



ELITA DANIELS

BEFORE^{THE} DAWN

TREE OF LIFE - BOOK TWO

THEY SHALL AGE LIKE US, DIE LIKE US

Before the Dawn

Tree of Life - Part II



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E. F. Daniels

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To my family, with gratitude and love



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Chapter 1

A Debt Paid

His face livid with anguish, Deacon walked through the rainfall which stung his flesh and bent him with cold misery. His hair was heavy with rain, his mind filled with miserable thoughts. He had no sense of where he was going or how long he had gone in this direction; grief and tears had dimmed his vision. It felt a sickening effort to support his own weight, he wished to lay down, but continued with morbid persistence.

He knew Cedrik would lay her in the earth. It was too much to bear. At the thought he stumbled and his legs, powerless to support him, brought him to the ground as if he had no feeling in his limbs.

How could she breathe when she was in darkness beneath the soil and away from him? Painful sobs wrenched out of him, and he beat his bruised fists against the cold wet earth, till he felt sick with pain. He could not rouse himself, grief kept him prostrate. He caught his breath and lay silent, fearing the ache of movement. The thought of dragging on a wretched existence

without her was intolerable, life before him seemed dead. He felt his flesh lose all its colour and go grey; without her he did not exist. For hours he was heavy with a death-like inanition, lost in a terrible sense of despair. Twice his lips uttered the name of Magenta, his face fixed in its expression of resigned despondence. The rain continued to beat down. He cursed himself for leaving, far better to have remained and perished with her.

He had wept and lain all night upon the earth. When morning came he did not move. He was utterly destroyed with a preference for death. There was such a dimness in his mind that he felt neither the soreness of his body nor his heart. When death did not come anger stirred within him. Again he became fierce and attempted to rouse himself. He beat his fists hard on the ground to hurt them. The pain was such as to have a perversely enlivening impact on him, and he forced himself to stand. To die now would be to give way to Nature's mockery.

In the night on a straight path that lay between two stands of trees, a woman crouched gathering herbs. Her apparel was humble but neat. She looked up and saw a young man coming down the path, his head bowed as if walking against a cold wind; although the air was still. Something in his manner was strange, yet she continued diligently.

"It is late for a woman to be out unaccompanied," he said from close behind. He had come upon her so silently, she drew her breath in surprise. She arose and turned to face him. "Do you live near here?" asked Deacon but was not answered beyond a look of mistrust. "For your master, I presume?" He gestured to the herbs in her hands, some of which he recognized as po-

tent pain relievers, and a strange expression came into his face, something near contempt, as if he had discovered her a traitor.

Her eyes avoided his. "I have nothing for you," she said, and began to walk swiftly. He kept by her side, keeping pace easily. He walked close to her, but would not speak. She went on without a sideward glance, gnawed by terror at his behaviour. His persistent silence was strange and discomposing. With each moment she grew more fearful, more impatient, until, at last, she turned and confronted him. "What do you want!" she cried. She shivered but her eyes blazed with anger.

"I'm going to tell you," he said, unaffected. From her hands he took the herbs but left the knife. "I want for you to turn around and walk back to the village, have yourself a drink, and do not return before light."

"That is all you ask?" she said slowly and with the torment of doubt.

"That is all."

She would not move but looked at him. "You mean to kill him," she said. For an instant it seemed she had no scruple with his intentions, then, with a flash of outrage, she made a strike at him with the weapon. But his hand struck down on her wrist, and with a downward thrust, jerked the knife from her grip to the ground. His free hand caught her around the throat.

"You would have fared better had you trusted me," he said, crushing the breath from her, his face so near to hers he could see the look of panic in her eyes, feel the fear trembling in her. Then, as if against his power of control, he released her. "Make haste before worse comes of it," he said, breathlessly.

Through the trees she fled from him, not once turning back. He continued down the path alone, tossing the herbs aside. He

came to a wooden bridge, traversing a brook, and saw beyond the dark meadow lights of the house he sought. He waited some length before approaching. His face was drawn with weariness and pain but his eyes, intense and fixed, were as if fever burned in his blood. He saw before him the attainment of retribution—the satiation of his inveterate hate and long awaited vengeance.

With an unerring step Deacon walked toward Luseph's home. It was a large old house, impressive and imposing, with steps leading to the main entrance. Cautiously he opened the door, which was unfastened. All was dark but for a few lamps. The entrance hall was short and narrow with a stone floor and oak stairs leading to the next level. To his left led into a sitting room. He stood a moment, wondering if he should turn in there or go up the stairs, when the sound of movement decided for him.

The sitting room was dimly lit and comfortably furnished. In addition to the books the most impressive aspect of the room was the prominent fireplace with its masterfully carved mantel shelf, whereupon a man leaned as if for support, his eyes half shut, and his face sharp and white in the darkness. A discomfort in his chest made it difficult to stand erect, an indwelling agony apparent in his very movement. His stature and bearing though diminished nevertheless gave evidence to the remarkable and distinctive qualities of his intellect and character. Despite all the symptoms of death which he bore upon him, he was a powerful man. Standing here, Luseph began to feel excessively weary, body and soul. Next to his chair was a serving of supper on an elegant silver tray, but it was not what he wanted. He had no appetite. He lifted the lid to the teapot and found it empty.

