

the three lands  
law links #1

# God of Vengeance

dusk peterson



**Chronicles of the Great Peninsula**  
**The Three Lands**  
*Law Links #1*

**GOD OF VENGEANCE**  
*Dusk Peterson*

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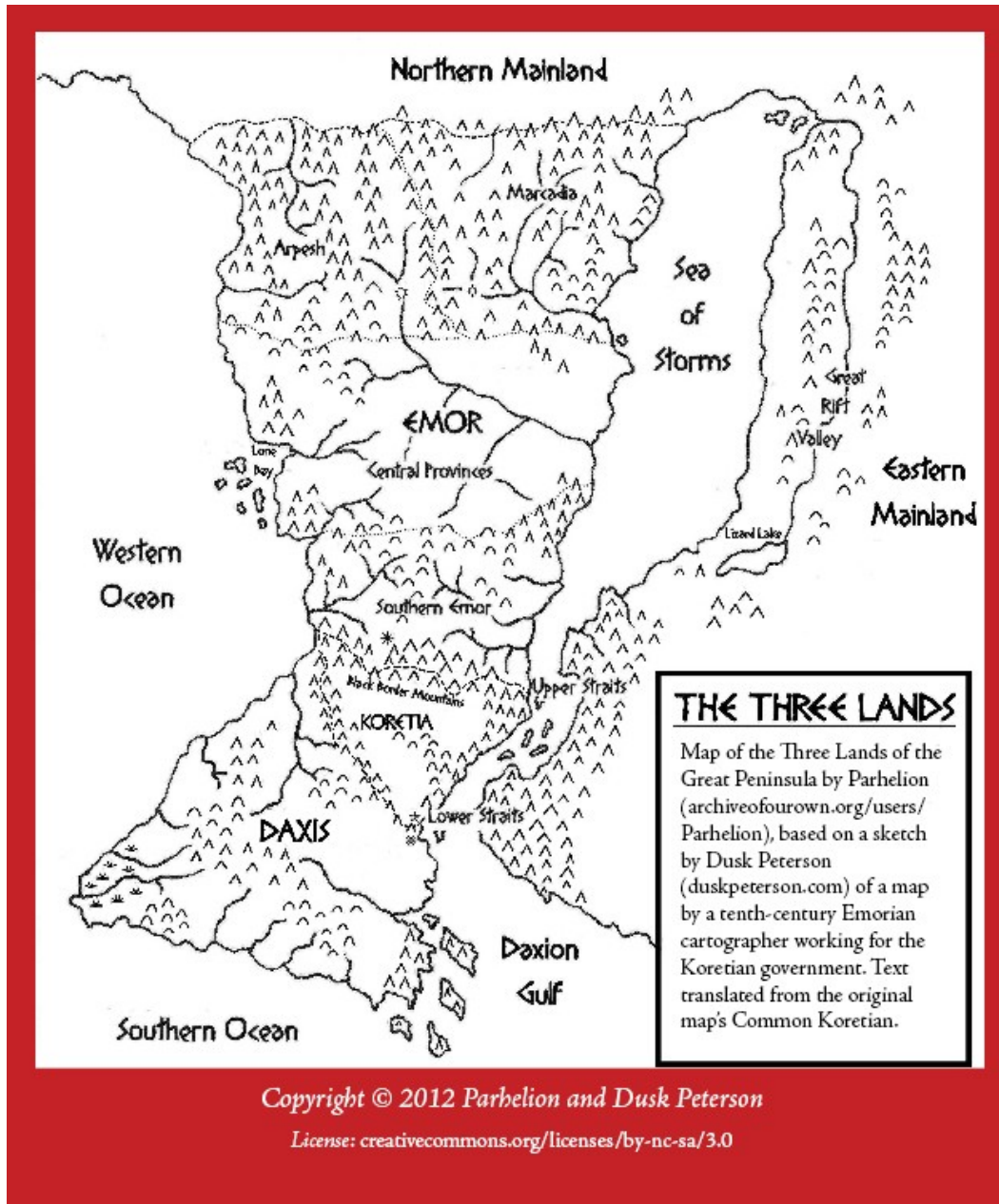
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# ***Law Links #1***

## **God of Vengeance**

### **CHAPTER ONE**

*Begun on the first day of September in the 940th year after the giving of the law, by Adrian son of Berenger, from the Village of Mountside in the Land of Koretia.*

Hamar and I played Jackal and Prey this afternoon, with Hamar as the Jackal, and with me as the Jackal's prey. I spent three hours hiding amidst the mountain rocks, creeping away whenever Hamar came near, and he never caught me. Eventually Hamar called to me that I was cheating, and I came out and we argued about it and would probably have ended up duelling each other except that I was reluctant to get blood on the new dagger that our father gave me this morning.

Finally I told Hamar that it wasn't fair that he always played that he was the hunting god, while I was always delegated to being the hunted. He responded that I play the prey better than anyone else in the village – which is true – but I pointed out to him that I am just as good at being the hunter as I am at being the hunted. “Besides,” I said, “I came of age this morning, and if you want to be at my birthday feast this evening, you ought to acknowledge that I am a man.”

He sulkily allowed me to take the Jackal's role, and I caught him within a quarter of an hour. My father said this morning that Hamar and I ought not to be playing such games any more, since we are both men, even if I am only sixteen and Hamar is just two years older. But Fenton said that even boys' games have value to a man and that some day I may be able to make as much use of my hours spent at Jackal and Prey as I will of what I learned in the rite he performed over me late last night.

o—o—o

Fenton and I were silent for a long while after the rite was done. We were in the sanctuary, of course, but the small chamber seemed strange, for I had never been there at night, and Fenton hadn't lit so much as a candle. He had even shuttered the windows so that the uninitiated would not chance to hear the words he spoke. The only light came from the full moon, which shone down through the smoke-hole onto the altar. I could barely see Fenton.

He had tried to put his arm round me after it was through, but I pushed him away – it was the first time I had ever done that, but I wanted him to know that, being a man, I was now old enough to be strong on my own. So I had dressed, still shivering, and he had gone over to the table against the wall and poured wine for us. He paused after pouring the first cup, and for a moment I thought he would share a cup of wine with me, as he sometimes does with my father. But then he poured a second cup of wine and came over to where I was standing, staring through the cracks of the shuttered window.

He handed me my cup before he unlatched the window and swung it open. Light from my family's home, several spear-lengths up the mountain, spilled into the room. I could see, through the open window of our hall, that my parents were sitting on their chairs next to the central hearth. My father had Mira upon his knee and was bouncing her up and down as though she were riding a horse. She was squealing with delight as though she were a small girl instead of being thirteen and close to her coming of age.

I longed to join them, to return to the familiar safety of my house, but I was worried that would make me appear a coward. So I sipped from the wine, though my stomach remained so tense that I feared I would be sick.

Finally I said, "Perhaps I should have picked another god to serve. One whose rite isn't so frightening."

I meant this as a joke, and I tried to smile, but Fenton said seriously, "In many ways, the Jackal is the most merciful god. Some of the other god-rites are far worse."

I looked over at him then. He was leaning back against the altar, sipping his wine, and his face was shadowed by the hood of the frayed priest-robe he has worn for eleven years. He looked as calm as ever, just as he had looked calm when he spoke in the name of the god and raised the knife over me as I lay upon the altar. . . .

On impulse, I put my cup aside and came over to take Fenton's hand. For a moment I felt foolish; his hand was as steady as ever. Then I felt, very faintly, the tremor within him, like a thunder-roll deep within the earth.

It was then, I think, that I truly understood what it means to be a man: to put thoughts of others before thoughts of myself. I said softly, "I'm sorry," and for a moment I could think of nothing but Fenton's pain.

Then he turned his head to look at me. As the firelight fell upon his face, I saw his smile, and I felt foolish and boyish again.

"It's of no matter," he replied. "I have performed this rite many times before, and on other occasions it was far worse. At least this time I knew

that the god would not require the worst of me.”

I wanted to ask how he was sure that the Jackal would not accept my proffered sacrifice, but I thought the better of it. I let go of his hand and rubbed the back of my neck. It seemed odd to feel the soft night-breeze blowing where, only a short time before, my boy’s-hair had been. I said, before I could question the wisdom of my asking, “*Has* a god ever required the full sacrifice when you performed the coming-of-age rite?”

To my relief, he shook his head. “Only once did he come close to doing so when I took part in a rite. And on that occasion, I was nearly the victim.”

He lifted his hand as he spoke, in order to bring the cup to his lips. As he did so, his sleeve slipped back far enough for me to see the faint lines of his blood vows. He has three of them. One is the vow he took when he became a priest, and the second is the vow of friendship he took with my father. I have never asked him about the third blood vow. Now I found myself wondering: Had Fenton become blood brother to one of the other priests in the priests’ house when he was in training? And was a vow between priests so great a matter that he had feared he would need to offer up a full sacrifice to his god or goddess?

Or perhaps he was simply referring to what had happened when the priest from Cold Run made Fenton a priest. I knew, of course, that the coming-of-age rite for a priest is different from that of an ordinary man, since the priest makes a greater commitment to his god or goddess. I supposed the rite must be far more frightening.

I felt again that odd tenderness I had felt before, and I wanted to find a way to remove Fenton’s mind from what had just happened. Desperately, I looked about the grey-shadowed sanctuary. Thus I caught sight of my back-sling, lying near the door.

I raced over to it and pulled the bound volume from it, then ran back to Fenton. “Look!” I said, thrusting the volume into his hands. “I’ve never shown this to anyone. See what I’ve been keeping.”

He opened it slowly, read aloud the first few words, and smiled. “Now I know why your Emorian has been improving so rapidly during recent months. I thought it must be due to more than my lessons.”

Feeling shyly pleased, I pointed to the first entry of my journal. “You see?” I said. “I even date the entries the Emorian way: ‘The fifth day of February in the 940th year after the giving of the law.’ What does ‘after the giving of the law’ mean?”

“That’s a lesson in itself,” Fenton murmured. He was flipping through the journal rapidly, far too quickly to be reading the entries, so I knew that he wished to preserve my privacy. “Some time soon, when we have time,

I'll explain Emorian law to you. I ought to have done so before now, I suppose, but it has been hard enough a task to teach you the Emorian language."

I grinned, not offended. We both knew that I had no special talent for learning foreign languages. It was a tribute to Fenton's talent for teaching that I now spoke his native language as well as I did.

He came to the final page, which was completed, and closed the volume. As he handed it back to me, he asked, "Will you continue to write this?"

I nodded. "I'm starting the second volume tomorrow. Today," I amended, looking at where the moon hung in the sky. "A new volume for a new life."

Fenton's eye lingered a moment upon the moon, and I found myself wondering whether he worships the Moon Goddess. He has never told me who his god is – there is a great deal Fenton has never told me about himself. Sometimes I feel that he is as mysterious as the gods, and that he is hiding something of vital importance from me. Something that would transform my life.

For a moment, standing in that dark sanctuary, I almost thought he would tell me. But all that he said was, "My only suggestion is that, from now on, you write as though you were speaking to an Emorian who needed to be told about Koretian life. Those first few words you wrote in your journal . . . I would not have understood them when I first came to Koretia. Not because you lack command of the Emorian language," he added, seeing my expression fall, "but because I was unfamiliar with Koretian customs. Knowing another person's language is only half the struggle. You must try to make clear to them how you think, so that they can understand ways that are strange to them."

I thought upon this for a while. Finally I said, "What do I need to explain to Emorians about Koretia that they don't already know?"

He looked at me for a long moment, his light-skinned hand curled around his cup. Finally he said, with a firmness that surprised me, "Emorians know nothing about Koretia. You will need to teach them everything."

o—o—o

I thought about that afterwards, while lying in bed at home. I suppose that I must accept Fenton's statement as true, since he was born in Emor and spent eighteen years there as a slave. I asked him again last night, for the twelve dozenth time, to tell me about his escape through the



mountains. . . . But perhaps I should explain, for the benefit of my Emorian reader, that I live in northern Koretia, and my village is built on the side of one of the black border mountains between Koretia and Emor. We found Fenton one day, lying atop our mountain, where he was nearly dead after his escape past the border mountain patrol – I know that I don't have to explain about the patrol, since they are Emorian soldiers, after all. My father told me that Fenton is the only man he has ever known to slip past the patrol, either coming out of Emor or going into it, and I think it was mainly out of admiration for his bravery that my father made Fenton his blood brother and therefore made him a member of our village. For – I realize once more that I must explain – most Koretian villages are made up entirely of single families, relatives either through birth or through blood vows of marriage or friendship.

Fenton spent six years in the priests' house at our capital city, which is in southern Koretia, but when he had learned his calling he returned here. My father asked Fenton to come back here to tutor me, and he even allowed Fenton to teach me Emorian, which my father calls a godless language, but which Fenton says could be of use to me since we have several people of Emorian blood in our village. Emor may be godless, says Fenton, but it knows certain things Koretia does not know, and we who live here in the borderland are in the best position to take what is good from both lands and combine those goods into something new.

Needless to say, I do not report such remarks to my father. Tonight my father is giving me a birthday feast – a thoroughly Koretian one, with nut tosses and blessings and blood vows. Afterwards we will sleep by the fire in order to watch the Jackal eat his prey. (That's what we call it here in Koretia when the fire burns its wood.) I will bring along this second volume of my journal, in case anything happens at the feast that is interesting enough that I would want to write it down.

Perhaps, now that I am a man, I will be able to peer into Fenton's spirit and know what he is, in the same manner as the Jackal knows me.

o—o—o

*The second day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

I suppose that I ought to be reluctant to write in this journal again, considering its role in what happened at my birthday feast. But when I told Fenton what had happened, he said that I must model myself on the Jackal and not destroy the good in my eagerness to erase the evil. Fenton does not say, as my father says, that the Jackal ate his prey and that what happened is the will of the gods. Instead, Fenton says that the ways of the gods are

mysterious, and though the gods do not bless the evil deeds that men have done, they are able to take these deeds and turn them to good.

For this reason, I will continue to write in this second and now sole volume of my journal, though it feels odd to take up this book once more and remember it lying between Hamar and me on the night of my birthday, like a murderer's thigh-dagger hidden in its sheath.

We were sitting around the outdoor fire in our village green, which must have been selected for its purpose for the simple reason that it is the only piece of reasonably flat open ground in Mountside. What other flat places there are on the slopes of our mountain – usually naked boulders jutting out from the sparse grassland – are occupied by houses such as our own. My mother, who lived in Cold Run before she vowed herself to my father, often complains about how uncomfortable our rock floor is compared to the dirt floor she grew up with. My father, over the years, has always made the argument that such stony barriers prevent fires from spreading from one village house to the next, and I suppose that such an argument is now irrefutable.

We had already had my birthday blessing and the prayers to the gods – that took a while, since Fenton prayed to all seven rather than reveal which gods are worshipped by the people of our village. Some people, like my brother, consider their god-service something to be spoken of only to the priest. My brother and I were sharing wild-berry wine from one cup, since we were short of drinking vessels, and at a certain point Hamar commented, “The Emorians think wild-berry wine tastes like poison.”

I had just received one of the nut bowls that was being passed hand to hand around the fire. I took a nut, gave the bowl to Hamar, and said, “Where did you hear that?”

“From Titus – I heard him talking to Lange. He said that the Emorians believe their wine to be the best wine in the Three Lands.”

“Well, they would,” I said in disgust. “They think that everything they do is better than what is done in Koretia and Daxis. They even say that it's better not to believe in gods.”

“No!” Hamar stared in astonishment at this blasphemy.

“That's what Fenton says,” I said calmly, having recovered from my shock at the time I first heard this. “He said that the Emorians believe that Koretians use the gods as an excuse to indulge themselves in passionate and irrational behavior.”

I thought it best not to add that Fenton had said that the Emorians were sometimes right about this. Hamar leaned back his head to sip from our cup, as well as to watch one of the nuts soar over the flames and then crack at the moment before it reached the fire. We joined in the cheers and

applause. Hamar said idly, “Do you suppose that Emorians have nut tosses?”

“I don’t know, but I know they eat nuts. Fenton said that he tasted some Daxion nuts when he was a slave and that they were delicious.”

Hamar frowned as he took from the man next to him the bowl of blackroot nuts. “Not that I want to accuse a priest of such a thing, but he must have been lying. Daxion nuts are a noblemen’s luxury.”

“Well, his master was rich, remember? —Oh, blessed of the gods,” I said enviously as I noticed that Hamar was holding the last nut of the bowl he had been handed. He stared at the flames for the moment, formulating his thoughts, and then sacrificed his nut to the fire. Hamar was always eager to show off his throwing skills: as a result the nut went too high, then plunged quickly into the fire before it was hot enough to crack.

“Too bad,” I said. “What did you pray for?” Then, at Hamar’s look: “You can tell me, since the god didn’t accept your sacrifice. The prayer won’t be answered in any case.”

