

BLOOD
AND SHADOWS

The Road to Shanhasson

Book 2

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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 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 in 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 have 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 bellyful 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 she 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, or Khul may decide 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 Rhaekhar 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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