

LORD OF THE BLACK LAND: VOLUME ONE (Excerpt)

by Jack Conner

Chapter 1

Wolves ranged throughout the forest, howling furiously, sending fear before them like a plague. Their howls shook the stones of the great fortress that reared from the cliffs of the mountain, the fortress where the wolf-lord lived. And in his hall, upon his throne, he sat and waited.

Presently a shadow stepped from behind a pillar, its eyes shining yellow in the dimness of the chamber.

“I am here.”

Vrulug, the wolf-lord, smiled at his visitor’s stealth, though his guards put their hands to the hilts of their swords. He waved them away.

“Step forward,” he said.

The shadow obeyed. The low, leaping red light of the braziers revealed it, an inch at a time. It was a man, or at least it appeared like one for the moment—tall and dark and wild, broad of shoulder, deep of chest, unclad. The smell of blood rose from him. Though he stepped forward, his face remained in shadow, and his eyes glinted from the darkness.

“I’m yours to command, my lord. What would you have of me?” Raugst’s voice betrayed only a slight edge. He had been called away from the hunt and clearly longed to rejoin it.

“Something important.” Vrulug dismissed his Borchstog guards, and they left grumbling, obviously not pleased at the thought of their lord alone with the visitor, perhaps even jealous of the intimacy it shared with him. Smoke from a nearby urn drifted across the room, and from somewhere the cry of a tortured prisoner echoed off the walls.

“I need for you to infiltrate the Wesrains,” Vrulug said, without preamble.

Raugst lifted his eyebrows in appreciation. Then, smoothly, he bowed his head. “It shall be done, my lord.”

“Good.” Vrulug relaxed. Raugst would do well, as he always did. “Grand times are approaching, my friend. *The* grand times.” He lowered his voice. “The Master ... makes His move.” He let the words stretch out, making each one important.

“Truly?” There was genuine surprise in Raugst’s voice. When Vrulug inclined his head, Raugst’s eyes glittered with a different sort of light than before. “I did not think it would be so soon.”

“Nor did I, yet the hour of His victory approaches. What’s more, *we will make it happen.*” He let the importance of that sink in, then clapped his hands. A servant emerged from an alcove with

a platter bearing a bottle and two sparkling glasses. The servant filled each glass with red fluid, fine wine laced with human blood, and Vrulug and Raugst both took one.

“To the One,” Vrulug said, and Raugst echoed the words.

They drank. The howling of the wolves outside reached a crescendo, and Raugst cocked his head, listening.

“Do you miss the hunt?” Vrulug said. “I know I drew you away too soon.”

Raugst smiled. “On the contrary, my lord. I have new prey now.”