He wondered where Adeline was with his remedy. Already the pain was becoming intolerable.

He took a book from his collection, holding it in one hand he eased himself into his chair. He produced a pipe, and folding his arms began to smoke in a slow, languid attitude. He sat quietly, staring vacantly. The sharpness of firelight accentuated the austerity of his features; a face that still had a certain handsome quality, the thin, well-cut lips pressed firmly together. He had an uncanny look of being detached from any living being.

Quietly Deacon went in, avoiding the light, passing along the walls just beyond the radiance of lamplight. The loneliness of the large house seemed strange and comfortless. The scent of herbs mingled with that of pipe smoke filled him with a feeling of nostalgic unease. He saw by the fire a thin wasted figure. He could not come forward out of the shadows but stood transfixed. His heart hardly seemed to beat. Father and son were alone together for the first time in many years.

Deacon maintained his observation and saw not only that some terrible illness was killing Luseph, but that some great agony must gnaw at him and shatter his nerves, a man dying for his infamies.

Luseph was unaware of the figure in the shadows. His thoughts were on the woman who cared for him. She had the doting of a loving daughter, and yet her eyes looked upon him with an adoration a lover might for her beloved. His eyes half closed, and without realizing, his mind started to drift into a sleep more like unconsciousness, his respiration touched with a slight wheeze.

He jolted awake, uncertain as to whether he had heard something or sensed it, and over in a corner he could make out a dark

figure, the face disintegrated in shadow. Luseph sat forward. "Preston?" He quickly recognized his error by the strangeness of manner which the visitor exhibited. He turned up the lamp. "Who is there?"

The stranger remained quiet in the darkness.

"Come into the light where I can see you."

There was no answer at all, not even a show of movement. What was the fellow about that he lurked there in the shadows? "What do you want? Speak!" Not fathoming the cause of this uncanny silence exhausted and exasperated him. "Have you had too much to drink that you stand there dull-witted as a fish?" He turned his face towards the fire. Supposing it was one of the necromancers that sometimes sought him hungry for knowledge, he said, "There is nothing here for you."

Then came a voice from the dark. "You know not what nights and days I have spent, what hours I have passed, waiting for this moment."

Luseph felt a twitch in his heart. Something in the tone, or perhaps being this way startled out of silence, made him shiver. He slowly faced round. "Who are you?" He was keen to look upon the face of the stranger and struggled to his feet, keeping one hand on the armrest to support himself. "Come nearer to me," he said, anxiously. "Let me see you."

He reached forth a hand, indicating for the young man to come forward, a peculiar hope clutching at his heart. When the figure hung back and would not leave the shadows, Luseph's protracted hopefulness thinned into angry bewilderment and he said, "What is this nonsense? Tell me what you want."

Deacon came forward with a pale, intent face. "Your death, in misery and wretchedness," he said without the slightest change in the monotony of his voice.

"My present situation is one in which such threats hold no meaning," answered Luseph.

Deacon, in a burst of rage, shattered all the windows in one explosive display of power—thousands of pieces of fragmented glass sprayed throughout the room. However, in the same instant, he suspended the lacerating-shower; each shard fixed motionless in the air as if frozen in time, not one piece touching Luseph, though very near to his face. Either from shock or from the pain he was beginning to suffer, Luseph sank down into his chair, his eyes fixed on the young man, who had come into his range of vision.

Deacon let the shattered glass fall all at once. "You and I," he said, "have a great score to settle." He came forward and any obstacle was repelled from his path. He paused before his father. "Do you know who I am?"

Luseph released a shaky breath, looking up into the face of his child. "My son . . ."

An affected expression welled up on the young face. His heart throbbed with an involuntary emotion. That loathsome fact linked the dark, hateful nightmare on to actuality. Everything was confusion and turmoil within him.

Luseph reached and touched his son's hand with trembling fingers. Deacon's brow heavily contracted, as if the contact repulsed him. All his father's wrongs and disgraces flashed upon him with a blinding brightness and the outrage of his heart returned. It came upon him like a sudden tempest. He laid reckless hands on Luseph, dragging him forward by the collar

and tossing him across the floor. His moment of insanity did not end there but took on a wilder and broader range. Knocking aside any obstruction between him and his father he raged in violence, lifting Luseph to his feet only to dash him down again, and with such unabated brutality it seemed he would never be released alive.

Deacon did not give him a moment to recover but loomed over him, darker and darker, like a shadow of doom. For many moments the tempest raged on in reckless hostility, then Deacon stooped and dragged Luseph to his feet, slamming him against the wall, pinning him there. He bent all the force of his attention on his father, faltering in his rage. Suddenly up close to the man a strange feeling clutched at his heart, a sense of blood-loyalty, which bound him to his father in spite of everything. And for an instant they trembled in the balance, their faces so close they were almost touching, their breathing loud and ragged with emotion. Deacon felt ready to smash something for the unfathomable state of mind it threw him. Yet it held him gripped there, powerless, a high heat burning in his veins, the fierce passions that had so long grown strong and over mastering, threatening to unhinge all reason and plunge him headlong into implacable fury.

