

PETER V.
BRETT

THE CORE

A FINAL DESCENT
INTO DARKNESS

THE
CORE

PETER V. BRETT



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Dedication

*For Sirena Lilith,
who is already changing my life in countless ways.*

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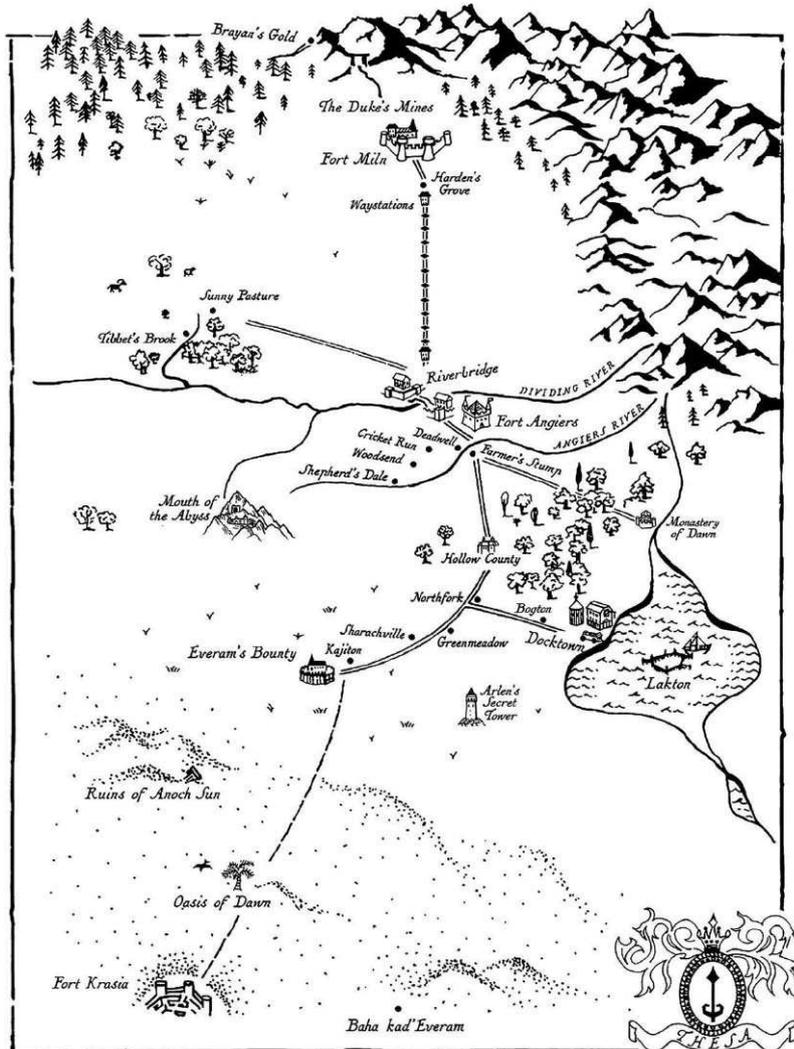
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Map



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Prologue

Gaolers

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‘There will be swarm.’

Alagai Ka, the demon Consort, spoke with the lips of the human drone, the one they called Shanjat. The Consort lay bound within a circle of power, but he had shattered one of the locks and taken the drone before his captors could react.

His will crushed, Shanjat was little more than a puppet now, and the Consort took pleasure in the pain that caused his captors. He shifted the drone’s feet, getting a sense of the body. Not as useful as a mimic, but strong, armed with the primitive weapons of the surface stock and an emotional connection to his captors the Consort could exploit.

‘What in the Core is that supposed to mean?’ the Explorer demanded. The one the others called Arlen or Par’chin. He held influence over the others, but it was not true dominance.

The Consort accessed the drone’s language centre, growing in fluency with the primitive grunts that passed for communication among humans. ‘The queen is close to laying.’

The Explorer met the drone’s eyes and crossed his arms. The wards inked into his flesh throbbed with power. ‘Know that. What’s it got to do with a swarm?’

