

Blood of the Underworld

by David Dalglish

BOOKS BY DAVID DALGLISH

THE HALF-ORC SERIES

The Weight of Blood
The Cost of Betrayal
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The Shadows of Grace
A Sliver of Redemption

THE SHADOWDANCE TRILOGY

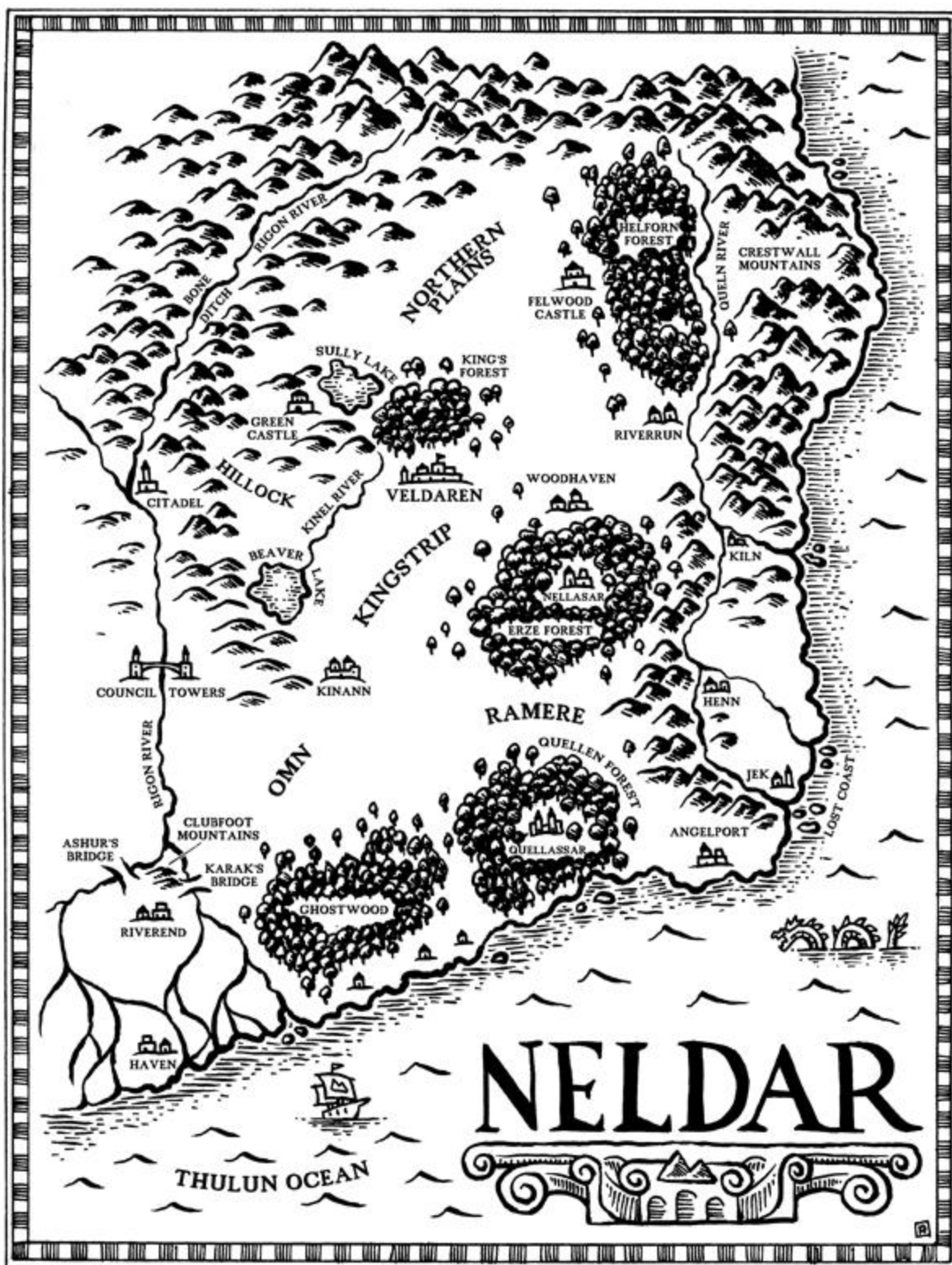
A Dance of Cloaks
A Dance of Blades
A Dance of Death

WATCHER'S BLADE TRILOGY

Blood of the Underworld
Blood of the Father (coming late 2012)

THE PALADINS

Night of Wolves
Clash of Faiths
The Old Ways



Prologue



The city of Veldaren was his to protect, but more than ever, Haern felt himself losing control as he watched the body bleed at his feet. It had rained just before dark, muddying the streets and back alleys. Blood mixed with the wet ground. The dead man's face was half-buried, mouth open in death, throat opened by blade, and both were filling with mud. In the moonlight, the green of the dead man's cloak took on a sickly hue. Haern doubted any would shed tears for the loss, but that was beside the point. He was the King's Watcher, enforcer of Veldaren, and such violence could not be tolerated.

Yet, despite the work of his sabers, the violence was steadily rising.

"I hope you find a better life beyond this," Haern said, shutting the dead thief's eye so it no longer stared up at him. "No one should die in the mud."

