

PROLOGUE

"Don't cry, my love, my little one. You shall never be alone."
Queen Isadora, age 22, to Princess Lewen on the day of her birth.



Sleep had never been so difficult to find. Not here. Not in this isolated haven where demons, real and imagined, dared not tread. The House at Dewhurst, nestled in the fringe of the Forgotten Lands and surrounded for as far as the eye could see by fields and woods, had long served as Queen Isadora's favorite retreat from the pressures of absolute rule. Yet something gnawed at her; something she could not name. Still restless, she rose from her bed to pad barefoot across the floor. A light breeze stirred her curtains as she opened the balcony door.

She assured herself she deserved this break. The rigors of planning the annual Lords and Ladies Feast had absorbed her the past moon. She regretted leaving the king to tie up loose ends, but she could no longer bear to work with the steward. Or to be in his company. Perhaps this was the root of her insomnia. When she returned to the castle, she would broach the subject with her husband.

But there was something else. She could sense it.

She stepped onto the balcony. It was the seventh moon of the almon. The morning air was crisp and cool, swept from the west by damp winds born over the Mersal Sea. Far to the east, the towering Lumax Mountain range lay like a giant serpent, separating the kingdoms of Aranox and Tegan. She wished it could be made to slither south and provide instead a barrier to the troubled Lawless Lands.

Hushed voices rose from below. An occasional clank of metal, a swish of cloth, the click of boot heel on stone—these were the only other sounds to greet her. *Back in Fostead, they would all be drowned by the village orchestra: carriages and carts rolling over cobblestones, street hawkers clamoring to be heard, the rhythmic clang of hammer on anvil...*

Louder voices, agitated and concerned, shook the queen from her reverie. Hands on the balcony railing, she leaned forward apprehensively, straining to hear more clearly.

"What do you make of it?" a deep voice asked.

"Still too distant," another replied.

Isadora could see nothing out of the ordinary. Scrub brush, rock-strewn dirt and patches of tall grass eventually surrendered to a forest of joining trees, its canopy of green, brown, and yellow hiding all beneath it.

More noise from below again caused the queen to shift her gaze. Four of the royal guard were now visible as they moved from beneath her balcony and across the courtyard. They walked at arm's length from each other, stopping simultaneously to stare into the distance. She noted with a hint of relief that none saw fit to draw a weapon.

"Do you see what I mean?" It was Rolft, the eldest and most trusted of her personal guards.

"I do." The unmistakable baritone of Fereliss.

"As do I," said Yurik, pointing to the east.

The queen looked again, and this time she saw it. A speck of moving dust had emerged from the distant woods. She stared at it intently until she was certain it was moving toward her rather than away. *Here it comes!*

"I see the horse, but are you certain of the rider? If so, your eyes are sharper than mine." It was Garth, the youngest and largest of her guards.

The rider? A wave of regret accompanied Isadora's sudden recollection of the previous evening's tense stand-off between Rolft and her daughter. The queen had put a quick end to it. *"You say 'cannot' Rolft, but the princess is of age now. If she desires to ride alone tomorrow, so be it. We shall not speak of this again."* Her heart began to race as she peered to the east. *Stay calm!* The speck was growing into a small dust cloud churning barren ground. *No, wait!* The flicker of long grey legs! It was a horse, but she could see no rider. And there was something awkward about the animal's gait.

"I'm sure of it now." Rolft's tone left little doubt as to his conviction or concern.

The queen resisted the impulse to scream aloud. *Sure of what!?* Regret was quickly turning to dread.

"It cannot be." Yurik glanced back at her with a furrowed brow, and then quickly looked away.

"Lewen," Fereliss said.

Isadora's mouth opened at the sound of her daughter's name, but no words escaped. *Lewen's horse...without a rider?* Her eyes were riveted on the galloping stallion, her heart pounding, blood coursing in her ears.

"Gods be merciful." Garth placed a hand on Fereliss' shoulder, perhaps as much to steady himself as to comfort his companion.

“It cannot be,” repeated Yurik. Looking up at the queen, he cried in a pained voice, “Best go inside, m’lady!”

