

CHAPTER ONE

Reva



M*ay the World Father, who sees all and knows all in His love, guide my blade.*

She watched the tall man as he made his way down the gangplank and onto the quayside. He was dressed in common sailor's garb, plain, dun-coloured cloth and sturdy but aged boots, a threadbare woollen cloak about his shoulders and, she was surprised to see, no sword at his belt or on his back. He did, however, have a rope-tied canvas bag slung over his shoulder, a bag of sufficient length for a sword.

The tall man turned as someone called to him from the ship, a broad, black-skinned man with a red scarf tied around his neck, marking him as captain of the vessel that had carried such an illustrious passenger to this minor port. The tall man shook his head, a polite but strained smile on his lips, gave a friendly but emphatic wave of farewell and turned his back on the ship. He walked on quickly, drawing the hood of his cloak over his head as he did so. There were a good number of hawkers, troubadours and whores on the quayside, most affording the tall man the barest attention, though he drew a few glances due to his height. A clutch of whores made a half-hearted attempt to entice his custom, clearly he was another salt-dog with little wealth to share, but he just laughed easily, hands spread in a sham of apologetic and reluctant poverty.

Stupid sluts, she thought, crouched in the dank alleyway that had been her home for the past three days. Fish traders occupied the buildings on either side and she was yet to accustom herself to the stench. *He lusts for blood, not flesh.*

The tall man rounded a corner, making for the north gate no doubt. She rose from her hiding place to follow.

“Payment’s due, love.” It was the fat boy again. He had been plaguing her since her arrival in the alley, extracting payment in coin not to alert the guards to her presence here, the port authorities had little tolerance for vagrants these days, but she knew it wasn’t payment in coin that really interested him. He was perhaps sixteen, two years her junior, but an inch or so taller than her and considerably wider. From the look in his eye he had spent much of her coin on wine. “No more pretending,” he said. “One more day an’ you’d be gone, y’said. An’ yer still here. Payment’s due.”

“Please,” she backed away, voice high, fearful. If he had been sober, he might have wondered why she backed away from the street into the shadow, where surely she was more vulnerable. “I’ve got more, see?” She held out her hand, a copper gleaming dully in the half-light.

“Copper!” He batted it away, as she had assumed he would. “Cumbraelin bitch. I’ll take your coppers and more besi—”

Her fist caught him under the nose, fore-knuckles extended, a precise blow to a spot which would cause the most pain and confusion. His head snapped back, a small explosion of blood coming from his nose and mashed upper lip. Her knife came free from the hidden sheath at the small of her back as he staggered, but the killing blow wasn’t necessary. The fat boy ran his tongue over his ruined lip, incomprehension lighting his eyes, then collapsed to the alley floor. She took hold of his ankles and dragged him into the shadow. His pockets yielded what remained of her coppers, a small vial of redflower and a half-eaten apple. She took the coppers, left the redflower and walked away munching on the apple. It would likely be hours before anyone found the fat

boy and even then they would assume he was the victim of a drunken fight.

The tall man came into sight within the space of a moment, making his way through the gate, giving an affable nod to the guards but keeping his hood in place. She lingered, finishing her apple as he took the north road, letting him get a good half mile ahead before following.

May the World Father, who sees all and knows all in His love, guide my blade.

The tall man kept to the road for the rest of the day, occasionally stopping to check his surroundings, eyes scanning tree-line and horizon. The actions of a careful man, or an experienced warrior. She kept away from the road, staying in the trees that dominated the country north of Warnsclave, just close enough to keep him in sight. He walked at a steady pace with a regular, long-legged stride that ate up the miles with deceptive speed. There were a few other travellers on the road, mostly carts carrying cargo to or from the port, a few lone riders, none of whom stopped to talk to the tall man. With so many outlaws haunting the woods, talking to a stranger was unwise, though he seemed unconcerned at their wary disinterest.

