

# *FLESH AND FIRE*

BOOK ONE OF  
THE VINEART WAR

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Any details that don't connect to the actual process were either changed intentionally, or I got wrong. Don't blame them.

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# *FLESH AND FIRE*

*When I preach*, I remind myself that the Collegium was created for one purpose: that the world not forget Sin Washer, and how—and why—He came to us. That is our duty, our reason for being.

The story is a simple one, in the telling. Ages past, prince-mages ruled these lands. Some were good men, and some were evil, but all were arrogant with their power, and the emperor in distant Ettion, busy with his own rebellious court, did not rein them in. Bored, they battled each other, staging magical conflicts merely to prove their skills. Year after year, the contests grew more brutal, the need to win more overwhelming.

In those days, all spellwine came from the First Growth, whose vines were straight and tall, the flesh fruit ripe with magic, and only the quality of a prince-mage's harvest determined whose spell-crafting would prevail. Thus the people were taken from their other, necessary work, until entire regions felt the pinch of hunger and disease.

Distraught, the people cried out to their gods to save them. Of all the ten gods, only two heard and listened: Baphos, patron of the harvest, and Charif of the growing season. Taking the form of ordinary mortals, they came together to scold the emperor for failing in his duties. The emperor, troubled closer to home, told them to take their complaints to the prince-mages and discipline them directly. Baphos and Charif did so, gathering them together and warning them of the consequences of their actions. But the prince-mages, prideful and strong, did not listen.

Charif was annoyed at the reception they received, and Baphos soothed her, and together they created a child who grew to adulthood between the sowing and the reaping. He was named Zatim, and when he reached his full growth, he came before the prince-mages as well and spoke unto them with the words of his parents, warning them to cease or be destroyed.

The prince-mages refused to hear his words as well, and ordered him slain for daring to reprimand them, for such was their pride in their magic that they thought themselves equal to the child of gods. And so the killers came upon Zatim as he walked alone, and fell upon him with blades dipped in deadly spellwine. But as the knives pierced his flesh, it was not blood but wine that flowed from his veins, a more potent spell-wine than any mage could craft. The killers fell back in awe and fear, and he struck them down with a single word, for unlike his parents Zatim felt no affection for humans to soften his heart.

But his parents' voices came to him, reminding him that he had been born not to destroy but to protect, and he heard them, and heeded their wisdom. Lowering his hands, the wine-blood flowed over his fingers and down into the soil, spreading through every land, and where it touched the grapes, they withered and changed, the vines twisting under his anger until where once there was a single spellgrape there now were many, their pale yellow skin tinged with the red of his blood, and the prince-mages did not know how to use them.

And the common people rushed to Zatim's side, trying to staunch the flow and save his life, and in their concern his anger was tempered. He smiled and touched



them as well with his wine-blood, and their sadness fled and they felt peace such as they had never known.

“See this,” he said unto them. “See this, how I cleft the magic of the land from the seats of power. Let nevermore the mighty craft magic and use it against those they are sworn to protect.”

And then he died, and those around him gathered the wine-blood from his flesh, and brought others before them and washed their hands with the blood as well, and so the peace was shared, and they praised the name of Zatim Sin Washer, who had stopped the prince-mages and saved the lands from destruction, and given them peace.

This is the story we tell, we Washer’s Kin. We travel from the Collegium school to pour the wine-blood for those who are in need of comfort, and tell Sin Washer’s story, over and over again, so that none will forget what we once were, and how we came to be as we are now.

THAT IS THE story as we tell it, and it ends there, but where legend ends, history begins, and no true story ends so cleanly.

In distant Ettion, in the year of Sin Washer’s birth and death, the emperor himself was slain in his own bed, and the lands fell into chaos. A few prince-mages still tended their strange new grapes, but Sin Washer had spoken truly: each vine was now limited in scope, not the mighty powers of before. And so the age of the prince-mages waned, their attentions turning to more immediate, practical sources of power and strength. But the vineyards remained, and in their place the Vinearts, the vine-mages, arose to master the grapes, and craft them into useful things.