‘You have imprisoned me and killed my strongest brethren,’ the Consort said. ‘There are none left in the mind court with power enough to keep the young queens from draining their mother of magic and maturing.’

The Explorer shrugged. ‘Queens’ll kill each other, won’t they? Right there in the whelping room, with the strongest one taking over the hive. Better a hatchling queen than a fully matured one.’

The Consort kept the drone’s eyes fixed on the Explorer as he watched the auras of the others in the room with his own eyes.

Armed with the cloak and spear and crown of the Mind Killer, the Heir – the one called Jardir – was easily the most dangerous. Chained in a warding circle, the Consort had few options if the Heir decided to kill him, and the subjugation of Shanjat enraged the Heir beyond measure.

But the Heir’s aura betrayed him. Much as he wanted to kill the Consort, he needed him alive.

More interesting was the web of emotions connecting the Heir to the Explorer. Love and hate, rivalry and respect. Anger. Guilt. It was a heady mix, and the Consort took pleasure as he studied it. The Heir was impatient for information. There was much the Explorer had not told him, and irritation crackled along his aura at having to follow another’s lead.

Less predictable was the Hunter, the one called Renna. The fierce female was hot with stolen core magic, her flesh stained with wards of power. She was less skilled in

the use of her power, apt to lash out unless kept in check. She was tamped down, weapon in hand, ready to spring at the first break in the stalemate.

The last was a female drone, Shanvah. Like the puppet, she had no great magic about her. If she had not killed a demon prince with her weapons, the Consort would have dismissed her as irrelevant.

But while Shanvah was the weakest of his captors, her aura was exquisite. The puppet was her sire. Her will was strong, keeping her surface aura still, but beneath, her spirit was wracked with pain. The Consort would savour the memory of it when he sliced open her skull and bit into the soft meat of her mind.

The Consort made the puppet laugh, keeping the humans' attention on the drone instead of him. 'The young queens won't have a chance to fight. With none of my brethren strong enough to dominate the others, each will steal an egg and flee.'

The Explorer paused at that, understanding dawning. 'Start nests all over Thesa.'

'No doubt it has already begun.' He made the puppet wave its spear, and predictably the eyes of the humans followed. 'You doom your own kind, keeping me here.'

Delicately, the Consort shifted its chains, probing for a weakness. The wards etched into the metal burned, pulling at his magic, but the Consort kept a tight grip on his power. Already he had shattered one of the locks and freed a limb. If he could break another, the puppet might disable the circles enough for the Consort to escape.

'How many minds are left in the hive?' the Explorer demanded. 'We killed seven so far, not counting you. Reckon that ent nothing.'

'In the hive?' the Consort asked. 'None, by now. No doubt they have already divided the breeding grounds and seek to pacify their new territories before the laying.'

'Breeding grounds?' the Hunter asked.

The puppet smiled. 'The people of your Free Cities will soon find their walls and wards less secure than they have been led to believe.'

'Bold words, Alagai Ka,' the Heir said, 'as you lie bound before us.'

The Consort found what he sought, at last. The tiny flaw in one of the locks, eroded slowly over the months of his imprisonment. Breaking it would allow the demon to slip the chain, but the power required would be bright, and his captors might notice before it was done.

'You were allowed your breeding grounds against this time.' The puppet took a step to the side, and their eyes went with it. 'Hunting preserves for my brethren. They will take their drones and crack your walls like eggs, stocking their larders to satiate their hatchling queens.'

'And doom for Ala grow in their wombs,' the Heir said. 'We must not allow this.'

'Free me,' the Consort said.

'Not a chance,' the Explorer growled.

'It is your only real choice,' the Consort said. 'My return can still prevent swarm.'

'You are the Prince of Lies,' the Heir said. 'We are not fools enough to trust your words. There is another choice. We will go to the abyss and kill Alagai'ting Ka once and for all.'

'You claim not to be fools,' the Consort said, 'yet you believe you can survive the path to the hive? You will not even get as far as Kavri before he broke and fled back to the surface.'

