

## BLOOD COUSINS

by Jeremiah Zimmerman

“I’ve never felt heat like this before,” Mitokh said, the older of two boys who walked the mountain trail. At the age of sixteen, he was lanky and quick, having medium brown skin, dark eyes and wavy shiny black hair. Larivians were not tall or large people and Mitokh was a little shorter and thinner than most his age.

“Our grandfather said it had not been like this for over thirty years, not since our fathers were born,” Ikrae said. The second boy was Mitokh’s cousin on his father’s side. He was a year younger and an inch shorter, with lighter eyes, longer hair and a longer nose.

The two boys climbed the narrow game path up the steep slope of the mountain. Wild goats made the trails and thrived on brushes under the scattering of short trees that grew there. The way was rough, but the two always enjoyed the climb.

“The cave will be cooler,” Mitokh said. Sweat soaked the back of their off-white tunic. “It always is.” That was the reason for the steep trek. The cousins completed the morning chores quickly so they could spend the hottest portion of the day in the caves. The boys liked the caves, with its

labyrinth of tunnels and caverns. One cavern had a small lake, fed by icy cold water that emptied into a hole in the wall, coming back out a short ways south of them.

The red and yellow Laserfican suns beat down on them from a clear sky as they reached the cave entrance almost an hour after leaving the village. It had taken longer that day because of the heat. The two looked out over the small valley in the lower mountains of the Harzline Range. They were not able to see their village, but two hamlets were viewable at a far distance. The boys were alone on the mountain. They were always alone when they were there. As far as either of them knew, the two of them were the only ones that went to the caves and may be the only ones who knew of its existence.

Three years earlier, Mitokh and Ikrae discovered the caves while hunting a rabbit with short bows. The young hunters lost track of the rabbit when it darted behind a large thorny bush. Mitokh told the younger cousin to crawl in and flush it out.

Agreeing, Ikrae went down to all fours and crawled in behind the bush. “There’s a large crack in the cliff back here. I think the rabbit went in there.”

Mitokh groaned. “I was hopping for rabbit tonight.”

“I’m not going in there. It’s deep and dark.”

“Is it large enough to crawl through?”

“Yes. Both of us could get in together.”

Mitokh looked above the bush. It was deceiving, but there was a long crack reaching up quite a ways, enlarging as it approached the bush. Only from the left could one see the crevice and then only if you looked at it with the intent to find it. He placed the weapon on the ground, as well as the waist quiver, holding six additional arrows. Mitokh slipped behind the bush, receiving several scratches from the thorns for the effort.

The crack was wide at the base. Ikrae stood to one side. “It goes a few steps in and there’s a hole.”

Mitokh moved forward.

“What about cougars?”

“I thought you were the smart one. The rabbit would not go into a cougar’s den.”

“True, but its dark.”

The hole was dark just a few feet beyond the threshold. The opening was around four feet wide and three high. Loose gravel and dirt covered the ground of the crevice and spilled into the hole.

Ikrae followed as Mitokh crawled into the opening. Both peered into the darkness. The interior was black. The uneven floor went down at about forty-five degrees. Mitokh move further in, hoping his eyes would adjust. Stone shifted and the sound reverberated off the walls and gave an impression of a very long tunnel. “We’ll come back with candles.”

Two days later, the boys returned and explored the caves. Three year later, they looked forward to the damp coolness. They reached the bush and stepped into the crevice. A large assortment of candles had been collected at the back, out of the weather and water runoff. Mitokh took several candles and handed them to Ikrae. He then took the oil bag from his shoulder and filled the two battered lamps that were there.

Inside the hole, Ikrae put the candles down and deposited the collected dry wood and grass from the sack he had been carrying on the growing pile. With a worn flint and stone, the younger boy started a small fire in a pit they made to one side of the entrance. They used it to light the candles and lamps.

Each carried a candle and a lamp. They also took several other candles in the sack with them as they moved down the tunnels. They knew the maze well, but still searched it as they did when it was new. The cool air compared to the outside chilled them. The cousins saw no sign of cougars or other predators. They never did.

The two went straight to their favorite place, a high ceiling cavern. Unless they lit at least a dozen candles, they were unable to see the peaked top. They set the lamps on a couple of broken

stalagmites and lit the candles, placing them around the chamber. The light reflected off the green, yellow and orange stained beige stone and spires jutting from the ceiling and floor. When it rained heavily, the room glistened with thousands of sparkles.

Both Mitokh and Ikrae sang. Their voices reverberated off the stone and mixed, creating harmonizing tones giving their off-key singing an appealing sound. They moved around the cavern trying to create new harmonics. In time their voices grew tired and the two went exploring the rest of the caves.

“Mitokh, come see this.” Ikrae stood at the edge the small lake, no more than a pond. “The level is lower than I’ve ever seen it.”

“There’s not been rain for seventeen days,” Mitokh stated as he approached and looked at the still water. Usually there were tiny ripples from the stream’s motion. The water entered from the far side and flowed out along the wall to the right. The water level was over two feet lower than normal.

Mitokh peered to where the stream fed out. The light was dim, but he could see a thin, wide horizontal crack in the wall, completely exposed with the water level below that. He then looked to the far wall where the water usually entered. He could see well into the mouth, much further than usual. He could tell it went beyond the lamp’s light. What he could see seemed to be a tunnel. The two of them always thought it was a slit, similar to the exit point.

Mitokh untied and pushed off his sandals. He stepped into the water. It was warmer than usual. They were never able to swim in the icy water.

“What are you doing?” asked the younger boy.

“I want to get a closer look,” Mitokh said, wading across the thirty odd feet with the oil lamp. The water went to his waist at the deepest point, at the mouth of the tunnel.

Ikrae watched. “Why?”

“It looks like it goes back quite a ways.”

“Really? How far?”

Mitokh bent down and looked in. The water continued up the tunnel. There was no flow. The boy caused the only rippling. The source had completely stopped. Mitokh considered where the stream came out of the mountain. It was south of the cave, not towards their village, so they did not know where it ceased.

The boy waded into the tunnel. From the water level to the uneven ceiling was about six to fifteen inches. Holding the lamp near his head he was able to keep it above the water. The water passed his nose at the lower places.

“Come back out of there,” Ikrae said.

“It continues for a ways further. I think....” Mitokh stumbled in a hole. He pushed the lamp up as his head dipped below the water. Regaining his footing, resurfaced.

“Are you all right?” Ikrae asked.

Coughing out a bit swallowed water, Mitokh replied, “Yes. I just stumbled. There’s a hole.”

“I can’t see you.” How far are you?”

“I don’t know. There’s an opening.”

“I can hardly hear you,” Ikrae shouted. He did not hear what his cousin said. The boy quickly shed his sandals and waded to the mouth. “Mitokh, are you all right?”

“Yes. There’s a large cavern back h...” Mitokh yelled.

“What is it?”

“I’m all right. There’s a skeleton back here.”

“A skeleton? What kind. What animal could get back there?”

“It’s a man. I think it’s a man. There’s armor on him.”

“Armor?”

“Rusted,” Mitokh added. “It’s all rusted and ruttled.” The older boy climbed onto the ledge. The cavern was over forty feet across, a misshapen half circle with the stream on the flat side. The stream entrance mouth was below the water level.

Mitokh held the lamp closer to the skeleton. It was crumpled against the far wall from the stream's edge. The remains of the leather and chain mail armor barely clung to it. A corroded breastplate laid to one side of the bones, well beyond use. A hilt of a sword stuck up at an angle upon the remains.

“What’s going on,” came Ikrae’s distant voice.

“I don’t think you want to come back here. Not the way you feel about being under water.”

“I’m just worried about you.”

“I’m all right,” Mitokh said. He reached for the hilt of the sword. It seemed untouched by age. The boy took hold and pulled gently. He never handled a sword before. The boy had seen them used a few times. Both Mitokh and Ikrae had been to tournaments and seen the fighting. They each thought swords as being heavy, but when Mitokh pulled the one from the crumbling sheath, the blade felt lighter than expected. There was weight and solidness to the weapon.

“Are you coming out,” Ikrae said, feeling a little silly standing in the water at the mouth.

Mitokh looked at the blade of the sword. It was in excellent condition. A twinge of excitement surged through him. He looked to the water tunnel. “I’ll be out in a minute. I fou...” He stopped and looked back to the blade. He did not wish to tell his cousin. Peasants were not allowed to have swords or weapons of any type, but he wanted to keep it. If the Baron’s men knew he had it, they would take it. He knew Ikrae would tell his father. Keeping the cave secret was one thing. The Baron would not have them hanged for it, but to possess a sword is a hanging offense. Ikrae would tell his father and his father would tell his brother, Mitokh’s father, and he would take the sword to the Magistrate for the Baron. There would be questions and everyone would know of the cave.

Mitokh would not tell Ikrae. It would be the first time he did not tell his cousin something. The two had been inseparable since they were six and five. Mitokh did not like it, but the secret must be kept for now. He laid the sword along the wall, apart from the deceased. He then got back into the water and waded to Ikrae.

“A skeleton?” Ikrae asked again, in disbelief. “How did he get back there and why?”

Looking at the mouth, after climbing onto shore, Mitokh said, “I don’t know. It was there for a long, long time.”

“I should get home. Father will be expecting me.”

Mitokh glance to the tunnel’s mouth and reluctantly said, “Yes. I as well.”

At the entrance of the cave, they stowed the items and then hiked down the hill. Thirty minutes later, the boys walked into the small village of farms, simple single story dwellings and workshops they called home.

Ikrae’s father worked leather for the Baron and his knights. Their home with the attached workshop was closer to the edge of town. “I hope father doesn’t have much for me to do. I’ll come over when I’m done.”

“I’m going to see Thumela,” Mitokh replied.

“If you two get caught, her father will never let you wed and may likely kill you.”

Mitokh smiled. “We won’t be caught. Her father has no wit.”

Ikrae shook his head and entered the small workshop. Boelstark, his father, was busy cleaning hides that were to be sent to the saddler in the next village. “It is about time you got back. Those need sharpening,” said Boelstark, indicating an assortment of tools near a pedal grinding wheel. “When you are done with that, there are two more hides that need finishing.”

