

Chapter One
7 Keryishik 29AF

Sark stumbled on the slick forest floor, pushing off trees as they appeared out of the darkness in front of him. He was barely able to see in the driving rain. A bolt of lightning struck nearby. Sark threw himself to the ground, covering his head as sparks showered down from the forest canopy. He did not move until the sky had fallen silent. He rose and looked up. The falling rain blinded him.

He saw the flash of the dagger too late.

The steel buried itself in his stomach. A mangled grunt escaped his lips and he grasped at the wound, cold shock in his chest. His legs buckled and he tried to fall to the ground. The dagger's wielder refused, pushing up on the blade. Sark fought at first, and then gave in, his efforts only making the pain worse. His legs quivered, threatening to collapse at any moment.

Sark looked at the wound. Blood seeped through his fingers and down his mud-splattered robe. The dagger must have been five or six inches deep into his stomach. His eyes followed the blood-soaked hand clutching the dagger to the muscular arm and then to the face of a much younger man.

It was the Hunter.

Flecks of blood stained Sark's pale lips. "Why?"

"You're one of the Magi," The Hunter said, twisting and ripping the blade from Sark's stomach.

Sark screamed, falling to the wet leaves as his legs gave out from under him. He rolled onto his side, only to have the Hunter's firm boot push him onto his back. Blinking in the rainfall, he could see the Hunter's eyes. Those brown eyes that had given no hint of betrayal did not flinch at his agony. As the lightning flashed again, he saw a darkened scorch mark around the shoulder of the Hunter's leather vest.

He's hurt. I hurt him.

Sark rolled his head to the side. Through the forest, he could see the dim lights of the nearby village. A globe of light swayed from the mast of a fishing vessel. Plumes of smoke, nearly invisible in the winds of the storm, rose out of chimneys. A pair of wagons and a plow rested in one of the potato fields. "I never harmed them."

"Would you now?"

Sark shook his head. "I could never hurt Mortals." He tried to laugh but coughed blood instead. "I like the fish they sell me."

He heard the Hunter grunt, followed by the sound of the dagger being sheathed. The Hunter began rummaging through the leather pouch Sark carried at his side. Sark turned his head until he could see the Hunter again. The man was looking at a small metal tin.

One of Sark's hands slipped from his wound and fell to his side. Leaves clung to his blood-soaked fingers as he sought out a hidden pocket in his robe, the one near his hip. Inching his fingers into it, he pulled out a small, round ball of marbled clay. Without glancing at it, he knew that it had faint gray lines swirled with rivers of dark blue. It was pure. It would be enough.

Sark watched the Hunter, waiting until the man looked away. He brought the ball of clay around to throw, his crippled body protesting against the quick motion. Magical words flowed through his mind and spilled onto his lips.

Searing pain lanced through Sark's hand and the ball of clay fell amongst the leaves. Shocked, Sark stared at his hand. Two of his fingers were missing.

The Hunter leaned over the mage and stuck the tip of his once again bloodied dagger into the clay. He examined it at arm's length, and then turned to Sark.

"Not very good at war magic, are you?"

Sark quivered beneath the Hunter, not from the shock of his wounds but from knowing he was going to die. He had nothing left, no components for his spells, no blood left to warm his cold body. His wounded hand fell to the ground and the other slid off the hole in his stomach. There was no point in slowing his death. Sark closed his eyes.

Perhaps...perhaps I'll die before his sword is drawn.

The calm that came with that thought was shattered when Sark felt the Hunter's weight removed from his body. He shook as he heard the sword pulled free of its scabbard. He felt the rain beating on his face and relished it. He opened his eyes to a flash of steel.

Sillane, Mother, take me.

The Hunter pulled his blade from the soft ground beneath the mage's neck and wiped it clean on the corpse's robe before sheathing it. He rummaged through the headless man's cloak, finding two hidden pockets with small pieces of marbled clay and added them to the ball the wizard had tried to use earlier. He rose and walked over to where the head lay several feet away, face down in the leaves.