As night fell he left the road, entering the woods to seek out a campsite. She tracked him to a small clearing sheltered beneath the branches of a large yew, hiding herself in a shallow ditch behind a copse of gorse, watching through the weave of ferns as he made his camp. It was all done with an impressive economy, the near-unconscious actions of a practised wilds-man; wood gathered, fire lit, ground cleared and bedroll laid in the space of what seemed mere moments.

The tall man settled himself against the trunk of the yew, ate a supper of dried beef, washed it down with a gulp from his canteen, then sat watching his fire burn down. His expression was oddly intense, almost as if he were listening to a conversation of some import. She tensed, wary of discovery,

knife already drawn. *Does he sense me?* she wondered. The priest had warned her he had the Dark in him, that he was the most formidable enemy she was ever likely to face. She had laughed and cast her knife at the target on the wall of the barn where he spent so many years training her. The knife shuddered in the centre of the target, which split and fell apart. “The Father blesses me, remember?” she said. The priest had whipped her, for her pride and the crime of claiming to know the mind of the World Father.

She watched the tall man and his oddly intense expression for another hour before he blinked, cast a final glance around at the forest and huddled in his cloak to sleep. She forced herself to wait another hour, until the night sky was as dark as it would get and the forest was near black as pitch, the only light of substance the lacelike wisps rising from his dead fire.

She rose from her ditch in a crouch, knife reversed, blade flat against the skin of her arm to hide the gleam. She moved towards the tall man’s sleeping form with all the stealth the priest had beaten into her since the age of six, as near soundless as any forest predator could be. The tall man lay on his back, head tilted to one side, neck laid bare. It would be so easy to kill him now, but her mission was clear. *The sword*, the priest had told her, over and over. *The sword is all, his death is secondary.*

She switched the grip on her knife, the blade poised, ready. *Most men will talk with a knife at their throat*, the priest had said. *May the World Father, who sees all and knows all in His love, guide your blade.*

She launched herself onto the tall man, knife reaching for his exposed throat . . .

The air whooshed from her lungs in a pained rush as her chest connected with something hard. *His boots*, she realised with a groan. Then she was in the air, launched by the tall man’s boot thrust to land on her back a good ten feet away. She scrambled upright, knife slashing into the spot where she knew he would follow up his attack . . . The knife met only air. The tall

man was standing next to the yew, regarding her with an expression certain to provoke an upsurge of rage in her breast. Amusement.

She snarled, charging forward, ignoring the caution instilled by the priest's cane. She fainted to the left then leapt, the knife slashing down to pierce the tall man's shoulder . . . The knife met only air. She stumbled, unbalanced by the momentum of her attack. Whirling, seeing him standing close by, still amused.

She lunged, knife moving in a complex series of jabs and slashes, accompanied by a dizzyingly fast array of kicks and punches . . . They all met only air.

She forced herself to stop, drawing breath in ragged gasps, fighting down the rage and hate. *If an attack fails, withdraw.* The priest's words were loud in her head. *Watch from the shadows for another opportunity. The Father will always reward patience.*

She gave the tall man a final snarl of rage and turned away, ready to sprint into the darkness . . .

"You have your father's eyes."

GO! the priest's voice shouted in her mind. But she stopped, turned back slowly. The tall man's expression had changed, the amusement replaced with something like sorrow.

"Where is it?" she demanded. "Where is my father's sword, Darkblade?"

His eyebrows rose. "Darkblade. Haven't heard that one in years." He moved back to the camp, tossing fresh branches on the fire and striking a flint.

She turned back to the forest, then back to the camp, self-hate and frustration burning in her. *Weakling, coward.*

"Stay if you're staying," the Darkblade said. "Or run if you're running."

She drew a deep calming breath, sheathed her knife and went to sit down on the other side of the growing fire. "The Dark saved you," she accused. "Your unholy magics are an affront to the love of the Father."

He gave an amused grunt, still feeding the fire. "You have dung

on your shoes from Warnslave. Town dung has a particular smell. You should have hidden yourself downwind.”

She looked at her shoes and gave an inward curse, resisting the urge to scrape it off. “I know your Dark sight gives you knowledge, how else would you know about my father?”