He stood, pulling the hood over his face. In its shadow, he peered about the alley. Come morning, he'd alert a guard to the location of the body, but before then, he needed to investigate. If the murder was what he thought it was, there'd be a sign somewhere, a message for the Serpent Guild where the guards would overlook. On either side of him were stone buildings, their sides slick from the rain. Haern slowly checked one, then the other, until he found it. Cut into the stone was a crude squiggle representing a snake. A jagged line crossed over its head. Below it was a fresh circle with eight tiny lines.

"Spider Guild is spreading," Haern whispered to himself as he rubbed his chin. "Or was this revenge?"

He knew of no particular bad blood between the Serpents and Spiders, but that didn't mean much. The thief guilds were all battling for territory, a direct result of the peace Haern had bought with blood. The three wealthiest families of Neldar, known as the Trifect, paid handsomely for protection of the entire city. Yet, over the past two years, that amount had carefully shrunk, as had the size of most thief guilds. Every bit of land meant a higher payout. With the increase of killings, the number of guildless criminals had risen. They knew the risk the Watcher posed. They knew what he was capable of. But it was starting to no longer matter.

The thieves were getting desperate. They weren't afraid of him anymore.

Haern leapt to the rooftops, determined to rekindle that fear. Every night he scoured the city, often changing his route. He watched and listened, always wrapped in his gray cloaks. For years he'd foiled wars between the guilds, disrupting their plans. But there were no more plans. The thieves were wounded animals, biting at everything they saw. Every night he found a new body, a new symbol, or a new message. He wasn't certain where the various guilds' territories ended anymore, and he doubted the guilds themselves knew for sure.

He ran east. Footsteps in the mud led that way from the corpse. Perhaps it was time he gave the guilds a message of his own. The steps grew fainter. Out in the wild, there were many who were better trackers, but within the confines of a city, Haern was the master. Leaping up to the rooftops, he ran along, still following the telltale signs. A knocked over barrel here. A bit of mud brushed against a wall there. After a time, he felt like he was inside the murderer's mind, heading toward safe territory. Except that was wrong. Nowhere was safe, not from him.

Haern found the Spider talking with a fellow guildmate, the two standing before a tavern that had long since closed. One held a knife, and he gestured wildly with it while telling a story. The

blood on the blade was not yet dry. Haern worked his way closer, silently crawling across the roof until he was just above them, his ear leaning toward the edge of the tavern.

"...a little bitch," said the man with the knife.

"Course they are. What you expect from a bunch of fags loyal to that Ket bastard?"

"Still, you'd expect him to die like a man. Put a knife at my throat, you wouldn't hear me blubbering like a child."

Haern drew one of his sabers, a dark grin spread across his face. Was that so? Perhaps he should test that theory. Like a ghost, he fell upon them, not a sound to give them warning. His knees crashed into shoulders of the man wielding the knife. He heard a crack of bone, and the man dropped. The other stood shocked still, his eyes wide. Haern kicked, his heel crushing windpipe. As he fell, Haern turned his attention on the booster, who lay dazed in the mud from his head hitting the ground.

"So is this how a man dies?" Haern asked as he put the tip of his saber against the thief's throat. He shouldn't be wasting time, he knew. He was deep in Spider territory, and they would fight him if enough gathered together. Not that he feared them. Only their guild leader gave him pause. Thren Felhorn. His father.

The thief swallowed, the movement rubbing the tip up and down against his throat.

"I didn't do nothing," he said. "I've been here all night."

"Do you think I care?"

Haern knelt closer, his free hand grabbing the back of the man's head and holding it still. He stared into his eyes, then flinched as if he were to thrust. The thief let out a cry. The smell of urine reached Haern's nose. He leaned closer, his lips hovering before the man's ear.

"I see tears in your eyes," he whispered.

The hilt of his saber cracked down hard atop the thief's head, knocking him out cold. Slowly rising, he drew his other saber and turned to his initial prey, the murderer. The man sat on his rear, both hands clutching his throat. He was gasping for air, the sound akin to wind blowing over the top of a chimney. Blood dripped down his wrist, to his elbow, and then to the ground.

"You slit a Serpent's throat," Haern said, towering over him. "Care to tell me why?"

The man coughed, crimson blobs flecking across his pants. He gasped a few times, as if to hold his breath underwater, then forced out a word.

"Trespassing."

Haern shook his head.

"Not good enough," he said. "Not even close."

He shoved his sabers into the man's chest, through his heart. Pulling them free, he kicked the body to the ground, then slashed open his neck. The death was quick, the message given. His throat dry, Haern turned back to the thief he'd left unconscious. He almost killed him. Almost. But enough blood had spilled that night, and it wouldn't be the last. Once Thren found out, he'd retaliate against the Serpent Guild. Back and forth, always back and forth without end...

He sheathed his blades and turned to go, and that was when he heard the scream. It came from a distant alley, that of a thick-voiced male. Haern followed it, guessing which alley to turn down. The night was quiet, no one foolish enough to be out and about so deep in Spider territory. At first he thought he'd guessed wrong, but then he found the victim. He lay on his back at the farthest stretch of a dead end alley, arms splayed outward. His gray cloak signified him a member of the Spider Guild. No wounds were upon him but for the tiny arrow embedded in his throat. Haern walked over to it, his stomach turning. Another? But by who, and why?