The boy went to working sharpening the implements as Mitokh reached his home. The older boy also had chores to do. His father, Hawek, tended to the Baron’s cattle at the village. Four had been taken to the castle at Pruoth to be slaughtered, while the boys were away. That was when the hides were dropped off with Boelstark from earlier slaughters.

Even though it was hot, Mitokh rushed to complete his chores. He kept Thumela in his mind as he did so, but the sword also drew his thoughts. He did not know what to do with it. He did not know how to wield one and if he did learn, he could never let anyone know.

Later, when the two suns dropped close to the mountain peaks and the temperature started to cool, Mitokh went to a small patch of woods that bordered one of the farms and waited for Thumela. She was a daughter of one of the farming families in the village. They had been meeting regularly for nearly two years in the woods and had been in love for a year longer.

Mitokh waited quite a while before Thumela arrived. “Mother insisted I put more water out for the animals.” The girl was petite with a similar complexion to Mitokh, thick wavy hair braided to her slender waist. Her hips were narrow still and, if like her mother, would remain so, but unlike her mother Thumela’s backside was full and round. Aside from the hair and large round eyes, the rump attracted Mitokh greatly.

“Water is evaporating fast in this heat,” the boy said as he settled Thumela next to him on the blanket he brought out. She wore a simple dress, laced up the back tight enough to push her modest bosom up to display a slight amount of cleavage.

“Yes, but the troughs were nearly full.”

Mitokh kissed her lips to get her off the subject. She responded in kind. The two forgot the heat as they frolicked under the shaded trees. Loosening the lacing, the boy slipped the fabric off the Thumela’s shoulders, exposing her small breasts. After much kissing and caressing, Mitokh pulled the hemline up and mounted the girl.

The passion eased and the couple cuddled as the light faded. “It’s starting to get dark,” Thumela commented.

Mitokh escorted her to the edge of the woods and watched as she skirted along the field to her home. Back to his own house, he ate and went to bed.

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Distant thunder rumbled into the mountains. Wolves yapped signals to each other as they hunted Mitokh. He held the sword as he evaded the chase for hours. The leather and chain armor and the breastplate become heavy, but he dared not get rid of it. Earlier, he had killed one of the wolves and injured another. He would have died, if not for the protection of the armor. Men on horses hunted with the wolves and had shot Mitokh with an arrow. Pulling the arrow from him, he ran on. The mountains were steep and the horses were unable to follow. The wolves were weary to get close to the armed boy.

Scattering of clouds raced under three of the eleven moons that shined at various stages of fullness across the sky, providing ample light to run in. Mitokh ran on.

The boy stumbled. He rose as six gray wolves moved closer. He turned to run in the opposite direction, when he saw a larger, much larger black wolf with white specks. Their eyes locked. Mitokh sensed intelligence behind the animal's gaze. The boy backed, holding the sword out, firm and steady. He turned to face the other six predators. The boy was trapped. He raised the sword higher and anchored his footing for the inevitable attack. Weary or not, they were ready to lunge.

A rock slipped out from under his right foot and he stumbled. Before he could recover the large wolf lunged. Swinging the blade off balanced, Mitokh missed. So did the animal. Mitokh's right heel hit another, larger rock and he fell back. There was nothing but air. He knew he had cleared the cliff and was hurtling to his death.

Mitokh bolted up in his small straw filled mat bed. Perspiration soaked his nightshirt. He looked around the tiny room he shared with his older brother. Five years Mitokh senior; he slept soundly. Their father was not able to arrange a marriage for him yet. The older brother was not liked by most and was intensely jealous of Mitokh's popularity with the girls.

Slipping out of the bed, Mitokh changed into his day clothes. Passing over the sandals, he put on hard leather shoes with ties that wrapped the ankles twice. The room's window was small, but he

was still able to fit through it. He often sneaked out in the middle of the night, lately to see Thumela. This time he was going back to the cave. He needed to move the sword before the rains returned and raiser the water level.

On the way, he picked up bits of wood and grass. He walked faster as he went. The trek was completed in a shorted time. His heart pumped loudly in his ear, the dream still fresh in his mind. He kept a weary eye to the sides of the trail, fearing the wolves' return.

In the crystal clear sky, two large moons and four small ones provided light enough to see well. He looked to the sky and the multitude of bright stars. The glittery ribbon like band that stretched across the heavens was brighter than usual and about two-third complete. It was said the glittering specks were souls awaiting judgment by the gods. At times, the band was short, while others it reached from the eastern to the western horizon.

Mitokh reached the cave and quickly built a fire. The two boys had been there at night a few times, but never alone. Mitokh added a few more pieces of wood to comfort him with larger warmer flames. The heat felt good. He wondered how it could be so hot during the day and stone cold at night.

Collecting all the candles and both lamps from their kept place, he lit several around the inside of the entrance. Placing the rest in the bag, he set forth carrying it and both oil lamps, only one lit. As he walked to the lake room, he set out candle along the way. He made sure he had enough for his destination.

Once in the calm water, he lit the seven remaining candles. Mitokh removed all his clothes. Adrenaline pumped hard and that kept him warm as he stepped into the water and waded back to the chamber with the skeleton, ensuring not to fall in the hole he did so earlier. As before, he held the lamp near his head.

On the ledge, the bones and sword were as he remembered. Quickly, he grasped the blade and waded out. As much as he wished to rush out in haste, the deeper self calmed the nerves. There would be no one to help him should he become injured. He slowed.

Mitokh had considered where to hide the sword the entire time since he crawled from the bedroom window. While he dressed, he decided it should be under the loose gravel at the entrance of the cave. On the way out, Mitokh blew out the candles he set and placed them in the bag.

At the entrance, he put everything down and added more wood to the fire. The boy was chilled and sat close until he was warm. With a deep breath, he steadied his excitement. He did not know what wearied him. No one would find the sword there, not even Ikrae. The younger cousin was not as adventuresome and would not go digging around the gravel.

Mitokh brought the sword over to the right side of the fire. With his hands, he dug a long narrow, shallow trench. He placed the weapon into place and covered it.

Once buried, the boy replaced all the candles and lamps to their place and started his walk home. He felt good. The tension in him eased. Back to the small dwelling where he was born, Mitokh crawled back through the window, into bed and fell into a peaceful sleep.

The following day, Mitokh told Ikrae of the dream, including the sword. “It was scary. I was soaked when I woke.”

“Wolves are not that aggressive. As for the riders, wolves would not hunt with men.”

“I know. It was a dream. Seeing the skeleton must have caused it.”

“Probably. Father has a lot for me to do. I think it will take all day.”

“Maybe tomorrow will be cooler and we can go fishing at the river.”

“I hope so and hope we catch something.”

Several days passed. It was on the second day when they were able to get to the river and do some fishing. Three small trout were all they caught. Mitokh’s dreamt of the wolves four more times, each time he woke, the boy was as soaked as the first time. The fourth was longer. It progresses as the

others, but when he fell, Mitokh landed squarely on a dense thorny bush, breaking the fall, preventing him from breaking his back or neck. He rolled off the bush to the cliff side and crawled into the crevice.

Mitokh was able to hear voices far above him. The sound traveled down the crack in the cliff.

“He must be dead,” said one.

“We must be sure,” said another.

“It will take a while to get down there and find the right spot. The suns will be up soon.”

“Send the men down. I want to see the body.”

“Yes, your grace.”

Mitokh felt an urgency to hide. He found a hole and crawled in. He continued to crawl in the dark tunnels until he found a small lake. The water was soothing and he drank. The boy fell asleep. When he awoke, he heard talking and saw light.

Soldiers were advancing down the tunnel to the chamber he was in. Mitokh stood to make a last stand. The soldiers enter. “Kloersoe, you don’t have to die here,” said one of the men. The angle of the torches they carried prevented the face or details to be seen. “Tell us about the others and I will let you live.”

“I will not betray my oath,” Kloersoe said.

“Your oath means nothing. Tell us. My patience has run out.”

“The come here and kill me.”

Men to the side aimed arrows at the boy. Kloersoe jumped into the water. He pushed up against the back wall and felt a hole in it. Bending down, the boy backed up into it. Arrows fired. One hit. They continued to fire as he moved back. He pulled the arrow out with a scream and dropped it. It floated out.

“Go in there after him and bring him out,” said the man in charge.

Soldiers waded into the water. One lowered down and cautiously moved into the water filled tunnel. As he reached the end, Kloersoe thrust the blade into him.

The other man retreated, pulling the dying man out. “He’s got a good defensive position in there.”

“Go back and route him out. All of you go kill him.”

Swordsmen ventured into the water and each was killed as they got near to the far mouth of the tunnel. One got a strike at Kloersoe before he too met his demise. The leader saw blood flowing from the mouth of the tunnel. “The draught is over. Come on out of there. The man’s going to come out or drown.”

Only three came out of the nine that went in. Hour by hour the men watched. They had built a fire for light more than warmth. Soldiers went outside to bring in wood. Kloersoe could see them through the tunnel. The water level rose, forcing him back into the inner chamber. He saw that the chasers were not going to let him escape. Maybe in a couple days he would chance going out. The water would be high by then and he knew he would not be able to retreat into the sanctuary he found, but to stay would be his death as well. “Better to die fighting than to starve in here,” Kloersoe muttered to the hard stone. “First, I need rest.” He dozed never to awake.

## Chapter - 2

Mitokh woke again with a chill. It was the seventh time he died in the cavern. The boy did not understand the meaning of the dream, nor why they were unchanging about a man he did not know. He could not tell Ikrae he was having repeating nightmares about the man who died. Mitokh knew his friend would think he was overreacting to the skeleton. The bones did not bother Mitokh, but the dreams did. He tried to remember if he ever met or heard of a man named Kloersoe. Mitokh could not recall ever encountering the name before and was not sure if the name was real or one created for the nightmares.