Isadora watched the horse as it drew closer, a part of her shrinking from it as though she could somehow keep what it represented at bay. She realized now what the guards had already deduced—that the rider was, in fact, not missing. The moving dust cloud had cleared into a steed, dragging its rider by one foot trapped in a stirrup, the body bobbing up and down as the horse galloped over rocks and around shrubs.

No one spoke as the stallion entered the fields surrounding the house, slowing its gait in recognition of its home. Isadora watched in disbelief, unable to look away as the scene unfolded before her. Tall grasses parted for the laboring animal. Periodic glimpses of a limp body—*please don’t let that be my daughter*—in tattered, dusty garb. A twisted leg. Bones jutting from a mangled arm. A bloody head, its facial features no longer recognizable.

The horse came to a halt just before the stupefied guards. While there was little else to identify its rider, there was no mistaking the shock of yellow hair, or the jeweled necklace that had once adorned the queen. Isadora’s trembling hand rose to her throat. *My doing!* She could not breathe, and all her senses dulled as the world collapsed around her. *I must go to her!*



Rolft was the first to move, knife in hand as he kneeled to free the princess from her stirrup. “See to the queen,” he said.

His companions reacted quickly, turning just in time to watch the queen fall head-first in silence from her balcony. Rolft heard the sharp crack of her skull above the dull thud of her body as she met the courtyard stones behind him. Still kneeling by the princess, he closed his eyes and hung his head. There was no need to confirm what his heart already knew. This was a nightmare from which there would be no waking.

THE GUILD OF TAKERS

"In a world of give and take, we do our part." The Guild of Takers' credo.



Ruler Two

Ruler Two donned his ceremonial shabba, slipping his arms through its loose sleeves and cinching the robe around his waist with braided silk. He pulled the hood over his head until all but his face was hidden to the outside world and closed his eyes. He was a far cry from the frightened child that had first stepped inside The Guild's compound at age seven, was he not? No one who had looked upon him that day could have foreseen his many achievements: the soonest ever to graduate the School of Taking; one of very few to master every art taught there; the only overseer in Guild history to manage multiple territories simultaneously; the first student of the School of Taking to return as its headmaster; the youngest ever to become a member of the High Order. Most would consider his current position the pinnacle of success. But he did not.

He left his sanctum and proceeded down the hall until he reached the worm, a five-story spiral staircase in the center of The Hidor. Often, he would climb to the 'worm's head,' which extended well above The Hidor's roofline, allowing a clear view through its open wind catchers for as far as the eye could see. The desolate terrain of the Lawless Lands wasn't much to look at, but its vastness helped him think.

Today, however, he would exit the worm on the fourth floor and join his fellow rulers in the Chalice Room. He pictured the four of them: portly Ruler One with his bald head and saggy jowls, often seen waddling across the grounds to address the maintenance and upkeep of the GOT—The Guild's compound—or the needs of those who lived and worked there. Ruler Three always dressed in flowing gowns that hid her body's true shape. She was usually perched at her desk, her long gray hair pulled back from a scholarly visage marked by large round eyes that reminded him of an owl. It was a fitting look for one charged with managing The Guild's finances, including the supervision of all collectors and adjusters. Then there was Ruler Four, stone-faced leader of The Guild's small army. Impassive and aloof, and seldom seen without a fighting staff clenched tightly in his

hand, he spent most days barking orders to those responsible for defending the GOT and protecting its underground wealth. And of course, Ruler Five, slinking around so quietly on his long legs that one rarely heard him until his swarthy complexion, thick black brows and gleaming white teeth, were inches from one's face. The way he smiled made one think he hadn't eaten in weeks. He, too, seemed well-suited to his tasks: the supervision of all watchers, the elimination of unsanctioned competition, the disposal of liabilities, and the maintenance of relations with those The Guild relied on, including The League of Assassins. He seldom stayed for any length of time at the GOT, and Ruler Two wasn't complaining. Something about Ruler Five reeked of evil.

