

VERNIERS' ACCOUNT

He had many names. Although yet to reach his thirtieth year, history had seen fit to bestow upon him titles aplenty: Sword of the Realm to the mad king who sent him to plague us, the Young Hawk to the men who followed him through the trials of war, Darkblade to his Cumbraelin enemies and, as I was to learn much later, Beral Shak Ur to the enigmatic tribes of the Great Northern Forest – the Shadow of the Raven.

But my people knew him by only one name and it was this that sang in my head continually the morning they brought him to the docks: Hope Killer. Soon you will die and I will see it. Hope Killer.

Although he was certainly taller than most men, I was surprised to find that, contrary to the tales I had heard, he was no giant, and whilst his features were strong they could hardly be called handsome. His frame was muscular but not possessed of the massive thews described so vividly by the storytellers. The only aspect of his appearance to match his legend was his eyes: black as jet and piercing as a hawk's. They said his eyes could strip a man's soul bare, that no secret could be hidden if he met your gaze. I had never believed it but seeing him now, I could see why others would.

The prisoner was accompanied by a full company of the Imperial

Guard, riding in close escort, lances ready, hard eyes scanning the watching crowd for trouble. The crowd, however, were silent. They stopped to stare at him as he rode through, but there were no shouts, no insults or missiles hurled. I recalled that they knew this man, for a brief time he had ruled their city and commanded a foreign army within its walls, yet I saw no hate in their faces, no desire for vengeance. Mostly they seemed curious. Why was he here? Why was he alive at all?

The company reined in on the wharf, the prisoner dismounting to be led to the waiting vessel. I put my notes away and rose from my resting place atop a spice barrel, nodding at the captain. 'Honour to you, sir.'

The captain, a veteran Guards officer with a pale scar running along his jawline and the ebony skin of the southern Empire, returned the nod with practised formality. 'Lord Verniers.'

'I trust you had an untroubled journey?'

The captain shrugged. 'A few threats here and there. Had to crack a few heads in Jesseria, the locals wanted to hang the Hope Killer's carcass from their temple spire.'

I bridled at the disloyalty. The Emperor's Edict had been read in all towns through which the prisoner would travel, its meaning plain: no harm will come to the Hope Killer. 'The Emperor will hear of it,' I said.

'As you wish, but it was a small matter.' He turned to the prisoner. 'Lord Verniers, I present the Imperial prisoner Vaelin Al Sorna.'

I nodded formally to the tall man, the name a steady refrain in my head. Hope Killer, Hope Killer . . . 'Honour to you, sir,' I forced the greeting out.

His black eyes met mine for a second, piercing, enquiring. For a moment I wondered if the more outlandish stories were true, if there was magic in the gaze of this savage. Could he truly strip the truth from a man's soul? Since the war, stories had abounded of the

Hope Killer's mysterious powers. He could talk to animals, command the Nameless and shape the weather to his will. His steel was tempered with the blood of fallen enemies and would never break in battle. And worst of all, he and his people worshipped the dead, communing with the shades of their forebears to conjure forth all manner of foulness. I gave little credence to such folly, reasoning that if the Northmen's magics were so powerful, how had they contrived to suffer such a crushing defeat at our hands?

'My lord.' Vaelin Al Sorna's voice was harsh and thickly accented, his Alpiran had been learned in a dungeon and his tones were no doubt coarsened by years of shouting above the clash of weapons and screams of the fallen to win victory in a hundred battles, one of which had cost me my closest friend and the future of this Empire.

I turned to the captain. 'Why is he shackled? The Emperor ordered he be treated with respect.'

'The people didn't like seeing him riding unfettered,' the captain explained. 'The prisoner suggested we shackle him to avoid trouble.' He moved to Al Sorna and unlocked the restraints. The big man massaged his wrists with scarred hands.

'My lord!' A shout from the crowd. I turned to see a portly man in a white robe hurrying towards us, face wet with unaccustomed exertion. 'A moment, please!'

The captain's hand inched closer to his sabre but Al Sorna was unconcerned, smiling as the portly man approached. 'Governor Aruan.'

The portly man halted, wiping sweat from his face with a lace scarf. In his left hand he carried a long bundle wrapped in cloth. He nodded at the captain and myself but addressed himself to the prisoner. 'My lord. I never thought to see you again. Are you well?'

'I am, Governor. And you?'

The portly man spread his right hand, lace scarf dangling from his thumb, jewelled rings on every finger. 'Governor no longer. Merely

a poor merchant these days. Trade is not what it was, but we make our way.'

'Lord Verniers.' Vaelin Al Sorna gestured at me. 'This is Holus Nester Aruan, former Governor of the City of Linesh.'

'Honoured Sir,' Aruan greeted me with a short bow.

'Honoured Sir,' I replied formally. So this was the man from whom the Hope Killer had seized the city. Aruan's failure to take his own life in dishonour had been widely remarked upon in the aftermath of the war but the Emperor (Gods preserve him in his wisdom and mercy) had granted clemency in light of the extraordinary circumstances of the Hope Killer's occupation. Clemency, however, had not extended to a continuance of his Governorship.

Aruan turned back to Al Sorna. 'It pleases me to find you well. I wrote to the Emperor begging mercy.'

'I know, your letter was read at my trial.'

I knew from the trial records that Aruan's letter, written at no small risk to his life, had formed part of the evidence describing curiously uncharacteristic acts of generosity and mercy by the Hope Killer during the war. The Emperor had listened patiently to it all before ruling that the prisoner was on trial for his crimes, not his virtues.

'Your daughter is well?' the prisoner asked Aruan.

'Very, she weds this summer. A feckless son of a shipbuilder, but what can a poor father do? Thanks to you, at least she is alive to break my heart.'

'I am glad. About the wedding, not your broken heart. I can offer no gift except my best wishes.'

'Actually, my lord, I come with a gift of my own.'

Aruan lifted the long, cloth-covered bundle in both hands, presenting it to the Hope Killer with a strangely grave expression. 'I hear you will have need of this again soon.'

There was a definite hesitation in the Northman's demeanour

before he reached out to take the bundle, undoing the ties with his scarred hands. The cloth came away to reveal a sword of unfamiliar design, the scabbard-clad blade was a yard or so in the length and straight, unlike the curved sabres favoured by Alpiran soldiery. A single tine arched around the hilt to form a guard and the only ornamentation to the weapon was a plain steel pommel. The hilt and the scabbard bore many small nicks and scratches that spoke of years of hard use. This was no ceremonial weapon and I realised with a sickening rush that it was his sword. The sword he had carried to our shores. The sword that made him the Hope Killer.

‘You kept that?’ I sputtered at Aruan, appalled.

The portly man’s expression grew cold as he turned to me. ‘My honour demanded no less, my lord.’

