

**"WINNING
COMBINATION OF
A GAME OF THRONES,
SWORD-AND-SORCERY
RPGS, AND VIVID
DESCRIPTION."**

**—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY ON
A DANCE OF CLOAKS**

A DANCE OF GHOSTS

**THE UNDERWORLD
HAS LOST ITS KING**

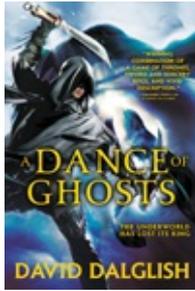
DAVID DALGLISH

A DANCE OF GHOSTS

SHADOWDANCE: BOOK 5

DAVID DALGLISH

orbitbooks.net
orbitshortfiction.com



[**Begin Reading**](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[*A Preview of A Dance of Chaos*](#)

[*A Preview of The Black Prism*](#)

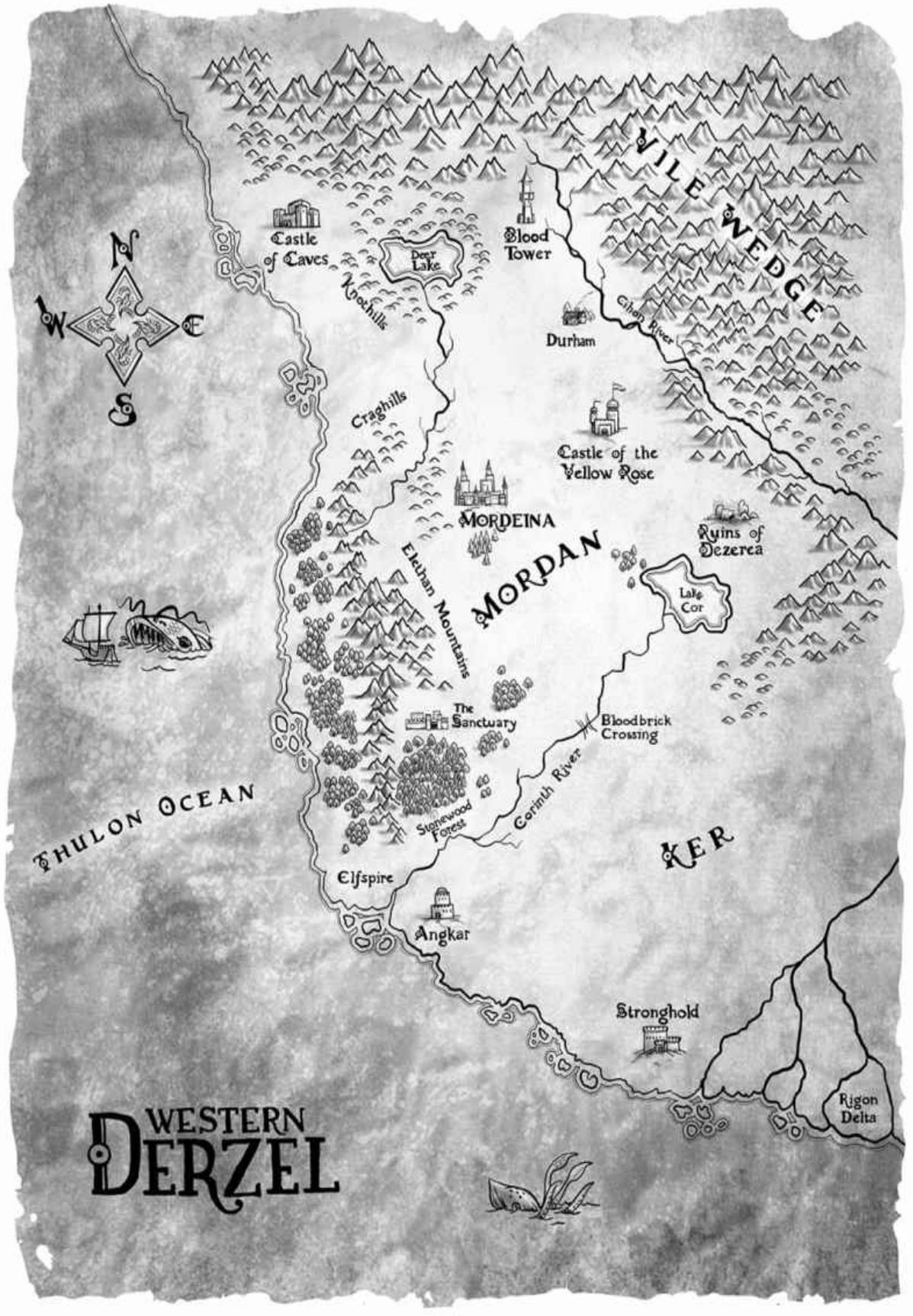
[Orbit Newsletter](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher constitute unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), prior written permission must be obtained by contacting the publisher at permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

