



Of Boys and Dogs

Chapter I

“Wake up,” Darius said.

Flowing on the banks of the poison river, I coasted, unable to focus on his voice. He spoke as though from a great distance, vague, trivial, gone from my mind the instant his words died away.

“Do you hear me?”

“Um,” I replied, drifting.

The darkness called to me, far more inviting than Darius’ annoyance. The mammoth draft horses pulled my body on the sled made of boughs, bouncing over rocks and logs. They wended their way among the heavy forest with its low-hanging limbs, around dense tree trunks, and ducked around thickets of scrub oak.

Voices, uncomfortably loud, forced the deep dark to recede. I blinked in the faint light as the drug-induced stupor loosened its grip.

“Too damn slow,” muttered the sergeant. “At this pace, we’ll reach His Majesty by this time next month.”

“We’ve no choice, sir,” replied another, a soft-spoken soldier. “This is rough country. We must go slow or we’ll kill him.”

“His Majesty might have a few things to say about that,” muttered another. I knew he rode beside me, for my dim sight watched his bay’s legs stride and I heard his low voice directly above me.

“Listen,” Darius said. “Find your anger. Let it help you.”
“I can’t.”

“You must. Rouse your fighting spirit, fight it.”

Heeding his advice, I tried to raise my friend the daemon. I sought my rage borne of rape and helplessness, my trusty companion who rose to my rescue on more than one occasion. Rage might burn away the poison in my blood, the drug Ja’Teel created that held me prisoner.

I called on him, demanded him, pleaded . . . *dammit, help me. I need you.* Once my friend, turned now into a lazy, despicable sleaze, he ignored my urgent call. My daemon slept, impotent and ignorant of my desperation. At my feeble mental urging, he grumbled, twitched and fell back into deep slumber.

“Your magic can burn away this poison,” Darius said. “Focus your will. Find the fire that once before burned poison from your blood. You can do it again. Seek your magic. Find your inner fire.”

I tried again to focus my will, to wake enough to bring it to bear on my own body. Sleep’s sweet seduction carried me down, down. I drifted, my body sliding and bumping over rocks and dead trees, painful and bruising, yet so very

unimportant. Only the dark void beckoned with the temptation I couldn't resist.

I floated, dreamless, comfortable, happy.

"Raine!" Ly'Tana screamed.

Startled, I woke.

"Raine! Help me. Please!"

Ly'Tana struggled in the merciless grip of Tongu hunters. Brindled hounds snapped and snarled without sound, leaping about their masters, fangs gleaming under the foam slicking their jaws. Tattooed Tongu hands ripped her leathers from her slender body. Her sword, clanging, fell to her feet. Naked, she screamed again, calling my name, pleading, panicked. In the hands of those who would fling her down and take her without mercy, she fought, tears streaming down her high, almond-colored cheekbones. Alone, frightened, she faced her enemies unarmed and undefended.

The cursed Tongu struck her across her brow. Half-conscious, her head fell forward, her filthy hair cascading over her face. Naked as the day she was born, she lay in the dirt, battered, bruised, defeated. The Tongu, grinning in his lust, his bald head tattooed with serpents, thrust his trousers to his ankles. He fell upon her bare, wriggling body. His mates yanked her legs apart. Ly'Tana screamed, her panic raw in my gut.

My rage boiled over. My daemon woke with a roar.

I tried to rise, to slay those that dared harm her. My paws twitched, spasmed, but hadn't the power to raise me up. *Kill them. Kill them all.* I snarled, biting at the vision; my

fangs snapped through a smoky haze and found no mortal flesh to bite. *Yes, damn you, yes, get up off your lazy ass and save her. Only you can save her. Get up, you mangy, flea-bitten hound. Kill them!*

I fell back, panting, growls of suppressed fury emerging from behind my bared fangs. Blind to all save the sight of Ly'Tana screaming, I fought to rise, to slay those that dared lay cursed hands upon her. The drug in my blood laughed at me, forced me into turpitude, beckoning me into quiet sleep and sweet oblivion. I yearned such sweetness, craved to answer its seductive call.

And Ly'Tana would die.

Get up, I screamed. Get up, you stupid fool.

