

CHAPTER ONE

“WATCH YOUR BACK!” BLAINE MCFADDEN BROUGHT his sword down hard on his opponent’s blade, deflecting a killing blow.

Piran Rowse wheeled at the warning, muttering curses under his breath. Two dark-clad men were heading his way, swords at the ready. Piran ran toward them with a battle cry, a sword gripped in each hand, driving his enemies back with the sheer ferocity of his onslaught.

A force of at least twenty-five men, all dressed in black, had attacked them. Where their allegiance lay, Blaine could only guess. Why they had come was clear. Blaine had no doubt the fighters had been sent to track and kill them. To kill him.

Their battleground was the deserted barnyard of a ruined farm. Not far away, Dawe Killick caught his breath in the shelter of a tumbledown chicken coop that barely held his tall, rangy form. He dodged out to fire his crossbow, taking advantage of its reach to fell one of the dark-clad men.

Kestel Falke had grabbed the sword of one of the fallen attackers and pulled a dagger from the bandolier beneath her

cloak. She circled one of the dead man's comrades warily, holding him at bay. From the top floor of the rickety barn, Ver-ran Danning, expert thief and sometime musician, lobbed anything he could find at his opponents, striking one of the men in the head with a chunk of wood.

Four of the eleven guards they had brought with them were down, and while the remaining guards were fighting valiantly, Blaine knew the odds weren't in their favor. After narrowly escaping death the night before, it seemed a mockery to die so needlessly come sunrise.

Blaine's opponent came at him again, sword raised shoulder-high for a death strike. Blaine brought his own blade up inside the strike as he stepped aside, dodging the blow and managing to score a gash on his attacker's arm. At more than six feet tall with shoulders broadened from years of hard labor in the Vel-ant prison colony, Lord Blaine McFadden could hold his own in a fight. Despite the cold late-autumn temperatures, the heat of the fight had plastered Blaine's long, chestnut brown hair against his head. His sea-blue eyes glinted with anger, focused on the man he intended to kill.

Blaine's body protested every jarring parry. Just the previous night, the wild magic he had sought to bind had nearly killed him, nearly killed all of them with its unharnessed power. They had lived through the assault, wearied and bloody, only to face a new danger. It had been sheer luck that the old tunnels had not collapsed around them, that they had been able to evade the dark-clad warriors, at least for a while. Not long enough.

"Who sent you?" Blaine shouted as his attacker came at him again, raining down a series of two-handed blows that nearly drove Blaine to his knees. Blaine knew he couldn't take much

more—none of them could. Not after the toll the magic had taken last night. Their attackers were fresh to the fight. He'd traveled half the world to die here, in the middle of nowhere, without even coming close to achieving his task.

“Lord Pollard wants you dead,” the black-clad man replied through gritted teeth. “Thought you'd have figured that out by now.”

“Tell Lord Pollard he can—” Blaine's words died in his throat as an arrow zipped past him, narrowly missing his shoulder, and thudded into the rotted wood of the barn behind him.

“Incoming!” Dawe shouted, dragging a hand back through his straight, dark hair. He looked like a scarecrow, all angles and bones. “We've got new players.” A hail of arrows fell, and several of the black-clad fighters went down, shot in the back. Kestel cried out as an arrow grazed her arm, but she kept on fighting, though blood colored the sleeve of her tunic.

“I think you and your men might want to run,” Blaine said, a cold smile crossing his features. “Seems to me whoever's out there is aiming for your people, not mine.”

For just an instant, Blaine took his eyes off his attacker to confirm the new threat. The yard was ringed with archers, all within bow range, but too far away from Blaine to make out any markings on their gray uniforms. *Sometimes the enemy of my enemy is my friend*, Blaine thought. *And other times, he's just a bigger, badder son of a bitch.*

Blaine's opponent spared no glance toward the archers. He came at Blaine ferociously, teeth bared and eyes wild. Blaine parried the first of the man's powerful strikes, but the second blow crashed down on his sword with enough force to numb his sword arm and send him staggering backward. The tip of his attacker's sword sliced into his right shoulder, and Blaine's

sword fell from his numb hand. His enemy reared back, sword at chest height, to drive the point home, aiming for Blaine's heart.

