

ADAM LEE

*Glory Awaits*

It had been raining for three nights, and the men of the army were growing weary and frustrated. They had been marching for days through this bleak land, and they were no closer to finding and closing with the foe that awaited them. Of late, the cold, blustery weather had added a misery all its own: the seeping mud, the mildewy stink that permeated their very skin, the rations eaten cold for lack of fire.

Their camp that night was a vast collection of low tents, surrounded by sentries that patrolled on foot and on horseback. Most were dark, as the men not on watch tried to snatch a few hours of sleep, but light glowed from inside one of them near the center of the camp.

The interior of the tent showed plainly that its occupant led a rough and ready life. Its floor was muddy earth and scraggly grass trampled flat, and the only furniture was a low cot, little more than a sheet of canvas stretched on a folding frame, with a scratchy, rough-woven blanket. A lantern on the ground sent shadows dancing on the canvas walls and outlined the raindrops that beaded on the outside. Besides those simple things, the only personal possessions were a rumpled canvas knapsack and a pair of tall, polished black boots.

Sitting on a rickety wooden stool was a brawny young man, with dark hair cut short on top and on the sides but pulled into a tail at the nape of his neck. He wore a dusty, battered black uniform, buttoned up the front with brass buttons, whose seams strained at his broad shoulders and his heavily muscled arms. His hands were the rough hands of a laborer, his skin weathered and callused, but his thick fingers were working with care and patience, and there was a frown of concentration on his face.

## *Glory Awaits*

Clasped between his knees was a long sword, its broad, flat blade just slightly curved, like a scimitar's. He had been gently stroking the edge against a gritty whetstone; now he was rubbing the flat of the blade with an oiled cloth, scrubbing away every trace of dirt or grime. He gave the sword one more stroke with the cloth, then held it up and inspected his handiwork. The metal had been polished to mirror-brightness, and the flat of the blade gave back a distorted reflection of his face. He grunted in satisfaction and set the weapon aside.

“Warde Kahliana.”

The voice came from right over his shoulder. In a heartbeat, the soldier snatched up his sword and was on his feet, all in the same motion, even as he knew he had already been taken by surprise. Without him hearing it, someone had entered his tent — and as he turned, he saw who that someone was.

The newcomer was almost as tall as Warde, but in contrast to the brawny young soldier, he was rail-thin. His head, like Warde's, brushed the roof of the tent. He wore no uniform, but a mismatched set of garb: a patched black cloak, gray linen shirt, brown breeches, leather boots.

The absence of a uniform was the first thing Warde noticed. The second thing was that his visitor was not human.

The newcomer's face was pale and hollow in the lantern's light, his eyes like two wells of darkness, iris and pupil the same inky black. A human being who looked like that would have been deathly ill, but he gave off an aura of dangerous, feral vitality. His lips quirked in a smile of sinister amusement.

“That sword will do you no good,” he said, and a warning lurked in his tone.

## ADAM LEE

Warde had grown up in the country of the god Vraxor, where those of demonic heritage walked the streets alongside humans. But even he had never met a Morin before.

Morin were among the rarest of the demon races: solitary, wild beings, unpredictable and prone to sudden fits of violent fury. For all his muscles, Warde felt overmatched. He knew that this one, in spite of his scarecrow frame, could easily bend him over backwards and break him in two.

He thought of shouting for help, but his intent must have shown on his face. “Do not call the guards,” the Morin warned. With a broad grin that displayed his short, sharp teeth, he added, “It would be a waste of perfectly good guards.”

“Who are you?” Warde asked warily. “What do you want?”

The Morin shrugged. “My name is Arvis. As for what I want... I have come to deliver a message.”

“From who? The lieutenant?”

“No, Warde Kahliana. From a higher power.” He grinned again. “It is simply this: Be on the lookout for an opportunity tomorrow. Glory awaits for those who are not afraid to seize it.”