Today, of course, they all would look quite similar, coequal members of the High Order, each heavily masked by their ceremonial garb. Their supreme leader, the magister, would join them, appearing as he always did, never seen outside his shabba. He probably slept in it. Only once had Ruler Two caught a glimpse of anything but the magister's wizened face, and that was when an unexpected gust of wind blew off the old man's hood. But even then, the swirl of dust that had accompanied the breeze made it impossible to see much. Ruler Two thought he might have glimpsed a deformed skull, but he could not be sure. And no one had dared stare.

The six of them were scheduled to spend the day together. Not a pleasant prospect. This was Reckoning Day, designed by the magister to determine each ruler's special tasks for the coming almon. It was the scarecrow's own remedy for "idle hands," based on his ludicrous assumption that routine operations left each ruler with spare time.

Ruler Two reviewed the basic framework of the reckoning: each ruler would present a list of proposed initiatives, briefly citing each project's purpose and benefit, the resources it required, and—perhaps most importantly—the name of the ruler expected to manage it. Proposed projects were limited only by one's imagination. Constructing a new wing to The Hidor, updating the Laws of Taking, adding to the school's curriculum, or building a new transport route—any such would do.

Following each presentation, rulers would be allowed to pose questions, advocate merits, point out drawbacks, and challenge estimated resources. After all, what did Ruler Five know about building bridges, or securing caches of ill-gotten gains in underground vaults? What business did Ruler Three have in recommending a new trade route?

When discussions concluded, each proposal would either be eliminated or added to the magister's list, which at day's end, the old man would prioritize and use to make assignments.

Ruler Two had found the best way to control his workload was to propose sensible projects within his own domain; otherwise, his spare time might be filled chasing after some other ruler's inane notion of what he should be doing. And none of them knew the first thing about the art of taking, or how it should be taught to others. He likened the reckoning to a strategic game of wits, really, each ruler trying their best to be the master of not only their own destiny, but that of their cohorts.

When all was said and done, he typically hoped to claim at least one of three informal symbols of reckoning success: inheriting the fewest projects proposed by others; foisting the most projects onto others' plates; or having proposed the largest number of projects prioritized by the magister, regardless of to whom they were assigned. If he could somehow manage all three, he could gloat for the next twelve moons.

This almon, however, his plan was even grander.

Ruler Two climbed the last of the worm's steps to the fourth floor slowly, allowing himself time to prepare, to practice the cleansing breaths and banish emotion. It was one of the first and most basic skills taught him by his mastertaker, Sarteeg, a maven not only of trickery, but of mindal, the ancient art of mind control. If the old man could only see him now, a member of the High Order, responsible for all aspects of The Guild's School of Taking and for the organization's succession planning.

One by one, Ruler Two's feelings slipped away, strongest to weakest, as though turned to liquid and drawn by wicking to some vessel outside his consciousness.

He stepped onto the fourth floor in stasis, the energy his excitement and trepidation had required now heightening his senses. He could hear the soft, rhythmic shuffling of the magister coming down the west wing's hall, a young nom with surer footing supporting him on either side.

Ruler Two slipped into the Chalice Room to find his equals already seated, silent and still. Ruler Five's eyes were closed beneath his bushy brows, his hands folded on the tabletop. Ruler Four sat rigid in his chair, no doubt eager to shed his shabba and don his military uniform as soon as possible. Ruler Three occupied herself in typical fashion, her fingers a blur as they played some mathematical game she had once tried to explain to him. Ruler One's eyes were easy to read. *You're anxious!* Ruler Two quickly surveyed the small room's preparations. If they were not to the magister's liking, Ruler One would start the reckoning at a distinct disadvantage. The room's walls were barren, save for a portrait of The Guild's founder. The narrow counter that ran the length of the back wall was draped with white linen and topped with an appealing presentation of fruit, bread, sweets and

drink. He took his place between Rulers Three and Four, and across from Rulers One and Five just as the magister entered.

Two noms assisted the magister into his resting chair at the head of the table before leaving the room and shutting the door behind them. The magister appraised the room, his eyes settling on Ruler One. “General business,” he said softly. “Truncated.”

Ruler One used his hood to wipe his brow. “Nothing to report, Magister.”

Ruler Two signaled the same.

Ruler Three rattled off a quick report. “Collections, normal. No adjustments warranted.”

Can she never simply say, “Nothing to report?”

Ruler Four maintained his perfect posture.

