

The Serum

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I'm trying my hand at writing, as I'd love to give life to characters I draw. Here's one of my first tries at a short story. Hope you enjoy it!

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Chapter 1 - Serum

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1 - Serum

A dark group this. Hagar sat to Jake's fore, the ill built wooden chair creaking and groaning under the strain of him, the scraping sound of rock sharpening his axe with grim death on his impatient face. He was more stocky than fat. There were as many rolls of muscle as skin on him. An angry scar from his left temple nearly touched his jaw. With his coarse eyebrows and hair, flat nose and perpetually grimacing mouth, he'd never turn a fair eye. Of course, in his short time with the man, he could not recall him looking to a person without measuring their threat. His brown blacksmith's vest stretched for his girth, and dark brown breeches and boots plainly made him. He certainly had the size for the work, but Jake could not imagine the man actually making anything. Those hands were made for destroying. He looked up at Jake, the sudden halt of rock scraping iron adding weight to those dark eyes searing through to the back of his skull. No, never a smile for anyone.

He quickly looked away from that gaze, citing a silent thanks as the scraping sound continued. Pera sat to his right, tossing her newly acquired knives, nonchalantly throwing those whose balance did not suit her fancy to the floor. He could have laughed; she would stand in front of a stampede and be calm as a morning's breeze. She had long silken black hair, though its extravagance was choked by her ponytail. It was hard not to notice those light auburn eyes and full lips. Despite a fairly sharp nose, she turned many a fair eye. Her shapely form, not quite so hidden with her tight blue tunic and breeches certainly compounded. Very pleasing to the eye. That is, until those auburn eyes turned on you. She and Hagar could be siblings. Somehow, coldness oozing from that face chilled deeper. Realizing he was staring, he quickly looked away from her as well. She spoke of fools getting bloody for it often enough. The way she could handle those blades, he believed her.

Brimere walked in a tight line to his left, steaming over the storeroom's wanting for breadth. Pacing was a favorite hobby of his. A sword hung to his side. A finely cut, if plain, green coat rested over a white shirt. His brown breeches and black boots finished him. If not for the unshaven face and small scar just above his right eye, Brimere could pass as a well to do. That scar made his right eyelid drag though, as if snared in an almost wink. And his shoulder length hair, stringy and loose, spoke of little thought for appearance. His hand rested on the pommel, and his gray eyes looked ready to kill anything that moved. Yes, quite a dark group.

He checked the tension in his bow. A half filled quiver lay on his back, making the seat less than comfortable. It squeaked as he adjusted himself. They were fine things once, but the years of use proved unkind. His knife, long enough to be named short sword, was buckled to his left hip. He was well enough with it, but his skill lie with the bow. His crimson coat must look stark against the black shirt. It was all he could snatch in time along with the blue pants and black boots. Specs of blood were down his collar. The fine coat was a present from her. *Whatever it takes.* He rubbed his untrimmed goatee. There was little time for that either. His finger length black hair was unkempt at best. His dark eyes must look tired. He could not sleep from worrying over her. There had to be time. *Whatever it takes.*

Pera threw a knife an inch deep into the thick wooden floor. Where the bloody hell is he? She said in a demanding tone, looking to Brimere with murder in her eyes. Dark looks were not the only startling thing to come from that one. He'll come! He'll come. Brimere said, half perturbed, half appeasing. Well's he flaming better hurry! We's got no time fur dis dawdling. Hagar said. A deck hand would blush between the mouths of those two. They were yelling of Taim. The scrawny fellow was not so late as everyone spat, but every moment counted. The Huandi Palace was considerable, and though none of them besides Brimere trusted the small fellow, Taim swore on his life he knew every corner. Where could the

sniveling rat be?

