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TOUCH THE SKY

by Joely Sue Burkhart

Chapter One

"There's no honor in this."

The holy man's voice drew Iman's gaze away from the ash-choked sky streaked red with the Great Wind Stallion's fury. Now more than ever he longed for the freedom of the sky. If he had wings like the great hawk on his shoulder, he would soar above the devastation of his homeland and never look back.

A hush fell over the uneasy crowd gathered at the center of Camp. Warriors parted respectfully. Skin baked nut brown by immeasurable years of summer sun, hair as white as the snow glittering at the top of Vulkar's Mountain, *Kae'Shaman* was the oldest and most respected holy man on the Plains. He stared Khul in the eye until their leader dropped his gaze to the shivering prisoner at his feet.

Kae'Shaman's voice rang in the silence. "The Great Wind Stallion does not honor blood shed in ignorance and anger."

Barely older than a lad, the outlander huddled naked in the trampled grass,

cradling his maimed hand to his chest. Weeping, he turned his face up to the circle of warriors. "Please, kill me."

Iman flinched. Two days ago, he thought the outlander's uncommon eyes resembled the deep blue of twilight. Now those brilliant eyes were as dull as the gray ash falling all around them.

The ground heaved underfoot, drawing cries of fear from the assembled crowd. Another wave of ash and rock spewed from the three peaks of Vulkar's Mountain, cloaking the midday sun in suffocating gray. The Great Wind Stallion's sorrow blanketed the rolling hills of grass.

Khul kicked the outlander in the chest, knocked the lad sprawling, and planted a boot on his neck. "The outlanders set fire to the Plains so they could steal Vulkar's own Children. How many *na'kindre* died in the fires? How many?"

No one answered, but the Mountain rumbled again and ash fell like rain. Iman's stomach churned with shame. Their failure to protect Vulkar's greatest gift tasted like bitter ash on his tongue.

The outlander wheezed for breath. "I didn't touch your horses! I didn't raise a sword against you when you came to take them back. My father, the High King of all the Green Lands, will pay dearly for my life. Please, why--"

"Silence!" Khul roared, grinding his boot harder on the outlander's throat. "Do you think our honor can be bought with gold? You sit in your fine homes

made of rock and wood, dressed in your silks, dining on delicacies shipped from afar, while your people grow fat and lazy on the fruit of your fertile Green Lands.

"You forget the Gods who blessed you with life. You neglect your own altars and mock our faithful sacrifice of blood as savage. You call us barbarians, we who carry the Great Wind Stallion's blood in our veins! You know nothing of honor. Nothing!"

Whistling nervously as Khul's volume increased, the hawk shook away clumps of ash and gripped Iman's shoulder tighter. Talons pricked his skin through the leather vest, another indication of the hawk's distress.

As soon as Iman offered his arm, the hawk hopped onto his gloved fist, wings already cocked. He threw his fist upward, and Arrow disappeared into the ghostly gloom like his namesake. Taking Iman's heart with him.

Khul unsheathed his *rahke* and crouched beside the outlander. "I will punish you for your people's sins."

Pity moved Iman to break the silence. "Many *na'kindre* died, but we already punished the outlanders for their sins. We conquered their armies and retrieved the surviving *na'kindre*. Show this last prisoner mercy, Khul. Kill him cleanly and let us be done."

Khul sneered at him. "I will never be done! As Khul of the Nine Camps of the Sha'Kae al'Dan, I'll trample them beneath our hooves!"

Cold, killing anger tightened Iman's hands into fists at his side, but he fought for calm reason. "You spoke truly, Khul, when you said the outlanders know nothing of honor. Another ride against the Green Lands will be butchery instead of honorable warfare."

Khul's face darkened with rage. He seized a handful of the outlander's cropped hair and jerked his head backward. The outlander whimpered but made no protest in the hope his torment would soon end.

Iman knew better. The torture was only beginning.

Khul drew the *rahke* down the young man's face, slicing his cheek to the bone. His heels drummed the ground, stirring up clouds of ash.

"We lost the *na'kindre*!" Khul shouted. "Vulkar's Children have deserted us and fled to His Mountain!"

Grimacing, Iman watched as Khul made another long gash to the outlander's other cheek. "They knew not what they did."

"No matter. They will pay dearly in blood. All of them! My honor demands it!"