And so were Sin Washer’s words proven true once again, for Vinearts must spend their entire lives learning their vines, and have no time to build armies or rule over men, and princes, busy with the ways of men, have no time to dedicate to the secret and subtle ways of vines.

For nearly fifteen hundred years, through surfeit and famine, prosperity and plague, we have abided by Sin Washer’s Commands. But time passes, memories fade, and the hunger for power is a terribly human thing, and so we—even we Washers—were caught unaware. . . .

## *Prelude*

*In the hills* of southern Iaja, thunder had rolled through the night before, but no rain accompanied it, and the slaves were at work in the vineyards soon after sunrise. The sun had progressed to the third-quarter mark when a lean figure came to stand at the edge of the yard. A freshly picked clutch of fruit rested in his work-roughened hand, and he was studying the flesh of the fruit, letting the magic deep within it speak to him and murmur of potential and promise.

A soft cough sounded, overriding the gentle morning hum of insects in the grass and attracting his attention, as intended. “Master?”

Vineart Sionio didn’t turn, but out of the corner of his eye he saw the slave, diffident but urgent, his hands fisting in the rough tunic that hung over his wiry body.

“Yes?” While he waited for a response, the Vineart placed a young green grape on his tongue and closed his mouth around it, crushing it and letting the juice coat his tongue. The taste was both delicate and sour, and it rose into his nasal passages. Not anywhere near ripe, still waiting for the heat of high summer and the cooler nights of Harvest, but showing distinct promise. His vineyards were still young, giving only limited yield. This Harvest might finally change that.

“Master,” the slave said again, “there is a . . .” The slave looked down at his feet, falling silent.

Sionio was a young man, barely thirty and still building his reputation; although granted a Master’s rank, he had not yet earned the right to name his House, his vines still known by the name of the nearest village. He was ambitious, though, and worked as hard as any slave when hands were needed in the yard. His slaves respected him and his magic to the point of caution, as was only proper, but he did not abuse them. There was no reason for them to fear speaking if there was something to be said.

“A what?” He turned then, and looked directly at the slave. “Speak. Stop wasting my time.”

The slave flinched. He was bald, and had either lost or forgotten to wear his hat that morning. Sionio made note to speak to the overseer about that. He could not afford a single slave to fall ill, not now. “I do not know what it is, Master. But it is in the fields. And it is wrong.”

Very few slaves could sense the magic that grew within spellgrapes’ flesh. But they worked the vineyards every day of the year, season after season, and it spoke to them in its own fashion. They knew what should be there . . . and what should not.

Sionio did not hesitate. “Show me.”

The soil was soft underfoot as they walked, the smell of the young fruit warm in

the afternoon sun. If the weather held for another month, if no rot or infestation threatened, and Harvest went well. . .

Sionio halted his thoughts there. Weather was something even a Vineart could not always control, and so it could easily become obsession. Sionio was a more practical man; he worried over what he could affect, and left the rest to the silent gods and Nature's whim. Skill and craft were what made spellwine, and he did not doubt his strength in either.

They came to the vines the slave had been weeding and stopped. "Here, Master."

A quick mental calculation placed them in seventh square, second grouping. Sionio knew every square of the enclosure, its planting, history, and expectations. The vines here were only four years old, but they had a noble heritage, the rootstock coming from his own master's enclosures, and in another few years their fruit would contribute to a noble, powerful spellwine that would carry Sionio's name across the known lands.

"Where is this wrongness?"

"There, Master." The slave pointed, his sun-browned finger shaking slightly. Six other slaves stood by, looking up and down the yard nervously, three males, two females, and one so old its gender was uncertain. Sionio frowned at them. They should be weeding and pruning, not fiddling with their thumbs like useless citizens.

"In the soil." The slave who had brought him word pointed again, down at the base of a vine, but made no move to get closer.

Sionio looked at the other slaves again, more closely this time. Two of them had taken off their own straw-brimmed hats and were crunching them between restless fingers. They could not meet his gaze, not even the oldster who should have known better.

