

## CHAPTER ONE

JORDIN CROUCHED atop the warehouse on Byzantium's eastern perimeter, dark hair lifting with the gust of an oncoming storm, eyes scanning the darkening streets below for any sign of Triphon. There could be only one reason why he would leave his watch at the door.

Dark Bloods. Hosts of hell.

More than eighty thousand of the vicious warriors hunted throughout the city, guarding the Citadel where their maker, Feyn Cerelia, ruled the world with an iron fist, determined to rid it of Jordin's kind.

Triphon had undoubtedly followed protocol and made an attempt to draw danger away from the provisions bank, one of only a few on the edges of the city from which Sovereigns "borrowed" food.

Jagged lightning lit the eastern horizon, baring the low hills a mere hundred meters distant. Beyond lay the wastelands, home to Roland's Immortals.

Immortals. They had rarely been sighted by her kind, and then only at a distance. They were lethal by any estimation, both to Feyn's Dark Bloods and to the few Sovereigns still living. Ghosts in the night.

Most Mortals had soundly rejected Jordin's appeal to follow Jonathan in his death and had vanished north with Roland,

defiantly embracing the promise of immortality. Only a handful had remained to seek new life—new wisdom—as Sovereigns.

But now, six years later, that life had been all but stamped out by the Blood War between Feyn's Dark Bloods and the Immortals, neither of which courted tolerance for Sovereigns. Jonathan's selfless love had spawned only hatred and the ruthless bloodshed that had held Byzantium in its grip for the last year.

Only thirty-seven Sovereigns still drew breath, hidden deep in the expansive caverns beneath Byzantium. Once over seven hundred in number, their ranks had been whittled down to a remnant in dire need of food and supplies. Under perpetual threat of death, they emerged only under cover of darkness and then only in pairs. Being caught alone was too dangerous; more than two presented the possibility of too great a loss if trouble found them.

Jordin turned and hurried along the two-foot-wide concrete wall bordering the top of the building in a crouch, her rubber-soled boots soundless on the asphalt roof. No sight of Triphon, no sound but the thunder rolling to the east.

She scanned the streets to the south. Empty. There was a Dark Blood post two streets over, beyond her line of vision, one of thousands positioned throughout Byzantium.

She twisted to the west. Five miles distant, the Citadel's ominous spires towered over the city. Heavily fortified rings of Dark Blood patrols had taken position, expanding out from the world's capital buildings to protect Feyn from the increasingly aggressive attacks of Roland's Immortals. But the Dark Bloods and the Immortals were not Jordin's only concern.

Well over two million Corpses crowded the capital, each of them loyal to Feyn's new Order. Although the Corpses possessed no emotion save fear, that fear included a holy terror of Jordin's kind. Feyn had seen to that. And though Corpses would never raise a hand in violence, they were quick to report any contact with a Sovereign.

Anyone caught for not reporting a Sovereign was summarily sent to the Authority of Passing—to death.

Hiding from two million Corpses was no easy task. Though Sovereigns looked no different in appearance save their eyes, which had turned a brilliant green, Corpses could smell them. Apparently her kind gave off the pungent scent of incense. Sovereigns: Loving all, loved by none. Then again, they had no problem loving Dark Bloods with a sword. Hadn't Jonathan done the same?

Jonathan. She would yet die for him without second thought. Some said he was out there waiting in the flesh, others said he existed only in their blood. All she knew for certain was that the expanded Mortal senses she'd lost in becoming a Sovereign—senses presumably still retained by Roland's Immortals—would be a welcome gift right now. With them she would know the exact location of the nearest Dark Bloods with a single sniff of the air. She would hear the scuffle on any street below... even a mumbled word from a hundred meters.

Instead of Mortal perception, her kind held surety of true life and occasional precognition of the future, which, although intriguing, proved limited—they could only see a few seconds or minutes ahead, and even then inconsistently. The “seeing” that had become the inheritance of all Sovereigns couldn't match the sheer strength of the Dark Bloods or the wicked skill of the Immortals.

Their enemies were hunting them to extinction.

She reminded herself that they were as they were meant to be, transformed by Jonathan's blood. It was Jonathan's way, to bring life—how, they still didn't know. But there was deep mystery in their transformation, and they held that mystery with reverence along with the knowledge that Sovereigns were like Jonathan in ways Corpses and Immortals never could be.