Sickened, Iman gripped the *rahke* on his hip. How long had this madness been growing in Khul's heart? "You would lead us to kill women and children? Lads like this prisoner who cannot even lift a sword against us?"

"I won't rest until every last Green Lander is dead."

Closing his eyes a moment, Iman drowned in remorse. How had they come to this? The Nine Camps would be torn asunder by this dishonor, crumpling as the tents fell beneath the weight of stone and ash. "Where is our honor, Khul? I cannot allow this travesty."

"You?" Khul laughed, but the other eight warriors forming his Blood shifted uneasily. "You swore to protect my life with every last drop of your own blood. How many times have you placed your own life at risk to protect me? I *am* your honor."

Despair shredded Iman's heart with talons as sharp as his hawk's. Unsheathing his knife, he cut away the braid of horsehair on his bicep that Khul gave to him when he became Blood. Ash swallowed the bracelet immediately. "Then I have no honor. I can no longer serve as your Blood, and I certainly cannot allow you to slaughter the innocent. Consider yourself challenged."

#

The Mountain belched thick, black smoke into the sky, obscuring the noonday sun. Shuddering in agony, the ground shifted beneath Iman's feet, but he couldn't tear his gaze away from the darkening sky. There was no sign of the hawk. After two years of companionship, Arrow had finally soared away without him.

He stripped off the leather vest and gloves. Deep in his heart, he knew he

would never see the hawk again.

The noonday sun disappeared entirely and darkness spread across the Plains, lit only by the ominous red glow of molten rock streaming from the Mountain. Blood from the God.

Shivering, he turned his gaze to Khul, searching for the honorable warrior he protected all these years. The fiery red of Vulkar's fury reflected in Khul's eyes, and a spreading stain of hunger blackened his gaze. His thirst for retribution was a great, dark leviathan rising from a storm-tossed sea.

Iman's heart sank. There would be no backing down from this challenge. Death might be the only resolution. He was more than willing to surrender his own life if Khul might turn aside from this path of dishonor.

Kae'Shaman placed a hand over the challengers' hearts to begin the ritual of formal challenge. "Two warriors stand before you, Great Wind Stallion, with fire in their blood. They offer their blood to You in honorable combat. May You strengthen their arms and hearts and bless their sacrifice."

With a vicious swipe of his *rahke*, Khul charged across the tight ring formed by the onlookers. Iman parried the blow and concentrated on defensive tactics. Mayhap a long fight would wear down some of Khul's fury. Iman prayed it might be so, for he had no stomach for killing his opponent, not after using his own body as a shield for years.

Full-speed slash and attack did nothing to cool Khul's temper. Blowing hard, Khul circled him, throwing his *rahke* back and forth between his hands. "Look at this cowardly dog. He challenges me, but then refuses to draw my blood. No wonder he's afraid to ride against the Green Landers again."

A well of icy cold water bubbled up in Iman's chest. Despite the daytime heat, he shivered. His teeth and bones ached with cold, his ears roared with rushing wind, and darkness clouded his vision. For a moment, he actually feared he might lose consciousness.

Khul didn't hesitate to use the momentary weakness against him. Iman felt the *rahke* slice across his abdomen and leaped backward before the wound became his death sentence.

Blinking, he shook his head in an attempt to clear his vision. What he saw, though, made no sense.

Thick, black shadows curled about Khul's legs. The shadows sucked at him, leeching his strength and honor, dragging him down. Down to darkness. Down to the Endless Night's domain.

Iman's stomach heaved. Writhing shadows stretched outward from Khul, spreading across the Plains like an insidious foul vine. Nighttime at noon. Mayhap the sun would never shine again. Mayhap the Endless Night would engulf the Plains forever.

As long as Khul lived, this Shadow would continue to grow. He would continue to infect the Sha'Kae al'Dan according to the Endless Night's darkest intent.

Khul must die.

Dodging another vicious attack, Iman searched frantically for any other way. He couldn't find it in his heart to break the oath holding him as closest Blood.

"You can't do it." Khul taunted with another swipe. "You can't draw my blood. If you kill me, you have no honor."

Iman ducked beneath the sweeping *rahke* and placed a shallow wound on Khul's chest. Deep in his heart, he waited for Vulkar's Mountain to explode in fury at such atrocity, but all he felt was fierce satisfaction.

Striking again and again, he planted wounds deliberately on Khul's body. Blood streaked his opponent, dripping into the ash.