To Rob, for keeping me from ever losing my confidence, and Krista, for answering every medieval question I could come up with





PROLOGUE

Kadish Fel wore a rut into the dirt floor as he paced in the center of the large warehouse. The smell of dust overwhelmed his nose, and he sneezed often. All around were giant squares of hay stacked to the ceiling, hay Kadish would sell to the outlying farms come winter. He kept his hands clasped behind his back, for it was the only way to keep himself from drawing his swords and twirling them as a nervous tic. But drawn weapons wouldn't do, not when he needed his ambush to succeed.

"Not sure I've ever seen you so nervous," said Carlisle, a squat man who helped Kadish with the more brutal affairs of his Hawk Guild. "You really think Darkhand will be that frightening in person?"

Kadish stopped his pacing, just for a moment.

"You know his reputation," he said, running a hand through his auburn hair.

"Aye, I do," laughed Carlisle. "But I also know people love telling tales, and that the tales get larger with the telling. This guy lives three kingdoms away, and every story making its way here probably went through many tellings before ever reaching us."

Carlisle reached into his pocket, taking out a pinch of snuff and snorting it.

"Besides," he continued, rubbing his eyes as they watered. "I don't care if this guy's the biggest shit in all of Mordeina; he's still coming into our city. Our *home*. That arrogant prick dies tonight."

Kadish looked to the rafters, to the tops of the mountains of hay. Hidden above were nearly twenty members of his Hawk Guild, every last one armed with crossbow bolts tipped with poison. On the ground were ten more, their daggers ready. In but a moment, Kadish could bring the wrath of his entire guild upon the man he was soon to meet for the first time. Yet he still felt he was the one in danger.

Muzien the Darkhand, no matter how bloated his reputation, no matter how far he was from home, was still a man to fear.

"Perhaps he won't show," Kadish said as the minutes crawled, midnight passing and the truly late hours arriving. "He might have anticipated our ambush."

Carlisle sat down on a single bundle of hay, grunting and shifting at its lack of comfort. He took another hit of snuff, then shook his head.

"Or maybe he's abandoned coming into Veldaren altogether. That Victor fellow, how long ago was it, three weeks..."

"Five," said Kadish.

“Five, right. Whatever. Victor’s men thrashed the Sun Guild, drove ’em out of the city like they were rats on a ship. Fuck, even the fabled Grayson Lightborn got his ass killed. Perhaps Muzien took one look at our city and decided he didn’t want to share his right-hand man’s fate?”

“Then why set up this meeting if he was just going to turn tail and slither back to Mordeina?”

Carlisle spit.

“He’s an elf. Who says he has to make sense?”

Kadish shrugged. Well, Carlisle did have a point there. Still, the reputation the Darkhand carried...

“No,” Kadish said. “The Sun Guild isn’t finished with our city just yet. He’s here, in Veldaren. And he’ll be here for our meeting, even if he makes us wait a few hours.”

“What makes you so certain?”

Kadish crossed his arms and leaned against one of the nine support beams throughout the middle of the building. The wood was rough and splintered, but his long brown cloak kept him safe from its discomfort. His brow furrowed, and he let his voice drop in hopes that only Carlisle, and not the rest of his hidden men, would hear.

“Because a man with a reputation like Muzien’s doesn’t get it through accident,” he said. “He gets it by working his ass off for it and making sure nothing tarnishes it. He’s like Thren in that regard, except even better if we’re to believe the stories. By Karak, I think every child alive has heard the tale of Muzien’s Red Wine.”

Carlisle snickered.

“Well,” he said. “Make sure you don’t drink anything that elf offers you, then, eh?”

“Indeed. But my point is, calling us here for a meeting and then flaking... all it takes are a few whispers by me and everyone hears of his cowardice, his unreliability. He won’t allow it, no matter how petty. He wants us afraid, every single one of us. I have a feeling we’re not the first he’ll talk to tonight.”

“Perhaps,” said Carlisle. “But we’ll sure as shit be the *last* he talks to.”

“I pray we are.”