She knew this, but it didn't keep her from lying awake at night, badgered by questions without answers—questions she could speak

to no one but Rom, and then only when her frustration boiled over. She was their leader, side by side with Rom. The others couldn't know how deeply she suffered. To be Sovereign was to be brimming with love in a new realm—they all said it. Jonathan had said it. But saying it didn't change the fact that they lived like dying rats beneath the city while Dark Bloods and Immortals flourished in the sun.

Was it possible what Roland had said six years ago... that Jonathan had abandoned them all?

Jordin closed her eyes and let the ugly question fall from her mind. No. They lived to bring Jonathan's life to the world—a last vestige of hope for a world steeped in death. Thirty-seven Sovereigns left, and now one more of them seemed to have vanished. They couldn't afford to lose another, much less one of their warriors. Triphon was the only one who could wield a weapon as efficiently as she or Rom.

A cry cut the night to the east, and Jordin whipped around, ears keen. She heard a shout followed by an unmistakable grunt.

Dark Blood.

Jordin reached the fire escape ladder in three running strides, grabbed the rail with her gloved hand, and threw her legs over the low perimeter wall. Her feet landed on the fifth rung and she descended on the fly. She stood only an inch over five feet in boots, and her body was lighter than any of the large bags of rice she'd dumped at the warehouse entrance, but her speed and skill made up for her lack of heft in any fight.

She released the ladder from ten feet up, landed lightly on the balls of her feet, and then sprinted east along the southern wall, reaching for her bow.

"Jordin!"

Triphon's familiar voice rode the wind, flooding her veins with adrenaline. He would call out only if his situation was dire enough to warrant the risk of drawing Dark Bloods.

She rounded the warehouse to find an empty alley and then flew through the narrow way. Beyond the last building the street

broadened into open ground that ran into the hills. The fact that Triphon's shout had come from this direction meant one thing: having been discovered by a roving patrol, he had led them toward the wasteland. The Dark Bloods were wary of the wilderness—not for the expanse of land itself, but for the Immortals who materialized from the darkness without warning. With their singularly acute eyesight, Immortals owned the night.

But those same Immortals posed as great a threat to Triphon.

She ran faster.

A sliver of moon peered out from beneath the clouds on the eastern horizon, giving Jordin clear sight of the street. The scene snapped into form in a single blink of her eye.

Triphon, sword drawn, was backed up against an unlit streetlamp. He was dressed for the night in black pants, a short coat, and rubber-soled boots like her own. His hood had fallen back, the scant moonlight illuminating his green eyes, radiant even at a hundred paces.

Seven Dark Bloods were closing in on him, bold despite the knowledge that some of them would surely die. They weren't stupid. Sovereigns might not have the superior breeding of Dark Bloods, but by the way Triphon held his sword easily in one hand, tipped toward the concrete, anyone could see he was trained in the Nomadic way of the Mortals—the same Mortals who'd stood their ground only six hundred strong against Saric's twelve thousand Dark Bloods six years ago.

Jordin had killed countless Dark Bloods that day; she and Triphon could take seven today.

To a man they towered nearly a foot over Triphon, built like bulls—muscle and brawn. But they moved with uncanny speed and took blows as if made of ironwood. Whatever alchemy had created such raw specimens of brutality couldn't be undone. They could not be brought to life like a common Corpse. Only Sovereign blood killed them.

Most still wore their hair in dreadlocks, but they had evolved over the past several years. Their retinas were as black as their pupils, but rimmed now in gold. So well proportioned, they were specimens

of perfection; loyal slaves, their insatiable lusts held in check only by Feyn herself. It was well known they abused common Corpses at will.

They hadn't seen her yet. She dropped to one knee, notched an arrow, and drew her bowstring.

The Dark Bloods pulled short, and the ringleader stepped forward, twirling his heavy sword as if it were a stick of balsa wood. His mutter was full of gravel—Jordin couldn't make out his words. She did, however, understand the meaning of the sudden approach by the two warriors to the leader's left.

They were going in for the kill.

She steadied her breath and released the bowstring. The wind had lulled, and her arrow flew straight. It slammed into the leader's head as she quickly notched her second arrow.

The Dark Blood she'd struck staggered back, bellowing a cry that momentarily arrested the others. Triphon moved while their attention was drawn away, lunging at the closest warrior, swinging his blade up to catch the unsuspecting Blood under his chin.

Jordin sent another arrow at a third warrior and then she was on her feet.

"Triphon!"