An arrow sang through the air and Blaine's opponent stiffened, his face drawn in a ghastly mask of pain and fury. He lumbered forward, intent on his quarry, but the delay was just enough. Blaine dove for his sword, grasping it in his left hand, and lunged forward, ducking under his opponent's blade, expecting to feel the bite of steel against his neck at any moment. His sword plunged deep into the man's belly and his opponent fell forward, dropping his sword to the ground. Pinned under the man's body, Blaine felt hot blood seep over him as it poured from the dying man's wounds.

It took all of Blaine's waning strength to throw the man off, and more resolve still to make it as far as his knees before he saw that the battle had turned. Most of the black-clad fighters lay skewered by arrows, and the rest had run for their lives. Only six of his own guards remained standing, along with Dawe, Piran, Verran, and Kestel. But the soldiers who ringed the yard had not moved, nor had they lowered their bows.

"Surrender. Throw down your weapons. You can't win but you can die, and you surely will unless you drop your weapons now and raise your hands," a man's voice called from the line of archers.

Piran let out a barrage of creatively vulgar curses, but he let his swords fall. Dawe tossed his unloaded crossbow out into the open and emerged, his hands behind his head. Kestel dropped her sword and dagger, looking toward the archers with a baleful expression.

"You in the barn. Come out, or so help me Torven, we'll shoot the others," the voice called.

“Hold your fire! I’m coming down,” Verran shouted, contempt thick in his voice.

“Let’s stick to our story and see if they go for it,” Blaine replied under his breath, just loud enough for his friends to hear.

“We mean you no harm,” he called out to the archers. “We’re tinkers and peddlers. We took shelter overnight and woke to find ourselves under attack. We’ll be on our way, and no bother to you.”

A half dozen men from the line of archers were moving toward them now, bows drawn and arrows at the ready. The archers still on the edge of the yard quashed any thoughts Blaine’s group might have had of fighting their way free.

“You look well armed for tinkers,” one of the archers replied. “Your bodyguards outnumber the rest of you,” he said, with a nod to the Glenreith guards who, though wearing neither insignia nor rank, were conspicuous in their military appearance. “That’s suspicious.”

“These are dangerous times,” Blaine replied. “We hired guards to protect us. We mean no harm. Just let us be on our way.”

The leader looked as if he was considering Blaine’s suggestion, then shook his head. “Not up to me. That’s for the captain to say.” He gestured, and more fighters joined him. “Get on your knees, and put your hands on top of your head. We’ll see what the captain makes of you.”

For a moment, Blaine feared from the expression on Piran’s face that his friend might charge their captors. At a nod from Blaine, they knelt, hands on heads, and Blaine waited to feel a quarrel in the back.

More fighters moved forward, binding the captives’ wrists

with strips of leather. One of the fighters moved to bind Blaine's wrists. He paused. "Sir," he called to the leader. "You should see this."

The leader walked over and frowned when he saw the brand on the inside of Blaine's left forearm, an "M" for murderer.

"You're a convict," the leader said, eyeing Blaine.

"I *was* a convict. Did my time in Velant. Earned my Ticket of Leave."

"Velant's up in Edgeland, at the top of the world," the leader said. "No one's supposed to come back from there."

"Just like there's *supposed* to be a king and magic's *supposed* to work," Blaine replied evenly. "Nothing's the way it's 'supposed' to be anymore."

"Got another one over here," the soldier said, lifting Dawe's arm to show the brand. Blaine sighed. He'd deserved his exile, but Dawe had been framed. And while the others bore no brands for their crimes, Verran for theft, Kestel for espionage, and Piran for court-martial-worthy insubordination, it wouldn't take too much for the fighter to figure out they were likely all 'escaped' convicts.

