact middle. When they moved again he realized they were right beside it. He wasn't surprised to see a god pillar, the sign of their shared religion in front of it. The Empire always put one up, even if it was in the eyes of the people, just for show.

He has been on assault missions on Eliti camps before. It was kill, disrupt or kidnap. And the Eliti still didn't change a thing. Stubborn bastards. These attacks always seem to surprise them. Like they couldn't imagine anyone trying something like that. Or maybe they just didn't care.

The command tent was guarded though. Two sentries on each side, bright glow globes behind them. The white light they cast set the clearing around the god pillar in glaring contrast to the pitch-dark lanes the assault unit had come down. Eris signaled, and the four throwers put on their slit shades. All they needed to see was their target for their knives. The rest of the men looked at the ground until they had been killed and the globes covered. The men separated, stepped out as one and whipped their knives at the sentries. They glittered as they spun through the air and into the throats of the Eliti soldiers. The D'ael rarely missed and at this range, they didn't. The men fell, blood spraying out in dark arcs. The knife throwers raced up to them and threw covers over the globes. One of the soldiers had started to cry out and a D'ael stooped over and finished him. The entire unit froze in the sudden blackness, waiting for a response from the Eliti army asleep around them. Nothing. They looked up to Eris. He signaled to advance on the command tent. They lined up in front of it, and then crouched down. The four men who killed the sentries took up their positions, spears and hand. Then the rest of the clan filed in to the tent, knives out.

The tent was large, and it had an entrance way, with a small room before the big one. There was an officer asleep at a small wooden desk, his head down on his arms. Eris signaled and one of the clan, Rosh couldn't see which, glided over, pulled his head back, clamped his hand over his mouth and stabbed the man in the heart. He died quickly and silently.

Eris signaled to rush the general. One to each arm and leg and one to gag him. He led this time. The D'ael surged forward

through the tent flaps and into the next chamber. To their surprise, the Eliti general was sitting on his bed, fully clothed, boots, cape and all. He had a candle in his hand.

"Come in come in," he said. "I was waiting for you." The D'ael were stunned. Eris's right hand came up to signal something and then slowly dropped down to his side. The general spoke again quietly,

"Are the guards and my adjutant dead?"

Eris looked at him, then at us then at him again. He nodded, yes.

"Well. Couldn't be helped. They couldn't be told."

One of the clan said "That's easy for you to say. You're still breathing."

The D'ael did not like the Eliti and especially didn't like their officers. They were city born and bred, arrogant and condescending in negotiations and vicious to their prisoners.

"They were deserters", he said. "They served in that rabble in the Southlands. Mutinied and followed that Southerner to fight the Bonded."

Many of the people had fought in that war too, Rosh thought and said some said it was the beginning of the end. That the Hound was here. Rosh wasn't one of them, but he didn't hold it against any who went.

'They could fight who and where and when they wanted. They were free people. The Civil War was not going to end anytime soon, and if the Hound was here, then it wasn't going to matter much in the end anyway'.

The general stood up, his hand away from his sword. He was short, broad across the chest with a slightly protruding belly, like a barrel. He was dark-haired and eyed.

"They are dead, and we have business. I need to speak to the clan leaders. I was ordered here by the Mothers to make contact."

Eris spoke quickly, "Why not a flag of truce then?"

The man did not respond to the question. "Please make take me to the clan leaders," he said. "I can get you out of camp."

Eris looked around. He was in charge, but the clans didn't fight like the Empire of Eliton. Decisions like this one could be discussed by the unit if there was time. And they had a little. He turned to his men,

"What do you think boys?"

Rosh spoke, "He's a bold one. But we came here to get him and if he wants to come, what's the problem?"

Some of the clan nodded in agreement.

"What if he's a spy or an assassin?" one of the men said. Rosh thought it was Balderin.

Eris scoffed, "We'll bind and blindfold him. He isn't going to be able to hurt anyone." And then he smiled, "You can help carry him for asking such a stupid question."

The unit of D'ael seem to decide at that moment, but Eris spoke again,

"But what if we just ask him what this is about? Make it a condition of taking him along?"

There were murmurs of agreement. "Yes." "I'd like to know." "It's a funny thing." "Don't like being in the dark."

These men were used to knowing why they fought. It was way of the people and the way of the D'ael.

"Right," Eris said. "He gives us something before we take him."

"Okay General," he said. "Before we go, you tell us what you want to talk about."

"Out of the question. I, I am to speak to the clan leaders only."

Eris shrugged, "Then we don't go. Rosh, kill him."