The boy sat in bed, leaning against the wall, wondering why the dreams kept reoccurring. They did not occur every night, but each time it did, the imagery became clearer and he recalled more details. As a cool breeze blew into the room through the open window, Mitokh thought of those details. The night within the nightmare was humid and he was able to count eighteen lightning strikes throughout the entire dream. When he was being chased, the sky was clear except to the west, but when he fell, the sky was mostly overcast with thick thunderclouds, with only one eastern moon providing light to see and that was fading fast. Rain started to fall a short time before he fell on the

thorny bush. The men who chased him were not carrying torches or lanterns until they were in the caverns, even though the light was dim. The breastplate he wore was made of steel and of good quality. The man addressed as ‘your grace’ had a low tonal voice that sounded slightly foreign.

As the boy went over the details of the dream, there was a fluttering of light and a few seconds later a long crackle of thunder. He leapt from the bed and dressed hastily. “Eskoer. Get up. It’s starting to rain.”

“What?” Mitokh’s brother groaned.

“Rain. I saw lightning. Listen. It’s raining.”

When the brothers got outside, their father and mother were already there. The rain was increasing by the minute. Hawek, their father, was smiling and looking up to the sky, letting the cool droplets wet his face. Like most Larivians, Hawek had no facial hair and only the blacksmith in the village was stronger.

More lightning streaked across the sky. “It’s going to be a hard rain,” Eskoer said.

“It may,” Hawek said. “I hope not too hard. As dry as it is, the farms will wash out.”

There was another flash. Mitokh saw a strange man standing next to him. With a screech of fear, he jumped back. The man was not there.

“What’s wrong,” the father asked. He saw that Mitokh’s face was pale.

“I saw...There was...”

Eskoer roared with laughter.

“Lightning can be scary,” said Foereenya, Mitokh’s mother.

“It’s not the lightning. I saw...” Mitokh looked around. “Nothing. It was a trick of the eyes.”

“You just woke up,” Hawek commented. “Things like that happen.”

“It must be,” Mitokh panted as his younger brother and sister joined them. The eldest sibling snickered and joked at each flash. Mitokh ignored the harassments, thinking of what he saw, trying to

see the man. He could not. They were all thoroughly drenched before they stepped inside, dried and went back to bed.

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Mitokh walked up to the small shrine with his family. It was a round gazebo with nine pillars of cream-colored stone with steps leading up to an altar. Red tile covered the roof. It was set on a hill a mile from the road and was dedicated to Baslaesu, the father of the lesser gods. Most everyone in the local villages paid homage there.

By tradition, Hawek drove his family by cart every nine days to pay tribute and thank the deity for their lives and good fortune. When Ikrae was younger, the families would go together, but after Boelstark's wife died in childbirth with their second daughter, Boelstark tended to go on other days, if he went at all. For the last few years, he went less and less often. Since his father did not go, Ikrae would often go to the shrine with Mitokh, but this time Mitokh did not ask Ikrae to come along. The nightmares were distracting the older boy and he did not wish to answer a lot of questions.

Mitokh slowly stepped up to the simple stone altar. On it was sat carved four-foot figure of a kneeling bearded man with feathered wings folded on the back, its hands rested on his legs with palms up in a welcoming gesture. All the stones were weathered and pitted. Either side of the altar were large bronze oil lamps for people to light their candles. The lamps were filled in the morning and evening by the local priests who came for their own prayers.

Mitokh's family was the only one present. Hawek set his candle on the flat area of the altar in front of the deity's idol. He knelt and gave a silent thanks for the rains and then a plead for his calves to remain healthy, for between what the Baron had taken and the death of two cows from the drought,

any loss of calves would displease his liege. His wife also knelt before her own candle. She gave similar thanks and pleas and added that wives could be arranged for the older two boys, especially Eskoer.

Before Mitokh lit the candle in his hand, he looked towards the mountains where the caves were. Mitokh had not asked Baslaesu for anything since he was five. He saw no point. Nothing he had every asked for came to be. The childhood frustration continued for a few years, until he realized that was childish greed. When that occurred, he started praying like his father, thanking the supreme deity for what was provided, but not making requests. Now the boy wanted to make a request and Baslaesu may be the only one who could help.

Mitokh lit the candle and set it on the altar. Kneeling, he looked to the statue and prayed, *Baslaesu, I beg you to rid me of these dreams. I do not understand why I have them and I do not know what to do to make them stop. I'm a simple herdsman's son. If I was wrong for wanting to keep the sword, I'm sorry. If I'm to give the sword to the Magistrate, I will.*" A sudden chill ran through the boy and the candle went out. He shivered and looked around. No one noticed. He rose relit the candle. *Then, I am to keep the sword.* Nothing happened. Lowering his head. *I abide to the great will of Baslaesu, but I still beg of you to remove the nightmares.* Looking suspiciously at the candle, he blew out the wick and picked it up. *Do I believe what I felt?*

At the cart, his father was looking to the southwest. "We better go. It looks as though another storm is coming."

"Draught for so long," Eskoer said as he climbed on the back of the small cart, "and now floods."

On the way home, Hawek drove the horses faster. The clouds moved across the sky faster and thicker. There was a distant rumble. Mitokh looked around. All seemed normal, but he was nervous.

Eskoer notices and chuckled. "See something?"

Mitokh gave a sour look and then ignored the gesturing his brother made. His other siblings snickered at each motion and snide remark.

Another, closer strike. They had another three miles to ride when the sprinkles started. More cracks of thunder. The rain increased.

“They’re getting closer,” Foereenya commented.

“I know,” said Hawek. “I did not expect the weather to change today, let alone so fast.” They rode on. The sky darkened as the storm front swept in and the deluge began. The horses grew skittish and lurched at every flash and rumble. “Eskoer, Mitokh, guide the horses.”

“That will take longer,” Foereenya stated, flinching at another, closer bolt.

Hawek reined the animals slower, allowing his boys to dismount. “The horses will kill themselves if they are not controlled.”

Both boys jump off the cart and trotted to the front. Mitokh took hold of the bridle of the left animal while his brother did the same for the other. The horses calmed as the walked. They were more strikes, but the steady hands relaxed the horses. Everything became soaked. Rivulets flowed on the muddy road.

The village drew in sight. There was another flash. Mitokh saw the same man from the other storm walking with him. The horse he held reared up, throwing Mitokh to the side of the road. He stumbled, fell back to the ground and struck a large bolder with the back of his head. He heard his mother scream as his vision grew heavy. Mitokh passed out.

Foereenya leapt from the cart and ran to her son lying in the mud, hard rain splashed his face and cloths. He stirred as she bent to him. “Thank the gods.”

Mitokh looked to his mother, his vision still blurry. “I’m all right,” he said and forced himself up.

“Are you sure?” The woman assisted her son to stand. “That was a hard fall.”

“I’m all right, mother,” Mitokh said and then lost the strength in his legs and fell back to the ground. Foereenya could not hold the sudden dead weight.

Hawek tossed the reins to Eskoer and jumped down to the road. He saw the boy was breathing, but blood mixed with mud under his head. The man gently lifted his son, carried him to the back of the cart and laid him there. He then removed his own tunic and covered what he could of the boy with it. Examining the head showed a two-inch long, deep gash behind the right ear. “Eskoer, give me your top.” The older boy removed the tunic and tossed to his father, still holding the horses. Without tearing it Hawek wrapped the skull. He then assisted his wife up onto the cart to hold Mitokh. Together Hawek and Eskoer walked the horses to the village and to their home.

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“Kloersoe,” said a shifty looking man. Mitokh knew the man was a gypsy traveler. “You must go. We’ll draw them to us. That should give you enough time to escape.”

Kloersoe was about to object, but knew the man was correct and mounted his horse. He rode hard, only slowing and stopping to give the animal rest.

Two days later, Kloersoe was ambushed while he and the horse drank at a mountain stream. An arrow struck his left shoulder and he fell into the cold stream. The man tumbled along the rocks, being pulled by the swift current. The arrow whipped around until it was snapped off when Kloersoe’s shoulder collided with a bolder.

Eventually, the man stopped himself on the opposite bank. Exhausted and in pain, he pulled himself from the water. Kloersoe looked around with stifled groans. The foliage was thick and there

was no trail. The head of the arrow was still in him. He grasped the remaining portion of the shaft and pulled. Between exhaustion and agony, he passed out.

Kloersoe did not know how much time passed when he awoke. It was still dark and he was still by the mountain stream, in pain and tired. He felt the urgency to move. The area was rough and it would take hours for the hunters to trace the stream and locate the spot he occupied.

Standing, Kloersoe pushed through the bushes. With his good hand, he climbed over rocks and swung around trees. The going was hard. In time he located a small trail.

Hours later, he heard the wolves, fell into the bush, crawled into cave and died.

\* \* \*

Mitokh opened his eyes. He saw Thumela looking at him. A smile broadened across her face.

“Marry me,” Mitokh said with a weak voice.

“You have to arrange that with my father and the Baron.”

“Arrange what?”

“Marriage.”

“You know how my father feels about yours.”

“Your mother likes him. Have her convince your father. You may not have long. I think my father has a suitor asking for me.”

“Why are we talking about this now, again?”

“You asked.”

“I did?”

“Yes, you asked me to marry you again, just as you woke. That fall must have affected your mind.”

He nodded. The headache got worse. “Yes, it did.” Mitokh started to sit up and swing his feet out, but collapsed back onto the bed mat.

“I’ll get your mother. Ikrae will be glad to see that you live.”

“Live?”

“It’s been two days since you hit your head.”

“Two days?”

Thumela departed. A short time later, Foereenya rushed to the bed and clutched her son. She kissed his cheek, her tears wetted his face on contact. “You gave me such a fright. You slept so long, I feared you would not wake.”

Mitokh said nothing. The last time he said he was ‘all right’ was two days earlier and that was his last memory, except for the dreams Baslaesu seemed fit not to end. He weakly hugged and kissed his mother back.

The rest of the day was spent resting. Mitokh ate and drank water. Ikrae came to visit as soon as he found out his cousin had awoken. “You had a lot of people worried, but I knew you were too stubborn to die.”

“I didn’t die. I don’t feel well right now, but I will be fine tomorrow.”

“Good. The festival is just five days away.”

“That’s right. I forgot about it.”