With a sudden bang, the worn door blocking the only entrance to the building smacked open. Despite the many hours of waiting, despite his fear of the unknown guildmaster of the Suns, Kadish felt relief that the time had finally come. In through the door walked two hard-looking men dressed in dark grays and tightly fitted clothing. Daggers gleamed from their belts. They wore no cloaks, instead bearing the four-pointed star sewn just above their hearts. From what Kadish had learned, the rings in their ears signified solo kills, and each man had at least a dozen hoops and studs. They strode in without pause, their eyes scanning every corner of the room. Kadish swallowed, trusting his men to be adequately hidden.

And then in stepped the Darkhand. He was tall, and despite the long dark coat he wore, it was striking how slender an elf Muzien was. That slenderness belied a smooth strength, for each step he took was carefully weighted, every twitch of his muscles like that of a feline predator. His hair was a dark umber, the front of which was hooked into two braids and tied behind his head. From his hips swayed two swords, mimicking him in length and slenderness. Upon entering the building, Muzien glanced about the place, seeing the tall stacks of hay, and smirked. That done, he brought his attention to Kadish as he moved to join his two acquaintances. The moment those cool blue eyes

settled on Kadish, he felt his scrotum tighten, felt the air around him thicken. Kadish had met hard men, had spent decades among those who viewed life as something to trade and fuck and cut short without a second thought.

He'd not seen eyes quite like Muzien's. Beneath that gaze, Kadish felt like an insect seeking an audience with the boot about to crush him beneath its heel.

"Wel... welcome to Veldaren," Kadish said, gathering his senses. He expected better of himself, and he used his wounded pride to find the strength to stand a little taller, and let a bit of mockery enter his voice. "I pray you won't be staying long?"

Muzien stood several feet opposite Kadish, with his bodyguards on either side. His long, pale fingers slowly twirled a gold band on the index finger of his left hand, which, true to his name, appeared to have been crafted out of coals instead of flesh.

"I'll stay until my task here is done," he said, openly staring at Kadish. Disliking the cryptic answer, Kadish felt himself snap.

"Not sure that's wise," he said. "Your kind ain't wanted here, Muzien. You think your little trick with your ears fools anybody?"

Muzien tilted his head slightly to one side, as if amused. The tops of his ears, where there should have been the distinctive upturned curve of his race, were instead two mutilated scars.

"What was done to my ears was not done for you, nor the wretches who fill this city," the elf said. His voice was deep and aged. "Nor do I care if I am unwanted. That did not stop my Sun Guild in Mordeina, and it shall not stop us here. Now please, I've come to hear your answer, not your pathetic attempts at insult."

"To get an answer, you need to ask a question," Carlisle said, earning himself a glare from Muzien. "So far, I don't think me and my guildmaster here have heard one yet."

"Is this toad yours?" Muzien asked. "I guess I should take comfort in knowing that mankind shows no greater patience here than it has anywhere else in our world."

"He only speaks my mind, if a bit hastily," Kadish said. He wasn't happy with Carlisle's outburst either, but he would still defend his own over the accusations of some foreign elf guildmaster. "You asked to meet me, so here I am. You said you have questions, and I'm here to answer. Ask away, and I'll do my best to play the good host."

Kadish put his hands behind his back and tried to look relaxed. In truth, he was preparing to dive aside the second any of the three drew their blades. The moment he shouted out, his guild would reveal its ambush, but until then he wanted to learn what he could about the Sun Guild's intentions, just in case someone else took up Muzien's mantle after his death.

"I have but two questions," said Muzien. "First... where is Thren Felhorn?"

Kadish was honestly surprised.

"Thren?" he asked. "Why do you care?"

At Muzien's glare, Kadish shrugged.

"Fine, then; don't tell me," he said. "But Thren's gone missing ever since he disbanded his Spider Guild. Rumors on the street claim your right hand Grayson killed him, but others said he got away only to be killed by Lord Victor Kane."

"So he is dead?" Muzien asked. "Has anyone seen his body?"

Again Kadish shrugged.

“Not that I know of.”

“Then he isn’t dead.”

It was spoken so simply, with such finality, Kadish didn’t bother to argue. What did it matter if the legendary Thren Felhorn was dead? His guild had been disbanded, his territory swallowed up by the remaining guilds. He was a nonentity now, a relic of the past in an underworld willing to move on and forget within the blink of an eye.

“Well, there’s question one,” Kadish said. “What’s your second, so we can get this over with and I can go find myself a bed and a pair of tits?”

Still Muzien twisted the ring on his finger, as if it was nothing more than a nervous tic of his own. But it seemed strange to think that... seemed strange to even consider a man with those cold blue eyes ever being nervous about anything. The gold of the band appeared ludicrous when contrasted against the dark flesh beneath it.