‘My thanks,’ Al Sorna said, before any further outrage could spill from my lips. He hefted the sword and I saw the Guard Captain stiffen as Al Sorna drew the blade an inch or so from the scabbard, testing the edge with his thumb. ‘Still sharp.’

‘It’s been well cared for. Oiled and sharpened regularly. I also have another small token.’ Aruan extended his hand. In his palm sat a single ruby, a well-cut stone of medium weight, no doubt one of the more valued gems in the family collection. I knew the story behind Aruan’s gratitude, but his evident regard for this savage and the sickening presence of the sword still irked me greatly.

Al Sorna seemed at a loss, shaking his head. ‘Governor, I cannot . . .’

I moved closer, speaking softly. ‘He does you a greater honour than you deserve, Northman. Refusing will insult him and dishonour you.’

He flicked his black eyes over me briefly before smiling at Aruan, ‘I cannot refuse such generosity.’ He took the gem. ‘I’ll keep it always.’

‘I hope not,’ Aruan responded with a laugh. ‘A man only keeps a jewel when he has no need to sell it.’

'You there!' A voice came from the vessel moored a short distance along the quay, a sizeable Meldenean galley, the number of oars and the width of the hull showing it to be a freighter rather than one of their fabled warships. A stocky man with an extensive black beard, marked as the captain by the red scarf on his head, was waving from the bow. 'Bring the Hope Killer aboard, you Alpiran dogs!' he shouted with customary Meldenean civility. 'Any more dithering and we'll miss the tide.'

'Our passage to the Islands awaits,' I told the prisoner, gathering my possessions. 'We'd best avoid the ire of our captain.'

'So it's true then,' Aruan said. 'You go to the Islands to fight for the lady?' I found myself disliking the tone in his voice, it sounded uncomfortably like awe.

'It's true.' He clasped hands briefly with Aruan and nodded at the captain of his guard before turning to me. 'My lord. Shall we?'

'You may be one of the first in line to lick your Emperor's feet, scribbler' – the ship's captain stabbed a finger into my chest – 'but this ship is my kingdom. You berth here or you can spend the voyage roped to the mainmast.'

He had shown us to our quarters, a curtained-off section of the hold near the prow of the ship. The hold stank of brine, bilge water and the intermingled odour of the cargo, a sickly, cloying mélange of fruit, dried fish and the myriad spices for which the Empire was famous. It was all I could do to keep from gagging.

'I am Lord Verniers Alishe Someren, Imperial Chronicler, First of the Learned and honoured servant of the Emperor,' I responded, the handkerchief over my mouth muffling my words somewhat. 'I am emissary to the Ship Lords and official escort to the Imperial prisoner. You will treat me with respect, pirate, or I'll have twenty guardsmen aboard in a trice to flog you in front of your crew.'

The captain leaned closer; incredibly his breath smelt worse than

the hold. 'Then I'll have twenty-one bodies to feed to the orcas when we leave the harbour, scribbler.'

Al Sorna prodded one of the bedrolls on the deck with his foot and glanced around briefly. 'This'll do. We'll need food and water.'

I bristled. 'You seriously suggest we sleep in this rat-hole? It's disgusting.'

'You should try a dungeon. Plenty of rats there too.' He turned to the captain. 'The water barrel is on the foredeck?'

The captain ran a stubby finger through the mass of his beard, contemplating the tall man, no doubt wondering if he was being mocked and calculating if he could kill him if he had to. They have a saying on the northern Alpiran coast: turn your back on a cobra but never a Meldenean. 'So you're the one who's going to cross swords with the Shield? They're offering twenty to one against you in Ildera. Think I should risk a copper on you? The Shield is the keenest blade in the Islands, can slice a fly in half with a sabre.'

'Such renown does him credit.' Vaelin Al Sorna smiled. 'The water barrel?'

'It's there. You can have one gourd a day each, no more. My crew won't go short for the likes of you two. You can get food from the galley, if you don't mind eating with scum like us.'

'No doubt I've eaten with worse. If you need an extra man at the oars, I am at your disposal.'

'Rowed before have you?'

'Once.'

The captain grunted, 'We'll manage.' He turned to go, muttering over his shoulder, 'We sail within the hour, stay out of the way until we clear the harbour.'

'Island savage!' I fumed, unpacking my belongings, laying out my quills and ink. I checked there were no rats lurking under my bedroll before sitting down to compose a letter to the Emperor. I

intended to let him know the full extent of this insult. 'He'll find no berth in an Alpiran harbour again, mark you.'

Vaelin Al Sorna sat down, resting his back against the hull. 'You speak my language?' he asked, slipping into the Northern tongue.

'I study languages,' I replied in kind. 'I can speak the seven major tongues of the Empire fluently and communicate in five more.'

'Impressive. Do you know the Seordah language?'

I looked up from my parchment. 'Seordah?'

'The Seordah Sil of the Great Northern Forest. You've heard of them?'

'My knowledge of northern savages is far from comprehensive. As yet I see little reason to complete it.'

'For a learned man you seem happy with your ignorance.'

'I feel I speak for my entire nation when I say I wish we had all remained in ignorance of you.'

He tilted his head, studying me. 'That's hate in your voice.'

I ignored him, my quill moving rapidly over the parchment, setting out the formal opening for Imperial correspondence.

'You knew him, didn't you?' Vaelin Al Sorna went on.

My quill stopped. I refused to meet his eye.

'You knew the Hope.'

I put my quill aside and rose. Suddenly the stench of the hold and the proximity of this savage were unbearable. 'Yes, I knew him,' I grated. 'I knew him to be the best of us. I knew he would be the greatest Emperor this land has ever seen. But that's not the reason for my hate, Northman. I hate you because I knew the Hope as my friend, and you killed him.'

I stalked away, climbing the steps to the main deck, wishing for the first time in my life that I could be a warrior, that my arms were thick with muscle and my heart hard as stone, that I could wield a sword and take bloody vengeance. But such things were beyond me. My body was trim but not strong, my wits quick but not ruthless. I

was no warrior. So there would be no vengeance for me. All I could do for my friend was witness the death of his killer and write the formal end to his story for the pleasure of my Emperor and the eternal truth of our archive.

I stayed on the deck for hours, leaning on the rail, watching the green-tinged waters of the north Alpiran coast deepen into the blue of the inner Erinean Sea as the ship's bosun beat the drum for the oarsmen and our journey began. Once clear of the coast the captain ordered the mainsail unfurled and our speed increased, the sharp prow of the vessel cutting through the gentle swell, the figurehead, a traditional Meldenean carving of the winged serpent, one of their innumerable sea gods, dipping its many-toothed head amidst a haze of spume. The oarsmen rowed for two hours before the bosun called a rest and they shipped oars, trooping off to their meal. The day watch stayed on deck, running the rigging and undertaking the never-ending chores of ship life. A few favoured me with a customary glare or two, but none attempted to converse, a mercy for which I was grateful.

