




PROLOGUE

As the young man knelt, the iron cold of the floor seeped through the thin material of his hose. He felt the stone, hard and unyielding, bruising him, but the discomfort was reassuring; the flagstones beneath him were the only thing in the chamber that felt solid. A fog of incense hung in shifting layers, stinging his eyes. It was a bitter smell that reminded him of burning leaves. He didn't know what it was, but it wasn't the serene frankincense that always welcomed him into church. Around him, shadows stole across the walls, nebulous and unfamiliar, as figures passed by candles that sputtered in holders on the ground, placed so far apart that the quivering points of fire cast little real light and served only to blind and disorient him further. A few yards away to his left the floor was spattered with a substance that gleamed wetly. Here, in this dimness, it looked almost black, but in daylight the young man knew it would be a bright, shocking red. He could still smell its sharp, metallic odour, even over the pungent incense, and he swallowed tightly, a plug of nausea clogging his throat.

This wasn't what he had expected. Part of him was glad of that; he may not have gone through with it had he known what would be asked of him this night. The only things that kept him here, doing as he was bid, were the presence of the men in the



shadows and the fear of what would happen if he refused. But he didn't want to show weakness. He wanted to do this right, despite his trepidation, and so he stared straight ahead, his chest, bare and pale, thrust forward, hands, slick with sweat, clasped tightly behind his back.

Now the men had stopped moving and the chamber had fallen silent again he could hear faint birdsong coming through the high windows, all covered with heavy black cloth. It must be almost dawn.

There was movement to his left. He saw a figure approaching and his stomach churned with apprehension. It was a man dressed in a shimmering cloak sewn from hundreds of overlapping circles of silk, all different shades of blue and pink: cobalt, sapphire, rose, violet. Here and there the material was shot through with silver thread that glistened whenever the candlelight caught it and created the impression that he was clad in the scales of a fish. The young man knew the figure was male, for he had spoken often during the ceremony, guiding him, commanding him, but so far his face had been concealed by a cowl, fashioned from the same material as the cloak, that hung down almost to his chest. It was surprising he could even see to walk. Under the cowl, his head appeared oddly misshapen and his voice, when he spoke, came out muffled and deep.

'You have chosen the path and it was wisely chosen. You have sworn the oaths and stood fast in the face of temptation and dread. Now is the final test and the most perilous. But obey me as you have pledged and all will be well.' The figure paused. 'Will you obey me now and always?'

'I will,' breathed the young man.

'Then prove it!' snapped the figure, whipping back the cowl and dropping to a crouch before the young man, who recoiled from the grinning skull that was revealed, the candles on the floor up-lighting it, making the bone that much yellower and

the huge, hollow eye sockets that much blacker.

Even though he knew it was just a mask, even though he caught a glimpse of dark human eyes through the sockets of the skull, his terror didn't dissipate, and when a small gold cross was drawn from the folds of the fish-scale cloak and held in front of him, his heart seemed fit to explode in his chest.

'Spit on it.'

'W . . . What?'

'Denounce its power over you. Prove you are loyal to me alone, that you speak as one with your brothers.'

The young man's eyes darted left and right as the men moved out of the shadows. They too wore masks; blood-red with the image of a white stag's head painted on the front of each.

'Spit!' came the command again.

Feeling the men crowding in around him, blocking out the frail candlelight, the young man leaned forward over the proffered cross. He collected saliva in his dry mouth with difficulty. Closing his eyes, he spat.