

Tainted Blood

“How does it feel, little elf?” Vade’s voice was quiet, like the whisper-soft caress of silk against a sword. “How does it feel, knowing you are about to die, and your people along with you?”

How..? How did he fail and misjudge someone so completely? How had it come to this without him realizing sooner? None of it should have happened; not like this. Not the war or the deepened hatred between their peoples, much less the curved, double-edged blade in his chest. Magical heat pulsed along the length of it, burning him from the inside. Vade stared down at him, dark eyes lit with a perverse, sadistic gleam so different from what he was used to; his smirk just a touch more insane. Or maybe he was finally seeing Vade’s kind of sane for the first time, the kind of sanity that comes from getting what you really want after deftly manipulating those around you. But if *this* was what Vade wanted all along – Vade leaned in slowly and Elendir’s thoughts scattered from the sharp pain exploding in his chest, the blade ripping through more muscle and scraping along bone. He wanted to scream, to beg for this to stop, but he wouldn’t dare give Vade that much satisfaction. Not now, not ever again.

“Bastard,” he hissed instead, the vile human curse slipping from his tongue. His voice was far weaker than he would have liked, strained around the edges despite the vehemence.

Vade snickered and gave a vicious twist of the blade. “Such filth from such a pretty mouth, Elendir,” he snarled.

Elendir couldn’t stop the harsh gasp for air, clenching his teeth even as his hands twisted, jerking at the ropes binding him. He was rewarded with the hilt of a dagger across his face and saw stars, his neck aching from the sudden snap to the side. His body sagged and he felt a bit more of his will to fight leave him, though it wouldn’t disappear entirely until he was dead.

“Brother, stop!”

Elendir’s eyes slid to the side, catching a glimpse of the boy hanging from the ceiling, the ropes pulled taught enough Talon’s toes just barely touched the ground. Why Vade tormented his own brother like this was beyond Elendir, but then, he stopped trying to understand Vade a while ago.

“Stop? I don’t think so, Talon. It seems you’re still deluded, thinking I’m the evil one here,” Vade growled, twisting the blade so violently the hilt broke off as the blade caught on bone. This time Elendir couldn’t stop the horrible howl of pain. Every breath he drew shifted the blade inside him, sending sharp jabs of lightning and fire through his body. “See how he whimpers and moans like a pathetic dog?” Vade laughed, tossing the hilt of the sword aside and turning towards Talon, his dagger glinting in what little moonlight filtered through the hut. Not much else was touched by the glow, the few streaks of silver twisted and distorted by Vade’s magik.

“Being in pain doesn’t make one pathetic,” Talon hissed. When Vade stepped closer, Talon spit in his face and was answered with the flat of the blade against his cheek. The edge cut into flesh, leaving a crooked arc of blood in its wake.

Vade laughed softly, a maniacal edge to it that would have set Elendir’s nerves on end even if he wasn’t in so much pain. Elendir whispered as softly as he could, sacred words to call on his own magik tearing past his lips with each harsh gasp. As he watched,

Vade leaned in towards Talon and licked the blood from his cheek. Elendir grimaced as the heavy pressure of blood-magik filled the air from that simple action. The shadows around them roiled with a life of their own, twisting, churning, growing, reaching up and out towards Talon as if to claim him. Such dark magik was forbidden by the Goddess of the Elves, and just the scent and weight of it in the air was enough to make Elendir recoil. Acrid fumes filled the hut, burning his nose with a scent like the sky had been lit on fire, but it was the groan of pain from Talon that made Elendir's chanting falter.

Several careful breaths later Elendir still couldn't focus enough to finish the spell; between the pain in his chest, Talon's muffled sounds of anguish, and Vade's laughter, it was a wonder he even remembered he needed to cast the spell. Goddess help him, he had to finish! He closed his eyes tightly and the rest of the incantation spilled from his lips in a rush. He held his breath, waiting for – there, the faint tremble in the earth, like hundreds of horses rushing by.

“What did you do!?” Vade spun around to glare at Elendir as the earth began to shake in earnest. The shadows coiled tightly around Talon, tinged red from their feast of the boy's blood, but they shuddered and faded with Vade's sudden distraction. Before Elendir could even think of answering, the ground beneath them erupted with a great rush of water, flooding the hut with enough force to crash through one wall, carrying a cursing Vade along with it. The sturdy pole behind Elendir splintered enough for him to find a catch in the woodwork. He cut at the bindings around his wrists until he could jerk them free, and that was a move he sorely regretted. Pain was his only friend right then; his father had been right about that it seemed, even if it was an entirely different kind of pain than he'd imagined. Still, he had to reach Talon and get them both out of here. “Goddess, grant me just a bit more strength,” he whispered.