Hamar shrugged, reaching over to take the wine cup from me. “It wasn’t an interesting prayer,” he said. “I prayed to the Sun God to protect me from harm.”

“Is that who your god is?” I said with interest. “Why did you choose the Sun God?”

Hamar shuffled the heels of his shoes against the ground, which was dry in the late-summer heat and therefore gave off great clouds of dirt that rose into the night sky. “The Sun God is the most powerful god, I think,” he said. “More powerful than the Jackal God, more powerful than the Moon Goddess – I don’t know why people choose to serve the other gods. The Sun grows our crops and he makes the fires that warm us, like that one.” He pointed to the balefire.

Annoyed, I said, “That’s the Jackal’s fire – he’s eating his prey.”

“Well, but who says that? Father, who worships the Jackal, and Fenton, who is his blood brother and wouldn’t say anything to offend Father.”

I rose to my feet and kicked the dust at Hamar, saying, “Don’t you dare say such a thing. Fenton would never lie about the gods, not even if it meant hurting Father or anyone else.”

Hamar jumped up and put his hand on his dagger hilt in a clear challenge. “Don’t you dare say that my god isn’t the most powerful!” he shouted.

A few heads turned our way, but not many, for our village had already had three duels that night, though only one of them resulted in serious injury. I could see my father watching us with amusement. He had kept out of our quarrels ever since we had reached an age where he trusted us to

be able to duel without drawing more than first blood – and he had made it clear that such blood must not be deep.

I considered taking Hamar aside and teaching him a lesson, but I decided that Fenton would not be pleased if I were to quarrel with my brother on my birthday. “Peace,” I said and held out my left hand.

Hamar considered this for a moment, then said, “Peace,” and clasped my hand as though our palms were sliced and we were joining our blood in a peace oath.

I waited till we were seated again before saying, “Anyway, Fenton says that all of the gods are the different faces of the Unknowable God.”

“Oh, well, if *Fenton* says . . .” Hamar’s words dissolved into giggles as I attacked my brother’s sides with my fingers.

I released him from my tickling eventually so that I could take another nut bowl that was passing my way. I noticed with envy that only two nuts were left. Taking my nut, I passed the bowl to Hamar, saying, “Here’s your second chance.”

Hamar was still catching his breath from my attack; he said between gasps, “You take it. If I tried it now, I’d probably drop it on Father’s head. Besides, I owe you a birthday present.”

Satisfied that this would now be a perfect birthday, I took Hamar’s sacrifice, made it my own, and prayed to the Jackal, saying, “God of Vengeance, God of Mercy, God of Judgment: I do not yet know how you wish me to serve you, but I know that Fenton is your servant, as he is the servant of all the gods. Since he is the wisest man I know, give me the strength to do something courageous which would please him. Hunting god and trickster god, as my sacrifice, accept this, all that I have.” I tossed the nut toward the fire.

It cracked while still clear of its flames, its sound breaking through the light chatter and laughter about me. Amidst the applause of the others, Hamar said with balanced criticism, “That’s better than your usual throws.”

“Thank you,” I said, judging it better to interpret this as a compliment. Feeling a warm glow after the sign that my prayer would be fulfilled, and wishing to make up for my quarrel with him, I said, “Hamar, I’ve been writing a journal.”

“Have you?” he said vaguely. He was looking over the fire at Fenton, who had risen to his feet. “Do you suppose that he’s going to start the blood vow now? Oh, he’s only walking over to get more wine. Listen, Adrian, I know what blood vow he has chosen for tonight – I heard him tell Father.”

“You ought not to tell me,” I said uneasily. “It’s supposed to be a

surprise.”

“Well, you’ll be finding out in a short while anyway, and I don’t want you to look crestfallen. It’s not at all an exciting one, like the one he gave me at my coming of age. He’s going to have us take a peace oath.”

“A peace oath?” I frowned in puzzlement. “You must have heard wrong. We’re not feuding with anyone.”

“We’re feuding with Cold Run,” said Hamar.

“Oh, that,” I said, dismissing the matter with a wave of the hand.

It occurs to me here that blood feuds may not be familiar to my Emorian reader. Fenton told me once that the Emorians don’t take blood vows, which obviously must have been some sort of joke on his part, but perhaps the Emorians don’t take certain types of blood vows, such as feud vows. Our village’s feud with Cold Run had not yet reached the stage of blood, though both Hamar and I half hoped that it would, as we had never before witnessed a blood feud. Of course we had witnessed a dozen or more lesser feuds. This one had started when Richard of Mountside, driving his cart, ran over the prize rooster of Tabitha of Cold Run and refused to pay for the creature, arguing that the rooster had darted in front of his wheels. Since that time we had progressed from livestock theft to drilling holes in wine barrels to water-traps that left the victim squealing in indignation – I knew that Hamar had done the last, since he had gleefully confessed to me that he had drawn the lot for this deed. Otherwise I would never have known, for, except on the rare occasions when a fire-killing occurs during a blood feud and the victim is avenged by his nearest kin, those who take part in a feud are known only to the village priests who draw the lots.

I knew that Fenton was worried because we were only two stages away from a blood feud, but everyone said that the people of both villages were too wise to shed blood over such a small matter. Anyway, the dispute would be ended as soon as someone was caught in the act of carrying out a part of the feud. This being the case, I could not understand why Fenton would waste my birthday vow with a peace oath, which was usually used only to settle a prolonged blood feud. But I was too loyal to Fenton to voice my disappointment; instead I hid my feelings by saying, “Oh, listen to me, will you? I’ve been writing a journal for several months now, all about everything that happens to me. I just started the second volume – it’s lying next to us here.”

That caught Hamar’s attention. He was always the sort of person who needed to have something right in front of him to fully understand it, this being the reason he did so badly at playing Jackal and Prey. I sometimes wondered too whether he hadn’t inherited most of the Emorian blood in our family, for he was as pale-faced as an Emorian, and he sometimes

talked about the unseen gods as though he were not quite sure he believed in them – but of course I would not insult him by pointing this out to him.

Now he said, “I wondered about that book, but I thought it was one of those volumes Fenton taught you to bind.”

“He did,” I said, “but I only bound blank pages, so I decided to fill them as a journal.”

“What does it say? Does it have anything in it about me?” He reached toward the book.

I pulled it hastily from his hands, remembering what I had written about him earlier that day. “Not this one,” I said, offering a silent apology up to the Jackal for my falsehood. “My earlier volume has some passages in it about you.” Some of those passages, I knew, were complimentary enough to my brother that he would be pleased to hear them.

“Read them to me now,” he ordered.

“I can’t. I don’t have the first volume with me. I hid it back in the house, where you and Mira couldn’t paw your way through it.”

“Then fetch it,” ordered Hamar. He’s like that sometimes.

I could see that he was on the point of going into one of his rages, so I said wearily, “You can fetch it yourself. I’ve hidden it in—”

“I can find it,” he said, clearly annoyed that I had so little faith in his hunting abilities.

I shrugged and turned my attention back to my wine flask. When I looked again, Hamar was gone.

After a minute, I regretted his departure. All around me, villagers were chatting and laughing, but Hamar and I had set ourselves slightly apart from the rest, and no one rose now to take Hamar’s place.

I looked about. Drew was on the other side of the fire with some of his playmates, and he looked longingly at me, but I was sure it could not be a manly act for me to go sit with a nephew so much younger than myself, so I turned my gaze away from him toward the younger men of the village. They were all standing in a knot, gathered round Drew’s father, Lange, who was talking about the latest village council meeting. I realized, with a lowering of the heart, that I would have nothing to contribute to such a conversation.

Leda was sitting nearby, holding her baby and smiling as she watched Lange. I was trying to decide whether it would be manly to go talk with my own sister when, to my relief, I caught sight of Fenton gesturing to me. I rose and rushed to join him.

He said in a low voice, “Adrian, where is your brother? Your father wants to start the village’s vow-taking now.”

I looked at the hall, which was farther down the mountain. “He went

back to our house to fetch something.”

“Well, have someone bring him back here. He should be present for the ceremony, and he will need to be here for its sequel, when you and he exchange vows.”

I looked round, but Leda was now in conversation with one of the more garrulous older women in the village; I knew that it would be difficult for her to extract herself from the talk. After a minute’s more frantic searching with my eyes, I found Mira.

She was sitting with her friend Chloris, who recently married Titus. Some of the older boys were saying at the time of the marriage that Emorians do terrible things to their women, but I had known better than to pass that information on to Mira; my sister is a terrible gossip. Besides, Titus has lived in Koretia for three years now. He has had time to become civilized.

When I told Mira what I needed done, she treated me as though I was still a boy. “Fetch him yourself,” she said, tossing her hair back over her shoulder. Then she said to Chloris eagerly, “Go on. What did he do next?”

Chloris turned pink; she was trying to bite away a smile. I sighed and stepped back out of hearing, turning my eyes toward Drew.

At that moment, though, I heard my father call for silence, and I knew that it was too late. I ran over and was just in time to scramble onto the speaking rock beside Fenton. My father remained below us, waiting for the moment when he would be called forward to help administer the vows.

I looked round from the heights of the speaking rock at the view before me. All in a cluster around us and the balefire were the men and women and children of the village – about thirty households in all, along with a few unmarried men who had become members of our village by vowing their blood to a blood-brother. That same vow – the one I was about to take with Hamar – is always taken by the village’s boys when they become men, as a way of showing their loyalty to the village . . . and also, of course, because a double bond of blood to one’s village, through birth and through friendship, makes a man more likely to exact vengeance in a feud.

So there were blade-carrying men and boys there, and very young boys who yearned to carry blades, and the women and girls who brought new sons into the world – and daughters too, for women and girls are needed to help with the healing of wounded men and the preparation of corpses. The last is a secret among women: the art of preparing a corpse so that it will stay fresh for three days, even in the hottest weather. But other than that, women are never allowed to take part in blood feuds. I’m glad I was born a boy rather than a girl.

Beyond the villagers stood the wooden houses, built on rock and dirt,

including our own house: a hall, along with a loft where Hamar and Mira and I slept.

And beyond that was the Sea of Koretia, as it is called: the long stretch of green woods, nearly unbroken within the triangular bounds of the mountains that enclose Koretia. Sometimes, on clear days when I'm on top of the mountain, I've thought I could see Capital Mountain, where the priests are trained, and at its foot the city where the King lives and his lords meet in council. But my father says that the capital is much too far away to be seen – many days' ride away. Only Capital Mountain serves as a dim and distant sentinel of the capital's position.

We of the borderland are almost a people apart, for it was here, the stories say, that the tribesmen from the northern portion of the Great Peninsula met the tribesmen of the southern portion of the Great Peninsula – who, it was said, had originally travelled over the Koretian Straights to the east, from mainland areas that were turning into desert. And when the northern people met the southern people, they intermarried and formed a common language. And that language was what we now call Border Koretian.

Then, after a few generations, most of the people left the borderland, the northern people spreading north and the southern people spreading south, so that the Three Lands of the Great Peninsula came to be formed: Koretia and Daxis to the south, and Emor to the north. But here in the borderland, some villagers stayed, preserving the ancient manners of speech and living. We who are their descendants hold the memories of what the Great Peninsula was like, back in the years before the Three Lands were formed.

Or so Fenton has told me. None of this was on my mind on my birthday, so I know that the reason I am writing all this down is to avoid writing what came next on that day.

o—o—o

Presently I became aware of Fenton speaking, though not because he was speaking about me. He was describing how the Jackal, after tricking his enemies, would often forgive his enemies and make peace with them. He was leaving out the stories where the Jackal killed his enemies, and I could see from my father's expression what he thought of this selectiveness in the recounting. But like all the other villagers, he remained respectfully silent as the gods' representative offered us a glimpse of the wisdom of the gods.

After a while, Fenton became more concrete in his examples of acts that



should be forgiven: he was citing acts that had taken place during our present feud in Cold Run, and I realized that Hamar had been right when he said that Fenton would require us to take a peace oath with Cold Run.

This reminded me that Hamar had still not reached the speaking rock in order to exchange his blood vow of friendship with me. I scanned the crowd with my eyes, trying to see whether, after finding my journal, Hamar had dilly-dallied in order to talk with some of the other boys.

Fenton was saying, “. . . and those who seek peace will experience the peace of the gods in their hearts, but those who seek fire and blood—”

He stopped suddenly. His head jerked up, as though he had heard the eerie wail of a jackal.

And at that moment, as Fenton was staring up the slope, and I was staring at Fenton, a woman screamed. A man cried, “The hall! It’s on fire!”

O—O—O

By the time we reached my house, flames were leaping through the roof. I – who had shouted almost incoherent warnings on the way that Hamar might be in the hall – would have run into the building immediately, even though black smoke was pouring out of the open door. But Fenton caught hold of me and held me; for a priest, he is very strong. As I struggled in his arms, he said, “No. Look – your father is going in.”

I turned my head in time to see my father duck his way through the doorway. He was carrying a face-cloth in his hand, which seemed odd, until I saw that it was dripping with water. He had it over his mouth and nose as he disappeared into the blackness.

More water was arriving, brought by the women from the mountain brook – women always seem to be quick-witted at such times. I saw Leda thrust her baby into Mira’s arms so that she could help with the water-carrying. Drew and some of the other boys had run off to fetch the village’s one ladder, other than our loft ladder, but they returned, panting, to report that the ladder was in a state of disrepair, as it was being mended by Warner, who is our village carpenter.

The men had joined the water-carrying now, and people were throwing water onto the flames, though it was clear that this was of no use. The flames were eating the walls of the house like a ravenous beast.

And my father and brother were still inside.

Suddenly my father emerged, stumbling, coughing. Fenton let go of me, and we both ran over to him.

“No . . . good,” he was saying to Lange when we arrived. “Loft ladder is . . . burnt. Can’t reach . . .”

At that moment, there was another scream, and the villagers, crying out, began to point.

I looked up. There in the tiny loft window, too small for anyone to crawl through, was a face I knew well, and a hand carrying a blade. I could not hear the voice above the roar of the flames, but the gestures that Hamar made with his dagger were clear enough.

The villagers had gone silent. Someone said, quite unnecessarily, “He wants us to avenge his death.”

There was a crack, like the crack on the day that the gods split the Great Peninsula from the mainland, and I heard Hamar give a great cry, and then the hall collapsed, and there was no sound but for the crackle of flames.

o—o—o

Lange was shouting again, calling upon the village men to dig into the rubble of the hall. The men came forward eagerly enough, but it was clear that it would be some time before they could follow these instructions, for the fallen timber was still red-hot. Leda, crying openly, continued to pour water onto the lingering flames, while Drew and Mira huddled together with the baby, with my mother standing behind them, her arms protectively round them as she gave out small, whimpering sobs.

And I – I who had stood by all this while and done nothing, I who had sent my brother to the place of his death – stood numbly, unable to weep as a man should weep on such a day. I felt nothing, except for the presence of Fenton’s hand on my shoulder.

Then I heard my father call my name. I turned and saw that he had tears streaming down his face. He gathered me into his arms, and I pressed my face into the hollow of his shoulder, closing my eyes and trying to rid myself of the image of the flames and the sound of Hamar’s voice in the final moments.

When I looked up again, Fenton was gone.

## CHAPTER TWO

*The third day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

I'm sitting on the back of our mountain – that is, on the northern side of the mountain, the side that is beyond the border and located in the no-man's-land of the black border mountains. Hamar and I used to sit in this spot to eat meals and to pretend that we could see as far north as Emor. Of course, our mountain is only a foothill in comparison to the other mountains, but the land to the north of us dips in such a way that our mountain actually looks taller than some of the other mountains. From this vantage point, you can see about one day's journey into the mountains, which takes you a third of the way to Emor, according to Fenton.

There isn't much to look at here, for what scrubby vegetation exists on the mountains is overwhelmed by the blackness of the rocky slopes, but right now I can see a flickering of light in the distance, accompanied by a low rumbling sound that has managed to travel this far, so I know that there must be a thunderstorm occurring to the north of us. It won't come this far – none of the clouds from Emor make it this far. Mountside receives all its rain from the south or the west or from whatever clouds have made their way over the ridge of mountains along the eastern sea-coast.

Mainly, what Hamar and I used to do here was listen: listen to the winds, and listen to the animals in the mountains, and pretend that we could hear the mountain patrol guards talking to each other, though we're too far south for that. Then, when we'd finished eating and listening, we'd play Jackal and Prey.

Father caught us playing here once, a few years' ago, and we could tell that his anger that we had crossed the border was combined with puzzlement that we could play Jackal and Prey in such a place. On the southern side of our mountain, where all the trees are located, Jackal and Prey is a game played through the eyes: you try to locate the prey by sighting him as he ducks around trees and bushes and rocks. But the rocks in the no-man's-land are so numerous that my father thought that you would have to spend years here before you could ever find your prey.

So we told him that we located the prey through sound, which made him even more confused. "How can you hear *anything* in the mountains, much less a prey?" he asked.

