

SNEAK PEEK!
Juno Books ~ Fall 2007



HER PAST
IS PAIN.
HER PRESENT...
VENGEANCE.

MATTHEW COOK

BLOOD MAGIC



AN EXCERPT FROM
BLOOD MAGIC
KIRIN'S TALE

MATTHEW COOK



AN EXCERPT FROM
BLOOD MAGIC: KIRIN'S TALE

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MEET MATTHEW COOK

Matt Cook graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1991 and wasted no time in beginning a family. As many Fine Arts graduates do, he took a normal, respectable job, one good for paying the bills but terrible at nourishing the soul. He spent several years trying to keep his illustration, digital graphics and photography skills sharp, even resorting to wedding photography when things were truly dire. More than ten years later, he was still no closer to making anything resembling a living in the visual arts, so he turned to his other great love: literature. In a bout of desperate optimism, he began on a mammoth undertaking: an urban fantasy trilogy set in his beloved Chicago. Four years later, while “taking a break” from editing that (still unfinished) project, he had this strange idea for a necromancer named Kirin . . .

Matt lives and works in Columbus, Ohio and I met him at Context, a small science fiction convention held there. Even though I live only a couple of hours’ drive north of Columbus, I’d never heard of Context, let alone considered attending, until my friend Ellen Datlow, editor extraordinaire, was a Guest of Honor. New Yorker Ellen discovered how cheap a steak dinner can be in Ohio and learned why, on a Saturday in October, most of Columbus wears red and talks about “Buckeyes.” I met this nice chap named Matt who later sent me an extraordinary novel about a necromancer named Kirin . . . and now he’s working on a second book about her (working title: *Blood Magic: Nights of Sin*).

Blood Magic: Kirin’s Tale will be published this fall by Juno Books and after reading this “sneak peek” we hope you’ll want to read all of Kirin’s fascinating tale. Our Web site at www.juno-books.com will keep you up to date on it and all our other great titles.

Paula Guran
Editor, Juno Books

CHAPTER ONE

For three days we run, and the Mor follow. Three days of burning sun, and dust, and constant, grinding pain—limbs growing heavier and heavier, slowing us down, making men stumble. More and more, those who fall do not rise, and we must leave them behind.

Three nights of hurried, cold camps; never risking a fire, afraid to sleep lest the enemy come upon us unaware. Three nights of scouting along our back trail, doing what I can to obfuscate the marks of our passage; a hopeless task for more than two dozen men, all heavily booted, all no longer caring to tread lightly, but I cannot help but to try.

Three days and nights since the doomed battle of Gamth's Pass, where five thousand men faced off against a force a tenth their size, and were annihilated just the same. Five thousand men cut down by the Mor's unearthly strength; stone-like limbs scything, claws ripping through man-flesh and horseflesh both with appalling ease, while arrows and blades bounced like gentle spring rain from their shield-like carapaces.

I was at the rear when the final charge met the Mor's irregular battle lines, breaking like waves against a rocky shore. I fired arrow after arrow down into the foe, knowing that only one in a hundred shafts might find some vulnerable place. My sweetlings, with their horned limbs and thorny hides, might have had better luck in the fray but I had been forbidden by the priests from calling them.

Pious fools. What good were their prayers against such a foe? What use their magics against beings of such strength? From my vantage point, I saw our line crumble, the Mor cutting it apart like monstrous ants dissecting and devouring a flailing earthworm.

Then there was nothing but screams and chaos as men abandoned their formations, scattering like leaves in a gale, screaming, shouting,

begging for mercy. I ran down into the swirling melee, searching for Jazen Tor, dodging the swipes and jabs of the Mor. I found him soon after, still fighting amongst the remains of his company, and we fled.

THE FOURTH DAY DAWNS. I do not pause for rest, but continue to scout the perimeter while the men snatch a few precious minutes of sleep. None grumble any more about relying on a woman; such prideful concerns have long since been forgotten. We are all refugees now, all prey.

My body yearns for rest, and sustenance; the hard uneven ground the men are sprawled upon looks as enticing as a featherbed. I push aside my weakness and run back along our trail, before my traitorous body can succumb to temptation. I am dismayed to find the Mor are less than three miles behind. They are gaining, moving at their implacable pace while we—burdened by our need for sleep, for food and drink—slow. If the Mor have such weaknesses, they have never displayed them.

Before I return, I kill a deer with my bow and use its still-warm body to summon one of my dark children. I place it along our trail, commanding it to kill anything that it sees. I dislike using animals, for the resulting creation is slow and stupid and weak, a pale shadow of what my sweetlings are usually capable of, but it should slow the Mor for a few precious minutes.

I return to find the sentries asleep on their feet. I clatter a bit as I roll my few meager possessions, giving them time to come awake. The sound is insufficient to rouse most of them and, finally, I must resort to shaking and shouting.

Soon, all are on their feet and we set out. The men are too exhausted to even groan, shuffling forward like zombies. Jazen Tor, who I allowed to share my blankets a million years ago, before Gamth's Pass, smiles and offers me a bit of biscuit.

"Eat up," he says, his voice a whispery croak, so different from his usual melodious baritone. "No need to ration. At this pace, we'll be at Fort Azure by mid-day."

I take the morsel with a nod of thanks and place it in my pouch. I am never hungry after birthing one of my precious ones, as if the act of creation fills some bodily need in me.

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I lean forward and whisper, “We must increase the pace. The Mor are gaining. At this rate they will be on us before we reach the fort.”

Tor looks over his shoulder at Captain Hollern. He knows, as do I, that our commander will not listen to any tactical advice I have to offer. Hollern is a follower of the Lightbringer, and barely tolerates my presence.

“I’ll spread the word,” Tor says with a weary sigh. “One final run, then we will be behind thick walls, eh?”

I smile in what I hope is a reassuring way and he moves back. He whispers in a man’s ear and I see the glazed look of exhaustion in his eyes shift to cornered fear. Tor grips his shoulder for a moment, seeming to will strength into the man, then moves to speak to another. Soon, the column begins to accelerate, just a bit, but maybe enough.