"Get on your feet," the leader said. "You can explain it to the captain. You're coming back to camp with us."

"What of our horses?" Blaine asked.

"We'll bring them," the leader replied. "If you can convince the captain to let you go, you can take them with you. If not," he said and shrugged, "we can put them to good use."

Blaine got to his feet, moving toward the barn's wide door. The others fell in behind him, while several of their captors moved to secure the horses and wagons.

"Who is your commander? What lord do you serve?" Blaine asked.

A bitter smile touched at the corners of the leader's mouth.

Now that Blaine got a good look at the man, he saw he was in his late teens or early twenties. The face was youthful, but there was a world-weariness in the man's eyes that seemed much older. "There are no lords left to serve," he replied. "No lords, no law, no liege. The war's over. Welcome to what's left."

The archers commandeered one of Blaine's group's wagons and horses and directed Blaine and the others to climb in. Two of the archers drove, while more archers walked beside the wagon.

"If I believed in the gods, I'd say now would be a good time to pray," muttered Piran.

"Our luck isn't looking good," Kestel replied with a sigh.

Piran snorted. "What? Just because wild magic ripped through some old, forgotten chamber and laid us all out flat as corpses, you think we're not ready for a good fight?" *Piran probably would be up for a brawl*, Blaine thought; at least, he had never shied away from one in the past. Shorter, stocky, with a bald head that Piran had kept shaved even in the bitter cold of the Edgeland wastes, Piran looked every bit the soldier he had been before his court-martial.

Blaine rubbed his temples, trying in vain to ease the throbbing headache that had begun the night before. When the warring kingdoms of Donderath and Meroven destroyed each other, the Continent also lost its control over magic. Without king, law, or magic, chaos followed. Tracking a series of clues that suggested magic might be restored, Blaine and his friends had made a failed attempt to harness the wild magic, an effort that had left several of their party, including Blaine, badly bruised and battered.

"Neither side was wearing any colors," Kestel murmured. "But this group has some kind of uniform, although it's hard to tell; they all look rather ragged." She paused. "I heard what the

man you were fighting said about Lord Pollard. If the archers aren't Pollard's men, who do they belong to?"

Before her exile to the Velant prison colony in Edgeland, Kestel had been a sought-after courtesan, a spy in the court of King Merrill, and an assassin. Like the others, she'd followed Blaine back to Donderath on the scant hope that magic could be restored. Today, her red hair was bound up, and she wore a tunic, treads, and boots borrowed from Glenreith's guard-house. Anyone who had seen her gowned and bejeweled for high court would have had difficulty recognizing Kestel as the same woman.

"Anyone else who wants to kill you, Mick, that you forgot to tell us about?" Verran asked, glancing nervously at the archers.

Blaine let out a long breath. "Not that I remember. But as you've seen, things aren't exactly the way they were when we shipped out."

"So we just sit here?" Piran's tone made his opinion clear.

Blaine rubbed his pounding forehead. Every muscle and joint ached as if he'd been beaten by the sheer, wild power of the magical backlash. "For now," he said.

They had tried to raise the magic at Mirdalur, a three-day ride from Blaine's family's manor at Glenreith. Geir, their vampire guide, had left them before dawn to find shelter from the daylight. Blaine and his friends, along with eleven of Glenreith's manor guards, had planned to sleep through the day and move out again once it was dark to avoid the bands of robbers and vagabonds that wandered the Donderath countryside.

"It's mid-afternoon, still daylight. That means this group is mortal," Kestel said. "That's one good thing."

Piran gave her a sidelong glance. "If that's the 'good' news, we're shit out of luck."

“I wish we knew who they were,” Kestel said, bending closer to the gap in the wall for a better look. “They look like a bunch of vagrants but fight like a unit.”

“I’m afraid we’ll get an answer soon enough,” Dawe Killick said, his head bowed and his face obscured by a hank of dark, lanky hair. Dawe was tall and slender, with a hawklike nose and piercing blue eyes. Despite the bonds on his wrists, Dawe’s long-fingered hands clenched in frustration.