Despite my silent curses, my body failed to respond to my commands. Ly'Tana thrashed under her tormentors, those that raped her as I watched, furious and helpless. Yet, oddly, I ignored Darius' voice that urged an action that might yet keep my love from harm.

"Gor," I heard a voice exclaim, "is he waking up?"

"Raine," Ly'Tana screamed, still fighting while pinned under the hard body of the Tongu. "Help me! Use your fire. Burn the poison. Help me."

Her head fell back, her red-gold, silky hair cascading around her shoulders, a shining liquid pool of molten silk catching the sunlight. The grinning Tongu seized a handful of its glossy mass and yanked her head back, baring her throat. His vile teeth sank into her vulnerable neck, drinking her blood like a starved animal.

Sluggishly slow, fire rose at my command. Its potent heat burned, withered, flared like coals offered fresh wood to consume before shrinking into nothing. *Not enough. Not nearly enough. I need more.* I called on my inner flames once again, gathered it into my fist.

My daemon howling in the background, I sent what little fire I managed to collect into my blood. Running, seeking, my magic found tiny bits of the poison and burned it out of existence.

My willpower replenished itself. Strength returned to my body and my fury doubled. Yet, it's too slow—far too slow. Time stood still. Ly'Tana flailed and wept, crying my name.

“More,” Darius urged. *“You must do more. Think of her.”*

Rygel's magic from the gods answered my call. I poured more fire into my blood, my brain, my tissues, burning the evil and skipping past the essential I needed to survive. More poison died under my assault, its death offering more me strength. Stronger by half again, I called on the powers granted me. I burned away more of Ja'Teel's venom, cleansing myself of its tenacious grip.

Ly'Tana screamed for me. I fought on, but it wasn't enough, not yet. Under the despicable body of the Tongu, Ly'Tana thrashed and cried, tears and blood rolling past her cheeks.

More, I need more.

What will returned to me, I used. My inner fire, whipped into a frenzy by my vision, burned yet more poison and my own blood along with it. Now I could raise my head,

though I couldn't see anything save my love suffering. I snarled, my rusty voice challenging the foul Tongu. *You are sooo deaa.*

"Sergeant," a panicked voice warned. "I think he's waking up."

"Grab the bloody cordial. Dose him, quick."

My fire fled along my veins, burning anything it didn't like. My senses returned with a rush. I lay on a pallet made of pine boughs. Ja'Teel had drugged me. Horses and Khalidian soldiers surrounded my wolf's body. Ja'Teel, in his endless pride and stupidity, had ridden off and left me in the care of men who had no clue of what I represented.

Ly'Tana, in the throes of violent rape, screamed, crying, begging. My soul cringed while my daemon raged. *I did this. I caused this.*

Fire borne of magic and fury cascaded though my body, burning the entire evil drug in its path.

The vision, if it was a vision, of Ly'Tana's rape at the hands of the Tongu coiled in upon itself and vanished with a distinct plop.

My eyes snapped open.

A human form, a silhouette against the bright sunlight, knelt beside me, upending a small flask over my snarling jaws and bared fangs.

Never again.

The soldier had time enough to squawk in brief panic before I lunged upward. Off the idiot contraption Ja'Teel devised, my free and unhindered body surged with open jaws and naked fury. My daemon controlled me now. The rage

borne from my hallucination hadn't departed with it. Though they hadn't violated Ly'Tana, I didn't care. They were in the wrong place and messed with the wrong wolf.

I slammed my fangs on the trooper's lower face and throat.

He tried to scream, throwing himself backward, his hands slapping ineffectively at my ears. His warm red blood gushed over my jaws, spilling down my ruff in a flood. Arterial blood sprayed my muzzle and eyes, drenching my face, burning my nostrils with its thick, cloying scent. I hung on, and felt his body die in my jaws. His spirit departed at breakneck speed to his gods.

Another one bites the dust.

With a contemptuous shake of my head, I hurled the dead soldier from me into the scrub oak thickets.

I leaped to my feet, roaring in rage and hate, facing my enemies—ready to kill more foolishly brave soldiers. Front paws to the north of the rig, hind legs to the south, I snarled; my bloody fangs dripped human gore. Ja'Teel's boys gaped in horror; their faces paled to a pasty shade. Their horses skittered sideways, eyes wide and white and nostrils flaring red.