Luseph his thin face bruised and bleeding had borne the wrath of his son without anger or retaliation, and Deacon noticed that the pale eyes, dimmed and full of love, wandered over his young face taking in all the detail. It was bitterly irksome to him. In a fit of revulsion he took hold of Luseph and flung him across the room, smashing and breaking through furniture. Again he propped Luseph up against the wall. Luseph scarcely able to stand let his head droop forward. For an instant the

room wheeled and his forehead sank against something firm and warm—Deacon's shoulder. The young man supported him while the room became steady. Choking into his son's shoulder, Luseph winced in pain. The agony was something deeper inside of him from an old wound, and Deacon knew he was suffering terribly without the remedy he had denied him.

"Does it hurt?" he said, closely, with a significance that brought Luseph's downcast eyes up to meet his with steady comprehension.

"Did you hurt her?" asked Luseph, some strength coming into his voice.

"Did I hurt her!" cried Deacon, and struck him a blow across the face bringing blood to the side of his mouth. "I should very much have liked to. Helping the likes of you she deserved no less." Luseph began to lose hold on his senses and closed his eyes. Deacon shook him hard. "Damn you! Wake up! You cannot die, not yet." Deacon pressed his forearm across his throat. "There is but one thing I will ever ask of you. You sought a man once. Gadrien. Tell me his location?"

"What do you want with such a devil?" asked Luseph. "What game do you play?"

"My reasons are my own. Tell me!" Deacon banged him against the wall.

"What foolishness do you intend!" Luseph cried, exerting his strength in return, and with an effect that was unexpected. Deacon was propelled backwards and crashed through a table which collapsed under his weight. Groaning, he rolled onto his side, half-rousing himself, a sluggishness in his head.

Luseph grimaced in pain. The effort cost him and he almost collapsed to the floor before making it to his chair. Deacon got

to his feet, his full faculties quickly recovered. "No—do not die—tell me where he is." In an instant he was at his father's side. "Tell me where he is!" Luseph gave no response, his face ghastly livid. "Open your eyes, look at me, open your eyes! Curse you!" Still gripping his father's shirt, Deacon let his head hang, then slowly looked up. "It is the one thing I have ever asked of you and even that you would deny me," he said. "You know where he is, I know you do, tell me."

Luseph tried to keep his attention focused on his son but despite himself a darkness came over his vision . . .

No sense of elapsed time, Luseph opened his eyes. The rim of a cup was pressed at his lips. Deacon said irritably, "Drink it, you fool."

Luseph took the cup into his hands and finished the strong drink himself. For the present the warm liquid served as an equivalent to the remedy. When Luseph had finished the restorative, Deacon took the cup and tossed it sharply aside, letting it shatter on the floor. He turned his attention back to the dying man. Although such a pitiful change had passed upon his father, Deacon could not forget those painful thoughts which all these years haunted him.

"At one point in my life," said Luseph, "I believed myself ineluctably destined for some great purpose. I deemed it damnable to cast aside abilities that should be embraced for the benefit of my fellow man. I freely availed myself to the possibilities of the undertaking, willing to fulfil the requirements in every detail whatever the cost, as long as the outcome was favourable to my desire. Even now I cannot without passion recall to mind what might have been, what I could have achieved, had my judgment not failed me, made me heedless."

As he spoke such strange gleams shone in his eyes. Then his impassioned face again became sober. He seemed to feel poignantly his own immoralities and the immensity of his fall. His features that to a singular degree reflected his strengths and inspired respect, those grey penetrating eyes apt to arrest with one glance, were now but a departing visage of what he once was, a faded distortion of the original. What a remarkable creature he must have been in the days of his reign when he was at the height of his influence, now broken and in ruin.

“In my pursuit I lost everything. I lost sight of my first purpose in the world and through my many negligences it was taken from me. I had made the greatest sacrifice. When I reflected on the work I had accomplished all my efforts and triumphs were as nothing. My every ambition, thoughts, and feeling of soul had been extinguished.”

Deacon listened with a stony expression. His wretch of a father was trying to find a light of sympathy in a lightless cell, the walls of which were of his own making. Luseph caught his breath, and in the intervals of his agony he continued: “The beauty of all things vanished, everything formerly pleased in was gone. My life misery, destitute of every joy. All these years I endured in the seclusion to which my miseries still condemn me. Yet I dared enjoy one comfort, one hope, that I should see you before I died.”

Colour came into Deacon’s face. He felt an unwanted pang. It passed shortly, however, for he found himself confronted by bitter recollections, and giving way to his feelings exclaimed, “Do you suppose that those words will be branded on my memory, that you will have given me something to reflect upon? That you have inspired some sense of pity?”

Deacon had so many things he wished to say, but they were lost amongst the confusion of opposing feeling, that, in the presence of his father came still more forcibly upon his heart, which labored under the load. But in all its magnitude it could not efface that which had long ruled through every fiber of his body and the more intangible fibers of what men know as the soul. His father's words could not for all that change his resolution. Deacon arose, standing over him. "I will find what I'm looking for. There is not a force in existence that can prevent me. And you . . . you're already dead to me."