“You have his eyes, as I said.” The Darkblade sat, reaching for a leather pouch and tossing it over the fire to her. “Here, you look hungry.”

The pouch contained dried beef and a few oatcakes. She ignored the food, and the growl of protest from her stomach. “You should know,” she said. “You killed him.”

“Actually, I didn’t. As for the man who did . . .” He trailed off, expression momentarily sombre. “Well, he’s dead too.”

“It was at your command, your attack on his holy mission . . .”

“Hentes Mustor was an insane fanatic who killed his own father and plunged this Realm into a needless war.”

“The Trueblade brought the Father’s justice to a traitor and sought to free us from your Heretic Dominion. His every action was in service to Father’s love . . .”

“Really? Did he tell you that?”

She fell silent, head lowered to hide her rage. Her father had told her nothing, she had never met him, as this Dark-afflicted heretic obviously knew. “Just tell me where it is,” she grated. “My father’s sword. It’s mine by right.”

“That’s your mission? A holy quest for a yard of sharpened steel.” He reached for the canvas-bound bundle propped against the yew tree and held it out to her. “Take this one if you want. It’s probably forged with greater skill than your father’s in any case.”

“The sword of the Trueblade is a holy relic, described as such in the Eleventh Book, blessed by the World Father to bring unity to the Loved and an end to the Heretic Dominion.”

He seemed to find further amusement in this. “In truth, it was a plain weapon of Renfaelin design, the kind used by a man-at-arms

or a knight with scant funds, no gold or jewels in the hilt to make it valuable.”

Despite his scorn the words were enticing. “You were there when it was taken from my father’s martyred corpse. Tell me where it is or I swear by the Father you will have to kill me for I will plague you all your days, Darkblade.”

“Vaelin,” he said, putting the bundle aside.

“What?”

“It’s my name. Do you think you could use it? Or Lord Al Sorna if you’re of a formal inclination.”

“I thought it was Brother.”

“Not any more.”

She drew back in surprise. *He is no longer of the Order?* It was absurd, surely some kind of trick.

“How did you know where to pick up my trail?” he asked.

“The ship put in at South Tower before sailing to Warnslave. A man as hated as you shouldn’t expect to avoid recognition. Word flies quickly among the Loved.”

“So, you are not alone in this great endeavour.”

She bit down on more anger-stoked words. *Why not tell him all your secrets, you worthless bitch?* She rose, turning her back on him. “This doesn’t end here . . .”

“I know where to find it.”

She hesitated, glancing over her shoulder. His expression was entirely serious now. “Then tell me.”

“I will, but I have conditions.”

She crossed her arms tightly, face wrinkled in contempt and disgust. “So the great Vaelin Al Sorna bargains for a woman’s flesh like any other man.”

“Not that. As you said, I should not expect to go unrecognised. I require a disguise of sorts.”

“Disguise?”

“Yes, you will be my disguise. We will travel together, as . . .” He thought for a moment. “. . . brother and sister.”

Travel together. Travel with him? The very thought of it was

sickening. But the sword . . . *The sword is all. May the Father forgive me.* “How far?” she said.

“To Varinshold.”

“That’s three weeks from here.”

“Longer, I have a stop to make along the way.”

“And you will tell me where to find the sword when we get to Varinshold?”

“My word on it.”

She sat again, refusing to look at him, hating the ease of his manipulation. “I agree.”

“Then you’d best get some sleep.” He moved back from the fire to lie down, wrapping his cloak around him. “Oh,” he said. “What do I call you?”

What do I call you? Not, what’s your name? He expected her to lie to him. She decided to disappoint him. When he died she wanted him to know the name of the woman that killed him. “Reva,” she said. *I was named for my mother.*

She awoke with a start, stirred by the sound of his scattering the remains of the fire. “You’d best eat something.” He nodded at the leather pouch. “Many miles to cover today.”