Hollern is oblivious to the change and soon is at the rear of the group. He picks up his pace without seeming to notice, the vacant look in his eyes never flickering. I wish he would just lie down like so many others have already done, putting his command in Jazen Tor’s more capable hands.

We come across the Fort Azure road and our pace increases further still. Homesteads are scattered along the road. All are abandoned, all burnt. The Mor, I know, always put our settlements to the torch after raiding, as if they cannot bear the very sight of any human structure. Most are abandoned, but some are surrounded by the shattered bodies of their former inhabitants; men, woman, children, limbs scattered and scavenger-chewed, heads missing. We do not stop to bury the fallen.

Mid-morning, we come to a stream and the men stop to refill their canteens. I whisper to Tor to not wait for me and slip away. I run back along our trail, gritting my teeth at the pain in my feet and legs. I will soon be behind thick walls, guarded by archers and pikemen, I tell myself. I can rest then.

I pass by one of the homesteads and check the bodies. None are usable. Without heads or limbs, the fallen are too damaged to call forth one of my sweetlings. The house has been burned to the foundation and its stones scattered. The ashen smell lies thick in my nose.

A horn blast splits the quiet air. Jazen’s horn. There is only one reason he would betray his position. I run back, panting, chest like a furnace, wondering if I am already too late.

I slow as I approach the spot where I left the men. The sound of battle reaches my ears, the slithering ring of blades striking rock-like skin, the hoarse grunts and shouts of men mixed with the eerie piping of the Mor. I leave the road, slipping like a ghost into the bushes. I reach the edge of the clearing, drawing forth an arrow and nocking it to the string.

Men lie scattered about the clearing in spreading pools of blood. The survivors, with Hollern and Jazen Tor among them, stand in a tight knot, back-to-back-to-back, sixteen men against three Mor.

The Mor tower over the soldiers, eight feet of stone-gray armor and leathery flesh, their massive, clawed upper arms rising and falling like threshing tools. Weapons are clutched in the smaller, lower limbs: stone hammers and knives. The blades glow a sullen orange, hot as lava, a result of one of their shaman's magics.

I draw my arrow back to my cheek, searching for a vulnerable joint, then see there are bodies not five feet from my position. They are horribly torn, the edges of their wounds blackened and smoking, but the Mor have not yet torn them asunder. I smile bloodlessly and take the arrow from the string.

As I open my inner eye, my sister crows in triumph inside my head. I tell her to be still. She spares me a mocking laugh, but falls silent, gods be praised.

I see the spirits of the fallen men, standing near their former vessels. The specters are dazed, wandering about, some crying, others peering at their former flesh with hopeless expressions.

Silently, I call out to the souls of the soldiers. They turn and listen, their ghostly faces pale and translucent in the wan sunlight. I whisper a song of blood and revenge, thrilling as one by one they drift back toward the fleshy remains.

The first Mor does not even have time to scream out a warning as my sweetling leaps upon its armored back. Then a second of my children, and a third, tear themselves free from their still-warm cocoons, shambling forth to take their revenge.

They charge forward, their skinless, rope-muscled limbs flailing, bone blades and horns hissing through the air. As one, they clamber up the Mor's hulking body. They are surprisingly nimble for such ruined-

looking things; ugly in a way that only a mother can love. I know that such alacrity will fade in time, as their tissues dry and tighten, but right now they are a whirlwind of muscle and sinew driven by the spirits of the recently dead and my own insatiable desires.

A Mor screams as one of my children's talons saws across a seam in its armored belly. Its intestines, or what passes for them, tumble out in a vibrant blue spill, smoking in the chill morning air. The Mor warrior falls to one knee, my children still hacking and tearing.

"Kirin, no!" Hollern screams, seeing what I have summoned. "Oh, gods, no!"

The remaining Mor, caught between my dark children and the remnants of the company, make a break for the trees. Jazen Tor leaps at one, his sword stabbing at his opponent's lightly armored back. His blade transfixes a stout leg, busting through the Mor's knee from behind.

It stumbles and Tor is pulled forward, falling face down, his hand still clasping his blade. The Mor turns, seeing what has hurt it. In its smaller, inner hand is a stone knife. The air ripples with laval heat.

"Jazen!" I scream, seeing what is about to happen. I give the silent command for my sweetlings to attack, to save him, but I know I am already too late.

The Mor's blade saws across Tor's face in a shower of blood. The crimson flood boils into steam as it pours across the knife. Jazen's scream fills the world. The knife stabs down, burying itself to the hilt in his breast, just as my sweetlings pile onto the enemy.

The Mor's eyes, cloudy, jade-like, almost glowing behind the armored slit of its face armor, lock with mine as my children begin slaughtering it. I cannot tell if it is smiling behind the overlapping bone plates. Soon, my children find a weak spot in its armor and it is over.

"I ordered you to never . . . to never . . ." Hollern pants. "Oh, gods! What have you done?"

"Shut up or you'll be next," I say, kneeling beside Jazen, uncaring that my words or my desire to see Hollern's blood are treason. I grab the stone knife's hilt and pull it from my lover's body, all too aware that it is too late. Even through the leather of my gloves, the hilt scalds my palms. I toss it into the stream, and the water boils evilly as it sinks with a hissing splash.

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“Shhhh..” I whisper to Jazen, stroking his crisped hair. “It will all be over soon. You will rise again, and we will be together. Together.”

“D . . . d . . . don’t . . . please . . .” he says, the words a bubbling hiss through the split, oozing wasteland of his face. His one remaining eye rolls and looks into my own. “Kirin . . . I’m afraid . . .”

I bend and kiss him, drawing his breath into my body. It tastes of brimstone and charred meat and his own treasured sweetness. The fiery blade has cooked him from within. I know he is in terrible pain, but cannot bring myself to do what is necessary to end his suffering. Inside, my sister spits and reviles me for a weakling, screaming that I am weak, am weak, am weak, that I will die beside him, in blood and fire.

I hold him, cradled in my lap, until his breath finally stops.

CHAPTER TWO

Kirin was not the name I was born with; it belonged to my twin sister. Back in the happy days when we were girls, Kirin was forever the dreamer, the one who had everything planned. Those were the days when nothing was more important to her than I, her twin, her other half. Before Marcus and the ruinous events that would lead to her death and our rebirth.