“What do—?” Warde began, but there was a whirl and a flutter, and the Morin was gone. Black rain blew into his tent.

Belatedly realizing that there was an intruder at large in the camp, he sprang through the open tent flap, ready to shout an alarm—and stopped, looking around in perplexity. The army camp was dark and silent, motionless. The strange intruder had vanished into the night as if he had never been there at all.

## *Glory Awaits*

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It was the next day, and the army was on the march.

Warde had reported his night visitor to the lieutenant, who had personally lined up the sentries on duty to scream abuse at them. There had been a thorough search of the camp, but no trace of the Morin had been found. Warde was starting to wonder if he had dreamed the strange encounter, but he couldn't get Arvis' cryptic words out of his head. *He said there would be an opportunity today. What did he mean?*

Such thoughts were a welcome distraction from his aching feet. They had been marching since before sunrise, through the rough terrain of Lahar. It was a land of rugged hills and sulfurous yellow stone, and the serpentine path through the badlands was strewn with treacherous lumps of pumice and vents blasting volcanic gas. A man could break an ankle if he didn't watch where he was going, and several men in Warde's company had.

Morning passed with no sight of the enemy, and they bivouacked in a low valley of crater-scarred stone, surrounded on three sides by sharp-ridged hills. A black river flowed down through a notch in the hills, joining a small lake in the center of the valley, and the soldiers took the opportunity to wash the dust from their hands and faces and refill their canteens. Warde sat with the men of his squad, all of them rubbing their blisters and calluses as they swapped stories of army life and of the old flames they'd left at home.

“And when I'm a warlord one day,” one of the privates, a bright-eyed boy with peach-fuzzed cheeks, was saying excitedly, “I'll have a succubus on either arm to serve me, and a

## ADAM LEE

uniform with buttons made all of gold, and I'll live in an estate the size of a palace. I know glory is coming to me. Just wait!"

Warde smiled tolerantly. "Best you start by not forgetting your sword next time, then," he teased, and the men laughed raucously.

Suddenly, his head snapped up. He had seen a glint of metal in the distance where no metal should be. In that same instant, there was a sharp bugle call. Over the hilltop, men in drab uniforms began to appear with the suddenness of ants swarming from a disturbed nest.

Vraxor's army was by far the larger, but the legions of Lahar were canny guerrilla fighters. They were on their home ground, and they had been using the terrain to their advantage, striking and retreating, drawing blood and slipping away into the folds of the land. The campaign of the last few weeks had been the latest fruitless attempt to pin them down. But now the legions had ambushed them, and they were the ones who were pinned.

Soldiers all around Warde were starting to their feet, shouting in alarm, grasping for shields and weapons. But the enemy had already brought their bows to bear. A hundred, a thousand bowstrings snapped back, and a black storm of arrows hurtled toward the unprepared army.

The arrows fell with deadly accuracy, falling into Vraxor's ranks like a flock of black birds descending on ripe wheat. And the officers, most of whom were mounted on horses and wearing bright dress uniforms, were the easiest targets.

"Fall back, men!" shouted Warde's lieutenant, mounted and beckoning the men of his company. "Regroup! Gather around me and prepare to charge!"

## *Glory Awaits*

Suddenly, there was a hissing whir and a sharp sound, and the long black shaft of an arrow stood out from the lieutenant's throat. He looked startled, reached up to touch the shaft transfixing him, then opened his mouth as if to speak. Instead, blood gurgled out and he toppled from his horse.

Many officers, not just the lieutenant, had fallen in that first barrage. Warde saw a colonel's horse, riderless and milling about among the crush of confused and frightened men. The battle was already becoming a rout, as the companies that had been preparing to charge the enemy had stalled in the face of Lahar's deadly bowmen, and the entire force wavered on the edge of breaking up in panic.

One of the men in Warde's squad, wide-eyed and frightened, seized him by the arm. "Sergeant! What do we do?"

