

An Untold Tale

# Brionwy's Lullaby

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**This is a story from the *Night World* book *Strange Fate* about the future—the future which awaits the world if the Apocalypse is not stopped. In this future, Dragons and vampires rule. The vampires pick the most beautiful of human girls, called Beauties, and keep them as slaves in harems. Brionwy is one such girl who is unlucky enough to catch her vampire master's eye. There will be much more about Brionwy in *Strange Fate*, but this story is meant to stand alone. Rating: for mature people who enjoy suspense and vampire tales.**

## Part I

"What's wrong?" Panting, Brionwy arrived at the center of the commotion just as the eunuchs shut the great doors of the conservatory behind her, keeping everyone else out.

She was in a sea of young girls in the twilight. It didn't occur to her to think that each of the girls was beautiful, was in fact, stunningly beautiful in her own way, because Brionwy had never seen any other sort of girl. The only unattractive faces she saw were the eunuchs and the old servants, and they didn't really count as people.

Now, a pale glow lit the faces of the girls in the conservatory. Several of them had lanterns or candles. The rest were lit by tiny lights that wound around the creeping ivy and wild roses that grew up the golden filigree columns of the pavilion. It was splendid here—but Brionwy no more saw the splendor than she saw the striking beauty of the girls. She lived in splendor in her chambers, ate in splendor, walked around the splendid gardens, with their gilded pergolas and their alabaster benches. The only thing she could not do was to walk out of the splendor, to leave the Great House where she lived in the harem quarters.



She was a courtesan.

Brionwy knew that, and knew what it meant, and at seventeen years old, she was old enough to worry. The Lord Overseer was *lamia*, a family vampire, the kind that could eat and drink and breathe—and procreate. But ever since Brionwy had come of age at twelve she had heard that the Lord Overseer of the Great House liked women, not young teenagers. That meant that she had *years* before she had to worry, and at twelve, years are lifetimes.

Now, though, things had taken on quite a different complexion. Things that seemed like games when she was young, playing with her nurse, had become deadly earnest intrigue.

"What happened?" she said again, looking for somebody sensible to answer her. And then she saw Marlin and Lyric and went to them. They were the only two girls who could be called friends in this entire bunch.

"What's going on?" she asked them. "I woke up when I heard screaming and I just followed it."

Lyric, a diminutive girl from the north, with very fair skin, light blond hair and eyes that were crystal gray answered her. "It's Aviva. Her baby is . . . gone. They took it—its . . . body away while she slept."

You had to talk like that. Even to people that you were certain were safe, you had to talk around it. One single word wrong these days and they'd beat you on the soles of your

feet. It didn't leave a mark, but it took a week in bed for the pain to go away. Brionwy had heard some of the screaming from a girl being beaten that way, and she never wanted to hear anything like it again.

She had been learning to talk like that since her first *dwenna*, Ceru, had taught her not to drink the midday golden juice or wine. Her first *duenna*, Brionwy corrected herself carefully. Ceru had told her it meant companion, chaperone, but to Brionwy it had meant nurse.

Ceru had nursed all three of them, Lyric, Marlin, and her; different as they were, they were all exactly the same age to the week.

And then one day Ceru disappeared and the word was that they'd put her in the women's pens down below the house, waiting for the next dragon to come and sate its appetite.

There had been nothing for them to do about it.

Now Brionwy said, "How old is Vivi?"

"Eighteen, I think," Marlin whispered back. In the dim light she almost disappeared.

Marlin was a nightskin, with dark hair that curled almost to her waist like a mane, and startling golden eyes.

"Eighteen, just barely," Lyric said.

"That young? And already a bereaved mother . . ." Brionwy whispered.

"Don't fret," Marlin whispered back. "Right now our lord only has a taste for tall dark-haired girls with pale skin. That leaves all of us out."

Lyric seemed to repress a shiver. "But that taste could change at any minute. He might suddenly want dark-skinned girls, with the eyes of a hawk . . ."

"Or little pale girls with gray eyes that look like ghosts . . ."

"Oh, don't," whispered Brionwy, but Marlin went on relentlessly shaking her curly black mane, "Or girls with red-gold hair and violet-blue eyes."