They rode for half a candlemark, away from the direction they had come. They were going north, as close as Blaine could reckon from the sun. Away from Mirdalur, and no closer to Glenreith. The odds weren’t in their favor, despite the fact that Geir had escaped capture.

The wagon rolled into a camp of fighters, who regarded it with wary curiosity. Whoever’s army the archers represented, it was a motley one. From what Blaine could see, only about half the men had tents, and those were stained and patched. Many had only the shelter of lean-tos or pieces of canvas held up by posts.

“How many do you figure are out there?” Kestel asked.

“Too many,” Blaine replied.

The fighters’ camp was as hard worn as the men themselves. A hodgepodge of moveable structures greeted them. Cook fires dotted the encampment, and in the rear, Blaine spotted mud-spattered horses and several wagons. No doubt the fighters would be glad to gain use of the horses and wagons his group had brought with them.

When they reached the outskirts of the camp, their Glenreith bodyguards were directed into two tents ringed with guards. Blaine, Kestel, Piran, Dawe, and Verran were ushered to a large tent in the center of the camp. By the tent’s size,

Blaine guessed it to be the captain's, but if so, then the group's leader was an ascetic. A bedroll lay to one side, and a small brazier in the middle did little to drive out the late autumn chill. A soldier's satchel lay near the bedroll, and there was a small shrine to Charrot, Torven, and Esthrane at the foot of the bedding. Otherwise, the tent was empty.

"Wait here." The young man who seemed to be the leader of the archers spoke in low tones to two of the fighters, who remained by the tent's entrance. Then Blaine and his friends were left alone.

"Best odds we're going to have," Piran muttered. "Five against two."

"And more than two score on the other side of the doorway," Kestel replied in a whisper. "I knew you couldn't read, but I thought you could do figures," she added with a hint of a smile that softened her words.

Blaine sighed. "With luck, these men will see we've got no quarrel with them and let us go."

"I'd put the odds of that as slim to nil," Piran sighed. "If nothing else, they'll want the horses. And maybe Kestel."

Despite their situation, Kestel grinned. "Let 'em try," she replied, palming a dagger from somewhere on her body.

"Shh," Dawe warned as footsteps drew closer.

Muffled voices sounded outside the tent. One was the voice of the man who had brought them to the camp. The other voice, deeper and more mature, was muffled. The tent flap swung back and a tall man entered, flanked by two guards. The man was broad-shouldered, with short-cut, dark blonde hair. Several days' worth of stubble shadowed gaunt, high cheekbones. He wore a woolen coat over what might have been gray uniform pants, and his clothes looked as if he had been roughing it for quite some time.

"My officer says he's got a bunch of escaped convicts," the

man said, not bothering to look up as he entered. Then he lifted his head and stopped in his tracks, staring at Blaine.

“You’re supposed to be dead,” he breathed, and his face had gone pale as a ghost.

“So are you,” Blaine responded, feeling as if he had been sucker punched. “Niklas?”

“Blaine McFadden died in Velant,” the man repeated, his voice just above a whisper. “That’s what we heard.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Blaine replied. “Although several people did their damndest to make that happen.” He paused. “Aunt Judith said you’d died in the war.”

A crooked grin spread across the man’s face. “Sorry to disappoint,” he echoed. “We were on the front lines, and it’s been a damn long walk home.” He sobered and turned to one of the guards. “Cut their bonds. Bring me some food, get a healer for them, and fetch whatever ale you can find.”

“Sir?”

“Just do it, Lieutenant. I’ll take my chances with them.”

The soldier did as he was told. Blaine rubbed his wrists. “Does this mean we get our horses back?” he asked as the others looked between the two men, trying to figure out the sudden lurch in conversation.

Niklas laughed and stepped forward, extending a hand to Blaine and then folding him into a back-thumping embrace. “By Torven’s horns, Blaine. I never thought I’d see you again.”

