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FURIES OF CALDERON  
ACADEM'S FURY  
CURSOR'S FURY  
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BOOK THREE OF THE CODEX ALERA

**JIM BUTCHER**





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# PROLOGUE

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Men plan.  
Fate laughs.

FROM THE WRITINGS OF GAIUS QUARTUS  
FIRST LORD OF ALEA

Tavi made a steeple of his fingers and stared down at the *ludus* board. Squares of black and white lay in eleven rows of eleven, and painted lead figurines, also of black and white, stood in serried ranks upon them. A second board, five squares by five, rested on a little metal rod, its center over the lower board's center, occupied by only a few pieces. Casualties of war sat on the table beside the board.

Midgame was well under way, and the pieces were approaching the point where exchanges and sacrifices would have to be made, leading into the endgame. It was the nature of *ludus*. Tavi's dark Legions had taken heavier losses than his opponent's, but he held a stronger position. So long as he kept the game running in his favor—and provided his opponent wasn't laying some kind of fiendish trap Tavi had overlooked—he stood an excellent chance of victory.

He picked up one of his Lords and swept the piece up onto the raised skyboard, representing the skies above the field of battle, bringing added pressure onto the beleaguered positions of the hosts of the white foe.

His opponent let out a low, relaxed sound that was like nothing so much as the growl of some large and sleepy predator. Tavi knew that the sound indicated the same emotion a mildly amused chuckle might have in a human being—but never for a second did he forget that his opponent was not human.

The Cane was an enormous creature, and stood better than nine feet tall when upright. His fur was dark and thick, a heavy, stiff coat over the whole of his body, save for upon his paw-hands, and in patches where heavy scar tissue could be seen on the skin beneath his fur. His head was that of an enormous wolf, though a bit stockier than the beast's, his muzzle tipped with a wide, black nose, his jaws filled with sharp white teeth. Triangular ears stood erect and forward, focused on the *ludus* board. His broad tail flicked back and forth in restless thought, and he narrowed scarlet-and-golden eyes. The Cane smelled like nothing else Tavi had ever encountered, musky, musty, dark, and something like metal and rust, though the Cane's armor and weaponry had been locked away for two years.

Varg hunched down on his haunches across the board from Tavi, disdaining a chair. Even so, the Cane's eyes were a foot above the young man's. They sat together in a plainly appointed chamber in the Grey Tower, the impregnable, inescapable prison of Alera Imperia.

Tavi permitted himself a small smile. *Almost impregnable. Not quite inescapable.*

As always, the thoughts of the events of Wintersend two years past filled Tavi with a familiar surge of pride, humiliation, and sadness. Even after all that time, his dreams were sometimes visited with howling monsters and streams of blood.

He forced his thoughts away from painful regrets. "What's so funny?" he asked the Cane.

"You," Varg said, without looking up from the *ludus* board. His voice was a slow, low thing, the words chewed and mangled oddly by the Cane's mouth and fangs. "Aggressive."

"That's how to win," Tavi said.

Varg reached out a heavy paw-hand and pushed a white High Lord figure forward with a long, sharp claw. The move countered Tavi's most recent move to the skyboard. "There is more to victory than ferocity."



Tavi pushed a *legionare* figure forward, and judged that he could shortly open his assault. “How so?”

“It must be tempered with discipline. Ferocity is useless unless employed in the proper place...” Varg reached up and swept a Steadholder figure from the skyboard, taking the *legionare*. Then he settled back from the board and folded his paw-hands. “...and the proper time.”

Tavi frowned down at the board. He had considered the Cane’s move in his planning, but had deemed it too unorthodox and impractical to worry much about it. But the subtle maneuvers of the game had altered the balance of power at that single point on the *ludus* board.

Tavi regarded his responses, and dismissed the first two counters as futile. Then, to his dismay, he found his next dozen options unpalatable. Within twenty moves, they would lead to a series of exchanges that would leave the Cane and his numerically superior forces in command of the *ludus* board and allow them to hunt down and capture Tavi’s First Lord at leisure.

“Crows,” the boy muttered quietly.