The Hunter pulled a canvas sack from his belt and picked the head up by its hair. Mud and wet leaves covered the face. He wiped it away, enough to see the dead eyes reflecting his own face whenever lightning flashed in the sky. He opened the sack to put the head in it, then froze.

He brought the head level with his own. Blood dripped from the severed neck, falling unnoticed onto the Hunter's pants as he stared into the eyes. Cold rain ran down his face, soaking his clothing until another flash of lightning revealed what he sought. In the dead eyes, he saw his face and another. A face cloaked in shadows.

The Hunter turned slowly, dropping the sack and placing a hand on his sword. There was no one behind him. He scanned the black forest, taking in every tree and rock that littered the floor. It took several minutes before he convinced himself there would be no one else. The wizard had lived alone in its cabin, deep in the forest, and the villagers would not have dared to leave their homes. Not tonight.

“Leave me alone,” the Hunter said.

He picked up the sack and looked in the direction of the village. White crested storm waters pressed the fishing boats against their docks and tugged on their ropes as they pulled back out to sea. The dark clouds ended abruptly several miles off shore and the sky faded to gray. The storm would be over by morning, only a few hours away.

The Hunter dropped the head into the sack and started back toward the mage’s cabin.

Chapter Two

8 Keryishik 29AF

A cold, wet wind greeted Mackey Ingles when he stepped from his home. He looked up to the sky, grumbled at the gray clouds, and hoisted his sack of towels onto his shoulder. He started walking, trying to avoid the puddles that had formed in the road, and taking care not to let the mud pull off his loose-fitting boots.

A stray dog lapped up water from a puddle in front of the doors of the Blow Down Inn. It growled and scurried away when Mackey approached. He cast a cursory glance over the building. It was long and two stories high. A small stable in the rear held a few horses and a narrow set of stairs clung to one side of the building, an after hours entrance for when the tavern was locked. The door at the top was partially ajar. Mackey frowned and dug into a pocket. He pulled out a key and unlocked the front doors.

The innkeeper stood in the doorway and looked around the dark tavern. The only light was that which slipped past the half drawn curtains. Placed around the room were eight tables and overturned chairs stacked on top of them. On the far side of the room was the polished fir wood bar, imported from Salen. The door to the kitchen lay beyond that.

“Morn, Mackey!”

Mackey turned to see a bright-eyed young woman walking toward him. She carried a basket of potatoes in her arms and an apron over her shoulder. The innkeeper smiled. Alisa was his favorite, a hard worker that filled out her low cut blouse as well. “Morn, lass.”

He stepped inside the tavern and pulled the curtains aside from one of the windows. The storm had kept most of the villagers inside their homes, leaving the

common room relatively clean. A few stray mugs sat on a table in the far corner and there was some dried mud missed by a hasty broom stroke. “Looks like we’ll be having it easy today.”

Alisa set the basket on the bar and tied her apron around her waist. “Where would you like me to start?”

“How about you be a good girl and warm up some cider to take down the road. Tree fell on the Langer’s home.”

“Oh my! Was anyone hurt?”

“Don’t think so. Just a bit of that old Gray Coast weather. The old man’s a little upset though.” Mackey pointed to a small keg behind the bar. “Take some of last night’s batch. It should still be good.”

Mackey dropped his sack on the bar and pulled out clean towels. He stuffed them beneath the bar, leaving several small ones on the counter for the morning cleaning. The empty seats of last night would be full today. The waves were still too strong to venture out to sea. The fishermen would seek out Mackey’s warm cider and potato cakes while waiting for the waters to calm.

Mackey had much of the common room cleaned before Alisa returned. He sent her into the kitchen to light a fire in the oven while he finished. By the time the first of the fishermen trickled in, the aroma of cakes and eggs drifted through the inn.

“Abe!” Mackey said to one man. “Morn! How are the catches? Have a seat at the bar, I’ll fetch your usual.”

The broad shouldered man waved the innkeeper off with a grin. “I’ll get it!” He reached over the bar. Alisa slapped him with a towel and he snapped his hand back.

