

Knife blades flashed between the assailants in the lamp light. Two men lunged and dodged each other in the fighting pit. Their feet scuffed through sawdust as they danced death. The crowd above them waved their betting scraps and shouted curses or encouragements at the circling combatants.

Some shouted for the tall, slender man with the hooked nose and shaved head. "Corgren! Corgren!" His lips remained partially parted like a snarl.

Others cried for the heavier man with pale hair and blue eyes that identified him as Hartian. "Hacker! Hacker!" Hacker flexed his free hand, prepared to hammer the other man with a stunning blow.

Sweat glistened on the fighters' bare chests in the flickering light. They feinted attacks and sliced with their flashing daggers. They circled. Hacker lunged at him.

Corgren slipped away from his opponent's slash. He stabbed and slashed counter-strokes, connecting to flesh at last. "I'll take your knife in trade for your life, son of a dog."

The cut trailed along Hacker's forearm as he held back a moment. "You're mine, Rokan cur!" His eyes narrowed and he flicked blood from his hand.

Corgren stood still, his snarl spreading into a grin. He had this oaf's measure now. He'd relish killing a proud Hartian on his own floor. Corgren spread his arms, inviting an attack.

The crowd howled.

Hacker hesitated. The crowd jeered him until he clenched his jaw and charged.

Corgren dodged aside and grabbed Hacker's arm. He jammed the knife into his opponent's right shoulder and ripped it from the wound.

Hacker roared his pain.

Corgren snapped his head away from the counter-strike of the opposite fist.

Hacker withdrew, struggling with his grip on his dagger. Blood gushed over his arm.

Corgren circled like a predator. He'd take his time now. He chuckled. Bleed, rat-faced Hartian. He hated them all. He feinted a stab and leapt around to Hacker's free hand as it jabbed past his face. He sliced the left shoulder and arm and laughed at the answering scream. It was a deep cut.

The bloodied Hartian staggered close to Corgren, then slashed.

Corgren dodged and cut his opponent's face.

Hacker screamed again. He held his face, gasping, every breath punctuated with a grunt.

It wouldn't be long now. He read resignation in Hacker's eyes. He'd kill him now.

Corgren lowered his hands.

The bloodied man's eyes narrowed. He gritted his teeth and charged, knife slashing.

Corgren dodged left of his wounded opponent. He flicked his knife at the exposed neck. The blade gashed him.

Hacker fell to his knees, knife dropped in the dust and forgotten. Blood spurted across the ring. The crowd roared approval as Hacker collapsed and bled his life into the sawdust.

He retrieved Hacker's blade as a trophy. He strutted around the ring, arms raised in the adulation. One less Hartian in the world to trouble his Rokan brethren. He quickly ducked out of the ring's door into rooms for the fighters. He sheathed the knives, found a bucket of water and cleaned blood from his torso and arms.

Paugren entered from another door, his nose only slightly less hooked than Corgren's. "Good work." Corgren's brother slapped him on the shoulder. "Any injuries? No? Good, I'll go collect the winnings."

He caught the flash of the strange tattoo on his brother's inner forearm. It was a few

months old and Paugren never explained where he'd gotten the matching pair on each forearm. Corgren splashed water in his face. "Careful. These dirty Hartians will cheat us if they can and attack us for no reason."

Paugren grinned. "I can handle this man and his hirelings. They think I've no stomach for them but they don't know I've taught you everything."

Corgren found his shirt as his brother exited the room. Paugren was his teacher and sparring partner. He was good but Corgren was better. It took a firm stomach to manage Corgren's bouts as much as it took him to fight in the ring. It was tough but lucrative. Far better than being a laborer for Hartians.