Kirin always knew what she wanted. At least, it seemed that way. Find the perfect men, sons of a wealthy family, then settle down in cottages on the same road, or even, if the gods were kind, neighboring town houses in the distant City; cherished wives of sophisticated, urban husbands.

She dreamed of a life filled with children and wealth, shared with dutiful, doting companions, purchased with our fair faces and slender bodies. Kirin was always the one who was so painfully aware of her gods-given beauty and what it could win for us, and who took such pains to display those gifts to their best advantage.

Growing up, she filled the air with nonstop chatter and demands. “Comb those cockleburs from your hair,” she would tell me. Or “Stand up straight. Slouching makes you look common. Ladies have dignity and good posture.” Or, her favorite, and mother’s: “Can’t you at least try to make yourself pretty?”

Kirin always dictated to me, the quiet one, the studious one, how we would live our lives. Even now she would do so, if she could. That she loathes the state of my life is no secret, for she takes every opportunity to remind me of how I am ruining myself.

Now that I am a woman grown, I can ignore her constant barbs. Most of the time. When I cannot, on those days when I am overly

weary, which is seldom, or sick, which is almost never, I simply remind myself of her terrible fate, and pity stays my bitter reply.

There are days, sometimes entire weeks, when I do not curse the perverse knowledge that has allowed me to survive for so long; the same knowledge which keeps my sister bound to me. But when she whispers to me, whispers to me in the long still hours of the dark, on those days I would give every last golden rukh I have ever had or will have for a chance to go back and unlearn what I know. To join my sister in her simple, shallow plans. To be that compliant, frustrated girl again.

Mother did her best to raise us as proper young women. She spent hours with the two of us, laying out her family's tarnished silver and the yellowed china that she said was too fine for any current company we might entertain. Endless lessons followed on how to lay a proper, elegant table, Mother frowning when I misplaced a fork or accidentally banged the side of my soup bowl with my spoon, or on how to start and maintain entertaining, empty conversation, steering clear of any subject that might cause offense or discord.

While we labored, she filled our ears with tales of her own girlhood. In her day, Mother had been a celebrated beauty, living a privileged life at court. Her days were filled with endless, drowsy lawn parties, where high-bred ladies met and mingled; her nights extravagant banquets and costume balls, where the true powers of the empire plotted behind their masks of revelry.

That was during the time of Emperor Albrecht, before his assassination and the subsequent rule of Contessa, his faithless wife, who was later called by many unpleasant names, the kindest of which was "The Mad." Before Contessa sent away all those loyal to the former Emperor; the better, or so mother always said, to clear the way for her lover Berthold, captain of the Emperor's former guard. All before my family fell on hard times, their wealth and position stripped away upon my grandfather's fall from grace and banishment from court.

Kirin devoured such knowledge, seeing it as practice for the day when she would inevitably marry back into the life that had been stripped from our mother, becoming a Grand Lady of the Empire.

Following Grandfather's exile, Mother and her two sisters were sent away to live with their aunt, while my uncles, older than they and both officers in the Empire's army, left for far-away lands at the head of their companies, there to pass from my mother's stories forever. Mother later married her landlord's son, Rupert, the man who would be my father. It was the best match she could make, she often told us, under such rude circumstances.

My sister's bottomless appetite for Mother's tales was not one I shared. For my part, I was never happier than when I was able to slip away and wander my father's modest holdings, exploring every stream and copse, often alone, but sometimes accompanied by the children of his field hands or tenants. I played *Come Along, Sweet*, or *Take the Castle*, or sometimes even *The Ogre and the Maiden* with them, laughing and running and acting out in a most unbecoming manner.

I suppose in many ways it was an idyllic childhood, despite my boredom and disinterest in my sister's prattle. We seldom fought, for Kirin had inherited not only Mother's leaf-green eyes and pale skin, physical traits we, naturally, shared, but also her skill for inspiring guilt with a simple glance or weary sigh. No, it was easier to allow myself to be drawn along in her wake, and to let her chart the course for the adult life that still seemed so very far away. Alas, childhood, like all things, must eventually pass.

Marcus Allaire, the youngest son of Richard the Huntsman, was the sort of boy that all the girls told stories about. Clean-limbed and blessed with a strong chin, flowing nut-brown hair and eyes the color of a cloudless summertime sky, it seemed destined that girls would swoon at his feet. And swoon they did, amongst the buzz of gossip and chatter that always followed in the wake of his enormous black charger. He often rode through town after a successful hunt, mounted in the saddle proudly, his massive bow aslant across his back and his latest kill draped across his saddlebags, a look of insufferable smugness twisting his full lips.

I admit that I despised him. He never went to the school that Mother demanded we attend and father worked so hard to afford; Marcus often said such learning was beneath a man of action like himself. I

remember many an afternoon, walking home from a long day of instruction, when he and his cronies would descend on us, hooting and cat-calling, their ponies splattering us with mud as Kirin and I clung to one another.

Such teasing, of course, ended as soon as our breasts began to swell, replaced with a different but equally unwelcome sort of attention. Almost before I knew it, Kirin's flush of rage shifted, becoming an altogether different kind of blush when Marcus's eyes would roam over her body.

I had always assumed my sister's all-consuming ambition and endless fascination for mother's tales of courtly life in the City would armor her against pretty, callous fools like Marcus. Assumed her dalliance with him, which began in the spring of our fifteenth year, was a passing thing, another trophy in her long chain of broken hearts. At first I even admired her for her boldness, for the Allaire family was not one to be trifled with, particularly the cruel, if lovely, Marcus.

So I willfully ignored the signs as their involvement deepened, becoming more open. Their displays of affection grew, from furtive kisses stolen behind Miller Osram's granary to public strolling and hand-holding of a most alarming nature.

Later, she began to slip from the house in the dead of night, creeping out our window after she thought me safely asleep. When she returned, her eyes were bright, like a fever victim's, and straw was tangled in her hair. When I demanded that she tell me what had happened, she laughed at me and called me a little girl and a fool.

