

The Thesal & The Mank



Harp Strathe

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The Thesal and the Mank
A Luterian World Erotic Novel

By

Harp Strathe

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For information contact:

Pink Flamingo Media

www.pinkflamingo.com

P.O. Box 632 Richland, MI 49083

USA

Email Comments: comments@pinkflamingo.com

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For D.L., always.

For Aly, who makes beautiful art,
and without whom I would not have seen vampires when
I closed my eyes

.

Chapter One

Dmitri disembarked the ship at dusk, torches sputtering in the wind coming off the sea, the lining of his cloak flashing crimson as he moved down the gangplank. He stepped off, soundless, striding onto the dock. A few moments later, on the same planks, making the same boards bounce and sway, a sharp clattering, he heard heavy tread and voices, the two men behind him keeping their noisy distance.

A thesal was a rare passenger. The sailors who had provided Dmitri's passage to Caska had been uneasy with him while they traveled, avoiding him, not looking at him. They didn't interest Dmitri anyway.

He was coming from months of travel, mostly on foot, some of it through remote areas, and then three days in a stuffy, dark hold, only roaming the decks at night. Now Dmitri was hungry, if hunger was the appropriate word to describe what he felt. Which it wasn't.

He wasn't thinking about his stomach, at least.

Caska was a large northern port, the largest city in the north, a busy center for trade and a draw to every kind of traveler. The port city was always lit, always loud, busy both during the day and also at night. Lamps were strung to light it. People crossed everywhere in the streets, slowing the carriages and horses. There were festivals throughout the year in Caska, crowds and brawling, revelry, drunkenness and people yelling.

Eyes followed him as Dmitri swept up the cobbled street, the crowd parting in front of him and filling in his wake. The cloak he wore billowed around his large black boots. His hood was off, showing his face. He was hunting. Stirring the light breeze, late summer, his dark hair was long to his jaw, sweeping brows.

When the secrat had entered Dmitri's body through the rite, so long ago now, it had changed him. Among other things, carrying the Ornthir had made Dmitri stronger, faster

than he had been. It had sharpened his reflexes, his balance. He was tireless. His sense of smell and his hearing were both highly developed, his body cooler, his heartbeat very slow.

The secret also found it convenient if he were an efficient predator. The Ornthir had made Dmitri compelling. It had changed his eyes, once a dark brown, now a gray so light they were almost white. Thesal eyes.

Women—men, as well—were drawn to Dmitri, drawn to the scent he made, drawn to the stern, pale carved beauty of his face and the grace of his body, broad shoulders. As he walked, he received glances, admiring, speculative.

He caught a shy glance, a flash of pretty brown eyes. His gaze lingered.

Then they saw his thesal cloak and their eyes tended to skitter away like hers did, walking a little faster, maybe moving closer to the people with her.

But sometimes they circled back. Dmitri didn't have to try hard.

He was only an hour into his hunt when he saw her. She was Caskian, sitting in the open front of a busy, respectable tavern, out of place, some circumstance putting her here. Two men were talking to her, vying for her attention. She was laughing. Dmitri passed her slowly, not looking at her. He scented her, the smell she made from between her legs, as clear to him as her voice was clear to the men with whom she flirted, her laughter drifting to him again, a glass in her hand.

She was drinking wine, popular in Caska, smelling spoiled to his senses. No scent of another male on her. Dmitri could hear her heart, faster than the men around her. His eyes slid back, seeing her glance at him, her eyes widening. She saw his thesal cloak and looked away quickly, her brows going up.

Dmitri slowed. She'd seen him, was interested. He saw a man glance at her from a near table, his eyes watchful, a

Caskian trader doing business with two other men in the way people in Caska did—slowly, over drinks and sitting. A male relative of some kind protecting her, but the man hadn't seen him.

Pausing in an archway across the busy street, Dmitri turned around, leaning his shoulder against a pillar, crossing his arms. She glanced at him again as he stared at her, nobody else noticing the exchange. She was pretty, thick dark brown hair twisted at her neck, a heart-shaped face with a small, folded mouth. She was in a light blue dress to her ankles with a flared skirt, Caskian-style. Her shoulders were bare, her breasts small, a pleasant swelling in the bodice.