Varg’s black lips peeled away from his white teeth, an imitation of an Aleran smile. Granted, no Aleran would ever look quite so...unabashedly carnivorous.

Tavi shook his head, still running down possibilities on the game board. “I’ve been playing *ludus* with you for almost two years, sir. I thought I had your tactics down fairly well.”

“Some,” Varg agreed. “You learn quickly.”

“I’m not so sure,” Tavi said in a dry tone. “What is it I’m supposed to be learning?”

“My mind,” Varg said.

“Why?”

“Know your enemy. Know yourself. Only then may you seize victory.”

Tavi tilted his head at Varg and arched an eyebrow without speaking.

The Cane showed more teeth. “Is it not obvious? We are at war, Aleran,” he said, without any particular rancor beyond his own unsettling inflections. He rolled a paw-hand at the *ludus* board. “For now the war is polite. But it is not simply a game. We match ourselves against one another. Study on another.”

Tavi glanced up and frowned at the Cane. “So that we’ll know how to kill one another come the day,” he said.

Varg let his silence speak of his agreement.

Tavi liked Varg, in his own way. The former Ambassador had been consistently honest, at least when dealing with Tavi, and the Cane held to an obscure but rigid sense of honor. Since their first meeting, Varg had treated Tavi with an amused respect. In his matches with Varg, Tavi had assumed that getting to know one another would eventually lead to some kind of friendship.

Varg disagreed.

For Tavi, it was a sobering thought for perhaps five seconds. Then it became bloody frightening. The Cane was what he was. A killer. If it served his honor and his purposes to rip Tavi’s throat out, he wouldn’t hesitate for an instant—but he was content to show polite tolerance until the time came for the open war to resume.

“I’ve seen skilled players do worse in their first few years in the game,” Varg rumbled. “You may one day be competent.”

Assuming, of course Varg and the Canim did not rip him to pieces. Tavi felt a sudden, uncomfortable urge to deflect the conversation. “How long have you been playing?”

Varg rose and paced across the room in the restless strides of any caged predator. “Six hundred years, as your breed reckons it. One hundred years as we count them.”

Tavi’s mouth fell open before he could shut it. “I didn’t know...that.”

Varg let out another chuckling growl.

Tavi pushed his mouth closed with one hand and fumbled for something relevant to say. His eyes went back to the *ludus* board, and he touched the square where Varg's gambit had slipped by him.

"Um. How did you manage to set that up?"

"Discipline," Varg said. "You left your pieces in irregular groups. Spread them out. It degrades their ability to support one another, compared to adjacent positioning on the board."

"I'm not sure I understand."

Varg started positioning pieces again, as they were at the confrontation, and Tavi could see what the Cane meant. His forces stood in neat rows, side by side. It looked awkward and crowded to Tavi, but the overlapping combat capabilities more than made up for the difficulty of arranging it, while his own pieces stood scattered everywhere, each move the result of seeking some single, specific advantage in order to dominate the board.

Varg restored the table to its game positioning, flicking his tail in emphasis with his words. "It is the same principle as when your Legions face our raiding parties. Their discipline mitigates their physical weakness. No amount of rage can match discipline. Unwisely employed aggression is more dangerous to oneself than any enemy, cub."

Tavi frowned at the board and grunted.

"Concede?" Varg asked.

"Game isn't over yet," Tavi said. He couldn't see how to defeat Varg's positioning, but if he pressed on, he might find an opportunity, or Varg might make some kind of mistake Tavi could capitalize upon. He pushed a Knight to Varg's Steadholder, taking the piece and beginning the vicious exchange.

After a dozen moves, Tavi did not find a way to beat the Cane. His defeat looked inevitable, and he grimaced and lifted a hand to knock his First Lord onto its side in capitulation.

Someone pounded on the door to the cell—really, Tavi thought, it was more like a Spartan apartment than a prison, a large suite that included a bed large enough to suit even the Cane as well as a sitting area and a reading area—and a guard opened the wooden door outside the prison suite. "Excuse me young man. A courier from the Citadel is here upon the Crown's business. He wishes to speak to you."

"Hah," Tavi said, and flashed Varg a smile as he lowered his hand. "Duty calls. I suppose we'll have to call this one a draw."