"Deacon," Luseph beseeched. He endeavored to rise but the exertion proved too much for him and he fell back, half-fainted, but reaching out he clutched his son's arm. The desperation of the gesture affected Deacon with emotions he couldn't identify. Thrown into the greatest confusion he cried, "I have had enough of your words!" and struck a blow with such brutal disregard to the requirements of his father's condition, it seemed impossible that he should survive the assault. Again Deacon struck him, and again, but the fourth he withheld. Looking down at the broken man, clutching still the sleeve of his shirt, a strange reluctance came over him to strike the finishing blow. In that same moment Luseph was seized in a fit of pain. He clenched tighter onto Deacon, and, in a way that was truly dreadful arched his back in paroxysms of agony. His jaw worked spasmodically. No utterances could come from the contracted throat, but he gazed at Deacon a look which penetrated deeper than words. He gave a sudden awful cry, and Deacon knew that his agony was frightful. Luseph's tortured body stiffened then relaxed. His hand fell limp and all life was gone out of him. His eyes stared open, his face was black with congested blood.

Deacon uttered something akin to a horrified cry and stumbled back, knocking over a table and letting out a dry sob. His gaze fastened on the dead man reclining in the armchair. Quickly Deacon recollected himself, and with the hecticness of a madman sprang upon the bookcase and went through several volumes, not bothering to return them but dropping them to the floor. He knocked a vase in the process, but, by nervous reflex caught it in both hands and steadied it. For a long moment he stared at the flowers—roses. His eyes swept the room and noticed for the first time that every vase was filled with roses. It was evident his father was not past his mother. Everywhere were these tokens of his father's enduring affection for her. With an intense feeling of revulsion Deacon felt the overwhelming urge to burn all the place, and casting a flame in his hand, set the curtains on fire. He was pale from extremity of emotion, but firm and unwavering in purpose and soon the whole room was alight.

Outside in the night he watched as roaring flames began to consume the entire house. He stared with such unblinking intensity it seemed tears might rise to his eyes, but they were all burned up with hate.

Chapter 2

An Unexpected Visitor

The fire began to quench at an unnatural rate. Magic was at work. At first this alteration was imperceptible to Deacon's abstracted gaze, but, by degrees, he became conscious of the interference, and having weaned his eyes from contemplation he grew aware of the rapidly diminishing fire. As if numbed he began to walk across the bridge toward the house. The moment his feet hit the grass he broke into a run. Upon reaching his father's house the fire was entirely extinguished.

In the charred and ruined room which he left his father, he saw a man bent over the body in a grieved fashion. The man twisted to see Deacon panting in the doorway. He arose, and with such a hostile attitude it seemed he would, in a single outburst, eradicate Deacon, but his attention was at once arrested by the young man—so similar was the manner of the son to that of the father. "You did this?" asked Preston.

Deacon stood dazed, gasping for breath, when the inarticulate cry of an anguished woman jarred his attention over to where Adeline stood in the doorway. She was staring at the

body, stunned, as if she did not yet see the two men. The entire time Preston had his attention intent on Deacon, looking as if he wanted to kill him, his lips set tightly, his hands clenched. The woman rushed in behind him and went to her master, as if she would fling herself upon him, but stopped short, holding her hand to her mouth. Then she turned on Deacon.

“You monster!” she cried. Preston caught her in his arms, another moment and she would have been falling all over Deacon like a wild thing. She struggled and raged at him, calling him black death and cursing him.

Deacon was white as death, his features giving no token of the agony that convulsed him inwardly. The woman’s anguished, hate-filled cries set his every nerve atremble. He staggered back, bumping past the corner of the door in his haste to leave.

“You fiend!” she screamed after him, redoubling her efforts to break free. “Curse you! Curse you! His blood is on your head!” Finally Preston released her. “Why do you let him leave?” she cried, dashing her hands against him.

“Contain yourself,” said Preston and flung her away. She turned a confused and dismayed look at him, her eyes reddened, anger raging in them. She shook her head in bitter disappointment and went to grieve over her master. Preston bent and lifted one of the books that had been tossed on the floor. He possessed a coolness of judgment. He ignored the woman sobbing and choking behind him.

Deacon fell semi-conscious into bed. He felt gutted, cringing on himself so that he should not ache so much. The deed was done. It did not happen how he had envisioned in his mind.

He felt a strange emptiness in the finality of it all, at the utter impossibility of going back and redoing things differently. There was so much more he had wanted to say, to make his father understand.

It was late afternoon when he finally went downstairs to the inn's common room. The occasional clanging noises from the busy kitchen struck upon his nerves like blows from a hammer. A coarse-looking woman stood at his table, slopping stew into a bowl set before him. The meal looked greasy and unappetizing yet he fell to it ravenously. It was several moments before he realized she was still watching him. He raised his face, wiping his mouth with his hand. "You've got a demanding appetite," she said. "What trouble you got yourself into?"