It would have done to be without the thief, but even if they did know the way to the guarded room, the four of them, alone or together, could not sneak into it. Taim was almost a dwarf with his stature, and was renowned for such skills. They needed him. Unfortunately. Their only concern was the sentry posted just outside the palace. Oh, those patrols walking the outer walls were a danger. No man who was not a veteran wore chain mail on these grounds. However, they were easy enough. All patrols had gaps that widened given some convenient diversion to snare their attention. But standing sentry was another matter all together. That work was bloody. Though Jake's blade was clean enough to eat with, it was his bow that saved them from alarm. No man could outrun an arrow. He had never killed a man like that. Running away. There were darker times in his criminal career when defending himself meant taking a life, but in all those years he was never the attacker. He felt a cold settle over him. *Whatever it takes.* He only hoped there was time left. There had to be time. Damn his soul for anything else.

Hagar put a fist to his mouth and gave a coarse cough. He looked dizzy for a moment. When he came to himself, he spat on the floor. It was blood. Wiping it from his mouth, he grumbled something under his breath that sounded like a sharp curse. Everyone looked to each other in silence. They were running out of time. It was already starting.

Tap, tap, tap-tap, tap, came knocking from the door. Taim put to waste five minutes over that knock, as if a special rhythm were required to a storage room that **none** would spare for knocking anyways. It was Pera's blade that spurred that along.

Taim's head peaked around the door as he creaked it open. Quickly fool! Hagar said in hushed tones before pulling the door open and yanking the man inside as he squealed. Just as deftly, he shut the door, pressing his ear against the old wood for evidence of discovery. The man was far short of scholarly, but he knew his way about this sort of business.

Taim rubbed his arm as he glared at Hagar. His nose was too long, and gauntness settled his features, though he was of decent health. His light green eyes were beady, and his thinning brown hair stuck out at the sides. Odd, almost comical was the little man. Don't dally Taim! Where is it? Brimere berated.

Alright, alright! A moment, only a moment. Taim said as he fingered the buttons of his gray coat. He could almost feel the heat permeating the now cramped space. While Taim was about, the man made time to undo the coat, take the item, place it inside, and button it back up! As he lived and breathed, every step the man took vexed someone!

A knot the size of a boulder rose in his throat as he watched him pull a small sack out of the coat pocket. Undoing the twine with quick little fingers, Taim cringed as everyone crowded him to peer. Finally bare for sight, the small glass vial lie full in his open hand, the cork stopping a slightly green mixture. It was done! The scrawny fellow was worth his words!

Brimere reached, and Taim quickly covered it back up, clutching it to his chest while darting Brimere with a scowl. As he wove the twine around itself again, Pera spoke over his shoulder. Give it over Taim. She said in a level tone. Her eyes were decidedly cold now. He had yet to see them so close when cold. Shivers ran down his spine. Taim, unable to witness the pair of ice daggers went from scowl to incredulous. Finishing his knot, he spoke in that high-pitched lilting manner of his. I think not. I'll hold to this parcel til we are safely& His eyes went wide as he turned to face Pera. Jake's jaw clenched. When that woman decided you were dead, she did not hesitate to make it so. Jake could plainly see the knife in his back now. Taim reached for the blade as he backed away from her, and dropped the vial! No! Jake screamed. He dove to the ground knocking Taim over as he barely caught it! Jake almost shook to have it in grasp. There must be time left. They were so close now. *Please let there be time!* The thud of Taim's fall woke him from his thoughts. Looking up, he saw that every eye was on him. He was too loud with his scream he realized. He must seem a mad man, diving for a vial that would certainly not break at such a small drop. But to leave such a thing to chance, even a small chance; if the vial had broken& So

much depended on that vial. So precious much.

You had best regain that stolid hold of yourself, before your back finds a knife in it as well. Pera said to him, though without as much crisp ice as she had given Taim. Doubtless the threat was no less empty however. Gurgles of blood seeped from Taim's gaping mouth as he vainly continued to reach for the knife. The vial was clutched to his own chest now as he looked at the writhing man. *Whatever it takes.*

We agreed to let him be Pera. Brimere said as he stepped over the now still body. Brimere knew the man well, almost as a friend it seemed, and had only flinched when Taim turned to display that knife in his back. Jake's hackles rose. They were all without conscious. None of them would hesitate to kill the entire party. Backstabbing as well as murderous. It made his steel harder for what he must do. A little. *Whatever it takes.*

He'd have us discovered with his buffoonery Lasserin. I for one care not to find my head on a pike. Pera said to Brimere, as evenly as if discussing the weather. She called Brimere by surname. The two had a history, though the details were left to mystery. Better he didn't know.