Her eyes drifted to his again. She liked the look of him. He met them and she looked away quickly, her heartbeat going faster, turning and talking to one of the men. Dmitri knew she saw his cloak. She knew what he was, understood he was extending the invitation. This was the moment in which she would make her choice. The rest was just the drama of it playing out.

She glanced at him. There it was. This time he held her gaze longer before she looked away. She became flustered, taking a drink. Her heart was pounding now, knowing what she'd done. Curious about what she'd heard about thesals, her scent changing with her excitement. Curious was fine. Curious often got him what he wanted.

She looked surprised, anxious when he straightened and walked slowly toward her, and then he passed her without looking at her and found his way into the dimness of the hall in the back of the tavern where they kept supplies. He moved slowly, nobody back here, the tavern busy. Dmitri explored, finding what he wanted. He waited, a shadow in deeper shadows.

He didn't have to wait long.

He watched as the Caskian woman rose, the male relative lifted his head. She indicated the back. He nodded.

Dmitri's secret thrummed in anticipation as she made her way through the tables, coming to him.

Dmitri backed up, drawing her in, her eyes roaming blindly in the dark hall, looking for him. He had found, over time, that a direct approach was best, and he didn't speak her language anyway. His hand slipped over her mouth from behind, lifting her, opening the door and pulling her into the small room behind them. He closed the door behind himself quietly with his foot, locking it.

He glanced around the room, still holding her. It wasn't large. A chair in front of a sturdy table. That would do. It was a small office. He hardly noticed her struggles in front of him.

He was hungry, need coiling in him. His hand was still on her mouth as his other hand went to her waist and over her breasts, roaming her curves, venom flooding his mouth. He tugged the tie of her bodice as she fought him, her cries muffled behind his hand.

The bodice released and he pushed it down impatiently, then still had to free the next layer, Caskian undergarments, finally reaching flesh. He cupped her small breast, the woman making a sharp, short noise and squirming more, the friction pleasant. Dmitri could smell her fear.

He laughed softly, his fingers going to his mouth, gathering his venom, returning to her nipple. He exposed her other breast, touching her. The shallow swells were warm and soft in his hand. She struggled for another few moments and then his venom began to work.

She went still in front of him, the sound of her breathing loud in the room, her mouth covered. He leaned down to scent her throat, enjoying the nearness of her blood, his fingers still tormenting her nipples. His venom was potent and they hardened, swelling. They would become very sensitive.

Dmitri could see her clearly, but he knew she was blind in the dark. This time her squirming was different, her

breathing deepening. Yes, she liked that, the smell between her legs strengthening, changing as she readied herself for him.

His hand left her breasts and he moved her forward to the table, sliding the chair aside with his foot, bending her over it, his hand still firmly over her mouth. He pinned her, hiking her skirts, little cotton drawers that he pulled down—pants under a dress, the younger races were so odd—exposing the sweet roundness of her ass in all the cloth, the woman still struggling. He let them drop.

Dmitri ran his hand over her butt, enjoying the warmth of her flesh, his cooler. His arousal was a separate thing, but it was linked, now, to his hunger. He kicked her legs apart, looking at her pink swelling, putting his fingers between her legs, stroking. She cried out in outrage behind his hand, already slick and wanting.

He brought his fingers to his mouth, tasting her slick, gathering mating venom, coating them. He returned to push his fingers into the delicate flesh, his thumb pressing into her pussy as his fingers stroked her. He had two kinds of venom. The other was defensive. Lethal. But his mating venom would only give her pleasure.

After a moment, she grunted behind his hand, his venom taking hold, making another sharp sound, her legs spreading more. Her smell was reaching what he liked. It would make her taste the best, sweetening her blood. Dmitri's secret teeth dropped, nothing she could see. He leaned down and nuzzled her, smelling her skin, and then he broke through, biting into the meat of her shoulder. There was a sharp cry of pain from her, muffled. He released a small amount of his venom.

He waited and then she made a deep, desperate noise, pulsing against his fingers, dripping slick. When he gave her more, she would climax. Dmitri stopped his fingers, waiting. She shuddered, small motions of need under him.

“You like that,” he told her softly in the language spoken in Caska, using some of the few phrases he knew in the language. “You want more?”

He could hear her heart pounding. She nodded a little helplessly behind his hand, a small wail, giving in to it, rubbing herself on his fingers. Her hips squirmed, pumping on his hand. It excited Dmitri, who gave her pussy a light slap that made her jump.

