



# Blood of the Father

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He should be asleep.

Tucked away snugly, in warmth and comfort. Safe from the bitter chill of winter, and the cold, cruel world beyond his bed. Instead, he wandered the darkened halls of his family's ancestral home, while outside the winter wind blew with the promise of more snow.

Tomas couldn't sleep. Something had woken him. And he knew that the only thing that could make things right again was a hug from his daddy.

Dressed in his woollen bedclothes, and a fur-lined cloak, the ten year-old boy was warm enough. But still he shivered as he picked his way through the house toward his father's study. The familiar hallways were made eerie by the absence of servants, or house guards.

His father tried to explain why he had to let them all go. He assured Tomas that it was a temporary absence. Just for a little while, he'd said, only until his fortunes changed. But they'd been gone for a long time now.

Only old Geoffry, and his wife Janice, had stayed behind. They claimed that they had nowhere else to go, but everyone knew that wasn't true. Geoffry had been in the service of the Arturan family since his father, Jonas, was a boy. It was no secret that his father loved the kindly, and loyal, old man.

Having left the bedchambers behind him, where his mother and sister slept peacefully behind him, Tomas had no more need for stealth. He ran, eager to reach his father's warm embrace.

Soon he could see the firelight that flickered below the door to his father's study. With a broad grin Tomas entered the warmly lit room. His father didn't look up. Instead he remained slumped over the plans and papers that littered his desk.

"Father?"

No response.

Tomas pulled his cloak a little tighter about his small frame. He could feel the chill wind blow in through an open window.

"Father?" he said, louder this time.

As he stared at his father's unmoving form, his heart hammered in his chest. He looked furtively about the room.

Certain that he was alone, he stepped forward quickly. With a firm hand he nudged his father. "Father! Please wake up! What's wro –"

The words died in his throat when he saw the blood.

His father was dead.

Tomas raced to the door to call for the guards when he remembered that there were no guards to call.

It was up to him.

His father, Jonas Arturan, was dead, and Tomas, the new Lord Arturan, would now have to take action. Without a moment's hesitation he grabbed his father's rapier from its place above the fire. It was a magnificent weapon.

Expertly made, the sky forged blade perfectly balanced. That sword had been in

his family for generations. It belonged to his father's father, and his father before him, and now, it belonged to him.

With a determined step he moved to the open window. Outside, he could see footprints that lead away from the house. Tomas grabbed the oil lamp from his father's desk, and with the sword in hand, he leapt out the window to follow the trail. He didn't have much time. Fresh snow might fall at any moment, and the trail would be lost forever.

The wind howled about him, whipping his cloak behind him. Thoughts of vengeance dominated his thoughts. He trudged through the ankle deep snow oblivious to the cold.

A mile from his home snow began to fall. It was a light dusting but he'd lived here long enough to know that could change. He had to hurry. It would not be long now before the trail was gone. He glanced behind him. He could no longer see the faint light from his house. and he realised how far he had come.

*I've come so far, he thought, I should turn back.*

Tomas stopped, and turned around.

*Craven!*

The word came unbidden to his mind. It was the name his sister had given him. Tomas knew he wasn't a brave boy and his sister teased him mercilessly. She often called him Craven. Perhaps more than she did Tomas.

*Tess is right, I am Craven. I shouldn't be here.*

He took his first step back toward the safety and warmth of his home. His courage had left him, and the bitter cold became biting. There was a sudden gust of wind that threatened to knock him over. He closed his eyes against the swirling snow.

*I'm never going to make it home.*

He started to cry. His father was dead. He was alone, in the dark. He was going to die out here. The snow continued to fall, and his tears turned to ice on his face. There was another gust of wind, stronger than the last. He was buffeted forward, and he stumbled slightly. He rubbed his eyes and took a deep sobbing breath. A familiar smell struck him.

Smoke. There was a fire nearby.

Tomas turned away from the house and scanned the area. There it was. A faint pinprick of light only a hundred paces away.

*If I'm going to die, I might as well die a man.* He swallowed his fear and headed to that source of light.