Hagar opened the door a crack to peek outside. Brimere looked to the lifeless body on the floor. I had two more jobs in mind for him. Two well making jobs. He said disappointingly. Well then, it seems I've saved one fool from another today. Pera said with mirth. Brimere smiled with a shake of his head, and even Hagar grunted a small chuckle and grin. Jake's skin crawled. How could they make light of putting a blade in a man's back? He felt a chill as he remembered his arrows piercing the backs of running men only moments before. *At least I'm not grinning over it. Whatever it takes.* Besides, the witch promised us a hundred gold marks a piece for that vial. Neither of us will have to lift a pocket for the rest of our lives! It was true. A man could live handsomely with that much coin if he was smart. Though, something told him none in the group were of a thrifty sort.

The gold was spoken of often that day, but none mentioned the hex. The witch promised the gold of course; she even produced a bag full and counted the display. But soon after, she cast a hex upon them that only she could lift. Only one day was given to reach her and be cleared of it. She did not speak of why she needed the vial; some rare spell no doubt. All however, knew the tales of that vial. The contents were a serum of health. It could cure anything. Any ailment at all. Even old age. The King was still strong and healthy at better than three hundred years with the help of it. His heart continued to thump, holding the vial so close to himself. There had to be time. *Dear sweet Creator there has to be!*

Pera suddenly coughed, just as coarsely as Hagar. Pulling a hankerchief from her belt pouch, she hid whatever came out. No doubt it was bloody. Brimere stepped to her worriedly, but she waved him away. Dread began to clench Jake. They had to hurry!

Hagar signaled the way clear. Jake put the vial in his coat pocket as they each slinked into the hallway, heads swaying to see both ways at once. It lacked much of the grandeur associated with palaces of course. The servant's wing was built for use, not beauty. Still, a finely decorated border of leaves and seashells lined the walls, and a long run of lavender carpet lay, sided by neatly carved small tables. Each table held urns of past first maids or unlit candles.

It was quiet as a tomb. As hoped, no one was in the halls during midday. Every soul not preparing food or serving tables in the dining hall was trying to wolf their own scraps before making their cleaning rounds in the royal chambers. Mealtime was often the only occasion that could pry royalty from the comforts. If then. Likely they admonished the servants for inadequate keeping, while simultaneously clearing them for privacy.

After a short maze, they neared the long stretch of hall leading to the open walkway outside. A loud wailing echoed off the walls. For a moment, everyone froze. Then, as if rehearsed, they readied. Brimere unsheathed his sword, a stern look with that promise of death spreading his face. Hagar gripped his axe and held it ready, the strong muscles in his arms bulging so that Jake thought he should hear the handle

creaking. Pera returned to ice, holding a pair of knives and looking ready to use them. Slowly, they approached the corner. Peering around, they saw who was making all the fuss. There, to the end of the hall, just before the outdoor walkway, lay a neat pile of six men folded atop one another. Their handiwork of course. A serving woman was on her knees, clutching one of the men in her arms as she swayed. It was not uncommon for a palace guard to take the bed of a serving girl. An arrow jutted from his back. Jake felt sick.

Suddenly he noticed they were all looking to him, and Jake straightened. The knot came back in his throat. He knew it made sense. He did have the bow, and he could end it quicker than the others. There was no other attainable exit, and they could not alert the woman to their presence by getting close enough for swords and knives. Not without giving her a solid chance to escape them and get help. Jake woodenly stepped out into the hallway. He took an arrow from his quiver, placed it, and drew. It was a good thirty paces, an easy shot. He felt sweat trickle down his brow. He could hear his teeth grinding.

Shoot you damned fool! We don't have time for your conscience! Someone said in a harsh whisper. He was so distraught he could not put a name to the voice. His hand would not release the shaft. He couldn't do it. Dear Creator he could not end another innocent life. Not the life of a woman! He then noticed the pressure of the vial against his chest. One life for another. *Whatever it takes.* He closed his eyes, and let go. The whistle of air ended with a sickening thud.