Free of the once confining drug of Ja'Teel's magic, I, in my daemon's powerful grip, lunged toward the sergeant. Panicked, he tried to spur his horse away. But his mount half-reared, and jumped out from under him. He tumbled from his cavalry saddle, his lips a wide 'o' of surprise and shock, and landed with a heavy thud onto the needle-strewn soil.

As the horse bolted into the woods, he tried to struggle up, floundering in the dirt and loose pine needles. He screamed, his dark eyes bulging from his head when I sprang toward him. His hands beat ineffectually at my face as I snapped my jaws over his vulnerable carotid. I tore his throat open, his anguished body falling to the dead leaves, needles and twigs of the lofty, indifferent range.

Spinning away from his corpse, I rapidly scanned the surroundings with my hearing and instincts. None threatened my rear or my flanks. My enemies, four Khalidian soldiers and three Tongu, fought their panicked mounts for control. Their hands sawed hard on reins, foam and blood springing from their horses' jaws. Their hounds cringed behind the leaping horses, chuffing, their hackles up and tails tucked between their legs.

Unfamiliar with riding, a Tongu overbalanced and tipped sideways out of his saddle. He fell hard to the ground, his breath departing his gut in a sharp whoosh. Kicking, his horse galloped into the trees.

His fellows, inexperienced with fighting from horseback, jumped down, their mounts following on the heels of the first. Drawing their cudgels from their belts, one helped the fallen one to his feet while the other stood between them and me.

The cavalry soldiers expertly controlled their snorting horses, left hands on their reins, rights hovering over sword hilts. One young man with straw-colored hair reined his horse toward me, his right hand slowly rising from his blade to hover over his head.

“Easy there, Prince Wolf,” he said quickly. “We had nuthin’ to do wit it. Not our call, understand? We only obeyed orders. You knows orders, right?”

His friends exchanged frantic glances, closer to panic than the one who spoke. Clearly they knew their duty: take me down. They also knew such a task quite impossible. Only weapons beyond their knowledge and abilities could take me prisoner again. Now their new leader offered a possible solution. Could I be bargained with?

“Please listen, Prince Wolf, sir,” the blond boy begged. “We was on our way to Arcadia, the sergeant and us. Beggin’ yer pardon, sir, we meant to desert, we did. We wanted nuttin to do with the King’s war between yer Lordship and yer wolves.”

Another boy barely out of his teens spoke up, his fiery red hair bouncing atop his freckled face. “That’s right,” he said. “We was part of the King’s army that fought your wolves and lost. That dark man that left us, he found us two days past and ordered us onto this detail. We didn’t want to go, but if he knew what we was planning . . . he’d have done kill us.”

“Ssstinking cowards,” the forward Tongu grated, hissing through his cut vocal cords. “We will ffllay hissss hide for him. Attack!”

I lunged forward, snarling, growling, halving the distance between us. The cavalymen reined their spooking horses away, neatly separating themselves from the three hunters. The Tongu flinched, raising their clubs, bunching together for protection. “Attack!” the man hissed again.

Tongu hounds growled and backed away with hackles high, their stiff tails curving over vulnerable genitals. The Tongu, in a panic, commanded their hounds to charge in hissing voices as they urged their frightened mutts to fight their battle for them.

Whining, ears flattened, the huge dogs cringed and hid behind their masters' legs. Shifting their panicked gazes between their once ferocious canines and me, the assassins hefted cudgels, trying to both threaten me and urge their protectors into protecting them. The hounds' loyalty to their masters slackened under their terror of me and refused their orders.

My will answered me when I called upon it. I changed into my two-legged form. The fury of Ly'Tana's vision rapidly faded, falling in upon itself. It left behind a new heartache and a new fury. Whipping my sword from its sheath, I pointed its deadly tip at the soldiers and Tongu.

"Get off your horses," I snarled.

Instantly, the four soldiers slid to the ground, expertly wrapped fists with leather reins and kept their skittish horses tight to them.

"Drop your weapons."

Four swords slid from sheaths and were tossed to the ground at my feet. Crossbows followed with a clatter and quivers of bolts fell to the dead leaves and twigs.

"Never," hissed the Tongu leader. Snapping his bow from his back, he nocked an arrow from the quiver at his belt.

I raised my lip in a half-snarl, half-grin. “Go ahead,” I said softly. “Do it. Do you feel lucky?”

