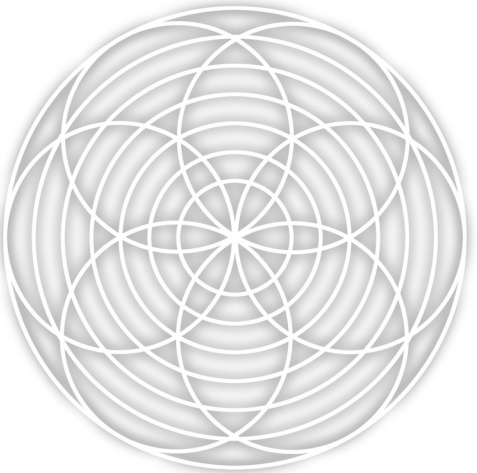
Traitor of Redwinter



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Traitor of Redwinter

The Redwinter Chronicles

BOOK TWO

ED McDONALD



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For Casper Fox Robert Morgan

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Events That Have Passed

Should it have been a while since you last entered Raine's world, a brief summary of key events that have transpired so far is given below. A glossary of characters, clans and terms is included at the end of the book.

Raine was born in the High Pastures, bleak and unforgiving highlands in the far north of Harran. Even as a child, she could see the spirits of the dead, a curse that carries a death sentence if it were ever to be discovered. At seventeen, having abandoned home years before, Raine found herself besieged at Dalnesse Monastery.

Raine helped a wounded girl named Hazia into the compound, but Hazia's mind had been taken by something dark and terrible. It was only the intervention of two Draoihn, Ulovar and his nephew Ovitus—magic users, spell casters, warriors who had been pursuing her—that prevented the rise of Ciuthach, an ancient demon. Raine discovered a trance rising in her mind, and together with Lord Draoihn Ulovar LacNaithe, banished Ciuthach.

Raine was taken south to the city of Harranir and the fortress-monastery of Redwinter, heart of the Draoihn's power. Ulovar used his power to draw a scar across Raine's mind, to allow her to cope with the things she had endured: she felt no grief, no empathy thereafter. Denied a chance to train as Draoihn herself, Raine became a servant. The luxury of this newfound life drew her in, even as she feared her grave-sight would be discovered and resented her low status. There she befriended a number of the other apprentices, including Esher, a young woman with whom she became close, as well as Ovitus's older cousin, Sanvaunt.

During those unhappy months, Ulovar's enemies sought to frame him for causing the monster Ciuthach's rise from the darkness. An attempt was made to kidnap Ovitus, which Raine was able to foil by shooting his attackers dead. However, a group of cultists led by Kaldhoone LacShale, a clan lord who had been cast down for the same grave-sight that Raine possessed, manipulated her and eventually set demons against her. Raine killed one,

and Sanvaunt another, though he was grievously wounded. How Sanvaunt prevailed remains a mystery. The numbing scar in Raine's mind burned away.

Raine tracked Kaldhoone down and prevented him from drowning Ovitus. In the battle beneath the city, Raine invoked the ghost of a dead man, and fed it power. Ovitus dragged Raine from the collapsing tunnels, and together they were able to present Kaldhoone's head as the evidence needed to exonerate Ulovar. Despite all of this, Raine and Ovitus's fledgling friendship lay in tatters after she discovered he had misrepresented their relationship.

Through all of this, Raine has been watched, guided, punished and humiliated by the Queen of Feathers. Just who and what she is remains unknown.

JUST A DREAM

I am dreaming. I will not try to pretend otherwise. I am me, but that carries less certainty here. I am Raine, but I am the Queen of Feathers. It is her dream, and I drift inconsequential, a presence riding her existence, a burr that found purchase on her raven-wing cloak. We are the same. I don't think she's aware of me. I don't exist yet. It's long ago, but this is where I am, dreaming, so it's today. Time means even less than I do.

Why should it? Everything is one. That's what the Draoihn say.

A woman stands close by. Her face is drawn, exhaustion marks the slump of her shoulders. The gown that glows around her is a mass of gold and silver. If there was ever a dress like it before, there will never be one like it again. A great arc of spines rises out from the back like a peacock's display, or a banner. Perhaps it is. The majesty of her gown, of her bejewelled rod of office, seems to dwarf the woman that stands surrounded by these treasures, as if she fell through the neck of the gown and found herself wrapped in them. This is what it feels like to be grand, to become mighty, to become apart. She is part of nothing. Only the Queen of Feathers stands beside her, I stand beside her, and together the two, or three, of us watch the final day of a war.