The words had the intended effect as the Heir stiffened, tightening his grip on the spear. 'More lies. Kaji defeated you.'

'Kavri killed many drones,' the Consort said. 'Many princes. It took centuries to repopulate the hive, but his attempts to breach our domain failed. That is the best your kind can hope for. This is not the first cycle, nor shall it be the last.'

'Said you'd guide us to the Core,' the Explorer said.

'You might as well ask to go to the surface of the day star,' the Consort said. 'You would be consumed long before you reached it. You know this.'

'To the hive, then,' the Explorer said. 'The mind court. The ripping whelping room of the demon queen.'

'That will destroy you, as well.' The Consort edged the puppet another step.

'Take our chances,' the Hunter said.

At last, they were in position. The puppet raised its spear and threw it at the Explorer's heart. As expected, he dissipated and it passed harmlessly through, flying straight at the Heir, who spun his weapon to bat it aside.

The puppet flung the shield with all its strength, the hard edge shattering one of the wardstones keeping the Consort imprisoned. The Hunter was moving fast to attack, but the female drone gave a cry, blocking the Hunter's path to her sire.

It was time enough for the puppet to turn, taking the warded chain in hand as the Consort focused a burst of magic to shatter the weakened link. Like a spider picking apart a damaged web, the puppet unwove the chain. The silver wards burned the Consort's skin, but the pain was a small price to pay for freedom.

He flicked a claw, using a burst of magic to fling a tiny piece of the shattered metal link through the air, striking the Heir's crown and knocking it from his head, preventing him from raising the shield that had first trapped the Consort.

The Hunter cast the female drone aside, leaping to try to stop the puppet, but it was too late. The Consort dissipated even as she swung her weapons, leaving solid only a single claw to lay open her bowels as they passed. He slipped through the gap the puppet had made in the circle, rematerializing at the edge of the outer warding.

The Explorer rushed to his mate as she gasped, trying desperately to keep her intestines from spilling onto the floor. The Hunter did not have the focus to dissipate and heal herself, and the Explorer would waste valuable time and power healing her.

The Consort drew an impact ward in the air, and the stones at the Heir's feet exploded, sending him stumbling as he scrambled for his crown. The puppet kicked the crown across the room, then attacked to stall the Heir just a few seconds more.

Turning, the Consort raised the stub of his tail, sending a spray of magic-dead faeces to disable the wards.

He was about to dissipate again when the Heir cried, 'Enough!' He slammed the butt of his spear to the floor, and a wave of magic knocked everyone from their feet. The Consort recovered quickly, dematerializing and moving for the gap in the wards, but not before the Explorer threw magic of his own, pulling back a curtain to cast dawn twilight over the gap in the wards. The day star had not yet crested the horizon, but already the light burned at his magic – unspeakable agony. The demon dare not approach.

The Hunter dissipated, re-forming with her wounds healed. She and the Explorer drew wardings in the air with practised hands, sending shocks of pain through the

demon's cloud even as he fled the light. In his non-corporeal form, the Consort could not control the puppet, and the female drone quickly put him in a submission hold. The Heir recovered his crown, raising the shield, trapping the Consort once more.

There was no choice but to surrender and negotiate. They still needed him alive. The Consort solidified, claws retracted and teeth covered, arms held high in the human sign of submission.

The Hunter struck him hard in the side of his head, impact wards rattling his skull. She was impulsive. The others would be more restrained.

But as the Consort rolled with the blow, the Explorer struck him from the opposite side, cracking his skull and bursting an eye from its socket.

The demon stumbled, only to take a third blow from the shaft of the Heir's spear, striking harder than a rock drone.

The beating continued, and the Consort thought surely they would kill him in their primitive savagery. He attempted to dissipate, but like the Hunter moments before, he found it impossible to focus enough to trigger the transformation.

Then it became hard to focus on who delivered which blow, and there was only the sound and shock as each fell.

And then it became hard to focus at all. Blackness filled his vision.