Standing over it, Haern felt something tickling the back of his mind. Something odd. The thief had been a smaller man, wiry, probably picked for his deft hands instead of brute strength. Hardly a whisker grew on his face. His face...

His eyes were closed, as was his mouth. That was it. A lethal hit with an arrow should have left him gasping in pain, his face reflecting that upon death, but it did not. The killer had shut his eyes and mouth to create the appearance of sleep, but why? Knowing he had little choice, Haern reached down, pushed two fingers between the dead man's teeth, and pried his jaw open. The starlight reflected off the metal immediately, and something about the sight sent a chill down Haern's spine. Lying on his tongue were two gold coins stacked atop one another. Haern took them, trying to decide the significance. A personal vendetta? A paid hit by another guild?

Laughter startled him, and he reached for his blade. He let it go when he realized it was just a drunken man curled against the wall, nearly invisible in the darkness.

"Sorry 'bout the scream," he said, drinking from the half-empty bottle he held. "Didn't mean to scare anybody."

"Did you see who did this?"

The drunk shook his head.

"Like this when I got here. Nearly tripped over the damn thing."

Haern frowned. So the scream had been from the drunk, not the man dying. It didn't surprise him, given how dry the blood was across the man's throat. He yanked out the arrow, held it up to the moonlight. He caught sight of tiny flecks of poison on the metal. A professional hit, but again, by who, and why? He glanced about, looking for a message, and quickly found it. That he hadn't spotted it immediately upon entering the alley unnerved him. It was large, and written in blood.

*tongue of gold, eyes of silver
run, run little spider
from the widow's quiver*

"The Widow?" Haern wondered aloud. The drunk's laughter stole away his concentration.

"You got competition," he said, then laughed again. Haern looked to the gold coins in his hand and didn't see the humor. Reading over the simple rhyme, a thought hit him, tightening his stomach into a knot. Bending down beside the body, he carefully lifted open the dead man's eyelids.

"Damn it," he whispered. "Damn it all to the Abyss."

His eyes were gone, replaced by two silver coins staring up at the moonlight. Haern left them for the guards to take.



Haern returned home to the Eschaton Tower exhausted. He'd scoured the area surrounding the murder as best he could, and tracked down several runners of the Spider Guild. The few he found had heard nothing, seen nothing, and even when threatened they showed no sign of lying. Leaving Veldaren for the tower, he'd felt nothing but frustration and bafflement. He kept repeating the phrase in his head.

Tongue of gold, eyes of silver...

As he opened the door, the smell of cooked eggs welcomed him home. Delysia was the only one awake, and she sat beside the fireplace with a plate on her lap. The orange light shone across her red hair, making it seem all the more vibrant. Seeing him, she smiled. The smile faded from her youthful face when she noticed his sour mood.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

"I'll talk about it later," he promised, heading for the stairs.

"Don't you want something to eat?"

He shook his head. He just wanted sleep. Hopefully when he woke up, he'd have new ideas as to why someone had killed a member of the Spider Guild in such a ritualistic—not to mention expensive—manner. The thought of eating twisted his stomach, anyway. He'd seen a lot of horrible things, but for some reason, he couldn't get the image out of his head of the corpse's vacant eye sockets replaced with coins.

Eyes of silver...

Haern climbed the stairs until he reached the fifth floor, and his room. Hurrying inside, he sat down on his bed, removed his sword belt, and drew out his sabers. Carefully, he cleaned them with a cloth, refusing to go to bed with dirty swords no matter how tired he was. That was lazy, and sloppy, and laziness and sloppiness had a way of sneaking out of one habit and into another. His many tutors had hammered that into his head while growing up, all so he could be a worthy heir to his father's empire of thieves and murderers. He chuckled, put away his swords. *Not quite according to plan*, he thought, imagining Thren scowling. *Not quite at all*.

Run, run, little spider...

His bed felt like the most wonderful thing in the world, and with a heavy cloth draped over his window, he closed his eyes amid blessed darkness. Sleep came quickly, despite his troubled mind. It did not, however, last long.

"Hey, Haern."

He opened an eye, saw his mercenary leader sitting beside him on the bed. His red beard and hair were unkempt from a night's sleep. He wore his wizard's robes, strangely dyed a yellow color for reasons he was sure he'd never hear. Trying not to smack the man, Haern rolled over.

"Go away, Tarlak."

"Good morning to you, too, Haern."

Haern sighed. The wizard had something to say, and he wasn't going to leave until he said it. Rolling back, Haern shot him a tired glare.

"What?"

“Some fancy new noble is returning to the city today,” Tarlak said, rubbing his fingernails against his robe and staring at them, as if he were only mildly interested. “Lord Victor Kane. Perhaps you’ve heard of him?”

The name was only vaguely familiar, which meant he’d been gone from Veldaren for a very long time. If he remembered correctly, he was just another one of those lords who lived outside the city, and liked to occasionally make a scene proclaiming how horrible Veldaren was, and how much better it’d be if their ideas were listened to. All hot air, no substance.