Varg let out another amused growl and rose as Tavi stood to face him. The Cane tilted his head slightly to one side. Tavi mimicked the gesture, though a little more deeply. "Until next week, then. Please excuse me, sir."

"Duty neither makes nor needs excuses, cub," Varg said. He flashed his fangs in another smile at the guard. The man didn't precisely flinch, but it seemed to Tavi that he had to fight not to do so.

Tavi withdrew to the barred door that faced the cell, never turning his back on Varg. He slipped through the door after the guard unlocked it, then followed him down two flights of stairs to a small, private office. It was a very plain affair, its walls lined with shelves of books, an unadorned table and chairs of gorgeously polished dark wood, a ledger desk, and a writing desk. A plain white porcelain pitcher sat on the table, beaded with droplets of water.

A small, stout, and somewhat myopic man sat in one of the chairs. He wore the red-and-blue-trimmed tunic of a senior functionary in the Citadel. The guard nodded to the man and withdrew into the hallway, shutting the door behind him.

Tavi frowned, studying the messenger. There was something familiar about him. Tavi did not recognize his face, but that meant little in the teeming mass of Alera Imperia's Citadel.

The messenger's head tilted slightly, and he remained silent.

Then Tavi grinned and swept into a formal bow. "Your Maiestv."

The messenger let out a bark of a laugh, a pleased sound. As he did, his form wavered and shifted, sliding into a larger, leaner frame, until Gaius Sextus, First Lord of Alera and the mightiest of its furycrafters, sat before Tavi. His hair was thick, well trimmed, and silver-white, though it and the lines at the corners of his eyes were the only features about the man that made him look older than a well-preserved forty years or so. There was an aloof, wolfish quality to the way he held himself, confident in his power, his intelligence and experience. Tavi idly noted that the First Lord had evidently altered his clothing when he changed, as it still fitted him despite Gaius having added six inches of height.

“How did you know?” Gaius murmured.

Tavi frowned. “The eyes, sire,” he said, finally.

“I changed them,” Gaius countered.

“Not their shape or color,” Tavi explained. “Just...your eyes. They were yours. I’m not sure how I knew.”

“Instincts, I suppose,” Gaius mused. “Though I wish it weren’t. If you had some kind of innate talent we could define, perhaps we could teach your technique to the rest of the Cursors. It could prove extremely valuable.”

“I’ll work on it, sire,” Tavi said.

“Very well,” Gaius said. “I wanted to speak to you. I read your analysis of the reports you’ve been tracking.”

Tavi blinked. “Sire? I thought those were for Captain Miles. I’m surprised they reached you.”

“In general, they wouldn’t. If I tried to read every paper in the Citadel, I’d be smothered within a day,” Gaius said. “But Miles thought enough of your argument that he passed it on to me.”

Tavi took a deep breath. “Oh.”

“You make a convincing case that now is the time for action against the more ambitious High Lords.”

“Sire,” Tavi protested. “That wasn’t necessarily my position. Miles wanted me to write in opposition to his preferred strategies. I was just advocating it to help him find weaknesses in his own planning.”

“I’m aware,” Gaius said. “But that makes your conclusions no less credible.” He frowned, eyes on one of the plain bookcases. “I think you’re right. It’s time to make the High Lords dance to *my* tune for a change.”

Tavi frowned again. “But...sire, it could escalate into a real disaster.”

Gaius shook his head. “The escalation is coming regardless of what we do. Sooner or later, Kalare or Aquitaine will move on me in force. Best to move now, on my own schedule, rather than waiting for them to prepare.”

“Optionally, sire,” Tavi pointed out. “It could fall flat, too.”

Gaius shook his head, smiling. “It won’t.”

“How do you know?”

The First Lord bobbed an eyebrow. “Instinct.”

Tavi chuckled despite himself. “Aye, sire.” He straightened. “What are my orders?”

“We still need to see to your military training,” the First Lord mused, “but none of the Legions I prefer are due to begin a training cycle until next year.” Gaius drew a leather letter case from within his tunic and tossed it to Tavi. “You’ll need something to fill your time. So you’re going on a trip.”

Tavi frowned down at the case. “Where?”