She ate two of the oatcakes and drank water from his canteen. Hunger was an old friend, she didn’t remember a day when it had been absent from her life. *The truly Loved*, the priest had said the first time he left her out in the cold all night, *require only the love of the Father for nourishment.*

They were on the road before the sun had climbed over the trees, Al Sorna setting a punishing pace with his long, even stride. “Why didn’t you buy a horse in Warnslave?” she asked. “Don’t nobles always ride everywhere?”

“I have barely enough coin for food never mind a horse,” he replied. “Besides, a man on foot attracts less attention.”

Why is he so keen to hide from his people? she wondered. *Mere mention of his name in Warnslave and they’d have laden him with all the gold he could carry and given him the pick of the stables.*

But hide he did, every time a cart trundled past he averted his gaze and tightened his hood. *Whatever he returned for*, she decided, *it wasn't glory*.

"You're quite good with that knife," he commented during a brief rest by a milestone.

"Not good enough," she muttered.

"Skills like that require training."

She ate an oatcake and said nothing.

"When I was your age I wouldn't have failed." It wasn't a taunt, just a statement of fact.

"Because your unholy Order whips you like dogs from childhood and verses you in death."

To her surprise he laughed. "Quite so. What other weapons can you use?"

She shook her head sullenly, unwilling to give him any more information than was necessary.

"You must know the bow, surely," he persisted. "All Cumbraelins know the bow."

"Well I don't!" she snapped. It was true. The priest had told her the knife would be all she would need, telling her the bow was not for women. He had a bow of his own of course, all Cumbraelin men did, priest or not. The pain of the beating he had given her for trying to teach herself the use of it in secret had been matched by the humiliation that came from the discovery that drawing a longbow required more strength than she had. It was a point of considerable annoyance.

He let the matter drop and they continued on their way, covering another twenty miles by nightfall. He made camp earlier than he had the night before, disappearing into the woods for at least an hour after lighting the fire and telling her to keep it stoked. "Where are you going?" she asked, suspecting he would simply walk away and leave her there.

"To see what gifts this forest can offer us."

He came back as the gloom was beginning to descend in earnest, carrying a long branch of ash. After supper he sat by the fire and

began whittling at the branch with a short sailor's knife, stripping away the twigs and bark with accustomed ease. He offered no explanation and she was unable to resist the urge to ask. "What are you making?"

"A bow."

She snorted, her anger rising. "I'll accept no gifts from you, Darkblade."

His eyes didn't rise from his work. "It's for me. We'll need to hunt some meat before long."

He worked on the bow for the next two nights, thinning the ends and shaping the centre into a curve, flat on one side. For a bowstring he fensed a spare boot-lace, tying it to the notches carved into the ends. "Never was much of an archer," he mused, thrumming the string and drawing forth a low note. "My brother Dentos, though, it was like he'd been born with a bow in his hand."

She knew the story of Brother Dentos, it was part of his legend. The famed Brother archer who had saved him when he brought fiery destruction down on the Alpiran siege engines, only to die in a cowardly Alpiran ambush the next day. The tale had it that the Darkblade had turned the sands red with his fury as he cut down the ambushers, though they begged for mercy. She had serious doubts as to the truth of this or any of the other fanciful tales attached to the life of Vaelin Al Sorna, but the effortless ease with which he had defeated her attack that first night made her wonder if there wasn't some truth hidden amongst all the nonsense.

He made arrows from another ash branch, sharpening the points as they had no metal for arrowheads. "Should do for birds," he said. "Couldn't take on a boar with it though, need iron-heads to get through the ribs."

He hefted the bow and walked off into the forest. She waited a full two minutes, cursed and then followed. She found him crouched behind the husk of an ancient oak, an arrow notched to the bowstring. He waited with an absolute stillness, eyes fixed on a

patch of tall grass in a small clearing ahead. Reva moved cautiously to his side but contrived to step on a dry twig, the loud crack echoing through the clearing. Three pheasants rose from the grass, wings thundering as they sought the sky. Al Sorna's bowstring snapped and a bird tumbled back to earth, trailing feathers. He gave her a glance of faint reproach and went to fetch the game.

Not much of an archer, she thought. Liar.