We were several leagues from the harbour when they came into view, black fins knifing through the swell, heralded by a cheerful shout from the crow's nest. 'Orcas!'

I couldn't tell how many there were, they moved too fast and too fluidly through the sea, occasionally breaking the surface to spout a cloud of steam before diving below. It was only when they came closer that I fully realised their size, over twenty feet from nose to tail. I had seen dolphins before in the southern seas, silvery, playful creatures that could be taught simple tricks. These were different, their size and the dark, flickering shadows they traced through the water seemed ominous to me, threatening shades of nature's indifferent cruelty. My shipmates clearly felt differently, yelling greetings from the rigging as if hailing old friends. Even the captain's habitual scowl seemed to have softened somewhat.

One of the orcas broke the surface in a spectacular display of foam, twisting in midair before crashing into the sea with a boom that shook the ship. The Meldeneans roared their appreciation. Oh Seliesen, I thought. The poem you would have written to honour such a sight.

'They think of them as sacred.' I turned to find that the Hope Killer had joined me at the rail. 'They say when a Meldenean dies at sea the orcas will carry his spirit to the endless ocean beyond the edge of the world.'

'Superstition,' I sniffed.

'Your people have their gods, do they not?'

'My people do, I do not. Gods are a myth, a comforting story for children.'

'Such words would make you welcome in my homeland.'

'We are not in your homeland, Northman. Nor would I ever wish to be.'

Another orca rose from the sea, rising fully ten feet into the air before plunging back down. 'It's strange,' Al Sorna mused. 'When our ships came across this sea the orcas ignored them and made only for the Meldeneans. Perhaps they share the same belief.'

'Perhaps,' I said. 'Or perhaps they appreciate a free meal.' I nodded at the prow, where the captain was throwing salmon into the sea, the orcas swooping on them faster than I could follow.

'Why are you here, Lord Verniers?' Al Sorna asked. 'Why did the Emperor send you? You're no gaoler.'

'The Emperor graciously consented to my request to witness your upcoming duel. And to accompany the Lady Emeren home of course.'

'You came to see me die.'

'I came to write an account of this event for the Imperial Archive. I am the Imperial Chronicler after all.'

'So they told me. Gerish, my gaoler, was a great admirer of your history of the war with my people, considered it the finest work in

Alpiran literature. He knew a lot for a man who spends his life in a dungeon. He would sit outside my cell for hours reading out page after page, especially the battles, he liked those.'

'Accurate research is the key to the historian's art.'

'Then it's a pity you got it so wrong.'

Once again I found myself wishing for a warrior's strength. 'Wrong?'

'Very.'

'I see. Perhaps if you work your savage's brain, you could tell me which sections were so very wrong.'

'Oh, you got the small things right, mostly. Except you said my command was the Legion of the Wolf. In fact it was the Thirty-fifth Regiment of Foot, known amongst the Realm Guard as the Wolfrunners.'

'I'll be sure to rush out a revised edition on my return to the capital,' I said dryly.

He closed his eyes, remembering. "King Janus's invasion of the northern coast was but the first step in pursuance of his greater ambition, the annexation of the entire Empire."

It was a verbatim recitation. I was impressed by his memory, but was damned if I'd say so. 'A simple statement of fact. You came here to steal the Empire. Janus was a madman to think such a scheme could succeed.'

Al Sorna shook his head. 'We came for the northern coastal ports. Janus wanted the trade routes through the Erinean. And he was no madman. He was old and desperate, but not mad.'

I was surprised at the sympathy evident in his voice; Janus was the great betrayer after all, it was part of the Hope Killer's legend. 'And how do you know the man's mind so well?'

'He told me.'

'Told you?' I laughed. 'I wrote a thousand letters of enquiry to every ambassador and Realm official I could think of. The few who

bothered to reply all agreed on one thing: Janus never confided his plans to anyone, not even his family.'

'And yet you claim he wanted to conquer your whole Empire.'

'A reasonable deduction based on the available evidence.'

'Reasonable, maybe, but wrong. Janus had a king's heart, hard and cold when he needed it to be. But he wasn't greedy and he was no dreamer. He knew the Realm could never muster the men and treasure needed to conquer your Empire. We came for the ports. He said it was the only way we could secure our future.'

'Why would he confide such intelligence to you?'

'We had . . . an arrangement. He told me many things he would tell no other. Some of his commands required an explanation before I would obey them. But sometimes I think he just needed to talk to someone. Even kings get lonely.'

I felt a curious sense of seduction; the Northman knew I hungered for the information he could give me. My respect for him grew, as did my dislike. He was using me, he wanted me to write the story he had to tell. Quite why I had no idea. I knew it was something to do with Janus and the duel he would fight in the Islands. Perhaps he needed to unburden himself before his end, leave a legacy of truth so he would be known to history as more than just the Hope Killer. A final attempt to redeem both his spirit and that of his dead king.

I let the silence string out, watching the orcas until they had eaten their fill of free fish and departed to the east. Finally, as the sun began to dip towards the horizon and the shadows grew long, I said, 'So tell me.'

CHAPTER ONE



The mist sat thick on the ground the morning Vaelin's father took him to the House of the Sixth Order. He rode in front, his hands grasping the saddle's pommel, enjoying the treat. His father rarely took him riding.

'Where do we go, my lord?' he had asked as his father led him to the stable.

The tall man said nothing but there was the briefest pause before he hoisted the saddle onto one of his chargers. Accustomed to his father's failure to respond to most questions, Vaelin thought nothing of it.

They rode away from the house, the charger's iron shoes clattering on the cobbles. After a while they passed through the north gate, where the bodies hung in cages from the gibbet and stained the air with the sick stench of decay. He had learned not to ask what they had done to earn such punishment, it was one of the few questions his father had always been willing to answer and the stories he told would leave Vaelin sweating and tearful in the night, whimpering at every noise beyond the window, wondering if the thieves or rebels or Dark-afflicted Deniers were coming for him.

The cobbles soon gave way to the turf beyond the walls, his father spurring the charger to a canter then a gallop, Vaelin laughing with excitement. He felt a momentary shame at his enjoyment. His mother had passed just two months previously and his father's sorrow was a black cloud that sat over the whole household, making servants fearful and callers rare. But Vaelin was only ten years old and had a child's view of death: he missed his mother but her passing was a mystery, the ultimate secret of the adult world, and although he cried, he didn't know why, and he still stole pastries from the cook and played with his wooden swords in the yard.