Brionwy knew it was true. And if the Lord Overseer *did* decide that he wanted girls like that, Brionwy would be bathed and massaged and plucked and soaked in perfume and put in a line of other redheads, all dressed in wisps of gauzy diaphanous nothingness.

"If that happens, it may be my day to die," Brionwy said to Marlin in an almost inaudible voice. "Because I don't know what I would do."

"You'll do what you're told. You're his toy. You're a courtesan."

"I'm a human being."

"And he's a vampire. That's the whole point. If you refuse him he'll have you thrown in the pen for hinds to wait for the next dragon."

The pen for hinds. For unmarried women. A stinking, filthy pen where haggard girls wearing rags for clothes waited for a hungry Master to fly by the Great House and its plantation of humans.

Brionwy was afraid of dragons, but not terrified. There was much scurrying about in the Great House before one of their visits, and the Beauties were given a special drink that put them to sleep for an entire day, twilight to twilight. This red juice, she *did* drink. Once, when Brionwy had said she'd like to stay awake and watch from her window what happened, Ceru had slapped her. It was one of the few times she'd ever seen her nurse angry. But Ceru had made her understand—if she heard the dragon Call; she wouldn't be watching, she would be trying to get to the dragon at any cost. That was how dragons collected their prey.

"You *don't* want to be put in a pen," Marlin assured her. She was one of those rare girls born, not to a Beauty in the harem, but to a woman in the breeding pens. She had made it through three tough selections before she was declared a Beauty and brought here. A single blemish, a mole or freckle or eyebrow hair that did not add to her beauty and she would never have made it through the third selection. But she had, and she was taken from her screaming mother to live in luxury and splendor—as a slave to beauty.

"Besides," Lyric was saying in a frightened whisper, "he has all those huge eunuch guards. He might force you."

"Ceru taught us to fight, didn't she?"

"But we haven't kept up practice. How can we, with that *dwenna* watching all the

time?"

Brionwy said nothing. She didn't want to frighten Lyric anymore than she already had. The tiny blond might not have kept up practice, but Brionwy had and she knew Marlin had, too. You could tell, pretty much, when a dwenna was coming. And each of them had been taught by Ceru to develop some special talent that took up space and solitude, giving them each an excuse to get off the perfumed cushions in the central pavilion and make some corner of the extensive gardens their own private territory. That was how Marlin had become a dancer, Lyric, an artist, she, Brionwy, a singer of songs.

"A singer of lullabies," she whispered. "A singer who sings to keep from going mad."

"What was that?" Even Marlin's sharp ears hadn't caught it.

"Nothing. Never mind—" Brionwy broke off as a sudden clamor of voices rose around them.

"Watch out!"

"Here she comes—"

"She's gone crazy . . . ."

Brionwy looked around. Yes, there was Aviva, her dark hair loose and tangled, her face haggard. You wouldn't take her for a Beauty now, Brionwy thought, and then Aviva had grabbed her arms and she was being shaken.

"Where is she? Where did they take her?"

"Aviva . . . Vivi . . . ."

"Don't tell me she's dead! She was lying beside me. Where is she?"

"Vivi, I'm sorry . . . ."

"You know things! You know what's really happening! *Tell me where my baby is!*"

Brionwy was terrified. Aviva was saying things that should never be said aloud. She must truly have lost her mind. She clearly cared nothing about her life, or for Brionwy's life either.

Brionwy could see that Marlin was trying to pry Vivi off her, but although the muscles in Marlin's arms were corded, the crisis had given Aviva inhuman strength. Around them, some girls were backing off. The only ones left were those who were deeply under the influence of the golden wine and had no understanding, or those who were very smart, and realized that they should act like girls with no understanding. It was the middling smart girls backing away.

Brionwy knew what she had to do. But her voice shook as she did it.

"Aviva, your baby is dead. I'm so sorry."

"You're lying! *You're lyyyying!* If she's dead, where's her little body?"

"You know the rules." Brionwy's body was shaking, too. "The dead are not to be left where they fall. They are to be burnt to holy ash and the ash—"

She broke off because Aviva slapped her across the mouth. But even with only one hand holding Brionwy's arm, Marlin couldn't pry her off.