In the morning she awoke to find herself alone in the camp, the Darkblade no doubt off hunting again, though his bow had been left propped against a fallen tree-trunk. There was a curious feeling in her belly, a strange heaviness and she realised this was the first time she could remember waking with a full stomach. Al Sorna had spitted and roasted the pheasant, seasoning the plucked skin with lemon thyme. The grease had covered her chin as she wolfed down her share. She caught him smiling as she ate, making her scowl and turn away. But she hadn't stopped eating.

Her eyes lingered on the bow for a moment. It was shorter than the longbow that had frustrated her for years, the stave thinner and no doubt easier to draw. She glanced around then picked it up, notching one of the arrows from Al Sorna's makeshift quiver of woven long grass. It felt light in her hands, comfortable. She took aim at the narrow trunk of a silver birch some ten yards away, it seemed the easiest target to hand. The bow was harder to draw than she anticipated, raising memories of hours of fruitless practice with the longbow, but she did at least manage to get the string back to her lips before loosing. The arrow glanced off the edge of the birch and disappeared into a patch of ferns.

"Not bad." Al Sorna was striding through the undergrowth, freshly gathered mushrooms were piled in his cloak.

Reva tossed the bow back to him and slumped down, drawing her knife. "It's unbalanced," she muttered. "Threw my aim off." She took hold of the hair at the nape of her neck and began her twice-weekly ritual of cutting.

“Don’t do that,” Al Sorna said. “You’re supposed to be my sister, and Asraelin women wear their hair long.”

“Asraelin women are vain sluts.” She pointedly sawed off a chunk of hair and let it fall.

Al Sorna sighed. “I suppose we could say you’re simple-minded. Took to cutting your hair as a child. Me old mum could never get her out of the habit.”

“You will not!” She glared at him. He smiled back. She gritted her teeth and returned the knife to its sheath.

He placed the bow and quiver of arrows next to her. “Keep it. I’ll make myself another.”

The next day saw them walking the road again. Al Sorna’s pace hadn’t slackened at all but she was finding it easier to keep up, no doubt helped by the recent improvement in her diet. They had been going for an hour when Al Sorna came to a halt, his head tilted upwards, nostrils flaring a little. It was a moment before Reva caught it, a scent on the westerly breeze, acrid, corrupt. She had smelt it before, as had he, no doubt on many more occasions.

He said nothing but left the road, walking towards the forest. It was beginning to thin as they travelled north, but there were still patches of thick woodland in which to camp or hunt. She noted a change in his movements as he approached the trees, a slight curve to the shoulders, a looseness to his arms, fingers splayed as if ready to reach for something. She had seen the priest move in a similar way, but never with such unconscious grace and she realised in a rush that the Darkblade was the priest’s superior, a thing she always thought impossible. No man could best the priest, his skills were born of the Father’s blessing after all. But this heretic, this enemy of the Loved, moved with such predatory grace she knew any contest between them would end only one way. *I was a fool*, she decided. *Trying to take him like that. When the time comes to kill him, I must be more guileful . . . or better trained.*

She followed at a short distance. She still carried the bow and wondered if she should notch an arrow but decided against it, her archery skills were hardly a threat to whatever might await them in the trees. She drew her knife instead, eyes continually seeking movement, finding only the sway of branches in the wind.

They found the bodies about twenty yards in, three of them, man, woman and child. The man had been lashed to a tree and gagged with a hemp rope, dried blood stained his bare chest from neck to waist. The woman was naked and her flesh bore the marks of prolonged torment, bruises and shallow cuts. One of her fingers had been hacked off, whilst she still breathed judging by the amount of blood. The boy could be no more than ten years in age and was also naked and similarly abused.

“Outlaws,” Reva said. She peered closer at the man tied to the tree, seeing how the hemp gag gouged into the flesh of his cheeks. “Looks like they made him watch.”

Al Sorna’s gaze was moving over the scene with an intensity she hadn’t seen before, scanning the ground as he moved, tracking. “This happened at least a day and a half ago,” Reva said. “Any tracks will be stale. They’ll be in the nearest town, drinking and whoring with whatever spoils they got here.”

