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Dark Haven

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Dark Haven

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Chapter One

Jonmarc Vahanian reined in his horse. The autumn day was chill and his breath misted in the air as brilliantly colored leaves swirled around the courtyard. His gaze scanned the hulking, dark stone building. The manor house of Dark Haven was finally habitable.

Jonmarc's horse snuffled restlessly. Teams of workers bustled around the courtyard, trying to get the manor house fully livable by winter and, more to Jonmarc's concern, suitable for visitors. He slipped down from his horse and absently handed the reins to a squire as Neirin, his grounds manager, bustled up. Neirin was born to Dark Haven's lands, kin to many of the ghosts and *vayash moru* who served the manor. A cloud of wild red hair framed his freckled face, and when he spoke it was with the heavy accent of the Principality highlands.

"You're out early, m'lord," Neirin greeted him cheerfully. "They'll be thinking you're *vayash moru* with the hours you've been keeping."

Jonmarc smiled. "I've always been a night person, but Dark Haven gives that a whole new meaning." He stretched, and grimaced as his right arm twinged. A little more than three months had elapsed since the battle with Arontala. The badly broken arm, leg and wrist had required most of the summer to mend, even with Carina's help.

"Taking a chill in the bones?"

"Not quite good as new, but getting there."

Neirin gave him a knowing look. "I doubt your lady healer had the schedule you keep in mind when you came north. Reaping grain with the farmers in the morning, down in the forge for the afternoon, swords practice with your guard at night."

Jonmarc chuckled. "She expects me to ignore orders. That means I'm doing just what she thought I would."

"That's the most twisted logic I've heard in a long time."

Jonmarc looked up at the dark stone of the manor house. "Yeah, well even by my standards, this is the strangest place I've been in a long time, so we're even." He stared down the road toward the village and the fields beyond. Last year's heavy rains made

for a poor harvest. Dark Haven could not afford another poor yield, and here in the northlands, winter would be coming on soon.

“You’re worried about the harvest.”

Jonmarc shrugged. “Shouldn’t I be? The manor house wasn’t the only thing left to rot for ten years. No one looked much after the fields, that’s certain. And with the mess Jared made of Margolan, there won’t be grain to spare this year. We’ve got to take in everything we grow and make sure it winters. I’ve no desire to win a title and still go hungry!”

“You’ve already done more than the last two lords.”

“As I’ve been told repeatedly, they died young. Maybe I’m not counting on a long tenure.”

“I wish you wouldn’t joke like that.”

“Who’s joking?”

Neirin looked out over the fields. “I’m not a mage, but even I know that things were better here before Arontala disturbed the currents of magic beneath the manor house. I’ve heard my father and my grandfather talk about how it was before. Ever since Arontala ripped out that damn orb, things have gotten worse.”

“Last year, when I heard Tris and the Sisterhood talk about the Flow, I didn’t actually believe them,” Jonmarc mused. “Now, I’m living on top of the damn thing. I’ve got no magic, but even to me, something feels wrong whenever I’m in the vaults below the manor.”

A powerful current of magic flowed beneath the manor house and through its foundation. It was in this Flow that the great mage Bava K’aa imprisoned the orb containing the soul of the Obsidian King more than fifty years ago. The manor’s foundation had shattered and one wing of the building had collapsed when Foor Arontala wrested the orb of the Obsidian King free eleven years ago. Mages swore that it created a disruption in the Flow, a dislocation that could be felt the breadth of the Winter Kingdoms.

A chill wind blasted past him, and leaves swirled around his feet. Once more, the manor house bustled with life and the activity of those who, if not alive, were not entirely

dead. Dark Haven was the ancestral home of the *vayash moru*, and Jonmarc, who earned its lordship as a gift from the king of Principality, was its newest lord.

“Are you ready for tonight?”

Jonmarc gave Neirin a hard stare. “Sure. I’m as ready as I’m going to be. I’m being introduced to the Blood Council. Only mortal in the place. The last time Gabriel arranged a Council meeting I almost died—and I wasn’t even officially invited. I’m not at all sure they’re happy about a new lord, and a mortal one at that.”

Neirin walked alongside Jonmarc as they surveyed the progress of the building crews. “You’ll be on Lord Gabriel’s lands. That gives you sanctuary. He’ll have his brood there to watch over you. No one will dare move against you. Even if they wanted to.”