The three came from the corner, Pera burning him with her eyes. Fool man. All men are fools! It was her voice that urged before. No matter now. He was stone. Cold, hard stone. *Whatever it takes.* He could not bring his eyes directly to her as they walked by, but from the corner of vision he could see her hunched over the man. She had tried to kiss him before leaving this world. There was a pang of something, but it was far away from him. He was damned. His soul was no longer his. There was some comfort in the realization. Now he could be hard enough to finish it. Hard as stone. He would make it in time. No matter what. *Whatever it takes.*

A small orchard lay just outside the servant quarters. A well-trimmed grape vine stood along a fence and wound behind the building. Aside from that, the ground was open grass. Hiding behind large columns lining the open walkway, they watched a patrol march along the vine covered stone wall. They were large men, each carrying a heavy bladed halberd and sword to side. Brightly brandished armor gleamed in the sun. Once far enough away, Hagar and Jake darted outside. Hagar cupped his hands, and Jake propped a foot in them. Grabbing the stone worked gutter along the edge of the roof, Jake nimbly climbed up on the tiles with a hoist from Hagar. Once atop the tiles, he lay still. Another patrol was coming by. The small orchard hid him from their eyes, obscuring where he lay. None of them so much as looked his way of course, but branches and leaves served little to stay the feeling of nakedness. He held his breath as he watched them go by.

Once out of view, he scrambled to the other side of the roof. The roofing came down to a valley, and raised higher still for the second and third stories in the servant quarters. He could just see the stables to the other end. Open stalls held a short line of horses. It was only the servant's horses, some of them little better than mules, but they should do. Three stable boys were about, two mucking out the stalls and one brushing a dun gelding. He rose a bit, propping himself as best he could on the slope, and aimed for one of the horse's flanks, high enough so as not to sever a tendon or artery. Odd, sparing a horse when he could not the life of a woman. The pang came back, but he fired it down. He could save the life of one. The only one that mattered. There had to be time.

His stomach burned, and his throat tightened. Sharp pains crawled inside him. He wavered for a moment, but forced it away. Steadying himself, he aimed again. A hard, coarse cough came out of him without warning. He lost his footing, and the arrow flew. He barely stifled a curse, helplessly watching the wayward arrow fly. It pierced the thatched roof of the stall above the horse he was aiming for. The stable boys stopped and looked to the roof. They could not see it buried inside the thatching. He cursed

himself. If he had taken the life of woman **and** a child, the dark one would likely reach up and take him now.

He spat out the metallic taste of blood. Clumsily wiping it off his mouth, he tried to concentrate as the disorienting feeling dissipated. After the dizziness subsided, he took a few deep breaths and aimed again. The arrow whistled through the air. He scrambled to the top, hurriedly climbing to the other side without ever looking back. He knew his way with a bow. He did not have to see the arrow take its mark. A high-pitched squeal of a horse rang in the air. Shortly after, cries for the guards came from young voices as he watched the next patrol through the thickness of the tree branches stop. They quickly ran to see to the matter.

As the ground met his feet from the drop, the trio was already making their way to the wall. There were no ramparts there, which meant no bowmen to have them through with arrows, and no banner men to alarm with horns. Noticing that everyone else had already donned them, he reached into his coat to retrieve the gloves the witch gave them. The vines were thick with thorns, but whatever the witch conjured on the relatively thin and ordinary looking things, it prevented the sharp spikes from coming through.

Jumping up, panting heavily, Jake quickly made his way up the wall with the others. A few thorns punched through his breeches, but he paid them no mind as he faintly heard the guards yelling. He caught Hagar at the top, though the man was more agile than he would have ever guessed. He actually bested Jake when they first went over the wall. Half way down the other side, he let himself drop to the ground.