Blood. Iman could not pull his gaze away from the blood. The scent made him lightheaded. His mouth watered.

He wanted to taste that blood sacrifice.

A different kind of shadow darkened the freezing lake of water flowing in his veins. Cold and deadly, it draped across his shoulders like a tangible cloak of dark ice he could feel against his skin.

Khul cursed. Squinting, he swung again, but this time his movements were

hesitant. *As if he couldn't see.*

Sidestepping around his opponent, Iman sliced a long cut down Khul's back.

Stunned, Khul whirled about and lashed out wildly. "What trickery is this? The Shadow was supposed to be mine!"

The Gods had many names and many faces, even the greatest Evil of all. Lord of Darkness, Shadow, Endless Night, Blackest Heart, Neverending Winter, He was the Death of hope, feared by all the lands of the world. Were the glorious days of summer on the rolling Sea of Grass doomed to fall to winter at last?

Was he now as corrupted as Khul? Is that why he wanted to violate his deepest oath and kill Khul? Why he wanted to taste the blood? Why freezing shadows touched him?

The thought chilled Iman's blood. Doubt froze his hand and the clinging blanket of shadow he felt about his shoulders wavered. He couldn't do it. He couldn't kill Khul, not with this shadow tainting him. He could disarm Khul, though, and pray. . .

A hard blow knocked Khul's *rahke* out of his hand.

Panting and dark-faced with rage, Khul gnashed his teeth. "Before Vulkar, you swore to protect me!"

"Aye." Iman barely recognized his own cold, empty voice. "Just as you swore before Vulkar to uphold His honor and glory across the Sea of Grass. Do

you see the angry glow in the sky again, Khul? Do you feel the ground shudder beneath your feet? Can you honestly say Vulkar is pleased with your leadership?"

"As Khul of the Nine Camps of the Sha'Kae al'Dan, I am Vulkar's hand on the Plains. You can't stop me!"

The ground rocked so hard that Iman staggered and nearly fell. Screams and shouts echoed in the gloom and people raced for the insubstantial safety of their tents.

He searched the darkened skies once more for his hawk, but ash thickened the air so badly he couldn't even make out the formidable Mountain. A foolish thought, but oh, how he wished he could have flown just one time. "Kill me if my blood will satisfy your thirst for vengeance. I'll hand you my own *rahke*."

Khul spat in his face. "You're no longer Blood. You have no honor. Kill me if you dare."

Victorious but losing in more ways than one, Iman sighed. Despair weighed heavily on his shoulders, and his gaze dropped to the prisoner still weeping. "At least free the outlander."

"You can save this one, Iman, but you can't save the others. At dawn, we ride for the Green Lands once more, and this time, the ground will be stained red with their blood."

The crowd dispersed, following Khul back to the tents. Standing knee-deep

in ash and soot, Iman felt the Great Wind Stallion's sorrow pierce his heart. He saved one lone outlander, while Khul contemplated the slaughter of thousands.

He failed. Now, he couldn't even save himself. With no honor, no Camp, and this cold shadow spreading in his own heart, where could he go?

#

Kae'Shaman placed his hand on Iman's chest, but he couldn't bear to meet the holy man's eyes.

"Vulkar has set your feet on a perilous path."

Iman stared down at the lifeless trampled grass smothered by soot and felt nothing but despair. "I should have killed Khul, but then I would despise myself even more."

"Will you listen to His Call?"

Raising his gaze to the black Mountain rumbling on the horizon, Iman felt a stirring in his heart. A cold wash of shadow waited inside him, but for what? For evil, or something more? "What must I do?"

"Climb the Mountain in search of Him."

Turning away, he tried to ignore the churning in his stomach. His heart leaped with hope at the thought of scaling those daggered slopes of obsidian. Perhaps his blood on Vulkar's Mountain would appease Him in some small way. "To climb Vulkar's Mountain is to die."

Compassion flashed in *Kae'Shaman's* eyes. "Aye."

Nodding, Iman ripped a handful of limp Plains grass free and scrubbed the worst of the blood off his *rahke* and hands. Just looking at the blood reminded him of the fierce urge he felt while fighting Khul. The hunger for blood, the raw metallic taste rolling on his tongue, lighting a fire in his heart.

A fire doomed to Shadow.

He deserved to die on the slopes of the Mountain, but mayhap he would survive long enough to throw himself off one of the three peaks. Then, he would soar at last.