“You stay out of that,” Alisa scolded. She picked up a mug and filled it for Abe. “Mackey, don’t forget about our one ... guest. He wanted to be woken early.”

The others fell silent and looked to Mackey. He cleared his throat and nodded. “Right. I’ll get on it.”

Aware of the eyes on his back, Mackey wiped his palms on his tunic and walked up the stairs to the second floor. At the top, he noticed a trail of dried mud and water stains. He followed it to its end, the second to last door.

Mackey closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and raised his hand.

The gentle rapping roused Cyle from the *fahlon* trance he had managed to enter a few hours earlier. His fingers flexed around the dagger in his hand. Wiping his free hand across his eyes, he threw off the soft brown hooded cloak that covered his legs and swung his feet off the bed. He had been upright, his back against the wall. Lying down would have assured sleep in his exhausted state.

Beneath the door, he could see the shadow of a single figure. The person coughed, paced back and forth, and stepped up to the door to knock again. It was a man, a bit on the overweight side. He recognized the gait as the innkeeper’s. Cyle crossed the room opened the door a crack. The older man smiled nervously and stepped back.

“Morn, sir. You...you wanted us to wake you. When you’re ready, come down to the common room. You’re entitled to a good breakfast. For services rendered. You know, for that...thing last night.”

Cyle nodded and shut the door, snapping the bolt into place. He heard the innkeeper’s mutterings through the door.

“Toran be blessed, let that one leave soon. I can’t take much more.”

Cyle waited until the man’s footsteps and voice faded down the stairs before stepping away from the door.

The room was small with barely enough space for the narrow bed and a simple chest for his belongings. Hanging from one wall was a piece of polished metal, fashioned into a crude oval with a water bucket on the floor beneath it. A sword belt with a pair of empty dagger scabbards hung over the bedpost. Intertwined with the belt was a dull gray medallion, the size of a large coin. On the chest lay his pants, a dirty tunic, and boots. Cyle slid the dagger into one of the scabbards and stepped in front of the mirror.

The face was not his. The eyes, bloodshot and stinging, were a pale blue.

Sleep. A few hours is all.

“No.”

Cyle shook his head and knelt beside the bucket, splashing cold water on his face. When he looked back in the mirror, the bloodshot eyes were still there but they were brown. It was his face again.

It was not a handsome face, he knew that, but people neither shunned nor stared. Most would have been surprised at so many creases and wrinkles on one who had spent only twenty-six summers walking Asymonte. His brown, nearly black hair, fell in front of his eyes and he brushed it away. He stepped back from the mirror, running his fingers over the numerous pale white scars of old wounds across his arms and chest. Blades, whipping tree branches, rocks - he had forgotten from where most of them had come. He remembered some though, as clearly as the day he received them. His fingers stopped near his right hip, hesitating before following the crooked river of melted skin that went to his knee.

Cyle jerked his hand away and reached for his clothes. After getting into his pants and boots, he picked up the remains of his tunic, which he held out at arm’s length. One of the sleeves was torn and the left shoulder had a large hole in it. He threw the garment aside. It fell to the corner. Opening the chest, he drew his pack from it. He rummaged around and pulled out a fresh tunic. His leather vest, set with steel rivets, went over top of that.

The last thing he picked up was the medallion. Running his fingers over it, he could feel more than see the engraved image of a three-towered castle. The dull gray metal had a stone-like texture, but was as strong as steel. It did not show any wear from the years or trials he had been through. Cyle slid it carefully over his neck, the metal chain unpleasantly cool.

Buckling the sword belt around his waist, he went over to the window and unlatched it. Cold salt air greeted him as he looked out onto the village docks. A single boat struggled in the waves as its crew tried to get an early start. A few other fishermen watched from the shore, wondering how they might also fare. Cyle turned his gaze from them to the windowsill. A canvas sack hung there, impaled to the wood by a dagger. He brought both inside and gathered the rest of his belongings from the bed. After a last glance around the room, he stepped out into the hall and headed for the stairs.