I tried to warn her, but she, of course, had heard all the same stories about Marcus as I. How he had been caught, unashamed, even proud, with the Widow Marsten at the scandalous age of fourteen. How he had professed his endless love for Anna Coltsfoot, a girl who later ran away from home with him for three days and nights before her father and brothers went and brought her back from whatever hideaway she had allowed herself to be taken to.

All the girls knew about how Anna had been quite suddenly and without explanation sent far away to live with relatives a month later, just as we also knew that Marcus had boasted about his conquest of her in the tavern upon his return. We all knew the reason for her

banishment, even though we would never openly admit it, for such talk was unseemly for young ladies such as we.

Why would Kirin continue to pursue this rough, callow young man, a person of limited prospects and questionable family, knowing full well his roguish reputation? True, the Allaires made a decent living, as their furs were of the best quality, but they were, when all was said and done, country folk, uneducated and coarse, certainly not what Mother had trained Kirin to pursue.

The more I tried to convince her of the danger of her actions, the firmer she became in her defense of him. It was as if a madness had come upon her, one that drove deeper and deeper the more that I tried to show her the error of her ways.

Mother, of course, eventually found out about Kirin. How could she not, with every tongue wagging about it? Their quarrels filled the air for many nights, drifting down from upstairs while I sat with Father, trying to read from one of my storybooks while he quietly drank glass after glass of bitter wine.

He did not interfere; he never did, for Mother had made it quite clear that his assistance was neither helpful nor welcome. Still, I shall never forget the way he would turn his bloodshot eyes up, searching the top of the stairs whenever the yelling became particularly loud, like a hound patiently awaiting its master's summons.

I still do not know if Mother finally realized Kirin was more than her match for stubbornness, or if she had some other, deeper scheme in mind, but eventually the quarrelling, like a wild fire that has finally exhausted its fuel, stopped. Even after Mother had given up, however, I still tried to make my sister see the folly of her decision.

But Kirin had won, a fact she was all too aware of. She no longer argued; she simply reminded me that Mother had grown silent on the issue, and suggested I do the same. When it was obvious she would brook no further discussion of the matter, I gave up, an act that I fear she must have seen as permission for what happened next.

Marcus's boyhood friend was Urik, miller Ostram's son. Both my sister and her loutish new beau made it clear that if I were to take up with Urik, all parties would be quite satisfied with such a development.

Urik was not unpleasant to look upon, even though he did share his father's barrel-chest and red-faced complexion. His hair was sandy blond and receding, a fact he tried to conceal by allowing it to grow long, wearing the corn silk curls about his shoulders.

Worst of all, Kirin often spoke of his prospects and his family's modest wealth, trying to tempt me with visions of the life of ease that she had somehow managed to mislay in her pursuit of Marcus.

By late summer, my sister's courtship had flowered into a full-fledged betrothal. Kirin set the date: our sixteenth birthday, the day we would officially become women.

Urik followed suit days later, stammering out his proposal with one knee sunk in the mud behind his father's mill. He looked so confused, kneeling there in the dirt, his face even redder than usual, either from embarrassment or excitement. I bade him wait three days for my answer, and went to see my sister.

She knew. Of course she knew. She and Marcus had it all planned, just as she always did. Certainly it would not do for Kirin to wed while her sister did not. All of my attempts to remind my sister of her grandiose schemes and plans, as well as Marcus' childhood cruelty, were fruitless.

When it was clear my resistance was enduring, she stopped speaking to me for a time; I usually capitulated to her demands without much of a fight. The next day she came to me, an unexpected ally at her side. Mother.

Kirin prattled endlessly about the size of miller Osram's warehouses and how his flours were prized by the finest bakers in the far-off City, a fact that Mother found endlessly fascinating. That Mother no longer turned her shrew's eye on Kirin's continued courtship by Marcus was not lost on me.

When Kirin's arguments were all played out, it was Mother's turn. Where my sister's flawed logic and empty promises failed, Mother's tears and sobbing entreaties triumphed. I did not, nor do I now, understand why Mother gave up on her dreams for our family's return to the good life in the City, but Kirin had certainly said something to her during their heated arguments, discovered some chink in the armor of

Mother's resolve, for all she could speak of was how we should look to make the best match that we could under the circumstances.

When I reminded her that she had made a similar bargain years before, she slapped me. The blow, so unexpected, for Mother had never raised anything but her voice to me, brought stinging tears to my eyes. We ended up in each other's arms, sobbing, Mother's tears wetting my shoulder while Kirin sat, smiling, untouched by the storm she had called down.

Eventually, I bowed to their wishes and accepted Urik's ring, telling myself over and over that he was indeed the better half of the pair. He was occasionally thoughtful and generally mild, a man who often brought me untidy bouquets of pansies and boxes of sweets imported from the far-off City.

That he usually ended up eating the majority of the candy himself did not trouble me, for was I not always told the thought is more important than the deed? I will grow to love him in time, I told myself every night, over and over, until the words became a jumble of meaningless sounds.

As summer slid towards autumn and my wedding, I resigned myself to my fate. My only consolation was that I would no longer have to deal with Marcus once the deed was done. I would be a proper woman, a wife and later a mother, burdened with the myriad chores of keeping my husband's house and rearing his children, far too busy with life's details to be troubled with Marcus or even, should I choose it, Kirin.

In that, of course, I was wrong.

Our wedding was a complex affair, what with two brides and two grooms and the attending families of all, but we managed. Kirin looked so happy in her sky-blue wedding silks, standing before the priest. I managed to say my vows without stumble or stammer, which was all I had asked for from the fickle gods.

The Allaires brought their entire clan, all six brothers and their wives and their feral children. As the evening wore on and Father's wine flowed, brawls broke out, every one a knot of chaos with an Allaire brother at its heart, laughing as they punched and kicked. Mother was horrified and retired early, before the worst of the night's

embarrassments. If Kirin noticed, she gave no sign; her attention was only for her new husband.

I watched Marcus as well. I knew what kind of man he was, what kind of man he must be, coming from such a feared and wild family. My mistake was thinking that my poor, sweet, dimwitted Urik was any better.

