

Excerpt: *The Blood King* by Gail Z. Martin

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*To set the scene: After arriving in Principality, the Sisterhood sends for Tris and Carina to begin his magical training in earnest. The Sisterhood tells Tris that they fear he may not be up to the challenge, and their greatest fear is that he would be possessed by the reemergent Obsidian King, returning that ancient evil to a human body with the power of a Summoner. The Sisterhood is clear—they consider it better for Tris to fail and die during his training than to fail against the Obsidian King and be possessed. His training will be brutal, pushing him to his limits, and letting pain be his foremost teacher.*

All Tris' preparation could not dispel his nervousness three days later as he and Theron made their way into the lowest levels beneath the citadel. The last traces of wormroot were gone, and a few day's rest had done much to restore his strength. His hand fell to the pommel of his sword. Mageslayer tingled at the edge of his senses, not quite sentient, but no mere steel, imbued with a power of its own. Neither he nor Theron spoke as they descended the steps to maze of rooms where the trial battle would take place.

Later on, if he survived this encounter, Tris understood that his battles would be fought alone against the avatars. Now, Theron came with him, and he was grateful for her support. They would face one or more avatars whose motions—and magic—would be controlled by other Sisters outside of the encounter room. Taru promised Tris that this battle was not warded to the death as future trials would be. Those battles would come after Winterstide—if he survived.

They entered the chamber, and Tris stifled a gasp. The chamber's appearance had been magically altered to resemble the great room at his home in the palace Shekerishet, its details perfect in every way. The tapestries along the walls, the carving in the mantle of the huge stone fireplace and the inlay in the furniture around the edges of the room were perfect to the smallest detail. Tris wondered who among the Sisters was so well acquainted with Shekerishet, as none of the Sisters were familiar to him, and he fought down his emotions at being back in the familiar surroundings of home.

The door closed behind him, and Tris and Theron moved forward slowly.

"Guards!" Theron shouted, and Tris turned to see soldiers streaming in from two side doors. Six soldiers, coming at a dead run. Tris drew his sword, knowing that Theron was at his back. Tris parried the first soldier's strike, wheeling to deflect a second guard even as he heard the clash of steel behind him as Theron engaged her attackers. Tris landed a solid Eastmark kick

that sent the third soldier sprawling. He assumed that that the soldiers' blades would be tainted with wormroot.

Tris barely deflected the second soldier's press, but his blade caught the first soldier unprepared, and cut him down. The third soldier scrambled to his feet and ran at Tris as the second soldier moved forward, and Tris held them off, swinging Mageslayer with a two-handed grip as the soldiers' blows jarred him hard enough that his teeth ached. A moment's inattention was all he needed to get inside the third soldier's guard, and sink his blade deep into the soldier's side.

"Behind you!"

Tris wheeled, his blade sliding down along his attacker's sword until they stood nearly guard to guard. Tris heaved the man clear of his sword and palmed the dagger from his belt in his other hand, circling warily.

Theron dispatched two of her attackers, but her third assailant dove toward her relentlessly. Tris took the offensive, surprising his attacker with a loud cry and a head-on run, their blades clashing so hard that it nearly tore the sword from the soldier's grasp. Tris dropped to a crouch, brandishing both knife and sword as Vahanian had taught him, and the soldier, taken off guard by Tris' boldness, gave Tris the opening he needed. He struck first with Mageslayer, using the blade to push back the soldier's sword, and let his momentum carry him forward, sinking the dagger into the soldier's chest. The soldier groaned and sank to his knees, a look of surprise on his face as he fell.

Tris cried out as a dagger buried itself deep in his left arm. He wheeled, blade raised, as the second soldier he had fought slumped to the ground, dead, his objective accomplished. Already, Tris could feel the wormroot tingle as warm blood spilled down his arm. From the initial jolt, he knew the dose was sizeable, and he chewed harder on the rope vine wad in his mouth, hoping that the anise-flavored juice would buy him a few precious moments of control.

Winded, Theron joined him. The six "soldiers" lay still on the floor, and although Tris knew that they were golems animated by magic, the detail, down to the blood that flowed from their death wounds, made the simulation deathly real.

"Welcome home," a voice said from the shadows of the far corner. Tris felt a chill go down his spine. The voice was a flawless imitation of Arontala's, and as a thin red robed figure stepped forward, Tris felt his magesense tingle a warning.

Something was very wrong, Tris thought as the figure approached. A crystal pendant around the mage's throat burned a bright red, and the fire captured within that small orb seemed

to seek Tris, glowing more brightly as it fixed on him. He knew the imprint of the power that radiated from the figure just as surely as he knew the danger of the fire's red glow.

"Theron—shield!" Tris cried out in warning, snapping his own shields up in defense. A blast of red fire streamed from the robed figure's hands, sizzling against Tris' shields and catching Theron unprotected. Before Tris could move in defense, the fire hit Theron squarely in the chest, slamming her back into the wall. Tris heard Theron cry out in pain, smelled the stench of burning flesh, and saw Theron slump to the floor, dead.

Behind him, Tris felt a sudden, wrenching shift in the wardings that protected the training room, and he knew with a sick feeling that a death warding had been set. Tris turned to face an avatar that had suddenly become dangerously real.

"Something's wrong." Taru's head snapped up abruptly from where she and Carina waited in a parlor near the encounter room.

Carina looked worried as Taru sprinted for the door, and ran to catch up. "What do you mean—wrong?"

"I mean the magic is wrong," said Taru.

"But you said Landis was running the trial—that you trusted Landis," Carina countered, needing to run faster to catch up with the Taru.

"I do trust Landis. But it's not Landis' power—not anymore," Taru replied.

Taru and Carina burst into the room where the training simulation was controlled. Landis lay in a pool of blood with a dagger in her back.

Carina gasped and dropped to her knees beside the mage. "She's been dosed with almost enough wormroot to kill," Carina diagnosed, "and she's lost a lot of blood. She's barely breathing."

"Can you help her?"

Carina was already digging in her pouch for powdered rope vine, and she grabbed a pitcher and a glass from the table nearby, then dissolved the powder in a glassful of water. Taru held Landis upright while Carina carefully dripped the liquid into Landis' mouth so that she would not gag. Then Carina bandaged the wound to stop the bleeding as Taru carefully set Landis back down on the floor.

"It's all I can do. The knife didn't hit anything vital—thank the Lady. There's no real cure but time for either the wormroot or the blood loss," Carina said, wiping Landis' blood off her hands and onto her robes. "We can't leave her alone."

“I’ll get help,” Taru replied, disappearing for a few minutes and returning with one of the other sisters, a plain-faced woman Carina knew was one of the citadel healers. They moved Landis to a couch near the fire, and Carina gave terse instructions to the healer. Once Landis was safely settled, Carina looked back at Taru.

“If Landis isn’t running the trial—who is?”

They headed out at a dead run for the encounter room, but at the doors, Taru stopped abruptly. She raised her hands, palms out, and slid them above the doors, a hands’ breadth away from the wood, and then swore.

“What’s wrong?” Carina asked.

“The wardings are wrong,” Taru replied. “Landis promised me she wasn’t going to set death wardings. Not yet. But that’s what’s in place—and they weren’t set by Landis.” She paused. “This warding is tainted with blood magic.”

“Arontala,” Carina breathed. “Could he be here—within the citadel?”

Taru shook her head. “Unlikely. The citadel is warded against magical intrusion—we can’t just ‘pop’ in and out, even if such a thing were easily possible.” She paused, and closed her eyes, stretching out one hand toward the encounter room doors. “There is no avatar. And only two mages are alive inside.”

“Could Theron have been the traitor?” Carina asked as Taru began to stride down the corridor with a sharp motion for Carina to follow.

“Unlikely. Although she had the skill to set the spell that killed Elam, she didn’t have an opportunity. She was with me, and went directly to train with Tris—remember? And she was with Tris again just now, when Landis was attacked. Landis couldn’t have been stabbed more than a few minutes before we arrived, or she would have been dead.” Taru replied. She slammed open the doors to a small library, lighting the torches around the room with a word, and strode over to a large crystal basin filled with water that sat on a bronze pedestal.

Carina caught up to Taru, breathless, as the Sister raised her hands over the scrying basin and held them, palms toward the water. Gradually, a mist appeared within the basin, and then as the mist cleared, an image emerged, as if from a distance, shrouded in fog. Carina gasped. “It’s Alaine—and Theron’s down.”

“It is Alaine’s body—but not Alaine’s power,” Taru said. “We have made a grave mistake.”

“What do you mean?” Carina asked, unable to take her eyes off the image unfolding within the scrying basin.

“Alaine was hand-picked by Landis, and her loyalty was absolute,” Taru said quietly. “But a few months ago, Landis sent Alaine to one of the other citadels within Margolan, before we understood the extent of Jared’s treachery. While Alaine was at that citadel, Jared’s troops attacked. She was the only survivor.” Taru sighed. “We were relieved that she came back to us—now I see it was a trap. Arontala must have broken her and embedded his own triggers, hoping that she might encounter Tris.” Taru shook her head. “Maybe he has spies in each of our citadels, on the chance that you’d seek sanctuary.”

“What’s that around Alaine’s throat?” Carina asked as the image wavered in the scrying bowl.

“That must be the portal for Arontala’s power,” Taru said. “It’s not something easily made.”

Carina cried out as fire streamed from the red gem, blasting against Tris’ shielding. “We’ve got to help him!”

Taru shook her head. “No one can enter or leave until one of the mages within the room is dead. The warding cannot be broken. Tris is on his own.”

Within the encounter room, Tris bit down hard on the rope vine, clenching his teeth as he struggled to hold his shielding against the blast of mage fire that burst from the red robed figure’s talisman. The hood fell back, revealing not Arontala’s face, but Alaine’s, her features twisted in an agonized grimace, her eyes desperate.

Tris knew the power of the red fire, and the searching presence that accompanied it. That fire had nearly killed Kiara in the scrying at Westmarch, and it had sought and found him when he had attempted a scrying with the caravan.

The fire battered his shielding, draining his strength as he struggled to hold his protections in place. Tris felt the presence find him, as the glow in the talisman at Alaine’s throat pulsed a deep carnelian.

“See your future,” a voice rasped from Alaine’s throat, contorting her features. Images flooded into Tris’ mind, searingly clear. Within Shekerishet’s corridors, Tris saw Vahanian, lying dead in a pool of blood, pierced through the chest by a crossbow bolt. The image flickered, and Tris saw a courtyard of gibbets, and hanging lifeless, Carroway and Carina, their faces blackened, their bodies twisting. Another image replaced that, of a forest of pikes set into the ground, and fixed on the stakes, impaled alive, Tris saw Soterius, Gabriel and Mikhail, saw the dawn break and saw the agony of the *vayash moru* as the daylight burned them, saw Soterius writhe in pain

that did not end with the light of day. Once more the sending pulsed and the image shifted, and this time, Tris saw Kiara, battered and drugged, given to Jared for his pleasure.

“This is Margolan’s future,” the voice hissed, seeming to come from around him and inside his own head, deafeningly loud, impossible to shut out. The sending shifted once more, and Tris saw the orb Soulcatcher in Arontala’s chambers pulsing with the same bright fire, saw the maw of the abyss open and the terrible power of the Obsidian King stream forth, freed from his prison, descending on the red robed mage who stood with arms upraised, awaiting his possession.

The power of the next image nearly drove Tris to his knees. He saw himself in Arontala’s workshop at Shekerishet, saw the Obsidian King in Arontala’s body send a massive blast of power toward him. In the vision, Tris saw his own shields strain and buckle, saw his body contort in agony, and felt the Obsidian King strip away his protections and break his will. Tris saw himself, tortured to the point of death and revived, pushed far past mortal endurance. In the vision, broken in spirit and body, he begged for death. And he saw himself, scarred and crippled by Arontala’s tortures, blank-eyed, without the will to resist, his power used as a resource for Arontala’s blood magic.

“You have failed,” the voice rasped, deafeningly loud. “And your failure will be the destruction of all those whom you loved.”

The visions were overwhelming, and Tris strained for control, feeling grief and hopelessness wash over him even as the wormroot threatened to push his power beyond his reach. Then at the edges of his magesense, Tris felt something else, and realized as the air turned cold around him that he and Alaine were no longer alone.

“Take your shot!” Tris heard Theron’s voice in his mind as the spirit of the fallen mage-fighter streamed from her burned corpse. With her was an older presence, and Tris knew it was Elam’s spirit. Reeling from the onslaught of the fiery blast and the sending, Tris saw the spirits howl toward Alaine, and as they descended on Alaine with the fury of the ghosts of the Ruune Videya, Tris gathered all his remaining power.

With a murmured word he dropped his shielding and sent an answering blast, drawing on Mageslayer’s power to keep the poison at bay. Sighting down Mageslayer’s blade like an athame, Tris directed his power, drawing on all his remaining strength and borrowing from the blue glow of his life thread.

Distracted by the vengeful spirits, Alaine’s attention shifted for an instant, and Tris sent the full blast of his power toward her. Alaine screamed as the blue fire lifted her into the air, slamming her against the rough stone wall, and pinning her against the rock. Unlike the blast that killed Theron, there were no real flames, no charring flesh, but the blue magefire struck at the

spirit and the lifeforce within Alaine's body with all of Tris' remaining power, evaporating that lifeforce like water beneath a flame. Alaine screamed once and her body writhed, and then Tris felt the tortured spirit within wrest free of her prison. The orb at her throat, deprived of a lifeforce on which to draw, went dark.

Tris fell to his knees, completely spent, as Alaine's body tumbled to the ground. He felt his own lifeforce waver as he fell face-forward onto the bare stone floor. The illusion of Shekerishet's great room disappeared, leaving him in an empty salle as the wardings that held the doors winked out. Tris heard the doors slam open, heard footsteps running in his direction, but the ones who reached him first were the spirits, Theron and Elam and Alaine, swirling around him on the Plain of Spirits. From Alaine, he felt gratitude for ending her torment, and he knew her soul bore the guilt of the murder that her body was forced to commit. From Theron and Elam, Tris felt approval and commendation, as the ghosts were stronger here on the far side of the line between light and darkness.

Tris stood on the Grey Shore of the Shadow Sea, further into the spirit plains than he had ever before ventured. There was a figure coming towards him along the water's edge, and even from a distance, Tris could feel the power of the Lady. He fell to his knees, his head bowed. *I have failed.*

The figure stopped in front of him, and Tris felt Her power overwhelm his senses. He dared not raise his head.

*Rise.* The voice sounded in his mind, in his heart, and in his soul. Able to do no other, Tris slowly stood. He expected that it would be the Mother Aspect of the goddess who came for him, Margolan's patron Aspect, and the Aspect to whom he had paid tribute all his life. But the face he dared to look on was framed with wild long hair the color of midnight, breathtaking in its dusky beauty, with eyes that glowed amber. The Aspect smiled, revealing its long eye teeth, and Tris knew that he stood in the presence of Istra, the Dark Lady. Numb with shock, grieving from the images of the sending, Tris found that he could feel no fear.

Istra opened her arms, spreading her heavy cloak. Tris' magesense could feel the spirits clustered in the darkness beneath that cloak, spirits that clung to the power of the Dark Lady like frightened children, sheltered beneath an intricately woven cloak whose pattern shifted as he stared. He knew without a word that he must step into that embrace, though in the mortal world, fear would have frozen him in place. Drawn forward by Her power, Tris stepped forward, wondering what would become of his soul with no Summoner to make his passage. Istra's cloak folded around him, smelling of leather and sweet grass, and Tris felt a power beyond words

stream through him as he fell into her embrace. Impossibly strong immortal arms closed around him and the darkness of the cloak covered him.

*My soul is forfeit, Tris made his confession. I've failed my family, my friends, and my people.*

*Not yet, Istra's voice sounded in his mind, impossibly sweet, defying mortal description. You must return.*

Tris felt the spirits that clustered beneath the cloak enfold him as he collapsed and his own strength failed him entirely. Borne up by the spirits, supported in the arms of the Dark Lady, Tris surrendered to the darkness.