The Consort woke in agony. He attempted to Draw power from his inner reserve to heal, but there was little remaining. Unconscious, he must have Drawn deeply to recover from the worst of his injuries. The rest would have to heal naturally.

He remained free of the cursed chain. Perhaps they were rushing to repair it, even now. Perhaps they expected him to remain disabled for longer.

If so, they were greater fools than even he had believed. The curtain had been drawn, and the Consort could sense the darkness beyond the thick cloth. Escape again felt within reach. He raised a claw, siphoning a bit of his remaining magic to power a ward he drew in the air.

But the power dissipated before it reached the tip of his talon, and a shock of pain ran through his body, causing him to hiss.

Again he Drew, and again the power failed, even as his flesh burned.

The Consort looked down at his skin, realization dawning even as he saw the glow of the wards.

They had inked his flesh with needles, much as the Explorer had done to himself. He was covered with wards.

Mind wards, keyed to his own caste. The symbols put him in a prison of his own flesh, preventing him from dissipating or reaching out with his mind. Worse, if the Consort – or one of his captors – fed the wards with enough magic, they would kill him.

It was worse by far than the chain. An indignity beyond anything the Consort could imagine.

But every problem had its solution. Every warding its weakness. He would bide his time, and find it.

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The cramping startled Leesha awake.

Ten days on the road with an escort of five thousand Cutters had gotten her used to discomfort. She could only sleep on her side now, something the carriage bench was not designed for. She had taken to curling on the floor like Amanvah and Sikvah in their carriage full of pillows.

Waves of pain washed over her as uterine muscles tightened and contracted, readying themselves for the task to come. Leesha wasn't due for another thirteen weeks, but it was common for women to experience this.

And every one of them panics the first time, Bruna used to say, thinking they'll birth early. Even me, though I'd smacked dozens of squalling babes into the world before I grunted out one of my own.

Leesha began breathing in a quick steady rhythm to calm herself and help endure the pain. Pain was nothing new these days. The skin of her stomach was blackened and bruised from powerful foetal blows.

Several times during her pregnancy, Leesha had been forced to channel powerful ward magic. Each time, the baby reacted violently. Feedback from magic could grant inhuman strength and stamina. It made the old young again, and brought the young to primacy before their time. It heightened emotions and lessened control. Folk in the throes of magic could be violent. Dangerous.

What might such power do to a child not fully formed? Not even at seven months, Leesha looked and felt full term. She anticipated an early delivery, even welcomed it, lest the child grow too large for natural birth.

Or punch through my womb and crawl out on its own. Leesha breathed and breathed, but she did not calm, nor did the pain subside.

All sorts of things can bring a set of contractions, Bruna taught. Like the brat kicking a full bladder.

Leesha found the chamber pot, but relieving herself did little to ease the spasming. She glanced at the porcelain. Her water was clouded and bloody.

She froze, mind racing as she stared at the pot. But then the baby kicked hard. She cried out in pain, and she knew.

It was coming.



Leesha was propped on the bench by the time Wonda came to report. It was nearly dawn.

Wonda handed off her reins, rolling off her horse nimbly as a cat. She landed on the lip of the moving carriage and opened the door, effortlessly swinging onto the bench

across from Leesha.

‘Almost home, mistress, if ya wanna warsh a bit,’ Wonda said. ‘Gar rode on ahead while ya slept. Just got word back.’

‘How bad is it?’ Leesha asked.

‘Bad,’ Wonda said. ‘Whole staff’s turned out. Gar tried to stop it like ya asked. Said it was like trying to pull up a stump bare-handed.’

‘Angierians and their ripping ceremony.’ Leesha grimaced. She was beginning to understand how Duchess Araine could walk past a cloud of bowing and curtsying servants while pretending not to see them at all. Sometimes it was the only way to get where you meant to go.

‘Ent just maids and guards,’ Wonda said. ‘Half the town council’s turned up.’

‘Night.’ Leesha put her face in her hands.

‘Give the word and I can have a wall of Cutters shuttle you right inside,’ Wonda said. ‘Tell everyone yu’ll see them when yu’ve had yur rest.’

