

Chapter 1

Day 1: Linendale Ward, The king's city of Illag

Duchess Chandolyn Vusson held her head high as she sauntered to the guestbook. She readied herself for the scorn waiting in the busy room ahead. Of the many salons in the city, Madame Yanwell's had a reputation for snobbery. Chandolyn had a reputation, too, and it did not endear the Yanwell crowd to her.

As a duchess, no one would outrank her, and in beauty and grace she was unmatched. She'd ranked as the finest young lady in the city, but that was years ago. That was before the murder and the trial. Chandolyn had avoided places like this ever since.

This was not a social call, however. If she wasn't here to spy, she wouldn't have come at all. She was here to catch Earl Oren Thorstle with his mistress. Success would earn her three gold crowns.

She scanned the day's signatures as she dipped the pen. This certainly was a prominent gathering, and a popular one. Dozens of influential names filled the lines. Flipping back, she saw Duke Wittson's written in a courtesan's perfect hand. The prospect of seeing *him* made her frown, even eight years after their last encounter. On the next page sat Thorstle's mark. The target was in the salon.

Eighty people filled the room. They were separated in clusters, some standing some sitting. Women in expensive but informal dresses outnumbered the men, who were divided evenly between officer's uniforms or gentleman's jackets. Every noble had at least two attendants and ten staff members made sure no one lacked wine or tea.

The main hall was decorated for luxury with reminders of scholarly conceit. The room was wrapped with dozens of tall, built-in shelves filled with untouched books. Elaborate gold-leaf trim set off these openings and encircled the room twice in a chair rail and a filigreed crown moulding. The antique ivory of the silk wallpaper and the weathered gold of the millwork were duplicated in the upholstered chairs and couches.

Chandolyn's instinct was to smile and join the nearest group, but she maintained a haughty expression and walked between two crowds. She could not see her adulterer, yet.

She had done her research on Colonel Earl Oren Thorstle. He

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was a cavalry officer in Pentad Oniad's army and should be wearing his dun grey uniform with white facings, trimmed with emerald green, and accessorized with white embroidery and gold epaulets. She also had his wife's description: five foot eight, violet eyes that could chill you, and jet black hair when it wasn't powdered or hidden under a wig. If he was here, he would be easy to spot.

As a spy master, Chandolyn had a dozen people to do her dirty work. For this kind of job, however, a position in the upper nobility was necessary and Chandolyn alone held such a rank in her organization. She didn't like to have such a direct hand, though. It risked exposure.

Everyone knew about her past, but if they found her secret side, she'd be drummed out of town. No one could know she was behind the many intrigues and scandals she'd had a hand in.

Oren Thorstle stood at the centre of a throng in the far corner of the huge room. Gifted with striking good looks, he also had a deep, resonant voice and the type of demanding personality that made everyone focus on him. Chandolyn could hear him perfectly from forty feet away.

Finding any one of this man's mistresses would be a simple effort. Given the way he impressed the ladies around him, it wouldn't surprise her if he took one of them to a cloakroom for a hushed, hurried entertainment. This would be the easiest fortune Chandolyn would ever earn.

A firm hand on her arm almost made her shriek. She tore away and faced her accoster. It was someone she knew. Someone she knew and didn't like: Duke Yarro Black.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in a forced whisper. He wore a dark blue waistcoat over a white shirt, black velvet breeches, and an immaculate wig.

Chandolyn tore away. "I don't do all my work for you. I am a duchess. I do know people."

"This is not a good time," he said, glaring at her through black eyes. "I am meeting Duke Wittson. It will go horribly wrong if someone from Tanarane is here, especially you. You must leave."

"No. I will not." She glanced in a mirror at her hair, dress, and makeup. For the occasion she had visited a hairdresser that specialized in magical enhancements. The trick to this kind of event was to look "everyday," but you still had to have the most beautiful, striking coiffure in the room. Chandolyn's long strawberry-blond locks assured that, but a little magic never hurt.

The same went for dresses. Large bustles or shoulder pads would draw shameful gapes from every sensible woman. Corsets, of course, were required. Chandolyn, busty and voluptuous, considered those embellishments the efforts of frail women to approximate her figure.

Everything was still in order despite Yarro Black's attack.

She turned away and walked to the nearest crowd.