“The Vale,” Gaius replied. “To the ruins of Appia, to be precise, to study with Maestro Magnus.”

Tavi blinked and stared. “What?”

“You’ve finished your second term as an academ, and great furies only know what you might

find to amuse yourself if left to your own devices here. I read your paper on the Romanic Arts. So did Magnus. He needs a research assistant,” Gaius said. “I suggested you, and he jumped at the chance to have you for six months.”

Tavi gaped. “But...sire, my duties...”

Gaius shook his head and said, “Believe me, I’m not handing you a gift, Tavi. I may need you in position there, depending on how matters fall out. Unless, of course, you do not wish to go.”

Tavi felt his mouth curve into a slow, disbelieving smile. “No, sire! I mean, uh, yes, sire! I’d be honored.”

“Excellent,” Gaius said. “Then pack to leave before dawn. And ask Gaele to deliver those letters for you.”

Tavi drew in a sharp breath. Gaele, a student and classmate of Tavi’s, had never really been Gaele. The true student had been murdered, doubled, and coldly replaced before Tavi had the chance to get to know the real Gaele. The spy who had done it, a Kalaran Bloodcrow called Rook, had been Tavi’s friend for two years before he’d discovered her murderous true identity.

Instead of turning her in, though, Gaius had decided to allow her to remain in her role, in order to use her to feed disinformation to her master. “You think she’ll pass this to Kalare?”

“This? Absolutely,” Gaius said.

“May I ask...?” Tavi said.

Gaius smiled. “The envelope contains routine mail and one letter to Aquitaine, informing him of my intention to adopt him legally and appoint him my heir.”

Tavi’s eyebrows shot up. “If Kalare gets wind of that, and believes it, you think it will push him to act before Aquitaine solidifies his claim to the throne.”

“He’ll react,” Gaius agreed. “But I’m not certain as to the manner of his reaction. He’s slightly mad, and it makes him difficult to predict. Which is why I want as many eyes and ears as I can spare in the south. Make sure you keep my coin with you at all times.”

“I understand, sire,” Tavi said, touching the old silver bull hung on the chain around his neck. He paused as a bitter taste of memory poisoned his mouth. “And Gaele?”

“Should this succeed, she will have outlived her usefulness to the Crown,” Gaius said in a voice as quiet and hard as stone.

“Yes, sire,” Tavi said, bowing. “What about Fade, sire?”

Gaius’s expression darkened an almost-imperceptible shade. “What about him?”

“He’s been with me since...since I can remember. I assumed that...”

“No,” Gaius said in a tone that brooked no dissent. “I have work for Fade to do as well.”

Tavi met Gaius’s uncompromising eyes for a long and silent moment. Then he nodded slightly in acquiescence. “Yes, sire.”

“Then let’s waste no more time.” Gaius rose. “Oh,” he said in a tone of afterthought. “Are you by any chance sleeping with the Marat Ambassador, Tavi?”

Tavi felt his mouth drop open again. His cheeks heated up so much that he thought they might actually, literally, burst into flame. “Um, sire...”

“You understand the consequences, I assume. Neither of you has furycraft that would prevent conception. And believe me when I say that paternity complicates one’s life immensely.”

Tavi wished desperately that the earth would open up, swallow him whole, and smash him into a parchment-thick blob. “We, uh. We aren’t doing *that*,” Tavi said. “There are, uh, well, other. Things. That aren’t...”

Gaius’s eyes sparkled. “Intercourse?”

Tavi put a hand over his face, mortified. “Oh, bloody crows. Yes, sire.”

Gaius let out a rolling laugh. “I dimly remember the concept,” he said. “And since young people

always have done and always will do a poor job of restraining themselves, at best, I suppose I must be satisfied with your, ah, alternate activities.” The smile faded. “But bear in mind, Tavi. She’s not human. She’s Marat. Enjoy yourself if you must—but I would advise you not to become too deeply attached to her. Your duties will only become more demanding.”

Tavi chewed on his lip and looked down. In his excitement, he had overlooked the fact that if he was sent away, he would not see Kitai for half of a year. He didn’t like that notion. Not at all. They found time to spend together on most days. And most nights.