Leesha shook her head. ‘This is my homecoming as countess. I won’t begin it by shunning everyone.’

‘Ay, mistress,’ Wonda said.

‘I need to tell you something, Wonda,’ Leesha said. ‘But you must remain calm when I do.’

Wonda gave a confused look, then her eyes widened. She began to rise.

‘Wonda Cutter, you keep your bottom on that bench.’ Leesha swung her finger like a lash, and the girl fell back.

‘The contractions are sixteen minutes apart,’ Leesha continued. ‘It may be hours before the baby comes. I’m going to be quite dependent on you today, dear, so I need you to listen carefully and stay focused.’

Wonda swallowed heavily, but she nodded. ‘Ay, mistress. Tell me what ya want and I’ll make it happen.’

‘I will exit the carriage at a stately pace and head for the door,’ Leesha said. ‘I will speak to one person at a time as I walk. At no time do we stop or slow.’

‘Ay, mistress,’ Wonda said.

‘I will openly appoint you head of my household guard,’ Leesha said. ‘If everyone’s mustered in the yard as you say, that should be enough for you to take command and send Cutter women to secure the royal manse. Once they have the royal chambers secure, no one gets in save you, me, and Darsy.’

‘Vika?’ Wonda asked.

Leesha shook her head. ‘Vika will be seeing her husband for the first time in months. I won’t take that from them. There’s nothing she can do that Darsy can’t.’

‘Ay, mistress,’ Wonda said.

‘You’re not to tell anyone what is happening,’ Leesha said. ‘Not the guards, not Gared, not anyone.’

‘But mistress ...’ Wonda began.

‘No one.’ Her words came out in a growl as Leesha gritted her teeth through another contraction. It was like a serpent wrapped around her belly, squeezing. ‘I won’t have loose talk turning this into a Jongleur’s show. I’m giving birth to Ahmann Jardir’s baby. Not everyone will wish it well, and after the birth we’ll both be ... vulnerable.’

Wonda’s eyes hardened. ‘Not while I’m around, mistress. Swear it by the sun.’



Wonda gave no sign anything was amiss when she exited the carriage, stepping easily into the stirrup of her moving horse.

The wardlight inside the carriage dimmed in the early-morning light, but it brightened as the door clicked shut. With it, the wards of silence reactivated, and Leesha let out a groan of pain.

She put one hand on the small of her back and the other under her heavy belly as she heaved herself upright. Heat wards had the kettle hot in seconds. Leesha poured steaming water on a cloth and pressed it to her face.

The reflection in the mirror was pale and hollow, dark circles beneath her eyes. Leesha longed to reach into her *hora* pouch, Drawing a bit of magic to give her strength through the ordeal to come, but it was too dangerous. Magic was known to send the child into wild fits. It was the last thing she wanted now.

She glanced at the powder kit, but she'd never had the skill painting her face that she had painting wards. That was her mother's talent. She made do as best she could, brushing her hair and straightening her dress.

The roads of Cutter's Hollow's outer boroughs twisted and turned, following the curving shape of the greatwards she and Arlen Bales designed. The Hollow had over a dozen boroughs now, an ever-expanding net of interconnected greatwards that pushed the demons back farther every night. Leesha knew the shape as intimately as a lover, not needing to glance out the window to know they were passing through Newhaven.

Soon they would enter Cutter's Hollow, the capital of Hollow County and the centre of the greatwards. Just two years ago, the Hollow had been a town of less than three hundred souls – barely large enough for a dot on the map. Now it was equal to any of the Free Cities.

Another contraction took her. They were getting closer – just six minutes apart now. She was dilating and could feel the child sitting lower. She breathed. There were herbs that could ease her pain, but she dare not take them until she was safely ensconced in her chambers.

Leesha peeked from the curtain, immediately regretting it as a cheer went up in response. She'd hoped to keep her homecoming quiet by arriving before dawn, but there was no quieting an escort of such size. Even at the early hour, folk crowded the streets and watched from windows as the procession wound its way home.