“Thanks. That makes me feel much better.”

Jonmarc pulled his cloak around him, watching the workers. By daylight, the laborers were mortal. By night, *vayash moru* craftsmen worked to restore the manor to its previous glory. Gabriel had begun the process of rebuilding before Jonmarc was able to travel from Margolan. Within a few weeks of Jonmarc’s arrival, the pantries were provisioned, the sheds filled with firewood and necessities, and the stables full with horses and their tack. Dark Haven was livable for mortals once more.

Dark Haven’s manor was four centuries old, a three-story rectangle with a large wing on either side. The main entrance had a sweeping set of steps cascading from a columned entranceway and above it a large balcony. Made of dark granite, Dark Haven seemed brooding.

Even the building’s construction revealed its role as home to both mortals and *vayash moru*. Its rooms were built concentrically. An outer ring of rooms with large windows was designed for its mortal inhabitants. A second ring of rooms at the core of the building was windowless, so *vayash moru* could move in safety regardless of the sun outside. At the far left end of the western wing was a small temple to the Goddess. But where Margolan worshipped Her as Mother and Childe and Isencroft venerated the avenger Chenne, only Dark Haven worshipped Her as Istra, the Dark Lady. The temple had been faithfully kept throughout the years of disuse. Even Jonmarc, whose views were at best agnostic except under fire, could feel a ghostly sense of presence there.

“How can it be this bloody cold so early in the season?” Jonmarc grumbled.

“This is Principality! It’s only by the Lady’s luck it hasn’t snowed.” The green-gray tinge of the clouds looked as if that luck might be ready to run out.

“If the snows are bad, Linton won’t be able to get his caravan provisioned by Winterstide. That trade agreement we worked out with him and Jolie is only good for bringing in money if they can move goods. We’re going to need gold to get the manor fully repaired and more to get the seed for next year’s crops. That reward from Staden is only going to go so far.”

Neirin smiled. “I’ve seen you drive a bargain. If anyone can stretch a coin, it’s you. It’s been a long time since Dark Haven was self-sustaining. Trade like that could get the village back on its feet.”

“Trade routes aside, the trip back for Tris’s wedding will be the demon’s own if we’ve got snow to deal with. It should take about three weeks with good weather, although I’ve never done it without guards chasing me, so we’ll see.”

“An early snow’ll play havoc with the remaining harvest, and the manor repairs. But you’ve got a fortnight before you and Lord Gabriel head for Margolan. Weather up here can change completely by then.” Neirin pulled his own cloak tighter around him. “Word’s out that you’ll be bringing a healer back with you, and a fine one at that. There hasn’t been a decent healer in Dark Haven for years. If your Lady is willing to be bothered, I dare say she’ll have patients aplenty.”

Jonmarc smiled. “Try to stop her. I suspect she’ll come quite well prepared. Just don’t bring her any bar fight injuries. She’s touchy about those.”

“Sounds like you have that on good authority.”

“On more than one occasion.”

Jonmarc entered through the iron-bound doors. He could smell roasting lamb, baking bread, and the aroma of simmering spiced wine. Dark Haven had a feast-day air about it. Although the *vayash moru* had no need of mortal food, the staff prepared for the Feast of the Departed—or Haunts as most called it—with gusto.

“It’s going to be different celebrating Haunts here, that’s for sure.”

Neirin grinned. “There’s nowhere else in the Winter Kingdoms you’ll find the residents to be so friendly with the departed--except maybe in Margolan with a Summoner-king.”

“As long as *I’m* still among the living, I’ll count it a win,” Jonmarc said, taking his leave of Neirin as he headed for his rooms.

Jonmarc had just closed the door behind him when the temperature in the room plummeted. He felt a prickle on the back of his neck, and knew that one of the manor’s ghosts was close at hand. Turning, he caught just a glimpse of a spectral girl as the apparition glided across the far side of his room and disappeared into the dark gray stone of the wall. He stared after her in silence.

“Don’t let our bonnie lass trouble you.”

Jonmarc turned to find Eifan, his valet standing behind him. Eifan had the dark eyes and dusky looks of a Trevath native, although his mortal days were some two hundred years past. A quick, wiry man, he moved with the speed of a small bird of prey.