Ruler Five waited, then cleared his voice. “Watchers report two uprisings in Tegan, both easily suppressed. One gatherer terminated in Aranox.”

Ruler Two took note. Uprisings of unauthorized competitors were common enough, but a GOT gatherer executed by one of The Guild’s own?

“Terminated?” asked the magister, seemingly reading Ruler Two’s mind. “Which sector?”

“Waterford, m’lord. The Inland territory... managed by Overseer Rascal.”

The magister’s lips barely twitched. “General business is concluded. Let the reckoning begin. Ruler One.”

As Ruler One filled his cavernous mouth with air, Ruler Two raised his left hand, two middle fingers curled beneath the tip of his thumb. It was the accepted way to request a break from normal proceedings.

“What do you proffer?” wheezed the magister.

“Moratorium,” Ruler Two said. It was an immediate and unexpected threat to his cohorts’ plans for the day. If granted, a moratorium would mean the postponement of the reckoning for a full almon, and the devotion of all The Guild’s resources to a singular, monumental project. Ruler Three shifted uneasily in her seat.

“We have not honored moratorium since the last review of territorial boundaries, eight almons past,” said the magister casually.

Ruler Two nodded. No one needed reminding about the last moratorium. It had been a colossal, tedious waste of everyone’s time, resulting in very little substantive change. The magister was warning him.

“What do you advocate?” asked the magister.

Ruler Two did not hesitate. “Overthrow both kings, m’lord. Replace them with governance by the people. Self-governance.”

Ruler One could not contain himself. A light scoff escaped his hood. The magister silenced him with a crooked finger pressed against a thumbpad.

“To what end?” asked the magister.

“To increase The Guild’s control over all of Baelon, m’lord.” *Keep it simple. To the point!*

“This has been tried before.”

“Yes, m’lord. One hundred thirty-five almons ago.” *I’ve done my homework!* “The landscape has changed.”

“Indeed.” The magister was silent for a long time. “Tell us how that change favors your proposal.”

Gladly! “The last attempt was made when there existed a long line of respected heirs to each kingdom’s throne, m’lord. The people of both realms took comfort in the promise of a familiar future. The GOT was not yet a century old and still wrestling with its own hierarchy. One hundred and thirty-five almons later, both realms remain in love with their kings, but the people worry. There is persistent talk about the future, and fear of the unknown. What shall come to pass when these kings are gone? Both monarchs are past their mid-life. Neither has a bloodline nor picked an heir, let alone identified possible candidates. But The Guild is stabilized, stronger now than it has ever been, its power and influence increased tenfold these past sixty almon.” *Yes, Magister, a shameless compliment to you, but a complete answer to your question demands it!*

One of the supreme leader’s yellow fingernails tapped the tabletop rhythmically. “A moratorium has been proffered.” He made a sweeping gesture, allowing those around the table to view the dark openings of his shabba sleeves, into which his bony white arms disappeared. “Initial challenges are welcome.”

Ruler Two knew the others’ dilemma. Silence was tantamount to support. A proposal of this magnitude warranted a hundred questions, yet none wished to look foolish in front of the magister. He had caught them off guard. He waited, further entrenched in his position with each passing moment.

Ruler One was the first to be recognized. His jowls quivered as he spoke. “Self-governance as practiced in the Isles? I fail to see the appeal. We have trouble enough with two kings. Neither will bow to bribe or threat. In fact, they work against us at every opportunity. And you want to multiply that hardship? The Isles are subject to a dozen

authorities, despite their tiny lands. How many do you think two realms would require? One hundred? Five hundred? Self-governance indeed!”

“It is not self-governance that has kept us from plundering the Isles,” said Ruler Two. “We do not bother with them because the distance is too great, the journey too dangerous, the prize too paltry to warrant our efforts. The islanders are happy, but they are also wretched poor. It takes a quarter moon at best to reach the islands. A full crew to sail a ship there. I wouldn’t waste the effort, let alone risk lives riding angry seas, not even were I certain to take everything of value from the Isles when I landed.”