Four heads swiveled to the threat at their backs. Without pausing, Triphon swung his blade at the fifth's belly, missed, but arced the sword into the shoulder of one of those who'd turned.

Another arrow—this one sent quickly into the mass of Bloods where it struck one of them in the side. In the course of ten seconds they had cut down three and wounded two more. They had once fought by Roland's side with as much precision, before the prince had turned his back on Jonathan's legacy.

She raced at breakneck speed, flipping her bow over her back, palming two knives as she went in. Leaderless and stunned by such lethal attack from behind, the Dark Bloods suddenly found themselves at a disadvantage.

She threw the seven-inch blade in her right hand from ten paces off, sidearm, but the Blood she'd intended it for slapped it from the air. The three remaining warriors sprang back, more cautious now.

Three on two—they would fell these fiends where they stood. Outrunning them would be far more difficult, and they couldn't risk leading them back to the cavern. If Feyn learned where they lived, they would all be crushed in a single blow and Sovereign blood would be no more.

"We kill them," Jordin said.

"We kill them," Triphon repeated with the hint of a grin.

The Blood to Jordin's left nodded and slowly straightened. A sick smile crept over his face.

"All of us?"

"All of you," Jordin said.

His gaze lifted past her shoulder. Triphon's followed. His face flattened. Jordin threw a quick glance behind her. Three Dark Bloods had emerged from the same alley from which she'd come.

"Jordin..."

She twisted back. More. No fewer than ten Dark Bloods had slipped from the corners of both buildings at the end of the street. They were boxed in, cut off on either side by brick warehouses, to the front and back by Dark Bloods.

Her heart rose into her throat. She shifted to one side, all thoughts of an easy escape gone. A fresh gust of wind whipped a dusty dervish up from the knoll beyond the end of the street. If they could make a run for the wasteland, the Dark Bloods might not follow. But getting past the line marching toward them would prove difficult if not impossible—Bloods were anything but slow.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear your response," the Dark Blood said. "Are you sure? All of us?"

*Jonathan, where are you now?*

The sentiment that accompanied the question had become more bitter than inquisitive as of late. But she hadn't always needed

Jonathan to survive. She'd been his guardian once, when her skill as a fighter had been unquestioned even by Roland himself. Her veins flooded with new resolve, fueled by anger. Their quest to follow Jonathan and bring life could *not* end here, regardless of the odds.

The sword of a fallen Blood lay on the ground three paces away. She still had nine arrows in the quiver at her back. Two more knives were sheathed against her thighs. And if no way for escape presented itself, there was the sword.

The calm calculation that had served Jordin so well at Roland's side slipped for an instant as an image filled her mind: Jonathan spreading his arms wide, crying out for Saric to kill him as she screamed, powerless, from the cliff above. Saric's blade arcing down into the chest of the only man she had ever loved, before or since.

She swallowed, mouth dry. Was this her fate as well?

Then so be it.

She whipped the knife in her left hand underhanded and watched it bite deeply into the eye of the Blood who'd spoken. His smirk exploded in a spray of blood. With a full-throated scream, she snatched the bow and arrow from her back.

Triphon's roar joined her cry, and he flew at the Bloods who'd first attacked him. She spun to face the new arrivals, dropped to one knee, notched an arrow, and sent it into one of the three who were now running from the same direction she'd come. A second and a third arrow, in rapid succession.

Her arrows found bodies but failed to take down two of the Bloods.

Jordin faced a critical decision. They'd have to split the Bloods—surrounded, they stood no chance. She'd have to deal with the two approaching from the rear, but she also had to find a way past the line beyond Triphon.

She let a final arrow fly toward the two Bloods sprinting for her, already bringing their blades to bear. They seemed utterly oblivious to the threat of death—what was death to the dead?



Without waiting to see her arrow find its mark, she twisted and came to her feet. Five arrows left.

She strung one on the fly and started forward, angling left. Triphon had taken down one of two Bloods he had engaged and was lunging at the other like a bull. If she could break through the line of Dark Bloods between them and the wasteland beyond, forcing them into two fronts, they'd still have a chance.

The ten had become twelve, all at a full run fifty paces distant and closing, thinner on the left than the right.

"Split them!" she cried and tore forward, shooting as she ran. She sent four arrows into the three warriors farthest to her left without precision, only caring that she stalled them enough to break past them.

One arrow left. She flung her bow over her back and ran at a full sprint toward the two stumbling on her far left. She had to reach them. Get one of their swords, engage from behind. It was the only way.