Shaking his head, Ikrae said, “You are losing your mind, if you forgot about the festival.”

“I may be losing my mind.”

\* \* \*

The Festival of Adkoera fell mid summer and market day was shifted from the normal day to the day of celebration. Market day was the only time that anyone could sell or trade without a medallion from the Baron. And the festival was the best time for trade. Families would make products for the market days held, by the Baron's decree on the fifth day, on the nine-day week, but the best were saved for the festival. A fee was collected by the Magistrate or Sheriff to set up a stall, often just a blanket laid out on the ground to sell the wares. Most of the time, several families would sell their things as together so only one fee would have to be paid. This allowed more time to enjoy the festival and not have to oversee the stall.

The day of the festival was warm with a scattering of clouds. The intense waves of thunderstorms had let up. Hawek and Boelstark joined with three other families into one stall. Mitokh and Ikrae were given a few bronze coins to spend and they raced off. There was much to see. The town that held the local celebration was large and drew from all the surrounding villages. Even the traveling gypsies were there with their colorful garb and full wood covered wagons.

It was the gypsies that Mitokh wished to see most. Ikrae and he always enjoyed the gypsies. They had the best jugglers and acrobats, but the women dancers, with their loose gowns and scarves showing more of their ample curves than other women would ever do, attracted the boys the most. The dancers performed at the base of a sloped mound. Most of the boys went, but the front was for the men. The men paid coins into hats carried by the younger children of the travelers.

In between shows, the men would talk close with the women of the traveling company, often going into the wagon together. Mitokh and Ikrae were aware of what went on inside and thought of what it would be like to be with experienced women.

Mitokh watched the performers, but was looking at the rest of the gypsies around. He looked for the man in his dreams, the one that told him to run. *Told Kloersoe to run*, he corrected his memory.

“What are you looking for,” Ikrae asked.

“What?”

“You keep looking at the gypsies. We can’t afford the women. Are you thinking of going with them?”

“No. I don’t want to go.”

“Some people do. I thought of it a few time.”

“You’ve said that before.”

“What’s wrong? Ever since you found that skeleton, you’ve not been yourself.”

“I’m all right. I’m myself,” Mitokh said, trying to act as he always did.

Ikrae was not accepting the facade. “No you’re not. It seems to be getting worse, especially after your injury.”

“Let’s go.”

“The dance isn’t over.”

The music ended suddenly with a flair and twirl from the dancers. “It is now. Let’s go.”

“What’s the rush?”

Mitokh did not know. Something was making him uncomfortable and he wanted to be anyplace other than there. The feeling had come over him suddenly. He looked around and saw an old gypsy woman wearing beaded necklaces and layers of rusty red patterned skirts, top and long vest. Her long silver hair hung past her hips. She was talking to a younger man of the company. Both scanned the audience. They scrutinized the older men.

There was a commotion to Mitokh’s right. Everyone looked to see. The local Bishop from the Temple of Sheemel walked past with three priests and two priestesses, all wearing deep robes trimmed

elaborately in gold thread. Instinctively, Mitokh sidestepped behind a large man, so as not to be seen by the Bishop and his entourage. The old gypsy saw the move and looked confused.

“Let’s go.” Mitokh then added, “I’m hungry,” as an excuse.

Ikrae looked suspicious, but was in need of food and drink himself. Mitokh quickly led the way and the old woman lost them in the crowd of people.

Mitokh spent the rest of the day half looking over his shoulder. Ikrae started getting nervous as well in response. On the way back to their village, Ikrae said, “I don’t know what you were expecting, but you didn’t seem to be having fun.”

“It’s nothing. The gypsies bothered me for some reason.”

Foereenya overheard. “Gypsies. What did those thieves do?”

“Nothing, mother,” Mitokh replied.

Foereenya looked to Ikrae, who said, “They seemed normal to me, ma’am”

“All right. You should avoid them. They are thieves and rogues and not to be trusted. I know they entertain you, but remember what I said about them. Watch the jugglers at a safe distance. Don’t let any of them near you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” both boys said together.

Foereenya turned to her husband. “I saw Hamella.”

“How did their farm fare?”

“Not well.”

“So many of the crops have been damaged and many suffer. Since Verdoe became a paladin for the Temple of Sheemel, their family has been short handed and now the crops are crippled.”

“We saw the Bishop,” said Ikrae. Mitokh felt a chill.

“Yes. We saw him as well,” Foereenya replied. “He was here to perform the initiation ceremony for the sisterhood. That is why I saw Hamella. Huin is to be a priestess.”

Hawek looked to his wife with raised brows. “Isn’t she too young to be initiated. As far as I knew, initiates were no younger than eight. How old is Huin?”

“This is her sixth summer. She was born in the fall.”

“Why select one so young? She’s barely weaned from the breast.”

“The ways of the Temple are their own.”

“Hamella must be proud. Two of her children in the service of Sheemel.”

“Mostly, yes, she is. There is a lot to do at the farm and now two of her four children are not there to help.”

“True, but the Baron will treat them better. He will not wish the Temples displeasure. He may even release Fuebliij from serfdom and from the land.

“Where would they go and what would they do? Baron Goershod has been good to them and to us.”

“The Baron’s father was not.” Hawek and his wife remembered when he petitioned the Baron to be married. They remember Baron Rilliok, Goershod’s father. When the marriage was arranged, Baron Rilliok came to the village and took ‘lord’s rights’ of Foereenya. He continued to do so until she was with child. After the birth of the girl, the Baron returned and took the infant. The baby was never seen again.

“No, Baron Goershod is not like his father,” Foereenya said.

“I know little of Goershod’s sons, but it would wise to accept free status if offered before any of them become Baron.”

“Freeman is not guaranteed a good life. They have no protection and many end up in prison for unpaid debts. If they have to work for another, will the employer be better than the nobles? What is the difference? Better the security of nobility.”

Hawek wrinkled his brow. “Even considering what the Baron did to you?”

“Even then. It was not as bad as you think. It is his right.”

Mitokh and Ikrae knew what they talked about. Mitokh thought about it often. Baron Goershod may take lord's rights with Thumela and the boy did not know what would happen if the Baron found out she was not a virgin.

Hawek had other thoughts on his mind. He considered his wife's words. Over the years he assumed she felt the same about what happened as he did. They never discussed the matter. He did not wish to upset his wife. Now he wondered if he should have talked with her. *What was done was done.* He pushed further thoughts from his mind and rode in silence.

As they rode, Mitokh kept wondering about the gypsies and his growing fascination with them. He never thought so much about them, but now he felt a connection. The Bishop on the other hand produced fear. It was never that way before. The boy was raised to trust and revere the clergy and in contrast, distrust the gypsies as rogues, thieves and prostitutes. Now an inner feeling inverted what he had believed to be true.

As the boy thought of the gypsies, the gypsies thought of the boy. "Are you sure?" said the gypsy leader to the old woman.

"Yes," said Jotta. In her sixties, the woman was the eldest among them. She had been practicing the magical arts since she was a young girl. "I felt Kloersoe. The boy had something to do with him."

"It had been so long," said the leader. "If he was still alive, why had he not tried to contact any of us?" Talnoer was stocky with dark eyes, a strong round chin and braided black hair highlighted with beads. He had lighter skin than most, being only part Larivian.

"I do not know, but it was him. He was somewhere close and the boy knows where."

"Do you know where the boy went?"

"No."

"We cannot go searching every village. The Bishop will not tolerate it. The truce is uneasy as it is."

“I know. We can only hope that when Kloersoe is ready, he will contact us.”

Talnoer looked around as the packing continued. “He is close to your age. What could he offer after so much time?”

“He has knowledge. We need to get that before he dies.”

“All right, I’ll leave a couple people to search for the boy.”

“That should do. I will stay as well,” Jotta stated.

“That will be too dangerous. Pintaen has the gift and is able to protect herself. You will come with us.”

Chapter - 3

The boys were back at the cave. Four days had past since the festival. More rain fell and the cavern lake was as full as it ever was. Mitokh stared at the water on the far side of the lake, to the tunnel below water level.

“You can’t go back there anymore,” Ikrae said.

“I know. I was wondering who the man was. Why did he die back there?”

“I don’t know. It seems odd. Why did he not go into the village for help?” Ikrae shrugged. “I suppose we’ll never know. Let’s go sing.”

Forcing his gaze away from the wall, Mitokh said, “Yes, let’s do that.”

“You’re worrying me,” Ikrae said as they walked from the lake.

“I’m all right. I have to petition the Baron for marriage and I’m worried he’ll say no.”

“You should be more worried if he and his father find out she’s not a virgin.”

“I am. Maybe they won’t. How often have you heard of Baron Goershod taking lord’s rights?”

“Not as often as his father,” Ikrae stated.

“I’ll talk to my father about conducting the arrangement.”

“He doesn’t like her or the family.”

“I’ll talk to my mother and then my father. My mother likes her.”

“She wants you and your brother to be married. I think she likes all girls”

“It would cost a lot to get Eskoer a wife. No one likes him much. My parents would never be able to pay for a wife for him. The father of any woman would ask too much. With Thumela’s help, an arrangement may be made.”

The two arrived at the ‘singing cavern’. “I hope you two can be married. Maybe it will straighten your mind.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my mind.”

“Yes there is. You are like a different person. You don’t even talk the same.”

“I don’t? I don’t seem different.”

“You are and that is worrying me,” Ikrae stated.

“Don’t worry. I’m all right. I just have a few things on my mind.”

“Something you haven’t told me about?”

“No,” Mitokh lied. “You know everything.” The boy started a tone to shift away from the subject and Ikrae added a higher key. They sang and later ran through the caves, chasing each other. Mitokh did everything they used to do, so he appeared normal. Ikrae was suspicious of that.

When they were ready to leave, Mitokh put out the fire at the cave mouth while Ikrae stowed the candles. After the older cousin extinguished the flames with dirt, he moved enough of the stones to reveal the sword to make sure it was still there. He stroked the metal and reburied it before Ikrae saw him. Mitokh then crawled through the entrance and headed for home.