Had I known on that day I was following Kirin down a road leading only to blood and pain and death, I would have fled, gods forgive me, abandoning her to the fate she so stubbornly insisted for herself. But, of course, we never know what fate the gods have in store for us, do we?

CHAPTER THREE

SMOKE RISES BEYOND THE TREES IN A BLACK COLUMN. Fort Azure lies at the end of this road. Fort Azure, with its promise of high walls and hot food, and sleep, gods-blessed sleep.

The men have noticed. Some groan at the sight. Others merely stare, their eyes as hard and flat as creek stones.

“What is that?” Hollern asks, his voice almost trembling. “What is that smoke?”

“It is the fort,” I say, not even trying to hide the disgust in my voice.

“Are they under attack?” Hollern asks. I walk away without answering. Soon enough, we will know.

I draw and nock an arrow, mentally commanding my sweetlings to fall in behind me. I pick the path carefully; my children are not known for their woodcraft, and do not understand what it means to walk lightly. In this they are much like the soldiers.

The men do not like my children, and stare at them with weary looks of disgust and fear. But, other than Hollern, they do not complain. When we have reached a place of safety, their feelings will doubtless change, but for now the soldiers are driven by desperation to tolerate their presence. They have seen what the sweetlings are capable of in battle, and so long as that strength serves to protect them, I know they will not turn on me.

A few minutes later, I see the glimmer of sunlight ahead. The border of the woods, at last. The breeze shifts, and the first smell of burning reaches me, wood smoke and something else, something like meat skewers roasting over a faire-day fire. I command Hollern and my sweetlings to stay put, then stalk to the tree line.

The Fort stands close to the trees' edge, no more than a bow shot from the forest's verge. Keeping the space between clear must have been a full time endeavor. Beyond lies the lower slopes and rolling foothills leading up to the mountains to the North.

Fort Azure's piled-stone walls are still standing, but the gates which barred the entrance are lying on the trampled grass before them, their thick timbers splintered and charred. Some enormous force has torn them from their hinges. The timbers are covered by pairs of deep gouges.

The Mor have already been here.

Something is burning inside the square walls, the source of the dense black cloud and the smell. The croaking and squabbling of crows is audible all the way from the woods.

I hear Hollern thrashing through the underbrush after me. I can just imagine his chest swelling with indignation, ready to bluster about not taking orders from a lowly scout. I whirl anyway, as if someone like him could ever come upon me unaware, drawing the bow all the way to my cheek and centering the murderous barb square between his eyes. Ten feet away, Hollern freezes, his eyes wide. I hold the shaft for a long moment, then slowly relax.

"I thought I told you to stay back," I whisper, turning away to stare at the burning fort.

"I refuse to stand there in the presence of those . . . those . . ."

"Be wary of what you say," I grate. "They saved your worthless hide, remember. Next time, they just might not."

"Are you threatening . . ." he sputters, his wide, peasant face, a farmer's face, all doughy, large-pored skin and freckles, flushing beet red.

"They might be inside still," I say, nodding towards the fort. "We should go around. Head overland to Fort Jasper."

"That's three days' march," he protests.

"True. But the Mor have been here, and recently. They might not have reached Jasper."

"The men need rest and supplies. We can patch the gate and retake the fort."

I spare him a long look, waiting for him to back down. The defiant jut of his jaw tells me the outcome of this farce. He shall not be turned aside from this path.

Damn. Damn. This is my fault. I can see he has chosen this because I do not wish it. Men are always so painfully aware of any perceived slight to their authority. I should have humbly suggested, and let him think that it was his idea. But, I have always had little patience for fools.

I shrug and sit, commanding my sweetlings to move up. A moment later, I hear them, pushing through the underbrush. Hollern gulps and steps back, his hand on his blade, as my children step forth.

The dark child I have summoned from the remains of a swarthy-faced soldier stops to pick one of the delicate mossflowers growing on the bark of a nearby oak. He stares at the tiny, shell-green blossom for a moment with one weeping, opal eye, before thrusting the flower into his fanged mouth. He chews for a moment, then seems to forget what he is about. The mangled flower drools from the corner of his lipless mouth.

Hollern shudders and sketches the sign of Loran Lightbringer in my direction, then storms off. A few minutes later, the men emerge cautiously from the trees. Hollern is at the rear. I can hear him commanding the men to move forward.

Two men are assigned to go inside the shattered gates, and, just for a moment, I dare to hope that the men will mutiny. But the habit of obedience is strong, and after sharing a long look, the pair slip inside, shields upraised, swords naked in their fists.

They return almost immediately. One rushes to the wall and the meager remains of his last meal come up in a liquid rush. The other sits, only answering Hollern's bleating commands for a report after being kicked. Hollern turns, shooting a withering look back in my direction, before going inside.

As much as I despise their commander, the men need help. This place is not safe. Jazen, dearest Jazen, would have known what to do; he would have jollied, or argued, or convinced his lead-headed commanding officer to do the right thing. But Jazen can no longer speak a language that Hollern can understand.

I look over at the child I have called from his flesh, and a sadness I have carefully trained myself to ignore ripples through me like nausea. I can still see Jazen's lovely features on one half of the sweetling's face, staring out at me with slack-eyed blankness. The other half is pure

nightmare, the legacy of the Mor's blade, a yawning, blackened canyon framing the stumps of shattered teeth, skin peeled back to expose the ripple and slide of leather-hard tendons.

A face only a mother could love.

Sighing, I sling my bow and command my children to take up positions at the corners of the walls, beneath the watchtowers. When they lie down, they look disturbingly like skinned bodies. I turn for the gates.

INSIDE, DEAD MEN ARE SCATTERED, as numerous as shells on a beach. All bear the gaping, jagged-edged wounds of the Mor. Many have been dismembered. Others have been cut in half. None have heads; this is indeed the Mor's handiwork, as if the shattered gate left any doubt.

A murder of crows fills the air above us, a cawing, vertiginous cloud of flapping darkness. The bold creatures return moments after being shoed away, gory beaks dipping, landing to pluck another succulent, grisly morsel from the fallen.

The smoke comes from a pyre of horses. For some reason, the Mor have stacked and set ablaze the dozen-odd horses stabled here, mounts for message couriers and long-range scouts, while leaving the bodies of the men to rot.