The owl sought recognition and received it, her well-preened feathers clearly ruffled. “That hardly meets the challenge posed by Ruler One. We all know the practical reasons for not operating in the Isles. Your recitation of them falls short of addressing the hardships we would face were both kingdoms to trade their monarchs for self-governance. Ruler One questions why we would choose to manage a hundred authorities when our hands are full with two. What about the numbers?”

“I thought you would be the first to make sense of them,” said Ruler Two. “The reluctance of a king to dance with us is not inherent in his throne, but in his character. No two are quite alike. If I pick ten men off the street to rule Baelon, how many do you think will look the other way whilst we line their pockets? Three? Four? All we need is one! Think on it.” He shot a glance at Ruler One. “How many did you say would be required to self-govern both the realms? How many of those hundreds will refuse our generous offers to assist? How many who might otherwise refuse us will have families to protect? You cannot help but see it now... The truth is quite the opposite of what Ruler One suggests. Increasing the number of authorities who govern will not complicate our work, but greatly simplify it. Even a small injection of our influence will spread like a disease until we are so embedded in Baelon’s governance that we can never be removed. We struggle now to manage two self-righteous kings. Why, when self-governance will eventually manage our interests by itself? With leadership spread so thin that cracks in it cannot be avoided.”

Ruler One sought to save face, but his request to be recognized was tentative. “You make it sound so easy. As though a snap of your fingers will make it so. The truth is that what you propose will be almons in the making. Why not wait and see who succeeds these kings? Perhaps it will be someone we can work with. Still far easier to manage two kings than two kingdoms, is it not?”

Ruler Two responded quickly. “How long would you wait? What are the odds that our self-righteous kings will choose successors they deem less virtuous? What if those they choose have heirs? No, of this we can be certain: with the monarchies in place, our future will always be *uncertain*.”

“Not true,” said the owl, barely waiting to be recognized. “Not if we choose the kings. We need not wait. Why not kill the kings, as you suggest, and then replace them with our own puppets? So much simpler than messing with this nonsense of self-governance.”

Ruler Two shook his head. “Perhaps Ruler Three is unfamiliar with the process that would commence were either of our reigning kings to meet their end today. It would take almons, be neither smooth nor orderly, and yet be overseen by layers of aristocracy sworn to uphold the interests of their departed kings. Trying to steer them toward your puppets would be like wishing a certain meal upon the table when you do not control the kitchen, the cooks, or the ingredients they are fond of. Ah, but what if instead, those struggling so hard were shown a better way to cook? A better way, as it were, to honor the interests of their late kings? A way to ensure the best interests of the people were always at the forefront of the minds of those who governed? What better time to suggest that better way than when the kitchen is in turmoil, the cooks fighting and confused? Self-governance will not be easy nor swift to achieve, but we will have almons, and once installed, it will be worth the effort a thousand times over. And its impact will last forever.”

Rulers One and Three looked to Four and Five, impassive and in no rush to be recognized.

Already committed, Ruler Three took the initiative. The owl’s talons danced in the air as she spoke. “Despite continued efforts to suppress us, both kingdoms now accept us as an unpleasant fact of life. By your own account, The Guild is stronger now than it has ever been. Our nets are cast over all of Baelon. No one dares to steal without The Guild’s approval, or paying for the privilege. Our profits have never been higher.

“Yet *everything* is risked if your plan fails. We will be like some house pest having left the safety of the shadows, tempted by a morsel in the sunlight it did not really need. Though suffered in the shadows, we will not be tolerated in the light of day—not scurrying about the house whilst brazenly reminding all of Baelon why they hate us. The full wrath of both realms will be brought down upon our heads, like some giant boot heel intent on grinding us to dust!”

Ruler One nodded in agreement, his jowls jiggling, until she finished. Ruler Three looked from the magister to Ruler Five for some sign of support, but neither showed any reaction.