“Why should I care?” Haern asked, leaning against his pillow and closing his eyes.

“Because he’ll be meeting the King soon, perhaps within the hour. Normally this wouldn’t be a big deal, but it sounds like he’s bringing a veritable army with him.”

“As if King Vaelor would let them pass through the gates.”

“That’s the thing,” Tarlak said. “It sounds like he will. He sent a message to the King. I won’t bore you with all the details. Much of it was the standard pompous nonsense these lords are fond of. But one comment in particular was interesting enough my informant thought it worth waking me up early.”

Haern put his forearm across his eyes.

“And what was that?”

“I believe it was something to the extent of: *‘Right now, thieves police thieves, yet when I am done, there will be no thieves at all.’*” Tarlak stood from the bed, walked over to the door.

“Sounds like someone plans on taking your job.”

He left. The room once more returned to quiet darkness.

Haern sat up, tossed the blankets aside.

“Damn it all...”



King Edwin Vaelor fidgeted on his throne, eager for the meeting to begin. Beside him stood his aging advisor, Gerand Croid, looking tired and bored. They’d emptied out the grand throne room of any petitioners and guests, per Gerand’s request. The advisor rubbed at the lengthy scar along his face, as if it bothered him. A sign of nervousness, belying the calm facade he showed. For some reason this made Edwin all the more impatient. Over the years he’d listened to what felt like a hundred lords all talk about how they could do a better job policing Veldaren. A few had even tried, such as when Alyssa Gemcroft unleashed an army of mercenaries upon the streets for a disastrous two nights. Half the city had damn near burned to the ground because of it, too.

Yet, at least Alyssa he could understand, given her belief at the time of her son’s death. Women did strange things when facing loss. This Lord Victor, though...

“You sure he has no family?” he asked Gerand.

“Quite sure, unless he has kept them in secret.”

The King scratched at his neck. He wore his finest robes, lined with velvet and furs that were dyed dark reds and purples. It’d been too long since he had worn it, and it itched. Still, he wanted to show this upstart noble his wealth, to remind him of his regality and his divine right to rule all of Neldar.

“What about a son? Or a daughter?”

“Forgive me, milord, but I do consider that family, and as I said, he has none.”

Edwin shot Gerand a glare, and he bowed low in apology.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I did not mean to speak with so harsh a tongue.”

“Try not to do so again.”

He might have made a stronger threat to someone else, but Gerand had served him loyally for years. Any threat would have been false, and both knew it. He was too important to lose. But again, it showed Gerand's true nervousness. Why? What was it about Lord Victor that worried him so?

"You've met him before, haven't you?" he asked.

Gerand nodded, adjusted the collar of his shirt.

"My wife's family lives on his lands," he said. "I've spoken to him only once, but that was enough. He is not a man to forget, my liege, nor take lightly. If he says he will accomplish something, then he will accomplish it, regardless the cost."

"Then why worry? He's pledged to clean out the streets. Let him try, and fail."

Gerand cleared his throat.

"That is the thing. He won't fail. What he promises is war, like which we have not had in four years."

The King grunted.

"You mean when that Gemcroft bitch went mad?"

"Yes, like that," Gerand said dryly.

Edwin leaned back in his chair and drank a tart wine from his goblet. Smacking his lips, he set it down and shook his head.

"If that's all he plans, then I'll laugh in his face and send him back out to whatever runty castle he came from. The thieves are like rats, and they've grown exceptionally skilled lately at hiding in the walls."

On the opposite side of the room, at the end of the crimson carpet leading to the raised dais, there came a knock on the heavy doors. The guards stationed there waited for an order. Edwin sighed, rubbed his eyes. Too early. He hadn't had much to eat, and coupled with the wine, it left him with a sharp headache. Stupid lords. Stupid, naive lords thinking they had every answer.

"Send him in," he said, his voice echoing down the hall. "But only him."

Two guards bowed, and then they cracked open one of the doors and stepped out. A moment later, it swung open wide, and in stepped Lord Victor, flanked by the guard. The King studied him as he approached. He was a tall man, lean with muscle. His blond hair was cut short about his neck, his face cleanly shaven. Instead of the expected attire of nobles, he wore tall boots, a red tunic showing the symbol of his house, and a suit of chainmail. A sword was strapped to his thigh, and Edwin felt his ire rise, this time for his guards being dense enough to let him keep it.

"Greetings, my King," Victor said, smiling wide. Gods he was handsome, his voice strong, confident. It made Edwin sick, and filled him with an irrational desire to slap him across the face.

"Welcome to my home," Edwin said, not rising. He gestured to the man's tunic. "I must confess, I have not seen that symbol in many a long year. I cannot remember its meaning."

Victor glanced down at his chest. Having a family crest go unrecognized would normally be considered an insult, but Victor didn't seem the slightest bit bothered.

"It is a pair of wings stretched wide before the sun," he said. "Their gold melds together, as is appropriate. Our wealth comes from the birds of the forest, the fields that grow beneath the sun, and the strength of our kin rising every day, without fail, to do what must be done."