As soon as Jake had his footing Pera reached out her hand to him, with a brandished knife in the other. Give me the vial. She said in an even tone. He remembered that cold look. She was close to deciding he was dead. Pera please, we don't have Brimere was interrupted by her. I'll not hear it. Langwin, or whatever his name is, has been queer as a thrice-sided coin since that storage room. I'll not have that in his possession. I don't trust him. And wipe your mouth. It's disgusting. She said. Trust? With this lot? He could have laughed, if he wasn't so cold inside. They all looked at him strangely. When he tried to wipe his mouth again, he realized he **was** laughing. He was laughing so hard that tears began to stream. Was he going mad? He could not stop laughing damn him! Take it. Jake said as he reached into his pocket and held it out to her, his fit finally ending. Take it! He said, harsher than he meant to say it. She stared, unsure of him. They all did. He wiped his mouth, feeling dried blood flake away. Perhaps he was going mad. He had done enough today for it. She snatched it from his hand, and put it in her belt pouch. He knew it didn't matter, but he still expected to feel the loss of it from his person. He felt nothing anymore. Hard as stone. It mattered not to have it in hand. It didn't change what he had to do. What must be done. *Whatever it takes.*

There were no guards outside the walls. Not here. This side was nothing more than a wide expanse of wood. An arena of private hunting for the king and his sons. Mock hunting of course. An animal would be released into the large fenced area for the king's pleasure. Jake prepared himself. He would have to do it soon. *Whatever it takes.*

After a half hour of walking, they were finally in sight of the fence. It was a rough-hewn stone wall really, yet it was low and jagged enough that an easy climb would cross it. Jake had slowly let everyone hurry ahead of him. Panting hard as an excuse for slacking. It was time now. With all of them facing away, he would not have another chance. Once across that stone wall, they'd have time to put mind to having a mad man trail them.

He quickly readied the bow, knocking two arrows. Luckily, Brimere and Hagar were close enough for the inaccurate two-shot to work. He wanted to laugh again, thinking the convenience of killing two men at once luck. He aimed and let go. Neither turned at the whistling before each was struck dead center.

They fell like bricks to the ground. As those were away he had already knocked another, but as he released, Pera was turning to the sounds. The arrow nicked her shoulder, deflecting it up and through her neck. Her eyes widened, and a gargling sound came from her. She charged him, pulling out her knives. He threw down the bow, having no time to knock another arrow, and drew his blade. It was a horrid sight. Her face was frozen in a grimacing snarl, as blood frothed from her mouth and neck, the arrow stiffly jutting on either side of it. Gut-wrenching sounds came in grunts with every strike. Wounded as she was, she was quick. Too quick. He was just no damn good with a blade. She cut his arms and legs, and in moments one long strip was away from his shirt across his chest, covered in blood.

He began to back her up however, no longer totally on the defensive. She was slowing. No one could last like that. Her skin was growing pale, and fright joined the hate in her eyes. *How can she still stand?* With a final stroke, she whipped the sword from his hand and jabbed her long-knife at his middle. He barred the way of the blade with his left hand, as little as that would do, and they crashed to the ground. He lay there for a moment, his breath driven from him, waiting for the cold burn to settle in at his stomach. But it never came. Oh the rest of him was on fire, with the heat of fighting ebbing away, each of those cuts began to sear! Yet he felt nothing at his stomach, not even the warmth of spreading blood. His hand hurt plenty though. His hand. *The gloves!* He pushed the dead woman off of him. Looking at his middle, he saw no wound to speak of. Though the force of the blow had his hand pounding, the blade did not pierce it! The witches conjuring had saved his life! The dark one did not want him just yet. With the scene surrounding him, he decided that to be it. The Creator would not spare him. Not after all this. It had to be done. *Whatever it takes.*

He did not roll the woman over. Cold as he was, he did not want to see her face again. Opening her belt pouch, he retrieved the vial.

Crawling atop the wall, he jumped down, falling hard on the grass. He was beginning to feel dizzy again. Was it the hex, or the loss of blood? It didn't matter. There was no time to worry for either. Four good horses were nibbling on the grass at a fallen tree. The wood was thicker this side, though one could still see for relative distance into the undulating brush. He went to his waiting mount. Bright neighed and nuzzled him. I need your swift legs girl! He said, gripping the saddle. He climbed atop the black mare, and galloped off.

The ride was not terribly long, but as night settled, Bright was near the end of her endurance. She was a tall, leggy mare built for speed, not stamina. An arrow piercing a wailing woman haunted his thoughts as he rode. It made him want to vomit. But he continuously forced it down. He forced it all down. He had one singular purpose left. There had to be time.