Several men were at the bar, chatting with Mackey. A dozen more sat scattered about at tables. One of the men noticed Cyle and nudged his companion. Soon, everyone had fallen silent. Cyle ignored their stares, heading for the nearest table. He set the sack on the chair next to him. Alisa hurried into the kitchen. A few moments later,

she emerged with a skillet. Cyle could hear the sizzling as she set the food in front of him.

“Can I get you anything else?”

Cyle cut into a flat cake with the edge of his fork and popped a piece into his mouth. He closed his eyes, savoring the taste. His body immediately felt better, taking in nourishment that he'd long denied himself. *Very fine, a subtle spice. Much like kafpt leaves. Ah, what I would not give for some boiled leaves from a kafpt wood.*

“What's kafpt wood?” Alisa asked.

“A tree from the northern shores, harvested by the Magi for its leaves. Lethal to Mortals –” Cyle stopped abruptly, the fork inches from his mouth. He had answered simply to have the barmaid leave him alone. The eggs fell off his fork and he growled. He scooped them up again. After chewing a few moments, he looked up. “The food is good.”

Alisa nodded and left Cyle alone. He ate in silence, interrupted only when Alisa returned to drop off a mug of cider. Before long, the patrons grew tired of staring at him and started to talk. Their voices were lower. Cyle could tell that the subject no longer revolved around fish or the weather. From the corner of his eye, Cyle saw a broad shouldered man staring at the sack. After a pull from his mug, the man stood and approached the table.

The innkeeper reached over the counter and tried to grab the man's arm, missing by inches. “Abe!” He whispered harshly.

The man stopped a few feet from Cyle's table, a nervous smile on his face. “I'm Abe Laard. I heard you came to help us with our problem.” He waited for a response, but Cyle worked on the last of his eggs. Abe and he took another drink, liquid sloshing down his chin. He pulled out a chair and sat beside Cyle, his smile fading. “Well, we're grateful for it. I know I speak for everyone when I say that, right?”

The man turned and looked back to the other villagers, some nodding in agreement. When he turned back, Cyle stared hard at him. Abe cleared his throat and glanced down at his mug. “Um, right. I have just one question for you.” He held up a shaking finger as to emphasize it. “Did you get him? I mean, *it*?”

Cyle looked at Abe for a long moment and then reached for the sack. He undid the string, glanced at the villagers briefly, and turned the sack over.

The dismembered head of Sark landed on the table with a thud. Abe jumped out of his seat, knocking the chair to the floor. Alisa, muffling a scream, ran into the kitchen. Mackey swore a prayer to the Great Book. The face was splattered with mud. The eyes were open, as if in fear, though the mouth was closed. The long dark hair was mangled and dirty, some strands cut short where the sword had severed the neck. Black flakes of dried blood fell onto the table.

Cyle picked the head up by its hair. It spun slowly, the empty eyes staring at each of the villagers in turn. “Is this what you were asking about?”

Abe nodded, closed his eyes, and backed away until he ran into a table. He spun around and grabbed the back of a chair. Cyle dropped the head into the sack once again and walked up to the bar. He glanced at Mackey before taking a handful of potatoes from Alisa's basket. He tucked them into his pack and pulled some coins from a pouch beneath his vest. He dropped three square silver coins onto the counter, hesitated, and

then added a few more. Then, without a look around, Cyle walked out of the Blow Down Inn.

Cyle threw on his cloak as he crossed the muddy courtyard. He opened the stable doors. With no other travelers at the inn, he had just let his horse roam rather than confine it to one of the small pens. The chestnut brown animal made its way over to him. Cyle patted the blaze of white that ran down its forehead. The horse pushed him toward the saddlebags that hung over one of the pen walls, using its powerful neck with impatience.

“Beggar.”

Cyle reached into one of the bags and pulled out a carrot. The horse snatched it from his hand, munching while Cyle threw a saddle blanket over the animal’s back. He strapped on the saddle, secured the rest of his gear, and led the horse out of the stable before climbing onto its back. A few of the villagers eyed him as he rode by. No one waved farewell or wished him a pleasant morning. They were eager to see him go.