"You four men, fall out for burial detail," Hollern commands, pointing to his chosen. "The rest, help me with these wagons. Ah, Kirin, I see you've come to your senses and have decided to join us."

"This is folly," I blurt. "You cannot secure this location. If the Mor return . . ."

"Then we have your bow. And the advantage of elevation." He and the men wrestle the wagon to the opening in the wall, then commands they overturn it. They begin rocking it. Finally it turns on its side, half-blocking the gate.

Hollern has gone mad. It is the only explanation. Assigning four men with three shovels between them the task of burying almost three-score bodies; trying to improvise a gate—which will not open if we should want to retreat—out of an overturned wagon and some hastily-piled crates.

I am readying my gear, intending to put as much distance as possible between myself and this place of death before darkness falls, when one of the

men catches my eye. He stares at me like a starving man might eye a slice of roast, a desperate, almost feral gleam in his eye. He knows, as do I, that if I go, he will die here. I long to tell him that even if I remain, the outcome will almost certainly be the same. There is nothing I can do for them.

Yet, hours later, I am still at the fort, manning the northwest watchtower. The men toil outside the wall, below me, digging shallow graves. They have completed half a dozen, and now afternoon is lengthening into dusk.

Hollern has constructed a great mound of debris in front of the gate, and now turns to commanding the men to police the bodies of the fallen. Once he is satisfied that his orders are being followed, he retires inside of the fort's keep. It, too, is damaged, its door hanging askew on a single bent hinge.

When it grows too dark for the men outside to work, we spend a tense half hour shifting the debris blocking the gate in order to allow them to come inside. I help with the work, trying, and failing, to imagine this heap of rubbish slowing, let alone stopping, a charging Mor.

The men build a proper fire from the remains of the pyre, sharing around whatever horse meat is still edible. Half man the walls while the remainder eat, or try to rest.

I take my meal, the cold remains of dried meat and biscuit from the bottom of my pack, up to the guard tower. I am careful to keep the fire at my back, lest it ruin my night vision.

The forest is a line of impenetrable blackness beneath the milky river of stars above. Anything could be hidden there. Anything. I know that I will never be able to rest in such a state.

As soon as my replacement takes his post, I slip over the wall. I dash across the open space between the walls and the forest, my eyes roaming, searching for any movement, any reflection of the moonlight. I wish my sweetlings could come with me; I would feel better for some company, but they are needed back at the fort. Besides, I will move faster, and far more silently, if I travel alone.

I patrol the woods for hours, ranging far afield before heading back, always alert for signs of the Mor. In the still hours of the darkest part of the night, I find an oak and climb into its branches, fashioning a tenu-

ous perch for myself in a convenient bough. It is not the most comfortable bed, but its concealment gives me comfort.

Dawn is a breathless promise hanging in the still air when I hear them. Heavy footsteps, breaking through the undergrowth. They are not trying to be quiet. They do not care for subtlety.

I still have time. Time to run to the fort. Time to tell the men to run. Time to warn them.

And they might—just might—listen to me. If Hollern sleeps deeply, I may have time to convince enough of the men of the coming danger before it is too late for them to flee.

But in my tree, I am safe. They will not think to look for me here. They cannot track me.

In the black, a crack sounds as something heavier than a Woodstrider steps on brittle wood. The sound, sharp and explosive, makes me jump.

Then I am scrambling down, the bark scratching at my hands, my clothes. My cloak snags on a broken branch and almost throttles me before I can free it.

I sprint across the open ground, arms upraised, calling out, “Scout returning! Scout returning! To arms! To arms! The enemy approaches!” Desperately hoping one of the half-awake guards will not loose an arrow at me.

I claw at the mound of debris, slipping between the wagon and the crates, while all around the men rouse themselves with sleepy groans and cries.

They surround me, their grimed, stubbled faces pale in the fading moonlight, mouths open with questions. How many? How far off? Are they coming? Are they coming? Are they coming?

“There is still time to flee,” I hiss, hoping that they will hear me. “We must go. Now. Before they arrive. We must—”

“Silence!” Hollern is here. Is coming through the broken keep door, uniform rumped and hair wild, naked steel in his fist.

“We must flee. They are in the woods. They are coming this way,” I say, facing the commander but speaking to the men. Hollern, I know, will not be swayed. But the men might.

“To arms, all men to the battlements. We’ll drive them back, in Loran’s name,” he says, a wild gleam in his bloodshot eyes.

“No! The gate will not hold!”

I see doubt bloom in some of the men’s eyes, a poison flower that is their only true salvation. The seed takes hold in the fertile soil of the men’s fear. Inside, my sister crows in triumph, and for once I am glad of it.

“You men!” Hollern shouts. He has seen it too. “You men; be true. This is Fort Azure. We can defend this place. We have walls, and gates.”

“The men stationed here had those as well,” I say, not bothering to mention that Hollern’s gate is mere rubbish. The men know. “They had five times our number, as well as a stout, intact gate, and even with all that, they were no match for the Mor.”

I see the men look to one another. Some nod. As one, they move to the improvised barricade, begin tearing it down.

“When you get outside, run for the trees,” I say, helping them pull aside boxes and furniture. “Scatter. Do not stop to fight; you cannot hope to win. The Mor are powerful, but are not quick. They are no match for your fleetness. And do not stop, no matter what. Try to find water; they do not like it. Head for the road, and then keep going.”

“This is mutiny! I’ll see you all hanged, starting with you, you treacherous bitch!” Hollern rages.

“Cut out ’is tongue. That’ll shut ’is yap right quick,” one of the men suggests. That stops his words. Hollern moves aside, glaring daggers at me, cowed for the moment.

“Movement in the trees!” a sentry shouts. The words turn my blood to ice. “Movement!” a second calls out.

As one, we look up from our labor, the pile only chest high now, and see them.

The Mor flow from the concealing forest. Three. Six. A dozen, and still more. Their hulking shoulders gleam like burnished stone in the growing dawnlight. Their inhuman faces, like armored masks, stare at us, eyes glowing with laval heat, full of hate.