“I offer you and your guild the same chance I will offer the Wolves, the Serpents, the Ash, and all the rest,” said the elf. “Despite whatever setbacks you think I have suffered, be assured our takeover of Veldaren is inevitable. The Sun Guild rises, and all who stand against us shall fall.”

“Big words,” Kadish mumbled. “You think we’ve not heard the same a hundred times before? There’s always a new challenger on the streets.”

Muzien smiled.

“You’ve not had a challenger like me. Listen well, Kadish Fel, for it is your only chance to survive this night unharmed. Toss aside your cloaks and accept the four-pointed star. There will be a place for everyone in my guild, for I will need strong hands and sharp minds to shape the future of Veldaren. You will have a station of honor, one worthy of the position you once held. All others will be given roles suited to their talents. No blood will be spilled. No wars fought between guilds. My victory is inevitable, so let us not waste the time, nor end lives unnecessarily.”

Kadish could hardly believe what he was hearing, and despite the deep pit of fear in his belly, he laughed.

“Is that so?” he asked. “Inevitable? You are truly something special, Muzien, but I fear you’ve let your pride overwhelm your common sense. *Hawks, now!*”

From the hay sprang his men, slipping out from behind bales, falling down from the rafters onto piles, dark sheets meant to hide them during their long wait discarded. Before the two bodyguards could draw their blades, a half dozen arrows plunged into each of their bodies, dropping them. Blood pooled at Muzien’s feet as he stood there, still twirling his ring. He’d not even blinked at the sudden ambush.

Kadish drew his own sword, took a step closer to Muzien.

“Not everyone here is as cowardly as you’d believe,” he said. “Now tell me why you’ve come to Veldaren, and why now.”

“Or what?” asked Muzien. “You’ll kill me?”

“Look around you,” Kadish said. “My guild is here and ready. However many you brought with you, it doesn’t matter. My arrows have you sighted. My swords are ready to plunge into your heart and lungs. You walked right into my home, you egotistical elf, so do you really think I wouldn’t be ready for an intruder like you?”

Slowly Muzien shook his head.

“Ready with an ambush, yes,” he said. “But for you to be stupid enough to spring it? No. No, I did not.”

The door to the warehouse slammed shut with a heavy thud.

“You and your guild fail to realize how far out of your depth you really are,” Muzien said as the rest of the Hawk Guild turned to the door, unsure of what was about to transpire. “You cannot see Veldaren’s fate even though it is as clear and undeniable as the rising sun. Your whores, your drug trades of leafs and powders, your *territory* as you would call it, will be swept into my arms. You could have continued on under my care. You could have had your place.”

A few of Kadish’s men pushed the doors, lightly at first, then with their entire bodies flung against it. The wood rattled but would not move.

“You could have lived,” said Muzien.

Kadish turned to the archers still in place.

“Kill him!” he shouted.

The arrows flew, but Muzien never moved. His body became a blur, the sight of it somehow hurting Kadish’s head. And then the arrows thudded into the dirt, leaving Muzien standing there, not a drop bleeding from his untouched form. The pit of fear in Kadish’s stomach turned to full-blown terror. As if lost in a dream he stepped closer to the elf and raised his sword. Muzien only stared at him with an expression that was equal parts pity and condescension. Still his swords remained buckled at his sides. Taking in a deep breath, Kadish plunged his weapon forward.

It disappeared into Muzien’s stomach without a hint of resistance, all the way up to Kadish’s hand. He felt nothing, only air. When he pulled the blade back, he knew his life was over.

“Do not resist,” said Muzien. “Let the smoke take you. Your death will be more peaceful that way.”

Kadish dropped his sword as the elf ceased the turning of his ring. Muzien’s image flickered, then faded away until it was as if he’d never been there at all.

All around him he heard screams, banging at the doors, people begging to be let out. Others were swearing they would change allegiance and join the Sun Guild. Kadish glanced to the door, saw even Carlisle was one of the ones willing to turn. It should have disappointed him, but it didn’t. Kadish was willing to toss aside his own cloak now, but he knew it was beyond that. He’d seen the look in Muzien’s eye. He knew his place now, what he meant to the Darkhand. They were but vermin to be destroyed.

From the very walls came the first hints of smoke, followed by the flickering tongues of fire.

Muzien watched as the building burned, twelve members of his Sun Guild forming a perfect circle surrounding it and holding torches aloft in silent ritual. The screams from within took several minutes to stop, and it wasn’t until they did that he spoke.

“He said he doesn’t know where Thren is hiding.”

Beside him stood his new right hand, a stocky man named Ridley with a pockmarked face.