'They betrayed me,' the Riven Queen says, for the glorious golden woman could be nobody else. 'I raised them on high, and they brought me ruin.'

'You betrayed them first,' I say, and I feel the petty meanness in my words. She's looking to me for succour, for forgiveness maybe. I am not going to offer her any.

We look out, us two, or three, across the field where the Riven Queen's army is being driven into the earth by the forces the last Draoihn have scraped together to match her. They are small in number, but they have found new, desperate strength, and they cut a path through the Riven Queen's army. It is an implacable display, a vengeful advance of steel and magic and death. Their enemies are not all human. Many are not even alive. They fall beneath the scythe just the same. The Riven Queen's power has been sundered.

'All this time, all the help you gave,' the Riven Queen says. 'Everything I learned from you. How did it come to this?'

'They have all said this, at the end,' I tell her. The Queen of Feathers tells her. We both tell her. 'I don't have an answer. I just have to keep trying.'

'You already know how it ends,' the Riven Queen says. She tosses her sceptre into the mud. For all that it's a fortune, it's worth nothing to her now. There is no running from this. She has marshalled the most terrible forces the world has seen in centuries. But she is going to lose nonetheless.

'I know what happens,' we say. I say. The Queen of Feathers says. 'But I don't know how. I thought you would be the one. But I appear to have made an error of judgement. This isn't it. But maybe it's a start.'

I wake from the dream now. I remember it piecemeal thereafter. The fear is what lingers, a trapped memory I'm unable to release. It is not the hideous nightmare things that Hallenae, the Riven Queen has summoned. It is not her alliance with the Faded Lords, who despite their terrible power are being brought down one by one, banished back to their nether realm. It isn't even the legion of corpses that fight at her behest.

It's that when we look at her, when the Queen of Feathers looks at her, when I look at her, the tired woman wrapped in a dress of gold and spines is me.

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The stories of this age begin and end with betrayal, and mine is no exception.

It was midsummer when the bodies began to fill the ditches and the flies swarmed.

'How many, do you think?' Castus asked. He sat high, a slender figure atop a tall horse. I'd got down in the mud; I wanted a closer look.

'Looks like an even dozen,' I said. Flies in the air, flies landing on my hands, flies hoping to reach my eyes. The dead were off the road, down a goat track, slumped and tangled with one another in the trench.

'You sure you want to do that?' Castus said. No, I wasn't. But I needed a closer look.

I half-slid down the bank and into the ditch. It was dry, everything was dry, the grass was baked yellow and the leaves were turning crisp on the trees. It was a summer for dying things. I reached out to touch the face of one of the dead, but despite the day's savage heat, he was cold. He'd been in his twenties. Not so old. Not old enough to die. His throat was a ruin, the blood that had cascaded down the front of his shirt was brown, and dry as the land around it. The dead man had been wearing a night shirt. The flies hummed loud, clogging the air, clogging nostrils and mouths. Poor bastards. The people, not the flies.

They had been dead long enough to reek, not long enough to rot. I should have felt a little more—"poor bastards" wasn't much to offer them. I suppose I didn't think of these folk so much as people, as people-who-had-been. Since I'd been a small child, I'd seen the souls of the dead. I'd risen from a death of my own, then another, first throttled, then drowned. But there were no ghosts here. Only the insects, billowing clouds of flies, and the silent, graveless bodies. Without a ghost, without a soul, it's all just so much spoiled meat.

'Light Above, the stench of it,' Castus said. He put a handkerchief up against his nose, but I doubted it would do much good. On the road he'd

got into some kind of pissing contest with Sanvaunt about who could see the furthest. Both men were Draoihn of the First Gate. They'd mastered the trance of Eio, and proven their dedication to the Crown. As an apprentice, I could hold the trance steadily, but I was glad not to use it now. Eio could sharpen the trance holder's vision enough to spot a field mouse at a thousand paces, let you sense the slight twitch of a muscle that was about to uncoil. But the First Gate was so much more than that. It expanded one's consciousness out, out, into the whole misery and glory of the world around. The bodies had been ditch-dumped a half mile from the road, and with the First Gate drumming its rhythm, Castus had inhaled that stench like a fist to the nose. He and I had broken off from the rest of the group to investigate. There was a bet on whether it was just some dead cow, mouldering in a ditch. But it wasn't, and it was horrible, and with only the First Gate to our names, there was little we could do to change it.