Back at the village, Mitokh’s mother had been crying. When she saw her son, she informed him, “Your grandfather died.”

“Grandfather Totek is dead?” Mitokh asked with a cracked voice.

A couple of tears welled in Foereenya's eyes. "Yes. It was sudden. He collapsed, shook intensely for a few seconds and then he was dead." Though not of the same blood, she loved her husband's father as she did her own. Her own father died years earlier and the Toeberiks became her family.

"We'll be burying him tomorrow," Foereenya stated. Mitokh could only nod and hug his mother. The rest of the day was somber. Everyone did their work in silence. Close to sunset, Mitokh and Ikrae went to the home where their grandfather had lived. The body was lying on the bed as though asleep. Both touched his skin to believe he was truly gone.

As Hawek and Boelstark wrapped the body in the shroud, the two boys asked if they could carry the litter to the burial plot outside of town. They were granted the privilege. The men finished wrapping the body, while Mitokh, Ikrae and other family members watched. Hawek, being the older of Totek's sons, spoke a simple chant over the body. Everyone closed their eyes in respect. Afterwards, they all left the house and went their separate ways.

Before leaving, Mitokh looked at the covered form. He had wanted to ask his grandfather about the draught that occurred over thirty years ago. He did not wish to say why he wanted to know and his grandfather had a way of pulling out the truth when he felt there was something being hidden. *I suppose it's not that important*, he thought. *Goodbye grandfather*. He walked to his home with his parents.

That night, Mitokh dreamt of a thick forest. Thicker and darker than any patch of woods he ever saw in the valley. Since he had never been beyond the mountain valley where he was born, the broad trees and fern undergrowth seemed alien to him. For a long time he wandered the small trails that meandered through the odd forest. The walk was pleasant and he was comfortable.

"Greetings, my grandson," came a young man's voice.

Mitokh looked to the side of the trail. On a knobby root of an especially large tree was a man in his thirties. The boy knew it was grandfather Totek. “Greeting, grandfather. Everyone will miss you.”

“I know,” the man said as he hopped off the root with more agility than Mitokh had ever seen from his grandfather. “I have to go soon, but you need to meet a few people first.”

“Who?”

“Come with me.” The man led Mitokh off the trail, into the trees. It seemed a mile trek through the bed of ferns before they came to another man sitting on an old fallen log. The log was rotten with young ferns and fungi growing from it.

The stranger was of modest height, very toned and muscular. His hair was tied back. He looked Larivian, except his manner felt odd and foreign, like the gypsies.

“This is Kloersoe,” Totek introduced.

Mitokh knew it was and stared at the man that sat on the rotting log. Kloersoe smiled back for some time. Mitokh wondered why things were taking so long if his grandfather was in a hurry.

Eventually Kloersoe said, “Greetings Mitokh. I know you have many questions and you are confused about a great many things that have occurred lately. We don’t have time for explanations and your grandfather has to go soon.”

There’s that time factor again and yet things seemed to move slowly.

Kloersoe continued. “While he is here, I need you to meet two people who will help you.”

“Help me? Help me do what?”

“To finish what I began. To destroy the evil that infests Larivia and the nobility.” The man swung his legs to the far side of the log and stood. Heading away, he beckoned for Mitokh to follow.

The boy’s grandfather jumped onto and over the log. “Come, come. We don’t have long. I’m being pulled.”

Mitokh leaped onto the log. He felt a tingle. He knew that he was on the threshold of a life making decision. He looked behind him, to his old life. He only saw the forest, but he knew his childhood and the life as a peasant was there.

Totek was about to say something, when Kloersoe placed a hand on his shoulder. “He has to make the decision on his own.”

“You don’t have time,” Totek said in a hushed whisper.

“I have the time, you don’t.”

“You won’t be able to do this after I’m gone.”

“Then I will do it another way.”

“And if he chooses not to come?”

“I will have to wait longer. Maybe his cousin will do it”

“Either would be a good choice.”

Mitokh listened to the conversation. It reflected his thoughts in part. The task at hand confused him. He knew nothing of it. He felt the growing need to leave his past behind. The forest was quiet. The boy did not know what the future held for him, but his past had nothing he wanted, except Thumela.

The boy turned toward the two men who waited. The answers to why the dreams nagged at him were with them. He hopped down on the far side.

Kloersoe led the way, followed by Totek and the Mitokh. A short distance later, the three approached two gypsies, a man and woman.

“This is Lumow and Pintaen,” Kloersoe introduced the gypsies.

“Pleased to meet you, Mitokh,” Lumow said, a tall slender man with a thin face and goatee. He was dressed in common clothing for gypsies.

Pintaen nodded. She also wore common gypsy attire and was a tiny, fragile looking woman.

“I have to go now,” Totek stated. “Mitokh, you are a man now and you’re a good one. I know you will do what needs to be done.” He hugged his grandson and walked off into the forest.

“Grandfather. I do not know what to do.” There was no reply or reaction. Mitokh was not sure he was heard. Totek walked around a tree and was gone.

The forest grew darker as the suns set. Kloersoe turned to Mitokh. “Remember Lumow and Pintaen. Accept their help. Finish what I began.”

The forest darkened and went black. As Mitokh had done so many times since the dreams began, he woke with a chill. This time he also yelled, “Grandfather,” aloud.

Eskoer woke from his brother’s outcry. Realizing what was yelled, Eskoer said, “He’s dead. Go back to sleep.”

Mitokh wanted to say something about his sibling’s coarse statement, but nothing he could say would change him, so he lay back down and thought about the dream. Of his past life, which he felt was over in some way; all he wanted to bring along was Thumela. He thought of Ikrae. His cousin and childhood friend had no place in his future. He knew that and felt only a small amount of regret. Sleep eventually retook him.

The morning came with a light sprinkle. By the time the funeral procession began its slow walk through the village, collecting people as it went along, the suns were high, hot and dry. Being older, Mitokh held the front of the litter and Ikrae the back. The burial grounds were near a patch of woods well away from the village. The litter bearers led the procession through an old iron rod gate in the chest rough stone wall.

The graveyard was a field of bushes beyond the wall. Paths branched out between the bushes. The bushes closer to the wall were quite old and large. Some had died and others, younger plants grew among the large ones. Only the family members of the Magistrate were buried close to the wall. Mitokh’s grandfather was to be laid to rest on the far side, away from the wall.

As the stream of people walked the selected paths, most saw that a man on horseback was observing them. When Mitokh noticed the man, he stumbled and caught his footing.

“Are you all right?” his father asked, walking a few paces behind.

“I’m fine, Father.” Mitokh responded as he looked to the man from his dream. Their eyes met. The boy knew he recognized him. Without any gestures, the gypsy, wearing a simple peasant outfit, turned the horse away and rode down the road. Mitokh scanned the area for the woman who was also in the dream. He did not see her.

The rider was out of sight when the procession gathered around a hole in the ground. The local priest stood at one side of the grave while the two cousins stepped to the opposite side.

The priest crossed his arms over his chest with closed fists, softly spoke a few sacred words and then reached down and scooped up a handful of dirt and held it out. “With the earth as the womb, the gods of the heavens created man and breathed life into him. Those who are gathered here know that Totek was a good man and we all know his service to the gods will be looked on with favor as his liege had.” He dropped the soil into the grave.

That act signaled for Hawek and Boelstark to approach, take hold of the ropes on the litter and lower the body into the hole. The priest chanted sacred words as the body descended. Once down, each person shoveled one scoop of dirt into the grave. As an indication of how much Totek was liked, the grave was completely covered before anyone placed a fourth shovel full into it. A small, young bush was planted on top, transplanted from beyond the graveyard. The plant was the grandfather’s favorite. Stones were placed around the bush.

After the burial, the congregation gathered in the village square with the priest. He performed a ceremony to bless the villagers from any ailments that may have been the cause of the man’s death. After its conclusion the priest said, “I must go now. I have pressing business.” The people bowed their heads as he walked away and then went about their business.

Mitokh felt uneasy and watched the clergyman mount his horse. As the man settled into the saddle, the horse grew skittish and reared up. The priest reigned in hard. When he did, the animal turned and landed on all fours, facing the center of the square where Mitokh still was. Mitokh gave a courteous bow and the man rode away.

The boy trotted to catch up with Foereenya as she walked home. “Mother, I would like to talk to you about Thumela.”

“Yes? What about her.”

“I wish to marry her, but father does not like her.”

“She is a nice girl. It is not her that he dislikes, it’s her father.”

“I thought he didn’t like her either. Why does he not like her father?”

“It goes back to before you were born, before I married him. It’s not important now.”

“Maybe you can convince father to petition for marriage.”

“I would like to see one of you two wedded. It does not seem possible for Eskoer.”

“No one likes him.”

“Don’t talk badly of your brother.”

“Sorry, mother.”

“I’ll discuss this with your father. Maybe this will settle the animosity between them.”

“Thank you, mother.”

Later that day, Mitokh went into the fields to tend the cows. He knew that if the man from his dream was still around the village, he would contact him there, where there was no one nearby. As suspected, the man came from the woods on the far side. Mitokh walked to the tall gypsy and looked around for the woman who was also in the dream. “Welcome, Lumow. Where’s Pintaen?”

The question startled the man. He looked around for a trap. Not seeing any immediate danger, he said, “She’s in the woods.”

“Let’s go find her,” the boy said. He thought of Ikrae’s comment about not sounding like himself. *He may be right.*

“All right, come along.” Lumow led the boy into the woods.

Mitokh followed. He wanted answers and the man was the only person outside his dreams that may be able to provide them. Having the gypsy walking before him gave the boy a chill. It confirmed the dreams were more than his imagination.

A short way into the woods where Mitokh meets with Thumela, Pintaen was leaning against a tree eating a handful of wild berries.

“I see you found him,” the petite woman said.

“It was more that he found me.”

“Really? And how was that.”

“He was waiting just beyond the woods. He knows our names.”

“He does, does he?” She turned to Mitokh, who was listening to the exchange. He had questions, but the two made him nervous. “How did you know who we were?”

“Kloersoe told me,” Mitokh answered, drawing their attention to him.