It's not as bad as everyone thinks, actually. It's true that the winds whistle through the mountains nearly without cease, and there are times

when Hamar and I have to shout in order to hear each other. But every few weeks, the wind dies down altogether for a long period of time, and even when it doesn't, the wind is usually low enough that you can hear any sounds in the nearby mountains. Besides, there are the echoes.

Hamar and I experimented once to see how far the echoes go. Hamar stayed here, and I went a couple of hours' journey into the mountains, then dropped a rock. As a result of the echoes bouncing from mountain to mountain, Hamar could hear the rock's fall as clearly as though I had been standing beside him.

Hamar told this to our father, which of course was a terrible mistake, since it revealed how far into the mountains we'd explored. Our father didn't bother to tell us that we'd break our necks climbing over the loose rocks of the mountains, or would fall down one of the many fissures at the feet of the mountains. That might be true of someone who lived in central or southern Koretia, but those of us who live in the borderland spend our lives clambering over the slippery slopes or hopping across the deep chasms. Instead, he said that it is easy to get lost in the border mountains unless you travel by way of the passes. The mountains are so tall that you can't orient yourself by the sun except around noonday – even the shadows are no help, because everything is in shadow in the parts of the mountain that are low enough for men to climb. Our father said that a man who is fool enough to travel the mountains anywhere other than the passes is likely to get lost and die.

Fenton says that this is quite true, and that the worst mistake he made when escaping Emor was to leave the mountains next to the passes and travel through the other mountains. It enabled him to escape the patrol – even the patrol guards stay close to the pass – but he might have wandered around the mountains till he died if he had not reached the Koretian border by chance. Even then, he had nearly died of thirst by the time he was found by my father and our old priest and my cousin Emlyn and I. (Actually, he was sighted first by Emlyn, who always seemed to have a gift for knowing when something important was happening out of sight.)

Since our father was so angry, Hamar and I didn't bother to tell him the greatest discovery that we had made, which was that we could locate objects far away, just by the way that the echoes arrived at us. The experiment with the rock was actually superfluous, because Hamar had been able to trace my movements through the mountains by the sounds I made as I travelled: he could locate where I was every time some rocks rolled out from under my feet and even, when I was close enough, when I was panting hard from the climbing.

When I told Fenton this in confidence, he said that we had discovered

one of the secrets of the mountain patrol – that this was why the patrol was so successful at locating border-breachers. “The patrol can hear a breacher coming about an hour ahead of time,” he said, “and once the breacher is close enough, the guards use the echoes of his movements to pinpoint exactly where he is. With that kind of training, the patrol can catch nearly anyone who passes by them.”

I doubt that the guards could have caught Hamar or me, because we learned how to run swiftly but silently over the mountains when we were playing here; otherwise our games would have been very short. We didn’t stop playing here after our father forbade us to. We simply came here when the village council was busy in its meetings, or on dark nights when no one would suspect us of sneaking over here. Of course, everyone in the borderland knows how to walk over a mountain even on a moonless night, but nobody in Mountside suspected that we were foolhardy enough to do this in the no-man’s-land, where the slopes are as black as the night sky. But this was when some of our best games took place.

Well, I’ll never play Jackal and Prey here again, because I have no one to play with any more – none of the other boys in the village would be bold enough to come here. I called out Hamar’s name as loud as I could a little while ago, and listened to the sound echoing off the mountains for quite a long time. I wonder whether the sound reached as far as the mountain patrol – if so, the guards must have wondered what it meant. It’s the only tribute I can think of to pay Hamar: to send his name into the mountains that we both loved so much.

o—o—o

*The fourth day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

We have received word back from Cold Run, in response to my father’s letter, sent by way of Fenton. The Baron of Cold Run, Roderick, claims that the killing of Hamar was an accident and that the killer believed our home was empty at the time he lit the fire. Roderick therefore refuses to state who the killer is or to hand him over to Mountside for punishment.

We all had a bitter laugh at the idea of a fire-feuder not scouting beforehand the house that he was planning to set on fire. This is obviously just an excuse from Roderick, who must value the murderer in some fashion. Because of Roderick’s lie and his refusal to surrender the murderer, my father declared that Cold Run has begun a blood feud. We have started to prepare for our side the feud – even emigrants such as Titus. As kin to the victim, my father will be sent to take revenge upon Cold Run for my brother’s death.

In the meantime, my father says that we must observe the traditional three days of mourning, even though everyone knows that the Jackal does not wait three days in the case of a murder – he comes immediately to claim the body of murder victims. So Hamar’s spirit is already in the Land Beyond, but father is determined to celebrate his life with proper ceremony. We men of the village will take our blood vows of vengeance tomorrow evening, after we light the balefire in honor of Hamar.

I spent this afternoon whetting my blade.

o—o—o

*The fifth day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

I went to see Fenton today, just after dawn.

Even though we are really too far north for such a construction, the priests’ house is built in the style that became fashionable around the time that Koretia was born: it has an atrium in the middle, with a garden-bed of raised earth. Fenton uses it as a place to grow apple trees, however strange it may seem to grow trees within the walls of a house. He said once that the apple trees make him feel less homesick – the only time he has ever hinted that he misses his native land.

Now I found him busy, pulling the first apples of the season from the branches. I held the basket for him as I said, “Father wants me to make my blood vow of friendship today.”

Fenton did not turn his eyes to look at me; he was trying to persuade a little green worm – which would no doubt destroy many of the apples on his tree – to crawl safely off the apple he was picking. “I imagine so. The blood feud begins tonight; you cannot take part in it unless you are pledged to one of the other men in the village.”

“Yes.” I let myself linger on that thought with pleasure, as I might have lingered on the last rays of summer sunshine. Hamar’s death still made me feel sick and hollow inside, but at least we would be able to find his murderer and punish him.

“Do you wish to make your blood vow of friendship to your father, since Hamar is gone?” Fenton asked as he turned to drop the apple into my waiting basket. “Or do you wish another of your relatives to be your blood brother?”

“I thought . . . I thought perhaps it might be more pious to pledge myself to someone who is nearer to the gods.”

I stammered a bit as I got the words out. I had spent much of the pre-dawn hours lying awake on my pallet, wondering how I would find the courage to make my request. My shyness was odd, for I am as close to

Fenton as I was to my brother, but somehow, asking Fenton to be my blood brother seemed as bold as asking a god whether I might be a guest in his home.

Fenton gave me the barest flick of a look before turning his attention back to inspecting the apples in the basket. "Only the gods can say who is closest to them."

I bit my lip as my cheeks turned hot at this refusal. After a minute, Fenton added, "Here, put the basket down and come help me. I need the use of your blade over here, where the leaves are thickest."

I gladly helped but found I could not meet his eyes as we did our work. Finally, Fenton said quietly, "Do not think that I feel anything but the greatest honor at your offer, son of Berenger. If love alone were reason enough to pledge myself to another, my blood would already be on your blade. But I swore to my god, long ago, that I would not vow my blood to any man who took part in blood feuds."

"But—" I stared at the faint scar on his wrist that represented my father's oath to him.

Something that was not quite a smile touched the edge of Fenton's mouth. "Your father and I became blood brothers when I was newly arrived in this land, before I realized how matters of justice are played out in Koretia. I have received many fortunes from that vow: your father's friendship, the opportunity to serve as the gods' representative in this village, and the sweet enjoyment of teaching you. But now that I know of blood feuds, I cannot, in all conscience, allow myself to blend my blood with any man who takes part in them."

"But the gods ordained the blood feuds," I said in confusion, pausing from my work, blade in hand. "And the priests are the ones who bless the hunters."

Fenton, reaching high for an apple beyond my reach, said, "Not all of us."

After a time, he paused to wipe sweat from his forehead as he said, "I pray for the hunters' safety. I can do that much for them. But it is your father's decision to begin this blood feud, not mine."

"It was the decision of Hamar's murderer," I growled, misery and hatred washing over me again.

Fenton did not speak immediately. His face, bright in the early morning light, seemed as white as a bone. At last he said, "Let us leave the murderer aside. You know, as well as I do, that other men in Cold Run are likely to be killed in this feud. Is it right that their blood should be shed for another man's deeds?"

"They're shielding the murderer," I said quickly.

“We cannot know that they do so by choice. They may be acting under their baron’s orders.”

“They share the murderer’s blood, for he is part of the village of Cold Run. Men who share the blood of a murderer deserve death as much the murderer does.” The words tripped off my tongue easily, for I had learned them when I was young. Ironically, the lesson had come from Cold Run’s priest, who had cared for us until Fenton became our priest.

“It is words like that,” said Fenton, bowing his head over the basket, “which make me determined not to share my blood with any hunter.”

I thought of this as I sheathed my blade and got down on my knees to begin inspecting the apples for worm-holes. I knew that Fenton’s words could not be the words of a coward, not only because he is the bravest man I know, but also because he is in no danger of being killed. Any village man who does not bear a blade cannot be hunted in a feud, and Fenton never bears a blade. He cannot bear a blade, by his oath as a priest.

So his words puzzled me. Finally I decided that, being a priest who is oath-bound not to fight, he wished only to pledge himself to others in a similar circumstance. This made sense, that he would want to be blood brother only to men who were on a similar path of life to his own. And yet .

..

“What if,” I said, my voice tight, “I should not be a hunter?”

His gaze flew over to me. “Your father would be angry.”

His reply reassured me. He had not said, “No”; he had only shown concern about angering his first blood brother. Feeling myself on surer ground now, as though I had found a part of a cliff that did not crumble, I said, “I am a man, and I must decide for myself what oaths I take. If I had been blood-bound in friendship to Hamar, I would gladly have taken part in the hunt for his murderer. As it is . . . It’s not too late for me to take another path, is it?” My words held more pleading than I would have liked.

“No,” said Fenton, sitting back on his heels; he had joined me a moment before in sorting the apples. “It is not too late. Yet you place temptation in my path, Adrian. If I can keep you out of this feud . . . But that is a poor reason to bind myself in lifelong friendship to another man.”

“You already said you wanted to be my blood brother.” The words came more easily from me now. “If the only thing holding you back is that I’m to be a hunter, then I won’t take part in the feud. It’s as simple as that.”

Fenton pushed back his hair under the hood of his robe, sighing. “It is far from simple. I see the possibility of another feud arising from this. And if you are doing this only for my sake—”

“No,” I said quickly. “You are my priest. If you think it would be wrong for me to take part in this feud – if you believe that my god doesn’t wish



this for me – then of course I won't hunt. That would be wrong, whether or not you became my blood brother." The thought was rising in me that perhaps Fenton had specially chosen me for this role, as a Commander might have chosen one of his soldiers to remain away from battle in order to guard some important post. Normally, as a grown man, I would not be required to remain bladeless, as though I were a priest or a child. But perhaps Fenton believed that one man in this village should remain bladeless during the coming feud, as a visible symbol of the words of peacemaking that he had spoken at my birthday feast.

And he had chosen me. He believed that I had the strength to withstand the temptation of taking part in the hunt.

Something of my joy at being granted this special role must have conveyed itself to my face, for after looking at me for some time, Fenton said gently, "I wish I had the eyes of the Jackal, to know what will come of this. But as you say, you are a man, and it is your right to make this choice. Come, then, and I will pledge my everlasting friendship and faithfulness to you. May our bond never be broken, even by death."

o—o—o

And so we exchanged blood, and then I went home and told my father of my decision, and he shouted at length until he finally calmed down enough to say, "Well, in practical terms, this means little. I will find Hamar's murderer when I am sent out, and that will be the end of the feud. But you ought not to have misled Fenton into thinking that you are on the path to becoming a priest, Adrian. You know that, the next time a feud arises between us and Cold Run or another village, he won't want you to take part in it, because of the promise you made him."

This had not occurred to me; I had thought of myself only as a special sentinel for this coming battle, not as withdrawn from battle for all time. But I dared not express my doubts to my father; I said only, "That is farther away even than the death of Hamar's murderer. Surely you have better things to worry about at this time. Have you whetted your blade?"

This turned our conversation to easier matters – ways to trap and kill the murderer – and so, in the end, I escaped further rebuke from my father. As for my mother, I think she is relieved that I will be in no danger from the coming feud, though of course she cannot say this openly, with my father so angered by my decision. And Mira is too young to fully take in all that is happening; she still cries every night from Hamar's loss.

But I . . . I have a difficult role given to me by the gods, and I have a blood brother who will help me to keep my promise.



## CHAPTER THREE

*The sixth day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

My father left for Cold Run early this morning before any of us had awoken except Fenton, who gave his blood brother the blessing for safe killing before sending him off – or so everyone thinks, but I now realize that Fenton must have given him only a prayer for his safety.

Leda packed a food-bag last night for my father, in case he should need several days to find a suitable prey. I'm staying at the house of Lange and Leda and Drew at the moment, since there isn't room enough for more than my father and mother and Mira in the sleeping-hut they have moved into since the fire. My father says that the village's first task after this is all over will be to build a new hall.

Lange came up to me somewhat hesitantly this morning and said that he knew I must still be upset over what had happened to Hamar, and would I like him to take care of matters in the village until my father's return? That was a nice way of saying that he didn't think I could handle the job yet. I gave him my permission gratefully. Now that Hamar is dead, Lange is next heir to my father after me, and he has much more experience in these matters than I do. He has been on the village council for twenty years now, and I have only attended one meeting since coming of age.

This set me thinking, though, of what Hamar's death would mean for me. I had almost forgotten, amidst the pain of what happened, that I am now the heir. Before this, I had planned to do some travelling in order to help me decide what sort of work I wanted to do. Of course, I could live at home as long as I wanted, and my father would support me, but I am not the sort of man to be a blood-worm to my parents. The money for my travels was my father's second birthday gift for me, but now there is no question of what work I will do.

I don't really mind. I think I will enjoy working alongside my father, though Hamar, who liked to elicit pity, always tried to make it sound as though he was training for the worst job in the world. Most of all, I will enjoy being able to attend village council meetings. For the last few years, Drew and I have been eavesdropping on the meetings by listening through one of the windows. (Drew is only nine, but he likes to pretend that he is as old as I am.) Now that I am of age, I would be able to attend the meetings anyway, but it will be different sitting at the right hand to my father and presiding over the meetings when he is away.

I will try not to remember that Hamar should be doing that instead of me.

o—o—o

*The eighth day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

My father still has not returned, and I am trying not to worry. Perhaps the Cold Run villagers are simply being cautious, as well they might. Anyway, if my father is killed, Cold Run's priest will send word.

Drew is so excited about the feud that I nearly slapped him today out of frustration, though I felt the same before this all started.

o—o—o

*The tenth day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

Still no word. Surely they would not have killed him and kept the news to themselves? It would be their victory, after all. Lange says that if we do not hear from Cold Run by tomorrow, he will send Fenton over to discover how matters stand.

o—o—o

*The eleventh day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

My father returned at noonday. He drew blood – Nathaniel, whom I vaguely remember as giving me rides on his pony when I visited Cold Run as a child. Everyone here is now tensely awaiting Cold Run's hunter, and all of the boys have long faces because they are not allowed to wear their daggers until the blood feud is over. My father spent a long time this evening reminding me that I must not wear my free-man's blade or even hold it in my hand as long as I am determined to stay out of the feud. I think he said that in order to shame me into taking my blood vow to murder, but I have remained steadfast to my promise to Fenton.

My father was delayed in returning because he hunted in Cold Run for several days before picking his prey. He had hoped that one of the villagers would say something that would reveal who Hamar's murderer was, but everyone there kept quiet about the subject, no doubt knowing that they might be overheard by our hunter.

My father was also delayed because it took him several minutes to bind Nathaniel, and during that time he got a lot of blood on his only remaining tunic – mainly Nathaniel's blood, fortunately. So my father decided to travel south to Border Borough to buy new clothes, not only for himself,

but also for my mother and Mira and me, since we lost all our goods in the fire. (Our money is safe, since my father always kept that with the town bankers.) While he was in town, my father informed Lord Ellis of our feud, and Lord Ellis says that he will send word to the King, though I cannot imagine why the King should be bothered with such a matter. There must be several dozen blood feuds going on in Koretia right now, and none of them is likely to go beyond the village or town where it began. But since the King is head of our bloodline, he has to know about even a small feud like this, since he may be called upon to defend us.

My father took two days to travel to Border Borough and back – of course, it would have taken less time than that to go east to Blackpass, but Blackpass's baron is Blackwood of the old nobility, and my father will not do business in a town that is run by our enemies' kin.

o—o—o

*The twelfth day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

I had Fenton read over the above entry, and I asked him whether there was anything in it that an Emorian was unlikely to understand. He laughed and said that it would all be incomprehensible to an Emorian. One of these days, he said, I will have to explain in my journal about bloodlines and blood debts and why the King is obliged to defend us in the feud if it grows serious, and why Blackwood must do the same for Cold Run, and a dozen other matters that I would have thought would be perfectly obvious.