But that way was cut short by a terrible sound behind her. A wet *thunk* followed by a sick *grunt*.

The *thunk* she knew to be a blade cutting deep into flesh. It was the *grunt* that made her start. She knew the voice.

Jordin twisted her head back. Triphon had killed the two Bloods he'd set upon, but a third had reached him from behind. Her arrow hung from the Blood's side, but it hadn't put him down.

Triphon's arms were thrown wide; his grimacing face tilted to the sky.

A sword protruded from his chest.

Jordin pulled up hard, stunned. The night stalled, ripped beyond the boundaries of time. Triphon was severed nearly in two, held up only by the Dark Blood whose sword was buried in his chest.

Jonathan had fallen to a similar blow.

The Dark Blood wrenched his blade free, and Triphon collapsed on the concrete street. Dead.

Time refused to return. Triphon dead. At the hand of one she'd failed to kill.

Jordin didn't know why she ran for him, losing the final advantage she had in breaking past the line of Bloods. Perhaps she could only see Jonathan there on the ground, dead because she had failed him as well. Perhaps in the deepest part of her soul she wanted to join Triphon in a pool of her own blood.

The Dark Blood standing over Triphon with bloody sword grinned wickedly.

Rage pushed reason from her mind. With a raw scream, she snatched her final arrow from her quiver, crammed it against the string with trembling fingers, pulled up five paces short, and fired at the Blood's head.

The arrow took the warrior in his mouth, knocking out his teeth and cutting clean through his spinal column. He dropped dead in Triphon's blood, eyes still wide in shock.

In Jordin's mind this was Saric. Saric, whom she despised more than Roland, whom she hated more than death itself for killing the man she loved.

Sounds of pursuit from behind had slowed. They were close. Too close. There would be no chance of escape. Even with a bow and a dozen knives, her favored weapon, she could not fend off ten Dark Bloods alone. Nor could she outrun them.

She could only honor Triphon by taking his sword and killing as many as would join them in death.

Tonight she would be rejoined with Jonathan. Finally.

She heard the scuff of boots behind her. To her right. Her left. They were in no hurry.

She walked up to Triphon's body, took a knee, and kissed his bloody lips. "I will see you soon, my friend."

She eased Triphon's sword from his fingers and stood. To the Bloods she would only be one more victim among so many for their taking. They couldn't know that they now had one of the two

Sovereign commanders in their grasp. All that mattered was that they had been created to vanquish the blood that flowed in her veins.

Jonathan's blood.

She turned. They had positioned themselves in a wide arc around her. *Calm now*. They were here to kill her, and that surety was as thick as the air they all breathed.

"You fought well," one of them said, stepping forward.

"I'm not done," she heard herself say.

"No, I expect not. It's honorable to die with a sword in hand. But in the end death is still death." A shallow smile toyed with his lips.

"What say we make sport of it?"

"I'm not here for sport."

"It would be a shame to die without offering us some pleasure."

"The only pleasure I'm interested in comes at the end of this sword."

Several of them chuckled. Revulsion swept through her gut.

"Not all swords bring death," the commander said. "Can a small thing like you wield a sword as well as you fling arrows? Your weight behind it would be hard pressed to knock a dog down."

"And I see ten before me."

His grin broadened. "Well spoken. If you weren't the enemy of my Maker I might make some dogs with you."

His smile vanished, and he stepped forward. The men to Jordin's far left closed in. As did two more on her right. They had no intention of killing her outright. This was it, then.

Jordin took a step back, thinking that she might be better off making a run for it. She cast a quick look behind her. Two more Dark Bloods stood on the end of the street, eyeing her lazily. There would be no running.

Too many closing in. If she couldn't run, would she be better off cutting her own throat before they could overpower her? The thought seized her, profane and inviting at once.

She backed up another step and pivoted to face the commander. The glint in his eyes was unmistakable. Her earlier notion of taking

as many with her as possible would only lead to more suffering. They would not let her die quickly.

“Drop the sword and we’ll be gentle,” the Dark Blood said. “By my Maker I swear it.”

She lifted her eyes to the moon shining through an opening in the clouds on the horizon. She had danced beneath that moon once. Its face was cold and foreign now. The sandy knoll already looked like something from another land, another life, distorted and jagged on the horizon.

The knoll moved. Only then did she realize what she was seeing, and the awareness of it stalled her breath. A line of horses stood on top of it, silhouetted by the cold light of the moon.