Had we been able to trance beyond the Second Gate we could have turned the dead flesh to stone, or liquified it with a touch. With the Third, the Gate of Taine, we could have burned them. There was nothing that Fier, the Fourth Gate of the mind, could have done to pry into their thoughts now, and they were long past the point when the Fifth Gate of healing could have helped them. That just left Skal, the Gate of Death. The Sixth Gate. And I didn't think they needed much help in that arena.

The sun beat down from a cloudless sky, punishing the living and dead alike.

'Who do you think they are?' I asked. Seven men, five women. Only the one had been dressed for bed. The others wore shirts, tunics, breeches. Nothing denoted them as being special, save the savage manner of their deaths.

'I think they were unlucky,' Castus said. 'First casualties of Arrowhead's ambition, I guess. Stop touching them, you use those hands to eat with. That corpse smell won't wash out easy.'

I ignored Castus and laboured hard enough to roll one of them over. My suspicion was confirmed, and it didn't sit easy.

'Hands were tied behind their backs,' I said. 'Executions. Why bring them all the way out here?'

'Well that's not good,' Castus said. 'I guess Arrowhead didn't want the townsfolk to know what he was doing? Maybe these were the town's leaders. You'll probably find the mayor in there somewhere.'

His assessment didn't sit right with me. I looked up and down the ditch at the poor, dead, trussed-up people. No, they weren't a town council. They were too young. None of them looked past thirty. They'd been helpless, slaughtered like swine, and there were rules in conflict, even for the likes of Arrowhead who was doing his best to foment unrest and was stopping short of outright rebellion against the king, and Redwinter, by a hair's breadth.

It wasn't war. Not yet, anyway, but it was the fronting of war, the way that two drunks square up to one another outside a bar that should have closed hours ago, that moment of posturing before the blows start to fall.

'Can you give me a minute here in private?' I asked.

'If you're thinking of taking up looting, I disapprove,' Castus said from behind his bunched handkerchief. 'They don't look to have had very good taste.'

'I just want to say a few words,' I said, which was honest. 'They deserve a blessing to send them on their way.' Which was also true, but not what I intended.

'So?'

'So go away. It's a private thing. You're too full of yourself to take it seriously. You make everything seem . . . juvenile.'

'Fair,' Castus said, and turned his horse back towards the road where the rest of our ambassadorial delegation awaited our return. I waited until he was a little way off, then slowly took a deep breath. It was supposed to be calming, but I regretted it immediately. The rot in the air filled my mouth, slithered across my gums. I coughed it out and spat until I'd emptied out what I could. I watched Castus move far enough away, his attention caught by angry nesting birds calling and swooping, and then I began.

Sometimes we act on instinct. Sometimes things can be forgiven when they happen automatically, a knee-jerk reaction to something out of the ordinary. Like when I'd fed my strength into a ghost to topple Kaldhoone LacShale. I hadn't known what I'd been doing, not really, and I'd been desperate. We forgive those things. Or we should. This, what I was about to do, I should perhaps have feared more.

People fear what they don't understand, but this was more than that. There is a finality to death that forms a constant in our lives. People live, then they are gone. To see the dead confuses that. It makes people afraid, and the price for that is to be stoned, or hanged, or burned. Fear evokes the highest of prices for its victims. To speak with spirits or command souls is

to press close to the other worlds, the Rivers of Skuttis where the damned are taken, the thin veil of the Fault that separates one reality from another, and the Night Below, where demons dwell. Sometimes I wondered whether, had I never discovered this power, I would have been the same as the rest of them.

Sanvaunt knew the truth about me, but he hadn't turned me in for it. If our situations had been reversed, I hoped I would have been like him. I wasn't sure I had his goodness, though. Especially in light of what I was about to attempt on these stinking bodies.

This thing I was about to do, this disrespectful, wretched thing, I'd learned from the book. Not just any book, of course. It was a book that offered words I didn't recognise, and when I whispered them to the night they tasted like corroding metal on my tongue. They buzzed in the air, and gave it substance. They were things of history, perhaps they were part of the history of our world, but they'd given me ideas. I'd told myself I wouldn't use them. I'd told myself I wouldn't go back to that dark place, that I'd already stepped too far down a road I didn't want to travel. But that's the thing about making yourself promises. They aren't promises at all, they're just a way to alleviate whatever shitty thing you're feeling at the time. We tell ourselves, "No more of that," but that's just helpful for a few moments. The temptation comes and we jump right back in. Drink, rose-thistle, Olatte leaf, gorging on food, it doesn't matter. We all crumble at the first hurdle.