I had no desire to argue with Fenton; it was the first time I have seen him laugh since this blood feud started. These days, he spends most of his time in the sanctuary, praying, and all the rest of his time with me, cramming me with knowledge of the Emorian language as though I had only hours to live, though of course he and I are the only men in this village who are safe.

My father gathered all the men in the village square today and warned everyone not to wander off alone, since Cold Run's hunter is no doubt hiding near our village at this very moment and waiting to make his kill. I heard my father tell Fenton afterwards that he expected the others to follow his advice for no more than half a day before forgetting it.

I changed into one of my new tunics today. It feels odd to be wearing a tunic with silver trim, just like my father and Hamar. All I am missing now is a sword, but my father says that will have to wait until we go together to Border Borough and have one custom-made for me. The delay is of no importance; I will only wear the sword on formal occasions, and I cannot even wear a dagger right now, as my father keeps reminding me. I think he

is puzzled that I am remaining so obstinate.

o—o—o

*The thirteenth day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

Despite our efforts to stay alert, Cold Run's hunter made his kill today. His prey was Titus.

I went over to see Chloris this evening. She was still weeping in her hut, refusing to see anyone, but she let me in; she said it was because I had refused to take part in the feud.

"I tried to persuade Titus to do the same," she said as I handed her a face-cloth because her own was soaked through. "Titus thought the blood feuds were foolish; he said that in Emor, Hamar's murderer would have been brought to judgment, and that would have been the end of it. But he said that he had to abide by Koretian customs, or nobody here would believe that he was truly loyal to the gods. As if anyone could have doubted that!" She exploded into another shower of tears, and I put my arm around her.

After she had calmed somewhat, I asked, "How would the Emorians have brought Hamar's murderer to judgment? Cold Run refuses to surrender the man."

"I keep trying to remember," she said, gulping between sobs. "Not that it matters to me, but it mattered to him – it was all he kept talking about during the last few days. He said that Cold Run refused to surrender the murderer to us because their baron was sure that the murderer wouldn't receive fair judgment here, and that Roderick was right. Titus said that there ought to be someone who could judge the murderer without any bias."

"Like a priest, you mean?"

"No, Titus said that even the priests are allied with the villagers they minister to. He said that, in Emor, the law would stop the blood feud. That's what he kept saying over and over – that if Koretia had the law, there would be no feud. And now he's dead." She flung herself face-down onto her pallet, and eventually I had to leave because I saw that I was only making her more upset by having her talk about this.

So I went to Fenton to ask him about the nature of Emorian law, and how it differs from the gods' law. I found him in the dark sanctuary with his fingers on the Jackal's mask – that seems to be the only god he prays to these days, I suppose because the Jackal is the hunting god.

He pulled away from the mask when he saw me, though. After I had asked my question, he said, "I wish that I had had time enough to explain

Emorian law to you, but it seemed a lengthy enough task just to teach you the Emorian language. And now—”

He turned away suddenly, and for a moment I feared that he would ask me to leave, as he does sometimes when he feels he must speak with the gods. But instead he went over to the altar and stood there for a moment with his head bowed, looking down upon the grey slab of stone. With his back to me, he seemed like a stranger. I could not see his face or his hands, and only his robe told me who he was – his robe, and the fact that he bore no blade.

A blood-fly buzzed past his head. The weather has not yet turned to autumn mildness, and so the blood-flies are still thick in the early evening. Fenton waved his hand, and at first I thought he was trying to kill the blood-fly before it settled upon him. Then I noticed that other flies were in the room – house flies, attracted by the drying blood on the altar.

He turned then, beckoning me over, and by the time I reached his side, his robe sleeves were pushed up to his elbows and he was scrubbing the blood with a brush. I found the other brush without needing to ask where it was; he rid himself of his assistant last year, after I offered to help him with his menial work. Together we dug away at the hard blood. There was a great deal of it. Usually, at his daily worship, Fenton sacrifices small animals: birds on feast days, and on other days, the rodents he traps in our houses. My mother said once that a priest in a village is as good as a cat. When the blood feud started, though, my father offered up to the gods our entire flock of goats. Our hired hands were happy at this news of less work, until they realized how long the feud might last, and that there might be no goats left in the end for them to watch.

Fenton said finally, “Why should we serve the gods?”

I was ready with an answer; we had talked about this many times. “Because they are good, pure good; anything good that we have, we received from them. If we serve them, the good in us will be increased. If we turn our face from them, the gods will curse us – not because they want us to suffer, but because they can no longer help us, unless we turn our face toward them again and ask their forgiveness.”

Fenton pushed his right sleeve further toward his shoulder. For a moment, I caught a sickening glimpse of what he keeps hidden under his robe; then he pushed his sleeve back down to his elbow. “And how do we serve the gods?” he asked.

“We serve them by thinking of what they want, always, before anything else,” I replied promptly. “We serve them by being willing to sacrifice everything we have and are, for their sake. We serve them by following the gods’ law, as given to us by our priest – you.” I ended with a smile.

Fenton smiled back, but said, as he pulled a bowl of water toward himself. “And what if I say the gods want one thing, and Cold Run’s priest says the gods want the opposite? Whose law do you follow then?”

I wanted to say that I would always follow his commands, no matter what any other priest said, but I knew that was not the answer he wanted, so I said reluctantly, “I would follow the gods’ law as proclaimed by the High Priest – when he finally comes. Do you think he will come?” I looked over at Fenton, who was now washing the altar with as much tenderness as a mother might wash her child.

I thought his smile wavered somewhat, but he said only, “In your time, perhaps. I don’t think he will show himself to the Koretians while I’m alive.”

I looked with concern at the wrinkles next to the sides of his eyes. It had never occurred to me before that he would die before I did. “Are you very old?” I asked tentatively, not wanting to add to his pain.

He laughed then, a light, soaring laugh, and threw a dry rag my way. “As old as the black border mountains,” he replied. “I celebrate my thirtieth birthyear next spring.”

That sounded quite old to me, but I had no wish to offend him, so I said quickly, “You didn’t tell me about the Emorians’ law.”

“I didn’t have to,” he said as we wiped the altar dry. “You told me yourself.”

My expression must have been as blank as my thoughts, for he smiled again and said, “I’ve heard many people say that the Emorians have no religion, but they’re the most religious people in the world. They have a god whom they serve with duty and sacrifice. They have priests who tell them what the god wants them to do. They have a High Priest who serves as the living presence of the god whom they worship. They even have their own gods’ law.”

I stood back from the altar, watching the last drops of moisture glisten in the ruddy evening sun. Finally I said, “The Emorian law – that’s their ‘gods’ law.’ And the ‘priests’ – they have people who tell them how to follow the law?”

Fenton nodded. He had brought out the brush again and was rubbing at a bit of blood we had missed. The flies, disappointed, wandered out the door. “They have men called judges who decide when their law has been broken. And the Emorian ‘High Priest’ is their ruler: the Chara. He is High Judge of the land, and he makes final decisions on the law. The Emorians even call their law the Chara’s law, believing that the Chara is the living embodiment of their god.”

“And who is their god?” I asked with curiosity.



“The law itself.”

I gave a laugh of disbelief as Fenton finally stood back, satisfied that the altar was purified for the morrow’s worship. “That makes no sense,” I said. “The law is what the gods give us – the law isn’t the gods themselves.”

“The Emorians may have seen it that way in the past,” said Fenton. “Some of their old documents refer to a Lawgiver, as though something stood behind the law – but you won’t find many Emorians talking that way today. To them, the law itself is worthy of worship and sacrifice, and they are as ready to lay down their lives for it as we are for our gods.”

I shook my head. “Somebody should tell them the truth,” I said. “Somebody should teach them that the gods are the only ones that are purely good, the only ones that they should worship. The gods are pure goodness, so the gods’ law is pure goodness, unlike the Emorians’ law.”

“Is it?” Fenton had been looking down at the altar all this time; now he raised his eyes. I could see them clearly in the light, bright blue like a newly forged blade. “It is the gods’ law that tells men to murder each other,” he said softly. “In Emor, this blood feud could never have happened. The Chara’s law would have forbidden it.”

I was so astonished that by this time I had forgotten my original question: of how the Emorians’ law accomplished this feat. Just the fact that Fenton would speak of the gods’ law in such a way made my heart beat fast, as though I expected a god to bring down his vengeance on us at any moment.

Finally, I swallowed the hardness in my throat and said, “But . . . you worship the gods.”

Fenton nodded. His gaze had drifted past me toward the door, and I realized from this that he did not wish his words to be heard by others; he was telling me a secret no one else had heard. “I pay honor to the gods with my life, but we men are imperfect; we see only glimpses of what the gods want. You said a while back that I give you the gods’ law, but I have never done that. I have given you my own understanding of what the gods want, an imperfect understanding. And sometimes, when men’s hearts turn evil, and they wish to follow their own wills rather than those of the gods, they pretend that the gods want what they want. They create rules for murder and execution and enslavement, and they call these rules the laws of the gods.”

Now my heart was beating so hard that I felt the blood throb at my fingertips. What Fenton was speaking was blasphemy; I was old enough to know that. Nothing less than a terrible death would satisfy the gods who heard such words spoken . . . and yet I could not believe that the gods, good as they were, would ever want to harm Fenton. I stood bewildered,

not knowing what to say.

For a moment, I thought that Fenton would speak more, but his eyes flicked to the side again and he said, “The Emorians’ law is hard to explain in one lesson, and surely it is time you were home and helping your father with your family’s evening worship.”

I turned around and saw standing on the threshold of the sanctuary my father, his brows drawn low as he looked, not at me, but at Fenton. For a moment, I feared that he had heard what Fenton had said and that he would denounce Fenton for his blasphemy. Then I remembered with relief that my father is blood-sworn not to harm Fenton, and that anything he had heard he would keep locked in his heart.

So I went home, and we worshipped the gods together as we have done since I was a baby, but this time I stared at the mask of the Jackal, wondering what the Emorians know that we Koretians do not know, and wondering how their law brings them closer to the gods’ will than ours does.

o—o—o

*The fifteenth day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

Our hunter returned today. Now that the blood feud is begun in earnest, we no longer wait out the period of mourning before we send our hunter. Digby, who is my great-uncle’s cousin, killed Angus the shopkeeper, whose wife I remember: she used to give me sweets when her husband wasn’t watching. My father is angry that Hamar’s murderer has not yet been identified, but he congratulated Digby on a fine kill. Now we await Cold Run’s hunter.

o—o—o

*The sixteenth day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

Every man in the village is on edge. I tapped Lange on the shoulder today as he was lathing wood, and he leapt as high as a funeral pyre flame.

Fenton continues to tutor me but has not spoken again about the Emorians’ law. I am quite glad. Fenton is such a good man that I know that the gods would never punish him for anything he said against their law, but I fear that the gods will punish me if I listen to such talk.

o—o—o

*The seventeenth day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

My cousin Rosa woke this morning, turned over in bed, and discovered her husband Warner lying in a pool of blood. The flies were feasting on his neck.

Her screams must have been heard all the way to Cold Run. Everyone has been saying that it was Warner's fault, for wearing his dagger to bed. No hunter can kill a man unless he wears a blade at his belt or carries it in his hand.

Lange has been sent to Cold Run. Drew is in a very bad mood and refuses to play with me.

o—o—o

*The eighteenth day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

I have been having a hard time keeping from thinking about the gods' law, so I allowed myself to think about the law today – I mean the Emorians' law, but I find myself thinking of it just as the law these days. I suppose that is impious.

If I were creating a law, I decided, I would make a law where the innocent need not die in the place of the guilty. It is not Warner's fault, or Titus's, or even Nathaniel's or Angus's, that someone at Cold Run killed Hamar. Why should all these men be killed to satisfy the gods' vengeance? It would be better if the gods were to pick priests who would have the power to say, "This man is guilty and must die for what he has done." And something would have to force those priests to follow the gods' will, rather than simply follow the desires of the villagers whom they served.

I just read the above paragraph and am now cold with fear for what I have written. I am tempted to blot out my words, but the gods already know that I have criticized the law that they gave us, and so I can do nothing except go to Fenton and confess to him my impiety – my blasphemy, rather. But he has said words harsher than mine against the law, so I do not know whether he will consider what I did to be wrong. I am very confused.

o—o—o

*The nineteenth day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

I had no chance to ask Fenton what I should do yesterday, for Lange brought back exciting news in the evening: he has killed Cold Run's baron.

My father says that Lange must have had great skill to accomplish such a feat; a baron is always especially wary during a blood feud, and Roderick was an accomplished swordsman. Lange, who is modest, says that he is lucky Roderick didn't kill him, and that Roderick's death is a sure sign that the gods wish for Mountside to win this feud.

Everyone has been celebrating tonight, sitting in front of the fire and making toasts to the gods in thanksgiving for their blessing upon Mountside. I had to leave the fireside before I was sick. When we visited Cold Run when I was young, we always stayed at Roderick's house. Roderick was like an uncle to Hamar and me, bringing us gifts from far-off villages when he went travelling.

Is something wrong with me? My father has begun to imply that I am nothing more than a coward, and I think he must be right. I ought to be rejoicing that Mountside is so close to winning the feud, but instead I feel as near to weeping as a woman.

I wish I could speak with Fenton, but he has gone to Cold Run. My father sent a message that we would observe the three days' mourning in honor of Cold Run's baron.

o—o—o

*The twentieth day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

Again I had no chance to talk to Fenton, for when he returned to Mountside he was accompanied by Cold Run's priest, Felix, and by Cold Run's new baron.

Griffith I remember even better than Roderick. He and my cousin Emlyn swore blood vows of friendship when they were children, and Hamar and I used to go to Cold Run to play with Emlyn and Griffith and Griffith's younger brother Siward. Sometimes the Cold Run boys would come here, and we would all play Jackal and Prey in the woods; Emlyn usually won, but Griffith was almost as good at the game. He and Emlyn were the best pranksters among the boys in either of our villages. My father used to say with a smile that it wasn't safe to become enemies of those two.

All this was back in the old days, before our feud started with Cold Run.

Griffith was dressed in mourning grey today, with a face to match; his eyes were so barren that it seemed his spirit had accompanied his father's to the Land Beyond. When he began talking, though, he was quite calm. He said that he had no wish to take the feud any farther than it had already gone, and that he was willing to concede victory to Mountside. He would compensate Richard for the damage to his cart when it ran over Tabitha's

rooster, and he would pay Mountside whatever fee it liked as blood-payment for the Cold Run man who would have died if the feud had ended in the normal way, with a hunter being caught and killed.

My father's answer was short. "Give me Hamar's murderer," he said, "and I will consider the matter ended."

We were all crowded into the sanctuary, there being as yet no village hall in which the council can meet. I could see Drew peeking in through the half-opened window, and the women's voices murmured outside. Some of the younger men had had a hard time restraining their laughter during Griffith's speech. Now they stared at my father, amazed that he would ask so small a victory price when it was clear that Cold Run's new baron was spineless.

I was standing next to my father and could hear Fenton murmuring in his ear, urging a peace oath, regardless of Griffith's answer. My father ignored him; he was staring with dark eyes at Griffith, whose spine appeared quite firm to me, and whose dagger-hand was twitching in a manner I did not like. I was glad that Griffith had vowed a truce oath and would not draw the blade at his side.

When he spoke, though, it was in the same mild voice as before. "Hamar's murderer has already received his punishment from our priest. If you wish his blood in payment for your son's death, I stand in his stead."

This time there was no laughter, only a collective intake of breath. Faintly through the window, I could hear Drew whispering the news to the other children, and soon after a gasp arose from the women outside. Felix was staring at Griffith as though he had gone mad.

My father is too well-bred to show his contempt for weaklings, but I thought his face shimmered with a smile for a moment before it grew grave again. He said, in a voice raised so that the women outside could hear, "My son, dying from the fire, demanded vengeance upon his killer. The gods were witness to that cry, and I would be lacking in my duty to the gods if I allowed their vengeance to go unfulfilled. I will accept no substitute for the murderer's blood."

Fenton began to say something, then stopped, having caught sight of Griffith's face. I wondered, then, whether Griffith himself was Hamar's murderer, for he looked at that moment like the sort of man who would willingly burn flesh. He said, slowly and precisely, "Then let the gods judge between us. They alone know which of us deserves their vengeance." And he turned and walked out of the sanctuary, with Felix trailing behind, looking as proud as a mountain cat when her cub makes its first kill.

So tonight the men are whetting their blades in preparation for the next hunt. Lange, who is always gentle with Drew, lectured his son sternly when

Drew touched Lange's blade.

Fenton and my father have been locked together in the sanctuary all day. I heard my father shouting.

o—o—o

*The twenty-first day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

Everyone was relieved yesterday when my father emerged from the sanctuary with his mind unchanged. I heard some boys saying today that Fenton has forgotten to worship the god of vengeance; by the time I was through with them, I was sure that I had proved I was no coward. When I told Fenton afterwards how I had defended him, though, he said that a fist is no better than a blade. I felt ashamed of myself and begged his pardon for breaking my promise to him.