Rosh advanced without hesitation, pulling the two long knives from the sheaths that crisscrossed his back. The general's eyes widened, and he put his hands up.

"I just want to talk!" He said.

"Maybe we were sent to kill you," Eris said. "Maybe...."

“Don’t be a fool,” the general said. “We knew you would try to kidnap me. Why do you think I paraded around the camp in my uniform? We’re not idiots.”

“Neither are we,” Eris replied. “You know the clan leaders will tell us. The people don’t follow orders like you. Tell us now, give us a reason to risk our lives dragging you back.”

Rosh knew that Eris was lying. The general was coming with them if he talked or not.

“Make it quick.”

“We have heard things,” the general said. “Things that are disturbing. About the Southlands.”

“Isn’t that over?”

“That’s what we thought. Only a short war to get the Chan out of there.”

“And?” Eris asked. “And?”

“One of our armies was attacked. The general grimaced. “And not by the Chan.”

The D’ael waited. The general seen pained by the conversation.

“We, the mothers... Eris cocked his head. “Some of the mothers”, the general admitted, “have spoken to the holy men. And one believes she has the Hound within her household.”

"The Hound?" The men were staggered. The Hound brings the end of the world. He covers the world in darkness so that the Other cannot have his madness and horror. This was what the people believed. And now the Empire has faith as well?

Eris spoke, "Do you believe this?"

The general looked at his hands, then at the D'ael. "I follow my mother. And she says we need to stop this war. and that you will listen because the people follow the old ways."

Rosh and the rest of the D'ael knew that some of the Eliti army followed these ways as well but not the officer class. *'Something strangely powerful must have happened to get them to try this,'* he thought. At that moment one of the four D'ael who were impersonating the guards burst into the tent,

"Change of the Guard coming. We need to go."

"Right," Eris said and signaled to the men. "Stay in the middle of our unit," he said directly to the general.

The D'ael went smoothly and quickly out of the tent, around the corner and back up the dark narrow path. They hadn't gotten very far when they heard the hooting of the Eliti horns. The alarm had been sounded. The camp would be awake in seconds.

Eris' right hand signaled double time. The D'ael broke into a run. The path they were on ran behind the parallel rows of tents so the soldiers emerging in the dark did not see them.

That would change when they got to the camp's edge. They wouldn't have time to wait for the patrols to pass. They might have to run straight through whatever was waiting for them.

The D'ael ran easy. They ran every day, mission or no. The D'ael were born running, lifting rocks, wrestling or throwing knives for training. Or so it was said. Rosh could not remember when he wasn't doing one thing or the other. Like his father and his father's father and his two brothers, while they lived.

Rosh was a typical D'ael in battle. Anxious but not nervous. Dying was not in the plan but if he was going over, he would do it with his clan, for his people.

The general stumbled. One of the D'ael grabbed him just before he fell into the man in front of him. They came to a halt. The narrow strip of ground in front of them was full of soldiers. Rosh figured they had to wait for it at least to thin out before they try to move on. They were at the camp's edge now. He could the light from the bright globes and he could see the Hirashu. Now he was a little more than anxious. They all crouched down a little lower. The Eliti would quickly quarter the camp and cut them off. They had to move. There was a pause in the running soldiers and Eris signaled, 'Go!'.

They went like a speeding grey animal with eleven heads and twenty-two feet. The two D'ael out in front flicked throwing knives into the guards on the high embankment that surrounded the camp. They fell back choking and spraying blood. The Hirashu, now unleashed, screamed and leaped at the column. Long stabbing knives flashed out as the D'ael met

its teeth and claws with their blades. The largest Hirashu died with its jaws clamped on the throat of one of their men. Razor sharp knives hacked off its head, but the man could not be saved. Up and over and down they went, running out of the white light of the globes they had not shattered with their throwing knives. Spears arced out of the camp in a sleeting cloud. But the D'ael scattered once in the open knowing the Eliti were best at mass warfare and individual targets made them hesitate. One, two men went down. The first took a spear directly in the back. He died almost instantly, with a quiet sigh. The other was impaled in the calf. It went through and pinned him to the ground. The D'ael didn't leave live men behind, so the spear was broken, and he was dragged out into the darkness.

Rosh reached the forest among the first of the unit. They had lost two of their number. Two of ten. Two brothers, father's, husbands and sons not at the clan fire tonight. He hung his head while he walked. Too many. *'That fucking general better be worth it.'* he thought. The general was gagged and hooded. They didn't carry him. They led him along paths they knew well, even in the dark, to their camp.

