

The Shadowed Blood

A ***Blood & Shadows*** story,
prequel to The Shanhasson Trilogy

By Joely Sue Burkhart

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The most honored Death Rider stood on a smoldering black ledge above a lake of fire in the heart of the Mountain and wept.

“Great Wind Stallion, hear my prayer. Lift Your Shadow of Death from me. I can’t bear it. I can’t bear to hurt her...”

Gregar’s throat constricted and his heart thudded painfully in his chest. Shuddering, he fell to his knees. The hem of his *memsha* began to smoke, his flesh blistered, but he did not rise.

In his dreams, the woman’s eyes were the same brilliant blue as the cloth wrapped about his hips. He carried more honor than any Death Rider before him, each red bead in his hair representing a sacrifice in Vulkar’s name. Yet he defiled that honor every single night. Shadow walked in his dreams, corrupting his gift and tainting his soul. Each nightmare dragged him closer to her, and thus closer to her death.

Last night’s dream had driven him back to Vulkar’s Mountain, the beginning of his doom.

Midnight eyes pooled with tears, she lay beneath him, trembling as his life’s blood poured out on her skin. She had not come easily to his embrace. She never did. Fighting for her life, she’d enjoyed wounding him as much as he’d relished her pain.

She fed his darkness like no other.

“I love you.”

“Aye,” he whispered, smoothing his thumb over the pulse thumping frantically in her throat. “My heart is yours, na’lanna.”

My beloved.

And he buried the ivory rahke in her heart.

“Not her!” Gregar roared, throwing his head back and shaking his fists. “I have killed in Your name countless times! I have heeded Your Call and sacrificed blood as You demanded, but I shall not sacrifice hers! Deliver me from this Shadow, Vulkar, or let me die. ”

Hands trembling, he unsheathed the ivory *rahke* on his hip and laid it on the ledge. He untied the braids at his temples, pulled each *kae’al* from his hair, and tossed the beads one by one into the burning lake. He ripped off his *memsha* and tossed it into the fires as well.

In vain, he searched for a vision, some sign of forgiveness. Smoke and steam wheeled above the heartfires of the earth, but no magnificent Stallion reared up out of the molten lake as before. No bone-crushing voice thundered in his skull.

Hoarse and raw, his throat burned from the fumes of charred minerals and melted rock. “I’ve killed her a thousand times in my dreams, and I don’t even know her name.”

Shoulders slumped, he glared at the ivory *rahke*, his gift from Vulkar when he’d become a Death Rider. The blade glinted as pure as snow, untouched by the smoldering rock and the numerous

marks he'd terminated. How many had he killed? Dozens?
Hundreds?

Why wasn't the ivory darkened by the Shadow he carried in his heart? Why wasn't the pristine blade stained with blood?

At the thought of *her* blood dripping from the *rahke*, his mouth watered.

His prayers had not been heard.

Picking up the knife, he stood and faced the lake of fire. "So be it."

Gregar gripped the ivory *rahke* in his teeth and leaped into the flames.

#

Bone-white bark cut into his face, but he didn't push away from the tree. Leaves both blood-red and black murmured in the breeze. The tree swayed him gently like a mother's embrace. No one but Death Riders and *shamans* ever saw the green, green valley of the secret Tenth Camp, let alone the *kae'sangral* at its heart.

Many a time, he'd lain on his back in the sweet grass and stared up at the tapestry of red and black limbs, listening to the faint melody tinkling from within the glistening trunk. If he listened hard enough, he could almost make out the words. He liked to think the tree sang of love, the greatest gift of all, and the greatest sacrifice.

Yet his sacrifice had been refused.

In the shade of the *kae'sangral*, the relentless Call thundering in his blood usually dimmed to a muted rumble in the darkest

corner of his mind. Over the years, he'd come here often to find peace, if only for awhile. Now, his skull thudded with every beat of his heart, and his fingers cramped on the ivory *rahke*.

Eventually, he would stumble. He would hesitate one moment too long and suddenly find himself galloping hard for the Shining Walls of her homeland. Wrapped in Shadow, invisible with Vulkar's Gift of Death, he would lie in wait for the woman.

And he would kill her.

"Why didn't you let me die?"

He didn't expect an answer, not from Vulkar, the Great Wind Stallion, who had doomed him to dishonor and Shadow. A response from His Dark Mare was even more unexpected.

:WE HAVE A PURPOSE FOR YOU YET, KAE'HAD-MANGUS.:

She called him the most honored Death Rider, the Right Hand of Vulkar, the Hand that Wields the *Rahke* of Sacrifice. How he'd come to despise his honored title.

Biting back a bitter curse, he whirled from the holy tree and fell to his knees.

The Dark Mare's coat glimmered like the full moon on the Silver Lake, a glistening rainbow of pearls. Her black mane and tail dragged the ground and Her eyes gleamed like an endless midnight sky overflowing with falling stars.

He laid the ivory *rahke* in the grass before him and bowed over it, pressing his face to the ground. "What would You have me do?"

She nibbled on his hair, tugging until he raised his head. :WE WOULD HAVE YOU LIVE.:

Jaws clenched, he fought back the rage boiling within him. “I shall not kill her!”

:GOOD.: The Dark Mare butted him in the chest, knocking him back on his heels. :WE WANT YOU TO PROTECT HER, NOT KILL HER.:

“It’s too late.” Drowning failure crumbled the last of his control and he leaped to his feet. Hands fisted, he fought not to pick up the *rahke* and slit his throat. As a Death Rider, he was already half dead; not even the lake of fire had been able to kill him. “The Endless Night has corrupted my gift of Death. I feel the Call for her termination every moment of every day and night. My blood pounds with the need to terminate her, my *rahke* hungers for her flesh, and I burn to taste her blood. She is my greatest mark, and I would rather die than succumb to Shadow!”

:TWO CALLS AWAIT YOU, BUT YOU CANNOT ANSWER BOTH. DOWN ONE PATH YOU ARE SURE TO EMBRACE HER IN DEATH, BUT SHE WOULD BE WHOLLY YOURS; THE OTHER PATH GIVES HER A CHANCE TO LIVE BUT SHE MAY NEVER KNOW YOUR LOVE.:

Hope made his hands tremble. “I would have her live at any cost.”

:LISTEN FOR THE SECOND CALL AND MAKE YOUR CHOICE.:

“There is no choice,” he swore as he picked up the ivory *rahke* and slammed it into its sheath on his hip. “If she lives, I’ll pay the cost.”

:EVEN IF THE COST OF HER LIFE IS YOUR DEATH?:

“Aye. Let me die if she might live.”