I checked one more time that Castus had moved far enough away before I placed my hand on the dead man with the hole in his throat. I began to say the words. I'd read them in the book, though I could never have written them down. They were ideas more than actual words, like colours you've never seen before. I hadn't tried to memorise them, but they flowed like a tune. There are seven spheres to existence, radiating out from us. There is the self, and there is the other. There is energy, and there is mind. There is life, and there is death. As a whole, we say there is a seventh, which is all of creation, but that is mere philosophy. As I gave voice to my song, I traced two circles. The sixth, the encompassing one, and just one more within, occupying half the diameter, isolating the sixth sphere from the others. A Sixth Gate within a Sixth Gate. I sought knowledge from only a single dimension of existence. It was death, obviously.

I wasn't good at this. I'd tried it before when one of the house cats died, and that hadn't gone well. My heart was thumping away, and even if the

heat of the day had made me sweat, this drew more. I spoke the words, as best as I understood them. Maybe it didn't matter if I only got some of them right. Distantly, internally, I heard a grinding, droning sound, like the dry turning of an iron wheel, as I looked into the empty void where a spirit should have lived.

I only got a few moments. A glimpse of the young man's last few breaths. He'd struggled at the end. Shouted, just one shout among many. A distinctive accent. And then there was a face, stark and porcelain white in front of his, so thin she could have lived through famine. And then she opened her mouth, and her teeth were jagged yellow points. Most of his last moments were fear, and terrible pain, but he thought of a woman before he died. Resentment that he'd not get a chance to live out his life with her. And that was it. Done.

I shuddered, fell backwards against the ditch wall, found my breath coming fast and hard. I'd only had an image of that face, that dreadful, pale-eyed face, but it had been enough. Human? I thought so, though there were things that walked in human guise. But to drag these people out here had taken more than just one sharp-toothed thing. For a moment I had the impression of blood in my mouth. I spat, but it was only my imagination.

It had only taken a few moments. The man's dead flesh was still cold beneath my hand. *Idiot Raine! You said you wouldn't do this again! Promised yourself!* The regret was intense. This was the last time. What had happened to me that I'd grown so cocksure that I'd do this stupid thing fifty feet from Castus—a fully fledged, oxblood-wearing Draoihn? I mean sure, it was Castus, and he seemed to take his duties about as seriously as he did everything else in his life, which was to say not at all. But still. I hadn't needed to do that. But like any addict, I'd just wanted to, so I'd taken the risk. Power is like a river, and restraint is the dam that stops it from sweeping you away. If you don't allow a little water through, no matter how dangerous that trickle might be, the dam will surely burst. No matter that even if Castus suspected I had the grave-sight, things could turn on me quickly. Those things were stones, pitchforks, and burning torches. I wanted to leave it all behind me, but I had to do it sometimes. Didn't I?

I could not have a life while the dark hunched over me. I felt it, slowly circling me. It didn't want to be still. I would find an answer. I would unlearn what I knew, and I could try to have what everyone else took for granted. Ordinariness. The book, secreted in my pack, held the answer, the means to free myself from these urges. It had to. I had to believe that.

'They were Brannish,' I said as I climbed out, eager to make some noise, as though something different might chase away what I'd just done. 'My bet is they're the Gilmundy governor's men. The foreign garrison.'

The Brannish ruled an empire to the south of Harran, and generously allowed us to govern ourselves—with the requisite tithes, governors and garrisons in place to bleed us dry. The garrisons weren't popular—nobody wants to see their oppressor's boot planted firmly in the middle of their town. But little was likely to bring wrath down faster on one's head than slaughtering a garrison. This was madness.

'How'd you figure that out?' Castus asked.

'Tattoos,' I lied, and since Castus was never going to climb down into the ditch to take a look himself, it seemed a safe enough claim.

'I thought Arrowhead was just expelling the Brannish governors and their men,' he said. 'This doesn't bode well for our negotiations.'

'No,' I said. 'Corpses rarely do.'

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Across a mile of heather and tumbledown land, sat upon both the northern and southern banks of the River Gil, Gilmundy looked much like any other market town, save for the grey-and-yellow banner that had replaced the king's. There was no wall, and few buildings rose to two storeys. The governor's residence, the mayoral estate and the church spire looked down across the thatched roofs, the triumvirate of power—or they had been.