They had done what was asked. The D'ael would hand him over, and the clan leaders would talk. And maybe the war with the Eliton would continue and maybe, it would stop. And maybe, the Hound was here, and the world would come to an end. But probably not. Probably it would be another war and the D'ael would be called to kill or kidnap or do something other men would not.

Rosh's leg hurt. He knew he had to get the wound cleaned. No

matter how small the cut, it could kill him if he didn't. He knew he had to eat and drink and sleep because the clan leaders could call for the D'ael again tomorrow. Maybe the general and his news would change everything but maybe not.

He ate, and he drank and then he found his bed in the big D'ael tent. It was dark and very quiet. Quickly, among his brothers, Rosh fell asleep.

Music

Music used to be different in Dece. Nowhere else in the known world could you hear music like this. It soared, it lifted, it twisted and pulled apart the mind like a hurricane wind. It was an audible drug that startled and staggered those who heard it. It was like the finest wine, the fiercest spice, the most carefully aged spirits, the sweetest candy and yet much more. The creators of this powerful experience, discovered as children, were taken away from their homes and then cloistered away in hidden and remote schools to spend half a lifetime learning the instruments to create the sounds, and the art of writing the notes that put men in their thrall. Their parents were paid handsomely, and most were proud to hand them over.

The masters lived in a waking dream of their own design. When they weren't writing or playing they were cared for almost as if they were infant children. Their minds lived elsewhere. How they didn't go mad, no one knew. Some thought it was that they only constructed the musical fantasies

and others experienced them. Some said they got gradually used to the sounds. Whatever it was, if they finished the training, they had many years of dreamy productivity. When their inspiration dried up, and it always did, they were sent back to the schools they came from to pass their faded gifts on to the next generation of music makers.

Only the richest of the patrons could afford to hear these powerful songs. And even then, only rarely, for reasons both financial and mental. They thought of course, that they earned it and their position in society made them better suited to appreciate it. Their lieutenants, guards, and whores came with the patrons to the concerts, but they could not go in the hall. The ecstasy was for the chosen.

When the music ended, the patrons sat for hours in reclining couches, waiting for calm. Their hearts raced, their minds reeled, and their eyes refused to focus. The savage, compelling dreams created by the music of the masters refused to let them go. Gradually though, the hard lines of the room, the minute irritations of their clothing, their bowels or their cares intruded. They got up in silence and one by one staggered out into the night.

The guards and whores left as well, leaving the separate special chambers made for them. They would always yearn for the faintly sublime feelings the barely heard music gave them. Some said the music patrons constructed their halls just so that could happen, ensuring the loyalty of their customers by subtly enslaving their followers. Providing another service. Others said they just didn't give a shit that the ordinary people

got addicted. Just so long as they got paid.

The part of the city where the music was played was safe. So much money and so many depended on it. But the rest of Dece was not. It had no government. It was a city of pleasure and risk. Order was kept by armed men, hired by the businesses or attached to whoever was visiting to experience what the city offered. The music hall had its own security of course. The masters made their patrons a lot of money, so they hired the best.

The music hall guards stopped up their ears when the music began. Exposure to the master's music would, over time, permanently damage their minds. In the far past, some had pretended to follow orders and listened when they could. At first, they exulted in their stolen passion. But they did not have the time to prepare or recover. And they heard the music every day, in either practice or performance. Eventually, they laid down outside the performance hall with a smile on their face unable to move or exploded into homicidal rage at the exact moment the music stopped. The music patrons then had their guards' ears checked every hour, every day. And like most bartenders, having seen its effects up close, most of these guards were wary of addiction.

The music patrons always made sure there was only enough of the prodigies to keep the money flowing, to them. They were rare enough in any case, but no rival schools or music halls were allowed to exist. Not in the Southlands. That was a bloody business at times but as the Southlands had never had an overarching authority, no captain, king or emperor, crimes

committed in the name of profit and pleasure in one place were never punished in another.

There was always the chance of one of the criminal patrons making trouble, but they had their inns and pubs, where ordinary singers sang their ordinary songs, gamblers lost money at table and wheel and whores whored all who could pay. Looking after gifted adult children and dealing with the historically vengeful and violent music patrons seemed like too much trouble.

It was also true that the value of the experience the music provided to paying customers had to be balanced against its ability to confound even the strongest mind. Some patrons described it like climbing a mountain of sensation. Enduring it and coming out coherent was somewhat like a badge of honor among those who could afford to listen. But people died climbing mountains. And the music of the masters made some pay.