“Did he at least offer an idea to explain the absence?”

Muzien nodded.

“He did. He said he believed Thren to be dead, though no proof of it has surfaced.”

Ridley took a step forward and tossed his own torch onto the burning wreckage. A large crack followed, one of the support beams having weakened so much it broke under the strain of the roof, which crumbled inward along with it.

“Of your students, who was the better, Grayson or Thren?” asked Ridley.

“Grayson.”

“Easy enough. Thren is still alive.”

Muzien cocked his head at that.

“How so?” he asked. “If the stronger and the more skilled has perished, why then should Thren have also survived?”

Ridley gave him a crooked smile.

“Because that’s the way this world works, Muzien. It’s the best of us who die before their time, the ones who the world gives cruel jokes and ignoble deaths.”

“If that is true, then why do I still live?”

Ridley winked.

“Because you’re *not* the best of us. You’re the worst of us, Muzien, the very worst.”

At that, the Darkhand had to smile. He looked to the sleeping city, which, despite the fire he set, would not dare come to put it out, not while so many of his guild walked the streets in all directions, ordering men and women to return to their beds should they poke their heads out their doors. The city was alive, Muzien knew, a living, breathing conglomerate of beings, and like any being, it could be made to fear, and fear him it would.

But there was still one man out there who wouldn’t fear him, who could be a great asset to his plan, or its most terrible threat.

“Where have you gone, my student?” Muzien asked with a breathless whisper that was carried away by the night wind along with the smoke, ash, and all else that remained of the Hawk Guild.

CHAPTER



The wagons, all three of them full of men and women laughing and calling to one another, rumbled along on wooden wheels down the road that split the forest. So far, it seemed none realized they were being watched.

“I don’t see why we must hide,” Thren whispered beside Haern as they crouched together against the trunks of trees fifteen feet out from the road.

“Caution over haste,” Haern said. He gestured to the dark gray clothes and long cloak each of them wore. “Besides, neither of us is inconspicuous.”

As Thren shrugged, Haern returned his attention to the three wagons, particularly the men and women visible at the front or walking alongside. They’d passed so many already, yet if there were even more...

“They’re with the Sun Guild,” Thren said, his voice slowly growing louder as the wagons continued. “If that is what you’re searching for, then stop bothering. Their earrings mark them clearly as such.”

“Damn,” Haern muttered, thudding his forehead against the rough bark of the tree, feeling it scratch his skin. “How many will he move into our city? A thousand? Ten?”

“A hundred thousand if need be,” Thren said, drawing his two short swords and calmly walking toward the road. “That’s how Muzien works. The idea of failing doesn’t even enter his head.”

Haern reached out to grab his arm, hesitated just before. Thren paused and looked his way, and there was a fire in his glare at the very idea that Haern might try to stop him.

“What is it?” Thren asked, pulling his gray hood up over his blond hair. “Since when are you one to shy away from bloodshed?”

“We have no reason to fight.”

Thren laughed.

“Those wagons are full of killers and thieves that will make life miserable for everyone in your precious little city. We’re doing the world a favor. Now either stay and watch, or take the east flank. Your choice.”

Haern watched his father break out into a sprint, racing just outside the limits of the road so the trees still blocked sight of him with their low branches and their wide green leaves. Despite his speed, he was still a whisper compared to the cheer coming

from the wagons. Haern estimated at least twenty total in the group, perhaps more if anyone were inside wagons and hidden by the sun-bleached tarps. Twenty dead, and all for what? Wearing the wrong earrings?

They're not innocent, Haern told himself as he drew his own swords and dashed to the other side of the road, rushing through the trees while eyeing the rapidly approaching wagons. The people in the Sun Guild were flooding into his city, taking over the various drug trades, demanding protection money from every street they controlled. They were threatening the peace he'd bled for. That was what he told himself as he watched his father come leaping out of the woods, spearing a raven-haired woman through the neck as she walked alongside one of the horses. That was what he repeated in his head as the driver of the wagon fell, intestines spilling out beneath him before he hit the dirt.

Not innocent.

From the other side, Haern emerged, his sabers feeling heavy in his hands. The party was letting out confused cries, many making mad dashes for wherever it was they'd stashed their weaponry. Haern knew the early period was when they'd need to score the most kills. If the survivors could band together, form a perimeter...

One saber cut through the heel of a fleeing man, and his other lashed out, opening the neck of a man who'd come rushing in with his own sword raised. A turn, a step, and the wounded man on the ground died with his lungs pierced through the back. As the blood flowed, Haern let out a grim chuckle.