She happened to pick Duke Wittson's group. Five nobles and a dozen attendants glared at her. This was bad. Wittson was one of the most powerful peers, master of the city of Birus and the rich lands surrounding it. In the capital and throughout all Phlegam, he wielded tremendous power and influence. Given the history he shared with Chandolyn, the superior look he now inflicted was all she had dreaded.

Seated, he was reclining back with his legs crossed while others leaned in like he had a pull on them. His natural, greying, dusty blond hair was only lightly powdered and roughly arranged.

Chandolyn bowed as the gentlemen in Wittson's group reluctantly rose. They might hate her, but they didn't dare behave poorly. A courtier scurried to find a chair to add to the circle.

"Your Honourable Grace," Wittson said. "It has been a long time." He turned and addressed his friends. "This is the Double Duchess, Lady Chandolyn Vusson."

When some people gasped, the ghost of a smile lit Wittson's face. Her history preceded her.

Chandolyn would never forget the last time they had seen each other. He had been furious that his church would not execute her.

After a pause, he took Chandolyn's gloved hand and bowed to kiss it. At fifty-five years old, he had a dignity that younger men lacked. The routine gesture was powerfully new from this confident duke.

Still no one spoke. Chandolyn was used to the awkward silences following her introductions. She'd had her husband killed, the story went, fooled the gods about her guilt, then sold his title to moneylenders, merchants, and other unsavouries. Striving noblemen secretly admired her, but everyone here was already at the top. Her story was a slap in their face.

"This is ... interesting," Earnest addressed her. "How have we not seen you in so long?"

"I live in different society, Your Honourable Grace," Chandolyn said, letting her smile fade.

"We know," Wittson slowly replied.

Chandolyn wished she had picked any other group. She should have taken a better assessment of the room, but Yarro Black had surprised her.

For eight years she'd consorted with people below her sullied station. She was more a woman of business than a peer of the realm, a fact that grated against Wittson and the old-style nobles he considered good company. They would be even more shocked to learn that she was also a spy and was in the chartered sicarian company of Tanarane. Wittson and his ilk had pushed her into this life by excluding her from society. It had

rendered her holdings worthless. She'd had to lend her dead husband's prestigious name to unworthy associations to survive.

As far as she was concerned, the shunning could cease. A duke was a duke, after all. Top of the nobility. She should be able to consort with anyone. It had been foolish to let people like Duke Wittson intimidate her for so long. She resolved to win them over.

"Maybe it's time," Chandolyn said, making her voice more breathy, "to mend fences." She looked around, gauging everyone's reaction. She was used to seducing her way into people's favour. This would be a tough effort and Oren Thorstle might get away in the meantime, but she couldn't resist a chance to test her charm. "They say to keep your friends close and your enemies closer."

Either her tone or her words made three men seem less hostile. If she kept working at it, she might eventually regain some status.

Wittson eyed her like she was a spider crossing his dinner plate.

"By Saga!" someone bellowed from halfway across the crowded room. "Is that the double duchess? What is she doing here?"

Chandolyn didn't have to turn to know who produced that screech. It was Earnest's son, Gancey. She'd heard his voice before. It was just as outraged as his father's at her trial.

Duke Wittson winced at his son's indecorum.

Gancey circled around, and faced her. He looked more like his father now, but the hollow cheeks under high cheekbones, the aristocratic hooked nose, and the weak chin above his thin neck came together to make him look arrogant and petulant. On Earnest the same features combined to define nobility.

"Shouldn't you be walking the wharves, selling yourself to sailors?" Gancey asked. "I'm sure you can earn half a crown spreading your legs for ruffians."

"Gancey," Earnest tried to interrupt, but his son was just getting started.

"Maybe no one told you you're not welcome here." Gancey tilted his head back and forth as he spoke, as if he was trying to drill the words into her. "You are not welcome anywhere. Get out or I will find someone to—"

"Gancey! Enough!" Duke Wittson barked.

Gancey flinched, turning back to look at his father. Every conversation in the room stopped.

Starting from the distant corners, more and more people started whispering to each other. Chandolyn clenched her jaw and the judgements rose like a tide.

A different commotion drew her attention. Someone else cut their way into the Wittson group.

"Excuse me, Your Honourable Graces," Yarro Black weaved in. As socially conscious as Black was, he was committing several gaffes at once.