It took only a moment to find the hilt of the sword lodged in the mud, an inch of the blade still attached where it had broken. The several inches of metal lodged in Elendir's chest seemed to twist on its own, the broken hilt magically calling out for its other half. His vision darkened at the edges, but he found a well of strength inside him to fight against the pain, forcing his legs to move him the few feet he needed to go. “Hold still,” he hissed, using Talon as a support as he forced his arm, despite the pain in his chest and the numb, prickling sensations in his arms, up to cut the boy's hands free. He braced himself for the tumble to the ground once the bindings finally snapped, some distant part of his mind hoping the fall would shove the blade in enough to end his pain, but it never came. Talon settled on his feet far more smoothly than he would have expected of a human. “Need to get out,” Elendir rasped.

Talon didn't argue, simply nodded and shifted enough to support him and carry them both from the hut. Fires blazing through the entire settlement met them as they stepped out, the dark sky darker still, choked with thick clouds of smoke and ash.

“By the stars,” Elendir whispered, an entirely different kind of pain in his voice. The sounds of battle came to him from far off, on the other side of the flames, but the voices of his own people were clear to him. They were dying as they tried to flee, forced to the ground by the smoke and flames. He may not have been involved in the quarrels that re-ignited the hatred between Elves and humans, or lead the armed forces responsible for this massacre, but his actions the past few months hadn't helped at all.

“This way,” Talon murmured, dragging Elendir away from the settlement and putting the growing fires behind them, though the cries of the dying would never leave his ears. “Thank you. For helping me.”

“He was tormenting you,” Elendir replied quietly, as if that should be more than enough reason, and for him it was. They reached a large, sturdy tree and Elendir risked a glance upwards, catching a glimpse of what had to be an Elvish dwelling in the branches far above, though still far too close to the ground to have been made by the Elves. He could only assume it had been built by some human before the rift had torn their races apart and turned them against one another. “You cannot expect me to climb that.” Any other day and it would have been a simple matter of magik and dexterity to get to the top, but in his current condition he barely had enough strength to keep his balance.

“No, of course not,” Talon replied quietly, confusion touching his voice. Elendir looked over to find ice-blue eyes studying him. They were lighter than Vade’s, clearer and without the edges of insanity, and the smile Talon offered him was far more genuine than anything he’d seen on a human before, no matter how faint or brief. Talon reached for a rope to release the lift, and it was then Elendir noticed how bloody the boy was, though it all seemed superficial. His stomach twisted as he realized it had all been done by Vade’s shadows. They had gorged on Talon’s blood, drawing it out of him through his very skin. He closed his eyes with a whispered prayer, unable to fight the sudden swelling of darkness that clouded his mind.

Elendir opened his eyes to find himself on his back, staring up at a ceiling, though the night sky met his gaze when he slowly turned his head. He must have passed out then, which was not surprising in the least. Waking up, however, was. A glance to his chest showed the blade still lodged there, which meant he had not been unconscious too long, or else Talon was not stupid enough to try to pull it free. Though it had been long enough for the boy to drug him, he realized, as he felt little pain, or perhaps his body was simply shutting down to give him a bit longer on this earth.

“You’re awake.” Talon settled beside him, relief clear on his face and a small bowl in his hand. “I feared your eyes would never open again.” A brief smile curved his lips as he picked up a cloth, dipping it into the water and dribbling it into Elendir’s mouth and over his face.

“I’m afraid my time left here is not long,” Elendir answered, swallowing the sweet water with a sigh of gratitude.

“Do not say that,” Talon whispered. “You and I both know you are the only hope we have of restoring peace between our people.” His eyes were dark with fear and unease when Elendir looked up at him, though his face had at least been washed clean of blood. Striking features similar to Vade’s shaped Talon’s face, and Elendir found himself wondering how he could have mistaken Vade’s insanity for spirit and passion, how he had dismissed Talon’s calm for weakness.

“There is little hope left for either of our races...” If he had only pursued Talon in the beginning, instead of seeking a treaty with Vade; they were both of the right bloodline, both of age despite Talon’s youthful appearance. Instead he had been fooled completely by Vade’s lies, done so many things considered depraved by the Goddess, all in his hopes and desire for peace. He had forsaken his people, his Goddess, and it had all been for naught.