While arrows flew and men screamed and died all around them, Warde thought furiously. The enemy held the high ground, and their officers had been decimated by the surprise assault. The proper response would be to fall back and regroup, to wait for orders.

But Arvis' words were ringing in his ears. *Glory awaits...*

"We will charge!" Warde shouted, pouring all his voice into a bellow to be heard over the screams of dying men. He drew his sword and held it up high, letting the polished blade catch the light and blaze like a banner. "Follow the river course uphill! Break their flank. For Vraxor and glory!"

Until that instant, the men all around Warde had been huddled in fear, but his determination instantly fired them with

## ADAM LEE

courage. “For Vraxor and glory!” they shouted, drawing their own weapons.

Warde waved them on, then charged up the hillside, heedless of the arrows falling all around. The men of his squad followed after, and as they ran uphill toward the enemy, more and more soldiers fell into line behind them, following whoever seemed to have a plan.

The hilltop was at least a hundred paces away. Waving his sword, his blood thundering in his head, Warde pounded up the slope. Arrows whirred by on either side, some almost close enough to touch. Fifty paces. It should have been certain doom, but Lahar’s skirmishers had expected to shatter their foe with a surprise assault and slip away, as they had done many times in the past. And it had almost worked. Thirty paces. But they hadn’t expected Vraxor’s forces to regroup so quickly, hadn’t expected them to advance rather than retreat. Twenty paces. He was close enough to see the enemy’s faces now, and some of them looked shocked and frightened. Ten paces. They were casting their bows aside, fumbling for swords and spears and other weapons that could be used in close quarters. *Too late*, Warde thought in grim satisfaction as he crested the hilltop. Five. Four. Three. Two. “For Vraxor and glory!” he roared one last time, and then hurled himself at the nearest foe, his sword slashing down in a deadly arc. With a thunderous concussion of metal on metal, the two armies collided.

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Warde walked among the army’s makeshift camp. The air was heavy with the clinging, dusty heat that was always the aftermath of a battle, but there was a general aura of relief and cheerfulness, as if a storm had passed and the sky was clearing. Some men were resharpening their swords or hammering out

## *Glory Awaits*

dents in their armor; others were swapping flasks of fiery, stinging liquor as army doctors tended to their wounds. Warde himself wore a stained bandage high on one arm and had a stitched cut across his cheek, the memorabilia of battle with a Laharian soldier. But he carried his sword proudly at his side, and he walked with the tired defiance of having dealt worse than he had received.

In the middle of the camp was a large, richly appointed red tent, one of the few that was more than sheets of canvas draped over forked sticks. Several fine horses were tethered to a post outside it. He had been summoned by a messenger after the battle who told him that the army's higher-ups wished to see him. Taking a deep breath, he ducked in.

He walked into the tent—and stopped dead. He had expected the commanding officer, the major in charge of his entire division, studying a table that was covered with maps and reports. What he had not expected was the other figure. It looked like the hunched shape of a man in a long red robe, head bowed and hidden in the cowl, arms folded together in the sleeves. But the tattered bottom edge of that scarlet robe floated, as if it were weightless, a pace off the ground. And as Warde entered, the hood rose up to regard him. Where there should have been a face, there was only a ghostly black void. It was a member of the dark god Vraxor's dreaded priesthood.

“*S-Sen'vrax,*” Warde stammered, instantly more fearful than he had been on the battlefield. He bowed as deeply as he could, feeling prickling sweat spring out on his back and under his arms.

The faceless void under the priest's hood studied him. Then it spoke: not with the voice of men, but a chilly, rasping

ADAM LEE

buzz that seemed to emanate from somewhere behind Warde's eyes. —You are Sergeant Warde Kahliana, who we sent for—

“Yes, *sen'vrax*.”

The major seemed to take no notice of the priest's presence. “Sergeant. What news from the battlefield?”