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Both Wittsons turned to face Yarro.

"A whore and a sicarian in one sitting," Gancey exclaimed. "Next we'll have lepers joining us."

"I was escorting Duchess Vusson to see His Grace, the Earl of Balgorden," Yarro said, nodding in the direction of another cluster of nobles. A stout man, overdressed in a formal jacket lifted his hand. That sly Yarro Black had arranged a cover story.

"Yes, let her go," an indignant earl spoke up. "She is famous for murdering her husband." He sneered like he'd scored a point in a fop's duel of wits.

Chandolyn held still a moment. She had facilitated her husband's death, but the month long inquisition by the Chief Justice of the Holy Court of Saga could not implicate her. She turned slowly and fixed the snide earl with a knowing glare. "I am not famous for murdering my husband. If that was worthy of notoriety, there would be many more famous women and many more dead husbands. I am remembered because I got away with it, a distinction you should keep in mind before trying to embarrass me."

The earl blanched. He leaned over and whispered to a courtier to avoid her gaze.

"Yes. You should go," Gancey said with restraint. "You're likely to find a warmer welcome from Balgorden."

Chandolyn pursed her lips on another deserved rebuke. She could put an earl in his place as a duchess, she could even politely remind Gancey to address her as "Your Honourable Grace" before calling her a whore, but this situation needed her immediate retreat. "I will attend my appointment with your leave." She bowed to Duke Wittson. "But your son is mistaken. I find this reception very warm, considering our last encounter."

She took Yarro Black's offered arm, allowing him to lead her. The assembled nobles shifted out of her path, some for fear, some for awe, others for disdain, and a few with a different impulse: desire. Chandolyn noted the men showing interest.

As they proceeded, she locked eyes with Oren Thorstle from afar. He, too, exhibited brazen interest and she didn't look away. Perhaps Yarro hadn't ruined her day after all. He looked smart in his uniform. Fit and handsome. Those eyes were powerful, Chandolyn's heart began pounding harder.

The whole scheme to turn him in as an adulterer seemed rash. It might be a better option to tell his wife a tale of fidelity while starting something torrid with him herself. Maybe he would pay her even more coin to keep his wife fooled.

Their line of sight was broken by a coterie of noblewomen sneering venomously at her.

Yarro led Chandolyn to Balgorden. The earl, cheery, red-faced, and loud, concocted a funny story that pertained to her. Chandolyn made a life of lying, for her part she did not skip a

beat. This helpful, joy-filled nobleman gave her hope for her kind. When the exchange started to lose momentum, Yarro made a polite excuse and escorted her away.

He led her through the crowd and, after taking a door and a passage, they entered an unused chamber. It was a gallery of ancient war heroics. Portraits, busts, weapons, and artifacts filled the walls. Yellow textured wallpaper and white enamelled millwork framed each piece for optimum viewing. Crysandles of different hues drew the best colours out of every work of art.

"You might have ruined everything," Black said through clenched teeth. "I told you to get out of here and you leapt into the fire."

Chandolyn frowned like she smelled something foul. "Is Tanarane looking for work from Earnest Wittson?"

"Yes, of course, but he won't hire us if he knows you're on the charter."

"Not to worry, Black," she assured. "I keep my association guarded very carefully."

Yarro Black harrumphed. "And what are you doing here?"

"Oh, I'm here to meet Earl Balgorden," Chandolyn smiled. "Charming fellow, don't you think?"

"I don't have time for your games. The earl did *me* a favour. Who are you here to see?"

Chandolyn batted her eyelashes.

"There's a back entrance off the green hall. You can leave by that door. I will do my best to throw suspicion off you."

"For Lera's sake," Chandolyn snapped back. "I am a duchess, not some servant. I have more right to be here than you."

"You are in Tanarane's inner council. That obliges you to protect and promote your charter. Even if you are an affiliate member. You *will* leave, now."

Chandolyn waved her hand like shooing a fly. He wasn't completely wrong, she would be wise to leave. Duke Wittson was irritated by her presence, but his son was furious. His behaviour drew far too much attention. But her pride was too strong. She was as good as any of them and was determined to prove it. Yarro Black didn't intimidate her, either. He was the intermediary between Tanarane and Lord Earl Saporanintar, the charter holder. Black's sole responsibility was to rub elbows with nobility and pass on the contracts he solicited. Chandolyn would not obey him. She glared in defiance, turned, and walked away.

