

# BLOOD

## EQUINOX

by

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"You want what?" spluttered Hederus. "You sir, forget who you are!"

Recoiling back, and purple with rage, he thrust out a ring encrusted finger, and growled in a slow malevolent voice: "I... I am God in the flesh, and I... and I alone, says who lives, and who dies."

Rising from his throne, Hederus inflated himself to his full height and rotund stature, and with damp puffy fingers, he smoothed his sumptuous robe. Flaming eyes, brimming with contempt and hate, stared down.

"Magician..." he masticated the word slowly, "you'll find no divine sacrifice here."

Anthemis, the court magus, looked with sky-washed eyes into the apoplectic face of Hederus - the self-appointed dictator of Laiterie.

"My lord," he said gently, "I didn't mean to offend the gods' chosen servant. Neither do I mean to stray over the bounds of my authority. And I do apologise if my words have caused offence."

A tense curtain of silence dropped onto the scene. The players turned to stone, and offered no further movement.

"Offence! Offence did you say!" The whining voice of Allium, Hederus' chamberlain, cut through the air like a sharp and pungent foul-odour. "Priest, your words are not only repulsive, but blasphemous as well."

He slithered up to Hederus with deference, and with a malevolent sidelong glance at the magician, he spat: "I muse that our mystic advisor would be better suited to a more spiritual existence. Correct me if I'm mistaken, but I believe that vicarious sacrifice has long been an acceptable principle with the Gods, and our self-exalted Anthemis here, should make a pleasing morsel."

Hederus emitted a sardonic belching grunt, and with his eyes ripping into Anthemis, he said: "What do you think of that, mystic? Are you ready to return to that hell that spawned you?"

"I am my Lord's servant," said Anthemis lowering his head, "and would find honour in giving my life in your service. However, a low mortal, such as I, is not an acceptable sacrifice to the gods."

"Why not? Will you not bleed as well as any lamb?" jibed Allium.

"Yes, I will bleed well enough," replied Anthemis, "nevertheless, only divinity is acceptable to the divine."

Hederus' eyes bulged even further out of their flaming sockets, and the veins in his neck throbbed like swollen rivers, ready to flood.

"However," the mystic continued quickly, "Allium is correct, a vicarious sacrifice can be acceptable to the gods."

"Since you are an inadequate worm, Anthemis, who then is worthy of this inordinate honour?" spat Allium venomously.

"There is one who can stand as a sacrifice in the stead of the divine king, and that is the white unicorn, the divine Queen of the sacred forest. And if the gods are to be appeased, so that we may break the drought, and once again prosper, the sacrifice must coincide with the autumnal equinox in the fortieth year of the divine king's life."

Allium opened his mouth to whine again, but Anthemis continued: "As this year is your majesty's fortieth, the sacrifice must be made three days hence." He paused for a moment, and gazed deeply into the king's eyes. "Without equinox blood, the dearth that is upon the land will continue, and all may perish."

"Nonsense! Rubbish!" shrilled Allium. "This is a trick to undermine the power of the throne, and to increase the control exercised by this priest... this priest of hell!"

"No... I think not." The king slowly sat down on the throne, and his fingers found comfort in stroking his beard. "No..." he continued, "the mystical one is accurate. The gods are displeased with the people, and I need to offer a gift that will confirm the felicity and good faith of our peasants."

He smiled malicious smile, and mused, "Gentlemen, I think it is time for a royal hunt. A king will go on behalf of his people, and hunt down a Queen. The blood of my royal consort will be a sweet savour that will open the hearts of the gods, and their tears of appreciation will fall as gentle rain on our dry, thirsty, worthless, and ungrateful peasants. What think you of that, my Anthemis?"

"Truly, your eminence has the wisdom of the gods. I will go and prepare an oil of seeing, that you may find your quarry with ease."

"Be gone unholy one," ordered Allium, "and take your psychic stench with you."

"Your servant, Sire." Anthemis bowed, and left the audience chamber.

"You don't trust that snake, do you?" hissed Allium

"Of course not, dolt! However, I need him to find the unicorn for me. After the Queen of the forest is laid to rest, then I will lay to rest our meddling magician... once and for all."

The king's sinister laugh reverberated through the palace. Its menacing timbre, like low thunder, heralded an approaching storm....

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Hederus cannot miss. He raises his bow, notches, draws, and as he lets fly, a silver arrow pierces him through the back of his neck.

The king falls without a sound to the ground, and lies in his own blood. And with the fading sight of creeping death, he sees Anthemis, with bow in hand, walking towards him. Anthemis pronounces the sacrificial prayer, and watches the king die.

The mystic then turns, and walks towards a snowy mound that lies on the other side of the clearing.

As he approaches, Anthemis finds the unicorn lying on her side, dead, with an arrow through her neck. Skilfully breaking the arrow, Anthemis draws it forth, and casts it aside.

Rumbling dark clouds cover the sun, and raindrops begin to fall. As the drops fall on the unicorn's neck, Anthemis carefully mingles the water and the blood with the golden contents of a small vial. As the elements mix, the wound washes away, and the unicorn's eyes flicker open.

"It's time to wake and arise, My Lady."

The unicorn rises without effort, and Anthemis gently touches her horn and bows. She turns, and trots into the rain.

As Anthemis watches the retreating unicorn she seems to fade and a woman in a snow-white gown turns her head, smiles approvingly, and dissolves into the curtain of rain.

Anthemis lifts his face to the gentle touch of the rain, "Yes," he whispers, "it's going to be all right now... Let's to go home..."

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