He left the small village and turned onto one of the merchant roads that led south. The sky cleared by mid-day though the temperature remained cool. Autumn had begun early. The vast forests that covered the land cast a brilliant red and orange glow, witnessed by few. The faster trade routes on the Kershyn Sea gave merchants little reason to bring wagons north.

For much of his journey, he stayed within sight of the coast. He could see the tall sails of ships carrying timber and foodstuffs south. Clusters of fishing boats bobbing on the rocky waters marked each village he passed. It was the Gray Coast way of life – fish or farm. He rode through the day and well into the night, stopping long enough to cook the potatoes and rest for a few hours.

It was late morning when he finally saw the towers of the forts of Shandra. Home to twenty thousand people, the city was the largest in the land of the Gray Coast and the center for merchant activity in the region. Ships lay at anchor in the waters of the harbor. Two stone forts protected the city, one to the south and another northeast, each dominated by a high tower that rose from its center. Soldiers manned the battlements, watching wagons pass by.

As he rode toward the city gates, Cyle knew his sword drew the attention of some of those soldiers. There were fewer men on duty than he had expected. The uprising in Salen had apparently drawn many soldiers south to protect against cross-border raids from the bandits and rebels who thrived since the assassination of Salen’s lord.

A short line of wagons waited outside the city gates. At the front, a pair of city guards argued with a merchant about his papers and goods. Cyle continued past the waiting wagons, drawing a few grumbles. One of the guards glanced up and raised his hand. “You there! To the end of the line!”

Cyle did not stop. The other guard shoved papers back into the merchant’s hands and stepped beside his partner. He waited until Cyle brought his horse to a halt in front of them, then reached out for the animal’s lead. “Cheeky one. Have you some steel at your hip, think the laws don’t apply to you? What is it you want?”

Cyle tapped his medallion. “This states my business.”

The guard dropped the horse’s lead in a hurry. “Toran, a Hunter!” His partner ran to open the gates. “Sorry, sir. Caution, you know, with all the trouble down in Salen. You’ll be wanting the Authority, right? It’s four streets down, take a left –”

“I know where it’s at,” Cyle said. He nudged his horse and pushed past the guard. Behind him, he could already hear the whispers and angry protests.

The streets of Shandra were chaotic, crowded with sailors who wore the blue-green scarves of the Royal Navy. They mingled with the crews of merchant ships, browsing through the wares of shopkeepers. The city guard roamed to prevent scuffles and keep the pickpockets away. Horse drawn wagons, carrying goods up from the docks, forced their way through the mass of people. Even with the strength of his horse to help push people aside, Cyle found that passage was not easy.

The Authority, nearly a month’s ride from Port Tyslie, was the center of the King’s presence in the Gray Coast. Each of the lands had similar structures in their capitals, though only those in the western lands were so heavily fortified. Fears of lands declaring independence fostered paranoia. The Royal Authority was a sprawling, three-story complex surrounded by a high wall. Heavily armed guards stood outside the gates while men armed with crossbows patrolled the roof. None had the pale skin of a Gray Coast native.

Cyle dismounted a short distance from the gates and walked his horse up to the guards. He slipped his medallion over his head and held it out to one who wore the markings of a corporal.

The man looked the medallion over and passed it back. He motioned to the sack hanging from the saddle. “Is that what I think it is?”

Cyle nodded. “Could my horse get some water?” He wiped sweat from his steed’s neck.

The corporal waved another of the guards forward. “Take the Hunter and his mount to the stables, then to Authority Kunan.” He paused for a moment and turned back to Cyle. “Good hunt.”

Damon Kunan, the Royal Authority of the Gray Coast, sat at his elegant desk on the third floor with papers spread out on the desk in front of him. He signed one of the documents with a flourish and pushed it aside. His aide picked it up, blew the ink dry, and tucked it carefully into a leather case. Damon frowned.