"Don't patronize me! You're not crazy! I'm not crazy! Babies don't just die, not so many of them, not always in the night! What about Vivienne's baby, and Donoma's, and Ianthe's—and Hajira's? Always in the night! Always with a dwenna on watch!"

Brionwy's mouth was stinging and she could taste the copper of her own blood. It nauseated her.

"It's a disease," she got out. "They used to call it crib death—something that little babies get—"

"Do you know what they gave meeee?" Aviva shrieked each word out separately.

"Do you know where they said my little Kefira was?"

"N-no . . . . Aviva . . . ."

"Here!" Aviva screamed like a triumphant vulture and with her free hand she pulled a small urn out of her pocket and then to Brionwy's horror there was thick dust in her eyes, on her face, in her nostrils, in her mouth. "Heeeeere! Heeeeere!" Aviva went on screaming the words, shaking Brionwy, until Brionwy, already nauseated, began to retch. "They said this is my baby! You have my Kefira in your mouth!"

Blindly, Brionwy turned and emptied her stomach.

Someone—Marlin probably, was trying to wipe her face.



And then the dwennas came.

Not just the dwennas. The head dwenna, Guntra, came herself, along with Sansana, her spy and aide-de-camp. Guntra was almost as large as some of the eunuchs, but she looked like a goddess of war; she had muscles on her arms that allowed her to pull Aviva backwards and force her to let go of Brionwy, although Aviva tried to hold on to the end and her nails left five scores in the flesh of Brionwy's upper arm.

Brionwy didn't care; she was just glad that the shaking had stopped. She wished she could open her eyes without pain.

"Now," said Guntra in a voice that should have been accompanied by lightning, "What's going on here? My girls fighting?"

They were "her girls" but it wasn't a term of affection. She said it the way she might have said "my dogs."

There was a babel of explanations from all sides. Fighting was also strictly against the rules. It damaged the merchandise, brought down the value of the Lord Overseer's property. Brionwy didn't understand how anyone could have gotten the story from the tumult around her, but in a moment Guntra was saying, "That's enough!" and then, "Guards! Bring Aviva, Marlin, and Brionwy to my solarium."

The disciplinary room! Brionwy tried to say something; that Marlin didn't need to be sent there at least; that she hadn't been fighting, but it was no good. Her mouth was still full of—of . . . she tried to stop and retch, but the softly-padded but large and strong hands that gripped her upper arms kept her going. They couldn't keep her from retching, though. She heard Marlin boldly saying that she, Brionwy, should be sent to the infirmary, and she felt a twinge of gratitude and regret.

Maybe the Lady Dwenna heard it as well, because as they reached the solarium she said, "That girl," and Brionwy felt hands push her forward.

"Open your eyes!"

Brionwy tried but had to close them immediately because of the dust. She tried again. Tears were running down her face in an uncontrollable stream, trying to wash the particles away.

"Sansa, take her and hold her under the fountain until that dust is washed out."

There was a fountain in the room; Brionwy could hear its familiar splashing. She went willingly with the new, cold and boney hand that gripped her arm in the same sore place and then they got close to the wound of water. Brionwy risked a look, saw a stream of water from the carved face of a dragon, and bent toward it, automatically reaching up to keep her hair out of the way.

"Sansa, hold her hair." Did Brionwy imagine it or was there a perceptible hesitation, an unwillingness before Sansama gripped her hair, pulling on it as she held it back, pulling it up hard that Brionwy almost hit the dragon. But then the grip eased and she was allowed to wash her eyes out in the stream of cold water. Nothing had ever felt so good. She washed her face, too, and then stepped back, shaking her hands over the fountain to dry them.

"Now you come here and tell me what happened in the peacock pavilion."

Brionwy had been wondering how the guards had kept Aviva from shrieking as they walked toward the room where discipline was meted out. Now she saw. One of the largest of the eunuchs had her in his grip, with a huge hand over her mouth. It was so large that it covered her nose as well, so that he could have smothered her.

Marlin was standing in the customary position of respect, head bent, eyes down, hands crossed on her chest. Brionwy quickly joined her, but water from her wet face dripped onto the floor.