Ruler Two leaned slightly forward in his chair. “Part of what you say is true. Though they work against us, both realms are resigned to our existence. We are little more to them than an unpleasant fact of life. If we do nothing to further call attention to ourselves, our relationship will remain unchanged. But we can capture this prize, this ‘morsel in the sunlight’ as you call it, without leaving the safety of the shadows. If we act wisely, the kings’ deaths will not be attributed to us. And we shall take no credit. Disposing of royalty is not my area of expertise, and it is decidedly no simple matter, but if Ruler Five cannot put two kings in the ground without leaving a trace of The Guild’s involvement, then I have badly misjudged him. So far as the promotion of self-governance goes, our actions will be as innocent and commonplace as those of a farmer sowing seeds in troubled lands, for that is exactly what we shall be. Once planted, those seeds shall be nurtured by others with a desire so strong and so sincere to see them grow that they will come to believe they did the planting themselves. And we shall stand back and watch from the shadows as the fruits of our labor take shape.”

Ruler Two sat back in his chair, satisfied with his defense. Ruler One would no longer meet his gaze. Ruler Three appeared unconvinced, but she was at a crossroads. Pushing past a certain point would not be in her best interests. She turned to Rulers Four and Five, her owl eyes imploring them to help her.

The magister flicked a bony finger in the air. “Ruler Four?”

“I see no major threat,” said the veteran soldier. “If the kings are killed without attribution to The Guild, our reasons to defend The GOT will be no different than they are today. Even if the plot fails—if we are found out and the realms came after us—what will they do? Come here? I think not. Our predecessors knew what they were doing when they built this place. We are a full day’s ride from Aranox, further from Tegan. A full day’s ride across an open, hostile desert with no place to hide. If they do come, what will they do when dark falls and the prattlers emerge from their tunnels? What then? No. By the time the king’s soldiers get here, they will need to turn around and scurry home, and they will be too late at that! If this were not the case, they would have been here long ago. No, if we are found out, I don’t think they will come here. More likely, they will wage war on our takers in Aranox and Tegan...at which point our operations will go quiet for a spell,

will they not? Until the kingdoms tire of chasing ghosts and declare false victory, and we resume our sport.”

The magister sucked a breath of air into his failing lungs. “Ruler Five?”

The hint of a smile that had rested on Ruler Five’s lips slowly spread into a full-fledged grin. His dark eyes stared at Ruler Two as though just beginning to recognize a long-lost friend. His snow-white teeth gleamed as he spoke. “No initial challenges, m’lord.”



Overseer Reynard Rascall

Reynard Rascall knew precious little about The Guild of Takers for having been a member twenty almons. Not even his decade as an overseer had allowed him to see through the heavy shroud of mystery that enveloped The High Order. Perhaps, had he been raised in the GOT compound and schooled by grandmasters in the shadows of The Hidor, he would be more familiar. No matter. He knew what every thief knew: if you did not pay your dues, in full and on time, you would be made to wish you had. It was all The Guild needed you to know. All it wanted you to know.

They might be watching now. One could never be sure. A guild watcher could assume so many disguises. Reynard glanced out a window at the docks below. The Waterford Wharf was a manual laborer’s paradise. Few places of business offered as many jobs to so many different trades. The number of dockworkers alone was impressive. During the day they were everywhere, from one end of the port to the other, lumbering up and down gangways, loading and unloading supplies, packing this, unpacking that, and forever washing down gangplanks for passengers and sailors alike. Fishermen mending their nets, shipwrights making repairs. All busy with their tasks, paying little attention to anyone not helping to ensure safety or success.

Now, at night, it was a different story. Most of those who toiled for a living had packed up at dusk and headed home.

The smell of fish remained. Outside on the docks, it was unbearable. Here on the second floor, it wasn’t much better. How was that possible? Did the odor permeate the building, so that no matter where he moved, it surrounded him? Or had the stench on the wharf so attached itself to him that he now carried it wherever he went? Reynard sniffed the sleeve of his shirt.

Perhaps he would dispose of the furniture—one table, three desks, a few chairs he didn't really need—and see if that improved things. The room was spacious, with views of the seaport below. There were no interior walls, only several large wooden posts rising through the floor and extending to the roof above. There was shelving, a few stand-alone racks, and some pulleys with rope draped over ceiling rafters. All useless to Reynard. For almons the room had functioned as a crude office and as storage for goods and materials for the workshop below, but the amount of coin Reynard had offered to rent the place had prompted the proprietor to vacate the premises the very next day, asking only a single question: "How long shall you be needing it?"