Talon set the bowl aside and dropped the cloth into it. “You turn your back on them then?” he demanded, voice tight with distress. “You lead your people in the name of hope for a brighter tomorrow to their death? You rip apart my family, coax my brother to the edge of madness with your willingness to go along with his desires for pain and suffering, and you dare turn your back on us now? You cannot just give up and die here!”

“I did not –” Elendir started to say, but Talon cut him off with a jerk of his hand.

“My brother may have been right about you after all. I was foolish to think Elves could be trusted, that there was anything left in your blood worth putting faith in. And if that is the case... then there truly is no hope for either of us,” Talon finished in a whisper, looking out towards the fires that still blazed brightly. Battles continued to be fought, the flames of fire tinged red as if with blood.

“Goddess, forgive me,” Elendir whispered. “*Ani nathau, ani núan ului, achuille an-cuiannen... Al-meletha, perónen. Alaedriana, dohena min.*” His voice shook with heartache, but the lilt of the words and the music inherent in the language was no less beautiful because of it. Such sorrow filled the words that Elendir thought his chest would break from it, and of all times for the Goddess to hear his words, he hoped those at least reached her.

“Was that a prayer for your people?” Talon asked softly, turning away from the terrible sight of carnage.

“And yours as well, in a way,” Elendir replied. “It is the least I can do now, for the mistakes I’ve made.” He shuddered and felt his body tensing from pain as whatever drugs or spells keeping it at bay began to fade. He hissed and reflexively reached for the blade inside him. His fingers convulsed around it, aching to tear it free, but he knew that death would be just as painful. Warm fingers closed around his and he shuddered again at how cold he was, looking up to find Talon staring at him with pain-filled eyes. “Do not weep for me,” he rasped. A coppery taste filled his mouth and he felt something sliding along his cheek. “Mourn my death if you must, as a lost prince, but do not feel remorse over my misdeeds. Now pull,” he hissed. The blade slid free at last and warmth spilled over his chest. Talon pressed down on him, staining his hands once again with blood.

“Elendir! Don’t die! You *can’t* die! I don’t know what to do! Help me!”

Warm golden light spilled into the darkness around them, tranquility as its very essence. When it faded a lady stood before them, radiating the same light and warmth. Hues of gold formed her skin, her hair long, silky strands of glinting straw, eyes the color of forest moss, her gown pure moonlight. “*Ani nathau? Al-meletha, perónen?* Elendir, my child, love cannot be only half-given.” She knelt beside them, brushing away the blood on Elendir’s cheek with sorrow in her expression. “You have suffered much. Both of you,” she whispered, looking to Talon, then past him at the destruction of the forest and death of so many innocents.

“Wh-who are you?” Talon asked, his voice weak and his eyes wide.

“I am Alaedriana, Mother of this forest, Goddess to the Elves. And you, Talon an Swiftriver, have a choice.” She smiled and touched Talon’s cheek, stalling his questions with a finger to his lips. “In a time when even the most faithful have forgotten their true nature, Elendir’s words alone reached me. My children scream in pain and sorrow, but they have forgotten how to ask for help, for mercy. It is the same for your people, is it not?” she asked softly, turning back to Elendir and resting a hand on Talon’s over the wound.

“It is,” Talon whispered, staring at Elendir as he stopped struggling to breathe when the Goddess rested her hand on him. “What are you doing?”

“He has asked for my forgiveness. All I can do now is grant him an easy death.”

“You’re killing him!” Talon hissed and shoved Alaedriana’s hand away with a snarl.

“He is dying, whether you wish to accept that or not,” she replied calmly. “Would you rather he suffers even more?”

Talon made a strangled sound of frustration and pressed harder on Elendir’s chest, trying in vain to stem the flow of blood. “Elendir! Open your eyes! Please!”

Dark green eyes slowly fluttered open, looking up at Talon before drifting towards the lady. “Goddess,” Elendir whispered, his voice hoarse and strained. “Goddess I’m s-sorry.”

“Shh. Hush, my child. You’ve done all you can.” Alaedriana smiled and reached out, smoothing back Elendir’s hair with a feather-light touch.

“No, there’s... still one thing I can do.”

The Goddess sighed deeply, staring at Elendir a moment and touching his cheek. “You know it may not be enough.”