He felt weak as he entered the small town of Oscillan, the temple of a new life with her. She had forever changed him. He was now an honest man. A respectable man. A husband that could care for a wife, and children. Thoughts drifted to that newly purchased seed of life. She lacked mere weeks to give them a family. *Please let there be time left.*

He had to slow Bright to a trot, or the horse would likely fall to have both their necks broken. He coughed into the empty streets, hard packed dirt forgiving bellows of dust behind. Most were snug in their homes now, or fisting ale in one of the two large taverns. He coughed again; this time accompanied by pain. The thick, metallic taste returned. He wiped his mouth, sparing not a glance for what was certainly blood. The hex was tightening its grip. He fought the urge to kick the horse to gallop. He could not afford the precious minutes earned.

She had taken ill. Mara was dying. The town herbalist, Garen, was a trusted friend. One of a mere handful in the entire kingdom that healed true to word. Though renowned in ability, Garen exhausted his knowledge without effect. Only two days prior, Garen informed Jake that if her condition did not turn soon, wife and child would not survive. His heart ached with the last memory of her, the night before he

left to find the witch woman. Sweet Creator it tortured him so to witness her agony. When she finally found sleep, the sole respite to her pain, he made a promise. Whatever it takes. He thought aloud in a hoarse voice. His vision was blurring, and his stomach pulsed with fire. Whatever it takes. He would keep that promise. There had to be time.

Bright, lathered in sweat, was breathing ragged. Strength girl. We're almost there. Almost. He said while stroking the mare. He tried to hum; it had a calming effect on her, but only produced another coarse cough with blood. *Please girl. So close. So close.*

The witch woman lived in a hovel, half a day's ride into the forest. Somehow, Garen had come by the location of the secluded place. He could remember feeling hope, real hope, shattering the darkness. It was his only chance. She was a squat, ghastly thing. Patched rags hanging on her bones, she wore as unkind a face as he had ever seen. Her piercing, solid black eyes were the first thing noticed. He burst in with arrow knocked, expecting only the witch. He knew the woman would not be forthcoming with help. Witches were not charitable sorts. He expected the possibility of death; who knew whether an arrow was fast enough to stay a witch? He did not however, expect her company. Brimere, Hagar, and Pera. They rounded on him the moment he set foot inside. Somehow, the witch knew he was coming! Yet instead of killing him, she made him part of a scheme. Strange twist of fate that the witch was hatching a thievery of exactly what he needed.

In a back alleyway behind a tavern, he reined Bright to a halt. He was finally home. They carved out a decent life here. He was well with the flute and harp, but Mara was a born performer. On occasion, her dance and song brought even nobles to the humble tavern. They were paid well for their service, including one of the finest rooms.

He almost fell off the horse in haste. He was terribly dizzy now. Everything spun like a top. Walking up the steps of the back entrance, he had to put a hand on the rough wood railing. Slowly, the world settled back down. The pain in his stomach was near unbearable now, and he could feel life leeching from open wounds. Gathering strength, he reached for the handle and drew open the door.

It was a small hallway, the bare wooden floors and walls without adorn. A flight of stairs rose to his right. The smells of spiced wines and the kitchen seeped through the walls, as well as the ruckus. He never minded it much. Most of his lurid life was spent in places like these. Places much worse. But it took time for Mara to acclimate. If she ever had. *She will. She will have plenty of time for all that!* Perhaps without him, but she **would** live to see it. A thought came. If she was cured, and there was serum left, perhaps it could save him as well! Immediately, feelings of shame washed over. How could he think of himself? He stomped the thought out ferociously. Her life came foremost. He could not chance sparing a drop from that vial. *Whatever it takes.*

Reaching the top flight, he coughed again. There was considerable blood in that one. Bleeding as he was from limbs and chest, the red in his cough seemed of little concern. None of it mattered. He had only one purpose.

Stumbling to the door in the middle of the hallway, he heard a squeal as quick footsteps fell behind him. He caught a glimpse of a little girl rounding the stairs. He didn't even notice her there. He was so weary. He must be a ghastly sight he realized.