Tavi felt his blush rising again, just thinking of it. But he felt faintly surprised at how much he disliked the idea of being parted from Kitai—and not just because it would mean a severe curtailing of his, ah, alternate activities. Kitai was a beautiful and fascinating young woman—clever of wit, quick of tongue, honest, loyal, fierce, and with a sense of innate empathy that Tavi had only seen previously in watercrafters like his aunt, Isana.

She was his friend. More than that, though, he was attached to Kitai by an unseen bond, some kind of link between them that each Marat shared with a totem creature. Every Marat Tavi had ever seen had been in the company of their totems, what Kitai called a *chala*. Her father, Doroga, the head of the Gargant Clan, was never to be seen outside the company of the enormous black gargant named Walker. He could count the number of times he’d seen Hashat, head of the Horse Clan, walking on his own feet with one hand.

Tavi nursed a secret concern that if he was separated from Kitai, it might put some kind of strain upon her, or harm her in some way. And after this visit to the south, he would be entering into his required three-year term with the Legions, which could take him to the far-flung reaches of the Realm—and which would certainly not be near Alera Imperia and Kitai, her people’s ambassador to the Crown.

Three years. And after *that*, there would be another assignment. And another. Cursors in service to the Crown rarely spent much time in one place.

He already missed her. Worse, he hadn’t told Gaius about the bond and what he feared it might do to Kitai. He had never explained his suspicions about the bond to the First Lord. Beyond a formless anxiety about the notion, he had no sharply defined reason why—but his instincts told him that he should be very wary about revealing anything Gaius might see as an ability to influence or manipulate one of his Cursors. Tavi had grown up on the frontiers of the Realm, dangerous lands where he’d spent most of his life learning to listen to his instincts.

Gaius watched the expressions play over his face and nodded, perhaps mistaking Tavi’s concern for romantic regrets. “You begin to understand.”

Tavi nodded once, without lifting his eyes, and carefully kept his emotions in check.

Gaius blew out a breath, resumed his disguised form, then headed for the door. “You’ll do as you wish, Tavi, but I trust your judgment. Start packing, Cursor. And good luck.”

Unseasonably rough weather slowed the pace of the Knights Aeri bearing Rook to her master in the south, and it took her nearly five days to make the trip. That time had been pure torture for her. She had no talent for windcraft herself, which meant that she could only sit in the enclosed windcraft-borne litter and stare at the package of folded documents sitting on the seat opposite her.

Nausea unrelated to the litter’s lurching through rough winds wound through her. She closed her eyes so that she wouldn’t have to look at the bundle of missives she’d secretly copied from official documents in the capital. She’d bought copies of some from unscrupulous, greedy palace staff. She’d stolen into empty offices and locked chambers to acquire others. All contained information of some value, crumbs and fragments that meant little alone, but that would be assembled into a more coherent

whole with the help of similar reports from her fellow bloodcrows.

Ultimately, though, none of them mattered. Not anymore. The topmost document on the stack would render it all obsolete. When her master learned what she had found, he would be forced to move. He would begin the civil war every Aleran with half a mind had known was coming. It would mean the death of tens of thousands of Alerans, at the very least. That was bad enough, but it wasn't what made her feel the most sick.

She had betrayed a friend to attain this secret. She was not the naïve youngster she pretended to be, but she was not much older than the boy from Calderon, and in the time she'd known him she'd grown to like and respect him and those around him. It had been a torment of its own, knowing that her friendship and laughter was nothing but a facade, and that if her friends knew her true purpose in the capital, every single one of them would not have hesitated to assault and imprison her.

Or even kill her outright.

It made it harder to play her role. The camaraderie and easy contact was seductive. She had entertained idle thoughts of defection, despite her determination to focus on other things. If she hadn't been a skilled watercrafter, she would have left tears on her pillow each night—but even that much would have jeopardized her cover, so she willed them away.

Just as she was doing now, as the litter finally descended into the sizzling, steaming heat of late summer in Kalare. She had to look calm and professional for her master, and her fear at the mere thought of failing him made a rush of terrified, acidic vertigo whirl through her. She clenched her hands into fists, closed her eyes, and reminded herself in a steady rhythm that she was his most valuable tool and too successful to discard.