He smiled then and said, "Men are called to different paths in life, and your father is wrong in thinking that I am training you to be a priest. I hold no doubt that, in future years, you will unsheathe your blade and defend others who are in need, and that the gods will honor your bloodshed as much as they honor my bladelessness. I want to be sure, though, that when you shed blood, you are following the gods' will, not your own."

This came so close to our previous conversation about the law that I'm sorry to say that I asked leave to skip our lesson that day. I left Fenton alone in the sanctuary, polishing the curved blade he uses during his daily sacrifices.

I remembered then that Fenton has shed more blood than any other man in our village, and I grew angry at my father for not remembering this. But when I arrived at my parents' sleeping hut, I had no opportunity to speak with my father, for my mother was weeping and my father was shouting.

I quickly climbed the ladder to the loft where Mira sleeps, before my parents could notice me, and then I listened to their conversation. "Thank the gods that Emlyn lives in the south," my mother was saying between sobs. "If he still lived in Cold Run, I've no doubt that you would have killed your nephew with your own blade if you had the opportunity."

"Emlyn is no kinsman of ours!" shouted my father. "Nor has he been since the feud began. Blood feuds break ties of kinship – you know that, for I would never have married you if I thought that you understood otherwise."

My mother drew breath to answer, but my father bellowed over her words, "You are a woman of Mountside – have you forgotten that? Or do you hold your birth-blood more dear than the blood I gave to you when we

exchanged our marriage vows?”

“Never,” my mother choked out. I could see her through the cracks in the floorboard, and I saw that her face-cloth was moist with tears. “I am yours always; the gods are witness to that. Why must this feud continue, though? Griffith has offered an honorable peace—”

“Honorable?” cried my father. “Honorable to allow the death of our first-born son to remain unavenged? Those are words I might hear from any weak-minded woman in the village. Those are words I might hear from our priest, who will never know what it is like to lose a son. May the gods watch over me, those are even words I might hear from my heir, who has turned into something halfway between a priest and a woman. Those are not words I expected to hear from the woman I picked to be my wife.”

I heard no more; I picked up a cushion from Mira’s bed and buried my head under it, afraid of hearing more about myself, and even more afraid of believing what my father said of me.

I went to see Fenton later, but Drew said he had gone out onto the mountain, and he had not returned when it was time for me to go to bed.

o—o—o

*The twenty-second day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

Today was the worst day since the feud began. No one died – we are still observing the period of mourning – but my father and I fought.

I have no need to record what he said about me; it is burned into my spirit. I will record here, though, what I said in the end, as a sort of penance, for it is painful to recall my shamelessness. I said, “You are just like the men Fenton talked about, who are evil in their hearts, and who pretend that the gods want what they want.”

My father said nothing after that, which frightened me more than if he had shouted. He has commanded me to stay in this hut until dinnertime, when he will allow me to join the villagers around the fire we are building to match the fire built in Cold Run tonight for Roderick’s body.

I almost wish that I had taken part in the feud after all. Perhaps I would be dead by now and would not feel this pain at what I have done.

o—o—o

The men had built the funeral pyre by the time Fenton arrived tonight, and the women were throwing onto it the mourning cloths that were meant to represent Roderick’s body. As I saw Fenton’s face, pale over the bright flames, I had a sudden image of Fenton himself burning in the fire, dying

the death of the god-cursed, but I quickly thrust this thought away. The gods love Fenton; of that I can be sure.

He was very quiet tonight, saying the words in honor of Roderick's life. His gaze strayed a couple of times to my father, who kept a seemingly silence throughout the rite. As soon as Fenton was finished, though, my father roared for wine, and soon all of us were sitting around the fire, warming ourselves as the first touch of autumn coolness travelled over the mountains from Emor.

I had hoped to be able to spend time talking to Fenton, but he was busy offering comfort to Chloris, who used this mock funeral pyre as an opportunity to reopen her grief for her dead husband. When he had succeeded in persuading Chloris to put aside her open grief, he began to walk toward my father, but he stopped as my father shouted for silence.

Licked by the light of the flames, my father stood with cup in hand, looking round at the people about him, like a father regarding his beloved children. His gaze rested finally on me, sitting between Mira and Drew. Then he raised his hand and said, "Eleven years ago last spring, we welcomed a new kinsman into our midst."

I knew immediately what my father was going to say next, and I looked over at Fenton. His lips were parted with surprise at this honor, and I saw a blush start across his cheeks. Then he ducked his head and went over to help one of my aunts collect the empty wine flasks.

"Eleven years ago," my father continued, "we met a stranger, an Emorian who had chosen to leave his old life and to brave danger in order to enter this land. He was called to Koretia by a voice, he told me, and he soon came to believe that the voice he had heard was that of his god. Wishing to serve his god with the same loyalty with which he had served his previous master, he took on the robes of priesthood and dedicated his manhood to the seven gods and goddesses of Koretia. Since that time he has borne no blade, except when serving as the gods' representative at the sacrifice."

All around me, I could see people nodding. Even those who were angry at Fenton for wishing an early peace with Cold Run knew that he had acted as he did out of love of the gods. Fenton himself, still busily collecting flasks, looked as flushed as a boy in love.

"Because he had shown himself to be a god-lover, I asked Fenton to share blood with me," my father said. "Because he had shown himself to be a god-lover, I entrusted to his care my younger son, who has now become my heir. It is because of Fenton that my son is what he is today."

He turned and handed his flask to Lange, who had been nodding with the others; then he unsheathed his dagger. A small sigh drifted through the



crowd like mist.

I was as impressed as the rest. I had expected my father only to offer a toast to Fenton, as a sign that this disagreement was superficial in comparison to their blood-bond and their love for each other. Now I realized that my father was going to go further and renew his blood vow of friendship with Fenton.

Fenton had raised his head. I saw his lips part again, and then he quietly took a step forward, awaiting the moment when my father would hand the blade to him. My father raised the underside of his arm so that all could see the thin slit of whiteness upon his wrist. He pointed to it with the tip of his dagger, and then carefully, precisely, he cut his wrist cross-wise from the original mark.

No one spoke. All eyes were now on Fenton, who looked like a corpse that had been drained of blood. My father, it was clear, had not told him what he planned.

“As the Jackal is my witness,” said my father in a cool and level voice, “I hereby abjure my vow of friendship with Fenton son of Paulin. No longer is his blood mine; no longer will I protect him from harm. He has broken his vow of friendship to me by teaching my son godless ways and has brought danger to him through those teachings.”

Now a murmur ran through the crowd, like wind running over grass. Everyone’s gaze turned toward me, including my father’s. For a moment more, as my spirit screamed from fear of what he would say next, my father looked upon me. Then he said quietly, “Fenton remains blood-bound to my son; I will not say anything that would cause harm to my son’s blood brother. For this reason, I will not repeat the teachings I have heard Fenton speak. Nor will I ask him to leave this village; he remains kin to us through my son. I have sent a letter to the King, though, asking him to send a new priest to us. When that priest arrives, Fenton may leave or stay, as he wishes. If he stays, I will not ask him to take part in the blood feud, for his vow to the gods forbids that. No longer, though, will he represent us before the gods. I believe that, if he were to remain as our priest, our village would be in danger of the gods’ anger. That is all I wish to say.” And wiping his blade clean on his sleeve, he sheathed his dagger and turned to Lange for his flask.

I looked over toward Fenton, but he was gone already, and when I ran to the sanctuary, the doors were locked.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*The twenty-third day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

I have been to the sanctuary five times today, but each time I have found the doors locked, and I dare not knock on the doors, for I have heard Fenton's voice murmuring prayers. I have been to see my father as well, and he listened to all that I had to say, but in the end he said nothing more than that, having been tutored by Fenton, I could not be expected to understand how Fenton had turned his face from the gods. The best I could do for Fenton, my father said, was to pray that the gods would show mercy toward him.

He also said that the greatest blame lay with himself, for allowing me to be tutored by an Emorian, but when he said that I left the hut, fearing that my anger would overcome me. How can my father not see that Fenton is a man loved by the gods, full of mercy and peace and goodness? It does not matter that Fenton was born in Emor. Even the blindest man ought to see that Fenton's a man of honor despite that.

But I have already brought about too much trouble by failing to show respect to my father. I am praying to the Jackal to solve the problems I have caused, for Fenton has always taught me that the gods can turn good to evil, and that the Jackal in particular can transform evil through his fire.

o—o—o

*The twenty-fourth day of September in the 940th year a.g.l.*

Nobody has been killed yet. Mountside's men are very much on edge. My father says it is likely that the hunter will avenge Roderick's death in an especially terrible manner, so everyone is taking care to stay close to the village.

I was unable to visit the sanctuary until this afternoon. My father wanted me to help him pick the location for our new hall and to discuss the plans for building it. I tried to keep my mind on all that he was telling me, but after a while he began looking at me out of the edge of his eye, and eventually he said in a sharp voice that he could do better work without me. So I went running to the sanctuary.

The doors were open. I slowed to a walk and entered cautiously, but the sanctuary was empty and was dark from the shadows of the tapestries on the walls. The smoke-hole in the high ceiling beckoned in a beam of light that fell straight onto the altar, as it always does at noonday. When I was little, I thought that Fenton slept on the altar, since the sanctuary has no

sleeping loft. Only when I grew older did I realize that he kept a pallet in the storeroom. Everything in the sanctuary is intended for the gods: the wood and pitch for the sacrifice, the everlasting flame from which Fenton lights the sacrificial fire, and the priest's blade.

I used to spend hours looking at Fenton's dagger when I was young. Unlike most priest's blades, its hilt is made of gold and is dotted with polished bloodstones; its blade, curving like the Jackal's claws, is finely tempered and is kept honed as sharp as a thigh-dagger. Fenton told me once that his blade was made by a craftsman in the south, who created it for the High Priest, but since the High Priest has not yet shown his face, the craftsman loaned the dagger to Fenton. I love to watch Fenton practice bringing the sparkling blade down upon the sacrifice. He says that it is better for him to practice the swift death-stroke when the altar is bare than to miss the heart of the sacrificial beast and cause it more pain.

Today, when I arrived, the altar was bare, but the room smelled of burnt meat, so I surmised that Fenton had finished his noonday sacrifice and had gone to take the remaining goat-meat to our village butcher, to be distributed to the poorer members of the village as an offering to the gods. I looked for something in the sanctuary that I could tidy, but all was in place except for a piece of paper and a pen and an open inkwell. I walked over to stop up the inkwell before the ink should turn dry, and as I did so, I caught sight of my name on the paper.

It was a letter of some sort, though Fenton had not yet addressed it; it told of everything that has happened recently, from Hamar's death until the events of two nights ago. Fenton ended the letter by saying, "From all that I have written, you will understand why I believe that my duties will soon be ending here and that, when we meet again, it will be in the manner which we once discussed. That this prospect does not grieve me is due mainly to Adrian: I feel that I have received richer rewards during my four years here with him than most men receive in a lifetime. Therefore, I leave now with the god's peace in my heart and need only record here my very great love for you, in anticipation of our reunion."

I read the last paragraph several times, my heart beating harder each time, until I looked up and found Fenton standing next to me.

For a moment, I failed to recognize him; all I saw was the sober-colored lesser free-man's tunic. It has been many years since I last saw Fenton without his priestly robe. Then I noticed that the man before me had no blade at this belt. I swallowed the hardness in my throat, saying, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been reading your correspondence."

"It doesn't matter," he replied with half a smile. "I never write anything that might be dangerous for others to read."

I tried to puzzle this out, as he reached over to place the pen and ink back where they belonged, on the table where he keeps the holy instruments that are used only in the gods' service. Finally, finding no better way to speak my thoughts, I blurted out, "You're leaving!"

"Only if the gods will it," he said. His long hair, which is usually tucked into his hood, veiled his face as he leaned forward. "If the gods permit it, I'll stay."

I wanted to tell him that my father would never send him from the village, but my voice faltered as I watched Fenton gently place the pen and ink next to the silver blade. Fenton was a priest, and he had vowed to serve the gods; if he could not serve them here, he would have to go elsewhere. "I'll come with you," I said at last.

Fenton raised his eyebrows as he turned round. "Leaving your father with no son to be his heir?"

I could make no answer to that; I knew that Fenton would think less of me if I failed in my duty to my father and my village. In the end, I asked, "Who were you writing to?"

Fenton glanced over at the doorway. People were passing by, and I could hear my father's voice nearby, giving instructions to our village's new carpenter. Without need for instruction, I went over to Fenton, and he and I left the sanctuary together, walking past the village boundaries toward the top of the mountain.

I went slowly, for Fenton's sake; he did not grow up on a mountain, as I did, and it takes him time to scramble over the rocks. When we had reached the edge of the cliff, where the mountainside breaks free of forest, and scrub tickles the legs of passersby, Fenton said, "I was writing to your cousin Emlyn."

I looked at Fenton with surprise. I knew, of course, that Fenton was the one who took Emlyn to the priests' house in hopes that the priests there could cure Emlyn's long-standing mind-illness; I also knew that he had tutored Emlyn when they lived together at the priests' house. But Fenton had scarcely spoken of Emlyn since that time, except when my mother asked questions about him. Since Emlyn's mother was my mother's sister, my mother has a special fondness for my cousin.

"I didn't know that you'd kept in contact," I said.

Fenton nodded, though his concentration was focussed on climbing over a jutting ledge. I paused to help him over the hard part. "Emlyn and I have written to each other since I left the south," Fenton said. "He sends his letters to the priest at Blackpass, and I pick them up there whenever I visit."

I thought about this as we made our way up the rocky path to the top of

the mountain. Fenton's exercise in subterfuge was perfectly sensible, of course. My father would not like the idea of any of us sending friendly letters to a native of Cold Run – not while our villages were feuding. I could not help but feel hurt, though, that Fenton had never revealed the secret of his correspondence to me. After all, our blood was now mixed, and our spirits had been mixed long before that.

As though guessing my thoughts, Fenton added, "Emlyn preferred that I not mention our correspondence to anyone. He embroiled himself in some trouble during his time at the priests' house – he never got along well with most of the priests there. Therefore, he has been trying to live a quiet life now, hoping that people will forget his past so that he may freely make his mark on the future when the time comes."

"What sort of work does he do?" I asked as I scrambled my way up to the mountaintop, and then waited with restrained impatience as Fenton followed behind.

"He is a jeweller," replied Fenton, and smiled at my look.

A more unlikely profession for my cousin I could not have imagined. What little I remember of him is of an active boy, forever darting around our village when he came to visit – often in a secretive manner, since he and Griffith were fond of playing pranks on their elders. When he was not helping Griffith set up water-traps for men or locking indignant women in their chambers, Emlyn was most often busy ducking through the woods next to Mountside, playing Jackal and Prey. He was the best Jackal I ever knew, though he said that I was the best prey. Certainly I was the only boy who had any success in keeping hidden when he went hunting for us.

If I had thought about it, I would have imagined Emlyn as a soldier or a dagger-thrower or at the very least a fisherman. The idea of Emlyn being content to spend his life sitting on a bench, poring over bits of gold and emerald, was sorely disappointing.

"He's not an ordinary jeweller," Fenton said loyally; he always seeks to see the best, even in men who have wasted their lives. "He sells his own work rather than depend on traders to do so – that allows him to travel a great deal. And his way of looking at precious metal and stones . . . He sees into the heart of them. I remember standing in the work chamber of the priests' house when Emlyn was a boy, watching him craft a neck-chain for a noblewoman. He told me – as though he were my tutor rather than I his – that the Koretian people are joined together by their love of the gods, like the links of a precious chain."

I puzzled over this image as we walked across the scrubby grass that shivered continuously from the wind from the black border mountains. "Joined together in what way?" I asked finally.

“I mused on that thought for many a day afterwards,” Fenton responded. “I finally came to realize that what binds all of us together is our belief that we must make sacrifice to the gods. If I truly love the gods and their law, I will know when the right moment comes to offer up my sacrifice. That is true of all of us who love the gods.”

I raised my eyes from our path and felt a shiver shudder over me as though I were grass, for as chance would take it, at that moment we were passing the spot of my earliest memory.

Although I was only five at the time, I could still remember that day: hearing Emlyn give one of his lilting cries, like a wild animal, and then arriving at the mountaintop to see my cousin standing over the body of a dead man. At the time, being young and filled with stories of the gods, I had imagined that the Jackal would appear at any moment to carry the man away to the Land Beyond. I was therefore eager to help Emlyn start the funeral fire so that I could meet the god.

To my disappointment, the man had been alive, though close to death.

“You offered up your sacrifice to your god long ago,” I said as we turned our paths toward the mountain range north of us. “You came to Koretia when your god called you, though you nearly died on the journey.”