"Sansa, your handkerchief. Now, girl, begin," said the big woman. Brionwy took a delicate, lacy handkerchief from the aide-de-camp. She couldn't help seeing the resentment in Sansama's face at being given these orders, as if she were an inferior, while the three girls heard it all and did nothing. Sansama had gone the opposite direction from Guntra as she aged and had become almost too lean and wiry, her face lovely and yet almost a death's head, with the skin pulled tight under hair that was dyed jet black.

Brionwy swiped her face with the handkerchief and began. She told of the screams she heard, of the pavilion milling with girls, and of Aviva's seizure of her. Here, she tried to

soften Aviva's accusations, while making sure that no one could say that she had lied.

"And all Marlin did was to try to make her let go of me," she finished. "Honestly, she wasn't involved in the fight at all."

But Guntra was frighteningly perceptive. "Not involved in the fight and yet trying to get you away from *the mad girl*," she remarked and smiled. It was not a merry smile. "Silas! Let go of that girl's mouth. One of you others find some yanme. All three of them could use a drink."

Yanme, that was the golden wine that tasted of pears and honey. It also made you pliant, hopeful, and truthful. Too relaxed to think of a clever lie. Brionwy only hoped that Marlin had been doing nothing against the rules lately.

"I won't drink it," a soft voice said.

From the position of respect Brionwy looked around in surprise to see who had spoken. With even greater surprise she saw that it was Aviva. She now sounded almost sane.

"You all think I'm crazy," she said in that same dead-quiet voice. "But I'm not. There's something going on. I'm sorry I threw that ash in your face, Brionwy. I thought you might know something or think like I do, but I was wrong," she added, to Brionwy's vast gratitude and relief. Vivi had just saved her from a beating, if not much worse. "And Marlin had nothing to do with it; she was just trying to break up a fight before I *really* hurt Brionwy."

"Well, you seem to have come to your senses remarkably fast, once you saw my little room of toys," rumbled Guntra amiably, like a volcano that has decided not to erupt after all.

Brionwy dared not lift her head to see the "toys" but she could guess from stories she'd heard what they were. . . the flexible canes for beatings, the shrews' bits that effectively kept you from speaking, the pool for dunking, the box of uncooked rice for kneeling in. None of them left a mark, or at least not a permanent mark. But they were torture just the same.

"Yes, I'm sane now," said Aviva, taking the golden goblet and swiftly downing the contents in one long draft. Marlin and Brionwy sipped at theirs more slowly. It was, Brionwy realized, much stronger than usual.

Guntra's smile was cruel, although she would have made a magnificent statue. "Many of my girls suddenly come down with a case of sanity when they see my solarium. But apologies won't change the fact that you've damaged merchandise, and committed sacrilege, not to mention breaking my sleep."

Sansama said, not even trying to hide her enthusiasm, "I think it's time for a toe tapping."

Brionwy, drinking her golden wine like an obedient puppet, expected to hear another apology from Aviva. She was waiting her chance to speak up, she wanted to tell Guntra about the lullaby sadness—a sort of melancholy that set in after a girl had a baby. She would be very careful to not mention the words "post-partum depression" which would give away the fact that she was reading old books. The ancient library of the harem was not exactly forbidden, but few of the girls even knew where it existed.

"No, apologies won't change that," Aviva said, still quietly, "*and apologies won't bring back my baby*. Kefira was named after my mother. She was three weeks old. *Where is she?*"

It was almost worse than hearing the words shrieked, to hear them almost whispered in this hissing, quiet voice. However soft, they still had a scream bottled up in them.

"She sleeps with me, with my arm around her. And tonight I woke up and my arm was empty. Empty! She was gone, my dwenna was gone, and when the bitch came back she told me it was all for my own good. That she'd touched Kefira and found that she was cold, so she took her away. That she'd done it so I wouldn't have to see her little body."

"That sounds reasonable to me," Guntra said. The volcano was still sleeping, but there was a warning rumble beneath the words. "Always remember, your dwennas are older than you, wiser than you, that they are here to protect you."