“Where is Kloersoe,” Pintaen asked.

“So that really was his name. I thought it was just a dream until I saw Lumow.”

“A dream?” the woman asked, perplexed.

Mitokh looked uneasily between the two gypsies. “I’ve been having dreams of the day Kloersoe died?”

“Died?” Lumow asked. “Kloersoe is dead.”

“You thought he was alive?” Mitokh asked.

“We thought you were hiding him.” The man looked to Pintaen “Does he speak the truth.”

“Of course I’m speaking the truth.” Mitokh felt indignant about strangers accusing him of lying.

Ignoring Mitokh's comment, she nodded. "He is and the two of them bonded in some way."

"Bonded?" Lumow said. "The Bishop will likely be here in a couple of days."

The mention of the Bishop caused a shiver in the boy. "Why would the Bishop come here?"

"Your priest seemed to recognized me," Lumow stated. "We have to be away before he arrives."

"Before you leave, can you tell me how to end the nightmares?"

"You're coming with us."

"I know Kloersoe wants me to, but I don't think I do."

Pintaen finished the last berry. "The Bishop is coming to find out why we are here. When he does, he will find out about the bond you and Kloersoe have and then he will have you killed."

"Why kill me? How will he know, if you are gone?"

"He'll know it out. Kloersoe has knowledge we need and people he knew and the Bishop wants that knowledge."

"I know nothing of what Kloersoe know."

"He'll assume you do. This is not the place to be talking about this, but if the Bishop finds out, many will die, starting with you."

"How can the bond you speak of be removed?"

"I do not know."

"Jotta should be able to remove it," Lumow said to the woman.

"Maybe."

"I can't just go," Mitokh said. "I'm going to be married."

"If you stay you will be dead."

"Why would the Bishop do that? I won't be able to tell hi anything."

"He won't at first," said Lumow. "He will try to get the knowledge out of you, whether you have it or not. He will torture you until he does and then kill you. It is not you, it's Kloersoe, but you

are connected to him in some way. The Bishop will get the information out through you. You can't stay here."

Mitokh thought hard about it. The Bishop frightened him for some reason and he wished to flee. "I want to take Thumela," he finally said.

"She's the one you are to marry?"

"Well, the arrangement had not been done, but we are hoping it will be so."

"Will she come without questions or telling someone?"

"I think so. If she thinks we can be together elsewhere. There's not really a good chance of us being married here, especially if the Baron takes first rights."

"I see," Pintaen said. "I hope she comes along then."

"I'll talk to her later. I have some chores left to do. Tomorrow we'll be ready to go."

"Good," Lumow said, "the sooner the better."

Mitokh left the gypsies. He finished with the cattle in the field and set about doing the evening tasks. The boy was getting excited. He knew that if he could convince Thumela to go with him, that they would be happy and safe. They had been living in fear since the first time they copulated. *How am I going to convince her*, he thought. *She knows nothing. Does she trust me that much?* He looked to the partly cloudy sky and the celestial ribbon of souls that curved partially across the heavens. *Baslaesu, please let her come with me and save her from her father and the Baron.*

\* \* \*

Thumela's father woke with a chill. His wife stirred uneasily next to him. The dream he awoke from was disturbing. In it, he plowed the field, when he heard laughter. It sounded like his daughter

and it taunted him. He walked into the barn and saw a young man running out the opposite side, playfully chasing Thumela. Noslae ran after the man and daughter, but the two were faster. When he caught up, the couple was in sexual embrace on a haystack. Thumela looked into her father's eyes, giggling as the man thrust into her. All the father was able to see of the seducer was the back.

Noslae woke. Moonlight beamed on his face through the open window. He swung his feet off the bed and sat up.

“What’s wrong?” asked the man’s wife.

“I’m checking on our daughter. I had a dream that may be telling me something I only half suspected.”

“Suspect what?”

“I think she may be...intimate with someone.”

“Our daughter. She’s a good girl.”

“I’m beginning to have doubts,” he said as he tied on his shoes. Noslae continued to wear his nightshirt. His wife shifted to the edge of the bed and placed her own shoes on. Together they climbed into the loft that served as their daughter’s bedroom.

“Mother, Father, what wrong?”

The man pulled back the covers and sat next to Thumela’s side. “Your mother is going to check you.”

“What?” the girl asked as her mother pulled the blanket the remainder of the way down.

The light from outside was dim and inadequate for the eyes. Thumela’s mother pushed the girl’s nightshirt up to the waist.

“What are you doing?” Thumela cried, pushing the hem back down.

Grasping the daughter’s wrists, Noslae forced the arms to her chest and held the girl in place.

“You will let your mother check.”

“No.” Thumela struggled, pressing her slender legs together and knees to the wall. She felt her mother take hold of her thighs, forcing them apart. Thumela continued to struggle, but her mother was strong and with her father holding her flat on her back, she was not able to prevent the intrusion. Thumela felt her mother probe into her.

“Oh dear, you were right.”

As the woman released the girl’s legs and recovered her, the father held her arms tighter to her chest, pushing his daughter down hard. “Who has done this to you?”

“No one.”

“Don’t lie to me. Who did this?”

“Mother. Make him stop.”

Tears soaked the woman’s face. “Tell us, dear. Who have you been with?”

“No one,” the girl said.

“The gods help you if you don’t tell me, for I will beat the name from you,” the father said.

“Please,” Thumela wept. “I love him.”

“Who?”

“I’m not going to tell you.”

Noslai held the wrists with his heft hand and backhanded Thumela’s face with the right. “You will tell me.”

Thumela cried out and then steadied her voice. “No.” She struggled harder. He struck her again. She remained silent. Another strike.

“Tell us, baby,” the mother said.

Thumela saw her father’s hand rise up again. “Mitokh,” she wept.

“Hawek’s son. I should have known.” Noslai released his daughter and stood, ducking below the low angled ceiling. He paced around the tiny loft, ranting. “His son is just like him. Hawek and

my sister, his son and my daughter.” He turned to the girl, who held her knees to her chest, clutching the blanket around her. “Are you still bleeding?”

“Yes, father. I’m not pregnant.”

“Good,” he said and climbed down the steep stairs. To his wife he said, “Keep her here.”

“Where are you going?”

“To talk to Hawek about his son.”

“Please don’t,” Thumela pleaded.

“He has to,” said the mother. “You’ve been violated.”

“No, I haven’t. I love him.”

“Don’t let her leave,” Noslae reminded his wife. He changed clothes and left the house.

Shortly before Noslae stepped from his home, Mitokh had set out to talk to the girl he wished to marry. He was leaving the valley in the morning and hoped Thumela would go along. The boy could not speak with her earlier and had waited until he knew her parents would be fast asleep. He had snuck to her house a few times before. He would crawl up the back to the loft window and help her out and down.

As Mitokh walked in the woods, he heard movement and grumbling ahead of him. He stopped. A man cursed under his breath as he tromped along the trail. Suddenly, the boy was pulled off the path. He was shushed into silence as a small hand covered his mouth. Mitokh saw a slender dagger being held at his chest by a delicate hand.

The cursing father walked past. Mitokh was able to pick out the words while he was close. “...boy. What was he thinking, violating my daughter? The Magistrate will have him hanged if the Baron doesn’t do worse and that father of his as well, but that will not be...” The man walked beyond earshot and out of sight.

Pintaen released Mitokh. “He would have killed you if he found you out here.”

“I have to warn my father.”

“That man will not harm your father. We have to go now.”

“I have to talk to Thumela.”

“It’s too late. If she comes with us now, your Baron will send men after us all.”

“I can’t just leave her.”

“That will be the best thing to do.”

“But…”

“Listen. If she goes, your liege will send soldiers. The Bishop knows we are in the area. If your girl goes as well, they will assume we had something to do with you both. Should you leave, alone, it will seem you ran for your life. That would be the truth, for the Magistrate in this village and the Baron would likely have you killed for what you had done.”

“We love each other.”

“I know. That will make matters worse. Just leave without her. Her father will blame you for everything that happened between you and that will save her life. You know she could be hanged alongside you if you are going to continue with the love statement.”

Mitokh thought for a few seconds. “I’m going to say goodbye.”

“You shouldn’t. She will not be alone. Trust me. You need to just walk away.”

“Trust you. I don’t even know you.” He remembered the dream and what Kloersoe said about the two gypsies. *Should I trust that dream and these people*, the boy thought. He decided to. “All right, I’ll go without her. I need to collect a few things.”

“At your house? You know you cannot go there while that man is there.”

“I can’t just go like this.”

“Yes you can. We’ll provide you with clothes when we catch up with the company.”

There was not much to be said. Pintaen guided the boy to where Lumow held three horses. The gypsies were expecting to find Kloersoe and hoped that he would go with them and in the event that Kloersoe did not have a horse, they brought one.

“There is something I do need to get.”

“We need to go,” Lumow stated firmly.

“Yes, I know. It’s in the mountains. It’s Kloersoe’s sword.”

“The sword is around here?” Lumow asked.

Mitokh felt excitement from the man. “Yes. It’s in the cave where Kloersoe died.”

“Good. Show us.”

As the three rode away from the village, Noslae arrived at Hawek’s abode and pounded on the door. Hawek opened it. “Noslae? What do you want at this hour?”

“Your son violated my daughter.”

“Eskoer did what?” Hawek snapped. His wife came out of the back room, pulling a robe around herself.

“Not Eskoer. Mitokh. Mitokh defiled my daughter. I had thought, since your wife came and talked to me about marriage that...”

Hawek turned to his wife. “You talked to him about Mitokh and Thumela?”

“Yes. I was going to talk to you before, but I thought I should check with Noslae to see if he would even consider the proposition.”

“You know how I feel about him and his family.”

“Think about us?” Noslae rebutted. “Damn you for thinking low of me and my family considering what you, and now your son, had done.”

“That is enough,” Hawek barked

“I don’t think so. I have no sons and only one daughter and Mitokh tarnished her. Is nothing sacred to you or your family?”

“Be quiet. I’m trying to sort this out with my wife.”

“Never mind your wife. Get Mitokh out here and have him explain things.”