'Is this really a good idea?' Castus asked. The rest of our small contingent had got stony-faced about the dead Brannish soldiers, but it hadn't changed our course of action. Faces were set gravely, backs were pricked up straight.

A group of men in northern clan colours moved along the road to meet us. Five riders to match our number. We reined in along the sun-baked road to await them. Summer had risen fast and hard across the country, and rain felt a long way away.

'Remember your manners, if you can,' Sanvaunt LacNaithe said. He turned those sleepy-lidded eyes on Castus LacClune. 'Better yet, don't speak at all.'

'I've already had enough of this business for one day,' Castus said. 'I didn't even touch them and I can't get the smell out of my nose.' It sounded like whining, but Castus's nonchalant disdain for the world was all part of a carefully cultivated façade. Where Sanvaunt was dark, Castus was fair.

Where Sanvaunt was unshaven, Castus kept his face smooth—despite what appeared to be yet another monumental hangover. I considered them both my friends, but there'd been bad blood between Clan LacNaithe and Clan LacClune since before they had names. Regardless, the five of us were all here together, so an effort had to be made to get along as best we could.

There shouldn't have been such inter-clan conflict among the Draoihn, but that was the way of it. We weren't like other people.

'I'll handle it,' the only other woman in our group said. She was less imposing than the men. They were fighters, wearing mail beneath their oxblood, but Liara was better dressed for a day in court than she was for battle. Red curls formed a bonnet around her head. Liara LacShale had passed her Testing earlier in the year, and her choice not to wear the Draoihn coat was a different form of intimidation. She was even more scornful of Castus's nightly excesses than Sanvaunt, and that in turn knocked onto me when I joined him, which had been more often than not of late. 'Let's see if Arrowhead comes in person,' she said.

'He won't,' I said. 'They'd be carrying his banner if they did.'

'Best leave it to the Draoihn, Raine,' Colban, the last of our delegation, said. 'It's not our place to talk. Just to watch.'

'I wasn't made to be a butterfly on the wall,' I said. 'I doubt they sent me just to look pretty.'

Colban was middle height, medium build, with ordinary brown hair. His features were even, and sometimes I thought he had the most average face possible. Nothing was small, or large, or pronounced, or weak. He was unexceptional to look at in nearly every way, the kind of young man you wouldn't notice passing you on the street. We were both apprenticed to the same master, and I'd pondered more than once about exactly why the two of us had been sent on this mission. For all the noble blood running around, we were all mighty young. Sanvaunt was the oldest at twenty-four, Liara and I were only eighteen and Castus and Colban were somewhere in the middle. Draoihn or not, and as capable as Sanvaunt and Liara had proven themselves to be, they were inexperienced to be spearheading a negotiation that could determine the fates of thousands. Castus was heir to another of the three great clans, but even the most loving parent—which he certainly did not have—wouldn't have been able to recommend him as a negotiator.

'Want to run lines while we wait?' Sanvaunt asked Liara. 'We've got ten minutes before they get here.'

'I think we should focus on the matter at hand,' Liara said. 'I need a clear head.'

'If I have to hear you two pretending to be imaginary people even one more time, I'll honestly have to take up drinking,' Castus said. 'I'm serious this time.'

'They're good lines though, aren't they?' Liara said. 'You should come see the show when it's done. Better yet, I'll give you a part. First ass from the left.'

'I would make a fabulous ass,' Castus said.

'You already do,' I said.

The five horsemen approached at a steady pace, horses stepping a non-threatening walk, but they were armed and armoured. The warrior at their fore wore a full suit of armour, plates polished to a silver-bright sheen that caught the midday sun. He must have been baking in there, so he must really have wanted to put on a show. The other men were clan warriors, mail-clad and bearing the devices of the High Pastures upon their shields.

I knew that I shouldn't have, but I slipped my hip-flask from my pocket and took a little swig. An acrid, nauseating flavour ran down the back of my throat. Given a minute, I'd feel a little surge of energy, of alertness. Confidence too, but I wasn't intended to do the talking and I'd need to remember that. Rose-thistle helped me get through the day after another long night spent reading by candlelight, but it was renowned for making tongues billow in the wind.

Ah, there it was. That little lurch in the world that made it all that much brighter without ever entering a trance. I slid the flask back and felt that I'd got away with it.

