

Excerpt from  
*Lord of the White Hell*  
Book Two

Kiram ran hard and the curse rushed after him. He felt its pursuit, like hot breath and sharp teeth snapping at his back. Something sliced through his pant leg and slashed open his calf. The pain flooded him with an animal desperation and his body responded with a rush of speed.

In the back of his mind he knew he should return to the security of the dormitory, but the curse spread between him and the school, so Kiram wasn't going to turn around.

He abandoned the thought of reaching any destination; nowhere could be safe. All that mattered was escape. He had to keep moving. His muscles burned and his lungs ached as he threw himself ahead too fast to even see where he was going.

Flows of snow dragged at him. He fought through them. He tore across the grounds and raced through the orchard. Twilight shadows engulfed him as he crossed the bridge and sprinted between rows of bare apple trees.

Sweat soaked his shirt. His rapid breath pumped out like steam from one of his engines. At some point he lost the orchard path and found himself stumbling through deeper drifts of snow and surrounded by wild, old trees.

He tripped over a fallen branch and crashed into the snow. As he scrambled back to his feet, he caught a glimpse of the roiling black mass rushing through the twilight shadows towards him. He heard whispers like distant screams. Overhanging tree branches splintered apart the instant the shadow curse fell across them—ripped to shreds just as the groom, Victaro, had been.

Raw panic electrified Kiram's trembling muscles. He fought through the snow and raced into the darkness of the dense woods. From overhead came the cry of a bird. A crow. First one then another and another.

**"Help me!"** Kiram shouted, praying that this once Bahiim mysticism would serve him. **"Please, sisters, help me!"**

He didn't have the strength to waste waiting for a response. He kept moving; then suddenly black wings swept past his head. A crow circled him and then flew between the big pines on Kiram's left. Desperate for any hope, Kiram plunged through the undergrowth after the bird. Other crows swept down from the branches, leading Kiram and calling him, their harsh voices challenging the terrible growls and shrieks of the curse behind him.

Hard cramps bit through Kiram's legs. His lungs felt raw. He staggered blindly after the crows, running between towering trees and snow-covered brambles. Then one of the crows alighted in the bare branches of a huge oak. Kiram fell against the rough trunk of the old tree. His legs buckled beneath him.

The black mass of the curse came up fast, rushing after Kiram. It arched up over the snow like a cresting wave. As its shadow neared Kiram a sick pain punched into his body. Something twisted through his intestines.

***It must have blood, Kiram.*** Alizadeh's voice moved over him like a chill wind.

Then the crows dived from their perches, sweeping down over Kiram and the curse crashed across their backs. Burning feathers and blood spattered the snow and pelted Kiram. Crow carcasses fell, smoking, to the ground. The curse rose like a black steam from the mutilated birds. Kiram pressed himself back against the oak, not wanting even a wisp to touch him. The curse hung like smoke in the air.

Kiram held his breath, afraid on some primal level that the curse might somehow hear him gasp or feel him exhale. He stared intently as the black wisps slowly coalesced into the dark silhouette of a man.

Kiram recognized the long body with its broad shoulders and slim hips. The curse could have been either Javier's or Fedeles' shadow, suspended in the air before his eyes. It took a step closer to Kiram, one hand extending, but then stopped. Suddenly its featureless head turned back as if hearing a call. Its mass dropped to the snow and slithered back across Kiram's tracks. In an instant it was gone.

Kiram dragged in a breath of the frigid air. His entire body shuddered from both cold and shock. The blood streaming down his calf felt alarmingly hot and suddenly he felt aware of the scratches where the crows' bones had grazed his skin. Black feathers matted with blood spattered his arms and face. Pieces of skulls and bodies pitted the snow all around him. His own blood smeared out from his right leg in a rapidly cooling pool.

Impending sobs tightened his throat and tears welled in his eyes. He wanted to curl into a ball and have his mother tell him that everything would be all right. He wanted to be back home and feel his father's strong embrace and know he was safe. Kiram wiped furiously at his face, knowing that he only succeeded in smearing crows' blood across his cheeks.

He couldn't act like a child, damn it.

He watched his breath rise in white clouds and dissipate into the dark. No one was going to come rescue him—certainly not his parents—and if he didn't get back to the academy he was going to freeze to death.

Kiram pushed himself back from the old oak. A pang flared through his calf but the leg still took his weight. He followed his own tracks back towards the academy. Every time he heard a sound or saw a motion in the branches above him he froze in fear. An owl swooped past him. Some small creature shrieked and skittered over a tree limb. Clusters of blue jays watched him in eerie silence.