He brought the bow and arrow up, drawing the string to his ear under the filthy fall of his oily hair. I stared deep into his furious, fear-filled dark eyes, the tattoos scrawled over his face and naked skull stark against his pale, sweating skin.

“Come on,” I said. “You may even kill me.”

The string twanged sharply. The arrow flew straight toward my chest.

I raised the tip of my sword slightly. A thin bolt of yellow flame burst from the steel and met the arrow midflight. Catching fire instantly, it burned under my superheated magic, turning to ash in less than an instant. The steel-tipped head dropped to the ground, the wooden shaft and its feathers retaining a vague shape of an arrow in midflight suspended halfway between us.

My fire continued its course, leaving the arrow-shaped dust to drift, caught on the light breeze and spread. The Tongu gaped, his jaw slack, as my bolt of flame sped toward his heart. He tried to run at the last second, ducking and twisting. Caught on the legs of his own hound, the man screamed, stumbling, trying not to fall.

Flying true, my fire hit him square in his gut.

Lit with fire from within, the man danced and jiggled in place, flames spurting from his open mouth, nose and ears. Smoke rose in thick tendrils from his hair and homespun clothing. Flames belched from the ends of his fingers while his soft shoes caught fire. He drew in air to scream, offering much needed oxygen to the starved flames deep within. They

climbed higher, burned brighter, lighting him up like a fallen star. His once pale face turned black; his tattoos melted, running, vanishing as his skin ran like liquid butter to drip on his now burning clothes. The flames, searing his throat shut, cut off his shrieks.

He fell onto his face, setting afire the dry leaves and twigs his dead body lay in.

I shook my head regretfully. "I reckon this wasn't his lucky day."

I glanced up at the frozen tableau, the taut faces silent in horror and shock. Even the hounds turned grizzled muzzles away from the horrid stench of burnt Tongu.

"Anyone else care to try their hand?" I asked.

Six sets of human eyes rose from the corpse. Hounds moaned, cowering. Even the mongrel belonging to the dead man failed to mourn his passing, and crept off to the side as though taking himself from the battle.

"No takers?" I asked.

I dropped my sword's tip to the ground and leaned on the hilt. I wagged my fingers at the small fires burning merrily around the dead man, crisping the dead leaves and twigs. Small flames and smoke rose lazily about the blackened Tongu.

"Someone might want to splash some water over those," I said. "I'd take it amiss if the forest caught fire."

The redhead seized his waterskin from his saddlebow. He uncorked it, then upended it over the burning leaves. The fires died, hissing like their late master, white smoke rising from their ashes. Not entirely unexpected, water splashed

onto the corpse. The suddenly heated water sparked and spat, jumping like live things before vanishing into nothing. The boy cried out with terror and loathing, drawing his hand across his mouth with a shudder. He backed away, his flesh beneath his freckles ghostly white.

Unarmed, his hands over his head, the frightened blond soldier dropped to his knees. “Mercy, Prince Wolf,” he cried, sweat trickling from his brow, down his pale cheeks and matting his fair hair to his neck. Blue eyes bulged in their sockets as his chest heaved. “Don’t be turning me into no crispy critter, sir. Let us go, please Yer Lordship, and you’ll never see us again. Never.”

“Whyever should I?” I asked. “You’re lying.”

“He’s not,” Darius interjected smoothly.

I scowled, not so much at the boy as at Darius. “You’ll set your masters on me the moment I let you go.”

“No, sir!”

A third young man, stepped forward. I recognized his voice as the one who admired my fangs and worried that I might be killed. He, too, dropped to his knee beside the straw-colored kid. His face remained calm, yet sweat trickled in rivulets down his cheeks. He spread his open hands to his sides.

“You heard him, Prince Wolf,” he said. “That bad man. If we failed to bring you down to him, if you escaped—”

He smiled slightly, his fingers gesturing toward me, up and down my immense size. “—should you escape, milord, our failure means crucifixion—”

“Or worse,” chimed in the fourth. “Kill us now, in your mercy. Kill us quick. Or let us go to Arcadia.”

“The Arcadian king is offering gold,” the blond boy said, his tone eager. “If the King’s soldiers desert and join his army, he’ll give us gold. The sergeant told us.”

