

STORIES OF IGHRIND

The Eve before the March of the Dead

Long before she knocked politely on the door to his study he sensed her approaching when she was still yards away from the manor. Such unconcealed power, he thought again when he lowered the protective shields and opened the door via a mental command. Her aura had dramatically increased in power since they last met.

He was beautiful, not handsome but really beautiful – delicate features, smooth alabaster skin, and long black hair. His body was well built, every muscle in perfect shape – in exactly that shape he wanted it to be. The embroidered black velvet jacket was an excellent match to his hair, as well as the black leather pants. Like most, he kept his wings shape-changed away so that they wouldn't be a hindrance. While he was not the Council Member of his family, he still was a trendsetter. The Council Member might lead the bloodline in broader terms of fashion and style, he was the one who perfected those in every detail.

So naturally, he was quite annoyed and had to struggle that his anger would not be reflected in his tri-colored silver eyes, when the woman who entered his luxurious study neither acknowledged his beauty and social standing nor the room he had spent centuries to arrange. Well, he had not expected more from her, but that cold, bored gaze still stung. So he had to use quite a measure of self-control to refrain from snarling, and so spoiling the greeting, maybe the whole meeting.

“Althea”, he said, standing up behind his huge, extravagantly carved desk made of ebony displaying obscenities.

The woman closing the door behind her kept meeting his eyes with that cold, white-golden eyes. She was probably taller than him – no small feat – and shared his need for perfection, being well muscled but not in a way that would undermine her femininity. Like him, she hid her wings. But there, the similarities ended. Her skin was of a dark ebony color resembling pure black marble. He knew it to not be her natural hair color of a silvery white, but still admired how superbly the dark purple black enhanced the darkness of her aura. The face was as lovely as he remembered, the eyes however looked older and somehow more frightening. She wore tight fitting black garments, that embraced every

curve, every muscle of her wonderful body and made it quite difficult to judge where cloth ended and skin began.

“You summoned me, Overlord and Secretary”, she answered with a fraction of a nod. Her voice was like honey and deep, but also cold and dangerously tense.

He startled at the formal greeting, “I asked you to talk with me, Althea...”

“What has the Council Member’s pet to talk about, then?”

That went worse than he’d imagined. He ignored the humiliating remark sighing, “Your father has nothing to do with this, Althea. Let us talk like...”

“...uncle and niece, perhaps?” she spat and snarled showing her long, and sharp canines.

“Yes.” Anger welled-up, freezing his face into a mask. An anger quite similar to his own greeted him from the other side of the room. He looked onto his desk to steady himself.

“Althea, I do not want to fight with you. Just talk. I sense a danger for the bloodline, our family...”

“Our family?” she hissed almost to low to be heard. “What did our family do when he found out what I was? What did you do, *uncle?*” The last word sounded more like a swearword you only use for your bitterest enemy.

That wouldn’t do. He needed the information he hoped she could give him. So, he strengthened all the shields around his study before he whispered – somehow still feeling that if he talked louder *he* would hear: “I was the one who talked to the Bookbinder.”

Her deadly mask crumbled for the thought of a second and he believed to see an emotion other than contempt in her eyes. “You? You asked them to...”

“Not them, only him. He was...loyal.”

“How much?”

“Wha-...”

“How much did you pay him?” The mask was back, even harder and colder than before.

“I won’t hold this against you. Nobody knows about this except the Bookbinder, me, and now you. I cannot publicly call in a favor from you; that you should realize. And I never thought that I ever would. But now...”

“I need to know one thing before we ‘talk’”.

He nodded and she understood this as a sign to keep on.

“Will we really talk as uncle and niece and everything said will not leave this room? Or will we talk as Council’s Secretary and Death’s Servant?”

“Kaesh’man, Bookbinder, and Servant of Death. You are a danger to the whole Capital!” He remarked smiling, hoping to light the atmosphere a bit, but failing.

“So?”