Two stories stand out concerning these dangers. Both happened many years ago. One young master was so good, if that word is the right one, that his performances began to change those who heard them. Initially, he was lionized as a great genius. More and more patrons paid more and more to hear him. But the consequences of hearing his work grew. One evening after his performance some patrons came out of their usual reverie permanently altered. Even after the usual waiting, they limped and stammered, their eyes wandered over everything they saw, they were unable to form sentences. Some lost the ability to speak, their minds completely gone. The music patrons looked

on in horror. Furious relatives and suspicious and angry guards had to be placated and paid off. The youthful master never performed again. Too dangerous to be sent back to the schools, he was killed, and his music burned in front of the affected families. Each of his teachers had a ring finger cut off as a lesson to them all. The families of the injured patrons got one of those in a small ornate box.

The other master with these skills was more aware. She desired to be free from her patrons. And alone among her peers, she wrote music which made the paying customers pliable. She filled them full of love for what she produced but she didn't damage them. She was subtle. Her music made other masters' compositions sound like weak imitations to the minds she manipulated. She too became enormously popular, her performances selling out in record time. Eventually one of the richest nobles in the Southlands tried to buy her from the music masters. He offered a ridiculous amount of money and then demanded that the young woman be delivered to his castle in the country immediately.

This had never happened before, and music patrons were shocked. But they weren't about to let their monopoly end in this way. After close questioning, this master discovered she wasn't as tough as she was clever. Her scheme to escape their clutches was discovered. But this talent was too valuable for her to be killed. Instead, she was bundled back to the schools to teach the other teachers how to make the young masters more proficient at making patrons at least a little malleable. The noble was told she had died. Her loyalty was ensured by a simple, explicit threat to her family. Her entire, extended

family.

Somehow though, over time the power of the music began to fade. Nothing the patrons did stopped the degradation. They searched farther and farther abroad. West to the Eliton Empire, south to the Chan Consolidation and north across the desert to the tribes, sending riders with the ability to test children for the talent. Fewer and fewer were found. Teachers were threatened, punished and then rewarded in a strange cycle of desperation. Music was produced, but it was only rarely memorable and only sometimes beautiful. When it was, it raised hopes, but in the end only created vague yearning. The patrons knew then they were listening to something good, but this music paled when compared to the experience produced by the old masters. These were sounds to like, even love, but not experience. Money flowed out of the halls and into everyday places. The masters, even when creating, were now adults in mind and practice. The mystery faded. The schools disbanded. The children were sent back home. Men and women taught music in homes and in the inns and pubs. The patrons refused to pay exorbitant sums to hear it. It was the end of an age.

Some say that was when the Southlands began to turn in on itself. It became the land we now know. People began to travel less, wonder less and believe less. Some said that this loss left a hole in the heart of the Southlands. That the promise of music that could lift and transform us, even if only the rich heard it, was the promise of something more than just what we can see, hear and touch. Some say that the Believer knew this and used his power to destroy the young, source of the gift so that his promise and his love and hate could fill southern hearts and

MUSIC

minds. That's what some say. It is hard to know, but the masters have gone and so has their power to move us beyond words and feeling. And that is a hard loss for all of us, rich or poor.

She

At night she sat and remembered the days before the Bonded came. She lived on the main north-south road. It was a simple time for her and her mate. Their home was close enough to the castle that no serious criminals came around and far enough away that Lord Belder or one of his children weren't riding by, looking down their noses at them every day. Or, worse, demanding land taxes or forced labor. Legally, they were under his protection, but the boundaries of his lands were vague and the idea of needing his soldiers seemed ridiculous at the time.

Her mate was a farmer. Or at least he called himself that. More like a gardener she always thought. The land they lived on was good, fertile black earth. They didn't own much, but the vegetables sold, and they got two or three crops before each winter. He was proud of what he did, but she knew it was her baking and weaving that kept them in fuel and food.

She missed his presence. She had grown used to his warm soft bulk in her bed. He wasn't bad company, although, he wasn't

much of a talker, had a limited vocabulary when he did speak and an abiding love for his vegetables. He drank too much in the winter. At home in his armchair and in the inn just a few steps down the road. Nothing much for a gardener to do during those long months. They didn't have animals to look after or much equipment to repair. He drank and ran a few errands, she kept weaving and baking. Traffic on the road slowed with the cold but it didn't stop, and the ladies of the castle always needed something new across their shoulders.