They galloped for several minutes before his father reined in, although to Vaelin it was all too brief, he wanted to gallop forever. They had stopped before a large, iron gate. The railings were tall, taller than three men set end to end, each topped with a wicked spike. At the apex of the gate's arch stood a figure made of iron, a warrior, sword held in front of his chest, pointing downwards, the face a withered skull. The walls on either side were almost as tall as the gate. To the left a brass bell hung from a wooden crossbeam.

Vaelin's father dismounted then lifted him from the saddle.

'What is this place, my lord?' he asked. His voice felt as loud as a shout although he spoke in a whisper. The silence and the mist made him uneasy, he didn't like the gate and the figure that sat atop it. He knew with a child's certainty that the blank eye sockets were a lie, a trick. It was watching them, waiting.

His father didn't reply. Walking over to the bell, he took his dagger from his belt and struck it with the pommel. The noise seemed like an outrage in the silence. Vaelin put his hands over his ears until it died away. When he looked up his father was standing over him.

'Vaelin,' he said in his coarse, warrior's voice. 'Do you remember the motto I taught you? Our family creed.'

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Tell me.’

“Loyalty is our strength.”

‘Yes. Loyalty is our strength. Remember it. Remember that you are my son and that I want you to stay here. In this place you will learn many things, you will become a brother of the Sixth Order. But you will always be my son, and you will honour my wishes.’

There was a scrape of gravel beyond the gate and Vaelin started, seeing a tall, cloaked figure standing behind the railings. He had been waiting for them. His face was hidden by the mist but Vaelin squirmed in the knowledge of being studied, appraised. He looked up at his father, seeing a large, strong-featured man with a greying beard and deep lines in his face and forehead. There was something new in his expression, something Vaelin had never seen before and couldn’t name. In later years he would see it in the faces of a thousand men and know it as an old friend: fear. It struck him that his father’s eyes were unusually dark, much darker than his mother’s. This was how he would remember him throughout his life. To others he was the Battle Lord, First Sword of the Realm, the hero of Beltrian, King’s saviour and father of a famous son. To Vaelin he would always be a fearful man abandoning his son at the gate to the House of the Sixth Order.

He felt his father’s large hand pressing against his back. ‘Go now Vaelin. Go to him. He will not hurt you.’

Liar! Vaelin thought fiercely, his feet dragging on the soil as he was pushed towards the gate. The cloaked figure’s face became clearer as they neared, long and narrow with thin lips and pale blue eyes. Vaelin found himself staring into them. The long-faced man stared back, ignoring his father.

‘What is your name, boy?’ The voice was soft, a sigh in the mist.

Why his voice didn’t tremble Vaelin never knew. ‘Vaelin, my lord. Vaelin Al Sorna.’

The thin lips formed a smile. 'I am not a lord, boy. I am Gainyl Arlyn, Aspect of the Sixth Order.'

Vaelin recalled his mother's many lessons in etiquette. 'My apologies, Aspect.'

There was a snort behind him. Vaelin turned to see his father riding away, the charger quickly swallowed by the mist, hooves drumming on the soft earth, fading to silence.

'He will not be coming back, Vaelin,' said the long-faced man, the Aspect, his smile gone. 'You know why he brought you here?'

'To learn many things and be a brother of the Sixth Order.'

'Yes. But no-one may enter except by his own choice, be he man or boy.'

A sudden desire to run, to escape into the mist. He would run away. He would find a band of outlaws to take him in, he would live in the forest, have many grand adventures and pretend himself an orphan . . . *Loyalty is our strength.*

The Aspect's gaze was impassive but Vaelin knew he could read every thought in his boy's head. He wondered later how many boys, dragged or tricked there by treacherous fathers, did run away, and if so, if they ever regretted it.

Loyalty is our strength.

'I wish to come in, please,' he told the Aspect. There were tears in his eyes but he blinked them away. 'I wish to learn many things.'

The Aspect reached out to unlock the gate. Vaelin noticed his hands bore many scars. He beckoned Vaelin inside as the gate swung open. 'Come, little Hawk. You are our brother now.'

Vaelin quickly realised that the House of the Sixth Order was not truly a house, it was a fortress. Granite walls rose like cliffs above him as the Aspect led him to the main gate. Dark figures patrolled the battlements, strongbows in hand, glancing down at him with blank, mist-shrouded eyes. The entrance was an arched doorway,

portcullis raised to allow them entry, the two spearmen on guard, both senior students of seventeen, bowed in profound respect as the Aspect passed through. He barely acknowledged them, leading Vaelin through the courtyard, where other students swept straw from the cobbles and the ring of hammer on metal came from the blacksmith's shop. Vaelin had seen castles before, his father and mother had taken him to the King's palace once, trussed into his best clothes and wriggling in boredom as the Aspect of the First Order droned on about the greatness of the King's heart. But the King's palace was a brightly lit maze of statues and tapestries and clean, polished marble and soldiers with breastplates you could see your face in. The King's palace didn't smell of dung and smoke and have a hundred shadowed doorways, all no doubt harbouring dark secrets a boy shouldn't know.

'Tell me what you know of this Order, Vaelin,' the Aspect instructed, leading him on towards the main keep.

Vaelin recited from his mother's lessons: 'The Sixth Order wields the sword of justice and smites the enemies of the Faith and the Realm.'

'Very good.' The Aspect sounded surprised. 'You are well taught. But what is it that we do that the other Orders do not?'

Vaelin struggled for an answer until they passed into the keep and saw two boys, both about twelve, fighting with wooden swords, ash cracking together in a rapid exchange of thrust, parry and slash. The boys fought within a circle of white chalk; every time their struggle brought them close to the edge of the circle the instructor, a skeletal shaven-headed man, would lash them with a cane. They barely flinched from the blows, intent on their contest. One boy overextended a lunge and took a blow to the head. He reeled back, blood streaming from the wound, falling heavily across the circle to draw another blow from the instructor's cane.

‘You fight,’ Vaelin told the Aspect, the violence and the blood making his heart hammer in his chest.

‘Yes.’ The Aspect halted and looked down at him. ‘We fight. We kill. We storm castle walls braving arrows and fire. We stand against the charge of horse and lance. We cut our way through the hedge of pike and spear to claim the standard of our enemy. The Sixth Order fights, but what does it fight for?’

‘For the Realm.’

The Aspect crouched until their faces were level. ‘Yes, the Realm, but what is more than the Realm?’

‘The Faith?’

‘You sound uncertain, little Hawk. Perhaps you are not as well taught as I believed.’

Behind him the instructor dragged the fallen boy to his feet amidst a shower of abuse. ‘Clumsy, slack-witted, shit-eating oaf! Get back in there. Fall again and I’ll make sure you never get up.’