"The same kind you'll find yourself, if you persist to question me." Deacon got up with such a violent start, people turned and stared at him, but he saw no one. He went outside down toward where his horse was tethered. His step slowed, then stopped altogether. The same man that he had seen at Luseph's house was there petting his horse. The man glanced up. He wore fine robes with a high collar neck. He was very striking, with prominent cheek bones, thin lips, and eyes keen but strangely blind. He seemed wholly master of his own world, yet underneath that calm surface was a terrible undercurrent; one that lay still and quiet, but which might stir and arouse at any moment, fearful and compelling, like the rage of a storm at sea. Deacon let him speak first, though inside him it was like a roaring furnace.

"That man," said Preston, "was my father."

Deacon set his teeth hard together. "You are lying." He clenched his hand and took a step forward. "What do you want that you would lie to me?"

"I do not lie," Preston said calmly. He gleaned some satisfaction in observing the young man, who seemed to waver and be in doubt. By the sheer force of will, Deacon dashed him against the post, the horse whining in complaint.

"He was not your father!" said Deacon, the concept of a relation to this man in all respects detestable to him.

Preston gave a smile as thin as a knife blade. "Not by blood but by every sense of the word."

"You stand no chance against me," said Deacon.

"It's not what I desire." Defying the force pressed against him, Preston exerted some effort and peeled himself from the post much as something coming unstuck. He shrugged his shoulders and rearranged his clothes as if any measure of violence was distasteful to him. He had a straight, dignified bearing such as to make Cedrik appear base by comparison. His brown hair was smoothed back, soft and thick, straight from his brow. "You were looking for something," he said. "What was it? Perhaps I can help? Luseph and I were in very close association."

"You wish to offer assistance to me after I killed the man who was supposedly as a father to you?"

"I don't think you so much as killed him as sped up the inevitable," replied Preston, appearing in control of the situation.

Deacon sneered and made a move toward his horse. Preston saw that he was about lose his opportunity.

"Deacon," he said hastily. The familiar usage of his name made Deacon stop and face round. A smile twitched at Preston's lips. "You would have no memory of me," he said. "But I remember you from when you were a small boy." Deacon looked at him without expression, not an eyelid moving. "I know what

they did to you. I was there when they tortured you. Strange art necromancy."

"You're one of them."

"I was your father's apprentice." In an instant Deacon had him seized by the throat—those words aroused all the devil in his soul. Reflexively, Preston's hand clasped round his assailant's, trying to hold it away. "But what went on with you, I had no part of," he said, gasping. "I was scarcely more than a child myself."

Deacon's black gaze bored into him, and without the slightest release of pressure, he asked, "Gadrien—where is he?"

"That I can help you with."

"Tell me."

"In exchange for what?"

"Your life."

"Not good enough."

"Then you had better name your price," said Deacon, burying his fingers in his throat.

Preston gasped once or twice as he tried to answer. "I want to go with you."

"No."

"Only as far as the port."

Deacon was looking him fairly in the face and could see no fear in his eyes, no evidences of excitement or agitation. He tightened his grip, then realizing he would need assistance, relaxed his fingers. He was hot and flushed, but Preston did not break a single sweat, not a hair out of place. His expression maintained its imperious pride. "It's only a four day ride to the port; then you shall be free of me. I'll set you on the right course

to Gadrien upon our arrival. Those are my terms. Decline, and I will depart as easily as I came."

Deacon narrowly scrutinized the countenance of the wretch. He knew that he entertained no good will towards him; however, whatever indirect or selfish schemes might possibly be in the works, he had little choice but to accept the offer. "You ride ahead of me," Deacon said in a cold, decisive way. "I don't trust you, and should you prove me right, I'll make certain you depart altogether."

Preston regarded the other coldly, not speaking a word. After a moment he gave a polite smile, which belied the intense annoyance in the expression of his eyes. "It is to be expected," he said smoothly. Then suddenly with his fist, seemingly imbued with something beyond a man's strength, struck a blow into Deacon's stomach which knocked the breath from him and dropped him on the spot. On his knees Deacon held his stomach, his head bent forward. Preston stood over him. The momentary flush which had stained his cheek subsided and he was calm as usual. "That's for killing my father," he said. The faintest bitterness of jealousy that had been very well concealed tainted his voice.

Chapter 3

Vindication

As far as Deacon could judge Preston looked a man in his middle thirties, but his age was difficult to assess because he seemed a perfect stroke of uttermost contradiction. His way and manner were those of a man of the world, experienced and in command. Yet there was a certain grandeur in his bearing that was almost infantile in its arrogance, a naivety that suggested he always got what he demanded, all with the cool confidence of one inherently entitled to respect. He was something of a maniac and something of a child. His magnetic presence compelled recognition, but did little to inspire any true respect. Unequivocally aristocratic, he seemed more suited and belonging to polite society. And yet there was in his every action and his keen, calculating eyes, something in which advertised a preponderant strength hidden within. He seemed a man denied nothing. What he could not win by words, he would take by force.

His self-importance and conceited temperament did little to impress his companion with feelings of regard. Aside from any

suspicious Deacon may have felt, he remained quite a distance behind to avoid as much contact as possible. Preston tried on occasion to broach some subjects, and by varying means attain some manner of kinship, but Deacon made any attempt impossible. He considered Preston to be from the same source of cruelty and humiliation to which his father had exposed him. He held, therefore, but little intercourse with his traveling companion.