“You know this bloke, Mick?” Piran asked warily.

Blaine nodded. “This is Niklas Theilsson. We grew up together. We’ve been friends for as long as I can remember.”

Niklas gave Blaine a quizzical look. “You go by ‘Mick’ now?”

Blaine sighed. “I did in Velant. These are my mates from Edgeland.”

The look in Niklas’s blue eyes gave Blaine to guess the other

was trying to put the pieces together. “Perhaps introductions are in order.”

“We met in Velant and survived because we had each other’s backs,” Blaine started, a slight note of challenge in his voice as if he expected judgment from Niklas. When their host said nothing, Blaine continued. “Verran Danning is a master locksmith and sometime minstrel,” he said, giving Verran’s thieving a quick cleanup. “Dawe Killick was a silversmith. Kestel Falke was a courtesan and an assassin.”

Kestel grinned. “It was the assassin part that got me my passage to Velant,” she said, a flash of warning in her eyes.

“And finally, Piran Rowse—”

Niklas interrupted with a chuckle. “I know Piran by reputation,” he said. “Your court-martial is still legendary.”

Blaine and the others turned to look at Piran. “Was there more to the story than you let on, Piran dear?” Kestel asked in her sweetest voice.

Piran reddened. “Might have been. No more than Mick here forgetting to tell his mates he’s a bleedin’ lord.”

Niklas swung an arm to indicate his nearly empty tent. “Please, have a seat. I think we have a lot to discuss.”

Blaine nodded to the others, and they sat cross-legged on the ground. Niklas brought a low, folding table and set it in front of them, then joined them. An aide returned with a pitcher of ale, a cloth filled with hard bread, sausage, cheese, and a variety of battered, military-issue tin cups. A healer followed him.

“This is Ordell, my battle healer,” Niklas said. “He’ll patch up the damage from the fight.” He turned to Ordell. “Blaine’s an old friend, and these are friends of his. Can you take a look at their injuries?”

If Ordell thought it strange that Niklas’s ‘old friend’ arrived

bound and under guard, he made no comment. “Yes, sir,” he replied and turned to Blaine. “Let’s see the damage, and I’ll do my best to have you patched up in time for supper,” he said with a grin.

“Thank you,” Blaine said, looking to both Niklas and Ordell. They were silent for the time it took Ordell to see to their wounds, and then the healer straightened and looked to Niklas.

“Nothing too serious,” Ordell said. “They should be fine in a few days.” Niklas nodded his thanks, and the healer ducked out of the tent.

“Eat,” Niklas instructed, “because I have a feeling this isn’t going to be a short conversation.”

“Then fill us in,” Blaine said, as he poured a cup of ale and passed the pitcher to the others. “We know Donderath lost the war. We know the magic is broken. But what led up to that—we don’t know.” He paused, fearful to ask the next question, yet knowing there was no way around it. “Before you start, I have to ask. Did Carr come back with you?”

Niklas suddenly looked tired, and his expression was grim. “Yes, Carr survived. Many of our soldiers didn’t. Carr was lucky. He’s out on extended patrol right now. I’ll make sure the two of you have a chance to talk when he gets back.”

Kestel laid a hand on Blaine’s arm. “Carr’s your younger brother, right?”

Blaine nodded. “He was just a kid when I was exiled.”

Niklas sighed. “We were all a lot younger then. In so many ways, it was a completely different world.” Niklas poured himself a cup of ale, and for a moment, he looked at a loss for words.

“There had been incidents along the border with Meroven for years,” Niklas began. “I went into the army not long after

you were sent away.” Niklas glanced toward Blaine. “Even then, spies told us Edgar of Meroven was unstable, and that he was likely to try to expand his borders. One thing led to another, and soon, Donderath and Meroven had an open war. The other kingdoms were pulled in and before long, the entire Continent had chosen sides.”