“Have to try,” he hissed. Elendir’s body convulsed with a deep shock of pain and his fingers clutched at Talon’s arm. “Please, Talon... Do you trust me? For the sake of both our people?”

“I –” Talon started, pausing and staring at Elendir. Confusion clouded his eyes, though it was quickly replaced by determination. “Yes,” he said firmly, moving his hand to grip Elendir’s tightly. “What do I do?”

“Take my magik.”

“What?! You cannot be ser-”

“He wishes to transfer his magik and gifts to you, Talon. With them you should be able to bring peace. Whether it will work or not, even I cannot foretell. Your brother has already ignited the bloodlust in your people. He must be stopped one way or another.” Alaedriana’s tone was grim but firm as she watched Talon. “If you have even the slightest doubt that you cannot do this –”

“No. If... this is what it takes for the bloodshed to end,” Talon said, clenching his jaw and giving a fierce little nod. “He has forsaken his people. Sanity has fled from him.” He looked to Elendir and smiled tightly. “You saved me when you did not have to, from my own kin. That in itself is worth repaying. I will not let your sacrifice be in vain.”

“So be it. Brace yourself, Talon an Swiftriver.” Time could not be wasted and she pressed a finger to both their foreheads, warm energy pulsing between them. There would be side effects, consequences, regrets, perhaps, when all was said and done, but that was a risk that would have to be taken. Wind swirled violently around them, sucking the air from their lungs, and Talon slumped forward onto Elendir with a choked cough. Powerful chanting filled the air, the words swallowed by the howl of the wind. The earth shook, enough that even the dwelling, high in the tree, trembled. Tiny flashes of lightning crackled through the air and Elendir convulsed, radiating power and energy and pure, raw magik – all of which flooded Talon’s body with a force that knocked him back.

The wind gained intensity and exploded moments later, shaking the dwelling once again with a rumble of thunder. Talon slowly came to, burning with the effort to absorb a magik that was not his own, magik never meant to be wielded by a human. Blood stained

his light hair and skin where he had fallen on Elendir's chest and he swallowed hard as he looked to the elf. "Elendir?" he breathed, crawling over to the still form of the elf and staring down at open, lifeless eyes. The Goddess slowly stood. "Please," he whispered, though what he was asking for even he wasn't sure. "I... don't know how to use this power. How am I supposed to do this when I cannot control it?" He felt strange, could barely tell where he ended and the magik began, though it pulsed inside him with a power and presence he'd never felt.

Alaedriana turned her gaze to Talon with a considering expression, her lips slowly curving into a faint smile. "He will show you," she replied softly. "More than his magik found its way to you, it seems."

Talon frowned, confusion clear in his expression, the demand to explain on the tip of his tongue when he *felt* it – an even more strange sensation, a warm flutter in his mind that had absolutely nothing to do with his newfound power. "What-?" he breathed.

"A temporary side effect. The transfer of so much magik is bound to have a few. There is no time to worry about it now," Alaedriana said, her voice calm, seeming perfectly at ease with the fact Elendir's soul currently resided within Talon.

Find Vade. It was not so much a statement of words as a sudden urge to do so, and Talon got to his feet without questioning it. He knew it was Elendir's presence, the urgency behind it unlike anything he would have felt himself. Slightly unsteady feet moved him to the lift and he picked up his sword before unwinding the rope to lower it to the ground. "How am I supposed to do this?" he whispered. "This power... It doesn't want to be controlled. It's... alive." His body still burned, though the warmth was not painful, merely uncomfortable. Even so, he could feel the magik inside him, twisting and writhing and coiling itself around his very being. He didn't exactly expect an answer so much as a feeling, but he felt a shift in the presence inside him, as if it were settling, and then Elendir's voice filled his mind, quiet but strong.

It is the power of the Earth. It cannot be controlled, but it will answer to your plea. You are a Child of the Earth, She will protect you.

Talon felt a wry smile tugging at his lips. How could he be considered worth protecting after all his people had done? He may not have agreed with any of it, never partook of any of it, but the fact he never spoke out for fear of bringing his brother's wrath upon himself held him just as responsible, just as guilty.

Thoughts like that will only get you killed. You did what you had to do, whether it was right or wrong does not matter in times like this. Do what you can to make things right; that is all anyone can ask of you, even yourself.