The bite on her shoulder was already healed and he leaned in and bit her there again, enjoying the taste of her blood in his channels, enjoying giving her more of his venom. The sharp jerks of her hips as she arched her back told him all about it as she cried out behind his hand. She jutting, rubbing herself on his cock behind her.

The woman’s cries were rhythmic now, deep with need. He released her mouth cautiously—they usually didn’t scream at this point, but you never knew—and grabbed her shoulders, turning her over, leaning her back on the table and pushing her knees up, spreading her, all in one motion. He looked at her. She was squirming, her eyes gone a little, staring blindly into the darkness. Her breasts were bare, her nipples jutting.

Dmitri was standing between her thighs. He coated his thumb with venom, resting his fingers on her and touching her clitoris, watching her face. He leaned down and pulled her nipple into his mouth, sucking and nipping with his first teeth, moving to the other as his other hand went to his pants, unbuttoning them, freeing his cock, heavy and aching, hard.

She was a loud one. He didn’t want any interruptions.

Dmitri reached into his pocket, pulling out a clean handkerchief—he kept several there—stopping to gag her, tying it. The woman fought it a little, indignant, her eyes heavy with pleasure as she panted under him. Her hands went to the gag and he captured them, putting them away. When he released her hands, she didn’t move them. Her

eyes were darting in the darkness. She had just realized he could see.

Now he could enjoy himself more freely. He let his secret teeth drop, his mouth opening and stretching, a small line of his venom reaching to dribble between her breasts, startling her. It was nothing she could see in the darkness. Her hand came down to feel what it was and he pinned it again. She left it there when he released it.

He leaned down and scented all around the small swell, the skin sensitive, warm as he bit into the side of her breast, grunting with pleasure as she cried out in pain, muffled. He savored the taste of her blood, her whole body jerking. He gave her more venom, releasing her, licking his lips. He came up, their faces close, the woman staring blindly, gone with pleasure, panting. Dmitri inhaled her warm breath, his own cooler, his teeth retracting.

“Do you want to come?” he said low in Caskian, another phrase he had picked up somewhere.

She nodded right away this time, whimpering behind the gag, offering her breasts to his mouth. His thumb was starting and stopping, her hips shaking. Dmitri gave her a fierce smile she couldn’t see, taking his cock in his hand and rubbing the tip at her entrance. She was ready.

Any thesal offered his lovers—his lovers also being its food, the secret making no distinction—intense pleasure so the thesal could take her blood for the secret. But the more he prepared her beforehand, the better she would taste.

Dmitri moved over her. She was slick. He found her and pressed in, rocking and then beginning to thrust, grunting lightly, his hand rounding her hip. She was meeting him, shuddering, her knees coming up higher.

Dmitri’s secret was awake in him, the Ornthir bringing a dark keenness to his vision, an urgency to his thrusts, the desires blending in Dmitri’s mind, carnal and for blood, mixing. They did this well together, his secret always with him.

Dmitri eyed her throat, her smell approaching what he wanted, her little cunt one kind of heat. He leaned down and nuzzled her neck, feeling the other kind of heat, warm, pulsing like a living thing, rushing under his lips. Dmitri was thrusting roughly, his own pleasure rising fast, the woman spread out under him.

He dragged his lips where her blood ran close to the surface at her throat, relishing the nearness of it, feeling the fast rhythm of her heart, and found his angle.

His teeth dropped and he broke through her skin slowly, enjoying it, sinking into her softness, setting the hooks. Her taste filled the channels that took it, giving him pleasure. Giving his secret pleasure.

The woman cried out behind the gag, arching. There was no way he could stop the pain of such a deep bite. But his venom followed, flowing on a separate path, slipping into the stream of her blood as she drew another breath, going all through her body in moments. She cried out again, arching. She went rigid with the beginning of her climax, her body shaking. He thrust deeper as she clamped on him, her cunt pulsing, feeling good on his cock as he pulled her blood again.

Dmitri closed his eyes. The pleasure of her blood was ongoing, as strong in the first moment as in the last. The carnal pleasure had an arc, a rising need and then the release. He couldn't separate them. This was what happened to those who carried a secret, which didn't see any difference between fucking and eating.

His channels easily alternated, giving him the sensation of swallowing, although it was not his throat. He gave her more venom, making her come harder. She would climax as long and as many times as he wanted. His thrusts became ragged, deeper. He pulled more blood from her.