Warde's boots clicked together as he stood up, ramrod straight, and ripped off a letter-perfect salute. “The enemy is vanquished, sir. We broke their line with a flanking assault. Some escaped, but the greater part was slain. We have taken prisoners—”

“So I heard,” the major murmured. “And I also hear that *you*, sergeant, took charge of that assault. You led an attack straight into the teeth of their arrows.”

Warde did not even consider lying. The priest's attentive silence was focused on him, and it was said that the servants of Vraxor could see into a man's soul. “Yes, sir.”

“Tell me,” the major said, coming around the table. “Why did you call for a charge? Your superior officer was killed in the ambush. Was a retreat and regroup not the standing order for that circumstance?”

The prickling sweat was becoming a slow burn. His skin itched where the priest's gaze intersected him. “Yes, sir.”

The major's gaze turned hard as flint. “Kneel, Warde Kahliana.”

Warde stared at the major in disbelief. Then he dropped heavily to one knee, bowing his head to look down at the dusty carpet.

## *Glory Awaits*

*I should have known, he thought in icy despair. Nothing good ever comes of disobeying orders, never. Why was I so foolish? Why did I listen to that Morin?*

“*Sen’vrax,*” the major said, “will you do the honors?”

Warde heard a rustle of cloth, and in sheer terror, he closed his eyes. He felt a light, feathery touch on the back of his neck, and flinched, expecting it to become the razor pain of a knife blade. Then he heard the priest speak.

—Warde Kahliana, by virtue of the authority granted us by the almighty Lord Vraxor, and in recognition of the faithful service you have offered the one true god, we do grant and confer upon you the rank of captain. We charge you most strictly to observe the duties associated with this position, in the sure and certain hope of bringing honor to yourself through your service—

The priest’s light touch moved away. After a moment, Warde realized nothing more was coming. Then the words he had just heard, which had been only noise in the midst of his terror, sunk in. He looked up incredulously, into the major’s face.

“You... I was not... I have been granted a commission?” he stammered.

A grim smile passed fleetingly across the major’s face. “What were you expecting, Captain Kahliana? The war against Lahar can always use capable young officers such as yourself. Go back to your tent and gather your belongings. We will find new quarters for you by tonight.”

Dazed, Warde stumbled out of the major’s tent, forgetting even to salute as he left. He walked through the camp

ADAM LEE

without seeing, unable to absorb what had just happened. It was only by the time he reached his own small tent that he had regained any of his poise—and as soon as he ducked back in, he froze in surprise. There was someone else already there.

It was Arvis, the Morin. He sat on Warde's rickety wooden camp stool, looking at him with a smile of faint, expectant amusement.

“Did I not tell you?” he said.

“You told me...” Warde said, frowning with the recollection. “You told me of this. You knew it was going to happen. How?”

Arvis moved a hand as if to brush away the question. “That is not important. What matters, *Captain Kahliana*, is that you owe me a favor. And I now intend to call it in.”

“What favor is that?” Warde felt a renewed prickle of nervousness.

“An officer of your rank is entitled to an adjutant. You will choose me to serve as yours.”

“An... assistant?” Warde said in disbelief. “You want to be my assistant? But you are not even an officer—”

Arvis shrugged. “It is of no matter. You will figure out a way.”

“Why should I do this for you?”

“There are three reasons,” he said, ticking them off on his fingers. “One: Because you want me for a friend, Warde Kahliana, and not an enemy.” He grinned, a fierce, fanged smile.

## *Glory Awaits*

“Two: Because I will make an excellent servant.” His grin, if anything, grew even wider.

“And three: Because you are a man of honor, and I have not led you astray. You know you are obligated to me. Believe me when I say that we shall both benefit from this partnership.”

*A Morin? For a servant? I would sooner go to sleep with a wild boar in my tent.* But for all his skepticism, Warde could not escape the knowledge that Arvis was right. The Morin *had* done him a favor, and he had an obligation to return it. And what Arvis had asked was not so onerous.

“Very well,” he said reluctantly. “We have an accord.”