She had learned to read as a child of the castle manager. That helped pass the time. She even had some Eliti books on a small shelf by their bed. They had little in common really, but they came to marriage late in life and the physical comfort was something they both grew to cherish.

They had lived that way for many years. No children came which he regretted. Especially when he was drunk. She felt only emptiness, and sometimes relief. She was the older when they wedded. Birthing would have been difficult for her. And they had nowhere to grow as a family, so more than one child would have been hard. She was glad they hadn't been faced with losing them to work in servitude at a larger farm, a tavern or worse, to the castle as a servant or soldier. Belder was a right bastard. So, there had only been her mate to worry about, and now only her.

She stared at the flickering blue flame coming off the flame stone. She sat in its cocoon of warmth in the darkness of her little house. She remembered the morning the Bonded came. First, though, were the refugees from the city. Silent, looking

at them in their homes with almost accusing eyes. None had warned them about what was coming. If they had, would they have believed them?

They were like animals, the Bonded. No, animals didn't act like they did, unless they were sick. She even knew a few of them. They were neighbors and customers. But mostly they were city folk. And they were barely recognizable as people when they ran by screaming, looting and, killing. She and her man had hidden, but when they got into his garden he bolted out the door before she could grab him.

She remembered how ridiculous the scene was, disheveled and hungry Bonded eating his crops and her fat mate running and knocking the pieces out of their hands. It was almost funny until he came. The Believer. His cavalry thundered up, surrounding him on the road. They were impressive, big men clad in red gold armor. He was black and silver, stinking and smoking. She could feel his twisted power, burning the ground he walked on. Why did he stop here? Did he hear the commotion? Sense her mate's resistance? Or maybe it was just bad luck. Or good? Oh, how afraid she was, she remembered her guts were water. And now, how she missed him! He had walked around her house, reached out with his right hand and they all fell to their knees. Her mate included. Then the Believer screamed or yelled or made a sound like nothing she had ever heard. She could still hear it. They fell all over themselves trying to touch him. His guard beat them back with the flats of their swords.

She remembered feeling at that moment as if she had been opened like a flower, or crumbled like dry soil, or flooded like a

river over its banks. It was him, in her heart, her mind, her soul. He, the Believer, needed her. He loved her. He was in pain. So much pain. He demanded she submit to him, help him carry his awful burden, and she did. She rushed out of the house to get to him, but she must have tripped on her long dress. She fell and hit her head hard on the corner of her small kitchen table. When she woke they were gone. She was weak and dizzy. Her face was covered in blood. She remembered crawling to her bed and sleeping. She rose only to sip water from a jug. She ached for him, but she couldn't move. She tried once. Staggered out the door and down the road until she threw up. She woke up in her bed. She could not remember how she got there.

She sipped the bitter tea made from the roots of the silver weed in the garden. It was hot and left her feeling hazy and serene. This was when she remembered the others' children. When she drank the tea. The Bonded had rejected them. Even if they were their own. She did not know why. And the children grew hungry. She fed them at first. But they kept coming and she had to live as well. And something in her heart had hardened to the little ones. The Believer, he had done it to her, she knew. One morning she had used her mate's walking stick on them. The older ones fought but they were weak, and she was bigger and just as desperate. She buried the ones she killed. The others moved on for the most part. They robbed her at night sometimes, those who had stayed around. She figured the rest went to the castle or south, a ragged army running down the road after the Bonded army and their parents.

It was very quiet. Her ears rang with the silence. Her eyes closed. Then the flame stone popped and hissed. She missed

the Believer like a young girl misses her loved one. She wanted to be close to him, uncaring of what happened next. His armor had steamed and the ground blackened under him. She had been torn apart when he was inside her. But still, she wanted him.

She had never fully recovered from the fall. Her eyesight was dimmed, and her walk remained unsteady. She stayed in her house. The Bonded did not return. People filtered in from east and west, looking in wonder at the empty buildings and the graves. Her business slowly resumed. She remembered how quickly it had passed. In a matter of hours, her world was gone. Like a roaring flood, a raging fire, an earth-shattering...she laughed at herself in the dark. What a little education could do. Maybe she should write it all down. For her descendants, except she didn't have any. She hadn't written anything down for a long time. No need for a woman with a pen in the Southlands. Or a man for that matter. Unless he kept accounts for a lord like her father had for Belder. No, she would just remember.

Her back ached. Years over a loom had left her bent. Her head was swimming from the tea. She was hungry, but she was rationing her food and she was done for the day. She snuggled down into her chair and drank the dregs in the cup. It helped her sleep. She thought of her mate and his awkward jiggling run into their garden to stop the Bonded. She died a little when she thought that the Believer would never return. She was never going to see either one of them ever again. Then her eyes focused on the orange and blue fire and she remembered.