“‘The Faith is the sum of our history and our spirit,’” Vaelin recited. “‘When we pass into the Beyond our essence joins with the souls of the Departed to lend us their guidance in this life. In return we give them honour and faith.’”

The Aspect raised an eyebrow. ‘You know the catechism well.’

‘Yes, sir. My mother tutored me often.’

The Aspect’s face clouded. ‘Your mother . . .’ He stopped, his expression switching back to the same emotionless mask. ‘Your mother should not be mentioned again. Nor your father, or any other member of your family. You have no family now save the Order. You belong to the Order. You understand?’

The boy with the cut on his head had fallen again and was being beaten by the master, the cane rising and falling in regular, even strokes, the master’s skull-like face betraying scant emotion. Vaelin had seen the same expression on his father’s face when he took the strap to one of his hounds.

You belong to the Order. To his surprise his heart had slowed, and he felt no quaver in his voice when he answered the Aspect, ‘I understand.’

The master’s name was Sollis. He had lean, weathered features and the eyes of a goat: grey, cold and staring. He took one look at Vaelin, and asked, ‘Do you know what carrion is?’

‘No, sir.’

Master Sollis stepped closer, looming over him. Vaelin’s heart still refused to beat any faster. The image of the skull-faced master swinging his cane at the boy on the floor of the keep had replaced his fear with a simmering anger.

‘It’s dead meat, boy,’ Master Sollis told him. ‘It’s the flesh left on the battlefield to be eaten by crows and gnawed by rats. That’s what awaits you, boy. Dead flesh.’

Vaelin said nothing. Sollis’s goat eyes tried to bore into him but he knew they saw no fear. The master made him angry, not afraid.

There were ten other boys allocated to the same room, an attic in the north tower. They were all his age or close to it, some sniffing in loneliness and abandonment, others smiling continually with the novelty of parental separation. Sollis made them line up, lashing his cane at a beefy boy who was too slow. ‘Move smartly, dung head.’

He eyed them individually, stepping closer to insult a few. ‘Name?’ he asked a tall, blond-haired boy.

‘Nortah Al Sendahl, sir.’

‘It’s master not sir, shit-wit.’ He moved down the line. ‘Name?’

‘Barkus Jeshua, Master,’ the beefy boy he had caned replied.

‘I see they still breed carthorses in Nilsael.’

And so on until he had insulted them all. Finally he stepped back to make a short speech: ‘No doubt your families sent you

here for their own reasons,' Sollis told them. 'They wanted you to be heroes, they wanted you to honour their name, they wanted to boast about you between swilling ale or whoring about town, or maybe they just wanted to be rid of a squalling brat. Well, forget them. If they wanted you, you wouldn't be here. You're ours now, you belong to the Order. You will learn to fight, you will kill the enemies of the Realm and the Faith until the day you die. Nothing else matters. Nothing else concerns you. You have no family, you have no dreams, you have no ambitions beyond the Order.'

He made them take the rough cotton sacks from their beds and run down the tower's numerous steps and across the courtyard to the stable, where they filled them with straw amidst a flurry of cane strokes. Vaelin was sure the cane fell on his back more than the others and suspected Sollis of forcing him towards the older, damper patches of straw. When the sacks were full he whipped them back up to the tower, where they placed them on the wooden frames that would serve as their beds. Then it was another run down to the vaults beneath the keep. He made them line up, breath steaming in the chill air, gasps echoing loudly. The vaults seemed vast, brick archways disappearing into the darkness on every side. Vaelin's fear began to rekindle as he stared into the shadows, bottomless and pregnant with menace.

'Eyes forward!' Sollis's cane left a welt on his arm and he choked down a pain-filled sob.

'New crop, Master Sollis?' a cheerful voice enquired. A very large man had appeared from the darkness, oil lamp flickering in his ham-sized fist. He was the first man Vaelin had seen who seemed broader than he was long. His girth was confined within a voluminous cloak, dark blue like the other masters', but with a single red rose embroidered on the breast. Master Sollis's cloak was bare of any decoration.

‘Another sweeping of shit, Master Grealin,’ he told the large man with an air of resignation.

Grealin’s fleshy face formed a brief smile. ‘How fortunate they are to have your guidance.’

There was a moment’s silence and Vaelin sensed the tension between the two men, finding it noteworthy that Sollis spoke first. ‘They need gear.’

‘Of course.’ Grealin moved closer to inspect them, he seemed strangely light of foot for such an enormous man, appearing to glide across the flagstones. ‘Little warriors must be armed for the battles to come.’ He still smiled but Vaelin noticed that his eyes showed no mirth as he scanned them. Once again he thought of his father, of the way he looked when they visited the horse traders’ fair and one of the breeders tried to interest him in a charger. His father would walk around the animal, telling Vaelin how to spot the signs of a good warhorse, the thickness of muscle that indicated whether it would be strong in the melee but too slow in the charge, how the best mounts needed some spirit left after breaking. ‘The eyes, Vaelin,’ he told him. ‘Look for a horse with a spark of fire in its eyes.’

Was that what Master Grealin was looking for now, fire in their eyes? Something to gauge who would last, how they would do in the charge or the melee.

Grealin paused next to a slightly built boy named Caenis, who had endured some of Sollis’s worst insults. Grealin looked down at him intently, the boy shifting uncomfortably under the scrutiny. ‘What’s your name, little warrior?’ Grealin asked him.

Caenis had to swallow before he could answer. ‘Caenis Al Nysa, Master.’

‘Al Nysa.’ Grealin looked thoughtful. ‘A noble family of some wealth, if memory serves. Lands in the south, allied by marriage to the House of Hurnish. You are a long way from home.’

‘Yes, Master.’

‘Well, fret not. You have a new home in the Order.’ He patted Caenis on the shoulder three times, making the boy flinch a little. Sollis’s cane had no doubt left him fearing even the gentlest touch. Grealin moved along the line, asking various questions of the boys, offering reassurances, all the while Master Sollis beat his cane against his booted calf, the *tack, tack, tack* of stick on leather echoing through the vaults.

‘I think I know your name already, little warrior.’ Grealin’s bulk towered over Vaelin. ‘Al Sorna. Your father and I fought together in the Meldenean war. A great man. You have his look.’

Vaelin saw the trap and didn’t hesitate. ‘I have no family, Master. Only the Order.’

‘Ah, but the Order is a family, little warrior.’ Grealin gave a short chuckle as he moved away. ‘And Master Sollis and I are your uncles.’ This made him laugh even more. Vaelin glanced at Sollis, now glaring at Grealin with undisguised hatred.

‘Follow me, gallant little men!’ Grealin called, his lamp raised above his head as he moved deeper into the vaults. ‘Don’t wander off, the rats don’t like visitors, and some of them are bigger than you.’ He chuckled again. Beside Vaelin, Caenis let out a short whimper, wide eyes staring into the fathomless blackness.