“As uncle and niece.”

“Good. Ask your questions.”

“Would you mind if we sit down?”

She remained standing for a few seconds before stepping closer to his desk and sitting leisurely down in one of the huge chairs. He set down on his desk in front of her, somehow needing the closeness to her body and ensuring an informal atmosphere he would have endangered if he set down behind that large, official desk.

“I was not sure what to think about the Cryossiarch’s sudden entrance to the Council declaring war against that lich-fiend would-be-conqueror who seems to be our progenitor. Then, two days ago I received a report that seven servants of Death had been seen congregating. Seven! One of you is a bad sign for everybody else, but seven! Will we all die in this hastily prepared attack, I wondered? Then I hoped that you were one of those deathmarked present and contacted you. So I would like to know, why have so many of Death’s Servants come to Leith?”

“I cannot tell you.” He was so well-versed in innuendo that he could not help but see her pupils contract for a second when he talked about the number of Death’s servants the report spoke of.

“How many have come to the Capital, Althea?”

“Eleven.”

“Eleven? Truly, eleven? Are we doomed? Are you the leader?”

“There are seven Maidens and three Mistresses.”

“That makes ten. Who is... is the Lady with you?” How powerful might Althea be? She was extremely powerful, but still concealed a lot behind her psychic shields. “Are you the Lady?” Lady was the second-lowest rank in fiendish hierarchy, similar in power to a deathmarked Mistress. ‘The Lady’ however, was ‘The Lady of Death’, the most powerful deathmarked of them all.

“The Lady is with us, always.”

“You won’t answer?”

“I won’t.”

“Why not? What will be the outcome of this battle? Will we defeat the lich-fiend?”

“I cannot say. Death’s whispers have become a constant companion since I arrived in the Capital.”

He did not know much about the deathmarked. He respected these females, but that was just common sense. However, he understood what that remark meant. Could mean.

“Will Death’s Servants fight in this war?”

“Death does not like to be cheated.”

That was easily understood. So His Servants would stand against the lich-fiend, that undead creature, who was the true fiend that sired his bloodline, the Kaesh’man – Leith’s mightiest Imperial Family.

“Will there be many losses still? Will the Capital be attacked?”

“Yes and no.”

“He won’t attack Leith... but there will still be death inside the Capital?” Her eyes still looked in his direction, but not at him. “Who? Why? Althea, tell me!”

Now she looked away.

“Althea, by...”

“You already invoked our familial ties twice. I warn you, don’t!” She said it in a tone that could kill lesser beings than him, and the room’s temperature dropped some degrees.

He ignored the coldness – the one in her eyes as well as the one now coating his desk. “By the dying sun, Althea, tell me what will happen in Leith?”

Like a cat, like a dangerous cat of prey ready to pounce, she jumped out of the chair and hissed at him: “How dare you use that damn password with me?”

“Althea, please!”

She calmed instantly, became deadly calm and locked her eyes – burning with terrible promises – with his.

“I see death when I look at you. I see death when I look at every Kaesh’man I meet. All of you will perish. When I look at this room I see nothing but smoldering wood and stone.”

The shock took him like a lightning bolt from the sky. “All? Really all?”

“All but one. There is one who is not surrounded by Death’s whispers.”

“Who?”

“Because you talked to the Bookbinder I will tell you this, uncle, and my debt will be repaid in full. If you want your son to survive, forget that you have one. He is safe where he is now.”

“But he is with the...” He closed his eyes and swallowed hard.

“Thank you, Althea.”

“Don’t thank me. It will be even harder for you. Knowing that you’ll die, but not knowing how and without the ability to stop it.” She said and turned towards the door.

“Why? Althea, why?”

She looked at him without pity. “May the Darkness embrace you, uncle.” Then she opened the door, stepped through his shields as if they were not there and left.

“May the Darkness embrace you.” An omen of danger if uttered by a deathmarked. A death sentence from His Lady’s lips.