Niklas shook his head. “Casualties were terrible. I tried to keep Carr out of the war for as long as I could, but finally, I knew he’d sign up with someone else if I didn’t take him. For your sake, I did my best to keep him as safe as possible.”

“Thank you,” Blaine murmured.

“After years of war, when it became clear that men alone wouldn’t decide the outcome, the mages got involved.” Niklas’s eyes took on a haunted expression. “It was about a year ago. I thought I’d seen the worst carnage war had to offer, but the mages turned it into a bloodbath.” He looked down for a few moments. “Still, the men on both sides never left their posts. I can only speak for my men, but when we saw what the Meroven mages could unleash, we feared what would befall our homeland if we could not hold the line.”

Niklas looked toward them but his gaze seemed far away, and his expression was bleak. “One night, it all came to a head. On the ground, the sheer energy that crackled around us felt as if the gods were sparring, as if the world were coming to an end. And in a way, it did.

“A blast of magic more powerful than anything we had ever felt before swept over the battlefields, knocking down men as if they were bowling pins. Those who took the brunt of the force were killed instantly. Those of us lucky enough to be sheltered at that moment survived, but with injuries. The sky opened up and fire fell on us. The sky was filled with a green light, and

wherever the light touched the ground, the land burned. It was the night of the Great Fire.” Niklas’s voice grew quiet, and he closed his eyes against the images in his memory.

“That night, whatever the mages did not only destroyed both armies, it destroyed the magic as well,” Niklas went on. “Magic stopped working, at least the kind of magic men could control. Wild magic became a danger, with magical storms touching down without warning, destroying everything in their paths. Strange beasts out of nightmares started appearing. Men went mad.

“When I could gather what remained of my men, we started for home. The Great Fire had laid waste to Donderath. The manor houses were destroyed. When the magic ‘died,’ it took the little magics as well as the great ones. Buildings, dams, and fences held together with a bit of magic all collapsed. Healers couldn’t use magic to heal. Farmers lost the magic to get rid of pests, so their crops failed. We never realized how many small magics we depended on until they stopped working.”

Niklas met Blaine’s gaze, and Blaine could see the grief in his friend’s face. “We went to war to protect Donderath. We failed.”

The group sat for a moment in silence as Niklas’s story sank in. Finally, Niklas shook himself free of his memories. By now, Blaine and his friends had eaten their fill of the bread and cheese, and Blaine pushed food toward Niklas, refilling his cup with ale.

“That’s quite a story,” Blaine said, sobered by the account. “We knew bits of what happened, but not from the front lines.”

“Something brought you back from the edge of the world, Blaine,” Niklas replied, taking a sip of his ale. “I’d like very much to know what it was.”

As briefly as he could, Blaine recounted how the death of magic on the Continent had affected even distant Edgeland. “Without the warden mages, Commander Prokief couldn’t keep the convicts from rebelling, and the Velant prison fell,” Blaine said. “Those of us who had earned our Tickets of Leave to become colonists realized that without supply ships from home, the colony wouldn’t have enough food for the winter.”

“How did you get a ship? And why did you, of anyone, come back?” Niklas pressed.

Blaine shrugged. “The ship was adrift and abandoned, and we towed her into Skalgerston Bay. We could take 500 people back with us, which was a burden off the colony. Those who wanted to return took their chances and made the trip.”

Niklas fixed Blaine with a piercing gaze. “You still haven’t answered me, Blaine. Why did you come back?”

Piran gave Blaine a warning glance, but Kestel nodded. Dawe shrugged. “Up to you, Mick,” Dawe said.

Verran grinned. “You can tell him, but will he believe you?”

Blaine returned his gaze to where Niklas sat waiting. “It’s a long story, but according to an ancient *talishte* and a very old mage’s map, there’s a chance that magic isn’t gone forever.” He paused, knowing that what he was about to say would strain the belief of even the best of friends. “Magic as we know it was harnessed four hundred years ago at Mirdalur when the king and the oldest nobles bound the wild power to their bidding. When the Meroven mages wiped out the Donderath nobility, they also broke the blood ties that bound the magic. All of the eldest heirs of the old Lords of the Blood are dead.”