The lift reached the ground and Talon stepped off, glancing towards the heart of the chaos with a tight feeling in his chest. His legs moved of their own volition and he wasn't quite sure if it was Elendir's doing or not. "How are we going to find him?" he asked softly, clutching at his sword as he walked. "He will not be fighting with everyone else," he added with certainty. His brother preferred letting others subdue his opponents first, tormenting them before slowly killing them himself once they were no longer a threat. It was that alone that kept Vade from killing either of them outright in the hut.

The edge of battle, then. He will want prisoners captured to torture, and you as well if he has realized you've survived.

"Of course," Talon murmured. It suited Vade's actions, after all. "So I just walk up and surrender myself, is that it?" It did not bode well for him, but it was likely the

only way to get anywhere near Vade. Getting out of any restraints afterward was a problem that would just have to wait.

Not surrender, no. Convince him you have finally seen he is right and killed me.

Talon grimaced at the suggestion as well as the smell of burning forest and flesh around them as they drew closer to the flames. The sounds of battle slowly grew louder in the distance. He tried hard to keep his eyes in front of him, searching for signs as to where Vade would be, but it was hard not to glance to the side when he passed burning buildings, searching for any signs of life. His fingers trembled and his arms felt numb as he recognized faces that were unmarred enough to be seen, though none of the bodies moved, even when he knelt by one to make sure.

We cannot waste time. You have to focus.

“But I should help them somehow,” Talon whispered.

The best way for you to help them is to find Vade and put a stop to this. There will be time for tending to the injured later.

“But —”

Talon! Wasting time will only kill more of both our people!

Talon flinched and stood, feeling a strange sensation in his body as Elendir forced him to walk. It was true, he knew that, but no matter how determined he was to put an end to this war, Vade was still his brother, was still his flesh and blood. The thought of having to kill him made him sick to his heart. He had given his word, yes; he was determined to do what was necessary, but that did not mean he would like it, or that he would not regret it later.

Clangs of metal meeting metal and indecipherable shouts grew louder as Talon reached the western edge of the town, the air clearing a bit as a light wind blew the smoke south. Movement in the trees caught his attention and he turned, hearing the release of an arrow from a bow. A tug of energy inside him erupted into a shield moments before the arrow soared past his face, knocked off course by the flare of magik. His arm was already lifting his sword, preparing for a fight whether his foe be Elf or human; he was an enemy of everyone right then if Vade had his way.

“Talon?!”

Talon looked up in surprise, recognizing the voice. There was no one there, until the shadows gave way to the blond with bow in hand, another arrow already notched and ready to let loose. “Ren!” Never had he been so relieved to see the Captain of the Guard.

“By Lady Áine! Vade swore you were dead! What happened to you!?”

“You would not believe me if I told you,” Talon replied, taking a step towards Ren, though he stopped when the bow was not lowered. What little hope he’d had that Vade had not completely turned against him vanished. “Ren... I must speak with my brother. Take me to him,” he commanded. Vade was still his brother, they still shared blood even if Vade proclaimed he was dead, and Ren was still loyal to the bloodline even if Vade’s word superceded his own.

Ren smiled tightly and nodded. “I have orders to take you to him, should you still be alive. Fates, how I wish you were dead, knowing what he will do to you,” he murmured. “Forgive me Talon, but I must ask you to lay down your sword.”

Talon couldn’t help but flinch, his pride flaring enough he nearly refused, but his tongue wouldn’t work.

Do as he says. This is the quickest way to reach Vade. You trust Ren not to put an arrow in your back, do you not? Elendir's voice was quiet, though every bit as urgent as his first demand to find Vade.

Yes, Ren could be trusted, at least for now. There was still always the possibility Vade would order Ren to at least injure him, but he set his sword down despite that, stretching his arms out and stepping back. "Where is he?" he demanded quietly, watching Ren move forward to pick up the sword.

"In the Church. With prisoners, of course," Ren answered, voice laden with disgust. That tone may have been in Talon's favor, but he was not going to count on it. "Keep your hands behind you. You know where it is. I will follow. Most of the elves have managed to flee by now; all that are left are those determined to fight until the very end."

Talon grimaced and clasped his hands behind his back, turning to head towards the Church. A sick twisting sensation filled his chest at the thought of blood staining holy ground. Only Vade would think tormenting or killing elves in the Church would be taken as an acceptable sacrifice by the Lady. "How many has he killed?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder to see Ren training an arrow on him once again.