“I don’t know why you bother,” Damon tapped the case with his quill. “No one cares what comes out of this office, least of all Port Tyslie.”

“Sire...I am only following the ordinances as laid down by the Royal Court. It specifically states that all official documents are to be placed in secure –“

“Do you think Port Tyslie cares about these?” Damon grabbed a handful of papers from the folder and tossed them into the air. The aide scurried to catch them as they scattered about. “Fishing shortages? Rainfall totals? Harre, Port Tyslie hasn’t a care of the Gray Coast so long as it pays taxes and does not follow Salen’s lead.” Damon dropped his quill back into the ink. “Put that all down. Fetch me some water and tea leaves, strong.”

Damon pushed his chair away from the desk and turned to the window as his aide left the room. The window overlooked the center of Shandra and the harbor. He stared at the masts of countless ships, each flying flags respective of their own merchant company. He settled on three man-o-wars flying the pitchfork and shield banner of King Tulon Barrham of Asymonte. He had heard from Harre that one would be returning to Port Tyslie soon.

“Port Tyslie in fall, no fairer place than thee,” Damon muttered, glancing over to a lengthy painting that hung on the wall near the office door. In its center lay a fabulous castle, surrounded by a city of rich buildings, and a bay filled with proud ships. A place he could only dream of. All because of his father’s ineptitude.

Bera Kunan’s attempts to siphon taxes into his own pockets had never bothered Damon or even his father’s superiors. It was simply the fact that he had failed spectacularly. The entire Kunan family would have been expelled from Asymonte’s nobility were it not for the pleading and favors of his grandfather. Even so, they went into exile in the Gray Coast. Damon had worked hard to earn the position of Royal Authority, but for now, it appeared that his progress through the ranks was at an end. With the exception of Salen’s civil unrest, Asymonte was at peace. Peace made for few changes.

The office door opened and Damon heard his aide enter. “Sire, your tea and...there is a man who wishes to see you. He claims to be a Magi Hunter.”

Damon turned, more suddenly than he wanted. A muscular man stood beside his aide, a sack in one hand and a sword by his side. The medallion that hung from his neck removed Damon’s doubts. They were not freely given and impossible to steal. The Authority took a moment to compose himself and motioned to a spare chair.

“Take a seat. I am certain you are tired. Harre, bring me the green book on that shelf.” Damon took the tea tray from his aide and set it on the desk. He picked up the teapot and began to fill a cup. The hot stream of liquid jerked back and forth with the shaking of his hand. “Tea, Hunter...”

“Belte. No.”

Water splashed onto the desk. “Cyle Belte?” Damon looked back to the teacup after seeing the Hunter’s nod. He set the pot back onto the tray and dropped two black leaves into the cup. His aide brought the book he had requested and placed it on the desk, then began to clean up the spill.

“Harre, when you are finished with that, stay.” Damon blew the dust off the book cover and opened it. He flipped through the pages until he found the last entry. “Pay no heed to my aide. I am grooming him to take over some of the responsibilities I have. I must say though, a Magi Hunter was not a lesson I intended to teach. But since you are here, I see little reason not to. Do you have any objections?”

“No.” Cyle sat down and dropped the sack onto the floor. It thumped loudly.

Damon ran his finger down the previous entries in the book, not reading them so much as giving him some time to consider his next words. He jabbed his finger onto one entry. “Ah, here it is. Dancus the eleventh, three years ago. It seems the Magi are not fond of the Gray Coast.”

“I can’t blame them.”

“Yes, right.” He began to recite, his voice settling into a comfortable pattern as the words came back to him. “Per the decree laid down by King Barrham in the second year of our freedom, a bounty exists on the head of every wizard and witch that remains in Asymonte. After the loss of the 2nd and 8th regiments of the Royal Army, the King declared that only the Magi Hunters may take a bounty. Once a head is taken, the Hunter is to come to the Royal Authority in the land in which the magi was slain.”