“The god was guiding me during that journey, else I would never have survived,” said Fenton as we reached the edge of the mountaintop and sat down where I had rested on the day I mourned Hamar. “Few border-breachers make it past the patrol alive.”

“*You* did, though,” I said, feeling pride swell within me as I looked over at Fenton. Even in a lesser free-man’s tunic, he is no ordinary man, I decided. Fenton’s face contains something I have seen in few other men; my father once told me that Fenton has a look of patience that was won through endurance to hard pain. Fenton’s eyes, too, are beyond the ordinary – not dreamy, as one would expect in a pious priest, nor practical, as Felix’s eyes are. Fenton’s eyes are cautious and calculating, but not in a mean sense – rather, when Fenton looks at you, it is as though he sees everything in you, down to the blackest evil residing within you. And yet I have never heard him say a harsh word against anyone, not even the Emorian slave-master that he fled from.

“I had assistance,” said Fenton, his left-hand fingers rubbing the slave-brand on his right arm as he stared out at the black peaks before us. “Do you remember that I mentioned my master’s son?”

“Yes, he helped you to escape.” I was bubbling with pleasure that Fenton would discuss his life in Emor; he so rarely does. “He and an older boy he’d met in the Emorian borderland. The older boy gave you food for your journey, and your master’s son persuaded you to leave Emor.”

“He did more than that for me,” said Fenton, his gaze continuing to embrace the still peaks. “My master’s son and the older boy became acquainted because they both wanted to join the border mountain patrol – in fact, they had spent that day in the mountains, listening to the patrol guards whistle their signals.”

“Whistle them?” I stiffened with excitement. This was a part of the story that Fenton had never told me.

Fenton nodded. The wind was blowing his hair into his face like a mask, but he was paying it no heed. “The patrol guards aren’t like any other soldiers. I remember how startled I was when I first caught sight of them, for I expected them to be in armor, like ordinary soldiers. I suppose, though, that the weight of leather, small as it is, is considered too high a price to pay for the loss of speed. Speed is all-important to the patrol – it is how they manage, against all odds, to catch breachers who are making their way through or near the pass in the mountains. Speed is important, and secrecy. If it hadn’t been for my master’s son, I wouldn’t have known that the guards were near me, until they had me surrounded. But my master’s son, who had spent the day watching and listening to the patrol as the guards went about their business, revealed to me one of the secrets of the patrol’s success.

“Rather than shout messages to one another – spoken messages that would be heard by the hunted – the guards instead whistle messages to one another. My master’s son, clever boy that he was, had managed to guess the meaning of a few of the whistles. Just a few; I believe that the patrol may have two dozen or more whistle-codes. But the few that he taught me were the most important ones, and with their help I was able to detect the changing movements of the guards and flee accordingly.”

I had stayed quiet all this time, but now I pelted Fenton with questions, like a Daxion archer sending forth his arrows. To my surprise, Fenton answered all my excited queries. Within the hour I had learned all of the whistle-codes Fenton had been taught, as well as facts about the patrol that Fenton had never before told me. I will have to record them here when I have greater leisure, but the one I remember most – because Fenton looked so grave when he said it – is that, if I ever crossed the border into Emor, I must never, ever draw my blade in the presence of a patrol guard. I am not sure why this is so. Perhaps it has to do with Emorian customs I have not yet learned.

As the afternoon shadows began to enfold us, I was still practicing the whistles – for Fenton, always the tutor, had insisted that if I were to learn them, I must learn them well. Fenton had his arm around me, which made me feel like a boy again, but so great was my contentment that I snuggled

my head under his chin. I still am not as tall as Fenton, so it was easy to do that. I could hear Fenton's heartbeat, as steady as well-balanced blade-steel, and the vibration of his voice as he said, "I've never wanted to reveal the patrol's secrets to others. I breached the border through sore need but would not want others to follow in my footsteps. Yet it occurred to me today that the day may come when you will wish to visit Emor. I thought I should give you what information I could in anticipation of that day."

"I wouldn't need to breach the border, though," I murmured; I was beginning to grow sleepy in the heat of the sun. "My father would give me a letter of passage. . . . You could come with me," it occurred to me to add. "You could visit your native land and show me places where you'd lived. The patrol wouldn't recognize you in your robe. Where is your robe, by the way?"

"Your mother fetched it away this morning to mend it, before I awoke," said Fenton; I could hear the smile in his voice. "I think it was her way of apologizing."

I was silent for a long moment, listening to the regular pace of Fenton's heart. Then I said, "Fenton, I tried to talk with my father—"

"It doesn't matter." Fenton's voice was quiet. "If this brings good that I cannot yet see, then I am glad. If it brings evil, then I am sure that the gods can transform that evil to good. . . . We were talking of sacrifice before."

This was such a sudden change of topic that it took me a moment to retrace our conversation. I could feel Fenton's hand tighten on my arm, as though he were thinking hard about what to say next. "Yes," I said with a yawn. "Sacrifice. You gave your sacrifice a long time ago."

For a moment more, Fenton's hand remained tight on my arm. Then it loosened, as though a decision had been made. "Not my sacrifice only," he said. "The dearest desire of my master's son had been to join the patrol, yet he broke Emorian law in revealing to me the patrol's secrets so that I could breach the border. He was too honest a boy to lie about his crime to others, so in aiding me, he lost his chance to join the border mountain patrol. I've never forgotten the sacrifice he made for me."

Amidst my sleepiness, I felt a sting of jealousy toward the young boy who had captured Fenton's heart by offering him a sacrifice. I have never had the opportunity to make a sacrifice for Fenton. Then I remembered that I had possessed Fenton's company all these years, while the boy would never even know that Fenton reached Koretia alive. I chided myself for my selfishness.

Fenton said, "The older boy . . . Adrian, are you listening?"

"Yes," I said, swallowing another yawn. "Go on."

"The older boy was named Quentin. Since he did nothing more for me



than give me food, it's possible that he joined the patrol in the end. If so, he could be of assistance to you if you ever needed to enter Emor and had trouble doing so – if, for example, you lost your letter of passage during your travels.”

I was going to deny scornfully that I would be so careless, but it seemed too much trouble to break through the weight of the heat pressing itself down upon me, hugging me like Fenton's arm. Heat, I thought; a bright spring day. Emlyn standing over a dead body . . . “Emlyn,” I murmured, feeling misery embrace me. “The Jackal . . .”

I heard a loud thump against my ear that woke me suddenly. After a moment, I identified it as Fenton's heart, which was now beating hard. I raised myself drowsily, saying, “What happened?”

Fenton smiled at me, though I thought there was a curious look to his gaze. “You were dreaming, I think.”

“Yes,” I said, remembering. “I was dreaming about the Jackal coming to our land and claiming the High Priesthood. That was one of the reasons I chose him as my god,” I reminded Fenton. “Because there's a chance that I might meet him one day. Don't you think that would be glorious? Meeting a god face-to-face?”

“I imagine it will be a bit frightening, too,” Fenton said, continuing to smile.

“I suppose so,” I said reluctantly, not wanting to dwell on this aspect. “What do you suppose he'll be like? He'll have black fur, I think, with golden whiskers and fiery eyes . . .”

“Fiery eyes for certain,” said Fenton with a laugh. “As for the rest . . . I should think that his outward appearance will be less important than his godliness. We were talking of your cousin Emlyn a while ago – do you remember his trick of being able to guess people's thoughts? He always seemed to know when villagers were intending to walk through certain doors, and he planned his water-traps accordingly. I suspect that when the Jackal comes, he will have that power, but in a godly form. He will know our spirits in a way that we do not know ourselves.”

I said nothing for a moment; Fenton's words had uncovered for me the forgotten portion of my dream, the part that had distressed me. Always, my first memory had been of Emlyn finding Fenton and calling to the rest of us, but now my dream had reminded me of what had happened a few moments before that call: Emlyn insisting on travelling further, though all of us were planning to return to Mountside at that point. He had ignored our objections and gone ahead to the mountaintop, just as though he had known what he would find lying there. . . .

I felt myself shiver, and Fenton put his hand over mine, though he

continued to look deeply into my face. “Is it the dream?” he asked quietly.

“It’s something I remembered,” I said in a low voice. “I don’t remember Emlyn well, but I remember a few things . . . I don’t suppose anyone else noticed this about him, not even Griffith; Emlyn always hid it from everyone when it happened. But I was so small, I suppose he didn’t realize that I’d understand. I didn’t at the time; it was only later, several years after he’d left for the south, when my father was speaking about how Emlyn’s illness made him stare into emptiness . . .” I shivered again and gazed upon Fenton, frightened for the first time.

I have never before been frightened in Fenton’s presence. I’ve known, of course, that he is a priest, and I’ve known what duties were required of him, but our village has always been filled with god-loving people, so his duties in that regard have gone unexercised, like a blade that remains always in its sheath. Yet if I told him . . . Was it right for me to place Emlyn in danger?

Fenton was still watching me, saying nothing, and peace descended suddenly upon me, as it often does when Fenton looks at me that way. My highest duty is not to Emlyn but to Fenton – to the gods, really, but Fenton is their representative. I knew, without asking, that Fenton would only do what was good for Emlyn’s spirit, however much pain Emlyn’s body might undergo. I said, trying to keep my voice steady, “Emlyn used to see things that weren’t there, and know things that were about to happen, before they happened. I think . . . I think Emlyn has a demon.”

The words were out, and I waited tensely. When Fenton finally spoke, though, his words were not ones I had expected. “Would your feelings about your cousin change if he was possessed by a demon?” he asked quietly.

I stared at him. Then I felt hot shame cover me as I realized the answer, and discovered what Fenton already knew: how small my loyalty is to the gods. “No,” I said painfully, staring down at the rock upon which Fenton and I were sitting. “I’d still love him. I know I shouldn’t love a god-cursed man, but . . .”

After a minute of agony, I raised my head, and to my surprise, I found that Fenton was smiling. “I feel the same way,” he said simply.

The heat in my face increased as I took in what he must be saying. Of course; what a fool I was. Fenton must have known all along that Emlyn was demon-possessed. And knowing that Emlyn’s spirit was being eaten by a murderous demon . . . Any other priest would have placed the curse upon Emlyn at once, but not Fenton, I realized. No, Fenton would wait until the final moment before Emlyn’s spirit was lost, doing all he could to draw Emlyn back from the evil path he was taking.

This, then, was the meaning of the correspondence between Fenton and Emlyn, and for the love that Fenton had voiced in his letter to my cousin. Blade and fire were not Fenton's primary weapons against evil, as they would be for any other priest. Fenton would fight the demon by loving the man who had given himself over to the demon.

"Adrian, you speak of matters that I would gladly share with you, but I cannot," said Fenton solemnly. "The god has bound my voice on this subject, and I cannot speak to you without his permission. Perhaps, if my god should give me liberty—"

"It's all right," I said quickly. "I know that you can't reveal the words of someone who confesses evil to you. I don't need to hear what's happened; I know that you'll help Emlyn if you can and kill the demon if you can't." I felt my skin prickle at the thought of what will happen if Fenton cannot rid Emlyn of the demon. Then I quickly put the thought aside. Fenton, I'm sure, can exorcise any demon.

Fenton seemed about to speak; then he stopped. The wind from the north continued to blow over us both, whistling through the mountain peaks like soldiers far away. Finally he said, with an intensity that surprised me, "There is one thing that I would have you know, Adrian, and this is something I want you to remember even if I must go away, and you and I are not able to keep in contact with each other. You'll meet many people over the years, even priests, who will tell you, 'My god told me to do this,' and 'It is the gods' wish that we do this.' Don't make the same mistake I once made and assume that their words are true. Though the gods can turn our evil to good, not all that men will in the gods' names is the will of the gods."

I felt like a prey that has entered the Jackal's trap. Too late, I realized what subject I had been inwardly hoping all afternoon we would avoid. This was not what I wanted to hear; I did not want to listen to any speech from Fenton that suggested my father's words about him are true. Of course I know that the gods would never punish Fenton for criticizing the gods' law – how could they punish a god-loving man like him? But I who am so weak in my love of the gods in comparison to Fenton, I who might misunderstand whatever truth lay behind Fenton's mysterious thoughts about the gods' law and use that misunderstanding to attack the gods and their law . . . Could it be, I wondered suddenly, that the gods had arranged for Fenton to leave this village so that I would not be endangered by his presence?

So horrible was this thought that I leapt to my feet. "I promised my father I'd help him with his duties," I said. "I'll have to go now." And I bounded away while Fenton was still trying to reply.

I ran across the grass and then down the mountain, feeling guilt claw at me because I knew that Fenton could not match my pace. Only as I reached the village did I look up toward the skyline, where the top of our mountain meets the sky. A man was standing there, silhouetted against the bright blue. Though his face was shadowed, I somehow knew that Fenton was smiling down at me.

o—o—o

I see that I have written a very long entry today; I suppose that is partly due to my guilt at leaving Fenton so abruptly. I will have to apologize to him tomorrow, and I think I will have to tell him also about the doubts I am having about the gods' law. For me not to confess my evil would be as wrong as if Emlyn had not confessed his evil to Fenton. If I am indeed in danger of turning my face from the gods, Fenton must be told.

I must shamefully admit, though, that I spent most of this evening thinking about the patrol guards and their whistles. I suppose that shows how frivolous I am.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*The second day of October in the 940th year a.g.l.*

The peace was broken today, in a fashion that I can hardly bear to think about. Cold Run sent its hunter; I saw him myself.

Father had sent me into the woods to look for trees to cut for the new hall. As I returned to the edge of the village, I saw the hunter standing next to a tree, leaning against it and holding his side as though he had been running. I could just see the edge of his face, and it was flushed red with warmth. I thought at first that he must be my youngest uncle, who is about my age, and that he was playing Jackal and Prey. So I called out softly, so that his playing partner would not hear, "Which are you, the hunter or the hunted?"

He turned swiftly, and for a moment all that I noticed was that he looked very ill. Then I saw the fear in his eyes, and I recognized him. It was Griffith's brother, Siward.

I felt a wave of relief flow over me. All I had to do was capture Siward, and the feud would be over. I had no dagger, but my father had taught me ways to fight if I were disarmed during a duel. I took a step forward.

Oddly, Siward did not move, not even to draw his dagger. Perhaps it was this peculiarity which made me turn and look back at the village. There were no bodies to be seen; everyone was going about their regular business. But there was a long, thin trail of smoke arising from one building.

I doubt that I looked back at Siward again. I was racing back into the village, ignoring the startled faces that swivelled my way, ignoring a call that sounded like my father's. I only stopped when I reached the sanctuary door and swung it open.

Immediately I began to curse myself. What had I been thinking? I had let the Cold Run hunter go and chased after a fire that turned out to be nothing more than Fenton's daily fire for the god. It was blazing on the altar as usual, the goat's meat already half-burned from the bones, while the sacrificial smoke wound its leisurely way up to the smoke-hole. It went straight as an arrow to its target, which Fenton had once told me was a sign that the gods were pleased with the sacrifice.

I was just about to turn away and run back to the woods to find Siward again when I noticed two things. One was that there were a great many bones on the altar. The other was that Fenton was not standing as usual next to the sacrifice.

I think I screamed. I know that I stood frozen at the doorway, unable to

move. It was only a few seconds before I began to fling myself forward, but in those few seconds other men had reached the sanctuary, and I found myself struggling against a pair of strong hands pulling me back. They belonged to my father, saving me from flinging myself into the god's fire.

The other men, though too cautious to actually throw themselves at the flames, were pulling down tapestries and smothering the fire in that way. I had already seen, though, that it was too late, so I turned my face against my father's chest and wept the tears I had not shed when my brother died.

I do not think he blamed me. When I looked up at him again, many minutes later, he was staring bleakly at the altar, where the flames were dying down. "Such barbarity," he murmured. "Never, in all the feuds I've taken part in . . . Not even an Emorian would curse himself in such a way." He turned suddenly away from me to Lange. My brother-in-marriage had stepped away from the altar to comfort Drew, who was sobbing in the doorway. "Find a trader to send word to Cold Run," my father said sharply. "Tell Griffith that one of his hunters has burned an unarmed priest. If Felix doesn't confirm the curse and hand the murderer over to us for punishment, then we'll know that entire village lies under the gods' curse. . . . What are you looking at?" His voice softened.

I stared up at him blankly. I could scarcely take in what he was saying; my spirit had begun to grow numb. My hand trembled as it tightened on the paper it held. With my fingers still cradling Fenton's neat handwriting, I said, "A letter. Fenton was writing to Emlyn."

My father was still a moment. Then, with one swift move, he snatched the letter and threw it into the dying flames.

I gasped and tried to move forward, but my father held me back. "Emlyn is your enemy," he said in a hard voice. "He is kin to the man who killed your blood brother. Would you honor Fenton's murdered spirit by showing kindness to his enemy?" His grip tightened on me. "How *will* you honor him?"