His secret needed it. Its requirement for blood was everything—food and water, desire and appetite, lust and hunger, intimacy and predation, all in the thick, sticky

warmth that flowed into him from her. And it felt good. Dmitri swallowed once more and began to come.

The woman's knees came up entirely, her cries frantic with pleasure. He didn't worry he'd hurt her. A young thesal new to carrying a secret sometimes drew too deeply, taking too much, but Dmitri was far from young.

His venom burned out any sickness she might otherwise give to him, and he hadn't smelled any. And he didn't have to worry about impregnating her either. All thesals were sterile. He'd given that up when he'd accepted his secret, part of the price he had paid.

He grunted, releasing in her, holding there, more pleasure washing through him. He flexed a last time and then slowly released his jaws, leaning back. He was over her, his mouth working, savoring the taste of blood. Dmitri looked at her neck. The wound was already closing, would be gone in a moment.

Dmitri leaned down, lingering to smell her throat, nuzzling her, instinctive, his breath stirring her hair, scenting himself on her, in her. It was a moment of intimacy he couldn't stop and she didn't feel. He withdrew from her gently, moving off of her. Dmitri straightened, feeling the blood flush through his body. His secret was satisfied. He buttoned his pants, reached and untied her gag, withdrawing it gently.

He waited. She finally sat up, staring blindly, her hands going to her bodice. She pulled it up over her breasts, her hand holding it there. She was a little dazed, as they sometimes were, but she was unmarked. Some food and a night's rest and she'd never notice what he'd taken.

She startled when he touched her arm, giving a small cry. He realized she hadn't known he was still there. He forgot to make noise sometimes, forgot how blind they were, how dull their senses. He collected her clothes—she wouldn't be able to find them quickly—making sure she looked presentable.

When she was ready, he leaned down and kissed her mouth, taking his time.

He felt her hesitate and then she answered him, her arms coming around his neck. She was sweet. He straightened, opening the door for her. She went out, moving a little shakily toward the light, and Dmitri slipped down the hall and then out the back door into darkness.

People moved out of his path as Dmitri continued his way up the main road. He could feed from anyone, but he enjoyed women. Their smaller size, their soft skin, their tits and pussies and their high cries of pleasure. But the secret's goal was always blood. It was up to a thesal to learn to control the secret's more dangerous impulses. The secret would keep feeding regardless, and sometimes until a thesal's lover was dead. It was a little mindless that way.

His Ornthir muttered irritably at Dmitri's thoughts, a low growl coming to Dmitri's throat. Dmitri voiced it, unable not to, a Caskian man walking in front of him glancing behind himself uneasily, the man seeing Dmitri's cloak and increasing his speed.

Dmitri didn't mind their fear. He was a solitary creature anyway. He never hid what he was. He declared it with the cloak he wore.

Chapter Two

There was a Veshtan temple for healing as there were in most villages on the coast, a large one in Caska. The temple was perched at the top of the hill at one of the highest points in the city. It was a building surrounding a stone square with a courtyard and gardens in the center, tall peaked red roofs.

The temples were the closest thing the wandering thesals had to a home, providing shelter and Veshtan hospitality. When they had first taken on the Secrat, Veshtans had built a huge underground city for the thesals in the catacombs outside of Nesra, the Veshtan city. But they had misunderstood the nature of thesals, the Secrat and their hosts restless, unwilling to stay in a single place, and generations later the underground city remained empty and echoing.

Dmitri walked up the path to the temple, away from the noisy streets of Caska, a gentle rise. He reached the arched stone entrance, the Veshtan sign for healing displayed there. Slipping under it, he wound his way soundlessly through the healer's herb garden and then into the courtyard. He stopped, waiting.

Time passed. He realized nobody was going to notice him. He was too still sometimes. He forgot how reliant on motion they were to sense someone else. It was astonishing how close he could get to people without them knowing.

Dmitri finally moved around a little aimlessly, having lost the knack, a man seeing him, startled, going inside quickly. In a moment, an acolyte came.

"Fortend ausi lamine, duvehin?" the acolyte asked him in the language spoken in Caska.

It was nothing Dmitri understood, the acolyte peering into the darkness. The acolyte couldn't see in the dark like Dmitri could. Dmitri took a step forward, into the torchlight. The man saw his thesal cloak, the crimson flash of the lining. He bowed.