On returning to the main hall, Chandolyn found the nobles engrossed in their schemes and gossip. Only those she approached gave her either a glare or a cold shoulder. She picked a wandering walk through the crowd, taking in as much as she could about the attendance. One thing she discovered was that she felt old. She put herself somewhere between the dowagers and the debutantes in age. At twenty-eight she was closer to the fledgling ladies, but as a widow felt something in common with

the elders. The young women seemed so flighty. Some of these girls, hanging off every word of this major and that diplomat, couldn't be any more than sixteen. Was Chandolyn that eager when she came out?

Thorstle was standing in a circle of adoring women. The rich timbre of his voice carried as he recounted a story to them. He glanced at Chandolyn, smiled, and finished his statement. The ladies tittered.

"Are you still here?" Gancey screeched. Chandolyn turned halfway around to see him stomping up. "I thought I told you to leave." He was loud enough that everyone within ten feet stopped and turned. That reedy rasp of his voice grated against Chandolyn's nerves.

"I am," Chandolyn said, assuming a relaxed tone and poise like she was in her boudoir with her favourite lover. She stepped slowly and evenly toward him, never taking her eyes off his. "I just couldn't leave without giving you a chance to apologize."

Gancey lurched back. "You'll get nothing of the sort." There was always tension in his voice, but there was extra strain in it now. Chandolyn steadily closed the distance. "It's you who should apologize," he managed.

"For what?" Chandolyn whispered as she moved intimately close, putting enough air into the words to rustle the fine hairs on his cheek. She felt the expensive fabric of his lapel between her fingers, then ran her hand down his jacket. Nearby watchers began to snicker. Gancey's breath was trembling.

"Enough," he screeched and shoved her back. The push was hard and angry and it knocked her sprawling on the floor. She tried to make the embarrassing tumble as graceful as possible. The gasps and indignation from the crowd were all directed at him.

"Stand down, sir," a resonant voice demanded. Chandolyn had to fight to keep a conniving grin off her face. This was the best outcome possible. It was Colonel Thorstle coming to her defence. He rushed up and stood toe to toe with Gancey. "You are despicable," he said to his face. He held Gancey's glare for several heartbeats then turned away and came over to kneel beside Chandolyn. This fall was going to be worth the bruises. "Are you alright?" he asked, taking her hand and putting an arm over her shoulder.

Chandolyn gazed deep into Oren's violet eyes. She tried to say "yes," but she had trouble getting it out. It wasn't shock that muted her, nor was it his amazing gallantry, though she drew as much as possible from both of those sources. She didn't dare speak for fear she would laugh. This scene came together exactly as she'd hoped. A weak nod conveyed her meaning to the kneeling earl.

Oren helped her to her feet. He kept an arm over her shoulder as he led the way to her attacker. "Apologize," he

demanded of Gancey. "You apologize to this lady or I will call you out to a duel."

The silence was painful. In it, Gancey's face reddened deeper and deeper.

"You are a loathsome oaf." Oren let Chandolyn go and took a step closer to Gancey. "I challenge you to a—"

"Gancey!" Earnest interrupted with a yell. He was twenty feet away, but Chandolyn could feel his anger. "You will apologize."

Ten hot breaths flared Gancey's nostrils. He finally muttered, "I am sorry, duchess."

This embarrassed Gancey but not nearly enough. She gave him a pained look as she tried to think of a way to put him in his place for good. Nothing came to mind immediately, but she had gained the sympathy of many former enemies. Perhaps even Duke Wittson had changed.

Chandolyn took Earl Thorstle's arm, turned, and allowed herself to be led away.

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Day 1: Southgate Ward, Illag

Menton's belly clenched and bent him double as he walked down the street. Vomit exploded out of his mouth and nose. The spasms continued, bringing up the ale three more times, and then Orthane slapped him hard enough to make him stagger into his own mess.

"Can't hold your cheap rotgut ale hey, boy?" Orthane said, viciously proud of his hit.

As Menton regained his footing, Orthane stepped up and shoved, knocking him sprawling.

