

While Revan and Brinhold tied their horses with the others, the Simarru man returned to tending the meat. The two Vhaldisii said nothing, their stares following Revan and Brinhold to the picket line. Once the horses were cared for, they returned to the fire and sat down across from the pair.

“We’re much obliged friends,” Brinhold said, rubbing his hands in front of the flames. “It’s a rough climb up the foothills — thought we’d be spending the night in the dark with cold rations for company.”

While Brin spoke, Revan’s eyes wandered to a scroll in the woman’s hands. He glanced up and found her staring at him with a cold smile. Before he could apologize, she tucked the vellum into her blankets and spoke.

“What brings two fine young men into the mountains?” she said in a smooth voice, “Clearly, you are not from the plains.” In the firelight, with the flames reflecting on her brilliant blond hair and sharp features, Revan thought she resembled a fox. *A fox who just snuck into a chicken coop.*

“We’re looking for work in Vhaldais,” Brin said. “My friend and I are handy with a blade and are hoping to sign on as guards with a trade company.”

The Vhaldissi man smiled, revealing a mouth of straight, silver-plated teeth. “We too have some experience in sword work. Perhaps after our meal the two of us can go a round?”

As he spoke, the fingers of his right hand tickled the silver hilt of his rapier. Revan was unsure, but he guessed the pommel was made of ivory or perhaps even pearl. He had no such doubts about the man’s skill with the weapon.

The woman released a cold laugh. “Now Carlos,” she said, “there’s no need to frighten our guests. And where are our manners? As I have said, this is Carlos, our Simarru friend is Shur and I,” she said, twisting her hand in a dramatic flourish, “am Josephine.” When she finished, she looked at Revan and Brinhold, waiting for their introductions.

“I am called Brand and my companion is Ren,” Brinhold lied.

“Brand and Ren,” Carlos tested the names. His voice held a questioning tone Revan was sure he didn’t believe them. “Tell me, why is it you travel with a saddled pony in addition to your own mounts?”

Brinhold and Revan looked at each other. Inwardly, Revan cursed. Why hadn’t they thought to unsaddle Shamus’ mount? The skard opened his mouth to reply but Revan cut him off. “The pony was my nephew’s,” he said. “I sought to sell him in the Simarron but the price I was offered was too low. I’m hoping to get more in Vhaldais.”

“It is a good pony,” Shur said, glancing back at the animal. “I do not know what you were offered, but the price is like to be the same in Vhaldais.”

Revan didn’t know what to say. Under the pressure of the two Vhaldissi, he’d forgotten about the Simarru man.

“Uh, those hares look about finished,” Brinhold said. “What say we eat?”

Revan broke out their oatcakes and dried fruit to share with Shur’s meat. The five ate in silence, but Revan was glad for it. He’d already had enough of Carlos and Josephine’s questions. While they ate, Revan tried his best to scan for signs of Shamus without looking too obvious. Wherever he was hiding, Revan was sure the leprechaun resented them sitting by the fire with a warm meal. Beneath Josephine’s cool watch, however, he would have gladly spent the night alone in the darkness.

When their meal was finished, Brinhold produced a flute from his pack and played a couple of tunes in an effort to lighten the tension. Revan thought the music was well done, but when the skard finished, Carlos gave a slow clap and sneered.

“I should hope your sword work is a might better than your skills as a musician,” he said, “For if you cannot hire on with a trade company you will have little luck making a living as a musician. Our troubadours are the finest minstrels in all of Peldrin.”

“I have heard tell the skalds —”

“You haven’t told us where you’re bound,” Revan said before Brin could start an argument. “Surely fine folk such as yourselves don’t wander the wilderness without good reason.”

“My apologies for our rudeness,” Josephine said. Apologetic was the last thing she sounded. “Carlos and I are famous spavalδος in Vhaleons, our capital city. We are traveling Peldrin in search of skilled foes to test ourselves against. Shur has been kind enough to serve as our guide whilst we cross the Simarron.”

“I confess this will be my first journey to Vhaldais,” Revan said. Now the pair were talking, he hoped to learn more. “I don’t know what a spavaldo is.”

Josephine gave Revan another of her fox-like smiles. “Your ignorance is forgiven,” she said. Her tone suggested was that of someone lecturing a small child. “Allow me to explain. As our troubadours are the finest performers in all of Peldrin, so too are the Vhaldisii duelists the most skilled swordsmen and women. The spavalδος and spavaldas travel from city to city, fighting worthy opponents to determine who is finest with a blade. Sometimes the duels are to the death, but most often they are only to first blood. The better duelists are sponsored by the wealthy and fight for the honor of their house, guild or company. We duel for the Lucas Sevenday Trading Company”

“Which of you is the best?” Brinhold asked when she finished. The skard was still sulking after Carlos’ critique of his performance.

Carlos and Josephine glanced at one another with forced smiles. “Some questions are better left unanswered,” Carlos said. “But we have talked much, let us retire for the evening.”

While Carlos and Josephine unrolled their blankets, Revan glanced at Brinhold. The skard’s expression made it clear he didn’t relish the idea of spending the night with the duelists

either. *They've done nothing to make us believe they're anything but honest travelers*, Revan tried to tell himself. He thought back to the duelists' cat-like grins and his comfort dissolved. *At least Shamus will be watching us. I only hope he hasn't fallen asleep out there in the dark.*

Revan nodded goodnight to the spavaldos and the Simarru man before rolling into his blankets, back facing the fire. He waited until the rustling of blankets stopped and Shur's snores broke into the night air before sliding his dirk from its sheath. He laid the weapon within quick reach and closed his eyes, all the while hoping he would have no need for it.