"Your pardon, thesal," the acolyte said in Romini, the Veshtan language. "Do you require comfort?"

The acolyte offered him the comfort of the dama, the Veshtan priestess housed here who would give him blood if he wanted it, allow him to bed her, a part of their rituals, the religion arcane. But the Caskian woman Dmitri had fed from had sated him and he wouldn't require blood for another few nights.

"I am grateful, but no," Dmitri said the ritual words, refusing. "A place to rest."

"Dmitri," he heard, turning his head.

Vlad, the master acolyte at Caska, came into the courtyard, a man nearing his rite, the time when a secret would judge him worthy or not. The master acolyte had wavy brown hair and warm eyes, large expressive hands.

"Vlad," Dmitri greeted him, pulling a vial from the pocket of his robes as the master acolyte bowed. "I have brought bark from the Quixol tree to add to the temple's supplies. The Dyosis arranged it. I retrieved it from the Southron lands. It will draw the parasite."

Veshtans were healers, and those Veshtans who chose to become thesals often served as messengers or couriers for the Veshtan Dyosis, a thesal being a fast traveler and the last person from whom anyone would try to steal. Vlad nodded, holding up the vial and looking at it.

"We have had many cases of the fever in Caska and several deaths," Vlad said, putting the vial in his pocket. "I will tell the healers when they wake. The temple is grateful, thesal. Excuse me."

Vlad gestured at the younger acolyte, who led Dmitri into the main hall, a kitchen and tables at which to eat. There was a fireplace with chairs gathered around it. From the hall, there were several halls branching off, books of medicine lining the walls. The acolyte led him through the opening to the right of the fireplace. Glancing left, Dmitri saw a room with long rows of drying plants hanging in bunches from the

ceiling. There were pleasant smells, autumn herbs, vials and beakers carefully arranged. Mortars and pestles. Holding jars, solvents and oils.

There was a corridor, all stone, and then they were going down a flight of stairs to a landing, and to another flight of stairs that curved in the same direction. At the bottom of the stairs, Dmitri was led down a hall and into a large private room, no windows. The acolyte left, closing the door quietly behind himself.

Dmitri set his pack down on the floor, shrugging off his cloak and setting it aside. There was a bed, although Dmitri didn't lie down to rest. The room was decorated like a Veshtan bedchamber, fine art and tapestries, a woven rug, the bedspread made of Luterian wool, freshly laundered sheets lightly scented with lavender. A fire was burning, the place warm, vented through the roof. Dmitri didn't need it, but it felt pleasant. Despite being relatively impervious to weather, all thesals complained of a nagging sense of being perpetually chilled.

Dmitri sat on the bed and removed his boots and then went and poured water from the pitcher into a basin, cleaning his hands. Water was another need that was served by blood, but he still had to wash. A scratch came at the door.

"Enter," he said, taking up a cloth and drying his hands.

The same acolyte came in. Dmitri looked at him.

"What are you called?" Dmitri said as the man set a towel and a bar of soap on a small ornate table by the door, the acolyte's eyes making a sweep of the room to make sure things were as they should be.

"Mircea, Thesal. There are baths down the hall. It's a natural spring, hot. It has everything you will need."

Dimitri knew that. He'd been here many times. Still, he hadn't really spoken to anyone in a long time. He'd been traveling, months of it. He and Vlad had spent time together

last time Dmitri had been here, but the master acolyte had indicated he was busy. Dmitri eyed the acolyte.

"When is your rite?" Dmitri asked him, seeing if he would talk.

The man paused, his hand on the door handle.

"I still have eight more years, thesal," he answered, "before I will be judged."

"It's not so long," Dmitri said. "Twelve behind you."

"I hope to be worthy, thesal," Mircea said.

The acolyte didn't ask his name. Some in the temples just wouldn't. Dmitri unbuttoned and drew off his shirt as the man turned to leave. He would put his clothing in the basket in the hall. The acolytes would wash his clothing and return them the next evening after Dmitri had rested.

Dmitri glanced up. The acolyte was still standing in the doorway, staring at Dmitri's wrist where the beginnings of the color began. It marked the secrat's entry point, winding around his arm and over his shoulder, the secrat's path to Dmitri's brain forever scarred into his body.

The Veshtan priestesses had placed the patterns of colorful ink there after the ritual, following the secrat line. The bond was irreversible, the secrat burrowing deep. Trying to remove the secrat would kill him now.