For Death's Sake

I

We woke up a couple of days ago and Lady Andaine was gone. And the policeman Conor and the Hound. Two of his men went with them I've heard. The rest stayed. They've gone west or south or something. And Conor and that black beast are the only reason we are still holding this place. And now, we are dead men.

Wils made a speech this morning. He stood on the parapet beside where the stone man had smashed our walls. He yelled and pleaded. His face was very red. Belder, Vik and Rian stood beside him. Glowering at us. Although Belder looked like he was going to throw up. He's been drunk since he got here, I've heard. Wils told us how strong the castle is and how brave we are. He said we beat them once and we can beat them again. Said Andaine went for reinforcements. No one believes that. From who? Most of the troops from the surrounding castles are here

already. I've heard she just ran. I don't know. I've always said she was okay. Worked hard on the roads. I've ridden with her and she's tough. But this? Everyone says she and the policeman were making eyes at each other since they got here. And he took her. He's a lucky bastard if he has bedded her. And now they're gone.

Others say Wils let her go to keep his line intact. All his wives and children are in here with us. Except for Myra. She was far to the south riding the roads. Never got back and now the Bonded surround us. So, she's still out there. But Wils didn't favor her. Myra was too much like her mother. Stubborn. Loud. Strong. We all heard them fight. That was a while ago of course, but Wils doesn't forgive.

It's nice out. That's one thing. Not too hot and I've got wall duty this afternoon. Maybe these assholes will just leave us alone. We did put a beating on them. Fucking Conor took down the stone man in the moat. Fucking unbelievable. I saw it come across the green. Big and weird, moving slowly at times. Like it was in mud. The air burned around it. It was fucked. Then I got ordered off the wall, to the keep. Missed the rest of it, guard duty for the family. Wils' family. Best kind of duty there is, off the wall. Saw the gate go up though. Flash of blue light and it fucking flew apart.

Wils showed something then. Right at them, that's where he went. Right at them. Have to respect that. I'll tell anyone. Took our best to do it though, had to kill every Bonded soldier I've heard. No retreat in them they say. If they come this afternoon, I guess I'll find out.

II

It's hot now. On the wall. Just standing here. My helm feels like an anvil on my head. The Bonded are coming again today. I can see movement in the forest. I have my bow ready. Norril and Tanzi are on either side of me. They look hot too, and nervous. We are all looking hard at the dark spaces between the trees that surround the castle. We all see the flickers of armor and gold flags. We share knowing looks.

"Just pour it on them boys, when they come," I say.

"Yeah, but not too early. Wait till you can be sure." Said Norril.

Tanzi nodded. He looked like he was too scared to speak. Wils went by, patting each of us on the back as he did.

"Stand firm men. Castle White must not fall," he says, over and over again.

"No shit," I say after he has gone.

Tanzi chokes out a laugh. Norril snorts. Then I hear, "Here they come."

The Bonded clear the forest quickly, large rectangular formations of infantry with roiling masses of irregulars out front. They run at the castle in a rush. Screaming like, I don't know what.

"Fuck," Norril said.

"Wait," I said. "Wait."

"Wait!" roared our captain.

We waited. Then we got the order,

"Notch! Aim!"

I raise my bow and aim down the arrow. They are close

enough that we can't miss.

"Release!"

I let go and my arrow leaps away, into the body of the advancing mass. I immediately pull another from my quiver and notch it.

"Release at will!" our captain yells with desperation in his voice. The Bonded have unnerved him. Arrow after arrow we send into them. Every one hits someone. My eyes are burning with sweat. My fingers are slippery. I am glad I have my leather glove on, to grip the string. Norril grins at me like a madman.

"We are killing these bastards."

I look out over the field. The green is covered in bodies. The irregulars do not carry shields. It is murder. I hear a noise behind me and I turn. Runners are coming up with tall buckets of arrows. Hundreds of arrows. We are going to need them.

"They aren't stopping." Tanzi says.

We keep firing. My fingers ache. My back is tight. I can see individual faces now. Red, screaming and crying. They are at the edge of the moat, shaking their swords and spears at us. It is so stupid. We take our time now, sighting carefully and burying each arrow in a Bonded irregular. They are so close. We can't miss. A few fall in the moat, their blood colors the muddy water, for a moment.