These slaves had been bought cheaply, all past puberty; the overlooked second string was all Sionio could afford at the time. Still, life here was better than on the slaver's caravan. They were not afraid of him, but of what they felt. Or, more accurately, they were more afraid of whatever was there than him.

Sionio pushed passed the slaves and knelt by the vine in question. A grape vine needed support to grow on, the woody stem not strong enough to support itself and the weight of its fruit. During the bare winter season, the slaves wove tendrils around waxed fibers strung between wooden posts, giving the vines something to cling to as they grew. Now, in the warmth of early summer, the small green leaves were clustered thickly around those ropes, protecting the grapes underneath from too much sun, rain, or animal predation.

Sionio's trousers, durable canvas styled after those worn by Iajan sailors, were quickly stained by the dirt as the Vineart dug his fingers into the soil. He reached toward the roots buried deep in the mineral-poor ground, until the soil reached the dark red mage-stain on the back of his hand. The senses that made him a Vineart, the ability that allowed him to craft the spellwines, rang an alarm. It was not magic that warned him, but some deep atavistic sense, an animal's warning of a predator, of something not right lurking nearby.

The civilized maiar, or princeling, in his city or fine country house might scoff,

but Sionio knew better. Instinct did not lie.

The slave was right. Something was wrong. Something deep, something new. Something that should not be there.

“Go fetch a firestone, and a smudge pot,” he told the nearest slave, the one who had fetched him originally. “And a vial of sweetwater.”

The slave took off at a run, and the others backed up a few steps more, not willing to leave but not wanting to be close to anything that called for sweetwater, also known for good reason as grape-purge.

“Now, what ails you, little ones?” he asked, returning his attention to the grapevines in front of him. To the uneducated eye they seemed perfectly healthy, the leaves shiny and unfurled, each bunch thick and heavy, the grapes small and deep green.

Whatever rot lurked in the soil, it did not seem to have affected the crop yet. With luck, they had caught it soon enough, and Sionio would reward the slave who had alerted him.

Then a tremor under his knee made him look down in time to see tiny red bugs skittering under his hand, digging their way out of the soil. They scrambled over his fingers, trying to climb the rough cloth of his clothing.

Bud mites were normal pests. They usually came out only in the early morning, feeding on the occasional grape that burst in the night. They should not be swarming like this, not now, not in such numbers.

Sionio unhooked a palm-sized wineskin from his leather belt with his free hand, uncorked it easily with two fingers, and tilted it so that a few drops fell onto his tongue. Unlike the grapes he had tasted earlier, the spellwine was rich and fruity, sweetly pungent: the instantly familiar taste of vine-heal. It faded into his mouth, the vapor rising into his sinuses, and as he breathed, the spell was released, allowing him to *feel* the soil, *feel* the movements under his hands and knees.

“Sin Washer!” he swore, jerking back even as the ground under him rumbled, the dirt and bugs flying upward as the force of his query summoned something, a something that erupted from the soil like a volcano, and threw him onto his backside.

The wrinkled, blind head of a grub rose a full length into the air, the shape of it familiar to anyone who had ever worked a vineyard, if a thousand times larger than such a thing should be. The slaves, shrieking, scattered and ran as though the grub would devour them. In the distance, from the kennel by the sleep house, dogs barked a now-useless alarm.

Sionio got to his feet, his gaze never leaving the giant grub’s form even as his mind identified the known facts. He might be young but he was not green. Faced with a threat to his vines, a Vineart did not react; a Vineart *acted*.

The leaves near where the grub reared its dark gray form had already faded to an ugly yellow, dying by sheer proximity to the thing, as though its very presence were a poison. Sionio suspected that, were he to lift the leaves, the young grapes would be withered and dying as well. This thing had to be stopped, now, before the blight spread.

He didn’t need a vial of spellwine to deal with the threat: the grub might be huge

but it was still a grub. Disgusting, and the size of the thing made it a creature of nightmares, yes, but any Vineart worthy of his vines knew how to deal with such a thing.

