

*Note: This was initially part of the prologue of Hidden Promise, but was removed for word count, and it did not add much to the immediate plot. I like this section because it serves to recap what happened at the end of Hidden Sanctuary while providing additional insight into the windani and Kahnlaire's forces in general.*

## **Pretender Ensnared**

Gralmund watched and listened, hidden in the shadows of the forest as one of the secondary claimed the alpha position. In doing so, he unwittingly sealed the blood oath around him and those belonging to him once more, binding them to Kahnlaire's service. Fortunately, Gralmund had been the first primary in the pack, above this one. He and his remained separate.

"The primary are all dead. I am Alpha, and I kept the ordered meeting time," said the secondary.

Larku, Gralmund's former alpha, had acted in his usual impulsive manner when he ordered a full revenge party hunt so far from their home territory. The fool thought Kahnlaire's support meant the entire northeast belonged to them, but your territory was what your pack could hold and no more.

Gralmund would have challenged him years ago were it not for the geas forced upon them with the blood oath. The compelled obedience meant no one could challenge for control and the hierarchy remained static and stale. It made Larku complacent with undeserved confidence.

"Tell me how a group of five decimated your hunters. Start at the beginning," Kahnlaire ordered through the hunter he possessed.

As the self-professed alpha described the precipitating events, Gralmund thought back over what happened. Larku's decision to send half the hunters back to the pack when they identified their prey was appropriate. While Gralmund might disagree with claiming such a grossly expanded territory, he did not oppose chasing down a small party who thought they could kill windani without a price. They were days behind the small group, but there was no shelter close enough for their prey to escape retribution.

Larku did not trust Gralmund to protect his back in a fight, so he sent him and those under him after the animals the small group sent fleeing to the east. He was right not to trust him. Gralmund would allow a strike through his guard if he thought it might eliminate Larku.

The secondary continued his recounting, and Gralmund listened closely. He had been diverted from the main hunt by that point.

"Their animals were the first to fall trying to match the stamina of the windani, so we thought them within our grasp. That was when the vampire creature flew over them and brought a wall of pain, death, and fire. We lost many upon the wall and heard the female slay those jumping it to attack her. We were delayed in our pursuit, and some cowards among our number trailed behind, eventually fleeing from her power.

"When we regained our ground, it was a shock to find only two remained. *Surely*, we thought, *they are riding two or three to a horse*. It was not so. One of the horses fell, and we saw only one being fly from its back. When the last beast fell, only two ran from us at their pitiful pace.

"That was when the sixth, the flyer, returned and plucked one from the ground to carry it off to the mountains before coming back for the last. We raced to the final runner and would have had them both except for her power. She dove in front of the elf and more fire erupted from the ground. When we could see ahead again, she had him in her arms, flying toward the mountains.

"More cowards trailed behind to flee with the second demonstration, but the then-alpha told us the second attack was less than the first and she weakened. Most took heart from his words and continued the chase. We rushed up the mountain pass in pursuit of our prey. *Even with a defensible position*, we thought, *surely, they cannot defeat so many*."

"Surely," Kahnlaire's surrogate drawled in impatience clear to Gralmund's ear, but it did nothing to hasten the stream of words from the oblivious pretender-alpha.

"Their mage rained deadly rocks upon us, their blades killed us in numbers as we rushed in to face them, and the female burned and fought as though she were flame brought to life. Those alive here are the

ones choosing to retreat at the end, when it was clear only one of the prey fell to us. I brought order, I sent a small group to track them silently for information, I am Alpha now.”

“And has that group brought you information on these enemies?”

“Nothing,” he snarled. “I fear they are also dead.”

“What did she look like, this female with power?”

“I was further back, which is why I live, but saw less from there. She has wings like the lighter color vampires, but looks human in form.” He spat the names of the latter race. “I know no further details of her.”

“Watch the pass,” came Kahnlaire’s order, “and make sure someone survives to report to me should they leave this place.”

“But we…”

Kahnlaire said nothing as he stared down the pretender, but Gralmund smelled the fear stink coming in waves.

“We will do as you say.”

Larku died in that fight along with the majority of his primary windani. With those deaths, the geas broke from Gralmund. He had been held to it only by hierarchy, never by a sworn blood oath of his own. This fool may have sworn those in his group to the prior oath, but he held no authority over Gralmund's people.

Stepping from his shadowed concealment when Kahnlaire's presence departed, Gralmund grinned when the sycophant cowered before him.

"B...Beta," he stuttered out.

"No longer. I am Alpha now."

The secondary's eyes widened, his mouth opening and closing as he failed to form an argument against the claim. He had forgotten about Gralmund, and now he could either die when Kahnlaire found out his error or die now in a failed challenge against Gralmund's authority.

Gralmund decided to save him from such a choice. "I will not dispute your claims to Kahnlair, though. There is enough territory for two alphas. You and those belonging to you will remain here and do as ordered by your master. I will take my pack and return to our ancestral land."

"You can't..."

He shrugged off the disagreement, the muscle rippling beneath his furred shoulder. "Then stop me."

The only response was a mute, slow shaking of his head. If he died now, Gralmund would absorb his thousands as part of the larger pack. They would have a chance of surviving, even if this windani did not. But such was not their way. He claimed a pack and would destroy them to hold his claim. Their loss was no concern of Gralmund's, so he shrugged again and turned to leave, the act a sign of disrespect. He feared no retaliation, the other alpha knew he stood no chance against Gralmund.

Howling in victory, he dropped to four feet to run back toward his waiting group of hunters, hearing their answering howls. He was free, and he was alpha. Things would be as *he* ordered, no one else.