He nearly fell on the door, barely staying the fall with a hand. It was getting so hard to breathe. He had to keep going. *So close.* Excitement, anticipation, fear, joy, every emotion began to well to the point of explosion. He finally reached her! She would live! Holding on to the knob for balance, he walked in. Confusion struck him. It was empty. The bed, where she had lain the last few days was made and ordered. The room was tidy as if she had spent the day getting it together. Was she well so quickly? The knot came back in his throat. Was he and was he too late? Through his blurred vision, he noticed a letter resting on the pillows. He lumbered to it.

He could hardly stand now. He felt numb with fear. Something was wrong. The upturned face was empty save for Jake, in Mara's hand. After a moment of fumbling the paper open, Jake brought the letter close enough to read through foggy eyes.

My Dearest Jake,

Sorrow fills my heart my love, but I simply cannot continue this. Dwelling in this hole, living breath to breath with the likes that frequent it. I know you mean well my love, but we must grasp fact; we scrape the cusp of what we can achieve together. The world holds so much for my child. I must apologize for that as well my love. My womb carries not your seed. My monthly ceased shortly after your trip to the coast for supplies. Don't make regret follow the telling my love; I would hope your intentions remain well for the baby and I. Garen fathered the child. It was a horrible lie to weave, concocting my sickness, but we were seldom apart, making our leave near impossible. The witch woman is an old friend of Garen's, so I did not send you blindly into harm. I heard your promise last night my love. It was sweet, but I hope you have not committed foolishness. You are too brash. You flounce away, adventure solely in mind. Did you even think once of me, bedridden sick? All alone? How sparse your care for others has been. My love, our time together must end. I left you half our savings, such as they are. Be well, and please refrain from trouble. Your life has been the cause of enough.

Mara Salandraleaf

He fell to the floor, crushing the letter in hand. Garen. Mara. It was all a ruse. *A ruse to make me leave long enough for them to gather and go.* All he did this day, all he sacrificed of himself, was for nothing. He, in cold blood, had **killed** for nothing. I hope you have not committed foolishness. He said aloud, repeating the written words. He began to laugh again. He laughed so hard that tears rolled from his eyes. His laughter roiled on as he coughed up more blood. The searing pain in his stomach made him laugh all the more. He wondered not if he was mad now. He was certain of it.

It continued for a long while, unsure whether he was still laughing or just crying. He didn't care anymore. Nothing mattered. His soul was damned, forever lost so that Mara could bed another man. Through his tears and fits of laughter, he reached into his pocket and retrieved the vial. He could drink it in and heal himself. But it would only mean a longer march in a pointless damned life. His chest felt ripped apart. He rested his back on the floor.

It came to him, staring at the ceiling as he lay there, life oozing away, the reason that Hagar, Brimere, and Pera were waiting for him at the witch house. Garen must have known of the witches plan, and surely thinking it a suicide scheme, planned to ensconce him. He wanted to laugh again, but his ruined throat would produce nothing else.

He was an empty shell. Salandraleaf. She even forewent his surname. He couldn't breathe. He tried, but could not force himself to release. It was not the hex. He simply could not draw a breath. The ceiling swirled, growing darker and darker. Death was embracing him; he could feel the cold arms. *Pera was right. A damned fool. All men are damned fools.* He was truly ice now, and death was there to escort his frozen soul to the damned.

Something sparked in him. Something distant. It gnawed and clawed its way past the ice and stone.

Slowly it settled over his heavy heart, and fire began to bloom. His teeth were grinding again. The world turned from darkness, to redness.

He sat up, with an effort, uncorked the vial and drank it down. As it burned down his throat he made one more promise. A vow to himself. Heat was roaring in him now. And then, as suddenly as it began, it chilled to ice again, as cold as a winter's night. Colder, harder than ever before. He rose as he felt the serum replenishing him. He was no longer Jake. That whelp died there on the floor. He was nameless. A vessel. A vessel that existed for one purpose. One gruesomely singular purpose. With a grim scowl, he was hard as stone for what must be done. What had to be done. *Whatever it takes & my love.*