It would be easier with his tools, of course.

Even as the thought passed through his mind, there was a sound behind him. The grub turned as though it, too, had heard the sound, and a thin shriek rose into the air from its open maw. The slave had returned. Despite its obvious fear, the slave forced himself forward enough to push an object into his master's waiting hands.

A firestone, warm and ready. And a small clay pot marked with the sigil for sweetwater.

The smudge pot would have been useful as well, but these were the two things that he needed most of all.

Clutching the firestone in his right hand, he felt the crystalline globe react to his own body heat, doubling and trebling the fire trapped inside glass until the colors swirled and danced, impatient to be let out. The clay pot he crushed with his other hand, feeling the thick, oily liquid drip over his fingers and down his palm, tingling slightly.

To work magic, most needed properly prepared spellwines. But here, in the middle of his own vineyard, all a Vineart needed was already in place. Let princes and lords buy spellwines; a Vineart had a more subtle magic at his command.

Sionio spit into his left palm and then clasped his hands together, letting the juice from his mouth mix with the sweetwater and coat the firestone. The spit carried the magic within him, tangled with the lingering traces of mustus and fermentation. Mageblood was not as potent as spellwine, but it was always present and ready.

“Scour, scour! Root and leaf, be clean! Go!”

A basic decantation, useful to prevent infestations of bugs and rot. The heated sweetwater mixture turned it into a flaming torch, exploding from his hands at the grub.

Magic that would have cleansed a midsized field of the most tenacious rot washed over the grub, making it scream like a horse in agony. The full body of the thing pulled out of the soil until it reached a man's height, almost as thick around and thrice as ugly as the most deformed freak.

And still it screamed, the ugly, bulbous head reaching through the flames to snap at the Vineart, the source of its agony. Blind, it still came dangerously close, aiming not for the Vineart's head but his hands, where the flames came from.

“Scour!” he cried again. “Root and leaf, be *clean*. Go!”

The decantation was a basic one, but he was no apprentice to miscast it or underestimate the power needed. It should have been a matter of moments before this was finished. Still, the grub attacked, despite the spell, and Sionio found himself pushed back one step and then another, until his back was up against the row of vines behind him, and he could retreat no farther.

What *was* this thing, he wondered, even as he grasped for another burst of magic, suddenly unable to concentrate through his fear. The thought occurred: grubs, even

bastard monster grubs, did not appear alone. Was this nightmare beast an aberration? Or were there more, lurking below the fields, waiting to consume his entire crop? If he faltered now, might he lose it all?

The firestone flared again, driven by his own fear and protective anger. The vineyard was more than the source of his power; it was his livelihood, his life. It was everything he had worked for, from the beginning of his training until now. The idea that something as ugly, as horrible, and as ordinarily defeatable as a *grub* might put that at risk drove him forward again, his hands flaming bright enough to match the sun overhead. His normally calm features twisted with anger and determination as he reached out with those burning hands, reaching through his disgust and natural aversion to *touch* the grub.

The moment he made contact, he wanted to recoil, to let go, to wipe his hands clean of the taint. The skin of the grub was hot and slimy and *wrong*. This was no garden mutant, no horror of nature. This thing was *magic*, although how or why Sionio could not fathom. Such magic was not possible, could not be possible. . . .

Even as Sionio thought those things, he was chanting a new decantation. Not an apprentice's cantrip, but something far deeper, far stronger, and far more dangerous.

"Wither and *die*," he ordered the grub. "Lack of moisture, lack of rain. Overheat, wither, and die. Go."

It was less a spell than a curse, the sort that should never even be whispered in any vineyard, much less his own. Sionio poured everything he had into it, and poured that in turn into the body of the beast grub. The remaining rosewater on his hands slicked onto the grub's skin like pig oil; mixed with his spit, it had the same effect as setting a torch to dry grain.

A huge, high shriek nearly shattered the Vineart's eardrums at such close range, and the grub wavered, quivered under his grasp, and then collapsed, taking down an entire span of the vine-row with its fall.