He turned a fierce gaze on her. “Your World Father’s love seems to make you cold.”

His anger made her take a firmer grip on the knife. “This land is thick with thievery and murder, Darkblade. I’ve seen death before. We’ve been lucky not to have drawn any outlaws ourselves.”

The fierceness in his gaze faded and he straightened, losing the predatory readiness. “Rhansmill is closest.”

“It’s out of our way.”

“I know.” He went to the body of the man and used his sailor’s knife to cut the bonds securing him to the tree. “Gather wood,” he told her. “A lot of wood.”

It took another day to get to Rhansmill, an unimpressive huddle of houses clustered around a water mill on the banks of the Avern

River. They arrived at night, finding the place in the throes of some form of celebration, numerous torches had been lit and the townsfolk thronged around a semicircle of garishly painted wagons.

“Players,” Reva said with distaste, seeing the frivolous and occasionally lewd depictions on the sides of the wagons. They made their way slowly through the crowd, Al Sorna’s hood drawn close about his face; however, the audience’s gaze was fixed on a wooden stage in the centre of the semicircle. The man on stage was narrow of face and dressed in a shirt of bright red silk with tight-fitting trews of yellow and black, he sang and played a mandolin whilst a woman in a chiffon dress danced. The man’s playing was expert, his voice melodious and pure, but it was the dance that captured Reva’s attention, the grace and precision of the woman’s movements drawing her gaze like a flame-entranced moth. Her bare arms seemed to shine in the torchlight, her eyes, bright and blue behind a chiffon veil . . .

Reva looked away and closed her eyes, fingernails digging into her palms. *World Father, I call on your forgiveness once more . . .*

“My lover’s hand held soft in mine,” the man in the red shirt sang, the final verse of “Across the Valley.” “Upon her cheek bright tears do shine, To the Beyond I’ll take her smile, Where for her love I’ll wait . . .” He stopped, eyes wide as they caught a figure in the crowd. Reva tracked his gaze, finding it directed straight at Al Sorna’s hooded face. “. . . a while,” the man finished, forcing the words out. The crowd’s applause was quick, despite the stumble.

“Thank you, my friends!” The mandolin player bowed deeply, raising a hand to the dancer. “The lovely Ellora and I thank you most humbly. Please show your appreciation in the usual manner.” He pointed at the bucket placed at the front of the stage. “And now, dear friends”—the player’s voice dropped a little, his expression becoming grave—“prepare yourselves for our final performance of the night. A tale of high adventure

and low treachery, of blood spilled and treasure stolen, prepare yourselves for *The Pirate's Revenge!*" He threw his arms wide then took the hand of the girl and rushed from the stage, hampered somewhat by a noticeable limp. Two men promptly strode onto the boards, both dressed in a fanciful approximation of Meldenean sailor's garb.

"I spy a ship, Captain!" the shorter of the men said when the applause had faded, holding a wooden spyglass to his eye to scan an imaginary horizon. "A Realm vessel, if I'm any judge. Rich plunder to be had, by the gods."

"Plunder indeed!" the taller player agreed, a false beard of loose wool covering his chin and a red scarf on his head. "And much blood to spill to sate our gods' thirst."

Al Sorna gave a soft touch to her arm as the two players shared an evil laugh. He inclined his head to the left and she followed as he moved through the crowd, making for a gap between the line of wagons. She was unsurprised to find the mandolin player there, eyes bright in the shadows, drinking in the sight of Al Sorna as he drew back his hood.

"Sergeant Norin," he said.

"My lord," the man breathed. "I had heard . . . there were rumours, but—"

Al Sorna moved forward and embraced the man warmly, Reva noting the player's expression of complete astonishment. "It's very good to see you, Janril," Al Sorna said, drawing back. "Very good indeed."