Chapter Two

In the lingering gloom of smoke and ash, Iman didn't know how long it took him to reach the hills at the foot of the Mountain. At least the earthquakes ceased and the crashing roar of fury settled to a low murmuring like distant thunder. The darkened sky was stained as red as blood.

Turning away from the ominous sky, he unsaddled his horse. No magnificent Child of the Great Wind Stallion, the small outlander mare stood with head down and sides streaked with sweat despite his care and slow pace. He cleaned out the mare's clogged nostrils and offered her water in his cupped palms from his meager supplies. Where he went, he would have no need for food or water.

Iman slapped the mare lightly on the rump and she ambled back toward the Plains, disappearing quickly in the thick swirling ash. He hoped she lived, that her unborn foal might bring hope to his people.

Sprays of fire and molten rock from the peaks cast an eerie red glow down

the glittering sides of the formidable summit. Treacherous and jagged, the Mountain did not invite random exploration. The obsidian shards would slice his hands and feet as readily as a *rahke*, but the blood was part of the ritual. According to legend, if a warrior sacrificed enough blood in his climb, he might actually live long enough to look down into the fiery lake at the center of the Mountain.

He tried to find the most likely path to the top, but the shadows of cleft and ridge crossed and fell in a confusing maze. Once a warrior stood at the foot of a God's Mountain, did all paths lead to the summit? Or none? With heavy heart he decided it didn't really matter. He would die on this black rock without ever seeing the sun again.

Iman jerked the *memsha* off his hips and stared at the cloth in his hands. Only a Blood wore red to signify his oath to give his blood in Khul's defense. This narrow strip of cloth was all that remained of his honor.

Unsheathing his *rahke*, he wrapped it in the red cloth and carefully laid the bundle on a flat boulder at the base of the Mountain. Naked except for his loincloth and his boots, defenseless and honorless, Iman closed his eyes.

Great Vulkar, forgive me. If it be Your will, I will die on this Mountain; I will sacrifice every last drop of my blood on Your black rock; I will cast myself into the fiery lake. Whatever You require, Great Wind Stallion, if only You will

forgive Your people and spare the Green Lands from Khul's wrath.

Taking a deep breath, Iman began climbing.

Rock crunched beneath his boots. Within moments, he was forced to use his hands to keep his balance. Searching for a handhold, he grimaced when a blade of obsidian sliced open his palm. His boots wouldn't survive the climb to the top.

The sacrifice began.

Please, let me be worthy. Let my blood, and my life, be found acceptable sacrifices.

#

One last surge sent him tumbling over the edge. Shaking with exhaustion, he lay on the slick rock and blinked sweat and blood from his eyes. Red glowed all around him and the rock steamed the sweat off his body. Beyond pain, he simply concentrated on breathing.

The top. He made it.

His feet were too shredded to bear his weight, so he pushed to his hands and knees and crawled forward. He could not die until he saw the lake of fire with his own eyes.

Pitch black above and below, and the roaring glow ahead. Wind rushed across the unforgiving peak, whipping his hair into his face. Rolling thunder--or thundering hooves--deafened him. Blades of rock sliced his knees, his hands, his

stomach, even his face. At last he lay on a black cliff hanging out over a sea of molten rock in the heart of the Mountain.

So hot. Sulfurous fumes burned his throat until he couldn't breathe or swallow. His skin tightened, crisping in the searing heat.

Flames roared toward the black glass roof. Dancing, writhing, the flames coalesced into a blood red coat shimmering with living fire. The mighty Stallion's head brushed the roof of heaven and His hooves shook the foundation of the world.

"Vulkar," he rasped. The smoking rock branded his skin. "Forgive me."

IMAN, SON OF MY BLOOD, YOUR FAITH HAS BROUGHT YOU TO ME. YOUR SACRIFICE IS ACCEPTABLE.

"I failed you." Dry, wracking sobs shredded his desiccated throat. "Khul will kill the innocent and dishonor us all."

THE ENDLESS NIGHT'S SHADOW STRETCHES ACROSS MY BELOVED PLAINS ONCE MORE. WHO WILL STAND AGAINST THE SHADOW? WHO WILL HONOR ME WITH A WILLING SACRIFICE OF BLOOD? WHO WILL RIGHT THE WRONGS OF MAN, NO MATTER THE COST?

"Take my life, Great Wind Stallion, and save the people."