“Noslae, if you don’t shut up, you’ll have more problems than my son.”

“Shall we see what the Magistrate thinks of all this?”

“Noslae,” Foereenya said, “I know you two have ill will, but...”

“It’s beyond ill will, ma’am.”

“All right, hostility, but if you bring the Magistrate into this feud of yours, your daughter will suffer along with our son.”

That stopped Noslae from further ranting. He was so upset with Hawek and Mitokh that he had not considered the consequences to his daughter. He was upset with her as well, but did not wish any harm to come to Thumela.

Hawek saw the thought processes within the man. “Now that you are not going to speak to the Magistrate, we can talk peacefully.”

“Your wife has a clear head. I will never say that about you. I will speak with her.”

“You will speak with me,” Hawek objected.

“I will only speak with *you* in the presence of the Magistrate.

“Please,” Foereenya said as she stepped between them, “don’t do this. None of us wish the Magistrate’s attention, so let’s calm down. Noslae, I still wish for Thumela and Mitokh to marry.”

“It’s too late for that.”

“Hear me out. As you said, you don’t have sons. In time, the land granted to you will be taken by the Baron and given to another. Mitokh will tend the fields when you are unable to. We have three sons. I would like for our firstborn to be wedded before Mitokh, but it is Thumela and Mitokh that has a relation.”

“The same kind of relation Yertna and your husband had.”

“My relation with Yertna was love,” Hawek said. “Your father had no reason to deny my marriage to her.”

“Considering what you had done to her,” Noslae stated, “he had every right.”

“I did nothing to harm her.”

“You defiled her, as Mitokh had done to my daughter.”

“Yertna was a virgin.”

“Yes,” Noslae said. “She was virginal when the Baron took his rights, but if he knew of what you two were doing, he would have had you hanged. She was not pure. The only reason I never said anything was that she would have suffered along with you.” The man took a breath, glared at Hawek before continuing. “I know you kept violating her after her marriage. How long? Did it continue until her death? Why she loved you, I cannot fathom.”

Hawek gave a dark look to the man, but before he could say anything, his wife said, “Mitokh and Thumela love each other. Will you ruin their happiness because of my husband?”

“Love?” Noslae said. “Your son could not restrain himself. He’s just like his father. How you tolerated Hawek’s infidelity is beyond me.”

“My relationship with my husband is not your concern.”

“Your son relationship with my daughter is mine. She’s no longer a virgin.”

“Yes. I can’t do anything about that. We’ll just have to hope the Baron...”

“Hope?”

“Yes, hope,” Fooreenya snapped back. “Our son has a greater chance of retribution.”

“As it should be.”

“Father,” Eskoer said from behind Hawek, “Mitokh is gone.”

“What,” all three asked at the same time.

“He’s not here.”

“Damn the boy,” said Noslae as he turned and ran toward his home.

Chapter - 4

“Don’t do anything to him,” Hawek yelled to Noslae as the man ran off into the moonlight. “Eskoer, get dressed,” Hawek told his son and went to change in more suitable clothing. Foereenya redress as well. The other younger children were told to stay in the house. When Hawek reached Noslae’s home, but Noslae was not there.

“Where did you husband go?” Hawek asked Noslae’s wife.

“I do not know. He came back looking for Mitokh. When he didn’t find him here, he left again. He’s very angry.”

“Thumela,” Hawek called into the house. “Where did Mitokh go?”

“Leave her alone,” the mother shouted.

“I don’t know,” Thumela replied, climbing down the steps from the loft.

“Go back to bed,” her mother commanded. The girl glared at her, but complied.

“If my son comes here for any reason, tell him to get straight home.” With that, Hawek and Eskoer commenced a search of the village and surrounding area. They did not recruit help. Hawek wished to keep the issue private.

As the search for Mitokh continued, Mitokh and the gypsies arrived at the cave entrance. The boy unburied the sword. “There is no sheath for it. The one that was with it rotted.”

“We’ll make one for it,” Lumow said. He took the hilt of the bastard sword and held it out. Checking to see that it was straight, he turned it first to one side and then the other. The condition was perfect. The design was simple with subtle etchings on the guards in a language the he did not understand or recognized.

“I do not know how to use it,” Mitokh said, watching the man carefully.

“We will teach you.”

“I’m a herder. You should have it.”

Lumow shook his head. “I would like to, but the task is yours to do.”

“What task?”

Before Lumow could say anything, Pintaen interrupted. “I want to see where Kloersoe is.” She was looking deeper into the tunnel.

“We can’t get to it anymore,” Mitokh stated. “The tunnel to that cavern had refilled.”

“We do not have time, anyway,” Lumow added.

“I wish to see it,” the woman insisted.

Sensing she had a need, Lumow nodded. “All right.” He turned to Mitokh. “Wrap this back in the cloth,” he said, handing the sword back to the boy, “and please show us.”

Mitokh rewrapped the blade and set it on the ground. He then pulled out the candles, lamp, flint and stone. After getting enough lit for everyone, the boy guided the gypsies into the depths of the caves.

When they arrived to the lake, Pintaen looked at the far side for several seconds and then said, “All right, we can go.” She held the lamp she carried above her head and walked to the exit.

Mitokh looked from the lake to her and then to Lumow. “That is all she is going to do?”

“Yes. That is all she needed to do.” The man followed the woman out.

“What was that about?” Mitokh said as he caught up.

“It’s her way.”

“What’s her way?”

“All in good time. You’ll have to ask her and I doubt she would tell you now.”

Mitokh wasn’t ready to ask his suspicions. He did not know how to ask, so he asked the one question he did know how to say. “What task is mine that I need that sword for?”

“I suppose you need to know,” Lumow said, ducking below a low portion of the ceiling. “It started before I was born. Kloersoe found out a secret about the clergy.”

“What secret?”

“We don’t know. It happened before I was born. He had told very few. Whatever it was almost started a war.”

“Kloersoe started a war?”

“It did not escalate to open warfare, but many did die as a result.”

“I never heard of it.”

“Of course not. It happened before either of us was born and it is not discussed.”

The three reached the entrance. Lumow told Mitokh, “Place everything as it was.” He then looked to the woman. “Can you cleanse the area?”

“Yes. The energies are cluttered, but the boys were the only ones here until we arrived.”

“Good.”

Mitokh watched the woman as he set about his tasks. She closed her eyes and stood, breathing slowly. “What is she doing?” Mitokh whispered. “What do you mean by cleansing?”

“She is removing any imprints of our visit that may be lingering around the area or in the tunnels.”

“Done,” Pintaen said, opening her eyes.

The boy looked to her and blurted out his suspicion. “You’re a witch. Gypsy woman *are* witches.”

With a luring smile, she said, “Some are and some men are as well.”

“We can talk as we ride,” Lumow stated and slipped around the thorn bush, receiving a few more scratches. “How did you find this cave?”

“Chasing a rabbit.”

On the trail, Mitokh thought of what Lumow had said. He felt an urging to do what Kloersoe begun, a drive deep within. “Who can help me do this task? I do not know what to do.”

Pintaen responded, “Jotta may be able to answer that. We were sent to find and bring Kloersoe to her. Maybe she can tell us more when she sees you.”

“I hope so,” Mitokh said softly, “but I do not want to start a war.”

“None of us do,” Lumow said, “but we may have no choice.”

\* \* \*

“Gone where?” Ikrae asked Foereenya, when he found out Mitokh had been missing for several hours.

Foereenya’s eyes were red and she fought off more tears. “We don’t know. Hawek and Eskoer are still looking. Noslae came over last night. He argued with your uncle. That is when we found out Mitokh was gone.”

“What were they arguing about?” He could think of only one thing.

“Thumela.”

“Mitokh wants to marry her.”

“I know. I talked to her father yesterday.”

“That started the argument?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll help look for him.” Ikrae ran off. He went straight for the cave. The boy knew that if Mitokh went anywhere to hide, it would be there. When he arrived, he could smell the fresh smoke from the fire and the pit was warm. “Mitokh,” he called down the tunnel. “I’m alone, Mitokh.”

There was no answer. Ikrae built a fire and went searching into the caverns with a lamp. He placed several candles along the way out of habit. There was no Mitokh. Back at the front he left the candles and lamp on the inside. He had been certain he would find his friend there. Ikrae crawled out.

The suns rose higher as the boy looked out over the valley. “Mitokh,” he called out several times with no answer except his own echoing voice. Ikrae went to where the stream came out of the ground and along every trail the two knew, calling out the cousin’s name. The suns started arching down.

Returning to the village, Ikrae went to Thumela’s home. He saw the bruises on her cheek, but decided not to ask about them. “Had Mitokh talked to you this morning?” he asked the girl. He did not think Mitokh did, but was running low on options. The girl’s parents let him speak to her on the front stoop. Ikrae knew the mother listened from within, hoping to gain some news. Noslae went about a few chores as if everything was normal.

“No. I haven’t seen him since the night before last,” Thumela said.

Ikrae could not speak freely and stepped off the stoop, saying, “We’ll find him.”

While the boy searched the countryside, four paladins, with their squires and servants, rode horses into the village. The bannerette held the personal standard for Bishop Shroevoch of a gold tree over a sinister red bar on a green field. The people in the square bowed their heads. “A stranger was here yesterday,” the lead templar said.

“Yes, my lord,” responded one of the villagers, keeping his head low. “We were burying old man Totek. We only saw him briefly before he rode off.”

“Which way did he go?”

“To the east, my lord.” The man pointed, not raising his head.

The rider nodded and rode away with his companions. Outside the village, the Templars asked others and received similar responses. The holy warriors of the temple rode east.

The suns set and Mitokh was still unaccounted for. “Sorry, son,” said Boelstark to Ikrae, “but we don’t know where else to look.”

“I’ve looked everywhere as well,” the boy said. He wanted to cry, but knew better to do so in front of his father. “What of Noslae?”

“What of him?”

“He was arguing with Hawek about getting Mitokh marrying Thumela.”

“There was more to the quarrel than that.”

“Could he have done something to Mitokh?”

“I don’t think so. No matter the problems of their past, I do not think Noslae is capable of harming Mitokh.”