Damon glanced up. The Hunter's eyes were roaming the room, stopping to stare at the painting of Port Tyslie. "The purpose of the Once Lords Decree is your livelihood, Hunter. One would think you, of all people, would appreciate how it is carried out."

"I've done this before."

"Harre has not. You will treat him as you would any other entity of the Authority. Do you understand, Hunter Belte?" The two men locked eyes for a moment before Cyle sighed and reluctantly sat up in his chair. Damon turned his attention to Harre. "It is one thing you must understand. The Magi Hunters are excellent warriors, albeit vicious and brutal. Yet, because their prey poses one of the greatest threats to Asymonte, they hold a belief that they are better than the rest of society. That is not true. On occasion, one must remind them of their place. Is that correct, Hunter?"

"Yes, sire."

Damon tried to ignore the pause before the Hunter's reply and picked up his quill. He jotted some notes in the book and then asked, "When and where did you find this magi?"

"Two days ago." Cyle glanced about the room. "What month is it?"

"Keryishik," Harre offered. He pointed to a bronze globe on the Authority's desk. A metal guide lined up with a series of etchings. "Today is the ninth day, so you would have found it on the seventh?"

Cyle nodded. "Outside the village of Adair, north of here."

Damon scratched the quill across the parchment. He dipped it into the inkwell while asking, "Do you know what magic he practiced?"

"The villagers claimed he could see through lies. For a short while, they went to him with disputes," Cyle said. "From that I assume he was a lesiner."

"A torturer standing in judgment? How unusual. Was there any aru?"

Cyle reached into his vest and pulled out an oblong block of marbled clay. He set it in the center of the desk. Damon stared at it for a while, then set aside his quill. He picked up the clay, turning it over in his hands. No larger than his hand, it was still the most he had ever seen. Possession and mining of the substance was illegal, upon pain of death. Damon held the clay out to Harre. His aide declined it with a nervous shake of his head.

"A lot of magic could be performed with this," Damon said. He toyed with the aru a few moments longer before setting it down on the desk. He motioned to the sack. "Let's see the head then."

Cyle opened the sack and pulled the head out by its hair. Harre turned away as the Authority fought the bile in his throat. He had not anticipated the stench. Clearing his throat, Damon turned his eyes down to the book. He did not look up until the head was once more in the sack. "The current bounty is thirty-five hundred silver nobles."

"It's dropped."

"Simple economics," Damon said. "The fewer magi, the less threat they pose to Asymonte. How much of that would you like now?"

Cyle thought for a moment. "Twenty gold crowns and a hundred nobles. Weed out any from Salen or Ergen."

"I'll have the rest sent to the Pavilion then." Damon scrawled some numbers on a scrap of parchment along with his signature and handed it to Harre. The aide left the

room while the Authority finished with his notes in the book. When he looked up, he saw the Hunter beside the window. “Is this your first time in Shandra?”

“I was here several years ago. Not much different, except those.” Cyle pointed to the masts of the man-o-wars. “What are they here for?”

“Fishermen claimed to have been attacked by a strange ship flying no flags or markings. Lord Shulo’ne and I presume Lord Flah of Onan must have convinced Port Tyslie it could be a threat. Piracy has been on the rise since the rebellion in Salen. There has been fear they could cut off shipping lanes. The vessel on the far left...or was it right? That is the Lu Isle. It is due to leave for Port Tyslie this evening.”

“Are they taking the southern route?”

Damon shrugged. “I would assume so. The north will be frozen soon, if not already.” He glanced over his shoulder as Harre returned, a large pouch in one hand. The Authority took it and handed it to the Hunter. He watched as Cyle opened the drawstrings and sifted through the silver squares and oval pieces of gold. “Will you be staying in Shandra tonight? I can recommend several fine inns.”

Cyle poured the coins back into the pouch and shook his head. “No, I think I’ll be catching a boat.” He tucked the pouch into his vest and started for the door.

“A question, Hunter Belte,” Damon said before Cyle had reached the door. He glanced at the sack on the floor. “How many of these have you killed?”

“Not enough, sire.”