I DO NOT YET REQUIRE YOUR LIFE. DO YOU HAVE ENOUGH FAITH TO HEAR MY CALL? TO TERMINATE THOSE MARKED FOR MY

SACRIFICE?

IMAN, CAN YOU KILL IN MY NAME?

Closing his eyes, he remembered the certainty he felt that Khul must die during the challenge, yet fear stayed his hand. Killing outside of battle was not something he ever considered before. What if he made a mistake? How could he be sure that the compulsion to kill was not a goal of Shadow but of Vulkar Himself?

MY SHADOW IS DEATH. A COLD DEATH, A BLOODY DEATH,
BUT DEVOID OF TORTURE AND WICKED DELIGHT IN CORRUPTION.
GIVE ME YOUR HEART, IMAN, AND I WILL GIVE YOU MY SHADOW. I
WILL GIVE YOU MY SILENT CALL. YOU WILL BE MY RIGHT HAND,
SACRIFICING BLOOD TO HONOR ME IN THE WORLD OF MEN.

"Use me, Vulkar. I am Given."

The Great Wind Stallion lowered His majestic head. TAKE THE *RAHKE*
OF SACRIFICE AND BECOME BLOOD OF MY BLOOD.

A bone-white *rahke* lay against the smoking obsidian. Iman picked it up, his hands shaking with trepidation. Did he dare? Closing his eyes, he lifted the razor-sharp blade to the proudly arched neck.

WITH THIS IVORY *RAHKE*, YOU BECOME *HAD-MANGUS*, THE
HAND THAT WIELDS THE *RAHKE* OF SACRIFICE.

Iman made a cut, pressed his mouth to the flames, and drank the blood

sacrifice of the God.

Blood. Fire. Heat flared through his body, crisping his skin until it blackened, cracked, and peeled away to reveal the flesh beneath. Flesh baked in the heartfires of the earth, falling off his bones. He screamed, and flames shot out of his mouth. Hotter and hotter, the inferno of holy blood bubbled up inside him until his heart exploded with fire and blood.

Chapter Three

Iman awoke lying on his back in cool, brilliant green grass. Black and red leaves waved in a gentle breeze above him on a white-barked tree. The odd sights and crisp, foreign smells in the air convinced him he was surely dead.

Ah, but the patches of brilliant blue sky above the strange tree stole his breath. Had the sky ever been so blue? Had the rising sun ever been so glorious? If only he could soar into that wide open expanse of sky. . .

:You can.:

Startled, he tried to rise, but his arms and legs felt disconnected and clumsy. Warm whiskered lips nibbled his hand, and silk trailed up his arm. He turned his head ever so slowly, and stared into the dark, liquid gaze of. . .

Surely a Child of Vulkar.

The color was wrong, for he couldn't remember ever seeing a black *na'kindre* before. Even its eyes were black instead of sky blue. An immense sense of grace and magic rolled off the creature, a taste of otherworldly power, of

inhuman knowledge. Like the outlander horses, but more, so much more. He thought never to see another after they deserted the Plains and fled to the safety of Vulkar's Mountain.

Swallowing his tears of awe, Iman forced his stiff body to scramble up to his knees. He bowed his head before the *na'kindre* and waited. . . for what? What happened to him?

Fire. Ivory *rahke*. Blood of the God.

He jerked his gaze back up to the bottomless black eyes before him. "Am I dead?"

:Aye, but only half dead.:

What did that mean? He grabbed his chest and found his heart still beating. He breathed deeply of the crisp air and the rich scent of horse, his chest rising and falling. Only half dead. Would he feel pain? Could he die again, or more completely, or. . ? His head ached and he felt an inexplicable urge to weep or laugh, he wasn't sure which.

Teeth closed on his forearm painfully. Jerking back, Iman glared at the creature, who managed to look holy and smug at the same moment. "Ouch!"

:Aye, you can still feel pain. You are not fully dead, merely not fully of the world any longer. You stand with one foot on the Plains and the other with Vulkar. You are changed, brother, but you are still Iman in your heart.:

He closed his eyes a moment and concentrated on how he felt inside. He remembered the grueling, painful climb, the blood on the rocks, his unbelievable sense of pride at reaching the top. Pride wasn't exactly the right word, he mused. Humbled. He felt humbled and honored to have reached the lake of fire. To have looked upon the form of Vulkar, and seen how the heartfires of the earth danced about His hooves. To have tasted the very blood of sacrifice that gave birth to the Sha'Kae al'Dan.