"You Kanes must be a proud lot," Edwin said.

For the first time that smug grin faltered, just a little.

"My father was a proud man," he said. "Proud as my mother was beautiful. A shame you will never meet them."

“Dead, then?” Edwin asked. He sensed disapproval, and that made him continue. He liked making Victor uncomfortable, reminding him that he was in charge of everything, even their conversation. “Accept my condolences. If you are the last of their line, I hope you are busy finding yourself a wife.”

“In time,” Victor said. A hard edge had entered his voice. “Though matters here must be settled first before I take a lovely bride’s hand in marriage. As a child, Veldaren was my home. Now I return, and I wish it to be my home again. But one does not move into a house full of rats and turn a blind eye to their droppings.”

“Be careful of who you call rat shit in this town,” Edwin said, laughing. “It might get you in trouble.”

His laughter died off uneasily as Victor stared at him with those clear blue eyes of his. It wasn’t just strength he saw in them. No, what he saw was madness, and it was starting to unnerve him.

“Fine,” he said, suddenly no longer having fun. He sat up, took another sip from his cup. “You’ve made plain your desire to clean up this city, though I have yet to hear how you will do it. So tell me, Victor. Let me hear your amazing plan.”

“There is nothing amazing about it,” Victor said. He crossed his arms over his chest, tilted his head back. “I have over three hundred mercenaries at my disposal, committed to my cause. They will aid me in this endeavor.”

“Your lands cannot be large. How can you afford them all?”

“There is always coin available for what a man cares about most.”

Edwin rolled his eyes and gestured for the man to continue.

“I know what it is you’re thinking,” Victor said, starting to pace. “You think I will unleash them like wild dogs, just like Lady Gemcroft did years before. I tell you now that that is wrong. I do not do this for destruction, nor a desire for killing. I will not slaughter life at random, nor pronounce a colored cloak reason enough for death. I will abide by *the law*, my King. That is all I truly desire from you. Give me your blessing to enforce your laws. These guilds may no longer rob from your stores, but their hands are far from clean.”

“And what do you expect from all this? A reward?”

“A home where I can live without fear will be my reward,” Victor said, smiling. “That, and for you to cover the cost of the mercenaries, should I succeed.”

“You ask for much while claiming to ask for little,” Gerand said, and Edwin had to agree.

“What makes you so confident you can accomplish this task?” the King asked.

“The blood of the underworld will spill across your executioner’s blade,” Victor said.

“Brought before your judges, lawfully condemned in your trials, and their bodies dumped into pits beyond your walls. Fear is how they have endured for so long, but I am not afraid of them. I fear nothing.”

Laughter interrupted their conversation. Edwin felt his throat tighten, and he looked to his left. There, in a tall window at least twenty feet above the ground, crouched a figure cloaked in gray.

How in Karak’s name did he get up there? he wondered.

“Come to join us, Watcher?” Edwin asked.

“I’m quite content to stay here,” the Watcher said, turning his attention to Victor. “You truly think fear is how the thief guilds have endured? Fear is just the whetstone that sharpens their blades. Razor wire and poisoned cups are how they have endured. They fill their ranks with those

desperate enough to kill just to have food in their bellies. You want to defeat the thief guilds? Flood the streets with bread, not soldiers.”

“For a man of such reputation, you are incredibly naive,” said Victor. He didn’t seem upset with the Watcher, only vaguely amused. “You think a little bit of milk and bread will sate their appetites? The guilds are full of men who will always want more than what they have. You used your blades to cull them, and took the gold of others to make them content. Your way is failing. You do not spoil a rotten child. You beat his ass with a rod.”

Victor turned to the King, who chewed on his lip. This lord was fiery, devoted, and quick-witted. He truly seemed unafraid of making enemies, for few would have dared speak to the Watcher in such a manner. Even the Watcher looked surprised.

“Do not be afraid,” Victor said, putting his back to the Watcher. “I have come as Veldaren’s savior, and am prepared for the burden. Let it all be cast on me. Let it be my name the thieves hear. Let them know I am the one enforcing your laws. There is nothing for you to lose. Noble, beggar, merchant, thief...all will come to justice. The coin I ask for in return is a pittance compared to what you gain. Give me your blessing.”

Edwin could tell Gerand wanted nothing to do with the offer, but for once, Edwin saw a ray of light in his miserable city. For years he’d lived in fear that he’d meet the same fate as his parents, killed off because one of the guilds decided him too meddlesome. Could this Lord Victor do it? Could he do what even the Watcher could not?

“If you truly desire to uphold the law, then so be it,” he said. “You and your men may act in the name of Victor Kane, ask questions in your name, and deliver justice in a manner befitting the law. But the moment I hear of your own men breaking my laws, starting fires, and acting like the lowborn scum they no doubt are, I will banish you from my city, never to return. As for your reward...”

He stared into Victor’s eyes, and Victor stared back.

“Every guild broken. Every guildmaster dead or gone. When I can walk down my streets without fear of an arrow, and eat my food without checking for sprinkles of glass, you will have your coin, as well as any portion of land within this city you desire for your home.”

Victor’s smile grew.