Still keeping an eye on the shocked, silent Tongu, I nodded thoughtfully. “Makes sense. Brutal is raiding his borders.”

The calm one nodded. “Yes, milord. Arcadia wants to rid the High King of his forces at the same time expand his own. The sergeant—”

His eyes roved toward where that sergeant’s corpse lay and his throat bobbed in a sharp gulp. “—he said King Brutal is too willing to slay his own men for failure. Is this true, milord?”

I nodded, fetching a sigh. “I’ve heard it’s true.”

“Would you slay your own men, if defeated in battle, milord?” the calm boy asked. “You being a prince, and all?”

“Of course not,” I snapped, not liking this turn of the conversation. “How stupid is that.”

“We heard what happened to our brothers in arms,” the calm boy said, his voice quavering. “That dark lord said it himself. Those you didn’t kill that night died—” He gulped, sweated and continued on, his courage undaunted. “They were tortured for days.”

His eyes found the panting Tongu hounds. “They even killed the dogs, sir. You heard him say so. It weren’t the dog’s fault, sir.”

“We just want out, Yer Lordship,” said the blond.
“Won’t you let us go?”

“Or permit us swear our loyalty to you.”

The calm boy’s soft voice jerked my head up. “What? Don’t be absurd, boy. Where I go you can’t follow.”

His mouth opened to protest until he caught my eye. He shut it quickly, his throat convulsing.

“What about them?” I demanded, jerking my head toward the pair of surviving Tongu.

“We ain’t with them, Prince Wolf, sir,” the blond boy stated.

The redhead shrugged. “They came with the dark lord, sir. They aren’t with us.”

I eyed the Tongu. “You also know the penalty for failure. Do you seek my mercy?”

The taller of the two straightened, his eyes blazing. His mouth worked soundlessly for a moment before he spat at my feet. “We will inform our Lord Tenzin of their betrayal,” he hissed, his eyes cutting to the four. “He will be glad of our loyalty.”

I chuckled. “Well, you can dream, anyway.” As I glanced at the three hounds, an idea rose. “Call them.”

“Milord?” The calm boy straightened, his eyes following mine to the three miserable mutts.

“If they come when you call, take them with you.” I grinned. “Save them from the fate their masters face.”

“Of course, milord.”

“You can’t!” the Tongu gasped.

I shrugged, chuckling. “It’s their choice. I suspect those hounds know what’s best for them.”

Bending over, the boy snapped his fingers. “Come here, fella. Come on. Let’s go.”

Three sets of grizzled heads swung toward the sound.

Following his lead, the other three lads whistled, snapped fingers and called in encouraging voices. The hounds raised wagging tails with ears perked; pink tongues caught between fangs. They stared at the young men, their brown eyes alight with interest.

The tall Tongu who spat stepped forward, as though to prevent a hound from making a choice. Taking a hint from Ja’Teel, I remembered a distant lesson taught by Rygel. As he had frozen me, Ly’Tana, Kel’Ratan and her warriors in that far away inn chamber, I halted both Tongu with my magic. Only their eyes flickered, wide with fear, as they found themselves unable to move to step, scratch their noses, or take a piss.

“Chill, boys,” I murmured. “Methinks your hounds like these youths better. Or perhaps they appreciate the niceties in life. Like living.”

The hound belonging to the toasted Tongu took the first step. I supposed since he now found himself masterless, he knew he needed, wanted, a new master. Perhaps he craved a leader more disposed to kindness, not evil. Maybe he’d like a master who threw a ball for him to fetch rather than send him to kill a helpless human being.

He took a second step, then a third. Within a moment, he nuzzled the cheek of the calm boy. Half-afraid, half

thrilled, that young soldier caressed wiry ears, smiling, nose to nose with a killer dog.

“I ain’t never had a dog before,” he murmured.

A second hound followed, walking straight toward the redhead without hesitation. Brutal’s former soldier stroked his head and past his ears, his jaw gaping in awe. The third hound abandoning his stilled human to creep on lowered legs, whining, to the young blond. Like his brothers, this mongrel discovered the joys of unconditional love the instant those humans hands touched his canine head.

I glanced at the one quiet young man, aloof, watching his brother soldiers fuss and play with their new friends. He felt my eyes on him, and glanced up.

“Sorry,” I murmured. “Not enough mutts to go around.”