After that, I could do nothing but close my eyes and cry for a long time, while my father held me tenderly.

o—o—o

*The third day of October in the 940th year a.g.l.*

I slept last night with Fenton's sheathed dagger, which Lange found next to the altar. I knew, of course, that I was placing myself in danger by holding even a priest's blade all night, but it was the closest I could come to Fenton's spirit. Since he was murdered, he is in the Land Beyond already, being welcomed by the kind gods he loved so much. I tell myself that in

hopes that my pain will decrease.

I wish that Fenton was here to advise me. Already I have made one serious mistake: I told my father who Fenton's murderer was. That gave my father more arrows for his bow, though I suppose his attack on me would have occurred in any case.

I feel ashamed of myself for having written the above. I know that it does not do justice to the grief my father feels for the death of his former blood brother. "I was wrong to abjure my vow to Fenton," he told me today. "I see that now; I should have stayed by his side and guided him to see how he had turned his face from the gods, rather than allow the gods to punish him this way."

"The gods didn't murder him!" I shouted. "It was Siward!"

"Siward was the instrument of the gods' will, though that makes him no less guilty of his blasphemy," my father said steadily; his face was pale. "Siward will receive his just punishment for breaking the gods' law. The only question is whose hand shall execute his sentence."

I had a hard time steadying my breathing, though I had known what would come. "If Felix places him under the gods' curse—"

"He won't. Griffith has already sent word that Fenton was killed in error – an unarmed priest killed in *error* – and that he will not surrender the murderer. Nor will Felix acknowledge that the murderer is already under the gods' curse. Of course we know why, thanks to you. Griffith has so little loyalty to the gods that he will not surrender his heir and younger brother, lawbreaker though he is. Well, Griffith has already shown what sort of baron he is; the gods will punish him in time. Siward, though, requires justice now. Fenton's spirit will not be able to rest peacefully in the Land Beyond until he is avenged. By his blood brother."

The words were finally out. I tried to turn away from my father, but his hand held me fast. "I cannot avenge Fenton's death," my father said in carefully spaced words. "The abjuration of my vow will not allow that. You are his nearest kin; it is to you that this duty falls."

"But Fenton wouldn't *want* me to kill Siward," I said miserably.

My father sighed and released me. We were standing in the sanctuary, now stripped of all of its holy objects, since it had been profaned by the murder of a priest. Only Fenton's dagger, which I had carried with me all day, remained in the sanctuary, and even that, I had discovered upon inspecting it, was covered with blackened blood. Fenton must have been so preoccupied by his worry over the feud that he had sheathed his blade after his daily sacrifice, before wiping it clean. I had cleaned the blade and the sheath, this being the best I felt I could do for Fenton's spirit. Now, though, I was being asked to do more.

“Fenton held peculiar notions about the blood feuds,” said my father. “He told me honestly about those notions when he came to serve us, so I am yet more to blame for his death. I ought to have assisted him in recognizing his impiety, especially since he told me that he had been reprimanded for his views by the other priests at the priests’ house. One matter, though, Fenton and I always agreed upon, and that was that a murderer should receive his just punishment. Fenton disapproved of the blood feuds because he did not believe that a lawbreaker’s kin should suffer from his crime, but he never once suggested that the lawbreaker himself should escape justice.” My father reached out and held me again, gently this time. “You know who Fenton’s murderer is,” he said quietly. “There is no chance that the innocent will die under your blade. All that is needed is that you execute the man who broke the gods’ law twice over – by killing an unarmed man, and by killing a priest. Even Fenton would have approved of such an execution; he was not as soft as you present him.”

In my mind, I saw again Fenton cutting his skin unflinching, then handing the bloody blade to me. I closed my eyes against the image, saying with tightness in my throat, “It just doesn’t seem right for me to do this.”

After a while, the stillness grew so long that I opened my eyes. My father had taken his hand from me; in his face was a coldness more chill than the black border mountains in winter.

“If that is your feeling, then that is a sign of what you are,” he said in a slow, deliberate voice. “And if that is what you are, then you are no son of mine.”

I stared at him, feeling the weight of what he had said descend upon me. First Hamar, then Fenton, and now— My spirit could not survive another loss. I had no choice, no choice at all.

I burst into tears once more, and my father, sensing my answer, wrapped his arms around me. “Just Siward,” he said softly. “That is all I will ask of you. I won’t require you to take part in the feud beyond that.”

And so tomorrow I go to Cold Run, a hunter in search of his prey.

I hope I am caught.

o—o—o

*The sixth day of October in the 940th year a.g.l.*

One thing I can tell my father when I return. I am not the greatest coward in Koretia; Siward is.

I have never seen anyone so heavily protected. He cannot so much as go outside to empty a chamber pot without attracting half a dozen escorts.



Nor does he seem at all bothered at being treated like an unmarried woman whose chastity must be protected. I am finding it hard to control my growing contempt for him.

Despite what I wrote in my last entry, I know that I would not honor Fenton's spirit by allowing myself to be captured and killed, so I have been cautious, approaching the edges of the village only in the evening hours, when I cannot be seen in the shadows. Through the leafy bushes surrounding the village, I have glimpsed men I know: Griffith and Siward and my mother's uncles, and others I know less well. Once I thought I saw Emlyn, but it turned out to be a young boy I had never known, and I remembered then that Emlyn is a grown man now. Even if he had returned to the borderland after all these years, it is unlikely that I would recognize him.

I hope he is still in the south; I would not want my skilled cousin to be among those who might capture me. The danger is great, for everyone in Cold Run knows who the prey is this time, and everyone will be on the lookout for Mountside's hunter, lest he kill their baron's heir.

In the daytime I have been visiting neighboring villages and buying food. My father supplied me with a generous amount of money, since we both guessed it would take me at least a week to lure my prey into the open. Now I am beginning to think it will take me a month. Why could my prey not be an honorable man who was willing to fight his hunter, rather than a terrified titmouse hiding in its nest?

o—o—o

*The seventh day of October in the 940th year a.g.l.*

Before I left, I took my blood vow to my father and to the Jackal to participate in this feud. The mark has finally healed; its itch no longer annoys me.

Siward annoys me a great deal, though, and the more I watch him, the more my anger grows. At night I see Fenton in my dreams, screaming in the fire – or more likely, since he was a man of great courage and honor, remaining silent throughout his agony, so as not to weaken the courage of the rest of us. After that, I am sure, his fire was over; I know that the Jackal would not burn him further when Fenton reached the Land Beyond, just as I know, without even having to think it through, that Fenton was loved by the gods. My father was wrong about that; the gods would never punish Fenton, even if he spoke in error.

My father was not wrong about Siward; I can see that now. Griffith's brother has all the marks of a god-cursed man. He shows no concern for

the crime he committed and has so little shame that he will allow other men to endanger themselves in order to protect him against the consequences of the evil he has done.

I understand now why my father, after I had made my oath, spent a full hour talking to me of the sacred duty I was about to undertake. It was a speech such as I would not have expected to hear from him – a speech, indeed, that sounded as though it might have come from Fenton.

My father began by reminding me of how, in the old days, priests were responsible for the punishment of all of the god-cursed. Gradually, over the years, the priests graciously allowed other men to assist with this holy task. First the priests permitted the people of each village or town the privilege of helping to execute men and women who were demon-possessed; then the god-cursed who were sentenced to a Living Death were handed over to the care of the nobles; and finally, when evil men sought to escape from the justice of the gods, the priests began to send men out in the names of the gods, to kill the criminals. Thus began the blood feuds.

By the time my father was through speaking, I could see why he believes that he has a duty to the gods to avenge Hamar's murder. I still think that something must have gone wrong with the blood feuds over the centuries, as Fenton suggested. Surely the priests who invented the blood feuds never intended for innocent men to be killed in the place of guilty men. Yet there can be nothing wrong in killing a man who has burned a priest alive; indeed, if Fenton were here, I am sure that he would want such a man to be executed, lest he spread his curse among his people.

Already, I can see, that is what is happening. I cannot feel the anger that my father does toward Griffith and the other people of Cold Run; rather, I pity them for allowing themselves to be lured by a god-cursed man into protecting him.

I am surprised, actually, that Siward has managed to do this. He is the same age as me, and I would not have thought he was clever enough to beguile a man like Griffith. I suppose Griffith loves him greatly, though, and his love blinds him to the evil in Siward.

And perhaps Siward has allowed a demon to enter him, and the demon itself is directing Siward's actions. If that is the case, then the sooner Siward is dead, the better for Cold Run's people. Siward should be grateful that I will save him from a stoning.

o—o—o

*The eighth day of October in the 940th year a.g.l.*

May the Jackal eat his dead – will Siward *ever* emerge from the arms of his

protectors? Does the man have no honor left in him at all?

I suppose that it is time for me to stop hoping for chance to send Siward my way; it is time for me to begin creating a trap. To do that, I must remember what Siward's weaknesses are, and that is hard for me to do. Our feud with Cold Run began nine years ago, the year after Fenton and Emlyn left for the south, and I have not conversed with Siward since that time. Surely, though, he would not be much different now than he was when he was seven?

I remember that he was ravenous with curiosity, exploring everything odd and interesting in our village, but that he was not terribly clever. He was like Hamar that way, though he was much better-humored than my brother. These days, he seems sulky; I suppose that is the effect of the demon, if my guess about him is correct. In the old days he was quite pious, often visiting our sanctuary and even leaving offerings to the gods on our village's ash-tombs, which impressed Fenton greatly. I am inclined to wonder now whether the demon was already working in Siward then, teaching him how to lure Fenton into unwariness, but perhaps I should not speculate that far. Siward's piety may have been genuine in the old days, before he gave himself over to evil. Perhaps there is even a part of him now that continues to turn its face toward the gods . . . though when watching Siward yawn with indifference throughout the day, I find that hard to believe.

Now that I think of it, the yawning is strange. As a boy, when Siward wanted to show that he was indifferent to something, he tossed his head backwards; he never yawned. Could it be that Siward is yawning because he is truly tired? And if so, why—?

Ah. I have it now; the gods have sent me the answer. I must go to prepare my trap.

## CHAPTER SIX

*The ninth day of October in the 940th year a.g.l.*

It is hard to write what comes next – harder even than it was to write about Fenton's death.

Last night I found Cold Run's cemetery easily enough. It was where I remembered it, at the edge of the forest, well beyond sight and hearing of the village. That was just as I wanted it.

I was right too in remembering that Cold Run had an ancient sanctuary next to the cemetery. That shows the age of Cold Run, I suppose. Fenton told me that in the early years of Koretia, sanctuaries were never built in villages and towns but were instead built away from the people's homes, so that the priests could spend all their time worshipping the gods, and the people could receive peace when they came to offer up their sacrifices.

It has been many years, I am sure, since any priest offered a sacrifice here except, perhaps, on the occasions that villagers' ashes are placed in the ground. I had been foresighted enough, though, to bring my flint-box on this hunt, and it was not hard to find the right sort of wood nearby for a torch. I spent the last light of evening fashioning a torch-hook out of bits of spare metal in the sanctuary, then attaching it to the sanctuary wall. By the time that darkness came, I was ready.

I had to wait a long time, though. I suppose that Siward has been delaying each night until he was sure that I was no longer hunting on the edge of the village, and it was safe for him to come out. I had been afraid that he would bring his escort with him, but to my relief he came alone, cradling late summer vegetables in his arms. I supposed that, god-cursed though he was, even he knew that it is proper to visit the dead alone.

He placed the vegetables where I knew he would, on the ash-tomb of his father. I did not wait to see whether he would occupy himself with prayer or with some activity more befitting a god-cursed man; I was too busy trying to light the torch. It took me a dozen tries and a dozen more before I could persuade a spark to stick on the torch-wood, even though I had rubbed the wood with lamp oil I found in the sanctuary. It was sacred oil, I suppose – but then, what I was doing was sacred.

I had just reached the point of cursing softly when the torch flared up. Hastily I placed it on the hook near the open window. Then I waited.

He came, of course. Siward's curiosity had not been tamed by the years, and he could hardly have expected his hunter to be waiting in a place like this. I stood behind the door, my dagger drawn, holding my breath as the blood made my body throb with fear and eagerness.

The door opened, and Siward stepped through. For a moment, all I could see was the back of his dark head, turning from side to side; he was looking around the sanctuary to see who had lit the torch. Then his gaze was snagged by the torch itself, and by the objects lying in the corner beneath it: my back-sling, and atop it Fenton's glittering dagger.

I heard Siward gasp, and waited impatiently for him to come to an understanding of what was occurring. Finally he fumbled his dagger out of its sheath and whirled around.

This was as I had planned. I knew that my father would ask me for the details of the killing, and I was not going to shame myself and my family by attacking a man who had his back to me. Fenton's dagger was there only to remind Siward of why I was doing this, and of how great the crime was that he would pay for.

I was surprised, really, at how easy it was. I did not even have to wound him; it took just a few blows to disarm him. He tried to flee through the door then, but I abandoned my dagger and fell upon him, grinding his face against the floor as I chanted the words of binding.

He was sobbing before I had even started the chant, and he struggled to escape my grasp. Then, as I spoke the final words, he went limp under me, like a body whose spirit has escaped.

I wondered then, for a fleeting moment, whether the demon had deserted him, so that I was left only with an ordinary man. Then I iced over my heart, remembering whose hand had burned Fenton. Dragging Siward to his feet, I said sharply, "Go stand over there."

He went in the direction I pointed, his body still limp. When he had reached the dark corner, he turned round to look at me. I had already sheathed my blade and stepped away toward where the torch still hung, eating the air with its flame. With a soft prayer of thanks to the Jackal for use of his fire, I picked up the torch and walked steadily toward Siward.

I was a body's pace from him when he realized what I would do; then he screeched like an old woman. I suppose the contempt showed on my face. He gulped down the remainder of his scream and stood panting, like a bitch dog that has run too fast. "No," he said in a trembling voice. "Not that ..."

"What ails you?" I took another step toward him. "Aren't you brave enough to receive the type of death you give?" I took hold of his hair with my free hand and began to bring the torch toward his face.

He screamed again, screwing his eyes shut against the approaching heat. At the very end of the scream, he babbled, "He was dead before I burned him! I swear it!"

I paused. The torch was causing my hand to sweat; moisture was

running down Siward's face like tears. He opened his eyes a crack, swallowed another scream, and whispered rapidly, "It's what he wanted. I swear to you, it's what he wanted."

I had paused only to figure out which part of his face I should burn first; I knew better than to pay heed to the words of the god-cursed. Something made me hold my hand, though. If the demon was truly gone . . . Siward still must pay for what he had allowed the demon to do, but if the demon was gone, perhaps there was some hope that Siward would tell the truth.

I brought the torch forward a little more and watched Siward's eyes widen with terror. Demons, I supposed, did not show fear; they showed defiance. I waited a moment more before I realized that Siward's hair was beginning to tug in my hand. He was not trying to escape; he was on the point of passing out.

This was proof enough to me that I was dealing with a real man. I swung the torch back a bit. The moisture running down his face, I saw, was indeed tears. Not allowing my voice to soften – for that would be an act of impiety, given the godly task I was undertaking – I said, "You murdered a priest. The god-cursed deserve this sort of death. If you tell me, though—" My voice wavered, and I had to start again in a firmer manner. "If you tell me truthfully what Fenton said and did before you killed him, I'll grant you a quick death with my blade. If not . . ." I gestured with the torch.

"I will!" he said in a voice high with hysteria. "I vow to you, I'll tell you the truth!"

The oaths of the god-cursed are worth nothing, but I nodded as though his word was of worth, then walked back to place the torch on the hook. When I turned back, Siward was where I had left him, bound to my will.

The corner where he stood was dark, now that the torch was gone. Even when I returned to stand beside him, I could barely see his face. His body was pressed against the wood – the sanctuary was very old, too old to be made of modern building material such as wattle and daub. I took a second hasty look at the torch-fire, in order to ascertain that it was well away from the wall, then leaned against the wall next to Siward and said, with the firmness of a priest hearing a confession, "Tell me what happened."

I heard him swallow, and then he said in a quivering voice, "It was because of what Felix said. I mean— It's not his fault, but he told me before I left that what I was doing was a sacred act, so when I saw your sanctuary, it just seemed right that I should hunt my prey there." He paused, as though hoping I would understand his logic – as, indeed, he had reason to believe I would.

I said, "Felix must have told you that it's blasphemy to kill a priest."

"Of course!" Siward sounded stung. "I knew that when I was a babe in arms. But Fenton didn't *look* like a priest, that's the trouble. I thought he was the priest's assistant; his back was to me, and he was wearing ordinary clothes and holding a dagger—"

"It was a priest's dagger!" I said, exasperated. "He was readying himself to do the noonday sacrifice. Don't you know the difference between a curved priest's blade and a free-man's blade?"

Siward shook his head; one of his hands was gripped tight around the other. "I was too excited to notice. And – and too scared, I suppose. I knew that someone would come by at any moment and see me, so I closed and barred the sanctuary doors quickly. After that, I could hardly see anything. The only light was from the smoke-hole and from the cracks in the wood of the door and window-shutter."