“Except one,” Kestel said, with a meaningful look at Blaine.

Niklas met Blaine’s gaze. “You’re the last Lord of the Blood?”
“Apparently so.”

“From what we’ve been told, as long as there is a living Lord

of the Blood, it might be possible to harness the magic again,” Kestel continued.

“That’s why you returned?” Niklas asked, looking at Blaine as if he were suddenly a stranger.

“Told you he wouldn’t believe you,” Verran said.

Blaine looked down. “As crazy as it seems, yes.”

“Only we tried it and nearly got ourselves all killed,” Piran added. “So Mick wants to give it another go, because he can’t leave well enough alone.”

“The old records said the first lords harnessed the magic in a ritual at Mirdalur,” Blaine said, with an exasperated look at Piran. “We tried going there, to see if my presence would reactivate the magic.” He grimaced. “Piran’s right. The wild magic nearly killed us.”

“So that’s it then?” Niklas asked. “There’s no hope of bringing the magic back?”

“We’re not sure,” Kestel replied. “There are clues that it can be done—but we don’t know quite how just yet.” She hesitated. “There are some forces in Donderath that would be just as happy for the magic to stay dead.”

Niklas frowned. “Forces?”

“Do you remember Vedran Pollard?” Blaine asked.

“Real son of a bitch,” Niklas replied. “The only person I knew who was as mean as your father—maybe even worse.”

“Yeah, that’s Pollard. He’s thrown in his lot with a vampire named Pentreath Reese.”

Niklas whistled. “They’re the ones who don’t want to see magic return? Damn, Blaine. You sure know how to pick your enemies.” He scowled. “That group my men fought, you think they were Pollard’s men?”

Blaine nodded. “Yes. We had to dodge them the whole way to Mirdalur and then run for our lives when they nearly caught us

there. Pollard also had his men camped outside Glenreith when we returned, trying to pressure Aunt Judith into an alliance.”

Niklas made a rude noise. “You’ve got to be kidding.” When he saw Blaine was serious, he shook his head. “For a man everyone thought was dead, you can still kick up a fuss.”

“Somebody knew Blaine was alive,” Kestel commented soberly. “Pollard sent an assassin to Velant to kill him.”

All traces of humor drained from Niklas’s expression. “Seriously? An assassin? So you think Pollard may know about this whole Lord of the Blood thing?”

“Looks that way,” Blaine replied.

Niklas leaned forward. “Actually, this isn’t the first I’ve heard of Pollard. We’ve seen his handiwork the whole way across Donderath.”

Blaine frowned. “What do you mean?”

“We’ve never tangled with the black-clad men before, but only because we tried to stay out of their way. We have heard tales whenever we’ve stopped for provisions, and the stories aren’t good.” He rubbed the stubble on his chin. “Guess that’s why, when my men saw them fighting your group and the odds looked uneven, they waded in.”

“Believe me, we’re grateful,” Blaine said. “What tales did you hear?”

Niklas shrugged. “Rumors that Pollard’s been hunting down former mages. Several have disappeared and never returned. There were dark stories about men in black clothing ransacking the mage libraries and universities, carrying off sacks of items, and torching what was left.” He grimaced. “Pollard seems to like setting fires. I’d heard the same about villages where he didn’t get the information he was seeking.” He snapped his fingers. “Went up in flames, and Raka take the survivors.”

Outside, they heard a sudden crash. Horns sounded an

alarm. Shouts and the sound of fighting filled the air. Niklas jumped to his feet, as did Blaine and the others. A guard appeared in the tent doorway.

“Sir, we’re under attack.”

“By whom?” Niklas had drawn his sword, and his eyes glinted with anger.

The guard looked as if he was struggling against his own fear. “*Talishte*, sir. We’re being attacked by vampires.”