"There are a thousand tales of your death," the minstrel told Al Sorna over supper. They had been welcomed into the wagon he shared with Ellora. She had exchanged her chiffon dancer's garb for a plain grey dress and cooked them a meal of stew and dumplings. Reva avoided looking in her direction and concentrated on the food. Al Sorna had introduced her as "Reva, my pretend sister for the next few weeks." Janril Norin just nodded and told her she was welcome, any curiosity he might have felt about the

nature of their relationship carefully hidden. *Soldiers don't question their commanders*, she thought.

"And a thousand more of your escape," Norin went on. "They say you fashioned a mace from your chains with the aid of the Departed and slew your way out of the Emperor's dungeons. I wrote a song about it, always goes down well."

"Well, I'm afraid you'll have to write another," Al Sorna said. "About how they just let me go."

"I thought you went to the Meldenean Islands first," Reva said, letting her disbelief colour her tone. "Killed the pirates' champion and rescued a princess."

He just shrugged. "All I did in the Isles was take part in a play. Though, I'm not much of a player."

"Player or not, my lord," Norin said. "You know you're welcome in this company. For as long as you wish."

"We're making for Varinshold. If you're heading there, we'll gladly accompany you."

"We're going south," Ellora said. "The Summertide Fair in Mealinscove always reaps a healthy profit." There was a guardedness to her tone and a clear discomfort at the Darkblade's presence. *Smart enough to know he brings death everywhere he goes*, Reva surmised.

"We're going north," Norin told her in a flat tone, then smiled at Al Sorna. "The fair in Varinshold will be just as fruitful, I'm sure."

"We'll pay our way," Vaelin said to Ellora.

"Won't hear of it, my lord," Norin assured him. "Having your sword with us will be payment enough. So many outlaws about these days."

"Talking of which, we found their handiwork a few miles back. A family, robbed and slaughtered. Came here looking to ensure justice, in fact. Notice any candidates tonight?"

Norin thought for a moment. "There was a rowdy bunch in the alehouse this afternoon. Their clothes were mean but they had money for ale. Drew my interest because one of them had a

gold ring on a chain about his neck. Too small for a man's ring, if I'm any judge. Caused a bit of a ruckus when the brewer refused to sell them one of his daughters. The guards told them to quiet down or move on. There's a vagrants' camp a mile or so downriver. If they haven't gone back to the forest, likely we'll find them there."

Ellora's gaze turned into a glare at the mention of the word "We."

"If they were drunk they'll be sleeping it off," Al Sorna said. "They'll still be there in the morning, I'm sure. Though, ensuring justice will mean involving the guards, and I was hoping not to draw any attention."

"There are other forms of justice, my lord," Norin pointed out. "Was a time we dealt it to outlaws on a fairly regular basis, as I recall."

Al Sorna glanced at the canvas-wrapped sword in the corner of the wagon. "No, I'm no Lord Marshal these days and no longer exercise the King's Word. Seems it can't be helped. I'll find the guard captain in the morning."

After supper Norin sat on the wagon steps playing his mandolin, singing with Ellora at his side. The other players gathered round to listen and call for him to sing their favourites. Reva and Al Sorna drew a few curious glances and, from the awed expressions of a few, some had clearly divined his identity. However, Norin's statement that she and his old friend from the Wolfrunners were his guests and their privacy was to be respected seemed to be all that was required to ensure no questions were asked.

"Doesn't look a soldier," Reva observed to Al Sorna. They had placed themselves a short distance from the company, lighting a fire against the night's chill.

"He was always more of a minstrel," Al Sorna said. "But a hard fighter when it mattered. I'm glad he took his pension. Seems happy enough with his lot."

Reva shot a quick look at Ellora, her smile as she rested against Norin's knee. *Well he might*, she thought.

The company drifted off to their own wagons as the hour grew late and Norin and Ellora retired to bed. He had provided them with thick blankets and soft furs to lie on and Reva marvelled at the comfort of it. Sleeping on hard ground was all she had known for most of her life. *Comfort is a trap*, the priest had said. *A barrier to the Father's love, for it makes us weak, servile to the Heretic Dominion.* With that he had beaten her for the crime of hiding a sack of straw in the barn to sleep on.