"If it were just me, that would be one thing. But it wasn't just me. I slept with her in my bed, not in the crib because so many babies have died in their cribs in the last few

months. Do you remember Hajira, who killed herself? Her baby died. And Donoma. And Ianthe. And Vivienne—all their babies died or were taken away because they were boys.”

“We’ve had a bad run of luck.” Guntra sat back in her chair and took out a smoking stick, a cigar. She lit it in a candle flame that Sansama held for her, and went on speaking, blowing smoke out with the words. “But as you said, two of them were boys. And boys, even babies, can’t be raised here.”

“But that’s just our seraglio. When I was pregnant, especially at the end, I got frightened. I talked to some eighteen-year-olds, to nineteen- and twenty-year-olds—”

“Those girls are none of your business!”

“Maybe they weren’t before but they are now! We all have something in common. Shall I name some names? Phillana. Tesia. Lilike. Siany and Darrieau; Nahiddi and Dearelle! And some of the younger girls—” Aviva slapped her forehead as if it would help her to remember: “Rhoka, and—and Katsu and little fourteen-year-old Meriel. They all had babies! And all just months ago. Now their babies are gone!”

Brionwy was deeply, genuinely shocked. The harem was so large, with hundreds of girls, that she herself hadn’t realized how many pregnancies there were. But now she remembered some of those big bellies.

“And that doesn’t count Saadoon or Delfine,” Aviva went on in a rapid hiss, as if to get in as many words as possible before they shut her up. “What about them? They had ‘miscarriages’ in their eighth or ninth months. And Ayako and Eavanna, I forgot them. They had babies that died from crib-death, too.”

O Goddess, Brionwy thought. It was a phrase her nurse had often used. How did I miss this? How did everybody miss this?

It was the honey-pear wine, she thought, aware that she was giddy and lethargic, and aware that that lethargy probably was saving her life. She could never have stood here and listened to this terrible list of deaths without showing emotion otherwise. She sensed it was the same way with Marlin—otherwise Marlin would be screaming.

“You spread it out over the different groups, and over time,” Aviva was saying, almost as if to answer Brionwy’s question. So nobody noticed or cared. But I cared. And I want to know, where are they? *Where are all the babies?* **What did you do with all those babies?”**

She was shrieking again now, her hands flat on Guntra’s big ornamented desk, leaning toward the head duenna.

Very slowly and very deliberately, Guntra took a pull on her cigar. Then she put the cigar out on the back of Aviva’s hand.

Aviva screamed in pain.

I’m never getting out of here alive, Brionwy thought, terrified. Then she realized she was being addressed and she hastily made sure she was in a perfect position of respect.

“What do you think?” she was asked over Aviva’s moaning and struggling to get away from the eunuchs who now held her hands down on the desk. “What do you think about this baby business?”

Brionwy’s intellect fought with the golden wine not just to blurt out her true beliefs. “I think . . . she may have the lullaby melancholy,” she heard herself say, and knew that intellect had won. “It makes girls do crazy things after having babies. Sometimes they kill the babies themselves and don’t even remember.” Taking a risk, she lifted reddened, bleary, but sincere eyes to Guntra’s face. “I read about it in a book.”

“Yes, I know. You’re the little librarian,” Guntra said, and Brionwy was shocked. She’d had no idea anyone knew about her visits to the old library.

This was a very dangerous woman.

“And you”—to Marlin—“What do you think?”

Brionwy prayed for Marlin’s sake.

But the black girl didn’t need any help; she was tough. She hiccupped as if the strong golden wine had made her drunk, and when she spoke her words were slurred. “Get rid of her, m’lady,” she said, swinging her goblet in a wide-flung gesture which demonstrated that it was completely empty. “Throw her into the pens! The bitch woke me up an’ attacked m’friend out of thin air.”



Brionwy tried her hardest to hide her shock. She knew that Aviva was doomed to the pens anyway; nothing she or Marlin could say would save her or do her any greater harm than she had done herself. Marlin was merely doing damage control.

Guntra's eyes were back on Brionwy. "You're shocked by your black friend's words?" She doesn't miss a thing, Brionwy thought. Is she a vampire? Can she read my mind?