He held out a hand, and Arvis took it. The Morin’s fingers were slender and cold, betraying no hint of the inhuman strength the demon possessed.

“You will not regret this,” Arvis said confidently.

*May Vraxor make it so,* Warde thought. But more than anything else, he found, he was burning with unvoiced curiosity as to why Arvis had chosen him, had delivered that message to him. *What does this Morin know about me that I do not know about myself?*

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Warde’s boots, tall and black and polished to a glossy sheen, rang like bells on the corridor’s smooth floor with every step. They were new, and stiff; he hadn’t had time to break them in yet.

His uniform, too, was new and crisp, the fabric scratchy. The medals pinned to one breast were an unfamiliar weight. The

## ADAM LEE

only familiar thing was the heft of his sword at his side, a comforting reminder of his infantry days, even if he'd scarcely had occasion to draw it in years.

Warde was not alone. He walked in procession behind a priest of Vraxor, the hooded being's red robe trailing on the floor as it floated silently in the lead. Walking alongside Warde, as close as his shadow, was the lean dark shape of Arvis, now in the black uniform and red epaulets of an officer's adjutant.

Back at the officers' quarters, Warde thought distantly, the celebration was probably still going on. The government of Lahar had surrendered two days earlier. Their land was to be absorbed into the dominion of Vraxor, their people resettled where the priesthood saw fit. He should have been exulting along with the rest of his men, but a strange, restless mood lay over him.

The years since his promotion to captain blurred in his mind, an accelerating sequence of battles, of nights spent poring over maps by candlelight, of forced marches and sudden engagements, the fire and thunder of combat, the screams of men. But Vraxor had favored them, and the tide had turned. What had been a futile war of attrition had become an increasingly one-sided series of victories—and in his less modest moments, Warde admitted to himself he had played a part in that, as he rose through the ranks.

His mind kept returning to the final engagement of the war, Lahar's last, desperate strike: the Battle of Accan Ridge. They had mustered what remained of their army, slipped across rough terrain under cover of darkness, surrounded Warde's division in a surprise attack. It had been a chaotic, sleepless night, Warde directing the combat from his tent, straining for every scrap of information a stream of scouts could bring him,

## *Glory Awaits*

dispatching hasty orders to his captains and colonels, with the barking of artillery and the distant yells and clashing of steel in the background. But they had won the night, and morning's light had revealed the ragged, shivering remnants of Lahar's army among a field of slaughter. The surrender had come three days later.

But while his officers were celebrating, a priest of Vraxor had come to him at the fall of dusk, granted him a promotion to general, and told him his presence was required at the cathedral in the nearest town. It had volunteered no further information, as was the way of the *sen'vrax*.

"What do you suppose this is about?" he whispered to Arvis.

The Morin grinned enigmatically. "Let us say that I have my suspicions."

For all his initial reluctance to take the Morin on, Arvis had proved to be a loyal and invaluable servant, and his rise had been as swift as Warde's. He was more skilled at interpreting the often vague and cryptic orders of the priesthood than anyone else Warde had ever met, and he was a matchless bodyguard. Twice he had foiled assassins sent by the enemy, once an attempted coup from within Warde's own ranks. But for all that, he was still a mystery. The Morin spoke little about himself, and never about what he sought to gain from their alliance. Warde had never been given reason to regret their partnership, but often wondered.

They turned a corner, and up ahead was a heavy door of black oak barred with iron. The priest paused, turning to regard them. Its faceless, hooded stare seemed expectant.

ADAM LEE

Warde cleared his throat. “May I ask, *sen’vrax*, for what purpose I have been summoned?”

—You have served faithfully and well, Warde Kahliana. Tonight you are to receive your reward—

Without another word, the priest approached the door and removed a key, holding it in the folds of a sleeve. It slid the key into a lock, and there was a clunk of bolts shooting back. The door opened by itself, moving as if it were weightless despite its mass.

—We will leave you two now—

*Does it mean me and Arvis?* But the Morin had paused at the threshold, grinning, as if he knew something Warde didn’t.