She waited a good two hours. Al Sorna never snored, in fact he barely made a sound or moved at all when sleeping. She watched the gentle rise and fall of his chest beneath the blanket for a while longer to be sure, then slipped from her own coverings, picked up her shoes and made her way barefoot to the river. On the bank she splashed water on her face to banish any lingering tiredness, pulled on her shoes and followed the current downstream.

The vagrants' camp wasn't hard to find, the smell of woodsmoke announced its location before the cluster of shacks and tents came into view. Only one fire burned in the camp, raucous laughter echoing from the few occupants. Four men, passing a bottle around. *Must've scared the rest away*, she thought. She crept closer until their voices became clear.

"You rutted on that bitch when she was dead, Kella!" one of the men laughed. "Fucking a corpse, you filthy animal."

"Least I didn't rut on the boy," the other man shot back. "Against nature that is."

Reva saw little reason for stealth or further delay. This needed doing quickly before Al Sorna missed her.

The four men fell silent as she walked into the camp, surprise soon replaced by drunken lust.

"Looking for somewhere to sleep, lovely?" the largest of the men said. He had an extensive mop of unkempt hair and the gaunt, wasted look of a man who lived from day to day without regular meals or shelter. There was also a gold ring hanging on a string about his neck. *Too small for a man's ring, if I'm any*

judge. Reva remembered the sight of the woman in the forest, the finger hacked from her hand.

She said nothing and stared back.

“We’ve got plenty of room,” the man went on, coming closer on unsteady legs. “Everyone else’s pissed off. Can’t think why.”

Reva met his gaze, saying nothing. Drunk as he was, some faint warning must have sounded in his head for he stopped a few feet short of her, eyes narrowing. “What you want here gir—!”

The knife came free of the sheath in a blur, she ducked forward then upwards in a fluid motion, the blade slicing through his neck, then twisted away as he fell, blood spraying through his fingers.

The second one she killed was too shocked to react as she leapt, wrapped her legs about his chest and stabbed deep into his shoulder, once, then twice. She leapt free, darted towards the third man, now fumbling for a cudgel in his belt. He managed a single swing which she ducked with ease, rolling on the ground then slashing back to sever his hamstring. He fell, cursing and screaming. Reva turned to the fourth man. His fevered gaze took in the scene around him as he fidgeted, a long-bladed knife in his hand. He gave Reva a final terror-stricken glance, dropped the knife and fled. He had almost reached the sheltering darkness beyond the firelight before her knife throw took him between the shoulder blades.

Reva went to the large man’s body, pushing it over to retrieve the ring from around his neck. There was also a good-quality hunting knife in his belt, Realm Guard issue from the regimental crest on the handle. She took the knife, pocketed the ring and walked to the man with the severed hamstring, now weeping desperate pleas through a cloud of snot and spittle.

“Don’t worry, Kella,” she said. “I promise I won’t fuck your corpse.”

Ellora made them a breakfast of eggs and mushrooms fried in butter. *As good a cook as she is a dancer,* Reva thought, tucking

in. She waited until Ellora and Norin had gone to tend to the drays that pulled their wagon, then took the ring from her pocket and tossed it to Al Sorna. He looked at it for a long time. “The sun and the moon,” he said softly.

Reva frowned. “What?”

He held it up for her to see, an engraving on the inside of the band, two circles, one wreathed in flame. “They were Deniers.”

She shrugged and returned to her breakfast.

“The bodies,” Al Sorna said.

“Weighted and dumped in the river.”

“Very efficient of you.”

She looked up at the hardness in his tone, seeing something in his gaze that gave new fire to her anger. Disappointment. “I am not here because I choose to be, Darkblade,” she told him. “I am here for the sword of the Trueblade so that I might earn the love of the Father by bringing down your unholy Realm. I am not your friend, your sister or your pupil. And I do not care one whit for your approval.”

Janril Norin coughed, breaking the thick silence that reigned in the aftermath of her words. “Best be looking for the guard captain, my lord. If this is to be done today.”

“That won’t be necessary, Janril.” Al Sorna tossed the ring back to Reva. “Keep it, you earned it.”