They emerge from the trees, a ragged yet impassable line of armored death. Behind us are the foothills of the mountains, rising up and up,

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the ground turning to stone. Far above, snow glitters with the promise
of eternal, peaceful cold.

It is too late. They have come.

CHAPTER FOUR

WE MOVED INTO KIRIN'S DREAM COTTAGES soon after the wedding. The gardens we cultivated near our shared wall were my sister's treasure. She loved flowers, Kirin did, and spent every morning planting daisies and snapdragons and morning's glory. Bunches of sun-yellow marigolds vied with climbing rose, their alternately pungent and sweet scents vying for attention.

Ever the practical one, I focused on more mundane, useful crops. Tansy and thyme and mint. Chamomile for teas and hyssop to help with the winter's coughs. All this and more I grew, the plants in ordered, neat rows, surrounded by the desperate riot of Kirin's flowers. I did not know it then, but I would lay those same blooms, with mud-caked hands, on her defiled grave a scant year later.

Pregnancy came fast for Kirin, and I watched with envy as her reed-like body swelled with its preparations for motherhood. Knowing what I know now, about the body's changes in response to the growth of a child and the resulting blood and pain that is the gateway into life, I marvel I still retain such sentimentality about the process. Certainly, the girl I was felt an undeniable stab of jealousy every time I saw her, hands cradling the swell of her belly, her face serene and knowing, thoughts turned inwards.

Urik and I tried and tried to match her but no child quickened in my belly. At first, Urik said nothing, but as the months passed and Kirin's time drew closer, he began to first question, than accuse me, demanding to know if I or my father had known I was barren. I defended Father, of course, once going so far as to suggest that perhaps the fault was Urik's, not mine. The look he gave me was so full of fear and black hate that my blood ran cold. He told me I was to never repeat such hateful lies.

As Kirin's pregnancy advanced, Marcus's journeys away from home grew longer and longer. He became distant and cold. Rumors began to spread that he had a mistress in a nearby town, and I often saw my sister's eyes ringed with the unmistakable red of weeping when we met near the garden wall.

The day Kirin's baby finally arrived, red-faced and screaming on a raw, gray winter's day, was one of the most terrifying and thrilling experiences of my young life. The child was breech, and only the quick thinking of the midwife spared the life of mother and child both, but the delivery necessitated that she be cut most deeply. Never before had I seen such blood, blood enough to drown in, it seemed. That Kirin survived at all was a miracle, and the hard labor forced her to her bed for weeks afterwards. She named the babe Vanessa, after our storied grandmother.

Marcus, of course, was absent for the event, out on one of his "hunting trips." When he finally returned, three days later, he could barely walk, swaying drunkenly across the muddied yard. His bellows waked the babe, and she screamed in her father's face in terror, causing Marcus to shout even louder. He rode out that very night, headed for the tavern and "some peace and quiet," and did not return until the next morning.

After the birth, Marcus did seem to try to mend his ways. His trips grew shorter, and he spent the better part of the winter at home. Things were always difficult when he was around, however; men such as Marcus do not have much love for inactivity, and the six long months of winter crept by with painful slowness.

Finally, spring arrived and with it the return of Marcus's waywardness. Even as his absences grew longer and longer, Kirin would hear nothing ill of him. It was as if her love for him had stolen away not only her ambition but also her very reason. My entreaties for her to run away, for her own good as well as that of her newborn child, were met with stubborn silence.

One day in the late spring, close to Vanessa's mid-cycle birthday, he returned, reeling with drink and smelling like a whorehouse, bellowing for her to come and fix his supper. She refused and confronted him, her shouts of accusation drifting over the wall. Soon, they fell abruptly,

ominously silent. When I saw her next, her face bore the hand-shaped bruise of his displeasure. She wore the mark for days.

I pleaded with Urik to talk to his friend, but he would not, either out of friendship or fear I know not. Worst, the poison that had infected Marcus was contagious, and began to taint his simple spirit. The next months were a torture, filled with the white heat of arguments and the helpless, creeping doom of waiting for my husband and his loutish friend to return from the tavern or from one of their increasingly frequent trips.

My first life ended on the day my husband hit me. Urik, for his part, apologized profusely and tearfully, swearing over and over it was a momentary lapse, brought on in the heat of anger. That it would never happen again. But the deed was done. The long summer drew out like a blade, endless days of stifling heat and dreary days of waiting for my husband to return.

When he did finally arrive, more often than not, we fought. About the chores he promised to attend to but never seemed to finish. About the way his endless drinking was bloating his already soft body. About the accounts that needed paying. Soon enough, despite his promises, I was to feel the pain of my husband's hand again.

Divorce is not unheard of among my people, for the gods want all men and women to be happy and fruitful. Yet, a lifetime of instruction in what is and is not seemly and proper for a woman of my breeding had left me unwilling to endure the humiliation. The whispers and openly curious stares that followed me whenever I went into town began to disgust, then enrage me. I spent more and more time alone.

With Kirin lost in her world of denial, and Mother's refusal to become involved in anything distasteful and embarrassing, my only confidante was Edena, the old wise woman that lived up in the hills. Kirin and I sometimes traded the herbs I cultivated and gathered to her in exchange for the potions that soothed our monthly troubles and the healing poultices which Kirin's infant always seemed to need. There were many stories about Edena, tales that spoke of her dancing, nude, in the moonlight on summer's eve, or of strange men who were seen to live for a week, or a month, on her property, disappearing afterwards without a trace.

Yet she was always kind to me, her aged face open and inviting, ice blue eyes sparkling with merriment above rose-tinged cheeks. She seemed to me much more of a grandmotherly figure than my own storied ancestor, always bustling about her workshop, crushing herbs or boiling potions, her gray hair wreathed in fragrant steam.

More than once, however, I spied a dusty book or scroll winking out at me from beneath a shawl or folded blanket. I reminded myself that young ladies do not help themselves to others' things, even such a small and harmless thing as stealing a simple glance, all the while burning with curiosity.

I still do not know if it was her plan to entrap me with her knowledge. A lonely young woman, desperate for affection and starved for the chance to learn; she must have known what sort of student I would prove to be, always eager to read anything that passed through my hands. The whole town knew, why not she?