The Dark Mare brushed Her silken muzzle against his cheek, and Her scent filled his nose. The smell of musky flowers tightened his throat and sent his heart slamming against his ribcage. “You smell like her.”

:SHE IS THE ROSE OF SHANHASSON, MY LAST DAUGHTER IN WHOM ALL HOPE REMAINS. IF SHE FALLS INTO SHADOW, THE SUN WILL NEVER SHINE AGAIN.:

He didn’t realize he wept until She licked his tears from his cheeks. “I’ll die to keep her safe, if only...” Shame gnawed in the pit of his stomach and he couldn’t ask. He didn’t deserve a boon from the Dark Mare, not with Shadow eating his heart.

Yet She knew his heart and gave him the answer he sought.

:HER NAME IS SHANNARI.:

#

Wrapped in the Shadow of Death, Gregar crouched in the waist-high grass, invisible to the two warriors standing not ten paces from him. In the distance, thousands of tents dotted the foothills with the thrice-crowned mountain rearing up in the distance. This night, Vulkar’s Mountain rumbled constantly, further cloaking the evening sky with ash to match the mourning in the tents.

A most beloved Khul of the Nine Camps of the Sha’Kae al’Dan for over twenty years was drawing his last breath, and his favored son stood on a hill above the Silver Lake searching for guidance.

Both grim-faced warriors were known to Gregar. In fact, they were his closest friends, if a Death Rider who roamed the Plains killing in Vulkar's name could be said to have friends. Rhaekhar stood a hand taller than the other warrior, his shoulders broad, his long hair already heavily laden with his *kae'valda*. Warriors spent their lives earning tokens of honor to braid into their hair. By honor alone, Rhaekhar stood to make as excellent a Khul as his father before him.

If he wasn't terminated first.

Aye, the second Call thundered in Gregar's head, dueling with the shadowed Call that whispered how sweet the woman's blood would taste. The Calls tore him in two different directions. One urged him to peel back the Shadows, stand, and join the other warrior who stood close to the would-be Khul. Over the coming days, seven other warriors would feel the undeniable urge to approach Rhaekhar until nine total, one from each Camp, became Blood. They would protect the new Khul with their lives from assassins like him.

A Death Rider's honor was found in spilling Khul's blood, not in protecting Khul with his very life. So why had Vulkar planted this second Call in Gregar's heart and mind? Shadow tugged on his will, urging him to terminate this would-be Khul and then ride for the Shining Walls and the woman set apart for his sacrifice alone.

"You should prepare for the competition," the other warrior said, his voice flat and hard. Varne had never been known to show much emotion, but surely a son should have time to grieve for his

father before his friend pushed him to begin plotting to take Khul's place. "Drendon will be your closest challenger."

"Aye," Rhaekhar replied, rubbing his eyes tiredly. "We have days yet, Varne. I don't think--"

"His skill with the *rahke* is better than yours."

"Aye," Rhaekhar repeated, his voice tightening. "He may very well best me in the *kae'rahke* portion, but he'll pay in blood. Unquestionably, the *kae'don* will be mine. My warriors are the finest on the Plains and he knows it."

"He has a mate; you do not. He'll gain much advantage over you initially with her to increase his honor. Perhaps you should--"

Rhaekhar strode toward Gregar's hiding place, so close he could have gutted the warrior without moving.

"I shall have a mate soon enough."

Gregar's heart thudded and his ears roared with rushing winds. He barely heard Varne's query.

"Nay, you do not know her. I don't know her myself, not yet, but when I meet her, I'll know. I'll recognize her." Rhaekhar dropped his voice to a fervent whisper. "The Rose will be mine, a love like no other."

Those words rocked Gregar to his heels and the Shadowed Call thundered louder.

Kill him, kill him, KILL HIM!

This warrior would take his Rose. This warrior would be Khul, any Death Rider's greatest mark. Nay, the woman, *his* woman,

would be Khul'lanna, his greatest mark, his most secret heart's desire, and Rhaekhar would take her as his own.

Gregar held himself very still, but inside, his heart raged, his stomach rebelled, and his very blood boiled in his veins in denial. The ivory *rahke* came into his hand eagerly, hungry for this warrior's blood.

I love you, she whispered, and he buried the ivory rahke in her heart.

A love like no other.

Rhaekhar whirled and smoothly unsheathed his *rahke*. He scanned the tall Plains grass. "I know you're there. I hear your breathing."

With a rueful sigh, Gregar revealed himself by standing and slowly peeling back the cloaking shadows. To his credit, Rhaekhar didn't blanch or even take a wary step back. Face dark with shame, Varne charged forward and put his body between them, but he was too late and he knew it. If Gregar had decided to kill, the warrior would already be on the ground gasping as his life's blood fountained on the grass.

"Vulkar sorrows with you, Rhaekhar."

"Thank you. My father will ride to Vulkar soon." He sheathed the *rahke*, but he watched Gregar with hard, wary eyes. Rhaekhar must know how close to death he'd been. Since he kept his hand on his *rahke*, he must also realize the threat had not completely diminished. "Stand aside, Varne. I'm not Khul yet."

"But you will be," Varne retorted. "I feel the Call."

Gregar snorted. “If you feel the Call so well, why didn’t you know I laid in wait? I could have slit his throat before you blinked your eyes.”

The three warriors walked down to the pebbled shore of the Silver Lake. Above the waters, the full moon hung so low and full that Gregar thought he could reach up and snag it from the sky. Silvered light glimmered across the still, silent waters, shining like her eyes, the Dark Mare’s daughter.

The woman he would kill.

Evidently, the woman Rhaekhar would make Khul’lanna if given half a chance.

The sudden silence in Gregar’s mind made him stagger. His fingers involuntarily relaxed enough that the ivory *rahke* slipped from his grip. Startled, he grabbed the blade before it hit the ground and sliced his fingers open to the bone. Why had both Calls disappeared?

“That was rather clumsy,” Varne said with a smug little laugh. “Even outlanders usually wield their swords without cutting themselves.”

Ignoring his friend’s jibe, Rhaekhar gave his back confidently to the most honored Death Rider who had stalked him. “Why didn’t you kill me when you had the chance?”

Staring at the blood dripping down his fingers, staining the white blade, Gregar swayed. His head felt as light as a feather, his heart sluggish and reluctant to beat. Pain banded his chest, radiating from his heart. “I don’t know.”

#

I would have her live at any cost.