'I have the floor,' Liara said. 'Interrupt me and I'll run lines all the way home.' Liara could make even Ulovar laugh, but she took her duty seriously, didn't trip over her own worries when it came to business. She was a rising star in Redwinter, and that was no mean thing to say. Our fortress-monastery was more than just a centre of learning. It was a place of power, in all the ways that mattered, from the ancient artefacts hidden in the Blackwell, to the secrets locked in dry old tomes in its libraries and the deadly warriors it put into the field. Redwinter awarded no crowns, but it made and unmade kings all the same.

The armoured lord rode two lengths ahead of the rest of his party. They were all men of station, but this suit of silver marked him as something special. The helm had a full face plate styled to look something like a playhouse

mask, the mouth hole either mournful or snarling. Runic sigils had been engraved across the surfaces. It was Draoihn-made, forged by Redwinter's artificers. My bow, which I had stolen from the Blackwell and kept, was slung in a holster on the rear of my saddle. She wasn't strung, but she strung herself with moonlight when I asked, and I'd named her Midnight. The armour that this lord wore might even be proof against her arrows.

'I see LacNaithe and LacClune represented,' he said, his voice all metal within the helmet. 'But I think Van LacAud was expecting someone a little more . . . experienced.'

'Redwinter should be grand enough for you,' Liara said. 'Who am I addressing?'

'Braman of Dulceny,' he replied. Lack of a title suggested he'd climbed up through the ranks. That made him dangerous. Not many could afford Redwinter armour without being born to it.

'Well, Braman of Dulceny. You know why we're here,' Liara said. 'I assume you're our escort.'

'Of course,' he said. 'You'll understand that this is a difficult situation for all involved.'

'Difficult for the people of Gilmundy,' Liara said. 'But our negotiations should not be so complicated.'

'You'll understand if I ask you to surrender your weapons,' Braman said. 'Difficult situations, and all that.'

The corpses we'd come across said *no*. They'd be disarming me over their own dead bodies before I handed them Midnight. She was mine, I'd earned her, and no bow could match her. I thought it might come to blows at this very earliest point if Braman was foolish enough to insist. That took guts. There was something about him that told me his calm was solid but thin, and the violence that lay beneath could be called upon at any moment. It was the arrogance that told that story. What kind of man dared to order Draoihn around? We were the keepers of the Crown, we commanded fire and stone. Well, some of us did. A handful. The rest of us were still pretty dangerous and laws were of relative rather than absolute importance to us. But then, Braman was probably not his real name, and I'd have sent a Draoihn to treat with Draoihn. His visor remained lowered: if LacAud's streak of rebellion was ended with words, we'd all probably go back to pretending to be friends, but it's the lower caste of warriors whose transgressions are remembered. When a clan lord like LacAud took possession of another's

town it was a border dispute; when a common man tried the same it was only common thieving.

I'd shoot the other men first. Midnight would come out, and I could put an arrow into at least two of them before anyone realised. I didn't fancy my chances against Braman's armour—there were diamonds blended into the fibres of the steel. I'd leave him for the actual Draoihn to deal with.

My mind hadn't been the same since I'd killed Kaldhoone LacShale and his followers in the undercity. Eight months had sped by me. Cursed to see the dead, they'd had a right to be angry, but their anger had made them bitter. Cruel. They'd lied to bring me to their side, then tried to force my master to execute his own nephew. They'd inadvertently nearly unleashed a monster on the world. They had paid for it. I destroyed them all. And now, never knowing quite whom I could trust, I never stopped looking for threats, to the sides, in the shadows. Always working out the sequence in which to deal with enemies, making sure I had an exit at my back, covering all the angles. I hadn't killed anyone since that day, but calculating and assessing the world around me gave me some measure of control over what had happened. It did nothing to lessen the dreams, or the night-screaming. But it kept my heart from beating wildly out of control to know how and when I'd need to act, if I did. Maybe this was what I'd been sent here for.

'We are here on a diplomatic mission, from Redwinter, by order of Grandmaster Vedira Robilar, with the backing of the loyal members of the Council of Night and Day,' Liara said. 'An insistence that Draoihn be relieved of their weapons could only be taken as an indication that your master, who as you'll recall sits on Redwinter's Council of Night and Day, has chosen to relinquish his seat and now considers the Draoihn to be his enemy. I strongly recommend you rethink your position.'

Liara LacShale was young, short and roughly the shape of an apple, but when she spoke, people listened.

'As you wish,' Braman said. 'Nobody's looking for bloodshed today. But you can't blame a man for trying.'

'The only thing you're trying is my patience,' Liara said primly. 'Lead on.'