Ikrae was not convinced. He said nothing, not wishing to explain what he knew or how long he knew it. That night he thought of Noslae. In the morning, the boy completed the chores, took a shovel and entered the woods between Mitokh and Thumela’s homes. He expected to find a freshly disturbed patch of ground. He saw broken branches and traces of people tromping through the area, but nothing that was a recent grave.

Ikrae reached the edge of the woods on Noslae’s side. He stared at the fields, examining each foot. With the rains they had been getting, it was hard to determine if any of it was freshly dug at. He gave up on the thought of digging around the field and garden. He knew Noslae would not allow that.

Each day Ikrae went out looking. Each day he returned alone, with no answers. One the fifth day he gave up looking. The village was not large and he had been over it several times. On that fifth day, he saw Thumela and talked with her. The boy had been avoiding her. He had little control of his own feelings and did not need the additional emotional outbursts from Mitokh's girl. When he saw her that day, he was ready.

Thumela cried as they sat on the fence of the field near her house. "Where is he? What could have happened to him?"

"I don't know," Ikrae said, feeling uncomfortable about his suspicions.

"You knew him the best. If anyone knows something, it would be you."

"I know."

"You do know something."

"I have a suspicion."

"What? Tell me."

"I can't. You won't believe me."

"Why not. What could it be that I would not believe?" There was no answer. "Tell me."

"I don't think I should."

"Why not?"

"I already said."

"Believe you or not, you should tell me. I should know. Please."

He looked at the girl. He knew how much she loved Mitokh. "Promise that you would not be upset of me for thinking this."

"I promise. Now, tell me." Tears slowed and her voice became angrier.

"I think your father killed him." He saw her eyes grow dark. "You promise not to be mad at me."

"I'm not. Why would my father kill Mitokh?"

“Because of you two.”

“I should have known you knew. I wonder how many others did.”

“No one. How your parents didn’t know earlier is beyond me figuring out. Mitokh thought your father was stupid.”

“My father is stupid.” The girl was silent for a while. She felt Ikrae’s eyes on her as she stared at the ground. Finally, she swallowed. She wanted to talk to someone. “The night…” The girl cleared her throat. “The night Mitokh disappeared, my mother and father checked me. That’s how they found out.”

“That is why Uncle Hawek and your father were arguing.”

“Father was very angry. If he did find Mitokh… I think he could have… killed him.” She wiped her eyes with a sleeve.

“I tried to find a grave. If he did bury him somewhere, I don’t know where.”

“Father doesn’t think he’ll return. He thinks he ran far from here, to get away from the Magistrate, to keep from being hanged. Maybe we should talk to the Magistrate.”

“And tell him your father may have killed Mitokh? He won’t believe us. Everyone knows what happened between you and Mitokh now. Even if the Magistrate believes us, he’ll say Mitokh deserved it.”

Thumela shed more tears. “You’re right. I hope he did run away. At least that way I can hope he’ll be back for me. But, where did he go?”

“I don’t know.”

\* \* \*

“They are looking for us,” Pintaen told Mitokh. The boy and gypsies laid on the ground, looking over the crest of a large hill. On the road below, they saw four templars with nine servant riders and packhorses, displaying the local Bishop’s colors. It had been six days since leaving Anskrot. The three rode at an easy steady pace. Pintaen knew that the Bishop was trailing them. A few minutes before the paladins came into sight, the three left the road.

“Where’s the Bishop?” asked Lumow.

“I do not know. I had thought that he was following and not just his templars.”

“Can you sense for him. Maybe he’s close.”

“If I try and he is, he will know where we are.” She looked at the paladins as they continued on the road. They all held their breath when the soldiers reach the point where the gypsies left the road. The Templar continued.

“We’ll ride overland for a while,” Lumow declared.

After two more days in the saddle, the three riders caught sight of the gypsy caravan. Lumow rode them up to the first wagon being pulled by eight large draft horses and spoke to Talnoer when he became close. “This is Mitokh. Pintaen senses Kloersoe is bonded to him.”

“Where is Kloersoe?”

“Dead. It seems he died a long time ago.”

“And this boy is bond in some way to his essence?”

“It seems so,” Pintaen responded.

Talnoer handed the reins to the young adolescent boy sitting on the bench to his right and climbed down. “Welcome to the Medanlu Company, Mitokh,” the leader said when Mitokh and his two traveling companions dismounted.

“Thank you,” Mitokh replied. He watched the wagons roll by slowly. The boy had never seen them that close. He knew the wagons were large, but not to the degree that they were. Mitokh felt dwarfed in comparison. The wheels were as tall as he was. The painted wood sides extended up to

enclose a functional home tall enough to stand within with a shingled roof. Besides being painted with vibrant colors, colorful ribbons flapped in the breeze.

The day was warm with a few fluffy clouds drifting across the sky. Many of the gypsies walked along the wagons, while others rode individual mounts. Mitokh didn't receive more than curious glances as they passed.

When the sixth wagon approached, Talnoer said, "Pintaen, Mitokh, come with me." As the rear of the wagon passed, the leader grabbed hold and jumped on the back ledge. He opened the door, centered on the rear.

Pintaen leapt up and went in. Lumow took the reins from Mitokh and nodded from him to go. The boy trotted to the ledge and crawled on.

Inside, a pungent herbal scent almost overwhelmed Mitokh and the interior was dark. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the dim light that filtered in through two small curtained windows on either side.

"Jotta? Are you awake?" asked Talnoer.

"Yes," the old woman said from behind a maroon patterned drape on the far side of the inside. She sat up from the bed and pulled the drape aside.

"This is Mitokh," Talnoer said.

The woman looked intently at the boy and then said, "Sit down," indicating a place for him to take. Mitokh sat. "Where is Kloersoe?" Jotta asked.

Mitokh hesitated. Pintaen answered, "Dead. His spirit is bound to the boy."

Jotta nodded. "That explains what I sensed." To Mitokh, she said, "Give me your hand."

Slowly Mitokh reached out his right hand. The woman grasped it with her left and turned his palm up, setting her other palm to his. She closed her eyes for a while.

When Jotta opened her eyes, releasing his hand. "I sense Kloersoe. For reasons of his own, this boy is to do his work."

Mitokh shook his head. “I do not wish to.”

“I know that,” Jotta stated.

“Can’t you break this...bond Pintaen keeps talking about?”

“Yes, but I’m not.”

“What? Why not?”

“Kloersoe is able to communicate to you. We have to finish what was started.”

“Why can’t someone else do that? I want the nightmares to stop. That is why I am here.”

“There is more to your presence here than that.”

“No there isn’t,” Mitokh stated firmly, but the woman knew he did not mean it and the boy knew her thoughts on that. Jotta just smiled at him. Mitokh did not know why, but he felt akin to these people. Ever since he found the skeleton, the village of his birth seemed less his home. Even with the feelings, he still had a tie to Anskrot he was not ready to release that so easily. There also were the dreams he did not wish. “If Kloersoe is going to communicate through me, couldn’t he just do it? Tell you what he has to and let me go?”

“It would take years to do that, more than I have left. I’m sorry, but you will be with us a while.”

“I have to get Thumela. I was not planning to stay away this long and need to get her.”

“Who?”

Pintaen explained. “She’s a girl in the village where we found Mitokh.” The younger woman told what she knew of the situation.

“You do not want to bring her into this,” the old lady advised. “She’ll be safer there.”

“I don’t think she will. Her father was mad enough to kill.”

The old woman looked to Pintaen, who said, “The father was angry, but he will not harm her.”

“You cannot know that,” Mitokh claimed.

“Yes she can,” Jotta countered. “You have work to do and Thumela is not part of it. We have to get you settled in.” The woman turned to Talnoer before Mitokh could object further and asked, “How low until we set camp?”

“A few miles. There’s that lake I wish to get to.”

“That will be nice. I need to rest.” Turning back to Mitokh, Jotta added, “When we set camp, I want to hear of those nightmares you have been having. Ride with us. In time, you will know more and what you have to do.”

“Why me?”

“I think it’s because you were the only one that saw Kloersoe’s remains. The bond took place at that time. No one was with you?”

“Ikrae is the only other one that knows of the skeleton.”

“He did not go look. You did. That was why you bonded. I should rest now. We’ll have time later for a few questions. I don’t know how much I could answer, but I’ll try.”

Talnoer rose and ushered Mitokh out. Pintaen followed until she reached her horse. The leader asked Mitokh to ride with him. The boy went with him.

As they rode along the countryside they passed a scattering of villages. The hills became shorter and the view broader. Mitokh was raised his entire life in the mountains. He had never seen so much open space in all directions. Part of him was uneasy with the openness, but mostly he was exhilarated. He was also glad to be out of the saddle. The boy was not used to riding and his backside was painful.

For a while Mitokh was content to watch the scenery. They followed the road along the Soemaru River that flowed from a portion of the mountains near his home. With each stream that fed into it, the river grew. Mitokh sat left of Talnoer, who had taken the reins and the boy on the other side was the leader’s son. Eventually Mitokh asked the leader, “Have you ever met Kloersoe?”

“Once, when I was very young.”

“Do you believe his spirit is still around and haunting me?”

“Yes, but I would not call it haunting.”

“He’s not creating nightmares for you.”

With a slight chuckle, Talnoer said, “No, he’s not.” The two talked of the dreams and everything that was found out. Mitokh knew he would be repeating it all to Jotta, but it helped to discuss it.

Talnoer seemed disappointed that there was not details of what Kloersoe had done in his earlier activities. “That was all he revealed to you?”

“Yes, so far. I’ve not had any dreams since I left my village, none that I think was caused by him. I still know he’s present in the ones I do have.”

“It will help you if you consider this your home.”

“I’ll be going back to Anskrot soon, will I not?”

“With what you told me, do you think you should?”

“I don’t know.”

Later, a small lake came into view. To Mitokh, the lake was the largest by far he had ever seen.

“Wow. That is big.”

“That’s Lake Arikuewa. It is very small compared to Lake Bakhue.”

“I had always wished to see Lake Bakhue,” Mitokh said.

“You will.”