There came a knock on the door. One feature that had attracted Reynard to this particular building was an exterior staircase, providing direct access from an alleyway to his rented room. If he chose to, he could come and go discreetly, unbeknownst even to those working up a sweat directly below.

Another knock came, this time slightly louder.

"Come in!" Reynard called out.

The door opened, and several men entered the room. The light was fading fast, but Reynard could still recognize them. Spiro, the man he trusted most in this business, and the two bruisers who generally accompanied him, Able and Elijah. They coaxed three men in front of them, occasionally prodding them with a knee to their backsides. As they neared Reynard, Spiro and his cronies stopped pushing and stepped back.

"Good evening, gentlemen." Reynard swept his shoulder-length black bangs behind his earlobes. "How nice of you to be out so late on my account. I swear, were it not important that we meet, I myself would be in bed by now."

"Reynard—" said the only man with spectacles.

"Now, now, Kasparr." Reynard stepped closer to him. "Please don't."

Kasparr opened his mouth to speak again, then bit his lip and swallowed.

"Joshua... Jonathon. It's good to see you." Reynard placed both hands on the shoulders of one, then the other, skipping over Kasparr as though he were not there. "You've traveled far. You must be weary. Spiro, some chairs for our guests, if you please."

Spiro's shadow moved silently across the room. As he made his way back toward Reynard, the sound of chair legs scraping against the floor accompanied him. Able and Elijah moved to the door, their large silhouettes framing either side.

"Thank you, Spiro." Reynard grasped the two chairs, turning them as he motioned. "Joshua... Jonathon. Come, sit here. Please."

All three of Reynard's guests exchanged nervous glances, but none dared refuse. Joshua and Jonathon shuffled forward, casting a last look at Kasparr before fixing their eyes on Reynard. Both watched him so intently that they had to feel for their seats with their hands.

"There, there," said Reynard, patting them on the shoulders as he moved behind them. "Best seats in the house. Front row! Reserved just for you. Great theater!" Joshua closed his eyes as though sensing pending doom.

"And you, Kasparr! Our guest of honor. Star of the show, really!" Reynard dragged the third chair to where Kasparr stood, stepped behind him and spoke directly into his ear. "Sit here, please. Center stage, that's where you belong this evening."

"Reynard, if I might explain myself," Kasparr reached for Reynard's hand as he lowered himself into the seat.

"Stop right there, Kasparr. That's nowhere in the script. Have you not studied your lines? Tsk, tsk. This is not a dress rehearsal, Kasparr. This is live theater. Jonathon! Do I not pay you well for your services?"

"Very well, Reynard. Most assuredly," said a shaking Jonathon.

"For your loyalty, Joshua?"

"M-more than enough," stuttered Joshua. "In fact, if you like..."

"You see, Kasparr, even the audience knows its lines." Reynard crouched in front of Kasparr, so that their faces were on a level, then brushed his fallen bangs back behind his earlobes. "You appear to have a bad case of stage fright." He patted Kasparr's knee, then stood to cross the room. "No matter. I'm here for you. When it's your turn to speak, I shall prompt you. How's that?" Through the darkened outline of a small window, Reynard watched the sun sink into the sea. He would need to hurry.

"Jonathon, Joshua, can you still see the stage? All will be for naught if you cannot." He paused at the edge of a long table covered with what appeared to be a tablecloth and waited for a response. "I didn't hear you."

"Yes, Reynard," said Jonathon.

"I can as well," whispered Joshua.

"Very good. And thank you for keeping your voices down. We wouldn't want to upset the rest of the audience, would we?" One of the large men standing guard at the door suppressed a chuckle. Reynard was unsure whether it was Able or Elijah, but either way, it made him smile. It was nice to be appreciated.

“This is very important...the three of you here together. I’m a simple businessman, and I rely on you to make our business profitable. Joshua, you manage our interests in the north. Jonathon, you the south, and Kasparr, you handle the Fostead sector. I, of course, manage the coastal area myself. Between us, we cover the entire inland territory. You three were chosen, hand-picked by me after great deliberation. It’s a tremendous honor, really. And a tremendous responsibility. I’ve placed my livelihood...nay, my very life...in your hands.” Reynard stared long and hard at each of the seated men in turn, then rapped the knuckles of one hand sharply on the tabletop. “You see the truth in this, do you not? I must submit the same sum to The Guild each moon, regardless of the amount you send to me. One dire short, one kingshead light, and I must pay the difference. Or pay a different price.”