Hesitantly, Warde stepped in. The door swung shut behind him with a whisper.

He hadn’t been sure what to expect. He had been half-expecting piles of gold, precious jewels, a banquet table, a throne. But it was a bedroom.

There was a heavy four-poster bed, with smooth black sheets, and soft light provided by tapers burning in iron stands. Outside the lone window, the first stars of the evening glimmered gold in a deepening sky.

And kneeling, at the foot of the bed, was the most beautiful woman Warde had ever seen.

She had been waiting patiently, her eyes downcast, her hands on her knees. As Warde entered the room, she looked up at him.

## *Glory Awaits*

She wore a simple black robe, but Warde did not see it. What he saw was a body of impossible perfection, skin the color of ivory, like a statue carved out of marble by a master craftsman. Her long hair was as black as a raven's feather, her lips a red so dark it looked almost black. Her eyes were deep, unearthly violet, bewitching in their intensity. As she met Warde's gaze, they flashed briefly, glowing like a cat's eyes in the fading light.

"I am yours, Warde Kahliana," she said in a voice like music.

Warde stood frozen in shock, unable to frame a response. His thoughts had congealed like molasses on a cold morning.

The woman was a succubus, of course. He knew it immediately, although he had never met one, only heard of them from alcohol-soaked fantasies swapped in the officers' quarters late at night. She was of demon heritage, no more human than Arvis. But every drunken whisper, every besotted ramble, said they were perfect companions: incomparably beautiful, completely without scruples, utterly obedient to a man's every whim. Warde swallowed hard and wondered how many of those stories were true.

The woman was looking at him expectantly, the hint of a question in her eyes. Belatedly, he realized he had been staring dumbly. He felt his face flush with heat.

"I am... That is..." he said, fumbling for words. Then a welcome habit of military discipline reasserted itself, and he straightened up and bowed to her. "Forgive me. This was... that is, you are not what I expected."

ADAM LEE

“You need not apologize,” she said with a small shrug. “As I said, I am yours. I am commanded to serve you in any way you desire.”

That was what Warde had feared. He had no pity for men who fell in honest combat, but he had always abhorred slavery, though he had seen dark things in Vraxor’s lands, things done by the priests that sent shivers down his back; and he was under no illusions about what happened to criminals and prisoners of war. Still, when it came to his own command, he had held firm. He had refused to accept draftees into his brigades, arguing to his superiors that one man who chose to fight of his own free will was worth ten unwilling conscripts. With this unearthly beautiful woman before him, *given* to him, he dreaded her answer, but honor compelled him to ask.

“I must know, my lady. Is your service freely chosen?”

A faint, amused smile flickered across her perfect lips. “We serve Lord Vraxor, because he has commanded us to do so, and an eternity of suffering awaits those who disobey the word of the one true god. It is much the same with you, I imagine.”

“No!” Warde said in frustration. “I mean—yes, I am a servant of Lord Vraxor. But that is not what I meant. What I mean is... was it your decision to serve me in this... manner?”

She frowned slightly. “I am a bondservant to the priesthood of Lord Vraxor. All of my kind are. We are born into servitude by virtue of our special talents, given as possessions to the mighty and the faithful as the *sen’vrax* decree.”

“Talents? What talents?”

“Besides the obvious?” Another quirk of those flawless lips. “Among other things, we are known for our sweet and

## *Glory Awaits*

docile natures.” Her eyes flashed again in a stray gleam of light, violet fire in the dark. “We cannot bear children by human men, which makes us much sought after as concubines to those who desire no more illegitimate children to support. And we are naturally empathic.”

*Docile? I doubt that.* He knew she *would* do anything he asked—she would not dare defy the priesthood any more than he would—but Warde could glimpse a heat in her eyes that her demure manner could not conceal. She reminded him of a panther, a great jungle cat: beautiful and dangerous all at the same time. But something else she had said caught his attention.