Sionio fell back, the monster's death throes knocking him away, and he landed again on his back. He watched as the grub thrashed and writhed, and, finally, fell still.

An eerie silence fell over the vineyard. Birds did not sing overhead, slaves did not chatter, and even the wind seemed hushed. Distantly, as though through water, he could hear the faint sounds of something rustling, and recognized it, barely, as the sound of human bodies. His slaves, who had run . . . but not so far away. If he called to them, they would come back.

No. Not until he was sure the thing was dead. Slaves were not cheap, and good slaves, loyal slaves, were even more difficult to replace.

He got up and walked with steady grace to the monster's corpse. The sweetwater was gone, burned off his hands, and he could feel the depletion of the magic within his marrow. Sweetwater was dangerous to the user as well as the target. But this was still his vineyard, his lands, and so long as his feet walked the soil, there was strength here for him to take. Enough to ensure this thing was dead, and the immediate threat, gone.

The corpse was still and cooling. Dead. Even as he bent to check, the wrinkled gray form began to shimmer and shake. Before he could even jump back, sure it was some sort of trick, it imploded, leaving behind only a choking gray cloud of foul-

tasting dust.

He had not caused that. Magic-born, and magic-sent, and magic-destroyed. Whoever had sent this monster against him wanted no trace left to be discovered. Who could do such a thing? Touching the grub, feeling its life-spark pulsing against his skin, enhanced by the sweetwater, had filled him with such dread, such disgust. .magic should not cause him to shudder like that. Something lay beneath it, something dank and sour on the tongue.

He could ask no one. A Vineart would have no cause to attack him; they could not benefit from his vines, nor take over his lands. That was not their way; deviation from Sin Washer's Command to abjure power was unthinkable, unforgivable. And yet, it was a magical attack, so clearly another Vineart was involved. But who? Who could have created such an abomination of a spell? More to the point, who had bought it, used it against him?

Shaken, Sionio stood, and with a twitch of his hand summoned the slaves to him. Four came, four of the six who had worked this cluster originally. If the two who fled were not dead already, he would remedy that by nightfall. He rewarded betrayal as well as loyalty.

"Speak to no one of this," he warned the remaining four. "Speak of it, and die." No matter that he had defeated the beast, that his magic had been the greater force. The fact was that someone had attacked him— had sent this thing into his vineyard. Any whisper, any gossip that his grapes were tainted by the attack, and his reputation could be ruined forever.

The slaves dropped to the ground and, foreheads on the soil, swore their obedience. When he released them, they got to their feet and went back to work, joining the others farther away. They all nervously avoided the blasted cluster as though still expecting something else to emerge without warning.

Sionio walked to the end of the square and looked out over his lands. The ground around where the grub had fallen was seared, the vines dead where they had grown. But there was no further sense of wrongness: there had been only the one massive grub, burrowing in from below.

"Is it me?" he asked the now-still air. "Is someone spelling for me specifically? Or are others under attack as well?" If so, he had no way of knowing; the demands of the vines made Vinearts into solitary creatures, not prone to mingling with their peers, and their training made it difficult to trust others. There was not a soul he could turn to, not a soul he could ask for advice, now that his master was gone. That was the way things were.

Sionio stared out across the tops of the vines, a wave of green sloping down to a high stone wall. Odds were that this was a onetime event, a freak spell gone awry and out of control, the caster silent out of embarrassment or fear. Still, he needed to be certain.

A second wineskin was hooked to his belt, barely large enough to hold one swallow. It never left his person, too valuable to ever let out of his sight. Unlike most spellwines, this one did not fade as it aged, but grew stronger, and all he needed was that one sip.

Still, he hesitated. This was a spellwine of his own making, and difficult to craft. There would be no replacing it, not for years. But if he did not use it now, there might not be years left him if he were attacked again unawares.

Decided, he removed the skin and let the liquid within hit his tongue. It was thick and heavy, bitter and sweet like overripe berries left too long in the sun. But that sensation was overwhelmed almost immediately by the sweep of magic distilled into that potent liquid. This was different than any other spellwine: a simple command triggered its magic.