How arrogant and grand a promise when he hadn't known the full sacrifice in order to see her safe from his blade. Sitting on the sandy shore, Gregar stared out over the silvered waters and fought. He fought his pride and honor, his gift of Death, and most of all, he fought his love.

If his control slipped a single moment, he would kill her. Yet he could not bear to let her go. Rocking slightly, he rolled the *rahke* back and forth across his palm, watching the gleam of moonlight on the ivory.

He had thought seeing her alive and well would be enough, but he hadn't expected her to go to another warrior, his friend, while he was forced to watch from afar, silent and unapproachable.

She may never know your love.

The waters rippled but no breeze stirred his hair. Crystal water clouded to a shadowy murk, darkening and collapsing into a window. One glimpse of the woman's face within made his heart gallop and his fingers curled tight about the *rahke*.

Yet his stomach lurched. He didn't want to re-live her death again. He didn't want to smell the scent of her blood and feel the thick, wet heat on his hands. Not her. Never her.

However, this vision was different than the Shadowed dream. She wore Sha'Kae al'Dan clothing, and her hair swung short at her shoulders. In his dreams, a thick heavy braid had hung down to the back of her thighs. No Shining Walls met his gaze but the

rolling hills of grass and the wide open sky of the Plains. By the emerald green of the *memshai* about her hips, he knew to whom she belonged. Even now, his pride raged at him to drag her from the warrior who would be Khul of the Nine Camps of the Sha’Kae al’Dan.

However, dozens of outlanders surrounded her. Swords threatened her on all sides. On foot and armed only with a black *rahke* and an outlander sword, she was hopelessly outnumbered. Where was Khul now to protect her?

Although oceans of time and space separated them, Gregar felt as though he stood a dozen paces away. His muscles strained with the urge to protect her. He would gut every last outlander that stood between them. Midnight blue eyes met his, glinting with pride, shining with emotion. He dared not call it love, not when she belonged to another.

Her mouth moved, her lips forming his name.

Suddenly, he knew. If he started across that great divide to put his body before hers, to shield her from those who threatened her, he would die that very same day. Even a fist of pitiful outlanders would be able to eliminate one Death Rider, unless he used his gift of Shadow to reach her.

And then I would kill her myself.

Rage, regret, and crippling grief billowed through him like clouds racing across a stormy sky. Thunder rolled through his head, the frantic beat of his heart. Winds rushed through his ears, a distant trumpet of the Great Wind Stallion calling him home.

Nothing else mattered but touching her. He would lay his palm against her cheek, and perhaps breathe her scent of roses one last time while the outlanders buried steel in his body. Leaning over his broken body in the vision, she held something. His ivory *rahke* gleamed in her hand like a captured star, rejoicing that it had come home to her at last.

He stretched out his hand, reaching for her through the window.

“Gregar.”

His fingers touched water, wet and cold. Startled, he blinked, searching for the vision. Crystal clear water sparkled in the moonlight.

His Rose was gone.

Throat aching, he slowly turned his attention to the other warrior. The two Calls returned with a vengeance, grating on his bones and splitting his head wide open. Would he be Death Rider or Blood?

Kill or protect? Hold her--and slaughter her--or lose her forever?

Rhaekhar’s face was lined with grief. “My father now gallops across the skies with Vulkar.”

Shakily, Gregar pushed to his feet. He couldn’t resist searching the waters once more. Even a glimpse of her would ease his mind and help him make the decision.

Rhaekhar didn’t wait for his condolences. “Will you join me as Blood?”

She would be so close...and yet so terribly far away. If Gregar swore himself to Khul, he would be a Death Rider no more. Perhaps she would be safe even from him. Certainly, he would never touch her in love. A Blood rarely slept or ate, let alone felt the natural physical needs of any warrior.

He must never give voice to the emotion he carried in his heart.

Gregar laughed to keep from falling to his knees in the water and drowning himself in an attempt to reach the vision again. Closing his eyes, he pictured her in his mind once more: pale face, huge dark eyes, chin high and shoulders squared, even when facing a brutal death surrounded by her own countrymen.

Which would he prefer: tears of terror in her eyes as he murdered her, or tears of grief at his death?

Her gaze met his, her sweet mouth forming his name.

Na'lanna. My beloved.

Gregar took a deep breath and opened his eyes. Faintly, he caught the scent of his Rose dripping sweet, sweet blood. He swallowed hard and sheathed the ivory *rahke*. "Are you sure you want a Shadowed Blood at your back?"

"Aye," Rhaekhar replied. "I would fight Shadow with Shadow."

Perhaps he'd had some vision of the woman, too, for his voice rang with grim intent. He offered his arm, and Gregar clasped him firmly, judging the other warrior's strength and weighing the *kae'valda* in his hair. He would not only be a renowned Khul, but also a fitting warrior for his Rose.

“It’s an honor to serve, Khul. My blood is yours.”

He would die gladly, if only she might press her lips to his on his last breath. *My blood is hers as well, but Shannari can never be my Rose.*

The End

If you enjoyed this story, please consider **The Rose of Shanhasson**, the first book in The Shanhasson Trilogy that continues Gregar’s story, now available at Drollerie Press.

Keep reading for a sneak peek of **The Road to Shanhasson**, book two of The Shanhasson Trilogy coming March 2009 from Drollerie Press!

The Road to Shanhasson

A ***Blood & Shadows*** story,
Book 2 of the Shanhasson Trilogy

By Joely Sue Burkhart

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Chapter One

Blessed Lady above, thank you for bringing me home.

Shannari drew rein and paused her mare at the top of the hill. Rolling waves of golden hay stretched off into the distance. The scent of baking bread and warm earth filled her nose, a visceral reminder of the warrior on her right. Not the home of her birth, perhaps, but the Plains had definitely become the home of her heart.

Rhaekhar, Khul of the Nine Camps of the Sha’Kae al’Dan, had defeated her heart as well as her army and she was sure would admit the former had been much more difficult a battle. His tousled golden-brown hair hung well down his shoulders, begging to be combed by her fingers. The braids at either temple were heavy with colored beads, golden rings, and other symbols of honor he had won over the years. His skin gleamed like polished bronze in the summer afternoon light, tight over his powerful arms and shoulders. Looking at him made heat unfurl deep in her stomach.

The breeze picked up enough to flutter her cropped hair into her eyes. Irritated as much by the stinging pang to her vanity as the tickling hair in her face, she swiped at the unruly mess. She

missed the heavy weight of hair down her back, but she was extremely lucky Theo hadn't taken her head as well as her hair.

“In a matter of hours, I’ll be making you my Khul’lanna.” Rhaekhar’s voice rumbled, thick and tight with desire. “Do you desire Gregar to participate in your claiming?”