"None yet that I know of, though he was none too happy when I found him – soaking wet and promising death to that prince."

Talon flinched as Ren's words brought back images of watching Elendir die, though he took comfort that Vade at least had not been there to see it. He skirted along the edge of the marketplace, catching sight of the fountain at its center. Once a beautiful work of magik and crystal in the shape of Lady Áine herself – Keeper of Secrets and Guardian of Sleep and Graves – now a blackened, crumbling mass of debris. The open stalls and small buildings that made up this part of town were in no better shape; the tiny shack Vivian used to sell flowers had its roof caved in, as if a powerful spell had crashed headlong into it. Doors and windows were completely obliterated, there was a gaping hole in the side of Marcus' butcher shop, and even Alexia's trinket and clothes shop lay in ruins, ripped and burned fabric littering the ground around it. Whatever skirmish had taken place here, it happened between those well-trained in battle magik.

The Church came into view just past the marketplace and a cold weight settled in Talon's chest. There was no turning back from here, not when he was so close, not when he could hear the fading sounds of battle and screams of anguish and despair, and worst of all Vade's laughter. A tingle formed along the skin of his spine, traveling all the way up until the back of his neck felt tight with a chill. His feet paused on the dark stone steps and he stared through the door into the dim light inside. He did not want to go forward, knowing what awaited him at the end of this path he had chosen. He fought against Elendir as the elf tried to force his legs to move, but it was no use. Elendir's resolve and steadfast determination to set things right were far stronger than his own fear of taking the life of a brother who held no love for his people.

Several steps led him up to the large wooden doors and he pushed the left one open enough to step inside. The familiar feel of blood-magik hung heavy in the air and he shuddered, his skin tingling from the memory of Vade's shadows feeding on his blood. He rubbed at his arm and stared at the row of prone elves that had replaced the altar. Vade stood in front of them, a sword at his hip and his cursed whip in the other. The elves were on their knees, but one jumped to his feet despite having his arms bound

behind his back, yelling loudly in Vade's face. Though Talon couldn't make out the words, he could hear the anger in them and was equally impressed and afraid for the elf who dared provoke his brother like that. He inched closer and watched as Vade's arm lifted, wincing as the knot of the whip slammed into the elf's face, sending him to his knees once again.

Lôrien! Elendir screamed, piercing enough that a dull buzz filled Talon's mind. His feet carried him forward far more swiftly than he wanted to move and he came up on Vade in moments, anger growing stronger inside him with every step.

"Stop this!" Talon hissed, reaching to grasp Vade's arm when it lifted again. He met his brother's glare steadily, Elendir's presence inside him a source of livid strength.

Vade turned sharply with narrowed eyes, smiling slowly as he focused on Talon. "Well, well, if it isn't my dear baby brother. How foolish of you not to flee when you had the chance."

Talon shook his head, fighting for control over his body against Elendir's rage, and released Vade's arm. "I will not flee," he answered, forgetting about the plan. He was here with Vade right in front of him where he needed to be; there was no point in lying when Vade would see through it. They both knew Talon would never betray his own heart. "Elendir is dead. You have what you wanted, so let them go!"

Vade's smile twisted into something a bit more sinister, stepping back and glancing to the elf he'd struck down – *Lôrien*, Elendir had called him. "You expect me to release what's left of the royal family?"

"Royal?" Talon breathed. This was Elendir's family? "What do you plan to do with them then?" he demanded, fearing he already knew the answer to that. Death by Vade's hands was a fate he would not wish on anyone.

"The same thing I plan to do to you."

Talon hardly had time to react as Vade lashed out with his whip. The tiny blade woven into the tip caught him across the cheek, narrowly missing his eye. He knew Vade was only toying with him – Vade was skilled enough to pierce a fly with that blade. Being unarmed, the only option he had was to scramble back the way he had come. A sharp point digging into his back stopped him and a glance over his shoulder let him know Ren had followed him inside.

"Ren, return his sword," Vade commanded, coiling his whip as he slowly approached. He fastened it at his hip and drew his sword, and Talon had little choice but to reclaim his own. "Come, brother," Vade mocked, baring his teeth in a grin filled with malice. "Let's dance." A heartbeat later the shadows deepened and darkened, rushing into the space between them with enough force to shatter the windows and blow the doors completely open.