It didn't help much, but at least it gave her something to do during the last few moments of the flight, until the rich, vaguely rotten vegetable stench of Kalare made its way into her nose and throat. She didn't need to look out the window and see the city, as busy at dusk as at dawn. Nine-tenths of the place was worn, muddy squalor. The enclosed litter descended upon the other tenth, the splendor of the High Lord's Tower, landing upon the battlements as such litters did many times each day.

She took a deep breath, calmed herself, took up her papers, raised her hood to hide her identity from any observer, and hurried down the stairs to cross a courtyard into the Tower proper, the High Lord's residence. The stewards on duty recognized her voice and did not ask her to lower her hood. Kalarus had impressed upon them his will regarding Rook's visits, and not even his guards would dare his anger. She was hurried directly to the High Lord's study.

Kalarus sat at his desk within, reading. He was not a large man, nor heavily built, though perhaps a bit taller than average. He wore a shirt of light, almost gauzy grey silk, and trousers of the same material in dark green. Every single finger bore a ring set with a variety of green stones, and he wore a steel circlet across his brow. He was dark of hair and eye, like most southerners, and modestly handsome—though he wore a goatee to hide his weak chin.

Rook knew her role. She stood beside the door in total silence until Kalarus glanced up at her a few moments later.

“So,” he murmured. “What brings you all the way back home, Rook?”

She drew back her hood, bowed her head, and stepped forward to lay the missives upon her master's desk. “Most of these are routine. But I think you'll want to read the topmost document without delay.”

He grunted and idly reached out, toying with the paper without unfolding it. “This had better be earthshaking news, Rook. Every moment you are gone from your duties to Gaius risks your cover. I should be unhappy to lose such a valuable tool over a foolish decision.”

She fumed with anger, but kept it inside and bowed her head again. “My lord, in my best judgment, that information is an order of magnitude more valuable than any spy, however well placed

In fact, I'd bet my life on it."

Kalare's eyebrows lifted a fraction. "You just did," he said quietly. Then he opened the paper and began to read.

Any man with Kalare's power and experience concealed his emotions and reactions as a matter of course, just as Rook hid her own from the High Lord. Anyone with sufficient skill at watercrafting could learn a very great deal about a person from those reactions, both physical and emotional. As a matter of course, the most powerful lords of Alera trained themselves to restrain their emotions in order to foil another's crafting.

But Rook did not need to make an effort to read the man with crafting. She had a knack for reading others, honed over the years of her dangerous service, and it had nothing to do with furycraft. She could not have picked out any single change in his features but was perfectly certain that Kalare had been startled and badly shaken by the news.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"From a palace page. He overslept and had to sprint for the windport. As we are friends, he asked me to deliver his messages for him."

Kalare shook his head. "You believe it genuine?"

"Yes, my lord."

The fingers of his right hand began a flickering, twitching, trembling motion, drumming quietly on the desk. "I would never have thought Gaius would make peace with Aquitaine. He hates the man."

Rook murmured, "Gaius needs him. For now. Necessity can trump even hatred."

Her heart fluttered as that last phrase left her mouth tinged with a featherlight portion of bitter irony. Kalare did not notice. His fingers twitched even faster. "Another year to prepare, and I could have crushed him in a single season."

"He may well be aware of the fact, my lord. He seeks to goad you into premature action."

Kalare frowned down at his fingers, and they slowly stilled. Then he folded the message, over and over again, eyes narrowed. Then his lips parted, baring his teeth in a predatory smile. "Indeed. I am the bear he baits. Gaius is arrogant and always has been. He is certain that he knows everything."

Rook nodded, adding nothing.

"He is about to learn that *this* bear is a great deal larger and more dangerous than he believed." He stood up, jerked on a summoning bell's cord, then beckoned and caused his furies to open a nearby chest and to toss a dozen rolled maps onto its surface. "Pass the word to my captains that the time has come. We mobilize and march within the week. Tell your people to put pressure upon the Cursors again."

Rook bowed. "Aye, my lord."