“I expect our lass is up and about early for Haunts,” the *vayash moru* said, setting out the last of the bath items next to a steaming tub of water.

“I’ve seen her before. Did you know her? I mean, alive?”

Eifan shook his head. “Many of Dark Haven’s ghosts are older even than I, m’lord. The lass is said to be the daughter of one of the Lords of Dark Haven, taken by a plague. They say she’s looking for a healer who promised to come to the manor and never arrived.” He held out a towel. “You have a big evening ahead of you, m’lord. Your bath is ready and your clothes are laid out.”

“Have you seen Gabriel?”

“No, m’lord. Lord Gabriel had business to attend with the Great Houses in preparation for tonight. I am sure he’ll return shortly.”

“Too soon, I’m sure,”

Though the *vayash moru* were generally taciturn by mortal standards, several months of solid *vayash moru* companionship had given him more insight than he could have ever imagined. “Something on your mind, Eifan?”

“It’s not my place, m’lord.”

“I’ve never held much for ‘place.’”

Eifan was silent for a moment. “I have served three masters of Dark Haven. None made so good a beginning as you. I would like to see you succeed. There are

some, m'lord, who may not share that view. You'll be the only mortal at the Blood Council tonight. Some among my kind don't agree that a mortal should be our Lord."

"I've had mortals trying to kill me for most of my life. I'm used to rough company."

"Watch out for Uri and his brood, m'lord. He wants the title for himself. I don't think any would be so bold as to move against you with Gabriel nearby, but I would not walk alone tonight, m'lord, were I you."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"It's said that the Lady chooses a mortal to rule Dark Haven to protect Those Who Walk the Night," Eifan said quietly. "Many believe that were Dark Haven to have a *vayash moru* lord, one who never ages and never dies, that we might grow too arrogant among our mortal neighbors."

"And I'm here to make sure that doesn't happen?"

"A mortal lord might better balance the needs of both *vayash moru* and mortal subjects."

"So why the concern? You need a mortal, I'm here, and Gabriel keeps telling me I'm the Lady's choice, although how he claims to know, I haven't a clue."

"It's the will of the Dark Lady. Mortals say that Istra is a demon, but we believe Istra is a she-wolf, protecting her pups. As Lord of Dark Haven, you are her champion."

"Thank you."

Eifan made a small bow and left Jonmarc to his thoughts as he undressed and slipped into the waiting tub. Eifan's comment made Jonmarc think of a carving in Dark Haven's chapel. It showed Istra, a sad-eyed beauty with a regal presence turning back a torch-wielding mob and standing between them and a cringing group of *vayash moru*. Although he had no occasion to frequent shrines, he was as familiar as any in the Winter Kingdoms with the faces of the Lady. Chenne, the warrior. Athira, the lover/whore and goddess of luck, the Aspect to whom he was most likely to pray, if he prayed at all. The serene Mother and the preternaturally wise Childe. Sinha, the crone. The Formless One, who lacked even a name.

Until he came to Dark Haven, Jonmarc had never seen a depiction of Istra, though he had heard Her name. "Istra's Bargain" was a term common among soldiers and mercenaries, fighter's slang for a suicide pact that promised one's soul to the Lady

in return for the life of one's enemy. He had seen soldiers make that pact, marking themselves with the sign of the Lady and making their vow. None had come back alive, but all achieved victory.

So it had been with curiosity that he explored Dark Haven's chapel. Though small, it was filled with carvings and artwork of supreme craftsmanship, illuminated by banks of candles. The chapel was tended around the clock by a *vayash moru* recluse who never spoke and seemed to exist only to serve the chapel. A large stained-glass image of the Lady, back-lit by torches, dominated the rear wall of the chapel.

Eifan was correct. Istra was no demon. One elaborate bas relief showed her, head bowed, lifting up the broken body of a fallen *vayash moru*. But it was the Lady of the stained glass that held Jonmarc's attention. Amber-eyed and darkly beautiful, her intricately-decorated cloak was wrapped around her huddled children and her lips parted to reveal the long eye teeth of the *vayash moru*. Istra was the goddess of the outcast, of those who walked alone in the hour of the wolf. And mortal though he was, something in those eyes connected with Jonmarc Vahanian's own outcast soul.