It was strange, thinking of Thamos' keep as home, but it belonged to her now as Countess of Hollow County. In her absence, Darsy had turned Leesha's cottage in the Gatherers' Wood into the headquarters for Gatherers' Academy, hopefully the first of many establishments of learning in the Hollow. Leesha would rather be there training apprentices, but there was far more she could accomplish if she took up residence in the keep.

She wrinkled her nose as the fortress came into view. It was a blocky, walled structure, built more for defence than aesthetics – at least on the outside. The inside was worse in some ways, lavish as a palace in a land struggling to rebuild. Both problems would have to be addressed now that the place was hers.

The great gates of the keep were open, the road lined on either side by the remains of the Wooden Lancers, Thamos' cavalry. There were barely fifty of them now, the

others lost with the count himself in the Battle of Docktown. They were resplendent on their great Angierian mustangs, man and horse equally stone-faced at attention. All were armed and armoured, as if expecting Leesha to command them into battle at any moment.

The courtyard, too, looked mustered as much for a war as a homecoming. To the left, Captain Gamon was mounted with his lieutenants before hundreds of men-at-arms, straight-backed with eyes forward, heavy polearms planted on the ground, points all at precisely the same angle.

Courtyard right, the entire keep's staff – an army in its own right – lined up no less sharply than the infantry, uniforms clean and pressed.

It will be interesting to see what happens to those perfect ranks if I give birth in the courtyard. The thought was wry, but then the child kicked, and it ceased to amuse.

As Wonda warned, a knot of people stood at the base of the steps to the keep. Lord Arther was at their front, rigid in his dress uniform and spear. Beside him was Tarisa, the count's childhood nurse who had become lady's maid to Leesha. Gared was waiting with Rosal, his promised, and Rosal's mother. With him were Inquisitor Hayes; Gatherers Darsy and Vika; her father, Erny; and ... night, even Leesha's mother, Elona, glaring daggers at Rosal's back. Leesha prayed the early hour would succour her from that demon, at least, but as usual it went unanswered.

Wonda poked her head in the door. 'Ready, mistress?'

A fresh contraction ripped through her. She felt hot, sweating even in the cold winter air.

Leesha smiled, showing none of it. Her legs shook as she got to her feet, and she felt the child inch lower. 'Yes, dear. Swiftly now.'

Gamon dismounted as the carriage arrived. He, Arther, and Gared nearly tripped over one another in the scramble to offer their hands as she stepped down. Leesha ignored them all, clutching Wonda's arm as she carefully descended the steps. It would not do to fall in front of the entire assembly.

'Welcome back to the Hollow, Countess Paper,' Arther said with a courtly bow. 'It is a great relief to see you well. When we heard of the attack on Angiers, we feared the worst.'

'Thank you,' Leesha said as she steadied herself. All around the courtyard, there were bows and curtsies. Leesha kept her back straight, acknowledging it all with a dignified nod that would have done Duchess Araine proud.

Then she began walking. Wonda angled herself to take the lead even as she lent her support. Close behind, two meaty Cutter women followed.

Caught off guard, the men stumbled out of their path, but they recovered swiftly, scurrying after. Gamon was the first to match her pace. 'My lady, I have prepared a roster of the house guards ...'

'Thank you, Captain Gamon.' Leesha's insides were churning. She clenched her thighs, terrified her water might break before she reached the house. 'Be a dear and give it to Captain Wonda, please.'

Gamon's eyes widened, and he stopped in his tracks. '*Captain Wonda?*'

'I hereby appoint Wonda Cutter captain of my house guard,' Leesha said loudly, continuing to walk. 'A long-overdue promotion.'

Gamon hurried to catch back up. ‘If my command has been in some way unsatisfactory ...’

Leesha smiled, wondering if she might vomit. ‘Not at all. Your service was exemplary, and your valour on behalf of the Hollow is without question. You will retain command of the Wooden Soldiers, but my house security will report to Captain Wonda alone. Order the men to fall out and return to their duties. We’re not expecting an attack.’