"Dithstal," the man said, excited, looking at the mark.

Dmitri sighed, walking and squatting by his pack.

"Ornthir," he corrected, pulling out clean clothing.

Older than Dithstal, certainly, Dmitri's secrat irritable at the error, the acolyte chagrined but still interested.

"The Ornthir? Truly?"

"Yes," Dmitri confirmed, looking up at him.

The acolyte remembered himself, dragging his eyes from the ink, leaving. The dama would be disappointed when she learned Dmitri didn't require her. Dmitri wasn't just any thesal. His secrat was an Ornthir, the only Ornthir left, the last of its line, the most ancient and powerful of the secrat, Dmitri's not the first body it had ridden.

The dama would want his venom, would want what it would do to her body, a part of her rituals. His venom was potent. Powder made from thesal venom went out all over the world in salves and tonics, healing.

The Secrat were long-lived beings, symbiotic, moving into a host for the host's lifetime and then going to another when the host's natural span—about three hundred years for a Veshtan—was done, the priestesses at the Veshtan temple at Nesra overseeing the transfer.

But no being was immortal. For all it was ancient, Dmitri's Ornthir would die eventually. Nobody knew how they had once reproduced, but there were no young secrats now. Veshtan speculated that the Secrat were dying out. The secrats confirmed this when they were asked. But they couldn't say why.

They couldn't say anything. They didn't talk.

Dmitri would return to Caska, regardless. He might still take comfort from the dama before he went home. He would go inland to Shapir, a small village there, his last stop, delivering the Quixol root before he returned to the Veshtan city, Nesra, far in the north.

When the acolyte was gone—off to tell everyone in the temple the Ornthir had come, Dmitri imagined—he stretched, feeling good to be off the ship, good to be fed and sated. His fingertips almost touched the ceiling, his shoulders alternating, tensing and relaxing. He opened the door and made his way to the baths.

Dmitri lifted his pack, dusk, leaving the Veshtan temple in Caska. It was a few days' travel by foot to the small village of Shapir, although he would get there in two nights, his stride long and tireless. He sometimes ran to places if he wanted to get there faster, but he was in no hurry.

He didn't ride. He and horses had an uneasy relationship, since he was nocturnal and they went by the diurnal rhythms that had been so familiar to him long ago. And they

were shy of him, uneasy, didn't tolerate him well, sensing his secret.

All animals were.

It was early evening. Dmitri walked easily. The village to which he was traveling barely qualified as such it was so small, and the crude road, little more than a path, leading to it, was mostly empty at night. A couple of times he heard the steady lub of hearts. Sometimes they were pounding, excitement or desire, the lure of the night that most people only tasted lightly, on its coming edge, experiencing the rest of it dreaming. As the night wore on, the woods around him were full of only the stirring of nocturnal creatures like himself, their higher, faster heart rhythms as familiar to him.

Dmitri walked through the night, quiet, his secret a background noise in his mind, similarly content to move across the landscape. Slowly the sky filled with the beginnings of color. It was Dmitri's favorite time, the light seeming so bright, although he knew it would be dim to others, pre-dawn. It would blind him if he lingered, would burn his skin if the sunlight fell directly.

He didn't really remember the feeling of sunlight on his skin, although he remembered fearing he would miss it.

When it was time, Dmitri went into the deep woods, staying near the river for the sound of it. He found a hollow tree. He took his pack off, burying it in dead leaves. He had his thesal cloak, thick, made for this purpose. When he had been a young thesal, he had once survived a whole anxious day under it, exposed on a dusty plain, just inattention and bad luck, the agony of sunlight a breath away.

He swept the huge dead center of the tree out. The clearing was dim in front of him, covered by canopy. He got in, squatting, his knees up. He drew the deep hood over his head, drew the sleeves down over his hands and waited, the second lids in his eyes slowly closing, the world dimming, protecting the sensitive irises.

Dmitri didn't exactly sleep. The changes the secret had made to his body meant that he required very little of it. He drowsed, a twilight state, sometimes dreaming or remembering, sometimes aware of what happened around him.

Hours later, a hotazine stopped at the river to drink, her brown rump in dappled sunlight, her form delicate, coarse fur. Dmitri roused to the scent of her blood, watching her. The wind shifted, sending his scent to her and she bolted, her mouth opening in terror, panting. His eyes shifted, following her path, and then his attention wandered, going down again.