It was a cool, rainy summer day and the narrow streets were half empty. Menton was sober enough to feel shame as he picked himself off the ground. Orthane lurched ahead, angry at everyone and caring about no one. Menton ran to catch up.

"I told you to get us a ride," Orthane chided. "Walking half a mile in this weather. It's all your fault, you dumb shit. I'm completely soaked."

"The barkeep wouldn't—"

"Myaa, myaa, myaa," Orthane wheeled on him. "We'd be riding in a carriage if you could do anything right. And now you're so drunk, no one'll pick us up."

"But he said—" Menton tried to explain.

"Shut your fucking gob. I don't need excuses."

If he could have composed his thoughts and kept Orthane from interrupting, Menton would have told him that the publican was never going to arrange a ride again. He wouldn't do anything for them because of the last brawl Orthane had started. They

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were lucky to enter his pub at all.

Orthane had a face for scowling. At his angriest, with his small eyes and small ears, his skin twisted into furrows and angles. The grey eyes were set deep and never seemed to blink. A worn, three-corner hat was keeping his greasy, greying, thick hair dry. It hid a sharp widow's peak above his short forehead.

He was much shorter than Menton, and walked with a posture of confidence, even in this rain. Never looking down, he strode ahead, elbows out and back. His hips and waist were narrow and it looked like a larger man's torso had been set on top of it.

Menton was wearing a tricorne hat, too, but not a cape, like his companion. He had picked his knee-length leather jacket with wide lapels and collar. Every button, even the ones that split the back for riding, was fastened against the rain.

The water still penetrated through dozens of holes. They had been created by swords, arrows, musket balls, monsters' claws and teeth, and wizards' spells. Every time he'd returned home each new gash received tight stitching and patching, but the jacket was no good in this weather. Healing potions and spells had sealed his skin without a trace of injury, but there was no such repair for his clothes.

They staggered through Southgate, a city ward populated by prosperous but untitled families. It was an aspiring neighbourhood. There were none of the collapsing tenements of Openward, nor any of the stinking mills and arcanerants. Any Southgate stroll would only pass a handful of beggars, compared to hundreds in the poor wards. Without access to the river, this district lacked mobs of drunken sailors and longshoremen. These locals worked hard and yearned for better. They wanted to rise in society. The markets and thoroughfares were clean, plumbing saved the street from foul human waste, and people hid their clutter from public places.

Even though people here wanted to seem wealthy, they were far from it. Menton and Orthane were special mercenaries for a powerful noble. Menton knew how the other half lived. The plaster faced buildings were large and well designed, but each was connected to its neighbours. In a noble ward the mansions were dressed in stone and were surrounded gardens and wrought iron fences. A large dwelling here sheltered an extended family of twenty, while gentry estates quartered scores of servants to care for six or seven people.

Orthane regularly patronized every bar in every direction from headquarters. Menton was always taken along. He liked the ones in peasant and working wards, but Orthane dragged him to nice areas like this, too. These jaunts could be fun, but more often they were regrettable or embarrassing. Too often, they ended in trouble.

The street narrowed between buildings as they plodded along. They stopped where the walls on either side were closest, and the four-storey buildings shielded the rain. Only one

carriage at a time could pass here. Orthane shook the rain of his cloak and glared at Menton. He drew in a long breath, the kind he always did before delivering a devastating harangue.

A terrified shriek from up ahead alerted Menton to danger. Orthane might not have heard it, but the noise, definitely a woman's voice, moved Menton like spurs to a horse's flank.

"Where do you think you're going?" Orthane yelled, but Menton ignored him.

After the end of the two close buildings the next ones were set back, widening the street to fifteen feet again. Menton splashed forward, listening for more pleas. In three steps he heard her again. The cries came from a narrow gap between two buildings. He leaned into a determined sprint.

As he entered the passage, he heard more sounds. Besides the woman, someone else cried out in pained groans. When Menton rounded another corner, he heard snide, merciless taunts. Pushing off a wall to speed a left turn, Menton hurried deeper into the alley.

A scrawny man in tattered clothes grappled a dark-skinned woman in a multi-coloured dress. The thug's arm was across her chest and he held one of her arms by the wrist. Another man with the same skin as the woman was lying huddled on his side, bleeding from a wound in his gut. There were four other attackers. Two watched the alley and the two biggest, each wielding a knife, were kicking the prone foreigner.