Thinking of the Great Wind Stallion brought a relentless pressure pounding inside his skull like boulders tumbling down the Mountain.

:Can you feel the Call?:

A dreadful purpose filled him, an unseen line of need stretching from him toward the Plains. He knew what he needed to do. "Aye."

:Then let me carry you to accomplish Vulkar's will.:

Iman picked up the ivory *rahke* lying on the jewel green grass and gathered a handful of mane to haul himself up onto the *na'kindre's* back.

They splashed across a crystal-clear spring and trotted the length of the valley. Never had Iman seen such green, green grass. The color was too vibrant for his eyes after the golden brown of the Plains. "Where is this place?"

:The Tenth Camp can only be found if Vulkar and the Dark Mare wish it.

We are on the Mountain, but not.:

Strangely, he understood perfectly. A neigh of welcome drew his gaze to a herd of more *na'kindre* grazing in the peaceful safety of the Tenth Camp. Tears coursed down his cheeks. So very few remained of the once mighty herd. The one he rode paused, and each of them came to him, breathing in his face, brushing him with their soft muzzles. None of them spoke to him in his mind, but he felt blessed just the same.

Suddenly, he noticed something odd. Every single one of them was black.

"Does this place change you, too?"

:We are all changed who live in the Tenth Camp. My brothers wait for their warriors to be Called.:

Iman glanced back over his shoulder as his mount continued toward the end of the long, narrow strip of vivid green. He counted at least a fist of black *na'kindre*. Fifty assassins roaming the Plains, killing in Vulkar's name, aye, but very deadly weapons just the same.

"How will they work together to do Vulkar's will? Who will coordinate them?"

:You will.:

Gulping, Iman could barely speak. "Me?"

:Aye. You are the first Right Hand, and thus the most honored, Kae'Had-Mangus. You will lead the Hands Who Wield the Rahke of Sacrifice.:

The sense of dreadful responsibility nearly overwhelmed him. Iman swore on Vulkar's very blood to kill in His name. With fifty terrifying warriors roaming the Plains as Death, how long could the Sha'Kae al'Dan survive?

"Until the last dark days."

"*Kae'Shaman!*" Iman never expected to see the ancient holy man again, let alone here. "Will you ride with me, then?"

"Nay." *Kae'Shaman* laughed, shaking his head. "I haven't the skills or the desire, not in these old bones. Call me Dayvid now, for I'm *Kae'Shaman* no longer."

Iman's heart sank. "Without your leadership, the Nine Camps are doomed."

"Another *shaman* will be honored in my place. I have been Called to new duties." *Kae'Shaman*, or rather, Dayvid, stretched his arm out in an arc across the green vale. "Here lies the Tenth Camp where any *shaman* may come to a closer ride with the Great Wind Stallion. Here, too, we will train those who come after you. We will train them in Vulkar's gifts of Shadow and Death."

"So many *na'kindre* died in the fires," Iman whispered. "So many warriors died in the wars or sacrificed themselves in dishonor when we failed to protect Vulkar's most sacred gift. Are the last days so very close, then?"

"The last days are closer than ever, which is to say, I know nothing more than you, my friend. But know this. The Endless Night touches the world more

than ever, corrupting our Plains even now, and Vulkar will cull His herd mercilessly."

The pool of cold water and deadly Shadow inside him welled upward. The Call thundered in his head. Pawing the ground, the *na'kindre* tossed its head. It was time. Time for him to ride as Death on the Plains, to wield this ivory *rahke* in Vulkar's name, and to cull the taint from the Sha'Kae al'Dan.

"You shall be known as Death Riders, assassins wrapped in Shadow, invisible when you stalk your mark with merciless hearts of ice. Your blood is sworn wholly to Vulkar. You owe allegiance to none but Him and may reside with any or no Camp as you will. Your only commandment is to terminate your mark or die. Never stop. Never give mercy. Never ignore Vulkar's Call."

Iman kneeled the *na'kindre* toward the summit. "Death rides this very day."

"May Vulkar help us all," Dayvid whispered.

#

The side of the vale steepened, but his black *na'kindre* powered up to the top effortlessly. Obsidian shards glittered in the sun, and Iman shaded his eyes with his hand to take in the panoramic view of the rolling hills stretching toward the horizon.