Animals always reacted like this. Other people were more likely to eat her. He hated animal blood, all thesals did. Dmitri drifted, his thoughts becoming abstract. He dreamed.

Lawhen ran through the forest. The tall black wood gates were ahead, safety.

She had left Tia behind, just left her, one of the two men catching her and throwing Tia to the ground. Tears blurred Lawhen's vision as she tried to go faster. She looked behind her and cried out.

She wasn't going to make it.

She could hear him. He was too fast. She realized she was still carrying the basket. They had been in the forest collecting roots. She and Tia had run and Tia had been behind her—.

Lawhen dropped the basket, trying to run faster, so frightened, knowing she couldn't escape.

Her hand went to her knife and she cried out as he slammed into her from behind. She cried out again as they hit the dirt of the forest floor together, rolling, coming to a stop with his body on top of her. She pulled her knife and he slapped it from her hand where it went flying, using the return to strike her face, a heavy, open-handed blow.

Lawhen lost time, becoming aware when she felt her shirt ripping, felt his hands on her breasts, the man reeking,

filthy. She felt his mouth on them, felt him pulling her pants down. His face was cruel, his yellow hair in braids wrapped with red ribbon, his eyes crazed. His hands were everywhere, Lawhen struggling and then pain, so much pain.

She cried out again and heard him laugh, felt him thrusting into her body—.

Dmitri abruptly became aware, breathing fast, snarling, his mouth open and his secret teeth bared entirely, venom dripping onto the forest floor with small fast taps. He panted, the images slow to leave him.

He realized his hands were shaking. He slowly managed to stop growling, his teeth clashing once, loud, getting himself under control, his secret as upset. The Ornthir was beside itself, waves of hatred directed at the male figure in the dream. It was an effect of taking the secret, these dreams. His Ornthir didn't sleep, but it shared them when Dmitri did.

Dmitri breathed, closing his eyes, waiting for his secret to calm.

Nobody knew why the thesals had these dreams about the women in front of the black wooden gates, the walls of black stacked stone, but all of them did. Dmitri shuddered, trying to move past the horror of it, unable to separate it from the outrage his secret felt.

His secret offered him the image it often did, a woman, long dark hair, beautiful. She was laughing, happy, her eyes so light gray they almost looked white, so like thesal eyes. The Ornthir's feelings followed as they always did, a wave of keen longing and grief. Dmitri endured it.

It was almost as painful as the dream, the secret's loneliness always pulling at him.

All the thesals dreamed of these women, some kind of transfer from the Secret to their hosts. From these visions and dreams, Veshtan speculated that these women had once hosted the Secret long ago. Dmitri felt a wave of

impatience from his Ornthir, his secret more alert than others. His Ornthir was always impatient when this idea was raised.

Dmitri had to say that it was difficult for him to imagine thesals who were women, a secret in their heads. His secret had always seemed male to him, although he knew the tiny creature had no sex.

Lawhen. Tia. Dmitri rolled the names of the two women in his mind. They had seemed so real. He didn't know why his secret would name the figures in his dream. His secret didn't have a name. The answer was lost to the history of the Secret, the womens' faces the only thing left.

By the next night, Dmitri was done with Shapir and ready to return to Caska. Shapir had been depressing and small, the temple tiny, the few people there panicking a little to give shelter to his Ornthir. The master acolyte had apologized repeatedly for having no dama to give him comfort. The woman had left the order and gone home, her replacement not arrived yet.

Dmitri was untroubled by it. He would return tomorrow night and go to the Dama in Caska. He left the temple, eyeing the vast swath of forest that surrounded it, places people didn't go. It must be strange to live on the edge of all that unknown.

From Caska, Dmitri would make the long walk northwest to Nesra, inland, the land curving, the Veshtan city deep in the mountains. He would move from temple to temple, including the temple closest to Nesra, the place where Dmitri had spent twenty years being trained before taking on his secret.

But when he was ready, passing through the courtyard and out of the arch, dusk and his feet on the road, Dmitri found his Ornthir stirring, its attention entirely in the opposite direction. Dmitri stopped, looking the other way, where the wide path into Shapir ended and a small path into the deep forest began.