Snow began to fall in light streams at first, but then it grew heavy. Kiram's old footprints became shallow impressions. He struggled to follow his path back through the forest.

Huge flakes of snow settled in his hair and melted against his skin. Kiram shoved his hands into his coat pockets. At first his feet ached, almost burned from the cold, but now they were numb weights. He couldn't stop shivering.

It couldn't be much further. Kiram thought he could smell oven smoke in the air. Just a little farther, he promised himself, but his steps were unsteady and he wasn't even sure of where he was anymore. Suddenly his boot caught on a buried stump and he tumbled down an incline, slamming into the trunk of a tree.

He struggled up to his feet, but the snow slipped beneath him, and he slid farther down the incline, this time only coming to a stop when his back and shoulder pummeled into the ragged stones of a crumbling wall.

Kiram lay still, too cold to care about his scrapes and bruises. Snow drifted down onto him. He was so tired and this fucking day just wouldn't let up. He tried to roll over but his arm wouldn't move; instead a terrible dislocated feeling shot through his shoulder. His calf seemed dead and he didn't have the strength to force himself up to his feet again.

He had to rest. Just for a few minutes, then he'd go on. Kiram closed his eyes. He imagined how he would brace himself with his left leg and use the wall to support his weight. He'd get up; it wouldn't be all that difficult. If he couldn't climb the slippery incline, then he'd follow the wall. It had to have been part of the academy grounds at one time. Doubtless it would lead him close enough that he could catch a glimpse of the dormitory. He'd probably be back in less than an hour.

With that thought a delirious calm settled over Kiram. He felt a little warmer, almost comfortable, now. Perhaps the snow was letting up. His muscles relaxed and he slept as blankets of snow settled over his body.



The hands that gripped him felt like heated brands. Kiram opened his eyes and for a moment saw nothing but brilliant light, then felt the sensual heat of the white hell.

Javier's black hair and dark eyes came into focus and slowly Kiram made out the rest of his features. He leaned over Kiram. Dark sky spread out behind him. High in the sky a crow circled.

What kind of crow flew when it was so dark? And when had it stopped snowing?

"Kiram." Javier's voice seemed strangely distant and his expression was strained. "Can you hear me?"

Kiram tried to respond but found himself producing only a weak groan. Javier's hand felt blazing hot as it stroked his cheek.

"Just stay awake, Kiram. Stay with me," Javier said. Then he straightened and looked back over his shoulder, shouting, "I found him!"

Kiram was aware of being lifted up against Javier's chest and the sparks from the white hell crackling around him. He thought he heard Nestor's voice and Elezar's as well, but he wasn't sure. Only the heat and light of Javier's presence felt real to him. Slowly the range of his awareness grew. His shoulder and calf hurt. His hands and feet ached. A strange bouncing motion sent pangs through his shoulder. They were riding, he realized. He was on Lunaluz, leaning against Javier, and still high above them the crow circled, calling.

"The curse." Kiram tried to get the words out but his lips felt leaden. "It's in Fedeles. That's where it hides."

"I know." Javier's voice was rough.

Of course Javier knew. Kiram leaned back against Javier's chest.

"Fedeles destroyed my engine." It alarmed him that he couldn't get more than a whisper out and his words sounded slurred. "He didn't want to do it. He was crying the whole time. I think the curse in him drove him to it."

Suddenly Kiram realized what that would mean. The man who controlled the curse must have found out that Scholar Donamillo planned to use Kiram's engine to free Fedeles. How had he found out? Only a few people knew anything about it, aside from himself, Javier, and Scholar Donamillo. Genimo knew apparently and

perhaps Morisio had guessed at the truth. One of them must have let some vital detail slip to the man controlling the curse.

“Fedeles tried to tell me about the man who put the curse in him but that’s when it came out of him and attacked me.” Speaking just a few words felt exhausting. Kiram drew in a deep breath. Javier said nothing, but for a moment he dropped the reins from his right hand and gently touched Kiram’s chest.

The shadows of apple trees danced and jumped as he and Javier rode past. Behind them Kiram could hear other riders. He closed his eyes for just a moment and then immediately opened them again when a blaze of white light surged over him.

“Don’t sleep, Kiram. Stay with me.” Javier gripped him hard and a searing heat flared through Kiram’s chest as Javier opened the white hell again...

The adventure continues in

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