Menton twisted to squeeze past the closest lookout, but the move unbalanced him and he lurched into the scrawny guy holding the woman. He knocked them both over. Hero, villain, and damsel-in-distress sprawled in a tangle. Menton found himself on mucky, rough ground, pawing over garbage and mud.

The kicking men stopped to look, but the bypassed lookout rushed in first. He stomped up fast to deliver a kick.

Menton twisted so he could see. The lookout took a lunging step and drew his other foot back for a rib-cracking kick. Menton smashed his elbow into the planted ankle, buckling the lookout's joint before he delivered. The thug fell onto his scrawny accomplice.

Though he was drunk and outnumbered, Menton wasn't afraid. He'd been in hundreds of fights against tougher opponents. Drunk wasn't even an impairment compared to what happened on a mission. He'd had his head rung into stupor, taken arrows through limbs. He'd felt the paralyzing crunch of a mace, muscles slashed useless by swords, and a musket ball splattering a crater in the chest. He always found a way to carry on. In this scrap he wasn't even hurt. He sprang up, helped the woman to her feet, and put her against the wall where he could protect her.

"We got a hero here, boys," a knife wielder sneered. He was medium height with thick bones. A jagged scar ran from the corner of his eye to the middle of his chin. "Someone else to

rob."

"Looks like he's got some coin on him," the far lookout chimed in. "Do ya think you're some kind of hero, fella?" This he said to Menton.

"I suppose," Menton said. "I am a sicarian."

"Haha, fat chance." the scarred knife wielder said.

"What's a sicarian?" the larger man beside him asked.

"They hunt and kill for the king," the far lookout contributed.

"No, they fucking don't," Scar said, sneering. "They kill monsters in the mountains. They're wizards and exemplars. I'll bet he's got treasure and potions 'n all."

"Well, he ain't got no sword," the other knife wielder said.

"I'm going to kill him," Ankle scowled. Getting up, he tested his leg and found it couldn't hold him. He swore.

"Let them go," Menton said steadily. "Let them go and I won't hurt you."

The thugs laughed. "You don't have a weapon," Far Lookout said. "No armour neither. And you're just a damn kid."

"What you gonna do, boy?" the second knife wielder taunted. He was as thick as the guy with the scar, but taller. Menton could tell by his posture and tone that he knew how to fight.

A movement from behind drew Menton's attention. Scrawny was up. He jumped at Menton with his arms out.

Menton turned tuned his back to him and shifted closer, fluidly grabbing one grappling arm. He leaned forward and pulled down. The move wheeled Scrawny over and Menton guided his forehead into the ground. The horrid spinal crack and hollow skull thud made everyone cringe. When Menton stood back up he was in the same position he'd started in. The four remaining thugs hadn't moved either, except to drop their jaws.

"Now what trouble did you find?" Orthane scolded from the entrance to the alley.

Menton closed his eyes, grimacing. He warned the muggers again: "Get away now and I'll let you go." He thumbed back at Orthane. "My friend won't be so kind."

The knife wielders advanced, Scar closing first. Big, strong, and determined, with a murderous contempt in his eyes, he showed no fear.

Menton was a sicarian, hired by the nobility to kill monsters, recover treasure, and guard important people. A thug with a knife didn't worry him. He stood his ground.

He focused on Scar's knife. The blade was only a hand span long, but dangerous enough. He shifted back as Scar slashed. There was no windup or strength in the attack, leaving no easy opening to move in. The other knife wielder circled to the left.

The woman whimpered as her husband struggled to pull himself toward her. Menton was struck with a vision. He saw in an instant flash through both the husband and his wife's eyes.

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Deeper than that, he could feel their emotion, their pain and fear. They were certain they would die. Then Menton was back in his own senses. He was moved by their fear and love. It multiplied his anger. He clenched his teeth and sprang on Scar.

Scar, caught off guard, tried to reverse his swing, but Menton got a hand on his forearm and pummelled his face. When he dropped the knife, Menton kicked it back and shoved the thug's head into the wall. Scar crumpled to the ground.

The larger man with the bigger knife leapt. Menton ducked, coiled, and shoved him forward. The attack became a lurch. Menton stood up, grabbed the man's arm and worked the knife free at the same time as he stepped on the back of his knee. The man went down and Menton crunched his face into the wall with his hip. He fell into a heap.