“Thank you,” he said, bowing. “You’ll never regret it. I swear this upon the honor of my house.”

With a wave of his hand, Edwin dismissed the lord, who left in a hurry. A bounce was in his step. Unbelievable. Would he still be so cheerful when the collected might of every thief guild bore down upon him? How long until there were none left alive to taste his drink and sample his food? And when the chaos grew, and the real bloodshed began, was there anyone with enough skill to protect him?

He looked to the window, but the Watcher was already gone.



Her servant women fussed over her, fitting clothes, applying rouge, and brushing hair, until Alyssa Gemcroft finally sent them away, unable to take any more. They filed out, leaving her alone in her extravagant bedroom. Well, not quite alone...

"Come down, Zusa," she said. "Tell me what is wrong."

From a far corner of the room, hidden in a dark space unlit by light from the windows, a woman fell to the ground. Despite the many years it had been since leaving Karak's cult of Faceless Women, Zusa still wore the tight wrappings across her body, strips of cloth colored various shades of black and purple. Her face, at least, she kept exposed: dark skin, dark hair cut short at the neck, and beautiful green eyes. A long grey cloak hung from her shoulders, the thin material curling about her body with the slightest tugs of Zusa's fingers.

"There is nothing wrong," Zusa said, crossing her arms over her chest and leaning against the wall.

"I'm used to you keeping an eye on me, but you only hide on the ceiling when you're nervous." She smiled at her friend. "You know I trust your instincts, so tell me."

Zusa gestured to the dress.

"You doll yourself up worse than a whore. Powder everywhere, rouge, perfume on your neck...and I must say, I pity your breasts."

Alyssa looked down at herself. Indeed, she'd let her servants help prepare her for her meeting, but had she let them get carried away? Her dress was a sultry red, tightly fitted, with a ring of rubies sewn along the neck. A gold chain held a large emerald tucked into the curve of her breasts, which, true to Zusa's words, her corset had rammed almost unnaturally high.

"This is what is expected of me," Alyssa said, sighing. She wanted to sit down, but feared to ruffle her dress, or even worse, strain the ties of the corset. The realization made her blush, and she could tell Zusa knew her defense a flimsy one.

"Since when did Lady Gemcroft do the expected?" Zusa asked, the last of her nerves fading away with a smile. "But you are beautiful, even if overdone. I only wonder why. Lord Stephen is but a child, young even compared to you. Your smile alone should impress him."

Alyssa paced, keeping her movements slow and controlled lest she muss her appearance.

"It's been a year since his appointment, and I am yet to meet him. I fear he'll think I have snubbed him, or deemed him unworthy of his position. I only wish to make a good impression."

Zusa sat down on the bed, shifting the daggers tied to her waist so they did not poke into the soft mattress.

"He will think it anyway," she said. "Though I fear his impression will be that you are making advances upon him."

Alyssa opened her mouth, closed it, and then looked to her dress. She sighed.

"Help me, will you?" she asked.

Ten minutes later she was in a far more comfortable dress, and they'd wiped clean her face. Alyssa left her hair the same, having always enjoyed the sight of thin braids interlocked and weaving throughout her long red locks. Able to breathe and move far more freely, she hugged Zusa, then attached a simple lace of silver about her neck.

"We have kept Stephen waiting long enough," she said. "Let's go."

A litter waited outside her mansion, and she and Zusa climbed inside. As they traveled through the streets of Veldaren, Alyssa felt butterflies in her stomach and did her best to belittle them. It was stupid to be nervous. Of the three families of the Trifect, she'd been in power the longest, and had clearly solidified her position as ruler of the Gemcroft fortune. Stephen Connington was but a bastard of his father, Leon. Still, he was the only one with a clear biological relation. It'd taken several years before he'd been granted control of the estate from the caretakers. In the end, they'd had no choice. Leon had killed most of his family members and steadfastly refused to have named heirs, lest they drown him in his bath.

She winced at the memory of Leon. He'd been unpleasant at times, if not repulsive. The fat had rolled off of him, yet his tiny eyes had always been of a young, starving man eager to take, and take, regardless the vice. She'd heard stories of what his gentle touchers—his private group of elite torturers—could do to a man to make him break. A shudder ran through her. She prayed that Stephen had inherited very little of his father beyond his name.

As for the last family of the Trifect, the Keenans, they'd yet to recover from the fiasco in Angelport two years prior, when both Madelyn and Laurie had been murdered, along with their temporary successor, Torgar. Their grandchild, Tori, was the biological heir, but it would be many years before she could take over rule. Last report Alyssa had heard from Angelport was that various relatives were still bickering over who would be Tori's godfather, as the Keenan wealth crumbled around them.

No, Alyssa was the pillar of strength of the Trifect, the one holding it all together. She had to be strong, confident. Zusa had been right. Terrible as it was, the last thing she wanted to do was flaunt her feminine qualities when needing Stephen to take her seriously.

"I should have brought Nathaniel with me," Alyssa said as the litter bounced across the rough street.

"Your son is better served with an honorable man like Lord Gandrem than dealing with worms like the Conningtons," Zusa said.

Alyssa frowned and glanced out the curtained window to the passing homes.