“Show me my enemy.”

The spellwine complied and, in that instant of connection—and discovery—his enemy struck once more. Fatally.



**PART I**  
*Slave*

## Chapter 1

### HOUSE OF MALECH: HARVEST

*The boy focused* on what he was doing, but not so much that he failed to sense someone pause behind him, too close for comfort. He managed not to flinch as the older slave bent down to whisper. “Nice job you pulled, Fox-fur. Who’d you sweetmouth for it?”

The boy grunted, not wanting to talk, even to defend himself. Talk got you noticed. Notice was bad. Keep your face down, your hands busy, and your mouth shut, and survive. Those were the unspoken rules everyone knew.

After a minute the other slave shrugged and moved on with his own assignment. Left alone, the boy looked up into the sky, his eyes squinting as he searched the pale blue distance. He hadn’t sweetmouthed anyone. Luck of the pick, was all. He wasn’t going to question it. He didn’t question anything; he just did as he was told.

The brightness of the open sky made his eyes water. There was a bird—a tarn, from the banding—flying overhead in search of a careless or greedy rabbit. Every year they cut back the brush to the ancient grove of trees that marked the end of the vineyard, trying to keep the rabbits and foxes from the vines. They had built stone fences and decanted spells to keep humans away, but animals were harder to convince.

This field, and the rest of it, was part of the Valle of Ivy. The valley was cut into a chessboard of fields, half green with crops, the others brown and fallow, interspersed with the occasional gnarled fruit tree, and dotted with low stone buildings. In the distance a river cut through the fields—the Ivy. The chessboard and the buildings belonged to the House of Malech, one of four Vinearts established within The Berengia, and the only one currently ranked Master. His master. The slave knew nothing of the other Vinearts or The Berengia, or what lay beyond her borders. To imagine anything beyond the vineyard and the sleep house was as impossible as flying with the tarn overhead.

At the far edge of the fields where the boy was stationed, a pair of trees—not quite so ancient, but still wider around than a man could reach—created a shelter for two low structures built of pale gray stone: the slaves’ sleep house and vineyard’s storehouse, where the plows and tools were kept. Those, and the open form of the vintnery behind him, made of the same stone as the enclosure’s walls, were the boundaries of his world. The other buildings behind the vintnery, across a wide cobbled road, might as well have been on the other side of the Ivy, for all he knew of them.

The boy looked away from the sky and downward. Every slave in the House of Malech was working today. Summer had been warm and rainy, but those days had given way to cooler, drier mornings, and the grapes had ripened on schedule, green leaves turning a dark red at the edges, the grapes darker red yet, their skin tight over plump, juicy flesh. He could practically feel the ripeness in the air, waiting. He had learned the hard way not to mention that to anyone, the way the ripening grapes made a noise in his head, inside his bones. The one time he had asked another slave about it, he'd got beaten until his skull had bled, and the overseer had kept him out of the yards for the day.

The tarn had disappeared while he'd looked away. Now not even a cloud marred the expanse of blue, the sun already high overhead and surprisingly strong for the season. A faint breeze came down off the ridge, carrying a salty hint that cooled the sweat on his skin just enough to make it noticeable. The boy shifted, making himself as comfortable as he could, glad at least to be out of the direct sunlight, out of the fields. In the distance, past the vintner's shed, beyond the dark gray bulk of the sleep house, two score of slaves, stripped down to their loose-woven pants, worked their way up and down the groupings of waist-high vines, carefully stripping the ripe bunches from each plant one handful at a time, bending and rising in tune to some unheard rhythm.

He had done that, for three Harvests before this one, once he was old enough to be trusted. Your hands cramped after a while, and every finger cracked and bled, but not a single fruit was damaged if you could help it; each straw basket on their backs, once filled, was worth more than the slave carrying it. That was the first thing learned the very first day a slave was brought into the vineyard. You learned, and you survived, and, if your master was kind, you might even make it out of the yards, out of the sun and the rain, and away from walking stooped all your waking hours until you slept that way, too.