She opened her mouth to respond, but she really didn’t know. Did she want Gregar? Definitely. Did she want a complicated relationship that made her uncomfortable, let alone with both Rhaekhar and such an extremely dangerous man? Not really. Especially in this so-called claiming, where Rhaekhar’s whole intent would be to make her scream as many times as possible while everyone outside the tent listened.

“Even if you asked, I would refuse.”

Jerking her attention to the Blood, she listened carefully to his bond. His heart ached with longing, even while a darker need twisted his own *rahke* in his heart.

“You’re still my greatest mark, *na’lanna*. I refuse to risk you. I won’t rush you into asking me to Khul’s blankets.”

“Are you saying never?”

“Great Vulkar, nay.” Gregar laughed shakily. “You’ll be Khul’lanna; the honor of your claiming is rightfully Khul’s. My time will be later, if you so desire.”

“I shall declare you co-mate before the Camps,” Rhaekhar said to his Blood, his voice ringing with command. “If you want to participate, she shall ask you, or I shall order you.”

Shannari felt heat sear her cheeks at the thought. “No ordering. If it happens, it happens.”

“*When* it happens.” Rhaekhar cupped her chin in his palm and tilted her gaze up to his. “His blood is mine to command, and he offers himself to you. You want him. You will have him. Our honor is greater than this doubt you carry.” His eyes darkened, turning smoky amber. “Besides, I want very much to expand on that delightful image you created for us. I want to see the pleasure in your eyes when he touches you.”

“And I want to see your pleasure when Khul touches you,” Gregar said.

Both warriors laughed at whatever expression was on her face.

Another gust of wind drew her attention to the sky. A storm brewed in the distance. Clouds scuttled toward them, thickening on the horizon. Shadows raced across the hills. Despite the two warriors so close and the army of mounted barbarians behind them, she shivered and touched the sword at her hip. She’d come so close to dying in Shadow. Could she ever see a shadow stretching across the ground and not remember the madness in Theo’s eyes?

Both warriors crowded their horses closer to hers: Gregar at her left, his heat searing her back, Rhaekhar on her right, his hair tumbling into her face. Their scents filled her, sweet hay and flowers, warrior and leather, accented with dark, rich coffee and the smell of baking bread. Her heart ached, clutching with fear.

Eventually, she'd have to go back to Shanhasson. She'd have to face Theo and exact Our Blessed Lady's justice, and when she did...

Either one of them could die.

"I won't stay you from your destiny, *na'lanna*." Rhaekhar sighed heavily, and through his bond, she felt a fierce surge of warrior instinct to wrap her up in his arms and carry her far to the south where he'd never let her face danger again. "But I care nothing about those honorless curs in your homeland. Your own people would have stood by and watched Theo kill you. I say let them writhe in agony in the Three Hells forever."

"As long as Theo lives, he'll try to kill me and any children we have. I refuse to live in danger the rest of my life, and I certainly won't let him destroy the Lady's Green and Beautiful Lands."

Gregar whispered against her ear. "Let me stay tight at your back, and as long as I live, Shadow shall not touch you again."

:You won't die. You can't.:

:The day of my death is closer than ever, na'lanna. Do not wait too long to ask me.:

Straightening, Rhaekhar guided his horse down the slope, and Wind automatically followed, with Gregar close behind. "We must discuss the arrangements of our co-mating."

"Shall I stop drinking *drakkar*?" Gregar asked. "Just in case?"

Drakkar was the warriors' method of birth control on the Plains. Shannari's hands clutched the reins but she didn't dare

look back over her shoulder. She was sure to see a big smirk on the Blood's face.

“Aye. All children, whether mine or yours, shall carry my honor.”

“Agreed.”

The awful reality of the position she'd put Rhaekhar into twisted her stomach into knots. The greatest warrior on the Plains might be faced with the task of raising children not his. His honor, which she had only begun to understand, would surely be lessened. How could he let this happen? “Don't I get a say in this?”

Rhaekhar ignored her. “When she asks you to my blankets, I'm First. I reserve the right to impose limits if she is unable to do so.”

“Actually, I insist you do so,” Gregar replied, his voice hard and brittle with ice. “I have no limits. If the dreams I've had over the years are any indication, she has none either, at least when it comes to me.”

Years before she'd ever known him she'd dreamed of a man wrapped in shadow, lying in wait for her. In these dreams of darkness and death, they'd battled and loved and killed each other, over and over. Those gruesome dreams still haunted her.

Evidently, they haunted Gregar, too. “My honor is yours, Khul. I ask that you make one solemn oath to me.”

Rhaekhar drew his golden stallion to a halt and turned to face his Blood. “Anything, my friend.”

“If she bleeds at any time, you must kill me.”

She gasped and reached out to Gregar immediately. His forearm was corded, his fingers white on the reins. His eyes glittered like obsidian.

“I’m not to be trusted if I catch the scent of her fresh blood. Don’t let me slide into bloodlust, or I may--” His voice broke. “I have no limits,” he whispered hoarsely. “Don’t let me--”

“On my honor, I shall kill you first.”

The tension bled out of the Blood and he nodded. “My thanks, Khul.”

“You can’t be serious.” Heart pounding, she looked from one warrior to the other. “I love him. You can’t kill him. You promised!”

Rhaekhar stared at her, his eyes dark, his face grim. “I’ll do whatever I must, *na’lanna*. You want him, you’ve got him, but I won’t let him hurt you.”

Shivers crawled down her spine. Ice crept around her heart.

“Much,” Gregar whispered softly.

Rhaekhar growled, his hand dropping to his *rahke*.

“She’ll like a little, Khul. Just rein me in.”

“We shall see.” Rhaekhar turned his gaze to her, his eyes almost as dark as his Blood’s, his voice thick. “Together.”

Heart pounding, she stared at him, trembling. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head, a small smile playing about his lips. “Are you up for a *kae’rahke* this night, Gregar?”

The two warriors rode ahead, leaving Shannari staring after them with dread pounding in her veins. A *kae'rahke*? Challenge? Sometimes they fought to the death.

“Aye, I’m up for many things, Khul.”

Rhaekhar laughed, a dark masculine sound of arrogance that made her grind her teeth together. “I bet you are. Good. I’ll declare you co-mate before the claiming. What do you want for terms?”

Groaning, Shannari tried to think of a way to distract them. Short of ripping her armor and clothes off, she didn’t think much would distract them from their goal of blood.

Gregar winked at her. “I would certainly enjoy another kiss. This time, I want a proper kiss.”