A candlemark later, he adjusted the collar of the black velvet doublet and tugged at his cuffs. He ran a hand back along his thick, brown hair, done up in a neat queue that fell shoulder length, and took a passing glance in the mirror to make sure all was well. He met his own dark eyes and paused.

By rights, I should be face down dead in a ditch somewhere with a shiv between my shoulders. Probably would be if Harrtuck hadn't conned me into smuggling Tris out of Margolan.

That adventure, which had begun for Jonmarc a few weeks after last year's Haunts, moved him from outlaw smuggler to a friend of kings and a landed noble. The bounty hunters and debts were paid off, the smuggling put aside permanently. Even so, he did not feel at ease.

Jonmarc picked up a small rigging of leather straps and green wood. Carefully, he buckled it onto his right forearm. The contraption held a single arrow and a tightly coiled spring. It was just slim enough to fit into the sleeve of his doublet. Jonmarc raised his arm level with his chest and flexed his wrist, tripping the release. The arrow shot out, embedding itself into the wall. Where they were going tonight, Jonmarc had no illusions

about being safe. His daily sparring with *vayash moru* partners made it clear that, should tonight go badly, his sword would be poor protection. The arrow was a weapon of last resort. He retrieved the arrow and refitted it, and slipped his coat on.

There was a knock at the door. "Come in."

Gabriel stood in the doorway. The slim, flaxen-haired *vayash moru* noble was dressed for court. His coat was midnight blue, elegantly tailored from fine brocade. If nothing else, Jonmarc thought, immortality was good for acquiring wealth.

"Good evening, Jonmarc."

"I hope it will be." He turned. "So, was it ready?"

A faint smile played at the corners of Gabriel's thin lips. "Would you like to see it?"

No one would mistake Gabriel for anything but an aristocrat, Jonmarc thought. His bearing, his fine features, everything about him bespoke privilege and breeding. And yet, since before the battle for Margolan's throne, Gabriel had sought him out, sometimes as protector, sometimes as unlikely partner. Since Jonmarc had come to Dark Haven, Gabriel had been content to function as the manor's seneschal, although Jonmarc knew Gabriel owned lands of greater worth. He was also one of the Blood Council.

Jonmarc knew that he could not have accomplished so much nor navigated the politics of becoming the manor's lord without Gabriel's help, and he had grown comfortable with Gabriel's companionship. If they were not quite friends, they were very compatible business partners, and Jonmarc was grateful for a guide in a strange and forbidding land.

"Let's see how good this goldsmith of yours really is."

Gabriel held out a velvet pouch. Jonmarc emptied it into his palm, and caught his breath. The bracelet in his hand was feather-light. Wrought of silver and gold, the betrothal token incorporated two intricate designs. Five vertical lines with a "V", reminiscent of the marks of a wolf's claws, was Jonmarc's old river mark, the symbol by which he was known as a fighter and a smuggler. The other, a full moon rising from a valley, was the crest of the Lord of Dark Haven. Incorporated into a bracelet—called a *shevir* in the borderlands of Jonmarc's birth—the symbols warned any who could read

them that the wearer was under the protection of a known fighter, a lord, and perhaps the *vayash moru* themselves.

“It’s beautiful.” He turned it so that it gleamed in the firelight. “You were right. A few hundred years of practice pays off. Now comes the hard part.”

“And that is?”

“Getting Carina to accept it.”

Gabriel chuckled. “Did I see our courier return from Isencroft last evening? Has Carina agreed to winter with us?”

Jonmarc replaced the *shevir* in its pouch and placed it on the mantle. He turned away and walked toward the windows, which were frosted from the chill outside.

“Donelan’s adjusted her duties. She’s planning to be here for the winter.” He smiled. “I wouldn’t doubt that Kiara’s had a hand in it—she and Berry considered it a personal challenge to get the two of us together.”

“Those are all good signs.”

Jonmarc shrugged. “Carina’ll have had three months to remember what it’s like living in the Isencroft palace. Healer to the king, cousin to the next queen of Margolan, and a reputation that will open any door in the Winter Kingdoms. Why should she give up any of that?”

“Because she loves you.”

“Maybe she’s had time to come to her senses. I mean, even with Dark Haven, I’m not exactly a step up.”

“I don’t think Carina cares much about such things.”

“We’ll see.”

Gabriel inclined his head. “Ready to ride?”

Jonmarc nodded. “Let’s hope the Council’s in a good mood.”