Gamon looked like he was trying to swallow a stone, but after months in Angiers not knowing if she was captive or guest, Leesha was tired of seeing Wooden Soldiers everywhere. Wonda had already hand-selected Cutters to take over the house guard, and signalled them to secure the entrance and sweep the manse.

Arther moved quickly to take the empty place as Gamon fell back, stunned. ‘The house staff ...’

‘... looks crisp and ready to start the day,’ Leesha cut him off. ‘Let’s not keep them.’ She whisked a hand, dismissing the assemblage.

‘Of course, my lady.’ Arther gave a signal, and the crowd began to disperse. He looked ready to say more, but Leesha’s mother pushed her way in front, Erny trailing after. Elona was six months pregnant, though she hid it well with low-cut gowns that masked her belly and drew eyes elsewhere. The men fell back like she was a coreling.

‘My daughter, Countess of the Hollow!’ Elona spread her arms, face glowing with ... was that what pride looked like on her? It was terrifying if so.

‘Mother, Father.’ Leesha allowed each a brief embrace, trying to keep from shaking.

Elona sensed it, but she had the decency to drop her voice. ‘You look terrible. What’s wrong?’

‘I just need to get inside and rest.’ Leesha gave Wonda’s arm a squeeze, and they started moving again. Others might fear to impede Elona, but Wonda was implacable as a falling tree. Elona moved to follow, but pulled up as Erny held her back. She glared at him, but like Wonda Cutter, Leesha’s father was always on her side.

‘Welcome home, Countess.’ Rosal dipped a practiced curtsy, her mother following suit.

‘Emelia,’ Leesha said, careful to use the woman’s proper name. ‘Mrs Lacquer. I’m surprised to find you here at such an early hour.’

Gared swept in, the three of them following Leesha up the steps. ‘Count had the ladies staying here in his keep on account of propriety. We can find another place ...’

‘Nonsense.’ Leesha winked at Rosal. ‘We’ve plenty of room. How would it look for an upstanding young woman like yourself to move into the baron’s household before the wedding? A scandal!’

Gared blushed. ‘Preciate it. Got some papers for you to look at when you have time ...’

‘Send them over in the morning.’ Leesha was almost to the steps now.

Inquisitor Hayes appeared next, bowing deeply. His acolyte Child Franq, usually inseparable from his master, was conspicuously absent. ‘Countess. Praise be to the Creator that you are well.’

The next carriage in line pulled up and opened its door. Hayes’ eyes widened as Tender Jona stepped out. Vika gave a cry, breaking from the receiving line to hurry down the steps to her husband.

Hayes looked at her in shock, but even shaking with pain, Leesha's smile was genuine. 'You'll be pleased to know, Inquisitor, that your interim assignment to the Hollow has ended. Jona will resume leading services in Hollow County.'

'Preposterous,' the Inquisitor sputtered. 'I'm not going to just hand my cathedral over ...'

Leesha raised an eyebrow. '*Your* cathedral, Inquisitor? The one in *my* county?' She was still moving. The doors to the keep were closer, but still so far.

Hayes was forced to sacrifice dignity, lifting his robes to scuttle after her. 'Only Duke Pether can relieve me ...'

Leesha cut him off, producing a letter bearing the royal seal. 'Your inquisition is over.'

'The inquisition was about more than one heretic Tender,' Hayes argued. 'The question of Arlen Bales ...'

'Is one you and the Council of Tenders can debate all you wish back in Angiers,' Leesha said. 'Shepherd Jona will minister to the Hollow's flock.'

Hayes' gawp was greater even than Gamon's. '*Shepherd?!*'

'His Grace gave up the title when he became duke,' Leesha said, 'and there are more people in the Hollow than Angiers in any event. The Pact of the Free Cities gives our Tenders the right to form a new order.'

Unsure how to respond, the Inquisitor took the letter and fell back from Leesha's determined march. The duke's decree gave her the power to choose the spiritual leader of Hollow County, but she was testing the limits by promoting Jona to Shepherd. It was a declaration of independence that would not please the ivy throne, but there was little they could do to stop it now that Leesha was ensconced in the Hollow once more.