"I'm shocked because she seems to be, um, a little, tipsy, Madam Dwenna, in front of Madam Dwenna." And Brionwy manufactured a little tipsy giggle of her own.

"And do you think babies are disappearing?" The vital question came almost before Brionwy had stopped speaking.

Brionwy found her mouth saying things without her even having to think about them. "Well, no. There's little Dovra and Tibbie and Agnes, all chubby and sweet and as happy as—as kittens." And they're all toddlers, past their first year, she thought. But do I know any *babies*?

"There's brats everywhere," Marlin slurred. "You can't dance without falling over one. They ought to have their own section." And she slapped a hand on Guntra's desk.

Shocked, Brionwy realized that what Marlin had done was very clever. She would be punished for her rudeness, but a small punishment was better than being sentenced to the pens.

Guntra puffed her cigar back to life. Marlin hastily took her hand off the desk, swaying drunkenly.

"Shall I tell you girls the truth of what's happening? I wonder," she said, as cruel as a cat playing with a mouse.

"Y-you'll lie," Aviva got out between her sobbing.

"No." Very amiably. "Do you want to hear?"

Brionwy felt a chill lift hairs all over her skin. She didn't want to hear Guntra's explanation. She didn't want to go to the pens.

"I'll tell you. The Overseer,"—and Guntra casually made something like the position of respect—"wants to increase the numbers of the Beauties, because soon there will be a Great Hunt. The Lady who owns this Great House will be coming. That's why so many girls have been bred, and with that many pregnancies you have to expect some little problems."

Brionwy was struck speechless, unable to tell how to react. She was looking at Guntra with naked fear in her eyes, she knew it. Guntra liked that.

In a Great Hunt, the Beauties, all those who had not been bred, were put on the running track first, and the dragons had their pick. Only later were the pens opened, so that the dragons could call the barely human slaves of the pens.

A Great Hunt would be very amusing for the dragon and the Lady. They would see the Beauties, dressed in their choicest finery, and then watch as the dragons . . .

"Oh, none of you have been bred yet, have you?" Guntra said with mock sympathy, consulting some folders on her desk. "What a pity. But there's still time before the Great Hunt, and I'll keep you in mind."

She means she wants us to spy for her, Brionwy thought. "Thank you, Lady Dwenna," she heard her traitorous voice say. But I don't want to be bred, she thought, almost hysterically.

"Also there are some Selections for another duty. It's possible that *you* might be chosen there," she added, looking Marlin over. Marlin looked exotic and gorgeous even as she slept, wearing a very low-cut gown of thin material, cut in a startling style, diagonally from the bottom up to the waist. Gold wires were threaded in her long, curling, black hair.

The Head Dwenna turned to examine Brionwy, exhaling a cloud of smoke that smelled of dry twigs and spices burning. "You haven't been caring for yourself as you should. That stops now. Your dwenna will arrange massages and mudbaths, and all that sort of thing. I doubt you'd pass anyway, but you're letting yourself go to seed, and seventeen is too young for that. Just because the Overseer hasn't chosen you yet doesn't mean you can slack around. He's picked girls in their twenties, and you're still his property. I won't tolerate damage to his property."

"Yes, Madam."

"Now, out with all of you, except the hysterical one. Ten smacks with a good birch rod for the black girl and the redhead, for fighting. You take care of that," she said to Sansama, who looked elevated.

Brionwy felt weak with relief. She wasn't going to enjoy her first beating, but it was far better than what she'd feared. This could have ended in all three of them being penned.

She felt terrible leaving Aviva there. Still not once but twice Aviva had said things that she must have known would get her banished. Or worse. Brionwy had heard of things even worse than being sent to the pens. This new Selection now, to find the most beautiful of the Beauties who were still innocent, aroused Brionwy's suspicions. It could be for a bloodfeast or something like that. Oh, yes, she had heard of worse things than being banished.

She and Marlin meekly followed Sansama, who was almost glowing at the thought of punishment. Brionwy wondered where they were going. Somewhere where cries of pain wouldn't be heard, that was certain. And Sansama was just the sort to make you count the strokes and find some little reason to increase the number. Guntra at least had a certain majesty about her cruelty; Sansama was just a snake.