Who was he kidding? The combined wrath of the Watcher and Thren Felhorn had descended upon the Sun guildmembers. There would be no survivors.

"Fall back!" a man yelled, heavyset and with dirty hair hanging over his face. He seemed to be the only one aware of what was going on, and Haern set his sights immediately upon him. His foe wielded a long blade in his left hand, his other ushering people toward the third wagon. Two more had joined his side by the time Haern came crashing in, whose haste nearly cost him dearly. The two others, each holding a short sword, tried to rush him simultaneously, their blades slashing. Haern skidded to a stop out of reach, and he flung himself to the right, smashing away the pathetic attacks to create an opening. The third man, however, had far more skill than the other two and anticipated the maneuver. Out lashed his sword with his long reach, its aim for Haern's chest.

Fighting off panic, Haern whirled the saber in his right hand about, and he let his weight drop unsupported. The thrusting blade batted upward, and Haern fell, tilting his head back and watching the blade stab mere inches above him. Landing hard on his knees, he rolled once to put his feet beneath him, then lunged. His skilled foe was already pulling back, but the other two were not so lucky. Haern struck down the first, rammed his knee into the second, disarming him with a slash to the wrist, and then cutting him down as well.

"You'll die for this," the dirty-haired man said, still retreating toward the back of the wagon. "You're messing with the Sun Guild; don't you get that?"

The threat had only the opposite effect on Haern. Instead of frightening him, he felt relief. They had made no mistake when guessing their allegiance.

"You're about to be dead men, and you waste your last words on empty threats?" Haern asked.

The man grinned, and from around the corner stepped two women, each armed with small crossbows. Before the man could even open his mouth to give the order to fire, Haern was already flinging his cloak into the air to obfuscate his movements. Instead of dodging to either side, he rushed low and straight at them, and when he heard the surprised cries of the three, he dropped into a roll. He heard the twang of crossbow strings, and he tensed on instinct, waiting for the piercing pain of a bolt. None came. He pulled out of the roll, and then his sabers did their work. The man died, having survived for only three exchanges of their blades. One of the women dropped her crossbow to draw a dagger, the other still frantically trying to reload.

“Drop your weapons,” Haern told them.

They had no chance to respond. Blades pierced both their chests, and they gasped before they fell. Thren Felhorn stood behind them, his swords and clothes caked with blood.

“Drop your weapons?” Thren asked, swinging his short swords in a futile attempt to fling the blood off them. “Did you plan on taking prisoners?”

Haern looked around for any more to fight, but the three wagons had been abandoned.

“Does it matter?” he asked.

“You hesitate to kill women,” Thren said, shaking his head. “The ones immersed in the lives we live are just as dangerous as any man. You’ll get yourself killed someday if you let such a weakness linger.”

“Perhaps.” He sheathed his blades. “Did you kill the rest?”

Thren gestured north, toward the forest.

“About five or six managed to flee. I’m sure they’ll come back for the wagon in a day or two, see what’s left of it. We have nothing to fear from those cowards.”

Haern was less ready to be so dismissive, but he did not argue the point. Instead, he stood and stared at the bodies bleeding out before him as his father walked over to the nearest covered wagon and tossed aside one of the flaps. One of the women was not yet dead, but her eyes were glassy, her breath coming in rapid, shallow gasps. Her fingers were near her face, digging into the loose earth as her hands convulsed at random intervals.

“We needed to refresh our supplies, so meeting them was fortunate,” Thren said, and Haern heard rattling as he pushed aside unseen things to search through the wagon’s contents.

“Aye,” Haern said, kneeling down before the woman. He reached into his belt, withdrew a dagger he kept for emergencies. The woman continued to gasp, slower now. Feeling like he’d swallowed a rock, Haern forced her eyelids closed with his left hand, then stabbed with his right. Unlike his father’s strike, his pierced the heart directly. He left the blade in there, not wishing to increase the pain any further, and instead watched and waited. The woman let out a gasp, but it sounded more surprised than anything. And then the breath leaked out of her, the movement of her chest stopped, and her fingers curled in tight and moved no more.

Haern pulled free the dagger and stood. As he cleaned it on the bottom of his cloak, he glanced over his shoulder, caught his father watching him.

“That wasn’t necessary,” said Thren.

“I disagree. Did you find anything useful?”

Thren gestured for him to come closer and look for himself.

“Plenty of food and drink,” Thren said as Haern glanced inside. “But it looks like it was only for the crew manning the wagons. I thought there’d be some crimleaf in here, maybe some wines laced with Violet, but instead we have only these...”