The dark-skinned woman scurried to her man's side. She put her hand on the bleeding gash in his belly and they cried as they held each other close.

"Go and I won't hurt you," Menton said to the remaining thugs, fighting down his boiling rage. A part of him wanted to punish these men, to make them hurt for hurting others, but he cringed at the thought of it. Scar and Ankle, both on their knees, were scuffling away, Big Knife was unconscious, and the last two were creeping back submissively. This fight was over.

"Menton, you coward," Orthane yelled as he ran in. He grabbed one of the standing thugs by the hair and stabbed him in the neck with Scar's knife. Menton had kicked it back and Orthane now used it.

"No. NO," Menton pleaded. His anger vanished.

Orthane pulled his knife, shoved Neck-Wound aside, and moved to straddle Ankle as he crawled. He plunged the blade three times into his back.

Menton backed off. "No one has to die!" he pleaded.

"Everyone dies," Orthane replied with savage glee in his eyes.

Neck-Wound oozed blood between his fingers. The stab had missed the mark and it wasn't a gusher. He ran off with the only other attacker still on his feet. The man between Orthane's legs bucked and writhed, blood streaming out of his back, frantically trying to crawl away. Orthane lifted a leg, letting him go, and dashed over to Scar. He caught the rising outlaw as he stood.

"You're gonna die by your own knife, you smelly thug."

Menton sprang forward and shoved Orthane. "No," he shouted.

Orthane let go of Scar and staggered back against a building.

"Don't you ever hit me," he yelled. All sense left his eyes, replaced by burning fury. It was the look of a ravenous orc, but in the features of the man who had lifted Menton from poverty.

Menton feared the monster inside. He shrank back.

Orthane sprang at him and slammed him against the wall.

"I'll kill you," he seethed rabidly, spit flying out of his mouth.

Menton felt the blood-slick steel of the knife press against his throat. He couldn't move. Closing his eyes, he waited for the slice that would end his life.

Orthane let go and rushed after the fleeing thugs. Menton gasped and fell to his knees.

"You're still alive," Orthane said, gloating over the man he'd stabbed in the back who'd collapsed twenty feet away. "Not for long, shit-eater."

Orthane flipped him over. The wounded man tried feebly to grab Orthane's arms, but it was like watching a four-year-old struggling against a grown man. Orthane put one knee on his elbow, pinning it to the ground, and just let the guy clutch at his knife with the other. Orthane plunged the blade into his neck and sawed it down from his chin to his collarbone. Menton looked away but heard the sputtering coughs as the thug drowned in his own blood.

"That's the third time you attacked me," Orthane said to Menton. He slouched over the dying man, panting. "I forgave the other two 'cause I reckon you're sweet on Cora, but I'm not letting this one slide. I mean to turn you into a real sicarian. Your stupid cowardice is gonna get me killed."

He looked down to watch his victim's final movements. "We're going back to headquarters," he ordered.

"What about these two?" Menton asked, indicating the foreign couple.

"Fuck 'em, what do you care?"

"He's gutted. He's going to die."

Orthane scowled, shook his head, and walked back to the street. Menton was going to hear about how soft he was for weeks to come. He took a deep breath and carefully walked over to the colourfully dressed man and woman.

The woman shrieked when he came close. Menton shook his head and raised his hands. Then he noticed he still held a knife. He cast it aside like it was cursed, then approached tentatively. Her fast, staccato gibberish meant nothing to him, but her tone conveyed panic and wariness. A smile and repeated nods were all the reassurances he could give back.

She moved aside as he scooped her husband up, then she followed. Menton carried him back to the street. Rain, blood, mud, filth, and sweat dripped slowly away in the steady drizzle. The buzz of the ale faded even more slowly, but the horror and emotion would not dissipate.

Menton took them to his headquarters. He had healing potions there. They would work on the man's wound, but what Menton really needed was a fix for Orthane.

* * *

Night 1: Manse Marrik, Wittson's Duchy

Finnoar, the Earl of Marrik and the most trusted ruler within Duke Wittson's duchy, was roused by his nighttime valet. Not used to emergencies and groggy from wine, it took a sustained prodding to get him out of bed. The rude awakening might make this the last evening this servant would serve on staff.