His heart yearned to return to the Sea of Grass, to gallop across the hills and smell the baking grass and wildflowers accented with the scent of horses. The

chest-tall grass was flattened with ash and rock, but soon the land would be reborn. Flowers would bloom again. Foals would whinny and gallop on spindly legs. Tents would dot the hills once more. And in this endless cycle of life, Death would ride these very Plains in the most sacred of duties.

Blood would flow, and Vulkar would be well pleased with the sacrifice.

Searching the slopes for the best way down to the hills below, Iman drew his *na'kindre* to a halt. The cliffs and caverns of obsidian seemed just as impossible to traverse now. Could even *na'kindre* traverse such a torturous path without slicing open hooves or breaking a leg?

:The name I chose is Azure, because you love the sky so much. Only you will know what creature I truly am--all other warriors will see only a horse. I will carry you like a fleeting Shadow across a storm-dark sky, silent as death and as invisible.:

Standing on the peak of the Mountain with the rising sun shining on his face, Iman let the tears course down his cheeks. From honorless Blood with a broken oath, to the Right Hand of Vulkar, the Hand that Wields the *Rahke* of Sacrifice, with a Child of Vulkar to carry him across the rolling hills of grass. He felt so much joy in his heart that he hurt.

For the first time in weeks, he began to feel hope for the Plains and the Nine Camps. Even the thought of killing could not tarnish this bright hope, for a

swirling flame of Vulkar's fire still burned in his heart. Miracles of miracles, he was alive with a mission from Vulkar, with surety in his heart that he possessed the strength of faith to do the Great Wind Stallion's will.

He felt a little foolish, but he asked anyway. "Can you fly?"

:Oh, brother, for you, I will touch the sky.:

#

Standing in the darkest silence of night outside Khul's tent, Iman unsheathed the ivory *rahke* given by Vulkar. A warrior walked past him with unseeing eyes. No one saw him enter Camp, and no one saw him in their midst, for he was wrapped in Shadows.

Invisible and silent, he slipped inside Khul's tent.

Soft mumbles whispered in sleep, the steady breathing of the Blood guarding inside, the rustle of blanket, the beating of his mark's heart pounding incessantly inside his mind. Iman eased closer.

A dark taint oozed from the sleeping leader, corrupting everything it touched--the Camp, the outlying Plains, the warriors preparing to ride against the helpless outlanders once more. Indeed, the Endless Night would delight in such a slaughter.

Nay. The corruption would spread no further. He would end it here and now.

Silently, he stepped between two awake Blood and knelt over Khul who slept, aye, but not easily. His head tossed back and forth and his arms jerked restlessly beneath the blanket. Reeking rot and disease clogged Iman's nose. Without a doubt, he knew the Endless Night was in Khul's dreams this very moment.

He made a single, quick slice across Khul's throat. Blood sprayed from the severed artery and Khul gurgled awake. Eyes, blind and staring, hands grabbing at his throat. The Blood did not move from their guarding place; they thought he dreamed.

Blood. The blood called to him, a sacrifice worthy of the Great Wind Stallion, a cleansing for the corruption Khul had wrought on the Plains. The fire of Vulkar blazed higher in Iman's heart. Lifting a trembling hand to his mouth, he licked the blood from his fingers, feeding the fire within.

The Great Wind Stallion smiled upon His Hand Who Wields the *Rahke* of Sacrifice.

Iman walked out of the tent as soundlessly as he entered. A shout echoed from inside the tent, for at last the Blood noticed Khul's death throes. His old friend and second-in-command nearly bumped into him without seeing him. He could taste their fear on the air, and smell the blood of the dying Khul of the Nine Camps.

The sun broke the dark line of the horizon and began its glorious climb. The tainted shadows of evil melted away beneath the rising sun and Khul's blood sacrifice. The air was cleaner, purer, and a great unseen weight was lifted from Camp. The people might mourn their loss, but a new Khul would be declared in a matter of days. Hopefully a calmer warrior with unswerving honor and courage.

If not, Iman would visit him in the dead of night, too.

Azure nickered and bumped him in the chest, smearing his muzzle in Khul's blood. *:Well done, brother.:*

Iman threw his arm about the great horse's neck and leaned against him. Side by side, they watched the sun rise over the rolling hills of swaying grass. The Mountain to the south was quiet in the new dawn, and the rain of ash ceased. The wide expanse of sky beckoned to him as always.

:Let us fly.: