

SNEAK PEEK EXCERPT

From *Dark Lady's Chosen* by Gail Z. Martin Coming in December, 2009 from Solaris Books

CHAPTER ONE

HOOF BEATS THUNDERED in the winter night. The wind was bitter cold. Jonmarc Vahanian pulled his collar up to shield his face. Thirty *vayash moru* rode with him, outfitted for battle. *Vyrkin* loped alongside them, shape-shifters in the form of large wolves. The *vayash moru* were the Dark Haven guard—almost all of its undead members, save the dozen who had remained to guard the manor house. The rest came at the summons of Riqua and Gabriel from their broods. Jonmarc was the only mortal among them. Tonight, anger and grief overrode fear.

They rode to end a war before it could begin. He rode to avenge Carina.

The skin on his chest burned over his heart where he had drawn the sign of the Lady. Jonmarc had made an oath—Istra's Bargain, as soldiers called it. In return for the death of his enemy, Malesh, Jonmarc had bargained with the Dark Lady at the cost of his soul. He didn't expect to return to Dark Haven.

The bond between maker and fledgling is so close that the fledgling dies the maker's death. Gabriel had warned him that destroying Malesh would also kill Carina, giving her less time to recover from Malesh's botched attack. Malesh's challenge to destroy a village every night unless Jonmarc faced him in battle left no other choice. And so they rode. Jonmarc let the battle coldness deaden feeling. He had one mission: to destroy Malesh quickly and painlessly. The truce between *vayash moru* and mortals would be preserved—at the cost of any chance to save Carina. After that—well, he didn't expect there to be an 'after that' for him. That was the bargain.

"Remember what I told you." Laisren, his *vayash moru* weapons master, rode up alongside him. "Fledglings die easy—wood or metal through the heart. Direct sunlight. Decapitation. But if Malesh has older *vayash moru* on his side, it gets tougher. Stabbing through the heart immobilizes, but it won't kill the oldest ones. Sunlight cripples but won't destroy—not if they're more than a few hundred years old. The only sure way to destroy one of the Old Ones is to cut off the head."

Jonmarc glared at him. "How do I know which ones are the Old Ones?"

Laisren's smile was chilling. "When nothing else destroys them."

Months of training with Laisren had honed Jonmarc's legendary sword skills sharp enough to hold his own against a *vayash moru* opponent. Pitched battle against dozens of undead fighters would be something else entirely. Jonmarc had hedged his bet. Underneath his right sleeve was a single crossbow quarrel in a powerful spring-loaded launcher. It was a doomsday weapon, useful only when he was close enough for point-blank range. Malesh was young enough in the Dark Gift that a quarrel through the heart might destroy him. If not, it would immobilize him long enough for Jonmarc to strike the fatal blow. Under his left sleeve was a knife sheathed for quick

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release. A baldric across his chest held more knives, and a crossbow was slung over his shoulder. In his right boot, he had a blade that he could slip forward. It wasn't much, but he hoped it was enough.

A forbidding stand of massive trees stretched between the village and Dark Haven. Local legend held the forest to be haunted, and few hunters would venture into these woods even in dire times. As they rode, Jonmarc sensed the presence of spirits around them as wisps of green light flickered in the distance between the trees. A year on the road with Tris Drayke, Margolan's Summoner king, had made the appearance of ghosts unremarkable to Jonmarc. The revenants seemed to be waiting, watching their group in anticipation. Ghosts were the least of Jonmarc's worries tonight.

Gabriel, riding beside Jonmarc at the head of the group, reined in his horse and raised his hand to signal the others to slow. They dismounted, and tethered their horses. The road below them sloped downward toward the small village of Crombey, a clearing surrounded on three sides by dense forest. A few dozen homes lay quiet in the moonlight, smoke rising from the chimneys. Just before second bells, the village was still. At the edge of the forest was the Caliggan Crossroads. The main road ran parallel to the woods, and at the crossroads, the road branched, offering a dirt path into the darkness of the forest, or down the hill into the village. The trampled snow made it plain that Jonmarc and his party were the only ones foolhardy enough to take the forest road. Dark stories told of a sharp-toothed crone who would set upon travelers at the crossroads and feast on their hearts. Tonight, the crossroads was empty.

In the distance, bells tolled twice.

As the last tones of the bells faded, dark shapes streaked from the forest, moving fast, gliding above the snow.

"It begins," Gabriel murmured, stepping forward to meet a dark-clad opponent.

Jonmarc drew his sword and stood ready, gripping the hilt two-handed. He struggled against his own mortal fear and the pounding of his heart for the awareness that would let him track the movements of his opponents. He had the fleeting image of a slim, blond man barely out of his teens as the first *vayash moru* struck at him. Jonmarc wheeled, landing a solid Eastmark kick that threw his enemy backward. The black-clad man lunged again, and Jonmarc swung with his sword, connecting hard with the attacker's shoulder and opening a gash that would have felled a mortal. Jonmarc could hear laughter as the man swung his own sword, a pounding blow that made Jonmarc stagger backward as he parried.

Jonmarc could not spare his attention for the fighting around him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that a force at least as large as his own was engaged against them. He could hear the clang of steel and the snarls of the *vyrkin*. A second *vayash moru* joined the blond man, circling Jonmarc like a predator.

"Where's Malesh?" Jonmarc shouted. "This was his challenge. I came. Didn't he have the balls to finish what he started?"

"Malesh will come in his own time," the blond man said with a cold smile. There was a blur of motion. Jonmarc let his intuition guide him and reacted more by feel than by sight. He swung hard; his blade connected again. At the edge of his sight, he saw the second *vayash moru* move.

Jonmarc lashed out with his sword and wheeled into a high Eastmark kick. His blade sank deep into the blond man's chest, spilling dark ichor across the snow. The *vayash moru* stepped back, sliding along the blade, and began to tremble. Jonmarc lunged, twisting the sword, and the *vayash moru* arched and screamed. The second man attacked faster than Jonmarc could turn, and

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he felt the *vayash moru*'s sword slice painfully into his forearm. Before Jonmarc could swing again, there was a rush of air and a large, gray form sprang from the shadows. A huge wolf tackled the *vayash moru*, teeth bared, knocking him backward. Behind them in the snow, the body of the first *vayash moru*, stabbed through the heart, crumbled into dust.

The *vayash moru* slammed the pommel of its sword against the *vyrkin*'s skull as the wolf lunged for its throat. Jonmarc heard the snick of sharp teeth as the *vayash moru* grabbed at the scruff of the wolf's neck. There was madness in the *vyrkin*'s violet eyes as the animal snarled and twisted, pawing at the air for the chance to sink its teeth into its opponent. The *vayash moru* ripped the animal free, throwing it hard against the trunk of a tree and tearing a deep gash through the *vyrkin*'s shoulder.

Jonmarc swung hard, striking for the neck, but the *vayash moru* moved faster, with a kick that knocked Jonmarc's feet out from under him. The *vayash moru* pinned him, bending Jonmarc's sword arm back painfully and pressing against his rib cage with the heel of his free hand until there was the snap of a rib breaking and Jonmarc twisted in pain. "Malesh said we couldn't kill you," the *vayash moru* said, and Jonmarc could see amusement in his opponent's icy blue eyes. "But he didn't say we couldn't have some fun." The *vayash moru* brought his knee down, hard, on Jonmarc's thigh.

Jonmarc stifled a cry and let the knife in his left arm sheath fall into his hand. He slammed the blade into his attacker's back, sliding it through his ribs and deep into the heart. The *vayash moru* jerked upward, his blue eyes widening, as ichor oozed from the edge of his mouth. In one fluid move, Jonmarc flipped him backward, ignoring his own pain to straddle the *vayash moru* and bring his sword down and through its neck. The head rolled clear in the snow, spurting dark liquid that smelled like old blood. Jonmarc scrambled clear as the body began to disintegrate.

"Behind you!" Gabriel's voice cut through the darkness and Jonmarc staggered to his feet just in time to parry a broadsword's stroke that nearly tore his sword from his grip. His attacker was a woman whose dark hair was caught back in a tight braid. Her eyes glinted with hatred. In the shadows, the wounded *vyrkin* whimpered, but did not rise.

Jonmarc crouched, knife in one hand, sword ready in the other. He did not wait for her attack. With a cry, he charged toward her, bringing his sword down with all his strength as he let his dagger fly. The dagger caught her in the chest as the sword cleaved her from shoulder to hip. Jonmarc snatched his blade free and swung again, slicing clean through her neck. He stopped only long enough to retrieve his knife, rising in a defensive stance.

He felt air move behind him too late to turn. Strong hands seized him from behind by the upper arms, immobilizing him. The strain on his broken ribs made Jonmarc gasp in pain. A dark-haired *vayash moru* with the coloring of a Trevath native advanced on him with a cold smile. The man landed a hard punch below Jonmarc's ribcage that made Jonmarc double over, and then struck him hard enough across the face that Jonmarc's vision swam and he almost blacked out.

"Hail, Lord of Dark Haven," the Trev mocked. Blood flecked Jonmarc's split lip.

"Malesh send you to do his dirty work?" Jonmarc growled, lifting his head defiantly. The Trev swung again with a blow that made Jonmarc's ears ring.

"The rest we kill. You—he wants alive. For now." The Trev stood back, readying for another punch.

Jonmarc bucked backward, counting on his captor behind him to remain solid. He lashed out with his feet, sliding the blade in his boot out and kicking for the Trev's chest. His foot connected hard and the Trev registered a look of shock as a black stain began to spread across his

chest from the blade sunk deep in his heart.

There was a howl and a snarl, and Jonmarc felt an impact as the man pinning his arms behind him staggered, loosening his grip enough for Jonmarc to twist out of his hold. The *vyrkin* took the *vayash moru* to the ground, sinking its teeth into its neck and closing its powerful jaws. Beneath the *vyrkin*, the *vayash moru* twisted and bucked, trying to wrest free. There was a crunch as the *vyrkin*'s teeth snapped bone and crushed sinew.

"Get back!" Jonmarc cried, readying his sword. The *vyrkin* sprang free and Jonmarc's sword whistled through the air, severing the *vayash moru*'s head. An acrid smell filled the air as the body crumbled.

Jonmarc looked around him, sword raised and ready. The snow was littered with dark patches of dust. In the moonlight, it was difficult to tell his *vayash moru* allies from their attackers, but Jonmarc thought the majority of his fighters were still moving. A shrill keen split the night air, and as one, the attacking *vayash moru* took flight. Gabriel and the others gave chase, but only as far as the forest's edge.

A whimper close at hand focused Jonmarc's attention. A large male wolf was seated next to a crumpled form near a tree. Jonmarc scanned the horizon once more for danger, and, sword still ready, walked over to where the wolf sat. A second wolf lay in a pool of blood in the snow beneath the tree. The wounded wolf twitched and moaned, then gasped and fell silent, its breath shallow and fast. From the angle of its body, Jonmarc guessed its spine was broken from the force of hitting the tree.

The male wolf nuzzled the fallen one and raised his head to howl. The wolf on the ground relaxed and shuddered one more time. As Jonmarc watched, the body began to shimmer as if the air around it were bending and folding in on itself. The blood-covered body of a woman lay still in the snow. Jonmarc knelt next to Eiria and covered her with his cloak.

One by one, he heard the rest of the *vyrkin* pad up near them until a circle of twelve wolves ringed him. The large male wolf, which Jonmarc knew was Yestin, howled again, and the pack responded. Chilling as a wolf's howl was, never had Jonmarc heard the depth of pain that filled this cry. Jonmarc heard a light crunch in the snow behind him and turned to see Gabriel and Laisren.

"I'm sorry," Jonmarc murmured to the wolf-Yestin. He looked up at Gabriel. "How bad?"

Gabriel's expression was somber. "Five of ours. Ten of theirs. But either Uri lied about the number of *vayash moru* Malesh made, or—and I think this is more likely—he's been joined by others. Malesh is less than a hundred years old. The *vayash moru* he made himself should be much weaker than all of those who fought for Dark Haven. It should have been a rout. It wasn't. I'm afraid the war has already begun." He frowned as he looked at Jonmarc, and ripped a strip of cloth from his shirt as a makeshift bandage. "You're hurt."

Jonmarc stood. He winced as the movement jostled broken ribs. "I'm still alive. That's more than I expected." Blood was running down his forearm. He let Gabriel bandage the wound to stop the bleeding. "Malesh didn't show up."

"He was here," Gabriel said tightly. "I saw him in the woods at a distance—but I was busy fighting two *vayash moru* that definitely weren't new fledges."

Laisren joined them. "I sent scouts into the village. Malesh broke his word. They're all dead, just like Westormere. Probably since sunset."

"Damn." Jonmarc looked from Laisren to Gabriel. "What now? We can't let Malesh keep slaughtering villagers."

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Gabriel nodded, looking out along the dark horizon. “Agreed. He’s trying to provoke a war and he wants to make a statement by killing you.”

“The *vayash moru* I fought were definitely looking for me. They said they had their orders.”

Laisren looked from Gabriel to Jonmarc. “There’s another village half a candlemark’s ride from here. It’s the only settlement nearby that would be large enough for anyone to notice. We could set a trap for Malesh there—be waiting for him just after sunset.”

“Assuming that Malesh chooses to strike there next,” Jonmarc countered.

“Malesh is arrogant,” Gabriel replied. “This win will make him even more sure of his abilities. Laisren’s right; it’s a logical next move. The question is, how many *vayash moru* does Malesh have on his side—and how many of the elders have joined him?”

“Riqua’s sent all of her brood she can spare—everyone who’s not needed to guard the manor house,” Laisren replied. “We don’t dare pull anyone from there—it would make it too easy for Malesh to double back and strike.”

Gabriel pursed his lips, thinking. “My brood is small. Mikhail is in Margolan, and those who aren’t with us tonight are at Dark Haven. There isn’t time to find Rafe and Astasia and beg them for help—assuming they’d side with us. We’re on our own.”

“What about Uri?” Jonmarc asked. “Wasn’t he supposed to bring Malesh back under his control?”

Laisren snorted. “If I know Uri, he’s fled Principality and he’s holed up in a nice, comfortable crypt on the far side of Isencroft by now.”

“Malesh isn’t going to listen to Uri,” Gabriel replied. “It’s too late for that. We’ve got to finish this.” He glanced up at the sky. “We need to clean up here and get to safety before dawn. It’s less than a candlemark’s ride to Wolvenskorn through the forest from here—but we need to hurry.”

Jonmarc nodded and turned, reaching down to pick up one of the discarded cloaks from a dead *vayash moru*. He walked over to Eiria’s body, and exchanged that cloak for his own, carefully wrapping her in the makeshift shroud. The *vyrkin* still sat guard, and even by moonlight, Jonmarc could see that they also had received injuries in the fight. He lifted Eiria’s body into his arms and gasped as it strained his ribs.

“We can bury her in the crypts beneath Wolvenskorn,” Gabriel said quietly as Laisren brought up their horses. “Generations of the *vyrkin* rest there.” He glanced from Jonmarc to the *vyrkin*. “And we’ll see about patching you up.”

Laisren swung up to his saddle and reached down to carry Eiria’s body. Jonmarc gritted his teeth as he mounted and the movement jolted his ribs. The group set off, leaving the moonlight behind them as the shadows made it too dark for mortal sight. Jonmarc kept his sword in hand. After a long trek, they saw the hulking form of Wolvenskorn outlined in the moonlight.

Wolvenskorn’s tall, sharply sloping peaks stood out against the sky, topped by narrow gables. Three levels of wooden and stone wings, one behind the next, rose from the snow. Each level had a deeply slanted roofline. The building was capped by a tall cupola ringed by carved monsters. The oldest wing was daub and wattle, with a sod roof that sloped back into the forest soil.

Grotesques and gargoyles looked down from the roof onto the front courtyard. Between them, intricately carved runes were both decoration and protection. The wooden sections of Wolvenskorn were set with carved panels and the lower halves were covered with overlapping shingles. An ancient circle of stone pillars circled the manor, placed there, Gabriel once told him, over a thousand years ago. Jonmarc hoped that their magic was as strong as Gabriel believed it to

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be.

Despite the time, servants ran to meet them, taking their horses. Jonmarc entered Wolvenskorn surrounded by the *vayash moru* fighters whose torn clothing told the tale of battle even if their wounds had already healed. The *vyrkin* followed them, some limping, some bleeding from their battle wounds. Two of the *vayash moru* carried dead *vyrkin*, shifted back to human form. A servant motioned to the *vyrkin* and they turned down a corridor. At Gabriel's nod, Jonmarc followed.

A fire blazed in one of the three huge fireplaces, and Jonmarc guessed it was a courtesy to him and to the *vyrkin*, as the *vayash moru* had no need of it. Piles of clothing lay in rows near the fireplace, and the *vyrkin* which were not too badly wounded padded over to them. The air seemed to shimmer and fold onto itself as the wolves shifted shape, their outlines blurring as they became men and women. Servants helped them dress, or wrapped blankets around those too wounded to dress themselves. Eiria's body lay covered with a cloak near the door, and Yestin, now in human form, sat beside the corpse and rested his head in his hands. Jonmarc walked slowly toward his friend and sat down wordlessly beside him.

There's nothing I can say that will help, Jonmarc thought. *And I know too well what he's feeling.*

One of the *vyrkin*, an older man with a trim, gray beard and deep-set eyes, took a large cloth bag from the shadows and laid it on a table. He lifted his hands over the bag and spoke in the language of the *vyrkin*, a clipped, tonal language that seemed to Jonmarc to be the speech of wolves adapted for humans. The man lifted his hands in turn to the four corners, and bowed to the north before carefully loosening the knots which bound the bag. *A vyrkin shaman,* Jonmarc guessed.

From the bag, the shaman withdrew a stole made of woven hair, set with pieces of bone. Chanting under his breath, the man smudged a dark kohl mark on his forehead, chin and cheekbones. His eyes seemed to glow as he took a scepter set with a carved head of a raging wolf whose eyes were rubies. Two mortal servants came to assist him, bringing clean cloth for bandages and water to mix poultices. The shaman slowly moved through the *vyrkin*, beginning with the most badly injured. As servants prepared the bandages, the medicine man chanted over the injured *vyrkin*, and sprinkled powders or dark liquids into their wounds, taking what he needed from the pouches and vials that hung from his belt. Over those worst injured, the shaman laid his hand on their forehead as he chanted, letting the scepter rise and fall in his other hand. The music was strange to Jonmarc, ancient and decidedly not human. Jonmarc could see the badly injured *vyrkin* relax under the shaman's touch, and saw their breathing come more smoothly.

Finally, the shaman stood in front of Jonmarc. "Will you accept my healing, wolf-brother?"

Jonmarc nodded. The shaman indicated for him to stretch out on the floor, and Jonmarc did so, grimacing as his broken ribs protested. The medicine man put his hand on Jonmarc's forehead, resting thumb and forefingers on his temples, and Jonmarc felt the pain lessen. The shaman frowned, and pulled the throat of Jonmarc's tunic to the side, exposing the mark of the Lady. A shadow crossed the shaman's face.

"Bloodsworn," he said in heavily-accented Common. He spoke words Jonmarc did not understand, and let his head fall back, raising his arms.

"He's given you a blessing," Yestin said without looking up. "He's asked the Wolf Father to heed your oath and deliver your enemy into your hand. You're fortunate. Such things are not

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granted to those outside the pack.”

“Thank you,” Jonmarc murmured as the medicine man returned his attention to Jonmarc’s badly cut arm. He felt the tingle of magic as the wound closed under the shaman’s touch, but it felt completely different from Carina’s healing. The shaman laid his hands on Jonmarc’s broken ribs, and Jonmarc could feel the warmth of his magic binding the broken bone together.

When the shaman had finished his healing, he turned to Yestin and laid his hand on the top of his head. In a quiet baritone voice, the shaman began to sing, and although Jonmarc did not understand the language, he knew it to be a dirge. He listened closely, and strange, wondrous images filled his mind, of thick forests and deep snow and the speed and power of the ultimate predator, of the solidarity of the pack and the warmth of the den. When the song was over, Yestin looked up, his eyes bright with tears, and nodded, unable to speak.

The shaman carefully put away his things, murmuring prayers or incantations as each item was placed in his bag. He left the room, accompanied by several of the uninjured *vyrkin*. Servants brought out food—platters of raw meat for the *vyrkin* and a plate of cheese and dried meat for Jonmarc, along with a glass of brandy.

When they had eaten, the shaman appeared in the doorway. He wore a long cape stitched with runes that seemed to shift and move as Jonmarc looked at them. Around his neck on a broad strap hung four disks of silver. The first was a waxing moon, and the second round disk was the full moon. The third was a waning moon, and the fourth was a ring, symbolizing the new moon. Two streaks of dark red paint had been added to the markings on his face. At his appearance, the *vyrkin* stood and gathered up their dead, filing from the room in silence. Gabriel touched Jonmarc’s shoulder, approaching so soundlessly that Jonmarc jumped. Without a word, Gabriel indicated for Jonmarc to come with him.

They followed the silent procession down flights of stairs hewn into the rock of Wolvenskorn’s foundation. Through torch lit, narrow corridors, they moved steadily lower, and the air grew colder. After many turns, the passage opened on a huge room. Torches in sconces set the room in flickering light. Large smooth stones seemed to rise from the bedrock and disappear into the ceiling, and Jonmarc wondered if they were the same ancient pillars that ringed Wolvenskorn. On the walls of the cave, stories unfolded in detailed paintings made onto the rock itself. And in the center of the room a large slab had been pulled back to open a shared crypt. Laid out in front of the crypt were three shrouded bodies, each wearing a single silver disk on a thin leather strip around their necks. From their outlines, Jonmarc guessed that two of the bodies were male. And he was certain that the third, smaller body was Eiria.

The *vyrkin* ringed the crypt, while Gabriel and Jonmarc stood behind them. Jonmarc saw Yestin, black-clad like the others, standing near Eiria’s body. The shaman stood in the front, between two large torches. When the room was quiet, the shaman began to sing, and his voice echoed from the rocks in the yips, growls and clicks of the *vyrkin* language. He began a slow dance as he sang, and Jonmarc guessed that it was a story in movement, although he had no idea of what was being told. Even without full understanding, the ritual was moving, and Jonmarc fought to keep control, to keep his thoughts away from his last sight of Carina, lying still and pale back at Dark Haven.

The shaman ended his song, and three of the *vyrkin* men stepped forward, gently lifting the bodies into their arms. Yestin sagged to his knees and made a cry of complete desolation as the bodies were lowered into the crypt and the heavy stone lid ground into place. The two men standing next to Yestin helped him to his feet, although it seemed to Jonmarc that Yestin leaned

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heavily on them for support as the group filed soundlessly from the chamber and back up the stairs to Wolvenskorn. Once back within the lower level of the manor, the *vyrkin* headed away down a corridor, and Gabriel laid a hand on Jonmarc's arm, shaking his head to keep him from following.

When the *vyrkin* were gone, Jonmarc turned to Gabriel. "Now what?"

"We rest. When we rise, we'll see if we can intercept Malesh at the next village."

"What if we're wrong?"

Gabriel looked solemn. "Malesh wants to be found. He intends to confront you. I suspect that he knows how fiercely we'll protect you, and his goal is to reduce our numbers before he attacks you."

Jonmarc wandered into an empty bedroom. Beyond the mullioned window, the first streaks of dawn lit the sky. "I thought you had to be at rest before dawn."

Gabriel stepped up beside him. "Four hundred years allows me to see a glimpse of sunrise and sunset. I've missed them." He paused. "As Laisren told you, our strength grows over lifetimes. For those of us who survive this long, a few moments in full sun will burn us, but not beyond what can be healed. Much as if you thrust your arm into a fire. At first, the damage is reversible. After a point, no healing can restore what's been consumed. I don't fear death, but I'm no fonder of pain than I was when I was alive. As you saw on the battlefield tonight, there are better ways to die."

Jonmarc looked at the glow above the mountains in silence for a moment. "I expected Malesh to be at the battle. I thought we'd fight, and it would be over."

Gabriel regarded him, as if guessing his thoughts. "Perhaps Riqua and the others will find a way to bring Carina back. It's not impossible—it just hasn't been done before. There's still hope."

Jonmarc did not turn. "Personally, I've never had much luck with hope."