

You're imagining things, Maud told herself. *It's a gray robe*. There were millions of them in the galaxy. It was the simplest and most common garment, second only to a cloak. In the end, all colors faded to gray.

The robed traveler took a seat at the bar. The bartender took the order and came back with two cups. The larger man half-turned to watch the room, blocking Maud's view of the robed traveller.

Move, you oath.

The larger man showed no signs of moving. She couldn't see his face from where she sat, but she recognized the particular way his cloak bulged. A vampire in full armor.

A few moments passed. The raiders sized them up. A quiet communication was taking place between the large dark-haired raider who had to be the leader and the rest. Anticipation hummed through the room like a low-voltage current.

The raider leader rose and casually moved back, giving himself room for a charge, resting his hand on the big blood hammer at his waist. Almost simultaneously, the largest raider, his face ruined by a deep scar, got to his feet and lumbered toward the bar.

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House Krahr had taken that saying and ran with it. The arrival deck of the ship looked like the courtyard of a castle in the finest Holy Anocracy tradition. Square gray stones paved the floor and veneered the towering walls. Long crimson banners of House Krahr, marked with a black profile of the saber-toothed predator, stretched between the false windows. The gentle breeze of atmospheric circulators stirred the fabric, and the krahrs on the banners seemed to snarl in response.

In the middle of the chamber, a vala tree spread its black branches. Solid, with a sturdy trunk and a mass of limbs that divided and subdivided into a vast

Commented [LBS1]: oath

Commented [LBS2]: I'm confused. The large raider leader is Arland? The people in the lodge, one of whom is even larger, are also raiders? It's hard to keep track of which characters we're talking about.

Commented [LBS3]: The krahrs are the predators on the banners? (In the previous sentence, I wasn't clear whether there were multiple predators or just one.)

crown, the vala reminded Maud of basswood, but unlike the gentle green of linden trees, the vala's leaves were a vivid scarlet. The blood-red heart of the ship, a remnant of the origin world, sacred to vampires. No major ritual took place in vampire society without the vala tree to witness it.

...

"Lord Soren," Maud murmured. "Lady Ilemina must be stressed by these preparations. Perhaps it would be wiser not to mention Lord Arland's proposal." And her refusing of it.

"I couldn't agree more," the Knight Sergeant said.

She let out a small breath of relief.

"Unfortunately, my nephew took it upon himself to inform his mother already."

What? She kept her voice calm. "He did?"

Commented [LBS4]: I'm fairly knowledgeable about trees but didn't know that basswood and linden were synonymous until I looked it up.

Commented [LBS5]: Ha! 😊