"Yes," she said. "But it won't be too long before he must put away foolish fantasies of knights and armies. I won't have all I've built squander and break like it has for the Keenans. In time, he must learn to deal with the worms as well as the dragons."

Not long after, they arrived at the closely guarded Connington mansion. Thick, high walls protected it from intruders, and armed soldiers with sashes about their waists to show their loyalty to the family patrolled the area. At the gate, two men bowed and opened it wide so they could enter. One of them sneered at Zusa's appearance, but the woman twirled, blew him a kiss, and then followed after Alyssa.

"Must I tell you to behave?" Alyssa whispered as they crossed the stone path toward the mansion entrance.

"I could have struck his head, if you would prefer."

Alyssa glanced back, saw the same guard watching them with a sneer on his face.

"Perhaps on the way out," she said, and they both quietly laughed.

Another guard stopped them at the door, and he glared at the daggers Zusa carried.

"No weapons," he told them.

"Zusa is my bodyguard, and will use them only to protect me," Alyssa said.

"There is no need. You are safe within these walls."

"Is that so?" Alyssa asked. "How long have you served the Conningtons, good sir?"

"Nine years," said the guard.

“That means you were here. Excellent. Please, tell me, where were you when your former master died?”

The guard swallowed hard. Leon had died in the mansion barracks, believed by most to have been killed by the Watcher.

“Very well,” said the guard. “But do not draw them unless forced.”

The doors opened, and they stepped inside. Alyssa had been there before, after its reconstruction from the fire during the Bloody Kengold. The floors were still soft, deep red rugs she knew had to be a nightmare to keep clean. The ceiling was high above her, the wood columns decorated with various animals. But where there should have been vases on tables were only bare surfaces. Where there should have been paintings and murals, bare walls.

“Much missing extravagance,” Zusa said, keeping her voice soft.

“Perhaps their coffers are worse than we thought,” Alyssa said.

Zusa didn’t look convinced. She gestured to where many portraits of Leon were clearly missing.

“Or the son looked upon the father, and did not like what he saw.”

At the end of the hall they waited until a servant stepped in, announced their presence, and then flung open the door. A practiced smile on her face, Alyssa went in to greet the new heir to the Connington fortune.

She knew he’d be young, only eighteen if their information on him was true, but she was still surprised by his small size, his soft face, and even softer hands, as he bent on one knee, bowed low, and kissed her offered fingers. Alyssa felt her smile grow more natural. He may not have spent his early life in affluence, but he’d learned quickly over the past year.

“I’m thrilled to at last make your acquaintance,” Stephen said, his voice tinged with a charming honesty. “I must admit, ever since my appointment, you were the one I was most nervous to meet.”

“May I ask why?”

“Your beauty, of course,” he said, and Alyssa caught his nervous glances about the room, his struggle to meet her eye. “That, and your unpredictability. Would you care for something to drink?”

They were in a cozy study, one wall covered with books, another with maps of Dezrel. Between the chairs was a small table, currently empty. When Alyssa agreed, Stephen noticeably calmed, calling out orders for servants and offering seats to his guests. Alyssa sat opposite him at the table, while Zusa refused, instead lurking behind Alyssa’s chair with her arms draped protectively over her neck. The embrace was a bit over-familiar for public, but Alyssa let it be. It amused her to see how Stephen’s eyes kept glancing their way.

As various cakes and fruits were placed before them, Stephen sat down and cleared his throat.

“I must confess, milady, that I asked you here with reason, one that you will...well, one that you’ll find surprising.”

“I’ve had advisors attempt to take my life, lovers turn to madmen, and my son brought to me from the dead.” Alyssa smiled at him. “I daresay you have a difficult task if you think you can surprise me.”

Stephen cleared his throat, but she saw a gleam in his eye piercing through his nervousness. He looked...pleased. She tried not to show it as she nibbled on a sweetcake, but a bit of worry crept up her belly. What if he did have something worthy of surprise?

“Alyssa...milady...what do you remember of your mother?”

The cake caught in her throat, and it took all of her control to keep her from launching into an unseemly coughing fit. Her mother? Why did he ask of her mother?

"She died when I was young," she said once she had swallowed. "The servants would not tell me the reason, and my father would only say that she left. I presume you think you know the truth of the matter?"

Stephen stood, as if unable to sit any longer.

"That I would, if you'd..."

She waved a hand dismissively, interrupting him.

"I am no fool, Stephen, and rumors are no stranger to me. I know what happened, if that is all you'd tell me. My mother was unfaithful to my father, and he..." She shook her head. "I love my father, but he was right to hide it from me. I'm not sure I'd have forgiven him, certainly not back then. She was given to Leon's...your father's gentle touchers. I can only pray they were merciful."

She felt Zusa's palm cup against her face, and she closed her eyes and leaned against it, accepting the comfort. When Alyssa looked again, Stephen was approaching the other door to the room.

"Well then," he said, unable to hold back a grin. "Everything you have said is true. But you are still wrong."

He opened the door, then stepped back.

"Alyssa," he said, "may I present to you Melody Gemcroft."