‘Ignore him,’ Vaelin whispered. ‘There’re no rats down here. The place is too clean, there’s nothing for them to eat.’ He wasn’t at all sure it was true but it sounded vaguely encouraging.

‘Shut your mouth, Sorna!’ Sollis’s cane snapped the air above his head. ‘Get moving.’

They followed Master Grealin’s lamp into the black emptiness of the vaults, footsteps and the fat man’s laughter mingling to form a surreal echo punctuated by the occasional snap of Sollis’s cane. Caenis’s eyes darted about constantly, no doubt searching for giant rats. It seemed an age before they came to a solid oak door set

into the rough brickwork. Grealin bade them wait as he unclasped his keys from his belt and unlocked the door.

‘Now, little men,’ he said, swinging the door open wide. ‘Let us arm you for the battles to come.’

The room beyond the door seemed cavernous. Endless racks of swords, spears, bows, lances and a hundred other weapons glittered in the torchlight and barrel after barrel lined the walls along with uncountable sacks of flour and grain. ‘My little domain,’ Grealin told them. ‘I am the Master of the Vaults and the keeper of the armoury. There is not a bean or an arrowhead in this store that I have not counted, twice. If you need anything, it is provided by me. And you answer to me if you lose it.’ Vaelin noted that his smile had disappeared.

They lined up outside the storeroom as Grealin fetched their bundles, ten grey muslin sacks bulging with various items. ‘These are the Order’s gifts, little men,’ Grealin told them brightly, moving along the line to deposit a sack at each boy’s feet. ‘Each of you will find the following in your bundle: one wooden sword of the Asraelin pattern, one hunting knife twelve inches in length, one pair of boots, two pairs of trows, two shirts of cotton, one cloak, one clasp, one purse, empty of course, and one of these . . .’ Master Grealin held something up to the lantern, it shone in the glow, twisting gently on its chain. It was a medallion, a circle of silver inset with a figure Vaelin recognised as the skull-headed warrior that sat atop the gate outside the Order House. ‘This is the sigil of our Order,’ Master Grealin went on. ‘It represents Saltroth Al Jenrial, first Aspect of the Order. Wear it always, when you sleep, when you wash, always. I’m sure Master Sollis has many punishments in mind for boys who forget to keep it on.’

Sollis kept quiet, the cane still tapping his boot said it all.

‘My other gift is but a few words of advice,’ Master Grealin continued. ‘Life in the Order is harsh and often short. Many of

you will be expelled before your final test, perhaps all of you, and those who win the right to stay with us will spend your lives patrolling distant frontiers, fighting endless wars against savages, outlaws or heretics during which you will most likely die if you are lucky or be maimed if you are not. Those few left alive after fifteen years' service will be given their own commands or return here to teach those who will replace you. This is the life to which your families have given you. It may not seem so, but it is an honour, cherish it, listen to your masters, learn what we can teach you and always hold true to the Faith. Remember these words and you will live long in the Order.' He smiled again, spreading his plump hands. 'That is all I can tell you, little warriors. Run along now, no doubt I'll see you all soon when you lose your precious gifts.' He chuckled again, disappearing into the storeroom, the echo of his laughter following them as Sollis's cane hounded them from the vaults.

The post was six feet tall and painted red at its top, blue in the middle and green at the base. There were about twenty of them, dotted around the practice field, silent witnesses to their torment. Sollis made them stand in front of a post and strike at the colours with their wooden swords as he called them out.

'Green! Red! Green! Blue! Red! Blue! Red! Green! Green . . .'

Vaelin's arm began to ache after the first few minutes but he kept swinging the wooden sword as hard as he could. Barkus had momentarily dropped his arm after a few swings, earning a salvo of cane strokes, robbing him of his habitual smile and leaving his forehead bloody.

'Red! Red! Blue! Green! Red! Blue! Blue . . .'

Vaelin found that the blow would jar his arm unless he angled the sword at the last instant, letting the blade slash across the post rather than thump into it. Sollis came to stand behind him, making

his back itch in expectation of the cane. But Sollis just watched for a moment and grunted before moving off to punish Nortah for striking at the blue instead of the red. 'Open your ears, you foppish clown!' Nortah took the blow on his neck and blinked away tears as he continued to fight the post.

He kept them at it for hours, his cane a sharp counterpoint to the solid thwack of their swords against the posts. After a while he made them switch hands. 'A brother of the Order fights with both hands,' he told them. 'Losing a limb is no excuse for cowardice.'

After another interminable hour or more he told them to stop, making them line up as he swapped his cane for a wooden sword. Like theirs it was of the Asraelin pattern: a straight blade with a hand-and-a-half-long hilt and pommel and a thin, metal tine curving around the hilt to protect the fingers of the wielder. Vaelin knew about swords, his father had many hanging above the fireplace in the dining hall, tempting his boy's hands although he never dared touch them. Of course they were larger than these wooden toys, the blades a yard or more in length and worn with use, kept sharp but showing the irregular edge that came from the smith's stone grinding away the many nicks and dents a sword would accumulate on the battlefield. There was one sword that always drew his eye more than the others, hung high on the wall well out of his reach, its blade pointed down straight at his nose. It was a simple enough blade, Asraelin like most of the others, and lacking the finely wrought craftsmanship of some, but unlike them its blade was unrepaired, it was highly polished but every nick, scratch and dent had been left to disfigure the steel. Vaelin dared not ask his father about it so approached his mother but with only marginally less trepidation; he knew she hated his father's swords. He found her in the drawing room, reading as she often did. It was in the early days of her illness and her face had taken

on a gauntness that Vaelin couldn't help but stare at. She smiled as he crept in, patted the seat next to her. She liked to show him her books, he would look at the pictures as she told him stories about the Faith and the Kingdom. He sat listening patiently to the tale of Kerlis the Faithless, cursed to the ever-death for denying the guidance of the Departed, until she paused long enough for him to ask: 'Mother, why does Father not repair his sword?'

She stopped in midpage, not looking at him. The silence stretched out and he wondered if she was going to adopt his father's practice of simply ignoring him. He was about to apologise and ask permission to leave when she said, 'It was the sword your father was given when he joined the King's army. He fought with it for many years during the birth of the Realm and when the war was done the King made him a Sword of the Realm, which is why you are called Vaelin Al Sorna and not just plain Vaelin Sorna. The marks on its blade are a history of how your father came to be who he is. And so he leaves it that way.'

'Wake up, Sorna!' Sollis's bark brought him back to the present with a start. 'You can be first, rat-face,' Sollis told Caenis, gesturing for the slight boy to stand a few feet in front of him. 'I will attack, you defend. We will be at this until one of you parries a blow.'