It took all my effort to keep from springing for the torch; I could tell from the misery in Siward's voice that he too was aware of how careless he had been. No hunter is supposed to attack his prey that quickly – not for the prey's sake, but because it would have been too easy for the prey to cry out for help, leaving the hunter trapped.

"Fenton didn't call for help," I said flatly.

"His back stiffened when I closed the door, and I knew then that my prey would call out or flee or attack . . . I wasn't sure what he would do. So I ran over to him and pushed his chest down onto the table – the altar," he amended. "I didn't see at first what it was. He spoke to me then, but I didn't hear what he said, because I was so busy reciting the binding and taking the blade from his hand. I did think it was odd that he didn't resist me." His voice trailed off. Perhaps, even in the darkness, he had seen the look I was giving him.

"Go on," I said harshly.

He swallowed again, and wiped his nose, and returned to clutching his hands together. "I pulled him up and turned him round, and – and then I saw who he was. And I was so scared, I wanted to flee. I expected him to call down the gods' vengeance upon me, but he didn't say anything, and that made me even more scared, because I realized he knew—"

Siward stopped abruptly. Outside the sanctuary, cicadas were singing in a drowsy manner, their sound nearly drowned out by the crackle of the flame nearby.

"Knew what?" I said. I felt his body start to slide away, and I grabbed hold of his arm. "Knew *what*?" I shouted.

I could feel that Siward was shaking under me. "I didn't mean to," he whimpered. "I swear, I didn't mean to."

I went suddenly still; I felt, as I had not felt before, the first touch of autumn on my body. Then, with no thought to what I was doing, I struck his face with my fist.

He stumbled to his knees, but I pulled him up by the back of his tunic. I could feel that he was shaking like a rock-tumbled brook. "I didn't mean to —" His voice was muffled.

"You killed him!" I shouted. "You killed Fenton, and you killed Hamar too! You killed them both!"

"I thought he was at your feast!" His reply was more a scream than a shout. "I was sure everyone was at your feast, or I'd never have lit the fire! Fenton must have known that, or he wouldn't have let me go last month."

I released him, feeling the cold reach my stomach. "He saw you?"

Siward nodded; his hands were over his face. "I waited till your hall collapsed — I'd hoped they'd be able to rescue Hamar — and then I ran. I thought everyone would be at the fire, but as I passed the sanctuary, I saw Fenton standing near the door. His hand was on the mask of the Jackal, and he was looking at me. My heart nearly stopped then, but he didn't say anything, so I kept running."

I turned away; I could feel bile on my tongue. He had known — Fenton had known all along who Hamar's murderer was. If he was willing to see the guilty be punished, as my father had said, why had Fenton remained silent? Why had he let innocent men die in Siward's place?

I turned round, and what I was going to say next died in my throat as I took in Siward's appearance. His hands had fallen from his face; blood was running from his nose, and his left cheek was already turning dark from the mark of my fist. I felt sick, and was too confused to understand why.

"Go on," I said roughly. "You'd bound Fenton."

Siward was biting his lip, which was trembling, but he managed to say, "I was afraid he would try to dissuade me from killing him. I knew that it was wrong to kill a priest, but I was sure that it must be even worse to break a blood vow to murder — and I'd vowed to murder the first man I bound. And I *had* to kill a prey; it was my way of making up to the gods for the mistake I'd made with Hamar the first time. So I explained all this to Fenton quickly, and told him how he mustn't try to dissuade me, or I'd have to kill him immediately — and he just listened, looking at me. I couldn't read what was in his face. And when I was through he said, all gently as though I were a child, 'Do not worry. It is the gods' will that I die this way. The Jackal must eat his dead.'"

For a sharp moment, I could see all in clarity: Siward trembling against the wall, the torch-fire casting long shadows toward us, the glint of the moon-glow over the cemetery. Then I shouted, "What sort of fool do you



think I am? You can't expect me to believe such a tale! Do you really think I'll give you a quick death in exchange for that lie? I'll—"

I stopped then. Siward had sunk to his knees and was sobbing uncontrollably; the blood from his nose splashed onto his hands as he tried to shield his face. I looked down at him, feeling coldness extend to the tips of my fingers. I knew then that I had not been mistaken before in what I felt.

I was sick, sick enough to vomit. Something had gone terribly wrong; my hunt had turned into something it was not meant to be.

I gulped in some air to steady myself, and then knelt down beside Siward. He began sobbing even louder as I touched him. After a moment of struggle with myself, I pulled my face-cloth out from my belt-purse and offered it to him.

He took it but seemed not to know what to do with it. "I didn't lie," he said between sobs. "I didn't lie."

I took the cloth and wiped his face clean. "It's all right," I said gruffly. "Go on with your story. I won't use the fire."

It took several minutes more for me to calm him. I was aware, as I had not been aware before, of the ash-tombs nearby. Oh, I was not superstitious enough to believe that the dead linger near their tombs. Why should they, when they live in the glories of the Land Beyond? But I could feel their presence: centuries' worth of villagers who had died of injuries and child-birth and sickness—

And feuds? How many had died in blood feuds?

Siward said finally, "I didn't know what to say after that. I was shaking so much that I dropped my dagger, though I was still holding Fenton's blade. I didn't think it would be right to kill a priest anywhere except his heart, and I was afraid that if I tried to kill him from where I stood, I'd miss the spot. So I made him lie on the table – on the altar, I mean. And then I placed the blade-tip against his heart, but when I looked, I saw that his eyes were closed and his lips were moving. I knew that he must be praying to his god, so I waited until he was finished, and then— It was really quite quick. I don't think I hurt him much."

I closed my eyes, took a long breath of dark night air, and said, without raising my lids, "And the fire?"

"That – that was because of what Fenton said. About the Jackal eating his dead. I knew that meant he wanted his corpse to be burned. It occurred to me afterwards, though, that because he was Emorian-born, your father might think he wanted to be buried whole in the ground, the way the Emorians are buried. I thought of writing a note to your father, but I was afraid he would recognize my hand. He helped me to learn my letters. So

instead I took the sacrifice wood out of the pile and placed it all around Fenton, then poured oil on him, and then lit the wood, using the sanctuary flame. I took his blade away first, so that it wouldn't be harmed," Siward added. "I waited until the Jackal's fire began to eat him, and then I scooped up my dagger and ran, and – and you saw me. And that's all that happened."

I rose slowly to my feet. After a moment I thought to open my eyes. The sanctuary was darker than before; the torch had begun to burn down to its root. I went over and took the remainder of the torch in my hand; I heard behind me a shuffle as Siward stumbled to his feet.

"Are you going to—?" He stopped and swallowed. "Will you cut my throat, as you promised?"

I shook my head without looking his way.

"But Adrian—!" His protest was halfway between a sob and a scream; he stopped abruptly as I threw the torch to the ground and stamped it out. The night's darkness gathered us in.

"I'm not going to kill you at all," I said in a voice that sounded distant to my ears. "I'm going to let you go."

There was no sound behind me, and for a moment I wondered whether Siward had slipped out the door. Then he said hesitantly, "But you have to kill me. You vowed to."

I shook my head again and went to stand by the window. It faced north; beyond the ash-tombs, gleaming like fire-burned bones under the rising moon, I could dimly see the shapes of the border mountains, black against the black sky.

I heard steps behind me; they stopped a body's length away. "Why?" asked Siward breathlessly.

I leaned my cheek against the age-smoothed wood of the window frame, feeling the night wind cool the tears, even as they flowed down my face. After a while I said, "Fenton wouldn't have wanted me to. He hated the blood feuds, not only because innocent men die in them, but because hunters kill for the wrong reasons. They kill, not out of love of justice, but out of hatred and revenge." I looked down at the ash-tombs again; their whiteness blurred under my tears. "That's why I was going to kill you."

Siward was silent, and then took another hesitant step toward me. "But your family . . ."

"I know." I closed my eyes, but the tears gushed out regardless. Presently, I felt a nudge at my elbow, and I turned to see that Siward was offering me the face-cloth.

I wiped my face, smearing Siward's blood on it in the process, as Siward said in a hesitant manner, "I think you're wrong, Adrian. I really think you

should kill me; it's what you promised your god. But if you decide not to— If you let me go—” He paused, then said in a rush, “I won't tell anyone I saw you. Not until they ask me. That will give you time to escape.”

I lowered the cloth, ignoring the chill breeze blowing down from the north. The coldness had left me; all that remained was emptiness. “What about your face? I marked you.”

Siward shook his head. “Griffith won't ask me about that. I'm always coming home this way.” He gave a weak smile that I remembered from the old days. “I'm an easy target for the others. You remember.”

I did, and as I looked at him standing there, shivering with cold fear, with blood on his face and a smile trembling on his lips, it was a wonder to me that I had ever forgotten. Many times, I had been the one who came to his defense as a boy, though I was no larger than he was; it had been all too obvious that Siward would never be the sort of boy who could defend himself against enemies. What demon had entered me to make me think Siward was vicious?

I said, my voice suddenly calm, “I'm sorry I threatened you with fire.”

He shook his head. “It doesn't matter,” he said in a resigned voice. “That's part of the punishment.”

“Punishment?”

“The punishment the gods have given me. Felix said that death would be too easy a punishment for me. He said that I must live with daily reminders that I am a man of dishonor.”

My breath caught at the back of my throat. In my spirit's eye, I was seeing Siward, walking submissively between his escorts like a captive between his guards.

I turned and went over to the corner where the torch had been. When I came back to the window, Fenton's blade lay across the palms of my hands. Siward stared down at the glinting gold and said, “I used it to murder a priest. Is it desecrated?”

“I don't think so,” I replied. “I washed off all the blood.” I stared down at the blade for a moment, then took a deep breath and said, “My father burned a letter that Fenton was writing to Emlyn. It said how much Fenton loved Emlyn and how – how he was looking forward to seeing him.” I bit my lip to control myself, and then forced myself to continue. “Fenton really cared for Emlyn, so I think Emlyn should have his dagger, to remember Fenton by. Do you think Griffith would let Emlyn have it?”

“I'm sure he would,” said Siward, continuing to stare at the bejewelled sheath. “If you left it at the doorstep of our hall—”

I shook my head. “I can't leave it in the dust; it's a sacred object. It has to be entrusted to a man of honor, someone who will care for it until

Griffith has a chance to see Emlyn." I held out the dagger. "You take it."

For a moment, I thought that Siward would fall to his knees again. Slowly he reached out and took the dagger from me. A smile was trembling on his lips once more. His hand touched mine briefly, warming my body.

The moon was rising higher. I turned away, picked up my back-sling, and was walking toward the door when Siward's voice halted me.

"I won't ask where you're going, but . . . *do* you know where you're going? Is there a place you can go where you'll be safe?"

I looked back at him. He was still standing there, defenseless even with a blade in his hand, and for a moment I felt my determination drain for me. It would be so easy, so very easy. Siward wouldn't blame me, my family would praise me, and the gods . . . Then I saw, beyond Siward, the black rocks framing the sky, and I felt courage enter me, like wine warming blood. "Yes," I said. "I know a place to go where I'll be safe from my family."

I turned and left.

o—o—o

So now I am journeying away from Cold Run, and away from Mountside, which I will never see again. My thoughts, I know, ought to be on my family, and I ought to be grieving at the loss of them. But I cannot think of that today, not after what happened last night. For I did not tell Siward the whole truth of why I broke my vow.

The gods murdered Fenton. That is what I learned last night; that is what Fenton learned in the moments before his death. It must have been as hard for him to accept as it is for me, yet his words leave no doubt as to what he believed, and what he believed must be true, for he was the wisest man I ever knew.

I see now how, in an odd way, I was closer to the truth than he was. I feared that the gods would punish me for my blasphemous questioning of their ways; Fenton was sure that neither he nor I would be punished, for he believed the gods to be all-good – he thought that they, like he, hated the blood feuds.

How wrong we both were. I was wrong in believing that the gods would not punish Fenton; he was wrong in believing that the gods hated the feuds. Not until Siward stood before him with his blade did Fenton realize the truth: that the gods are blood-lusting demons who, if they could not have his unquestioning obedience to their cruel ways, would punish him with death.

Fenton spent his final words in comforting Siward, who was too blind

to be able to see that he was a tool in the hands of tyrants. I think Fenton also said those words in hope that I would hear of them and be warned. Yet even so, I think Fenton must not have given up hope that the gods would forgive him. I can see him lying on the altar, with Siward's blade touching his heart, praying to the gods to show him mercy.

The gods gave him their answer, in blade and fire.

So now I am not simply fleeing away from my family, but toward something new: the other gift Fenton left me. For if it is true, as I now believe, that the gods' law is a brutal system designed to bring hatred and pain to this world, there remains another law that has not been tampered with by the gods' bloodstained hands. My mission now is to find it.

I only hope I can reach Emor before the Jackal discovers what I have done.

## More stories about these characters

**Law Links** (*The Three Lands* volume). Few events are more thrilling in a young man's life than a blood feud between two villages. Or so Adrian thought.

**Wildfire** (*The Three Lands* short story featuring Griffith). He was a loyal servant of the god. But even loyal servants have their limits.

## ***Chronicles of the Great Peninsula* online resources**

**[Chronology of the Great Peninsula](#)**. A timeline, updated whenever a new volume or story in *Chronicles of the Great Peninsula* is issued. It includes spoilers for political events but not for events in the lives of individual characters.

**[Pronunciation Guide to Proper Names in the Great Peninsula](#)**. Includes an MP3 file.

**[Peter's Family Tree](#)**. An Emorian royal genealogy for the period of the Late Charas. Includes minor spoilers for *Law Links* and *Blood Vow*.

**[Chronicles of the Great Peninsula bibliography](#)**. Includes a note on the geography and history of the Great Peninsula.

**[Shared Universes: Works set in the Great Peninsula world by other authors and artists](#)**.

## Series cycles by Dusk Peterson

**Chronicles of the Great Peninsula**. A cycle of mythic historical fantasy series about a battle between cultures, *Chronicles of the Great Peninsula* is set at a time when a centuries-old civilization is in danger of being destroyed. The cycle is inspired by conflicts between cultures during the Arthurian Era.

*Series in the cycle:*

- ***The Three Lands***. He vowed himself to his god. Now the god is growing impatient . . . ¶ *The Three Lands* is a mythic historical fantasy series on friendship, romance, and betrayal in times of war and peace. The series is inspired by conflicts between cultures during the final years of the Roman Empire.
- ***The Thousand Nations***. In a shattered world of warriors and barbarisms, only the deepest ties of friendship and romance can protect them. That, and a god they may not be able to trust. ¶ *The Thousand Nations* is a mythic historical fantasy series about what happens after the fall of a civilization. The series is inspired by conflicts between cultures during the Dark Ages.

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**Turn-of-the-Century Toughs**. A cycle of alternate history series about disreputable men on the margins of society, and the men and women who love them. Set in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as in a future that never existed, the novels and stories take place in an alternative version of America that was settled by inhabitants of the Old World in ancient times.

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- ***The Eternal Dungeon***. In a cool, dark cavern, guarded by men and by oaths, lies a dungeon in which prisoners fearfully await the inevitable. The inevitable will be replaced by the unexpected. ¶ *The Eternal Dungeon* is an alternate history series on romance, friendship, and family, set in a nineteenth-century prison where the psychologists wield whips.



- ***Dungeon Guards***. In the Eternal Dungeon, there are only two types of guards: skilled guards or dead guards. But one guard has been both. ¶ *Dungeon Guards* is an alternate history series about nineteenth-century prison workers who seek love and companionship as they fight together against danger.
- ***Life Prison***. They are imprisoned until death, and their lives cannot get worse . . . or so they think. But when an unlikely alliance forms against their captors, the reformers risk losing what little comforts they possess. ¶ *Life Prison* is an alternate history series on friendship, romance, and rebellion in nineteenth-century prisons.
- ***Michael's House***. In a world where temples are dying and sacred theaters have been replaced by brothels, what will happen when a hard-headed businessman joins forces with an idealist? ¶ *Michael's House* is an alternate history series on love in a Progressive Era slum.
- ***Waterman***. How can a youth from a bay island boarding school survive when he is sent to a futuristic prison? ¶ *Waterman* is a speculative fiction series of love in an alternative version of the Chesapeake Bay region during the 1910s and during the future as it was envisioned in the 1960s.

# **Author information, credits, and final comment**

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*Beta readers:* Kathleen Livingston and Loyal Reader.

*Cover art:* [bookdragon](#) (balance and sword) and [Phuong Thai Thi Quynh](#) (frame).

## **Final comment by Dusk Peterson**

If you've enjoyed this e-book, I hope you'll let other readers know about it. If there's a *Great Peninsula* story you'd like me to write, [please let me know](#). I love writing stories to prompts. I also love it when readers create [fanworks](#) of my writings.