Braman didn't like that. There was no face to see beyond his mask, but he sat motionless for several moments, and that stillness felt like a threat. But then he laughed, an unforced, natural sound bouncing around the tinny confines of his helmet.

'Quite so!' he said. 'Trying. I like it. Come, then. You're quite safe.'

Of course we were safe. We had three Draoihn, and though Colban and I were only apprentices, I liked to think we could hold our own too. I nudged my roan mare, Conker, to follow after our small escort, and flapped my arms up and down like a chicken. I was unused to the heat. Not a cloud in the sky, and the morning sun already had me slick with sweat. I could smell myself, which is seldom a pleasant experience. Funny that someone else's sweat can induce a tingle whereas one's own is just a reminder that you need to change.

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Gilmundy was a town like many I'd seen, a trade confluence where the great north road between Harranir and Dulceny intersected with the River Gil, which flowed east to west across it, all the way down to the LacClune seat of Clunwinny on the coast. Ostensibly the town belonged to the king, but the king was very old, his son was away fighting another king's wars, and his clan had lost most of its power, so like any wise ruler he'd left it to the vassals to sort things out for themselves. I tried to count fighting men as we passed through the streets, but I gave up quickly. The reports that had come in suggested a warband five hundred strong, and I didn't doubt them.

Light Above, but it was hot. Unseasonable early summer would lead into a blue-skied late one and I'd already had enough of it. I wasn't made for this kind of weather. I was a northern girl, and as much as I complained about it, rain and fog were a lot more comfortable for me than a heatwave. It had seemed fun at first, sitting on the porches of the gaming houses that Castus frequented, sipping chilled mead and wine, letting the aches of my training bruises soak away in the alcohol. But on the road, riding beneath that relentless ball of fire, I longed for winter to return.

LacAud had taken over the mayor's house on the north side of the river, but we made a diversion first to the Brannish governor's residence. No sign of any soldiers there, but then, I hadn't expected there to be. No governor, no 'peacekeeping' garrison. The occupiers, as many liked to call them. I liked the look of the place. It had white-washed, straight stone walls, and a good door. It wanted to be a small fortress, which in a way it was. At least the Brannish had been taken out to die—ghosts stayed close to their bones. My nights were restless enough without a haunting.

We'd been supposed to find those bodies. Billeting us here was all part of the show.

'Arrangements have been made for you to freshen up,' Braman said. 'Van LacAud will send for you when he's ready.'

'He should see us now,' Liara said. Braman's metal face was unchanged.

'Van LacAud is a Draoihn of the Second Gate, and a member of the Council of Night and Day,' Braman said. 'Not to mention he's actually lord of his clan, while this delegation is made of . . . you. I understand what the grandmaster intends, but honestly, we expected Ulovar LacNaithe.'

'He had better things to do than deal with this nonsense,' Liara said. 'But we'll play the game.'

I wished that were true. Ulovar would have been here on the fastest horse available to him, had he been able. Clan conflict served nobody, and murmurs of unrest over the succession of the Crown were muttered on every street. Ulovar wasn't well. He'd tried to hide it from me, from everyone, but he was always tired. Slower than he had been. My heart ached to see it.

There is a way that people speak about their parents, a bond that I'd never really understood. It stems from knowing that there's somebody out there who loves you relentlessly, that nothing could ever take that from you. I'd never felt it with Mama. I'd longed for it as a child, but she'd resented me so greatly that by the time I absconded, I knew that unconditional love wasn't there. Ulovar was not my father and he had never tried to be, but he'd taken me in, and done his best to help me. When grief and horror had threatened to overwhelm my sanity, he'd drawn a scar across my mind, cut me off from the pain. He'd given me a chance, recognised something in me that he thought was worthy of more. He'd offered me a life when I'd had nothing left. And that was as close as I thought I'd ever get to feeling what others took for granted. When I'd first met him, he'd been so strong, implacable, a rolling boulder that came to rest only when it willed. It hurt to see illness stealing that power away from him.

We were ushered inside. Crossing the threshold felt like stepping into a dead man's shoes. The whole place had been scrubbed and cleaned, like a spare bedroom made ready for guests. A pair of loaned retainers were ready to wait on us after Braman and his warriors left us at the door. It was a sparsely furnished, hard-edged sort of place, the kind that a proud commander takes satisfaction in having his people live in, and his people muttered about having to endure. Our escort left us there.

'Making a bit of a show of it, aren't they?' I said.

'Looks clean enough,' Castus said. 'I always sort of wanted to have a look

inside one of these places. See how the Brannish do things. It's a little disappointing.'