The earl wrapped himself in an evening robe, donned a pair of slippers, and walked down two flights of sweeping stairs to the grand foyer. The crysandles in the entry and an inner room were fully lit, revealing a snaking trail of blood droplets amid dusty footprints on the floor. Finnoar clenched his fists, gathered up his robe, and followed the blood into his mansion. The polished tile would come clean, but the affront to his dignity would not wipe away so easily.

The way through the drawing room was open, as were the doors at either end of the servery. The further he moved, the more he could hear a man struggling in pain. That voice was very similar to the earl's own. Finnoar clenched his teeth and slapped his hand across his eyes. It was his younger brother. Marroad had found serious trouble this time.

Two grooms, a footman, and the butler wrestled Lord Marroad Marrik on a kitchen table. Finnoar stood frozen in shock. There was so much blood. His brother's jacket, cast aside by the fireplace, was half soaked in it, and his white silk shirt was stained deep, wet red below his right armpit. As Marroad strained in pain against the men holding him down, he caught sight of Finnoar.

"Get a Leran," the younger sibling said between coughs and groans. "They tried to kill me."

Finnoar instantly forgot a dozen grudges and a hundred insults. Marroad was six years his junior, second in line to his title, and a constant frustration. He was a rascal at the best of times, squandering money on shady alliances, drinking and carousing with commoners, insulting his own family every chance he could, but all that fell away. Now he lay bleeding on a table used to carve animals.

"Who did this to you?"

"I need healing," Marroad groaned.

"Yes, yes." Finnoar verged on panic. He turned to the young man holding the feet. "You, groom. Can you ride?"

The groom looked him in the eye as he nodded. This servant had confidence and determination on his face despite the blood and terror. All Finnoar wanted to do was to cradle his brother and cry and pray. Taking the groom's steadiness as an example for himself, he swallowed and took a deep breath.

"Go to ... um, go to Earl Dandrawl. Yes. He has a healer. Then go to the church courthouse in Birus and get an exemplar of

Saga. Someone attacked my brother. Be quick or he will ..." die. He couldn't mention such a horrible fate.

"No," Marroad said. "Not—"

"Tell them. Fast as you can. Go."

The man ran out, nearly tripping over two young women of the scullery staff. He went through the rear exit and turned for the stables. The manse was a country house, no one lived close. Dandrawls were two miles away across fields, and the rich city of Birus was four miles past that. Finnoar wished this had happened in the city, help would only be a block or two away.

Finnoar could not be more different from a stranger than his own brother. Marroad was thin and supple where Finnoar was admonished, by his wife, for being shaped like a pear. He had thin, blond hair to his younger brother's dark. He'd never considered Marroad to be a reflection of himself, but now he truly felt his pain as if it were his own.

He looked around. All the servants were awake and crowded every door to see the commotion. He turned back to his brother, approached awkwardly, and took his hand.

"Don't go to Dandrawl," Marroad struggled to keep his eyes open. "And not ... Saga."

"Earl Dandrawl is close and the Sagans need your deposition. We have to catch the people who did this to you."

"Please, no," Marroad clutched at Finnoar's robe. "It's not too late. Call ... him ... back."

The earl wrenched his arm free and stepped back. "No. This is the best way."

The staff filling the kitchen's entry to the servery slunk back to let Lithinia, the lady of the house, come through.

"What is going on in my—" She stopped, aghast. "Is that Marroad? Oh, sweet Saga, who did this?"

"Stay out," Finnoar commanded. She ran a tight house, but he did not want her trying to take charge of this. "Someone is going for healing. He's going to be alright."

"Who did this?" Lithinia repeated. She wasn't shaken by the scene. Of course she wasn't. She controlled everything.

"Get me ... out of here," Marroad croaked.

"No." Finnoar turned back to his brother. "Help is coming."

"Not Dandrawl," Marroad yelled and fell back panting. He took several breaths to speak again. "They caught us. They did this." Each word came weaker than the last.

The earl rushed back to his brother and cradled his head.

"I was spying for Saporanintar," Marroad whispered. He struggled to keep his head up. "He wants to break ..." his head lolled back and Finnoar gripped him tighter. "Break Gancey Wittson's ..."

"Just hang on. Don't talk, brother."

But Marroad went silent and limp.