His master was not kind, but neither was he particularly cruel, and the boy had made it out of the yard. Barely.

Barely was enough. He could sit, and his back did not hurt, and his skin was not blistered by the sun. The Washer who traveled their road would say it was because he let the world move him rather than trying to move it. He didn't see how he could do otherwise. But there was much the Washers preached that he didn't understand.

A harvest-hire guard stood on the top of a slight rise at the edge of the field, watching the activity. A stiffened lash in his left hand tapped an irregular rhythm against his thigh as his gaze skimmed over the area being harvested. He was there more for tradition than need. It was death to steal a clutch of grapes. Death to taste one. Death to waste one. Nobles could afford spellwine, and free men might drink of *vin ordinaire*: slaves could not even dream of either.

The boy shifted, feeling warning prickles in his bare feet that told him he had been still too long. He looked away from the guard, letting his gaze rest on nothing in particular, waiting. That was best, to simply wait, and not draw attention.

When a basket was filled to near overflowing with fruit, the slave carrying it would place it to one side of the trellis-lane. A younger slave, not yet trusted with the picking, would come down to fetch it, leaving an empty basket in its place to be filled

in turn. That slave would bring the full basket down, away from the vineyard itself to the crusher, a great wooden monster construct twice as high as a grown man and four times the length.

That was where the boy waited. His responsibility was to monitor the fill level of the wooden crusher, making sure that the right amount of fruit was added, no more and no less.

The other slave had been right; it was a good job. It was also an important job, a sign that the overseer was not displeased with him, and he felt the responsibility keenly. But the truth was that it was boring, and his legs kept falling asleep.

An old slave, his wizened limbs useless for anything else, watched from the other side, sitting in a raised wooden chair to make sure that every fruit was placed into the great wooden monster and that no slave sneaked even one fruit into his mouth. He was also there to ensure that no fingers or clothes were trapped in the process. Every year at least one slave was maimed or killed that way, the weights and beams catching the unwary or the careless. The boy had worked six Harvests since the Master bought him and seen the results: slaves missing fingers and, in one case, an entire arm, crushed to uselessness and cut off before it could turn black and stink.

Two baskets were emptied into the maw of the monster, then a third. The old slave nodded at the boy, licking his cracked, dry lips in a way that reminded the boy of the lizards that sunned themselves on the low stone walls between the vineyards. The boy looked away again, focusing all of his attention on the crusher, as though that would make the old man go away. Harvest stories weren't the only ones told in the sleep house. The younger slaves knew to stay away from that one's hands in the darkness, or when they used the shit pits at night.

The slavers had men like that, too. He had been younger then, too young, and not as careful. But the slavers were past, done with him now that he belonged to another.

The other slaves might fumble under blankets or up against shadowed walls, willingly or not. Here the boy learned how to say no without saying anything at all, to evade reaching hands without giving offense, and even as those his own age began to look around with an interested eye, he felt no desire at all, not even to use his own hand, as the others did. Fortunately, hard work and a sudden growth over the winter had finally turned his rounded limbs into harder muscle, so a slave grabbed at him at his own risk now, and the overseer had shown no interest in flesh, save that it did the work assigned to it.

That thought in mind, when the fourth basket was emptied into the belly of the crusher, he darted forward and looked inside. A dark line, the stain of years of pressings, marked the three-quarter point. The boy waved his hand in a circular motion, and one more basket was dumped in, then the heavy door was slid shut. The boy stepped back, out of harm's way, as the crusher was turned upside down with a creaking, moaning noise, like a giant moaning in his sleep. Pressure in the form of giant bladders was applied, another slave working the bellows to fill the bladders until given the command to stop, and then deflating it again. Once, he had been told, slaves did this work with their feet. Too many grapes were lost that way, the process too slow. He wondered about the feel of grapes under the soles of his feet and between his toes, tread upon like dirt, and could not imagine it.