The Bonded regulars push their way to the front, shoving the others back. Some of them had to be dragged away. Now we see a wall of red and gold shields, tall and thick.

"Hold fire boys!" we hear. Norril shoots a couple of arrows anyway. They stick into the shield wall but do not come close to penetrating it. The captain screams,

“Hold fire you bastards! Save your arrows!”

I am so thirsty. The Bonded are at the edge of the moat. Waiting. We are on the wall looking down. I can barely breathe. It is so hot, and I am tired of killing. Why don't they stop? It is madness. I look at Tanzi and Norril. Both are soaked in sweat. But they have that set in their jaw. That look. A “Those fuckers are not getting in here’ look. No, they are not.

The runners at the top of the wall who had brought arrows now bring water. The spring below the keep is going to be handy. I kneel behind the parapet and drink deep. The water is so cold the top of my mouth and my throat aches. But its okay. It feels good.

“Ladders!” our captain screams, “Ladders! Kill the...”

Then I can't hear anything. The screams and yells of the men on the wall and on the other side of the moat drown out all attempts to hear the orders. I stand up. There they are, the Bonded have ladders that are long enough to reach over the moat and the top of the wall.

“Busy fuckers,” I say.

Norril grins at me and notches an arrow, crouched beside me. We wait for the men with the forked staffs. This isn't Wils' first battle. We trained for this. We will push those ladders right back before they get halfway up.

The ladders rise, hesitate and then come forward, hitting the stone walls with a thwack. Men are already three rungs up when they hit. Norril, Tanzi and I all aim at the same guy on the ladder. The first one. Two of our arrows hit him and he

goes down, crashing into the upraised shields. The second man on the ladder gets close to the wall before we kill him.

“That was fucked,” I yell out. “I’ll take the top one and you guys go for two and three.” I say, pointing to Tanzi and Norril respectively. They nod, and we notch, pull and release again and again. All along the wall I’m sure the same thing is happening, but I don’t have time to look. We have this part of the wall and they are not getting over here.

I have killed more than twenty men. I have wounded just as many or more. But these fuckers keep coming. Norril and Tanzi have kept up with me. But not one of those bastards has gotten onto the wall.

Then, suddenly, a swarm of arrows reach us. They have bowmen! Behind rows of their infantry, fifty strides behind the front ranks. The arrows click on the stone behind us. I crouch down and press up against the wall. Why did they wait so long to use them? I look up and see Norril standing and grinning at me and then an arrow slants into his right eye socket.

His hands slap up onto his face. He bellows, then falls to the ground and starts to shake. Blood pours out from behind his fingers. I reach him and put my hands on his shoulders. He’s starts to choke, and I don’t know what to do. He’s spraying blood and trying to pull the arrow out and he’s shaking all over. I try to hold him down. Then he stops. Another arrow slides into his leg. He doesn’t move.

“He’s dead,” Tanzi says. He is right beside me, but I had not seen him. Until he says it, again, “he’s dead.”

Our captain runs up, looks at Norril and then screams at me, "Get up! Fight!" He waves wildly in the direction of the Bonded. "Fight!"

We get up. My hands are covered in blood. How had that happened? The roar of the battle returns. Keep them off the wall. That's what we must do. It is so hot. My back and arms feel like wire that has been stretched too far, beyond its ability to retract. I have no strength left. I see the arrow enter Norril's eye again. I shiver. Then an arrow rushes by me and clicks off the stone. Then another. I reach back into the tall bucket and find one myself. I notch it and turn to sight it. A Bonded soldier is three rungs from the top. I put the arrow into his neck where it meets his shoulder. He flinches, takes another step up and then keels over and falls into the moat with a splash. I immediately reload and turn but there is no one on the ladder. One of our boys pushes it up and back until it falls over. The Bonded soldiers have stopped. They are retreating in good order. Shields up, leaving their dead behind.

"Yeah!" yells Tanzi. Then the entire wall joins in, "Hurrah! Hurrah!" deep voices bellow out in victory. I join them, and we shout until our throats are sore.

I am so tired. We are relieved, and we stagger down the steps to the courtyard. We eat and Tanzi gets drunk. Norril's body is gone. Dealt with, they say. Wils comes by, "We'll have a ceremony when this is all over. For the dead." He says, "Do it right."

This happens three more times. The Bonded come, we hold them off. How I'm not sure. They have no siege engines, or

trenches and we have a lot of arrows. And water and food. But our chances long term aren't good I've heard. If they decide to dig in they'll starve us out. All they need is patience. I'm glad they haven't shown much of that.