A surprised snake, Brionwy realized after a nudge from Marlin. There was cross-traffic here; they were heading *in* to a place where people were heading out. And not just people. People so richly dressed that they could only be the Lord Overseer's guests. Male guests, visiting the harem, Brionwy realized, admiring the pavilions and the rockeries, and the little streams . . . and the girls.

It had happened before. Someone had shone a lantern in her face as she was sleeping and she had done what Ceru had told her to in childhood. Her nurse had told her to snore, and she'd even made her practice to make sure it sounded real. The light was always hastily snatched away, and Brionwy still had her innocence.

Now, though, there was no chance of snoring. Brionwy assumed the position of respect, hoping she looked disheveled and dirty enough to be dismissed. She worried about Marlin, though, who was beautiful—and in danger.

Still, they were down to the last guests passing by—and a dark-skinned girl being carried somewhere on a stretcher—when one of the men stopped and spoke to Sansama.

"Where are these fragile blooms going?"

He must be drunk, Brionwy thought. To call Marlin "fragile" was madness and to call herself a "bloom" meant he was blind.

"To be punished, sir," Sansama replied, hands barely crossed at her chest. "For fighting and disrespect."

"They certainly don't look disrespectful, now." It was another voice, one that made Sansama jump.

Brionwy was desperately grateful for Marlin's good eyesight and hasty nudge. She herself and Marlin were on their knees, arms crossed so that their hands were resting on opposite shoulders, heads bent so that their long hair trailed on the ground.

"Oh—I—I didn't see you, Lord Overseer." Sansama hastily knelt. "It's certain that they were fighting, my lord."

"What could such pretty girls have to fight about?" the tipsy guest asked.

The Overseer said, "Somebody's definitely been damaging my property. There's blood on the redhead's arm. He lifted Marlin's head with a walking stick under her chin. "Did you do this scratching?"

"No," Marlin said, eyes down, but voice almost bold. "I tried to get another girl who went mad and started attacking her."

"Let me see your nails," the Overseer said, and Marlin held out her hands so he could inspect her long, gilded nails. "No, the other side. I see. You're telling the truth; there's no blood there." He looked at Brionwy who was watching everything from under the curtain of her hair.

"Let's see your face," he said, and she felt the cane tilting her chin up, not ungently. "Ah, you've been weeping. Who was it that hurt you?"

There was nothing to do but tell the truth. "Her name is Aviva, my lord. She went mad because her new baby died in the night. She made a disturbance. She's with Guntra



now.”

“Hmmm . . . . I’m sure Guntra knows how to deal with hysteria.”

Brionwy saw a chance and snatched at it before she could even think about what trouble it might land her in.

“My lord, the Head Dwenna as good as said she was going to the pens. But Aviva’s only seventeen and very pretty. She has dark hair and fair, fair skin.”

“Gracious! Are my tastes are so well known by all the teenagers in my house?” The Overseer held one hand up in surprise and the tipsy guest laughed. “Are you asking for mercy for her? After she shook you and scratched you that way?”

*No one ever told him she shook me.*

The thought hit Brionwy like a bucketful of ice water.

He seems like a pleasant person—so much different than I’d imagined, and yet he must have a wonderful spy system. He must have known everything that happened practically as it happened. He must know as much as Guntra about this—or more.

And then a second thought hit her like a second bucketful.

*He’s a vampire.*

He could probably read her thoughts. Yes, he had a little smile now; he could certainly read them. Thank all the Gods that he was genuinely handsome and that she felt that he seemed fair—not like Guntra, with her cat-cruel smile.

The Overseer’s eyes seemed to pierce hers. His were a far lighter blue than what she saw when she looked into the mirror. They were almost gray, like the perpetual twilight that passed for daytime.

He was smiling again.

And then her heart plummeted in terror.

“Hands off, I’m afraid,” the Overseer was saying to the tipsy guest. “You can have the darkskinned girl if you like. But I think I am about to have a change of taste, the news of which will undoubtedly run through the house like wildfire. Let’s have a look at you,” he added, and gestured for Brionwy to stand. She was wearing a pale blue chemise with a robe of the same color thrown over it; even together they were only translucent.

To be continued. . .