"And you..." Kalare smiled. "I have a special assignment for you. I had thought to attend to it personally, but it would seem that I must take my vengeance by proxy."

"The Steadholder?" Rook asked quietly.

"The bitch from Calderon," Kalare corrected her, a dangerous edge in his voice.

"Yes, my lord. It will be done." She bit her lips. "My lord...if I may?"

Kalare gestured at a door on the other side of the study, a solar for reading and entertaining intimate guests. Rook crossed the room and opened the door upon a spacious chamber with thick carpeting, richly furnished.

A small girl with glossy black hair sat on the floor with a young maid, playing with dollies. When the door opened, the child's caretaker glanced up, rose, bowed to Rook, and retreated without another word.

"Mama!" shrieked the child in glee. She rose and rushed over to Rook, who caught her daughter up into a tight hug. "I missed you. Mama."

Rook squeezed tighter, and awful, bitter tears escaped despite her determination not to weep. “I missed you, too, Masha.”

“Is it time, Mama?” her daughter asked. “Do we get to go to the country and have ponies now?”

“Not yet. But soon now, little one,” she whispered. “Soon, I promise.”

The little girl looked up at her with enormous eyes. “But I miss you.”

She hugged the child close to escape the pain in her eyes. “I miss you, too. I miss you so much.” Rook sensed Kalare’s presence behind her, in the doorway to the solar. She turned and faced him without looking at his eyes. “I’m sorry, little one. I can’t this time. I have to go now.”

“B-but you just got here!” Masha wailed. “What if I need you and I can’t find you?”

“Don’t worry,” Kalare told Rook in a smooth, gentle voice incongruous to the hard glitter in his eyes. “I’ll make sure my faithful retainer’s daughter is safe. You have my promise on that. I value your loyalty very highly.”

Rook turned away, putting her body between Masha and Kalare. She hugged the weeping little girl as a trickle of bitter, furious, terrified tears washed over her face.

She heard Kalare turn away and walk back into his study, chuckling under his breath. “More than he bargained for. Far more indeed.”

Ehren sat at the rickety desk in the open-walled bungalow, sweat dripping off his nose and onto the accounting ledger before him and beading into droplets upon a leather slave’s collar that would stream infrequently down his thin shirt. The Sunset Isles could grow hideously warm in the summer, though thank the great furies that it was finally beginning to wind down. Bugs swarmed around Ehren’s head and tiny swallows darted through the wide-open wall windows, snatching at them. His hand cramped every few moments, forcing him to set aside the quill pen he used. He had just laid it down when a cadaverously thin man strode through the door.

“Ehren,” he snapped, the name viciously snarled. “By the bloody crows I didn’t buy you to sit around staring out a window.”

Ehren’s frayed temper made the thought of breaking the fool’s neck rather tempting—but a Cursor did not allow such personal matters to interfere in his duties. His job was to remain invisible in the Sunset Isles, watching and listening and sending reports back to the mainland. He picked up the pen again, ducked his head, and said in a meek voice, “Yes, Master Ullus. Sorry. Just resting my fingers.”

“You’ll rest them in a gibbet if I see you lazing about again,” the man said, and stalked over to a low cabinet stocked with dirty glasses and bottles of cheap rum. Ullus immediately set about the task of making the glasses dirtier and the rum more worthless, as he did most days, while Ehren continued to labor on the impossibly incomplete accounts ledger.

Sometime later, a man came into the room. He was not large, but had the lean, seedy look Ehren had come to associate with the pirates who would terrorize merchant shipping before slipping back into the myriad hiding places in the Sunset Isles. His clothing showed much wear and exposure to salt and wind and sun, and he wore mismatched bits of finery, the decorative trophies of a successful pirate.

And yet...Ehren frowned and kept his eyes on the ledger. The man didn’t carry himself like a pirate at all. Most of them tended to be as ragged, undisciplined, and unkempt in mannerism as in appearance. This man looked cautious and sober. He moved like the best professional fighters, all relaxed awareness and restraint. Ehren judged that he was no pirate at all, but a cutter—an assassin who would trade death for gold if the price was right.

Ullus rose to his feet and rocked unsteadily back and forth on his heels. “Sir...” he began.



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