Alyssa's heart stopped. Standing in the hall, as if afraid to enter through the doorway, was a woman from a dream. Her eyes had sunken further, and many new wrinkles stretched across her lips and face, but the hair was the same, the ears, the nose, all the same as the woman who had sat on Alyssa's bed, candle in hand, and read story after story until sleep had taken her away. A thousand memories assaulted her, many long forgotten. Of brushing each other's hair. Of strict discipline and teaching of etiquette. The way she'd flicked her nose with a finger whenever she grabbed the wrong utensil at dinner. The smell of crushed flowers every time they'd embraced.

"Mother," Alyssa whispered.

Tears swelled in Melody's eyes, but they did not fall. She took a few tentative steps inside, and then Alyssa was on her feet. Their hug was careful, slow, as if each were afraid of the other. When they separated, Alyssa looked deeply into that tired, pale face and was convinced beyond a doubt. She didn't know what to feel. Didn't know what it meant.

"How?" she asked.

"Not now," Melody said. "But...it is good to see you, Alyssa. You've grown to be so beautiful, just like I knew you would."

"She still needs her rest," Stephen said, gently taking Melody's hand. "I'll explain what I can. Servant?"

He snapped his fingers, and when the stiff-necked servant arrived, he directed the man to take Melody back to her room. Feeling as if the world were spinning, Alyssa watched her long-dead mother be led away. Her stomach cramping, she went back to her chair, where Zusa remained leaning against the top, a guarded expression on her face.

"Is it true?" Zusa whispered as she sat.

"I think so." Alyssa felt like she walked in a dream, one where the dead had come back to life. Would Maynard be revealed next, having lived in hiding after taking an arrow to the chest? She looked to Stephen, who appeared ready to burst with pride.

"How?" she asked again.

“Your father did give Melody over to my father’s gentle touchers,” Stephen said, sipping from his drink. “He even paid for it. But they didn’t kill her. I believe my father fancied her beauty, from what I have learned. I will spare you all I know, but her detention was...unkind, as you can imagine. When Leon was killed, everything here was chaos. It was several years before the caretakers would even acknowledge my presence, let alone my true birthright. None of us knew who Melody was, for she would say nothing, and we had no record of her existence. Even the gentle touchers didn’t know for certain.”

He took another drink. Alyssa felt chills, imagining years crawling by trapped in Leon’s dungeon. Stephen was right; she could imagine the ‘unkind’ tortures he’d have subjected her to. How long might it have been? Struggling to remember, she thought back to when she’d first heard of her mother’s disappearance, a year before the Bloody Kengold. That put it at near ten years. Ten years in darkness. No wonder her eyes had sunken in, and her thin frame had been unable to fill the simple violet dress she wore.

“I’m not surprised Leon kept it a secret,” Alyssa said, trying to hold down her anger. “My father would have murdered him if he’d found out.”

Stephen’s cheek twitched, but his smile remained.

“Maybe so,” he said. “But when I finally accepted power, I cleared out all the prisoners, either through release or execution, depending on the measure of their crimes and the length of their stay. But what crime had this mysterious woman committed? She told the truth, of course, and as you can imagine, we did not believe her. Melody Gemcroft was dead. We all knew that. We all knew, but she persisted...”

He suddenly lurched to his feet, and before Alyssa knew what was going on, the young man knelt before her and took her hand in his.

“Please forgive me, Alyssa,” he said, staring at the floor. “For a year she stayed, and I disbelieved. But she did not relent, and told us stories, memories, all to prove she was who she claimed to be. I should have known sooner; I should have believed her. Will you forgive me for adding torment to an already tormented woman?”

“I...yes,” Alyssa said, carefully freeing her hand. Something about his touch made her uneasy. “How could you have known? I barely believe it myself.”

This seemed to be enough, and with a jarring mood swing, Stephen was once more the charming boy.

“The finest physicians and priests in all of Dezrel have attended her,” he said, grabbing a cake smothered with blueberries and wolfing it down. “Better food and bed have helped nurse her to health, and I am glad she took meeting you so well. Even walking at times puts her out of breath.”

“I must thank you,” Alyssa said, standing. “For everything.”

“It is all I can do to make up for the sins of my father,” Stephen said. “That, and to earn your forgiveness. I want us to be friends, Alyssa. May your next visit be far sooner than the last. As for Melody, we’ll have her few things packed up and ready in just a few moments.”

It was only then it hit Alyssa that it wasn’t all a dream. Her mother was alive, and of course it was expected that she would go with her, to her proper home. Alyssa swallowed, and she felt her world crumbling. She hated it, how she hated it, but her immediate thought was nothing but an angry denial.

I am still ruler of the Gemcroft family!

She dug her fingernails into her arm as punishment. Such a selfish, childish thought was unbecoming of her. She was better than that, more mature.

“All the best,” she said to Stephen, forcing a pleasant mask across her face. “It will be such a pleasure to bring my mother home.”

To meet her grandchild. To see how the rooms had changed. To hear of her husband’s death, and the thief war that had nearly decimated them. To reenter a family of whom she was the eldest, and the lawful ruler.

“All the best,” Stephen smiled.

Alyssa grabbed Zusa’s hand, squeezed it tight.