Eventually, I let curiosity overwhelm my manners. After reading the first page, I knew I wanted to know more. I went to her, the book open in my hands.

"My wisdom isn't for the idle or curious," she snarled, her usually smiling lips twisting with an expression of cruelty, waving away my promises and assurances that I would do anything she asked if she would only teach me more. "Nor is it for those lacking in courage, for I know of such things that would rattle the very fibers of a timid woman's heart and mind. Go back to your garden, little bird. Go back to the life that your sister has chosen for you."

I bent my head, letting my hair fall over my bruised eye, the painful legacy of last night's fight. It was true; I did lack the courage to stand up to my sister and to what my husband had become. But sitting there, head bent beneath Edena's stony glare, so different from her usual welcoming smile, I decided that I wanted to have that courage. To learn the things she kept hidden away like dragon's gold.

When I raised my head she must have seen it, for she met my challenging stare, holding my eyes with hers for what felt like a fortnight before dropping her gaze and nodding.

I still remember that first book as if I had just looked upon it yesterday—such a marvel. An atlas of the human body, illustrated in

surreal detail, the body's layers drawn on translucent vellum, which peeled away to expose the hidden secrets beneath. The colors were so vivid, more lurid and enticing than any mummer's show. It was an ancient thing, made through artistry the likes of which I'd never seen before, more precious than gold. Once that door was opened, I had no choice but to pass through.

Every day that Urik was away, I would hurry to finish my daily chores, then trudge the well-worn path to Edena's cottage. Then my studies would begin: long hours bent over my small desk, memorizing chants and herbal mixtures and the names of a thousand bodily parts from all manner of beasts and birds. When she deemed I was ready, we proceeded to a study of a different animal.

Eagerly, I studied the intricacies of the human body and how it reacts to death, transforming from a hunk of dead meat to the birthplace of miraculous new life. How nature wastes not the smallest particle after we leave our mortal shells behind.

As I began to master the physical mysteries, she spoke more and more of the nature of our souls. It was she who first showed me how the human spirit often lingers near the place where it is ripped from its earthly shell.

What she taught me filled me with a dark glee, which I hid away, like a precious stone I feared would be stolen. Even then I understood that our forbidden knowledge was power.

Once, we traveled in the dark of the night to the place where three highwaymen had been hanged and left as a warning beside the road. I'll never forget the sickly-sweet smell that wafted forth as we cut them down, repulsive, yet oddly compelling. The way that her oils and unguents opened my secret eye, granting me a glimpse of the robbers' shades, still lingering near their decaying bodies.

At my mistress's whispered command, those souls drifted back into their former bodies. They awoke from their endless slumber, her devoted, if not very nimble or swift-witted, servants. My education dispelled my fear of them.

My excursions did not go unnoticed. Kirin began to question me about my doings when I was away from home. She smirked when I

assured her I was simply helping the old woman with her chores and keeping her company through the long nights. I am sure she assumed I had taken a lover, and I did nothing to disabuse her of that notion.

One night, Marcus and Urik returned from a days-long hunting trip, reeking of beer and women. I watched from a far-away place outside of myself as my husband, once so tender and shy, used me. The stench of another woman lay thick on his skin. He giggled as he put his filthy hands on me, grinning as if he thought the smell might arouse me. I knew the time to depart had come. I slipped away when his snores filled the cottage; the herbal mixture I had put in his wine would assure his slumber for at least a day.

I scratched at Kirin's window, my pack already slung over my shoulder. I was certain she would follow. Were we not sisters? Twins? I would dazzle her with my new-found skills and knowledge and we would take our places at my mistress's side, beholden to no man. When she did not reply, I crept to the door and quietly unlatched it.

The familiar, dread smell struck me first, a mixture of copper and the heavy, organic smell of death. Blood splattered the walls. From beneath the kitchen table, an ivory hand could be seen in the dim firelight.

Her breast bore the crimson stains of her lifeblood. The weapon, a carving knife of rare Ulean steel that my own father had given her as a bride gift, lay on the floor. She looked surprised, as if death had played a sudden and not terribly funny joke on her. A wine-besotted snore reached me from the back bedroom.

I stood and watched him for what seemed like hours as my mind struggled to accept what he had done. Marcus lay there, his once-beautiful face swollen with drink, mouth open in a slack-jawed snore. Her blood was crusted on his hands, staining the pillowcases and sheet and the wine bottle he still clutched.

I knew what must be done, but whatever remaining wisps of the girl I had once been screamed at me that it was wrong, wrong, wrong. I closed my eyes and made my decision, stilling the last feeble protests. When next they opened, they were dull, lifeless windows; portals looking in on an empty room. The girl was gone. I was ready.

My clothes gave a whisper-soft rustle as I dropped my skirts and tunic to the floor, then slipped into my sister's bed. The moonlight slant-

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ing through the window made my skin luminous, glowing. I reached out and brushed the sweat-damp hair from Marcus' brow with a steady hand, then leaned forward to brush his lips with mine. I felt him stiffen at my touch, and moved so that he slipped inside of me.

Before the forbidden power reached out to snare his lifeblood, he muttered my sister's name—the name I would soon take as my own—telling me in a drunken mumble how sorry he was for killing me. Begging my forgiveness. It was not until my hands were on his flesh and my eyes shifted from white to black in the extremity of my transformation that he knew what shared his bed. I whispered that all was forgiven, allowing him the luxury of a last, unbroken look.

He tried to scream then, his mouth stretched in a soundless howl of agony, but my power held fast to the very roots of his breath, and the capacity was denied him at my whim. As he struggled and thrashed, his body desperately clinging to life, I rode him, my body lifting with his last desperate thrusts. My thighs and breasts and hands were slick with the blood that boiled from his eyes, his nose, anyplace and every place. The thick taste of copper was bright in my mouth as I threw back my head and moaned in mingled ecstasy and loathing.

Blood magic. Such power; such pain. All gleaned from a single, accidentally discovered book, found deep within one of Edena's chests. I never even considered that perhaps she was hiding it from me. Or from herself.

What happens next?

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