“Oh, aye,” Rhaekhar replied, giving her a smoldering look over his shoulder. “Do you want her tongue in your mouth, or yours in hers?”

“Preferably both.”

Very firmly, she turned her attention to her horse. Wind’s ears flickered back and forth, listening to the warriors. Her head was up, her muscles tight beneath Shannari’s thighs. The mare’s entire manner was alert, whether to flee or charge Shannari didn’t know. She stroked the sleek silvery neck and fingered the moonlight mane that was as soft and fine as Rhaekhar’s hair.

Deep inside her, Shannari felt a ripple in the still waters of the Lady’s lake she carried. Wind was not just a horse. Perhaps Wind was the Lady’s horse as well.

Clucking to her, Shannari urged the mare to canter ahead of her warriors, determined to put a little distance between them and all their “arrangements.” She felt both relief and regret at Gregar’s words. She wanted him...but that desire was fraught with danger, blood, and turmoil. She hated putting Rhaekhar through such conflict.

Yet something dark and raw quickened in her heart at the thought of exploring those bloody dreams with the Shadowed Blood.

Tightening her grip on the reins, Shannari leaned lower over the mare’s neck. *Faster, she thought. Let’s outrun them. Outrun the doubts and guilt. Outrun the darkness inside me.*

The mare’s ears flickered back as though she heard. Lowering her head, she tore off across the Plains at a gallop so smooth that Shannari barely felt the thud of hooves on the baked earth. Her hair whipped her face, and grass snapped at her thighs in sharp whips that made her thankful for her leather pants. For once, she was free, not chasing her destiny or fighting a losing battle. She was running away, and it felt... good.

She glanced back over her shoulder through streaming eyes. The golden and black warhorses chased after her, but they were no match for Wind’s speed. The mare was truly a gift from the Lady. She could outrun them and escape.

If she wanted.

Ah, that was the catch. Because she didn’t want to lose them, not even if it meant she failed her destiny and lost the High Throne forever. They each held a rein on her heart, and although they

could have, they didn't use their bonds to slow her or draw her back. Her own heart held her captive.

Wind slowed to a more manageable canter that allowed the warriors to catch up. Shannari kept her gaze straight ahead and didn't make any apologies. As soon as she'd run ahead into the Plains unprotected, she'd felt the immediate clutch of fear in Rhaekhar's heart and Gregar's surge of icy shadow. It didn't occur to them that she could never be unprotected now that the Lady's gift welled in her heart. All they knew was the strength of their blades and the weight of their honor.

Whatever either warrior had been prepared to say was interrupted by a hail from the top of the next hill. They'd been sighted. Now the Camp would empty to come and greet the returning warriors, and they'd want news of the battle. How many of them would be disappointed to see her still with their Khul?

"It doesn't matter," Rhaekhar replied to her thought. A glance at him confirmed the arrogant slash of his mouth, the hard line of his jaws, and the determination glittering in his eyes. He was Khul and he'd beat sense into anyone who objected. Such a display of arrogance made her mouth quirk with amusement.

They galloped up the next hill. People already lined the other side of the slope, cheering as their Khul made his appearance. Drendon and Alea led the foray. After the rocky start to their acquaintance, the woman would likely be furious to see the outlander still at Khul's side. Shannari searched the other woman's

face for dismay but oddly enough, she thought that Alea looked rather pleased.

“Welcome home to the Sea of Grass, Khul,” Drendon said. “You were victorious, of course.”

“Aye, but in the end, the greater battle was for the Rose of Shanhasson,” Rhaekhar said without resentment. In fact, the look of stark possession in his eyes damned near curled her toes. “Both are mine. In fact, I have an announcement.”

The crowd quieted expectantly.

“I, Rhaekhar, Khul of the Nine Camps of the Sha’Kae al’Dan, hereby claim Shannari dal’Dainari, the Rose of Shanhasson, as my Khul’lanna. Anyone who dares challenge me for her, let him come.”

Most of the people roared with approval, but not all. Shannari scanned the faces carefully, watching for a flicker of anger, hatred, or secrecy. The mix of negative and positive emotions seemed relatively balanced. *Great*, she thought. Only half of her soon-to-be husband’s people hated her.

Of course, tight-lipped and silent, Varne, Khul’s nearest Blood and the last line in his defense, looked like he’d swallowed a belly-full of *rahkes*.

Gregar’s voice rang out, “I challenge for her,” and she nearly fell off her horse.

People whispered excitedly, looking back and forth between the two warriors like they’d break out knives and fight to the death here and now. Braced for condemnation or outrage that both warriors would claim her--and Khul’s own Blood at that--she was

shocked to find the glares and grumbles at Rhaekhar's announcement disappearing beneath genuine excitement.

"Fun and games," she whispered, shaking her head. Now Rhaekhar's acceptance of another warrior at her side didn't seem quite so far-fetched, although she still battled her Green Land sensibilities.

Rhaekhar drew out the silence, staring at his Blood with the grim, implacable glare of the Khul, weighing and considering, as though he tested this warrior's honor *kae'al* by *kae'al*. Each moment's threat of bloodshed only improved the mood of the crowd.

Gregar might not wear any beads in his hair now that he was Blood, but she knew that everyone must remember what he'd been before Rhaekhar became Khul. Death. Shadow. Assassin.

Fun and games indeed, and in true Sha'Kae al'Dan fashion, a great deal of blood and honor were promised in Khul's silent examination. The watching warriors were nearly jumping up and down with glee at the prospect.

"She loves *me*," Rhaekhar growled. "What claim do you have on my woman?"

How much of this was playacting, and how much was torment for both warriors? Her own emotions were in too much turmoil for her to be able to understand what she was receiving of theirs. Shannari's heart pounded, her palms sweaty. It was all she could do not to draw her sword or turn the mare and run back across the hills. She didn't know where she'd go, but if she weren't here, this couldn't happen.

Gregar flashed his trademark smirk. “She loves me, too.”

Alea gasped out loud and the whispers increased until Rhaekhar turned to look at Shannari. Silence fell, as though the whole Plains listened and waited.

“What say you, *na’lanna*? Does my Blood speak the truth?”

Bloody hell. She sent a dark surge through their bond, allowing him to feel her irritation. Surely he could have prepared her for such a public and sudden announcement. Gripping the sword hilt on her hip, she lifted her chin and squared her shoulders. She could do this. Rhaekhar already knew the truth, as well as Gregar. They’d known long before she’d admitted the truth to herself. “Yes. I love you both.”

The crowd erupted into cheers again.

Rhaekhar smiled and it was like the noonday sun shining down on her. “Then I accept your challenge as co-mate, Gregar. Let us offer blood this night to bind our oaths to Shannari.”

“Agreed, Khul. My blood is yours; my blood is hers.” Gregar’s eyes swam with shadows and glittering obsidian. “She will taste us both.”

Concentrating on breathing, she closed her eyes a moment. She’d promised Gregar that she’d taste his or Khul’s blood whenever they offered, no matter where they were, no matter who watched.

“Can you wait a few days so we might contact the rest of the Camps?” Drendon asked. She scanned his face and posture, trying to guess if Rhaekhar’s best friend were pleased, shocked, or

horrified at this development. She didn't know Drendon that well, but his reserve surprised her. She'd expected his reaction to be more blatantly obvious, either for good or bad she didn't know. "I'm sure many would like to be present. It's not every day that a Khul claims his Khul'lanna."

"I'll not wait a single night." The tone of Rhaekhar's voice was low, rumbling bass.

"Neither shall I." Gregar's voice was cold with shadows, sending goose bumps racing down her arms.

:I thought you refused to participate.:

:I did. Yet I will feel Khul's pleasure as his Blood, and your pleasure as na'lanna.: Gregar's voice wound through her mind like black, thick velvet, stroking where no hand could ever reach. *:The two of you will likely kill me, but I shall ride to Vulkar with a smile on my face.:*

She swallowed hard and scrubbed her sweaty palm on her leathers. *:This is not the day of your death.:*

He laughed silently, but beneath the amusement echoed heart-rending sorrow. Her heart stuttered in response. *:Not yet, na'lanna.:*

The silvered lake in her mind rippled briefly, disturbed by small plops on the surface like tears. Shannari's throat constricted. If the Lady wept...

Please, Blessed Lady, save him. Don't take him from me.

:Do not weep for me, Shannari,: Gregar whispered in her mind. *:Dead or not, I shall never leave your back unprotected.:*

Rhaekhar touched her knee, drawing her attention to him. He'd dismounted and offered her a hand down. The sympathy and even grief on his face--because she loved and ached at the thought of losing another man--made the tears shimmering in her eyes fall down her cheeks.

She slid down into his embrace and wrapped her arms around his neck. *:Is he right? Will he die?:*

Rhaekhar's voice through the bond was somber. *:Only he knows what visions Vulkar gave.:*

Unless Gregar was mistaken, one of the men she loved more than she'd ever thought possible would die because of her, because he loved her. Yet he had no reason to lie.

Guilt and agony flooded her. Her grip tightened on Rhaekhar's hair, and she fought not to reach for her sword and challenge him, just to make herself forget that awful finality she sensed on the horizon. *:I can't bear for either of you to die for me.:*

:My life is yours, my heart. His life is yours. It will be our greatest honor to die to keep you safe.:

His scent filled her, bread hot from the oven. The thought of him laid out on the white marble of the High Court, gasping his last breath, sent a shudder through her so fierce she actually cried out.

Gregar, bleeding, dying, and Rhaekhar... It was her worst fear.

All these years, she'd told herself she couldn't love because of Devin, the lover who'd tried to kill her in her own bed years ago. Perhaps she'd been lying to herself. Perhaps the reason she hadn't

wanted to love had been another reason entirely, because it would kill her to lose either of these warriors who walked beside of her.

Oh, Lady, why? Why give her love greater than anything she'd ever hoped to feel, and then take it away so harshly?

Resolve tightened her grip on the sword and firmed her chin. Nobody had died yet. She had the skill to fight and protect herself, as well as the Lady's power filling her heart. Surely it would be enough, no matter what vision Gregar had received. *I will kill to keep them safe.*

Thunder rumbled across the Plains.

"Come on, Shannari." Alea grabbed her arm as it began to rain. "I'll prepare the steamtent for you and then you can rest awhile. I'm sure you're exhausted." She hurried Shannari off toward the camp.

#

Ill at ease, Shannari couldn't relax in the thick clouds of steam, even as the heat soaked deeply into her muscles. She'd never had a true female friend, and she and Alea had certainly gotten off on the wrong foot before. The other woman must be nearly bursting with questions about Shannari's complicated relationship, and Shannari had questions of her own. Alea obviously knew both warriors better, and had known them longer, than she. Part of her wanted ask for details that would help her deal with them easier, but the other was afraid she'd learn too much. She felt poised between two pawing, snorting horses that

were ready to tear off in opposite directions, ripping her limb from limb.

“I see you have a new injury.”

Shannari flicked her gaze up to the other woman’s face. Surprised, she realized Alea was actually concerned, not appalled at all the various scars Shannari had earned over the years. “I took a wound in battle, but one of Our Blessed Lady’s priests was thankfully nearby and Healed me.”

True, definitely, but she didn’t admit she likely would have died if not for the Lady’s intervention as well as Her priest’s. Her blood had spilled on the ground to break a curse of Shadow, and she’d killed several hundred troops at once without lifting a weapon, with Gregar’s unwilling help.

:Not unwilling. I was more than pleased to assist you.:

:Quit eavesdropping.: Shannari closed her eyes and listened to the bonds, trying to estimate how closely both warriors listened. They hovered inside her mind, listening and feeling everything. She knew where the pawing, snorting image of horses came from as soon as she touched Rhaekhar’s bond. He was like a warhorse screaming a challenge as he crushed his enemy beneath massive hooves.

Gregar laughed in her mind, making her shudder. *:Be quick with the bath, woman, before Khul decides to start the count before our kae’rahke.:*

Shaken, she concentrated on toning down that raging, pounding stallion leaking from Rhaekhar's bond. *:What's wrong with him?:*

:He leads the Nine Camps for Vulkar. Is it any wonder that the Great Wind Stallion would walk in his body when Khul claims his Dark Mare?:

Shannari wished she understood their religion better. The Dark Mare sounded rather ominous, and yet fitting, too. She was definitely dark, and mare to Rhaekhar's stallion. She'd never thought of it that way before. Perhaps there were more parallels between Our Blessed Lady and this Dark Mare than she'd thought. If so, that made Gregar...

:I am Shadow. I am Death.:

Yet Lygon, Lord of Darkness, had never felt such overwhelming sorrow and love. She didn't believe it one moment. *:And you're mine.:*

Startlement shimmered through his bond, making Shannari smile. Alea blinked and smiled back hesitantly, which only made it funnier. *:Stop it. Even Alea thinks I'm trying to be her friend now.:*

"I know we started off...awkwardly," Alea said, her face and eyes warm and sincere. "But I see how much Khul loves you, and you him, and I'm more happy then I can say. If you need any assistance as Khul'lanna, please ask."

Shannari studied the woman, looking for any hint of duplicity or falseness, but her gaze remained steady and her eyes open. "You truly do care for him like a brother, don't you?"

“Aye. I hope we can be friends, Shannari.”

What would it be like to have a friend, a real friend, someone she never had to suspect of a plot to entrap her? Could she truly trust Alea? Listening again for any ripple in the magical lake that welled within her, Shannari sensed no reason not to trust her. She smiled more openly herself, relaxing some of the ever-present guard that she kept about her heart and mind at all times. “Let’s bury the hatchet...er...*rahke*, then. What can you tell me about this claiming business?”

Alea gave Shannari a bright, eager smile. “The very first *kae’rahke* ever recorded on the Plains was between two warriors who desired to claim the same woman.”

Shannari’s stomach knotted and she clenched her hands so tightly her nails dug into her palms. “What happened?”

The other woman shrugged. “They fought, they bled, and they came to an agreement. The first *kae’rahke* led to the first co-mates. It’s even rarer than *na’lanna* bonds but you’re not the first woman to love two warriors.”

Pushing strands of wet, clinging hair off her face, Shannari asked, “What does Drendon think?”

“I didn’t speak to him, but if I know my warrior, he’s more concerned about Khul’s protection. If he falls, the responsibility of all Nine Camps falls to my mate, and with one of Khul’s Blood otherwise occupied...” Alea gave her a rather lecherous wink that sent a wave of embarrassment hotter than the steamtent flooding

across Shannari's face and neck. "Did I mention that not too many years ago, a claiming was a very public event?"

Shannari shook her head, though she could imagine. The moist heaviness in the air weighed on her chest and she felt like she couldn't get a deep breath. Suddenly anxious to get some fresh, rain-slick air, even if she got wet and cold, she stood up to leave the tent, but swayed and almost lost her balance.

Alea jumped up to steady her. "Are you well?"

Weariness suffused her limbs and Shannari was grateful for the other woman's arm. "All of a sudden, I feel rather tired."

With halting steps, she exited the steamtent into Khul's adjacent tent where Gregar immediately took her other arm. She yawned and nearly cracked her own jaws.

"Well, no wonder," Alea exclaimed. "It's a long ride to Dalden Bay and back. The ceremony won't begin for at least an hour, so you have plenty of time for a nap."

Gregar lowered her to the cushions. "Why don't you rest a while?"

Her eyes were so heavy, but she fought to stay awake. "Khul--" She slurred.

"He'll wait, *na'lanna*. Rest."

She tried to say more, but the words wouldn't come.

Chapter Two

The dream was so real and vivid that she began to doubt her memory of falling asleep.

Cheering despite the wind and rain, the crowd hovered in a ring, watching two warriors fight. Rhaekhar and Gregar danced in the center of the ring, already dripping blood. Rhaekhar's face was hard and grim, the furious face of the Khul, while Gregar fought coldly, his deadly rahke illuminated blue by the constant lightning in the sky. They fought viciously, each grunt and strike punctuated with thunder.

Shivering, Shannari watched them and prayed they wouldn't kill each other. The fight came closer and the scent of blood hung tantalizingly thick and sweet in the air. Her stomach clutched tightly, rumbling with hunger. Her mouth watered. Her palms sweated, aching for a weapon.

Without pausing the fight, Rhaekhar called to her. "Unsheathe your sword, woman. Bleed me."

Suddenly, she regretted her adamant refusals to touch the six-inch knives the warriors used on the Plains. On the night of their wedding, she wished to honor him, and she knew that a wound from her sword implied less honor. "I don't have a rahke."

*“No matter.” Gregar shrugged and winked suggestively.
“Blood is blood.”*

Rhaekhar’s chest rumbled on a low growl. “The honor doesn’t matter. Don’t you want to taste us?”

Something tickled her mind, a feeling of unease. A horse neighed, the whinny high-pitched and strident. Wind, she thought, pleased that she’d remembered the mare’s name. She glanced up, but the people and tents were gone, and her mare was nowhere in sight.

Her hand was curled around the hilt of her sword, but she didn’t draw it. Dread tightened her throat, her heart racing. If they were all three fighting, truly fighting, bleeding... What if one of them drew her blood?

Rhaekhar had promised to kill Gregar the moment she bled.

She fought herself, trying to release the sword, but her fingers were locked about the hilt. Panic crawled through her body. Fighting her own urges, she didn’t realize Gregar had moved behind her until he wrapped his forearm around her neck.

He hauled her tight against him, dragging her into the cold thick shadows that always hung about him. “She’s mine, Khul.”

Rhaekhar roared, charging like an enraged bull, but he could no longer see them. “Shannari! Where are you?”

Wrapped in Gregar’s shadows, she didn’t want to answer, despite the terror screaming through her body. She hated a threat at her back, but this was Gregar, the laughing, lecherous Blood. Shadowed, true, but she knew him.

He wouldn't hurt her...

"Much," he whispered against her ear. He shifted his grip on her so his hand encased the column of her throat. His other hand pressed the rahke dripping with her lover's blood to her body. He smeared her with blood but didn't draw her own. Deliberately, he rubbed himself against her, at first she thought to arouse her and to show her his own heavy need grinding against her.

Then the blood started to burn her skin.

Oh, Lady, now she remembered those Shadowed dreams they'd shared for years before they'd ever met. Inflamed with bloodlust, they'd usually killed each other. His blood stoked a fire in her, lighting up every inch of her skin. She fought his grip, but not to escape, not now. She wanted to turn around and lick the blood from his skin.

She wanted to use his rahke to make more wounds.

He slid the rahke down her belly. :Na'lanna.:

"Shannari!" Rhaekhar shouted. "Answer me!"

"Here," she moaned, twisting in the Blood's grip.

:His blood Calls you,; Gregar whispered in her mind. :Just as your blood Calls me.:

She could feel Rhaekhar rushing about, unable to find her in the stormy night with Gregar's gift of Shadow obscuring her. Khul's blood burned like a beacon, calling her to come and draw more, to taste that wealth and coat her skin with his blood. Doubt trembled through her. She was dangerous, as dangerous as Gregar. If she ever lost control and hurt Rhaekhar...she couldn't live with herself.

:I could make love to you right here while he searches, and he'd never be able to find you.:

It felt like the blood on her skin had sunk beneath the surface to torch the blood in her veins. Need pulsed with every beat of her heart. :You could kill me, too.:

:Aye, he would hear every cry and scream, but never find you.:

Heavy against her back, Gregar pushed her to the ground, his grip nearly crushing her windpipe. The trampled grass was wet and lightning tore the sky, but she couldn't feel the rain on her skin. She felt fevered, blazing with need. The razor sharp rahke pressed to her throat.

Gregar peeled some of the shadows away, and she screamed. It felt like her skin had been flayed open to the bone, her arms and legs flaring with pain. Immediately, Rhaekhar charged toward her, but he drew up short when he saw the rahke tight at her throat.

"What are you doing?"

Displeasure and horror echoed in his voice, but so did something else: jealousy. If the Shadowed Blood was touching her, he wanted to be a party to it, even this...this bloody business of shadow and pain.

"Ask me aloud, na'lanna, so he can hear you."

"Please," she whispered.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Bleed me, hurt me, kill me, I don't care, as long as you're inside me."

Rhaekhar recoiled a step, his proud arrogance faltering. “Great Vulkar! What have you done?”

“Nothing yet.” She heard the smirk in Gregar’s voice. “Do you want to participate?”

Thunder rolled like a thousand hooves across the sky. The knife danced quickly across her body before she could even react or cry out. Braced for pain, it took her a moment to realize all he’d done was slice her clothing away. Glittering bone white in the night, the rahke hovered before her face. Death approached. The hair on the back of her neck screamed with alarm, her skin thick with goose bumps. Her stomach convulsed.

The rahke jabbed toward her and she cried out, a pitiful whimper that shamed her.

The knife sank into Gregar’s shoulder behind her. He shuddered, groaning softly, and it wasn’t a sound of pain. Through his bond, she felt only a dark, expansive need pounding in his skull. Even with the blade buried in his body, he was thick and hard against her buttocks.

Then the blood poured down her neck and she knew why he’d hurt himself. The thick hot slide sent a torrent of need rushing through her that obliterated every doubt and alarm she possessed. Writhing in his grip, she fought to get him inside her, but his clothing kept him from her.

“She needs to be filled. Shall it be me or you, Khul?”

Without answering, Rhaekhar jerked his memsha off as he came to her. His eyes blazed gold in the murk, hot with desire. She

felt a wrenching in her heart, a deep, aching sadness that she'd corrupted him, but then he was on the ground, flat on his back, and Gregar moved her closer to crawl up his prone body. Rhaekhar's hands closed on her hips, drawing her tight to him as he slid inside.

Orgasm exploded through her immediately, sending her twitching and screaming with pleasure between the two of them. Gregar used his weight against her back to drive her harder onto Khul, pinning her tightly. She couldn't move; Khul couldn't thrust. They were both trapped, by their own desire and the Shadowed Blood.

She turned her face into Gregar's neck. His thick sable hair hung like a curtain down to Khul's chest. "I want you inside me too."

"I know you do." He reached down to yank his memsha away. "But the way I'll take you will hurt."

"Good."

"Na'lanna..." Rhaekhar's voice was full of agony, his eyes still torched with lust but also darkened with regret, pain, and grief.

"Don't do this."

Her heart stuttered, torn and shredded beyond repair, but then Gregar plunged the blade into his side. He bled down her back and buttocks. Blood burned higher, obliterating the twinge in her heart that said there was more than death and nightmares for her, for them all. His palm closed over her mouth, a fresh cut pouring intoxicating blood into her, stoking her thirst, her need, even more.

Blood and shadows closed in, dragging her fully into his embrace. Gritting her teeth, she whimpered as he pushed inside.

Pain, such pain, each cry feeding his dark need. Filled with the two of them, she could only shudder with each ragged breath.

“You’re not hurting enough,” Gregar growled in her ear. He thrust deeper, crushing her against Rhaekhar, and she rewarded him with a high, thin scream.

“Stop,” Rhaekhar whispered, his voice harsh. “You’re hurting her.”

Gregar laughed roughly, drawing another cry of pain from her. “She likes it. Do you want me to stop, na’lanna?”

“No, no, no, don’t stop.”

“We’ll take it all the way this time,” he promised against her ear, sliding the rahke into her hand. “You know what you must do.”

After countless dreams of Shadow and death, she did know. At least this time the rahke was in her hand and not his, so he’d die first. His body strained against hers, his breathing fast and hot. He licked Khul’s mark, the scarred bite in her neck. A spasm shook her, drawing a growl from Rhaekhar. He didn’t like another touching his mark. He leaned up and punched Gregar in the face, but the Blood gripped her shoulder harder in his teeth and growled back.

:Tell him to hit me again. Make me bite until you bleed. Then we’ll all die.:

“I heard,” Rhaekhar replied, his voice clipped. “We’re all going to die anyway.”

Her heart protested, wailing at the thought of losing them, even while something nasty in her reveled in the jealousy and hurt glimmering in Rhaekhar’s eyes. She tried to break free of the bloody

trap, but Gregar's voice caught, his body shaking. "Now, na'lanna. Finish me now as I come inside you." His voice rose on a roar of release. "Finish me!"

With a harsh cry, she plunged the rahke backward over her shoulder, aiming for his throat. The big artery in his neck gushed a fountain of blazing blood. Screaming, she shook with him, her skin on fire. Her release drove Rhaekhar over the edge, his fingers digging into her hips as he heaved beneath her.

The Shadowed Blood fell beside Khul. Gasping for air, he smiled despite the ragged hole in his throat. "Thank you, na'lanna."

"Your heart's desire," she whispered.

Agony tore her into a million pieces. Rage filled up what was left of her, thick and black and foul. She hated him; she hated herself. They were corrupted, tainted, so stained with Shadow that no amount of blood could wash them clean. Now they'd corrupted Rhaekhar, too. He'd lain there beneath her, taken his pleasure, and done nothing to stop the Shadowed Blood from hurting her. He'd done nothing to stop her from killing Gregar in the midst of their pleasure.

Betrayal ripped her heart out of her chest. She'd trusted him to pull her back from the Shadow; instead, he'd participated. He'd helped drag her to hell. "Why didn't you stop me?"

"You didn't want me to stop you."

That he was correct only infuriated her more. Gnawing rage blackened her heart and she plunged the bloody rahke into Rhaekhar's chest. "Now we all three have scars over our hearts."

He shuddered beneath her, his eyes widening with shock. “My heart,” he whispered. His hands fell from her and the light in his eyes died. “My life is yours.”

Both warriors drew their last breath while she sat there with a bloody knife in her hand and cried.

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