Reynard took a deep breath, exhaling as he closed his eyes. He tilted his face toward the ceiling. “Tell me, Kasparr, do you know what a gaffe is?” He waited, but there was only silence. “This is where you speak, Kasparr. It’s your line next.”

“A gaff?” Kasparr shifted nervously in his seat. “I suppose so, yes. I mean, it’s a hand tool, right? Used to hook large fish—“

“No, no, no!” Reynard was suddenly looming over Kasparr. “Not a gaff, Kasparr. *This* is a gaff, Kasparr.” He picked up a large steel hook from the table, held it in front of Kasparr’s face, then spelled the word out slowly. “G... A... F... F. I’m not asking about a gaff, Kasparr. I’m asking about a gaffe. G...A... F... F... E. You have some schooling. Surely you know the difference.”

“Yes.” Kasparr wrung his hands, looking longingly at the dark outlines of Jonathon and Joshua. “Of course. If I might explain, Reynard.”

“So you do know what a gaffe is.”

Kasparr nodded, tears flowing freely now. “Ye-yes, Reynard.”

“What is it then?”

“A gaffe is a terrible blunder. Reynard, I beseech you!”

“And do you know the price to be paid for a gaffe, Kasparr?” Reynard’s voice suddenly seethed with anger.

“Oh, Gods above, please...” As Kasparr removed his spectacles, Reynard swung the gaff. Kasparr screamed as the steel hook ripped into his throat.

Reynard gave a vicious tug to ensure it was firmly embedded. “When you shortchange me, Kasparr, you shortchange the entire guild!” With a firm grasp on the gaff, Reynard pulled Kasparr from the chair and dragged him across the room. Kasparr’s legs jerked

spasmodically, his boot heels bouncing off the floor. His hands clawed, then gripped the steel shank of the gaff where blood flowed freely from his throat, but there was no dislodging it. Gurgling noises roiled from his mouth and neck as Reynard hoisted him roughly onto the tarp-covered table. "Spiro!"

Instantly, Spiro appeared at Reynard's side, a dagger in his hand. He thrust it violently once, twice, three times into Kasparr's chest, and the gurgling subsided. The kicking became twitching, then stopped altogether.

Reynard wrested the gaff from Kasparr's throat, leaned against the table, and exhaled a deep breath. Spiro wiped his dagger on Kasparr's trousers, then sheathed it. Reynard placed a hand on Spiro's shoulder, still slightly out of breath. He swept his hair back out of his face as he motioned to their audience. "Take a bow, Spiro." As Spiro did so, Reynard approached Jonathon and Joshua.

"My apologies. Not very good theater after all. Kasparr should have better learned his lines."

Both Joshua and Jonathon sat wide-eyed. Joshua's teeth chattered uncontrollably and Jonathon instinctively placed his outstretched hands before him as Reynard approached.

"What's the matter?" asked Reynard. "Was it really that bad?" It suddenly dawned on him what they were looking at. He hadn't even realized he still held it. "Oh." He casually tossed the gaff behind him. It bounced off Kasparr's body, landing on the floor with a clatter. "Well!" He clapped his hands once loudly. "At least you know the difference now between gaff and gaffe, eh? That's something!" He shook a bloody finger in front of their faces. "My advice? Avoid them both. You'll live longer." He patted each man on the head and walked away. Able opened the door for him and Reynard moved rapidly down the stairs, leaving Spiro and his crew to clean the mess up.

It would not be difficult to dispose of Kasparr's body. This time of night, no one would notice a few extra hands carrying a lumpy tarp bound with twine, even if it did drip. *Hab! No one would likely notice were it day!* It was one of the few benefits of sharing this place with a horde of dead and dying fish. A little more blood, another ribbon of entrails, a few more pieces of decaying flesh. Who would be the wiser?

He'd taken care of business. He hoped The Guild was watching.