Black horses. Seven of them abreast, mounted by seven hooded warriors dressed in black. Staring down at the scene before them.

It was the first time Jordin had seen an Immortal in years. Their faces were covered in black. Like wraiths come to collect souls before vanishing into the wasteland once again. The Dark Blood before her must have seen her eyes widen. He twisted around. It only took him an instant to know what he was seeing.

“Form up! Immortals.”

As one, the Dark Bloods spun to the east. The line of horses began to descend the sandy slope, slowly at first and then breaking into a full gallop, riders bent low. Fearless. Silent.

The sight of such raw power and stealth was so compelling that Jordin didn’t immediately recognize she had just been granted her means of escape. The Dark Bloods had forgotten their single prey, now clearly prey themselves.

She spun just as the two Bloods who’d taken up behind her rushed forward. One took a swing at her, which she easily sidestepped. Then they were past and scrambling for position on either side of the street with the others.

Jordin reached down, snatched Triphon’s amulet from his neck, turned up the empty street, and ran.

## CHAPTER TWO

THE STILL figure stood looking out the six-foot-tall window, a dark silhouette against the night. Her hands were folded before her. The flicker of a lone candle on a table ten feet away lapped at the folds of her gown. All the others had long burned out.

Black, the velvet. Obsidian, the constellation of beading upon it. Ebony, the fall of unbound hair to the small of that back.

White, the skin.

It itched sometimes, on nights like this, as though the churning sky called to the inky dark of her veins beneath. Her skin had always been pale, but the shadow in her veins was six years new. A gift of the Dark Blood by her half brother, Saric, who had been Sovereign and Dark Blood before her.

Lightning flashed on the horizon, to the east. For an instant, a jagged finger of light illuminated the capital of the world. Her world. A dominion of state religion and new Order. Of loyalty fearfully given because it was demanded by an all-seeing Maker who would, without qualm, send those who did not obey to Hades. For the common Corpse, that Maker was the source of life they believed they had.

But to her Dark Blood minions, she was that Maker.

Feyn Cerelia, the Sovereign of the world. Destined to it by birth-right, she had once laid it down along with her life for the sake of a boy. Nine years later she had been forced to the throne by her

brother's ambition. Today, the brother was gone and the boy was dead. Each had been the other's undoing—she had seen to that. Now she ruled by one will alone: her own.

Eighty thousand Dark Bloods patrolled the capital city, guarded her borders, and controlled her transport ways. They were not “children,” as they had been to Saric, but minions. Lethal, rabid, loyal . . . and expendable. After all, Dark Bloods might be made anytime, at will.

Hers.

She instinctively touched the ring of office on her finger, straightening the heavy gold sigil, which had a habit of twisting. She found herself in this posture often at night, looking out at her realm from the palace tower, trying to understand what, if anything, she was missing. What did she search for through those windows that she didn't already have?

Saric?

No. She seldom thought of him since the day he'd staggered off into the wilderness, broken, defeated, abandoning his army and his power, either driven by madness or in a bid to find his own life. Somehow he had escaped with it. No matter. He couldn't have survived long in the wilderness, pampered as he had been all his years. They'd both been royal children once. In some ways, Saric had never become more than that. He'd grasped at the world as though a toy—and at her, as well. But he'd never been meant to rule. He didn't have the fortitude for it, despite his raging ambition.

She crossed her arms and paced along the curve of the window, looking past the walls of the Citadel and the spires of the great basilica beyond it, toward the west where the city met the wastelands.

Home of Immortals.

Irritation rose in her mind at the thought of the wastelands. The Immortals had become the bane of her rule and were too often on her mind. A pack of wolves that hunted her city, evading her traps and hunters. It both fascinated and infuriated her that her Dark

Bloods had failed to take a single Immortal—had not even been able to recover one body so her alchemists might distill the secret to their lethal ways. The prince, Roland, had grown increasingly aggressive with each raid on the city—something she admired greatly.

But her admiration only strengthened her resolve to see her enemy and all of his followers dead. Any ruler who thwarted her rule would have to die.

She searched the darkness beyond the window, following the current of the shifting clouds by the moonlight, and then shifted her focus to the glass of the window itself.

A pale face stared back. Now she could see the fine black branching of veins creeping beneath the skin over her jaw. The dark vein, there, just above her temple. Her skin was perfect, paler even than the prized translucence of the royals, without the fine lines that might have belied her age.