It seemed that he blurred then, moving too fast to follow, his sword extended in a lunge that caught Caenis squarely on the chest before he could raise his sword, sending him sprawling.

'Pathetic, Nysa,' Sollis told him curtly. 'You next, what's your name, Dentos.'

Dentos was a sharp-faced boy with lank hair and gangling limbs. He spoke with a thick west-Renfaelin brogue that Sollis found less than endearing. 'You fight as well as you speak,' he commented after the ash blade of his sword had cracked against

Dentos's ribs, leaving him winded on the ground. 'Jeshua, you're next.'

Barkus managed to dodge the first lightning lunge but his riposte failed to connect with the master's sword and he went down to a blow that swept his legs from under him.

The next two boys went down in quick succession as did Nortah, although he came close to side-stepping the thrust, which did nothing to impress Sollis. 'Have to do better than that.' He turned to Vaelin. 'Let's get it over with, Sorna.'

Vaelin took his position in front of Sollis and waited. Sollis's gaze met his, a cold stare that commanded his attention, the pale eyes *fixing* him . . . Vaelin didn't think, he simply acted, stepping to the side and bringing his sword up, the blade deflecting Sollis's lunge with a sharp crack.

Vaelin stepped back, sword ready for another blow. Trying to ignore the frozen silence of the others, concentrating on Master Sollis's next likely avenue of attack, an attack no doubt fuelled with the fury of humiliation. But no attack came. Master Sollis simply packed up his wooden sword and told them to gather their things and follow him to the dining hall. Vaelin watched him carefully as they walked across the practice ground and into the courtyard, searching for a sudden tension that could signal another swipe of the cane, but Sollis's dour demeanour remained unchanged. Vaelin found it hard to believe he would swallow the insult and vowed not to be taken unawares when the inevitable punishment came.

Mealtime proved to be something of a surprise. The hall was crowded with boys and the tumult of voices engaging in the habitual ridicule and gossip of youth. The tables were arranged according to age, the youngest boys near the doors, where they would enjoy the strongest draught, and the oldest at the far end next to the masters' table. There seemed to be about thirty masters

altogether, hard-eyed, mostly silent men, many scarred, a few showing livid burns. One man, sitting at the end of the table quietly eating a plate of bread and cheese, appeared to have had his entire scalp seared away. Only Master Grealin seemed cheerful, laughing heartily, a drumstick gripped in his meaty fist. The other masters either ignored him or nodded politely at whatever witticism he had chosen to share.

Master Sollis led them to the table closest to the door and told them to sit down. There were other groups of boys about their own age already at table. They had arrived a few weeks earlier and been in training longer under other masters. Vaelin noted the sneering superiority some exhibited, the nudges and smirks, finding that he didn't like it at all.

'You may talk freely,' Sollis told them. 'Eat the food, don't throw it. You have an hour.' He leaned down, speaking softly to Vaelin. 'If you fight, don't break any bones.' With that he left to join the other masters.

The table was crammed with plates of roasted chicken, pies, fruit, bread, cheese, even cakes. The feast was a sharp contrast with the stark austerity Vaelin had seen so far. Only once before had he seen so much food in one place, at the King's palace, and then he had hardly been allowed to eat anything. They sat in silence for a moment, partly in awe at the amount of food on the table but mostly out of simple awkwardness; they were strangers after all.

'How did you do it?'

Vaelin looked up to find Barkus, the hefty Nilsaelin boy, addressing him over the mound of pastries between them. 'What?'

'How did you parry the blow?'

The other boys were looking at him intently, Nortah dabbing a napkin at the bloody lip Sollis had given him. He couldn't tell if they were jealous or resentful. 'His eyes,' he said, reaching for

the water jug and pouring a measure into the plain tin goblet next to his plate.

‘What about his eyes?’ Dentos asked, he had taken a bread roll and was cramming pieces into his mouth, crumbs fountaining from his lips as he spoke. ‘Ye tellin’ us it was the Dark?’

Nortah laughed, so did Barkus, but the rest of the boys seemed chilled by the suggestion, except Caenis, who was concentrating on a modest portion of chicken and potatoes, apparently indifferent to the conversation.

Vaelin shifted in his seat, disliking the attention. ‘He fixes you with his eyes,’ he explained. ‘He stares, you stare back, you’re fixed, then he attacks while you’re still wondering what he’s planning. Don’t look at his eyes, look at his feet and his sword.’

Barkus took a bite from an apple and grunted. ‘He’s right you know. I thought he was trying to hypnotise me.’

‘What’s hypnotise?’ asked Dentos.

‘It’s looks like magic but really it’s just a trick,’ Barkus replied. ‘At last year’s Summertide Fair there was a man who could make people think they were pigs. He’d get them to root in the ground and oink and roll in shit.’

‘How?’

‘I don’t know, some kind of trick. He’d wave a bauble in front of their eyes and talk quietly to them for a while, then they’d do whatever he said.’

‘Do you think Master Sollis can do such things?’ asked Jennis, the boy Sollis said looked like a donkey.

‘Faith, who knows? I’ve heard the masters of the Orders know many Dark things, especially in the Sixth Order.’ Barkus held up a drumstick appreciatively before taking a large bite. ‘It seems that they know cookery as well. They make us sleep on straw and beat us every hour of the day, but they want to feed us well.’

‘Yeh,’ Dentos agreed. ‘Like my Uncle Sim’s dog.’

There was a puzzled silence. 'Your Uncle Sim's dog?' Nortah enquired.

Dentos nodded, chewing busily on a mouthful of pie. 'Growler. Best fightin' hound in the western counties. Ten victories 'fore he 'ad 'is throat torn out last winter. Uncle Sim loved that dog, 'ad four kids of 'is own, to three diff'rent women mind, but he loved that dog better'n any of 'em, feed Growler 'fore the kids he would. Best of stuff too, mind. Give the kids gruel and the dog beefsteak.' He chuckled wryly. 'Rotten old bastard.'

Nortah was unenlightened. 'What does it matter what some Renfaelin peasant feeds his dog?'

'So it would fight better,' Vaelin said. 'Good food builds strong muscles. That's why warhorses are fed best corn and oats and not set to grazing pasture.' He nodded at the food on the table. 'The better they feed us, the better we'll fight.' He met Nortah's eyes. 'And I don't think you should call him a peasant. We're all peasants here.'

Nortah stared back coldly. 'You have no right to lead, Al Sorna. You may be the Battle Lord's son . . . ?'

'I'm no-one's son and neither are you.' Vaelin took a bread roll, his stomach was growling. 'Not any more.'