He pushed aside the lid to a crate, reached inside, and lifted out a thick stone slab. It was roughly the size of his chest, and by the strain on his muscles, it was clearly heavy. Thren dropped it down on the wood, and at sight of the mark carved onto the front, he turned and spit.

“Egotistical bastards,” Thren said. “They can’t mark territory like any other guild. They have to carve it into the very stone of the walls and street.”

Haern reached down, his fingers tracing the four-pointed star of the Sun Guild, deeply cut into the tile with a skilled hand and then painted a soft yellow. The sight of it grew a pit in the center of Haern’s stomach as he wondered what all transpired in Veldaren during his absence. He’d hoped that after they drove out the first wave of members, plus killed the priest, Laerek, who’d been helping the Sun Guild move into the city, they would have earned a respite. Apparently, that was not the case.

“How many are there?” Haern asked, looking further into the wagon.

“Ten in this wagon alone,” Thren said. “The Darkhand plans on taking over the entire city, by the looks of it. These stones will signify their territory, and I have a feeling that in a few months, it will be impossible to cross a single street without seeing one.”

“Darkhand?” Haern asked.

Thren shook his head.

“Leader of the Sun Guild. Don’t worry about him for now. We have our own matters to attend. There’s cheese wrapped up near the front, plus some butter and lard. Grab your pack and get to it while I load up on whatever oats they had. If we’re to have a city left waiting for us by the time we’re done, we need to reach Luther and the Sanctuary as soon as possible.”

With their supplies now refilled, the two walked until nightfall, then found a spot safely far enough from the road to build a fire and eat the small portion of smoked pork they’d taken. Haern sat opposite his father, trying to do his best to relax and forget the previous hours of the day. He’d gone through far worse during his scouring of Veldaren. Why should a simple caravan bother him so much now?

Thren, meanwhile, looked the happiest he’d been since their trip began. Cleaning a bit of pork from his teeth, he tossed a scrap too burnt and hard to eat into the fire and stared at Haern, who shivered, feeling as cold as ever beneath that gaze. Haern shifted side to side, trying to find a way to make the carpet of leaves beneath him into something more comfortable.

“That hood,” Thren said, breaking a silence that had lasted more than an hour. “Who did you get it from?”

Haern tugged once on its side, and he huddled closer to the fire.

“What does it matter?” he asked. “It’s only a hood.”

Thren shook his head, clearly disappointed.

“I’m no fool. No matter the time of day, there’s always a shadow that falls across your face. Sometimes I can see your eyes; sometimes I can’t. And your voice, it’s not like it should be. It sounds more like you’re whispering, except it’s loud as you need it

to be for me to hear even if I'm five feet away or five hundred. There's magic in it, and you're not the kind of man who wields a wand or a staff, Watcher. You deal in steel, which means the magic came from someone else. I'm only curious as to who. It's an effective trick, albeit a simple one."

Haern drummed his fingers on the hilts of his sabers, pondered over how to answer.

"I took it from a man I killed," he said at last.

"Do I know him?"

He shook his head.

"An elf from afar. He thought to control a city with his blades. I showed him otherwise."

Thren let out a chuckle, and he lay back against one of the trees that surrounded their camp, with the hope that their trunks and leaves might hide the light of the fire from travelers.

"So you took it as a trophy?"

"Not a trophy," Haern said harsher than he meant. "A warning, for myself."

"And what kind of warning might that be? Not to be weaker than your opponent?"

Haern let out a sigh, and he stared into the fire instead of answering. How could he explain to his father that the reason he'd taken the hood was as a reminder to never believe as the elf, Graeven, had believed? To feel he was a god among mortals, controller of all their fates?

"A warning against what I might become," Haern said. "I'd rather not discuss it."

"Of course, of course," said Thren. He pulled his own hood back, used it as a cushion between the harsh bark of the tree and his head. "The perfect, noble Watcher. Never a man who could bribe him, never a whore who could seduce him. The way my men describe you would make you a god of death and shadows. Fear is a weapon you wield with skill, so spare me vague sentimentalism about warnings and reminders. You wear it to frighten your prey; just admit as much. It's sad to see someone living a lie."

Haern stood, and his hands fell to his sabers. He had no intention to draw them, but he wanted to deny the casual dismissal, to say or do something to somehow show his father the seriousness in which he took his words. Instead, Thren ignored him completely, closing his eyes as if to sleep.

"You're not going to wear that hood the whole trip, are you?" Thren asked.

Haern froze.

"I might," he said.

"It's been three weeks, and I've never once seen you pull it down. Do you fear me seeing your face, Watcher? And must I call you by such a stupid title?"