What light filtered in before was all but snuffed out, and Talon's eyes strained to adjust. *Your left!* Elendir's voice was frantic and Talon reacted on faith and instinct, raising his sword as he shifted and wincing as the ferocity of Vade's attack nearly ripped his weapon from his hand. There was no time to speak as Vade attacked him in earnest; it was all he could do to fend off the attacks, willingly suffering cuts and blows when it offered him strikes through Vade's defenses. The shadows roiled around them and he could feel them leeching at his energy. He may have been on equal footing with his brother when it came to swords, but Vade used all his magik and cunning to make sure he always had the advantage. Talon tried calling on the magik he felt burning inside him,

demanding release, but it wouldn't respond. He knew how it worked, had felt the sheer power behind it, but it offered up a resistance he could not seem to break.

Exhaustion wore at him far sooner than it should have, and more of Vade's blows crashed through his blocks or caught him when he tried to evade. Every cut and bruise was keenly felt, urging him to surrender, and he desperately wished he could without Vade slowly killing him.

Talon, you cannot give up! Use my power!

"I'm trying!" Talon hissed.

"Trying to do what?" Vade taunted, smirking as he disappeared into his shadows. Talon pressed back into a pillar, sagging against it as he glanced about, furtively searching for Vade. His body was covered in blood once again due to the blood-magik and shadows, and a deep gash on his arm continued to spill more. He breathed deeply, trying to calm his mind as Elendir advised. He needed to put the Elven magik to use, but it was a power that only answered to a plea, and while he had steeled himself for this battle he could not beg for Vade to be killed.

Then all is truly lost. Talon flinched, unwilling to believe that, but maybe it was true. He risked a look towards Elendir's family. Lôrien's lips were moving. He couldn't understand the words, but they seemed to falter as Vade's whip sailed out of the shadows, wrapping around Talon and pillar alike to trap him there. Vade followed a heartbeat later, sword raised for the kill, shadows engulfing Talon to drain even more of his energy. "No!" he screamed, struggling in vain and refusing to believe this was really how he was going to die. The sword was a hair's breadth away when pain exploded through his entire body. The powerful Elven magik was ripped from him completely, the sheer force of it enough to snap the whip binding him. He crashed to his knees and distantly realized Vade's sword hadn't pierced him. More importantly than that, Elendir was... floating between him and his brother. Vade's sword seemed trapped between them as well, stuck in Elendir's body where Vade had stabbed him earlier. Power radiated from the ethereal form and Talon could see Vade through Elendir, his brother's face twisted in anger and disbelief and with a hatred that would never die.

As long as Vade lived there would never be peace for their people. Once the Elves were gone, he would find another enemy to wage war against, and Talon could not allow that to happen. He raised his sword and lunged forward, thrusting his weapon through Elendir and into Vade's throat. He stared in silence as horror seized him and he jerked his hand away, forgetting to release his sword. Vade stumbled back, clutching his throat as he sank to his knees with a horrible gurgling sound. Talon dropped to the floor as well. He collapsed against the pillar once more as nausea joined his horror, staring at the blood as his sword clattered to the floor. So, so much blood. He forced himself to look up and meet his brother's eyes, shuddering at the maniacal gleam that wouldn't fade even this close to death. His brother's lips moved, though no words came out, just more blood, flowing through his fingers like water. Vade's lips twisted in pain though twitched into a smile, and Talon could almost see the pride fighting through the madness. *Good for you,* Vade seemed to say, and a sharp ache filled Talon's chest as he wondered if this was all just part of his brother's plans. What if Vade had been pushing him to this all along, to make him take control and finally stand up for what he believed in?

Vade fell forwards with a dull thud, the terrible wheezing sounds fading and the shadows slowly dissipating as blood pooled around him. Such a wound was beyond even

his magik's ability to endure and heal. Silence filled the air as the weight of Vade's blood-magik and presence faded. Talon could not make himself look away, staring at the spreading pool of blood and hardly noticing the sounds of movement growing around him. His fingers tingled and he went limp as his fatigue finally grew enough to tug his eyes closed. Was this how Elendir felt as he was dying, so cold and alone, like he had somehow failed? He couldn't die like this – his people needed him, now more than ever.

There was movement beside him, but his eyes refused to open. "You will live, Talon an Swiftriver." The voice reminded him of Elendir's and it was accompanied by a cool touch to his forehead. He knew who it belonged to, he was just too tired to remember the name. His body demanded rest and would not accept no for an answer. Dealing with his people and his murder of Vade would wait. Yes, he would live, but for now... "Sleep."