From his horse Preston glanced back at Deacon—his face was very worn and bore the peculiar pallor of one who had suffered a near-fatal illness. He had brooded over many thoughts, till he was exhausted with the effort of consciousness. Preston fell back and rode alongside him so that he could talk.

“You look unwell,” he said. “Are you?”

Deacon glance at Preston, his eyes dark and swift, and saw the scrutinizing concern. He did not answer his question.

“Don’t you know whether you are ill or not, without thinking about it half a day?” asked Preston. “Do you need to rest a moment?”

“No. I’m fine,” he said. “Ride ahead.”

Preston stayed at his side and watched him with amused eyes. “We’ll stop when we reach that cluster of trees yonder,” he said, indicating the spot. He continued with trivial conversations that were met with little response. They rode on in silence for some minutes. Then he glanced at Deacon, and with a startling change of subject, said, “Our beginnings are not so dissimilar as you think. My father did not always cherish good will towards me either.” His tone was light and confiding. “Luseph was the nearest likeness to a father I ever had. He set my path straight. Without his firm hand I would have spiraled out of control. Truly I owe him my life.”

Deacon knit his brows, unwilling to speak.

“He trusted me,” said Preston. “He told me of his convictions—all his plans—and I believed in his insight, respected his absolute devotion.”

“Ride ahead,” Deacon persisted savagely, but there was something of a lack of conviction in his tone despite its severity and he continued to listen, as if eager for knowledge from the other man.

“He instilled in me those idealist values that he embodied, that had so very nearly destroyed him,” said Preston. “On every point of equality he displayed unbounded enthusiasm. His sentiments on the worth of our abilities to serve and protect our fellow-creatures support me when life seems has no meaning.”

Preston keeping close beside him, continued in this vein seemingly without aim; in actuality he was with careful attention trying to follow the young man’s thoughts into the innermost recesses of his mind. Deacon for his part appeared disinterested, unhearing even, but he absorbed everything said as a sponge absorbs water. They lapsed into silence for several moments.

“He would speak of you sometimes,” said Preston, as if confiding some confidential fact. “Our conversations were not always confined to his philosophies and ideals. If ever anyone made you believe he didn’t care for you, they uttered a falsehood.”

“Unless you wish for me to bring you closer to him, I suggest not mentioning him any further,” said Deacon, hotly.

Preston mildly entertained by the threat managed to keep his countenance. “Were I in your place,” he said, “my reaction would be the same. Being subjected to such circumstances, and at such an age! I should think it enough to crush most natures.”

The subject which Preston had unexpectedly broached caused a sharp response in Deacon. The shadow that stole across his face, and the hate etched into each feature, could not be described as anything less than alarming. But the fitful-gleam in his eye showed, at least, that this time his interest was alert. Preston went on in the same unperturbed tone: "I will confess necromancy to be somewhat unpalatable. Most people are unable to wrest a positive significance from death. But they don't realize that death clarifies truths and values. In its presence false calamities vanish and only the worthy aspects of existence remain. It assists humanity to come to a self-conscious appreciation of life, grants us the knowledge of our lives worth and intensity. But that is not so much Necromancy as Death-worship and the two differ significantly. Those deluded devotees honor death through affliction. Their God cannot be satisfied without tortures of the body and mind. In my devotion there is no deity. It's not a religion but a craft. There is no worship.

"I can see you are confused. I tell you this because I want for you to understand that your affliction was not some senseless, unwarranted performance to appease a depraved God. There was a crucial purpose and none of it involved the loss of your life, which I know has been threatened in more ways than one."

"Is it your aim to excite my anger?" said Deacon.

"To enlighten you," answered Preston, reaching down and patting the neck of his horse. "There are, as you know, two sides to each story, and I'm fairly certain as to which one you were told. Are you aware that it was, in fact, Luseph who spared—"

"I am aware," said Deacon. "Throwing a man out to sea and a life raft after him, hardly inspires generous impulses."

“I suppose then, you are also aware that it was one of Travon’s men whom he was protecting you from—not his own?” Preston saw in Deacon’s expression that he didn’t know and continued, “As I said, it was never my master’s intentions to endanger your life.”

“Just distort it into something of a horror?”

Preston fell quiet. He felt he was butting heads with the other man. Deacon was the first to speak. “Who was this man?” he asked, in a manner that did not invite a detailed description of the whole detestable process, which had impacted his life so unutterably.

“I don’t know his name,” answered Preston. “But he caused Luseph a great deal of suffering. I’ll not burden you with detail of those bitter circumstances. Only let me tell you my masters were finished with you and your Riven blood. They no longer cared if you were taken. Their intent now was to channel the new source of power to Gadrien and restore him. This was almost complete, but it was difficult. Luseph’s attention persistently strayed outside of the circle to the conflict. He wanted to make certain you were safe amidst all the madness. You were lying before him on the altar, perfectly still, when you started to grow distressed and afflicted. Luseph could do nothing. He knew if he broke from the master’s circle prematurely, not only would all their efforts be lost, he would be exposed to unpredictable alterations. The effects of which, as you know, were lasting.