Nine years in stasis would do that.

But there was one change in her. A brilliant color that had crept in along the edges of her irises, which had turned black from the dark blood Saric had injected into her veins. The color was so slight at first that she hadn't noticed it for months, but one day she'd seen it in her mirror: a thin ring of gold around the edges, so her eyes no longer looked like giant pupils but twin suns eclipsed by a dark moon.

She had commanded that amber seeds be sewn among the glittering beads of her bodice, along the sleeves that hung, full, nearly to her knee. Black and gold, they blinked over her hips and scattered toward the hem, a thousand eyes turned toward the world.

A thousand eyes looking for something as she stood by the window each night. Because that was the heart of it, the thing Saric had never fathomed and would never have the chance to grasp: that when one rules the world, one finds that it's not enough. An ancient ruler—arcane even by the Age of Chaos—had bemoaned once that there were no more lands left to conquer. Today, she understood the

barbarian king of that age in a way that connected them through the millennia.

She'd heard the knock at the tower door some time ago. She had chosen to let whoever it was—and it could only be Dominic or Corban at this hour—stand and wait.

Now she turned from the window, hands still folded, and said, "Come."

The door opened immediately, and Dominic's slender form stepped into the dim light, admitted by the guard outside.

"My liege," he said, sinking to one knee, eyes on the floor before him.

Her gaze fell with dispassion on the former leader of the senate—a senate she had disbanded three years earlier under the strictures of her new Order. It had sent the world prelates spinning, leaving the cattle of the world population caught between loyalty to the Sovereign, who was the living agent of the Maker on earth, and the statutes of the old Order. A tension that kept them perpetually off balance and served her well.

"What is it, Dominic?"

His hair had grayed in the years since she had disbanded the senate and renounced many of Megas's statutes. He was a Dark Blood now, one of her own, genetically compelled to obey. But he'd been the staunchest guardian of Order before that. How many nights since his remaking had he tossed on his bed, prematurely sweating in the fires of Hades?

In the last year, his expression had grown more haunted. The furrows around his eyes had deepened into the pall of the damned—one who could do nothing to avert his eternal destiny. It had been interesting to watch at first. Now she found him a wasting vestige of an obsolete office.

"There was an engagement near a warehouse on the eastern end. Fifteen of your men were killed." In all this while he'd never once lifted his gaze. He knew better.



“Immortals, I assume.” Sovereigns lacked the luster of their former selves. It seemed they had a talent only for dying these days.

“Yes. Though this incident was different.”

“How?”

“We recovered a body.”

Her pulse surged. Was it possible? One of the wasteland horde—perhaps even Roland himself? Strange, the pang she felt at the thought.

“Yes? Well?”

“A Sovereign.”

She gave a snort of disgust.

He gestured, and a Dark Blood stepped in and sank to his knee a stride behind Dominic, the mouth of a burlap sack gathered in one hand that was visibly trembling in her presence.

“This is nothing new.”

“No, my liege. But we believe we may have recovered one of the leaders.”

Rom’s face flashed before her mind’s eye. Not the Rom of today as she imagined him. He was here in the city somewhere, she knew. He must be nearly forty by now. No, not him, but the Rom of a former life. A naïve boy she’d met once when she had been a naïve young woman.

A boy who had thrown his life away for a dream. Soon his body would be presented to her, dead as well. And for what?

“Show me.”

The warrior opened the bag and lifted the head by the hair.

She gazed at the gaping mouth of that head for a long moment. It was spread wide, as though surprised by some great, cosmic joke. She knew the face.

Triphon. Rom’s right-hand man, one of the first to sample the original vial of blood that had sent Rom on his holy quest.

“I want no more Sovereign heads brought before me.”

“As you wish, my liege,” Dominic said.

“Bring me a living Sovereign or a dead Immortal...or nothing at all.”

“As you wish. What would you have us do with this one?”

“Burn it, along with the others.”

“Yes, my liege.”

“Dominic, you may go.”

The aging former senate leader rose, backed out of the door, and closed it behind him. When only the Dark Blood warrior remained, she said, “Burn Dominic along with the body.”

She waited until the Dark Blood had taken his leave before crossing the room and snuffing out the candle with her fingers.

A moment later, she stood before the window again, this time in utter darkness.

If there were no more worlds to conquer, then she had no choice but to subdue this one thoroughly and utterly, wringing from every living soul an obedience unseen and unfathomed by any ruler before.