“Empathic? You mean you can tell what I am thinking?”

She shook her head. “Only what you are feeling. Emotions, and sometimes, strong images.”

“Then what am I feeling now?”

As if it were a routine task, she counted on her fingers. “Pride at your recent promotion. Sorrow at the loss of your men who fell in battle. Surprise at finding me here. Uncertainty...” She looked at him, her eyes narrowing. “Am I not the reward you wanted, Warde Kahliana?”

“No... I mean, you are not what I had... Look,” he said in frustration, “why are you still kneeling?”

“You have not given me any command to do otherwise,” she said, sounding surprised.

“Well, stand up!”

Looking bored and slightly puzzled, she stood, with one hand on her hip, the other loose at her side. Even without her

## ADAM LEE

putting any special effort into it, the grace of her motion took Warde's breath away. He had seen noble ladies at court, petitioners to the priesthood of Vraxor, all wearing their finest coats and gowns; still, none of them compared the way this woman wore a simple, loose-hanging black robe. He tried to focus.

"I do not ask my men to kneel to me," he said, "and I will not ask it of you. I do not want an unwilling servant, either in my command or in my bed. Do you understand?"

"I understand." Her voice was grave. "And you may send me away if it is your wish, Warde Kahliana, but," and she took a deep breath, "if there is any way I can please you, I ask that you tell me. If my service is unsatisfactory, the *sen'vrax* will not be pleased."

"No!" Warde said instantly. "I did not mean that. I have no desire for any harm to come to you. I only meant..." He fumbled over the words again. He did not know *what* he meant. *I have commanded armies and never flinched under fire. Why can I not master my own tongue for the sake of a woman?*

Then he thought of something that might narrow the distance he still felt lay between them. "Tell me, do you have a name?"

Again, that cool, amused smile. "Yes, Warde Kahliana, my kind has names. I am Tresse. Tresse Tarren."

Warde felt a flush of embarrassment, but mastered it. He sat on the bed and beckoned to her, and she came and sat down next to him. The touch of her arm on his was like a flash of fire, like icy silk, her flesh warm and yielding to his touch.

## *Glory Awaits*

“I will not send you away... Tresse,” he said, tasting the unfamiliar name. “Your beauty captivates me. But I do not want a mute concubine who sits at my heel. I want a partner to share my mind with, one who can be my equal and not merely my servant. Do you see?”

She looked at him, uncertainly. Then she smiled slightly, and her incredible, luminous eyes shimmered violet in the dark. “I think we understand each other, Warde Kahliana.”

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Brushing dust off his black cloak, Arvis entered the house, shutting the door behind him. A servant was there to take the garment.

“Greetings, Lord Arvis,” he said, holding the inner door open. “The master and mistress of the house are expecting you. They are in the sitting room.”

Arvis glanced all around as he entered the sitting room of Warde’s estate in Ral Vraxan. He had not visited in over a year, and the furnishings and hangings were different from the last time he had been there. In one corner of the room there was something like a wooden trunk.

Warde and Tresse were waiting there for him. Warde came forward to clap him on the shoulder.

“Arvis, old friend! Sit. Rest. There is wine.”

“Arvis, it is good to see you again,” Tresse said, coming forward to kiss him on the cheek. He returned her greeting with a grave nod, taking the glass she offered and settling into a chair across from them.

## ADAM LEE

The years had changed Warde. He was still the brawny, broad-shouldered man he had been in his youth, but now there were streaks of gray in his long, tied-back dark hair and his short trimmed beard. Tresse still had the ivory-sculpted beauty and flowing grace of her youth, though now her poise had a touch of the matronly. Arvis' glance flickered to the identical golden bands they each wore on one wrist.

"I always have time for the two of you," he said. "What will it be this month, your fourth anniversary?"

"Indeed," Warde acknowledged. "But sometimes it seems only days since we met." He squeezed Tresse's hand, and she smiled shyly.