They lapsed into silence, concentrating on the meal. After a while a fight broke out at one of the other tables, plates and food scattering amidst a flurry of fists and kicks. Some boys joined in right away, others stood by shouting encouragement, most simply stayed at their tables, some not even glancing up. The fight raged for a few minutes before one of the masters, the large man with the seared scalp, came over to break it up, swinging a hefty stick with grim efficiency. The boys who had been in the thick of the fight were checked for serious injury, blood mopped from noses and lips, and sent back to the table. One had been knocked unconscious and two boys were ordered to carry him to the

infirmary. Before long the din of conversation returned to the hall as if nothing had happened.

‘I wonder how many battles we’ll be in,’ Barkus said.

‘Lots and lots,’ Dentos responded. ‘You ’eard what the fat master said.’

‘They say war in the Realm is a thing of the past,’ said Caenis. It was the first time he had spoken and he seemed wary of offering an opinion. ‘Maybe there won’t be any battles for us to fight.’

‘There’s always another war,’ Vaelin said. It was something he had heard his mother say, actually she shouted it at his father during one of their arguments. It was before the last time his father went away, before she got sick. The King’s Messenger had arrived in the morning with a sealed letter. After reading it, his father began to pack his weapons and ordered the groom to saddle his best charger. Vaelin’s mother had cried and they went into her drawing room to argue out of Vaelin’s sight. He couldn’t hear his father’s words, he spoke softly, soothingly. His mother would have none of it. ‘Do not come to my bed when you return!’ she spat. ‘Your stench of blood sickens me.’

His father said something else, still maintaining the same soothing tone.

‘You said that last time. And the time before that,’ his mother replied. ‘And you’ll say it again. There’s always another war.’

After a while she began to cry again and there was silence in the house before his father emerged, patted Vaelin briefly on the head and went out to mount his waiting horse. After his return, four long months later, Vaelin noted that his parents slept in separate rooms.

After the meal it was time for observance. The plates were cleared away and they sat in silence as the Aspect recited the articles of the Faith in a clear, ringing voice that filled the hall. Despite his dark mood, Vaelin found the Aspect’s words oddly

uplifting, making him think of his mother and the strength of her belief, which had never wavered throughout her long illness. He wondered briefly if he would have been sent here if she were still alive, and knew with absolute certainty she would never have allowed it.

When the Aspect had finished his recitation he told them to take a moment for private contemplation and offer thanks for their blessings to the Departed. Vaelin sent his love to his mother and asked her guidance for the trials to come, fighting tears as he did so.

The first rule of the Order seemed to be that the youngest boys got the worst chores. Accordingly, after observance Sollis trooped them to the stables, where they spent several foul hours mucking out the stalls. They then had to cart the dung over to the manure mounds in Master Smentil's gardens. He was a very tall man who seemed incapable of speech, directing them with frantic gestures of his earth-darkened hands and strange, guttural grunts, the varying pitch of which would indicate if they were doing something right or not. His communication with Sollis was different, consisting of intricate hand gestures that the master seemed to understand instantly. The gardens were large, covering at least two acres of the land outside the walls, comprising long, orderly rows of cabbages, turnips and other vegetables. He also kept a small orchard surrounded by a stone wall. It being late winter he was busily engaged in pruning and one of their chores was gathering up the pruned branches for use as kindling.

It was as they carried the baskets of kindling back to the main keep that Vaelin dared ask a question of Master Sollis. 'Why can't Master Smentil speak, Master?'

He was prepared for a caning but Sollis confined his rebuke

to a sharp glance. They trudged on in silence for a few moments before Sollis muttered, 'The Lonak cut his tongue out.'

Vaelin shivered involuntarily. He had heard of the Lonak, everyone had. At least one of the swords in his father's collection had been carried through a campaign against the Lonak. They were wild men of the mountains to the far north who loved to raid the farms and villages of Renfael, raping, stealing and killing with gleeful savagery. Some called them wolfmen because it was said they grew fur and teeth and ate the flesh of their enemies.

'How come he's still livin', Master?' Dentos enquired. 'My Uncle Tam fought agin the Lonak an' said they never let a man live once they got him captured.'

Sollis's glance at Dentos was markedly sharper than the one he had turned on Vaelin. 'He escaped. He is a brave and resourceful man and a credit to the Order. We've talked of this enough.' He lashed his cane against Nortah's legs. 'Pick your feet up, Sendahl.'

After chores it was more sword practice. This time Sollis would perform a series of moves they had to copy. If any of them got it wrong, he made them run full pelt around the practice ground. At first they seemed to make a mistake at every attempt and they did a lot of running, but eventually they got it right more than they got it wrong.

Sollis called an end when the sky began to darken and they returned to the dining hall for an evening meal of bread and milk. There was little talk; they were too tired. Barkus made a few jokes and Dentos told a story about another of his uncles but there was little interest. Following the meal Sollis forced them to run up the stairs to their room, then lined them up, panting, drained, exhausted.

'Your first day in the Order is over,' he told them. 'It is a rule

of the Order that you can leave in the morning if you wish. It will only get harder from now on so think carefully.'

He left them there, panting in the candlelight, thinking of the morning.

'Do ye think they'll give us eggs for breakfast?' Dentos wondered.

Later, as Vaelin squirmed in his bed of straw, he found he couldn't sleep despite his exhaustion. Barkus was snoring but it wasn't this that kept him awake. His head was full of the enormity of the change in his life over the course of a single day. His father had given him away, pushed him into this place of beatings and lessons in death. It was clear his father hated him, he was a reminder of his dead wife best kept out of sight. Well he could hate too, hate was easy, hate would fuel him if his mother's love could not. *Loyalty is our strength.* He snorted a silent laugh of derision. *Let loyalty be your strength, Father. My hate for you will be mine.*

Someone was crying in the dark, shedding tears on his straw pillow. Was it Nortah? Dentos? Caenis? There was no way to tell. The sobs were a forlorn, deeply lonely counterpoint to the regular woodsaw rhythm of Barkus's snoring. Vaelin wanted to cry too, wanted to shed tears and wallow in self-pity, but the tears wouldn't come. He lay awake, restless, heart thumping so hard with alternating hatred and anger that he wondered if it would burst through his ribs. Panic made it beat even faster, sweat beaded his forehead and bathed his chest. It was terrible, unbearable, he had to get out, get away from this place . . .

'Vaelin.'

A voice. A word spoken in darkness. Clear and real and true. His racing heart slowed instantly as he sat up, eyes searching the shadowed room. There was no fear for he knew the voice. The

voice of his mother. Her shade had come to him, come to offer comfort, come to save him.

She didn't come again, although he strained his ears for another hour, no further words were spoken. But he knew he had heard it. She had come.

He settled back into the needle discomfort of the mattress, tiredness finally overtaking him. The sobs had ceased and even Barkus's snores seemed softer. He drifted into a dreamless, untroubled sleep.