'He's throwing it in our faces,' I said. 'He ejected every garrison in his land. You think it's meant to arouse patriotic sympathy, or is it a warning?'

'Maybe both,' Sanvaunt said. 'Or maybe they just had the room to spare.'

'I wouldn't take anything Arrowhead does at face value,' Liara said. 'He's a crafty old wolf. Sly, and audacious. It's a bad combination.'

'Do you think it's true, what they say about him? That arrows can't touch him?' I asked. It was a point of particular interest for me.

'It's true,' Sanvaunt said. 'And not just arrows. He's spent his life weaving incantations around himself to cover every attack. You'll feel it when you're close to him. Like a kind of lifting of the air around him. We've made jokes along the road, but what we're doing here is important. Best behaviour. Courtesy. Don't promise anything we can't deliver.'

'I'm not even sure why Colban and I are here,' I said. Sanvaunt looked away. He knew more about that than he was saying, but we hadn't talked much on the road. Last time I'd travelled with a LacNaithe man it had resulted in rumours going around about me, and we both felt it. He was protecting me, in his standoffish way. We'd kept a distance, although my gaze tended to rest between his shoulder blades as we rode. He had fantastic shoulders.

Liara and I were led to the room appointed to us, and that felt a little awkward. The night terrors came more often than not, and I often awoke screaming. I dreamed of burning eyes, of cold, wet, dead places, of the fleshless hands of the dead. Ulovar had used his Fourth Gate to free me of grief and empathy after I saw my friends cut down at Dalnesse Monastery, cauterising the mental wound, and whether it had been right or wrong to take that from me, it had worked. For a long time I had turned a blank face to the world, protecting myself, escaped into a void. Months on, after the scar left my mind, the dreams had flooded me, and at first, people had come to check on me. After a month, they just left me alone. Liara was unlikely to get a good night's sleep sharing a room with me.

Water had been warmed for a pair of copper bathtubs. It was only lukewarm, but that was better than the steaming Redwinter baths on a day as hot as this.

'You ever fear that you're going to get into a bath and the water's just going to turn black?' Liara said as she undressed. 'I swear I'm more sweat

than person at this point.' I smiled weakly at the joke, but I felt too nervous around her to join in. What did one say to the daughter of a man after you drowned her father? I stripped off and sank into the tub. The water was scented, and I felt my muscles begin to relax. My thighs were sore as a whipped backside: riding a horse all that way was no joke. But as I felt the relaxation coming over me, I immediately began to tense up again, looking for my weapons, checking the door, figuring out how far the drop from the window was. I should have checked the window before I got in. I had to fight down the urge to get out and check it.

It would have been so nice to just be a normal girl.

'Why did they send us?' I asked.

Liara had settled her head back against the rim of the tub, her eyes closed as she breathed in the steam.

'Because the north is in the grip of the sheep sickness, there'll be famine come winter, and LacAud is trying to force subsidies and concessions from parliament to alleviate it. That's what he says anyway.'

'That's not what I mean,' I said. 'Why us? You, Sanvaunt, Castus, me, Colban. That horse turd Braman was right—none of us have the rank to negotiate properly with Van Onostus LacAud.'

'You've hit the nail on the head,' Liara said. She opened her eyes, rested her hands one over the other on the rim of the bath and rested her chin atop them. 'Sending someone with real clout would make this a bigger issue. Everyone wants this over and done before autumn, and that means making light of it. So they aren't sending their biggest horses, they've sent foals instead. But Sanvaunt, wildrose he may be, has standing in the clan, and Ovitus is off in Brannlant so he was the only choice. By sending Castus they show that LacNaithe and LacClune stand together in this.'

'They make sense,' I said.

'But "why am *I* here," is that what you're asking?' Liara said. 'I'd love to believe that I was sent because I'm good. But I'm not naive. My father was a traitor, and I'm a reminder to LacAud of how Redwinter deals with those Draoihn who put themselves before the Crown. And to negotiate with a traitor's daughter—I'm an insult. You're here for the same reason. Or as a threat. You killed him, after all.'

She talked about her father bluntly. She had to, but I knew it hurt her. Whatever else he'd been, Kaldhoone LacShale had been her father, and for

people who actually have fathers, apparently that's important. I'd never met mine, and I didn't really care to.

Onostus LacAud intended us to wait. It was a flex of his arm, a game played to show who was in charge here. So it was a surprise when evening rolled around, and a summons arrived for me, and me alone.