Darsy moved in quickly at a signal from Leesha, the woman's bulk effectively dismissing the Inquisitor as she moved between them. 'Creator be praised, it's good to see you, mistress.'

'You have no idea.' Leesha pulled her into an embrace, dropping her voice. 'Contractions are coming every two minutes. If I'm not inside soon, I'll be giving birth on these steps. Wonda's sent women to secure the royal chambers.'

Darsy nodded, not missing a beat. 'Want me to go on ahead, or walk you?'

Leesha felt a rush of relief. 'Walk me, please.'

Darsy took her other arm, she and Wonda guiding Leesha along as the next carriage pulled up and Amanvah, Sikvah, and Kendall made their solemn exit. Darsy watched them curiously.

'Mistress,' Darsy said. 'Where's Rojer?'

Leesha kept her breath a deep, steady rhythm as she pointed to the coffin a group of Cutters were pulling from the carriage.

Darsy let out a strangled cry and pulled up short. Leesha would have overbalanced and stumbled if not for Wonda.

'Bottle it, Darsy,' Wonda growled. 'Ent got time right now.' Darsy nodded, recovering herself and getting them back in motion.

Amanvah glided up the steps swiftly, ignoring the glares of Wonda and Darsy. One look in her eyes was all Leesha needed.

She knows.

'Countess Leesha,' the *dama'ting* began.

‘Not now, Amanvah,’ Leesha breathed.

Amanvah ignored her, stepping in close. Wonda reached out to bar her way, but Amanvah put a knuckle into the arm and it fell away long enough for her to pass.

‘I must assist the birth,’ she said without preamble.

‘Core you will,’ Darsy growled.

‘I have cast the dice, mistress,’ Amanvah said quietly. ‘If I am not with you in the coming hours, you will die.’

‘That some kinda threat?’ Wonda’s voice was low and dangerous.

‘Stop it, all of you,’ Leesha said. ‘She comes.’

‘I can do anything ...’ Darsy began.

Leesha groaned, feeling the need to bear down. ‘There’s no time.’ She put a foot on the steps. Such a short climb, but it felt like a mountain.

Tarisa was waiting at the top. Leesha managed the climb unassisted, but still the woman needed only a glance to see what was happening.

‘This way,’ she said, turning on her heel and opening the doors, snapping her fingers at a group of maids. They scurried to her as she walked, and like a general, Tarisa sent them running off with instructions.

Leesha knew word would spread quickly now, but there was nothing to be done for it. She kept all her focus on breathing and putting one foot in front of the other.

The moment they left the great hall, Wonda signalled the guards. They closed ranks as the big woman swept Leesha up into her arms like a child, carrying her the rest of the way.



‘Push,’ Darsy said.

It was a pointless request. Leesha could feel the baby moving the moment they had her propped on the edge of the bed. It was coming whether she pushed or not. She was fully dilated, her water broken all over Wonda’s fine wooden armour. It would be over in moments.

But then the child thrashed, and Leesha cried out in pain. Darsy, too, gave a cry, seeing Leesha’s stomach distend as tiny hands and feet thrust into the lining. It felt like a demon inside her, trying to claw its way free. Fresh bruises were forming atop the faded ones all over her abdomen.

‘Can you see it?’ Leesha demanded.

Darsy sucked a breath and moved back in between the makeshift stirrups. ‘No, mistress.’

Corespawn it. She was so close.

‘Help me up,’ she said, gripping Wonda’s hand. ‘It will be easier if I squat.’ She bore down, trying to squeeze the child free.

Again the child struck, hitting her like a horse’s kick. Leesha screamed and stumbled, but Wonda caught her, easing her back to the pillows.

‘It is as I feared,’ Amanvah said. ‘Mistress, I must cut the child free.’

Wonda immediately interposed herself. ‘Not a chance.’

Darsy rose, the large woman towering over tiny Amanvah. ‘Not if you were the last Gatherer in the world.’