Dmitri was walking. He stopped, looking around. He was in a forest, no memory of coming there. He turned around. He could see torchlight. He realized Shapir was behind him, down a small path. He could just see the roof of the temple through a break in the trees. Dmitri frowned and turned around, beginning to walk toward it.

Dmitri was walking. He stopped, looking at the forest all around him. He turned around, seeing the roof of the temple through a break in the trees.

He closed his eyes. His secret couldn't control his actions, not outright, at least not for long. But it could make very strong suggestions. The Ornthir wanted him to go this way, northeast, straight into the thickest nowhere of the uncharted jungle.

Dmitri didn't understand, peering deeper into the forest. This was the vast Northern Wilderness. It didn't have another name. There were no people there, no settlements. It was just what it was. Animals and trees, rivers and mountains. Nobody went into the forested area in this part of the world, huge, predatory animals and quicksand, danger everywhere and no reason to be there. Why would they?

The Ornthir sent him a vision of the woman, the pale woman with dark hair and light gray eyes. Dmitri dwelled a little on her stark beauty, always so startling.

The dream again. Dmitri made a light sound of impatience. He could find a woman in any village to satisfy his hunger, and he had absolutely no desire to go wandering aimlessly in the thick of a jungle that in every map was simply described by a huge and uninhabited swath of green, no details.

He turned and strode back toward the temple.

Dmitri stopped, looking at the forest all around him. He turned, seeing the roof of the temple behind him through a break in the trees.

His secret was quiet. Dmitri sensed that if he turned back to the temple now, the Ornthir would let him, that it wouldn't try to stop him, maybe even couldn't. But in the near forty years he had carried the secret, it had never made this kind of demand, had never attempted to interfere so directly. They benefited from helping each other, and if one wanted something, the other—.

Dmitri felt a jolt of irritation, recognizing the secret's influence on his thoughts, something the Ornthir hadn't attempted in over three decades. The secret was quiet again. Dmitri looked into the jungle, feeling a wave of reluctance.

There were no temples in there. There were no cities in there, no villages, no people. No people meant Dmitri would have to subsist on animals. People were their food source, he reminded the Ornthir. Dmitri's nose wrinkled, but the secret was still curiously quiet at the prospect, something that should have upset it, something it should have fought. His Ornthir really wanted this.

Dmitri sighed and stepped toward the path, shouldering his pack, his secret emanating contentment.

Eighteen nights later, Dmitri was angry, hungry, and disgusted.

He was free from many of the dangers that a typical traveler alone in the jungle would face. He didn't get lost. He was relatively impervious to weather, didn't get diseases, healed if he was hurt. There weren't many predators here as dangerous as Dmitri was. The biggest of the cats, maybe. The huge forest tocsa, its thick brown coat and muzzle, crushing strength, making its marks on the trees to indicate its territory that Dmitri avoided.

But he hated animal blood and he had seen absolutely nothing in this forest that would lead him to believe that his secret had brought him here for anything except to torment him, urging him farther, wheedling and persuading.

Dmitri dropped the hotazine, the animal's body hitting the forest floor with a thud. Dmitri's mouth opened and closed with distaste, the blood bitter, awful. Wrong, thin. Unsatisfying.

He felt a wave of frustration. He was still hungry even sloshing with the stuff. He couldn't subsist on animals for too long. It would bring its own sickness, not to mention it was, again, completely disgusting.

He turned his head, looking back the way he had come. He still had to walk to Shapir, the way back the same distance he had already traveled, that being the law of distances.

Dmitri growled, a deep stuttering noise. That wasn't his secret. That was entirely him.

His Ornthir was being entirely too complacent about their diet, had been quiet about that through the whole miserable journey, having gotten what it wanted in the first place.

He would turn back tomorrow night, Dmitri decided, feeling the first stirrings of predictable protest from his secret, the same that had kept him going far past when he should have turned his nose toward Shapir. Dmitri voiced a furious, short sound, echoing a little, sonorous, the forest going even more silent around him, his secret going as quiet.

Dmitri picked up his pack and began to walk, the same direction he had been going, pine needles yielding under his boots. The secret offered more surety that there was something here somewhere that they absolutely needed to see. A thesal could move fast, and Dmitri didn't tire. By the time the sounds of the birds signaled day, he had covered far more territory than a typical Veshtan could. And all of it was the same.

Tomorrow night, he decided, ignoring his secret's objections. He found a place, uncomfortable. Hungry and irritable.