He grinned, a sudden bright, cheery smile. “That’s alright, sir,” he said. “I’m allergic.”

Against my will, a short laugh burst from my throat. “Boys, get on your horses,” I ordered, half-strangling. “Should I ever see you again, you’d better be loyal Arcadian soldiers.”

“Right, yer Lordship.” “Yes, sir.” “Your will, milord.”

The former Khalidian cavalry scrambled to their feet, rushed to retrieve their swords, hang crossbows to pommels, grab quivers and mount their horses. Their new hounds, without a backward look at the ones they left behind, leaped beside them. They chuffed, their cut throats unable to give voice, yet their plain brown eyes lit with what . . . joy? Wiry muzzles parted in happy pants, tongue lolling, as their boys jumped aboard their skittish, white-eyed horses.

A wave of nostalgia washed over me. I saw wolves dancing about the horses of Kel'Hallan warriors, happy, their human friends laughing down at them. The vision overlay the sight before my eyes, of dogs and boys uniting in mutual love and joy in being together.

The two visions joined and intermingled, soon so intertwined I couldn't tell one from the other.

"You did well today."

I ignored Darius as the Khalidians shouted and saluted me, kicking their horses into a gallop toward the west. The Tongu hounds raced at their heels with tongues flapping, paws flying to keep up. The group disappeared into the forest, downhill, toward Arcadia. Within moments, I couldn't even hear them.

"A dog's loyalty, like a wolf's, is unbreakable," I said thoughtfully, staring after them. "Those fellows knew the future you chose. They knew what their fate would be, the same as those hounds who died in agony. Why would they remain loyal? To what would you have them remain loyal?"

I turned back to the hunters, my brow hiked. "Something to think about, eh?"

I sheathed my sword at last, eyeing the pair of draft horses still hitched to the tree and branch sled. They waited with the eternal, calm patience of their kind, hip-shotten, ears slack.

"You want to change your minds?" I asked the Tongu, still wrapped, like a birthday package, within my magic. "Say the word and you can leave, never to return."

Only dark eyes defied me. They had the means to speak, but didn't even offer me that much respect. "Your funeral," I muttered, turning away. "Ja'Teel and Tenzin will show up eventually, wondering what's keeping you. Those boys will be leagues away by then, as will I.

"You, however, will still be standing there. I'm sure you'll have pissed your drawers by then, reeking like a cesspit."

The team woke at my approach, stamping, snorting, near panic. Murmuring under my breath, I stroked their sleek bay hides, offering them confidence despite my predator's odor. My fingers unbuckled their harness, working quickly in case they bolted. I didn't want them dragging Ja'Teel's contraption across the hills where they might get hung up.

Their nostrils sucked in my wolfish scent, yet my voice and hands soothed their troubled nerves. They settled, the one nearest me nuzzling my shoulder as I worked, snorting down his nostrils.

Freeing them at last, I caressed their soft muzzles for a moment. "I don't suppose I can convince you boys to head west, not east?"

The massive bay geldings whiffled my hands, lips searching for more attention, ears perked and brown eyes bright. My hands on their necks, I pushed them on their way. "Gods walk with you and see you safe."

The brown, black and white pair shambled away. At first they started eastward, toward familiar people and stable, following the direction of the Tongu's long departed mounts.

After a few long strides, they halted, heads up, scenting the breeze. Strangely, they turned around and began to trot, passing me by. In wonder, I watched as they hit a heavy gallop, white-feathered hooves rising and falling with thuds that vibrated my toes. Within a moment or two, they vanished under the trees, following the boy-soldiers and their new dogs.

“Did you do that?” I asked Darius.

“I?”

“Never mind.”

I walked a short distance away, prepared to turn wolf again. I spared the Tongu one more thought. “I’m thinking you’ll wish I *had* killed you, in the days to come. In your next life, if you have one, be certain to take the road of peace. It’ll save you much grief in the end.”

I changed into my other body. As their dark eyes glittered with hate and muted rage, my tongue lolled in a grin while they glared at my wolf form. “So long, boys,” I growled, my tail waving. While they could never understand me, I said, “I’d wish you long life, but, well, I’d hate to waste a blessing.”

Their muttered curses drifted to my ears as I ducked under the fir and balsam and resumed my trek north.