“But when he saw that this man’s focus was toward you, that he mouthed words against you, Luseph began to falter. His companions felt the energy he was channeling with them waver and decline. They chastised him and told him to maintain. He closed his eyes and he tried but was relentlessly distracted.

Again he saw you crying and saw that you were struggling as if about to go into a fit. His companions gained a greater hold on him, forbidding him to break contact. They could feel in his consciousness that he was straining. He could not bare to watch you die. His concentration broke, and even against their warning, he divided himself from the circle. He dispelled his anger of having broken the link in a forceful burst against the threat, breaking the man's hold on the spell. Then he took you and was making to escape when confronted by the same wretch.

"In his reduced state Luseph scarcely managed to debilitate his adversary before he himself collapsed. He could do nothing but shield you with his body. The entire chamber was chaos. While lying there with you he was struck by a stray torrent of flame and all his back was set aflame. It was then that another man loyal to Travon came and took you from your father's arms. Even as he writhed in agony and wretchedness Luseph tried to prevent you from being taken. As far as he was concerned every man in that room was a threat to you. Many of the necromancers fled, including the masters. Luseph had deprived them of the thirteenth link. Everything was lost.

"He was unable to escape and was at the mercy of Travon's men. He was tried before the council and dealt with expediently. Since he was cooperative in all that they asked, he was released after only two years, but he was not to leave the confinement of his residence." Preston gave an affected laugh and said, "He couldn't if he wanted to. Something inside of him was distorted and wrong, and on his back nearly all of his skin and tissues burned away. He was in a word, ruined. Luseph did never betray me or turn me in, but he would teach nothing more of necromancy and would not speak of it."

“Then why were you still with him after all these years?” asked Deacon.

“Because I loved him. Let’s stop here,” said Preston, drawing rein and dismounting. He did not resume the conversation but remained quiet. He didn’t want to push Deacon further than he was willing.

Chapter 4

Demonstration

Deacon was slower to dismount. Wearily, he slid down from the saddle and rested his face against the horse's neck, affectionately stroking its mane. When he turned he saw Preston was reviewing the map. Preston, his expression perplexed, ran his fingers through his hair. His mouth worked silently as if cursing himself. Deacon frowned as he watched him standing there like a confused fool. He walked over and Preston held out the map for him to see. "We were supposed to turn here."

Deacon tore the map from his hands. "Do you tell me we traveled a day in the wrong direction?" His anger rose, things swam blood-red before his eyes, the sun seemed to beat hot on his head, and sheer weariness overcame and staggered him. Preston caught his arm and steadied him.

"Sit down," he said. When Deacon tried weakly to free his arm, Preston said more forcefully, "Sit down!" This time the younger man complied. Preston retrieved Deacon's water-sack and discovered it empty. "You've got no water left, guzzler."

He poured water from his own into a cup. Deacon sat on a rock in the shade of a tree. His gaze was resting on Preston's features as a man might look upon the face of a newly discovered brother, who of which it was uncertain of his motive and character. Preston went to Deacon and held out the drink. Deacon looked at the offered cup as if it was poison rather than fresh water. Preston took a swig of it then offered it again. "Shall I let the horse have a taste as well, in case you fear I have any form of resistance?" he said, yielding momentarily to his sarcastic nature.

Deacon would like to have beaten the smugness out of him, but took the offered refreshment and sat back and rested his eyes. Preston returned to the map.

Feeling cool and relaxed, Deacon let his mind drift. His hands clasped the cup lying in his lap. When he became conscious that Preston approached him, he sat up quickly.

"I see the state of your nerves is still far from adequate," said Preston, unfolding the map. "We needn't back track. If we continue along here, then cut across there, we'll have lost only half a day at the most. So you see, you needn't get yourself worked up and start fainting." He tapped the rolled up map on Deacon's head.

Deacon grasped Preston's wrist. "If you are leading me on some wayward course—"

He need not finish the sentence, his attitude bespoke enough of consequence. Preston winced and a look of displeasure darkened his face. He in turn took hold of Deacon. In an instant Deacon felt an icy wave ripple down his spine, leaving a numbness in its wake, and the cup which he could no longer feel fell from his nerveless fingers. A cold weakness, terrible and crip-

pling, began to permeate his body. Slowly, he slumped down against the rock, half-reclining, as all feeling ebbed from his limbs, his face expressionless. A fear grew strong upon him as he struggled against the paralyzing touch and found he could not stir.

Without quitting his grasp on the young man's arm, Preston crouched down. "It's a pretty trick, don't you think?" he said, an undertone of unfriendliness in the words. Deacon's wide unwavering stare was his only answer. "You underestimated me," said Preston. "That was a mistake." He saw his victim moving his fingers, trying to sit up. He laid his hand on Deacon's shoulder and pressed him back. "If you start twisting or turning, or even breathing too hard, it only kills you faster."

Deacon was utterly paralyzed, his gaze fixed immovably on the speaker, a furious intensity in his eyes. A little tremor went over him, perceptibly, as he resisted the effects.

"Not a movement, not a sigh," cautioned Preston. "Breathe but one word, and down you go!" Then he added in a different tone, "I only do this to prove something to you. I want to prove that I am your friend. I could hurt you, kill you even, but it's not my desire. I want to help you. I need for you to understand this and trust me. Do you understand that I'm your friend?"