Arvis could not hide a smirk of amusement. "The stories I could tell your men of you, you old fool. You were given a succubus by the priesthood, your personal servant, ordered to obey your every word. And you set her free... and then married her."

"And I have never regretted it, whatever my men would say," Warde chuckled. "But we have news for you, Arvis. Tresse has been accepted by the priests for membership."

"Has she?"

Tresse nodded. "Their messenger arrived yesterday. I am to report to them at the end of the week to begin my service as an acolyte."

"The culmination of your long-held dream! Lord Vraxor has surely smiled upon you."

Tresse smiled faintly. "Do not congratulate me too soon. It may be twenty years or more before I am given the red robe."

## *Glory Awaits*

“I have no doubt you will ascend to the highest ranks of the priesthood,” Arvis said dismissively.

“Have you never thought of becoming a priest yourself, Arvis?” Warde asked. “There can be no question that you have the talent.”

Arvis shrugged. “I have considered it. But I have enough to do here, as one of the Voices. Lord Lian’s duties as Sovereign keep him busy, and he needs my wise counsel.” He grinned briefly, a short flash of teeth.

Warde’s expression grew grave. He cleared his throat. “That, I am afraid, is why I have asked you here, old friend. I have a favor to ask of you. And I fear it is a large one.”

“Oh? What favor is that?”

“As you say, you are one of the Voices. I am sure I do not have to tell you that a new campaign is beginning...”

“The War of the West. Yes. Our forces are mustering. Lian has been keeping me apprised of the battle plans.”

“A messenger of the *sen’vra*x came to me this morning. He told me that I am to lead the army. He made it most clear that refusal was not an option. It seems I am a victim of my own prestige...” He laughed, but there was a catch in his voice.

Arvis frowned, swirling his glass. “What do you wish from me?”

“There is a complication,” Warde said reluctantly. “Tresse will soon be in the priests’ service, and that is an opportunity she cannot...”

ADAM LEE

“Will not,” Tresse said sharply.

“Will not pass up,” he conceded with a nod. “And that is why we need someone to care for... our daughter.”

Arvis sat up straight. “Your *what?*”

He realized, too late, what the new piece of furniture in the room was. He came over to it, looked down. It was a bassinet, and lying there, swaddled in blankets, was a baby. A girl-child, still pink and new, with a look of wide-eyed curiosity. She glanced up at him, gurgled happily, and Arvis felt a shock. The child’s eyes were the same glimmering violet as Tresse’s.

“This is not possible,” he said. “Human and succubus. Such unions never bear fruit.”

Tresse shrugged. “So we believed as well. It seems the common wisdom is wrong.”

“Her name is Myrren,” Warde said, as if embarrassed. “If it were possible, I would retire from war and raise her myself. But Lord Vraxor requires more of me. Of both of us. We have only one other friend to whom we would entrust the care of our daughter...”

“*I?*” he said in astonishment. “A Morin? You wish *me* to be a... a parent?”

“We will hire nursemaids and teachers and such to assist you,” Warde hastened to assure him. “That will be taken care of. But we need something more. Someone to watch over her, to guide her way. Someone who will be there for her, when her parents cannot. There is no one I would rather have for that than you, Arvis.”

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Arvis felt himself at a loss. It was not a feeling he was used to.

“I... will need time to think this over,” he said.

“You can do so, of course,” Warde agreed.

“But not overlong,” Tresse added. “Both Warde and I will have to answer the call of our duty to Lord Vraxor very soon. We have no one whom we trust as much as you. We ask for your help.” She looked straight at him, with just the hint of a plea in her sharp violet eyes. “Please.”

As Arvis set out into the street, his thoughts were awhirl. *I, a parent? Absurd. The night I met Warde, he feared for his life. And now he proposes to entrust his daughter to me? The man must be mad. He has been a faithful friend to me, but I should turn down his request. I must. And yet, try as he might, the sight of that child’s violet eyes would not leave him.*

*The story continues at:  
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