On the morning of the fourth day after the first attack the sun does not come out. It is cool and misty with a stiff breeze coming from the east. Bad weather always comes from the east. Looking out across the green I see the bodies. The Bonded don't bother with their dead or wounded for that matter. Some of the ones we haven't filled with arrows are still moving, always towards us. We usually let them crawl into the moat and drown. Waste of ammunition to kill them. I feel sick when I see them struggle into the water.

Lots of commotion out in the forest last night. Moaning and screaming all night long. Then silence in the early morning. I've heard they're leaving. Some say Andaine is coming with a relief force. I don't think so. I think they'll come again today. They are late though. I squint into the clouds. The fingers on my right hand are hooked into a cramped claw. They started moving us off the wall for rest periods yesterday. Our arrows weren't going as far. All of us are tired and sick of the death. They should have given up by now. Or changed tactics. It's beyond belief that they keep coming. It's beyond anything. It's death for death's sake.

Wait, here they come again. I see something moving in the forest opposite the gate. Our captain yells,

"Ready boys!"

I knew it. Fuck. Then I see him. It must be him. The Believer

himself is here. He is bigger than a man, but wrong somehow. His arms are too long. I hear Tanzi whisper,
“Come closer and I’ll put an end to all this.”

He fingers his bowstring, but he looks scared. The air around the Believer is blackened with thin smoke. Like he had been on fire and was now just smoldering. It streams away from him in long dark tendrils. The castle goes silent. We all see him. He keeps coming stepping over the bodies. I think, yes, I see he is burning the grass as he walks over it. It’s a black path behind him. Shit. Tanzi looks at me. We are both terrified. I say,
“They are not coming in here.”

Tanzi gulps and nods. Wils pounds up the steps behind me, followed by his commanders.

“Oh no,” he breathes out. Then he runs down the wall towards the main gate.

The Believer raises his arms. A sound comes from him, deep and harsh. It hits like a wave, thumping into the wall. I am blown back and almost into the courtyard. I see several men fall silently to crunch into the ground behind us. I stagger back to my post. I hear a horrible ripping sound and a rumble. The earth in front of the Believer is rising. Stones, dirt, grass, all of it. And then it ripples like he is cracking a rug. The ground moves towards the gate like there is someone under it, pushing. I cannot believe what I am seeing. The grey sky reels above me. I want to look away from the horror, but I cannot. The wave reaches the moat and the water rises halfway up the wall. Then it thumps back down, spraying all of us. I am stunned. I can’t, how is he doing this? How? Then the next wave comes. I kneel and try to hold onto the walls of the castle. This time the earth

almost crests the wall. The water of the moat has become mud and is almost solid in parts as it mixed with the dirt. Stones and bodies all fly up and over us. A rock cracks into my helm. Still the wall holds. I get up and look out. All I see is a rising wall of black earth blocking out the light. All I hear are screams of terror. All I feel is fear, and then all I know is nothing.



About the Author

PF Legge is an over educated father, husband, teacher, football coach and author. He was born in Toronto and has lived in southwestern Ontario his entire life, the last 45 years in London. He is the author of three books; *Almost a Myth*, *Slaughter by Strange Means* and *The Fire: Tales from the Southlands*.

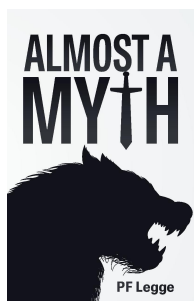
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Also by PF Legge



Almost a Myth

Conor is a law keeper, fighter and warrior. Gray is his Hound. Linked by a bond of mind and mission, they walk together through a world of political weakness and religious terror. Their fractured land is threatened by the Believer, a figure from nightmares who lives in the minds of his followers, the

Bonded.

Conor and Gray, along with Lady Andaine, a fierce noblewoman, will gather an army to fight for the freedom of their homeland. And they will come to understand that their powerful link is part of a larger war for life itself.

SLAUGHTER
by
STRANGE
MEANS



PF LEGGE

Slaughter by Strange Means

One man's journey

One world's fate

Conor led the army that won the war against the Bonded. Prophecies seemed fulfilled and peace at hand. Yet the conflict brought hungry empires and forces far worse than those of men into the Southlands. And victory had not prevented Conor from being imprisoned and his homeland ravaged and occupied. Alone and grieving, Conor faces new threats and the emergence of an ancient enemy as he fights his way across a chaotic landscape to find his friend and ally, the Hound Gray.

Linked together since their youth by mind and mission, Conor and Gray must seek to save their home and their world.