He moved much more slowly now. The cold penetrated his bones and leached his strength, but still he carried on. Soon he could see the campfire clearly. Through the falling snow he was able to make out a solitary figure huddled close to the fire. He shivered, suddenly aware of just how cold he was.

This was the person who had killed father.

Tomas forced himself to keep moving. He could feel the anger build within him, and took strength from the rage.

He was close now.

The man looked up as Tomas entered the circle of firelight. As soon as the warm glow enveloped him, the young boy started to feel better. He raised his father's sword, his sword now, and held the point of the blade toward his enemy as he had been taught.

"What are you planning to do with that, boy?" the man said calmly.

"You murdered my father," Tomas said through chattering teeth.

The assassin's lips curled in a slight smile. "You must be Jonas' son Tomas. I am pleased to make your acquaintance, My Lord." There wasn't a hint of condescension in his tone.

"I am here to avenge my father's death. Do you deny involvement in the crime?"

The cowed man nodded, and then rose to his feet. "I may have wielded the knife, lad. But I am not responsible for your father's death."

"Then tell me who is and I will deal with them after I am finished with you."

The man laughed. "I like you lad. You're not at all the craven child I have heard tell of." He caught Tomas' gaze. "But, I hope you think carefully about what you do next."

Tomas said nothing. His arm was beginning to tire. The tip of the blade was shaking uncontrollably. He realised there was very good chance he would die here. If not at this man's hand, then from the cold.

*What am I doing here?*

He had failed everyone. Failed his father, failed his mother, and his sister. That realization sapped the last of his resolve. Tomas dropped the sword as he collapsed to the ground with tears once more flowing from his young face.

The assassin stepped forward, and scooped the boy up in his arms. He carried him closer to the fire. With deft movements he opened Tomas' cloak to allow the heat to reach his frozen body, then rubbed his arms and legs. After he was sure the initial danger had passed the man wrapped Tomas warmly in a blanket. He rummaged around his pack and produced a strip of cured meat that he offered to the boy.

"You must really love your father," the assassin said.

Tomas accepted the food. "He was a good man. He took care of us all, and never raised a hand to me when I didn't deserve it."

"I never knew my father," the man said. He took a bite from his own piece of meat, and chewed in thoughtful silence for a long while. "You did a brave thing tonight, boy. It was a stupid thing, no question. But no less brave because of it. The way I hear it, your father was a good man. He deserves to be avenged."

"What do you mean?"

"I will kill the man responsible for you. The one who ordered your father's death will die by my hand."

"Why would you do such a thing?"

“Because you have something I want.”

Tomas glanced at his father’s sword. It was the only thing of any worth still left to his family. The assassin noticed this and laughed once again.

“No. Not the blade, boy.”

“Then what?”

“You, lad.” He looked Tomas in the eye. “I want your life.”

Tomas held the assassins gaze. His life in exchange for the death of the man behind his father’s death? It seemed a fair exchange. “You’ll be sure the bastard knows why he is dying?”

The man nodded.

“I accept,” Tomas said. He opened his shirt and offered the man his chest. “I ask only that you make it quick.”

The assassin erupted in laughter. “You’ve got stones, boy. I’ll give you that. You mistake my meaning. I don’t want to kill you. I want you to come with me. I will take you under my wing. Train you. I can introduce you to a life that few people ever experience.”

Tomas remained silent.

“There is one condition,” the man said, his face devoid of emotion, his gaze, piercing. He placed a hand on each of Tomas’ shoulders. “Listen carefully. I will require insurance against your commitment to this new life I give you.”

His blood suddenly ran cold. “What do you want?”

“The life of your mother and sister belong to me, until the day that you complete your training. Should you seek to escape me or the future I offer you they will both be killed. Do you understand me?”

Tomas nodded. “I will not betray your trust.”

The assassin stared into the young boy’s eyes. His gaze bored deep, and Tomas felt as though he were looking into his very soul. After a long moment the assassin released him. His right hand extended to seal the deal.

“Well, Tomas, welcome to The Family. Your new life awaits you.”

Tomas took his hand and shook it. “Tomas Arturan dies tonight. A new life needs a new name. From now, call me Craven.”