Preston took the cup and turned it up right. His voice was calm and insistent. "All you have to do, my brother, is let your eyes close to let me know you understand and I will free you."

Deacon's eyelids fluttered; but he could not speak. Preston observed him in silence. He could see that Deacon was burning up inside, that he was resisting within the confines of his numbed body, the veins on his tanned forehead standing out. There was rage in his eyes.

An almost imperceptible smile crept over Preston's features. "You want to hurt me," he said. "You think you are stronger than me. You think you can resist me." Preston tightened his grip. "The trust you place in your vitality betrays you. The amount of energy you have at your disposal does not matter. It's how you apply it. You cannot out do me." He spoke with that calm, familiar menace some men do their enemies, and the weakness in Deacon's body grew deeper and more debilitating. He looked up at Preston out of his numb desperation and Preston said, "You are spoiled. People fear your temper and that is how you get what you want; but do you see now that we are friends, not because I fear you but because I want to help you?"

Deacon was unresponsive. His body lay stoney and cold as marble. "I know you can hear me," said Preston touching Deacon's chin, and the dead grey face never changed, the gaze locked with glazing eyes. "Let your eyes close, and I will know." His voice was insistent, unfriendly, fearing Deacon would sooner die than relent.

Deacon lay numb while the pulse of life died slowly within him. He ceased to struggle and went down into a blind abyss of submission. Then something was crying in his mind to wake up, telling him insistently not to submit. It was growing deafening and in his innermost brain, a defiant consciousness took command. His body was reluctant to obey but slowly it awakened him from the numbness that had him gripped.

Preston was speaking but stopped in mid-phrase. Something was happening. He felt a shudder ripple up his arm, and a sudden suspicion struck him. He attempted to disable Deacon's efforts before full recovery could be effected. That moment was denied him. Deacon began to revive irrepressibly. The ebbing

strength of his body gathered itself together so that all the blood surged. He sent that deluge of energy into his represser, sending deep painful tremors into every nerve that made up Preston.

Deacon could read the sudden uncertainty that leaped into Preston's eyes, and could see convulsive shudderings start in his body. Preston was brought to his knees in contracting agony, sharp currents that went thrilling through him perilously. He lurched forward, and saved himself from falling by catching his hand against the rock. Stooped over Deacon's inert body he choked in pain, sobbing for breath. His arm was shaking so that he could scarce hold himself up. He began to shout aloud in fury and pain. He bore it until he could bear it no longer; then he relinquished and let go. Deacon took hold of him. He was strong again and getting stronger. His flow of energy was implacable, insistent, menacing, not letting Preston recover.

Preston spoke in broken, breathless phrases. "Stop, damn you, stop it!" He managed to catch one of Deacon's hands and gripped it convulsively. Something from inside of him entered into Deacon. Deacon felt it stirring. He looked down at his hand and a horror broke upon him. Something was moving beneath the flesh, living things that writhed and crawled. He watched their movement with a sick, fascinated incredulity; then with a cry of anguish, he hurled Preston from him. The crawling awfulness remained inside of him, moving with sickening life of its own.

He forgot Preston altogether. He twisted and squirmed on the ground. The pain went much deeper than physical, as if the crawling things inside of him were trying to break through and pass into every atom of his being by force and without right. Straining, he sought for sight of Preston who was lying at

a distance; convulsive shudderings passed over his limbs and he appeared unconscious. Staring at him with horror, Deacon then rolled on his back, looking down at his chest. The sweat of agony poured down his face. He could only lie there staring. Black, shapeless, horrors protruded through his clothed-chest and were somehow growing and lengthening before his eyes. Deacon panted and choked and still the black mass squirmed and lengthened. The twining, clawing, obscenities ripped loose from his body with thin, inhuman screams, and with such sudden forcefulness it made Deacon gasp in both pain and relief. Then these winged-demons were upon him, gnashing and biting. He put his hands up to protect his face.

Preston was no less assailed. Freed from their bonds the wretches no longer recognized him as their master and tore at him, making him bleed. Deacon fought like a man gone mad, heaving and twisting, half flinging them off. For an instant he was free. Embracing the last reserve of energy, he sought to gather and bring the demons together. Standing unsteadily, with outstretched hands, he contained them. Suspended in mid air the demons screeched and thrashed like eels caught in a net. His mind was working quickly as to what he should do with them. He could barely restrain them, and just when he thought he would have to release the vicious devils, his unconscious companion stirred and woke.

Preston at once saw the dilemma. He raised his hands and taking control of the unrestrained demons brought them back to his charge, drawing them into his body where they were contained and bonded in the confines of his being. They screeched with terrible inhuman malice and despair. Then they were gone.

Deacon had since dropped prone upon the ground. He was choking and sobbing for breath. Preston went to him and offered his hand. "It's finished," he said, trying to make peace. Deacon thrust Preston aside staggering to his feet, as if readying himself for the next round, but he staggered only a short way then collapsed. Preston looked at the broken heap that was Deacon and said, "I suspect we'll be spending the night here."