"You wish to know my face and name?" Haern asked. "What makes you think I'd be foolish enough to give either?"

Thren opened an eye.

"You freely travel with me, rely on my skills in combat to keep you alive, and sleep opposite of me by a fire. If I wanted to kill you, I'd have done so already. If you thought I would kill you, you'd have already tried to kill me, or at least run off to infiltrate the Stronghold on your own. So, please, let's drop at least a little of the suspicion, hrm? Besides, you don't have to give me your true name. Any other name would be preferable to 'Watcher.'"

Haern took a step back at the rebuke, then glanced around. So many times he'd endured such rants while growing up, and it did to him now what it always did to him then: made him feel like a complete fool. His fears were naïve, his wisdom unfounded. And sure enough, he'd hidden his face all during their travel southwest, down through the green lands of the Kingstrip and past the hills of Omn as they made their way toward the Gods' Bridges.

He sat back down, taking meager comfort that his father could not see the way his face blushed or how frustrated he was. Of course, Thren would still sense it, read it from the way he sat, the gestures his hands made, the tiniest of inflections in his voice. But at least it'd be somewhat less obvious. He thought to give a false name but decided keeping such a thing straight in his head was pointless. Haern was a common enough name, and already it was a disguise, a burial of the Aaron he had been.

"Haern," he said, crossing his arms. "For now, call me Haern."

"Very well, Haern. Care to tell me how you really obtained that magical hood?"

Haern tried to think of where to start, where was appropriate. In the distance, a coyote sounded, and the noise emphasized to Haern just how far from home he was, how distant the walls of Veldaren. Where he sat, there were only the woods, the animals, and Thren Felhorn... and his father more closely resembled the animals than any fellow human he'd normally associate with. The howl continued but was not taken up by any other animals, and that made it seem all the more lonely. When it stopped, Haern began.

"I went south to Angelpport at the request of a friend," he said. "An elf was using my old mark as a way to mock his victims as well as pay homage to my own reputation in Veldaren. This elf was killing anyone he needed to bring the entire city crumbling down. He thought war would purge the evil from it, a desperately needed cleansing at the hands of his race. The reason I took that hood was to remind myself to never, ever believe as he did. My skills, my blades, they can shape the future, but it is never my place to do so as if I were a god."

He fell silent, and in the center of his chest, he felt a pressure growing, a strange anxiety. He knew what it was, but that just made it all the stranger. He wanted to know what his father thought of it. Why, he could not say. The man was a monster, he knew that, he truly believed that. But for some reason, that didn't seem to matter.

While Haern had thought Thren would immediately mock him, instead, his father stayed relaxed by the fire, leaning against his tree. His left hand slowly picked at a leaf beside him, systematically stripping it so only the stem remained.

"Humility is rarely a virtue I practice," Thren said when the leaf was naked. "I'll admit there are times when accepting your own limitations can save your life, as well as lead to necessary growth in skill, but you taking that hood for such reasons is nothing more than a self-serving lie."

Haern opened his mouth to ask why, then closed it. Thren would tell him why, of course. He always did. Better to remain silent, hide behind the shadowed mask so his father would not see just how deeply his words stung.

But for once, Thren did not continue. His own face had grown distant, his gaze elsewhere.

"Why?" Haern asked when it was clear he would not continue.

Thren looked up, and there was something hidden in his face, something... proud.

“Because you *are* a god among the people of Veldaren,” Thren said. “You command the fear and loyalty of so many, it makes a mockery of our own king. With your blades, you have shaped Veldaren’s future more than any other man and woman alive. Yet that power scares you, doesn’t it, Haern? Better to tell yourself you aren’t that powerful. Better to tell yourself it isn’t your *place* to make such decisions over the lives of others. You’re a giant stooping down to pretend to be a man. You convince no one but yourself.”

“You would call me a fool?”

“No. I merely question the man who is afraid to be everything he was meant to be.”

The comment stung far worse than it should have. Haern knew who his father had intended him to be. He’d wanted a perfect killer, denied friends, starved of affection, left without faith or family. Only the skills to take a life, and the ruthless training to lead his father’s guild. Haern was never meant to be anything other than an echo of Thren living on after his father’s death.

“Who are you to decide what I was meant to be?” Haern asked him, unable to keep the bite from his voice.

“Just a man slowly getting older,” Thren said, laying down and closing his eyes to sleep. “But I know denial when I see it. All I said was that you are a god among the people of Veldaren. Never once did I say how you should wield that power.”

The darkness was deepening, the sound of the cicadas growing loud enough to overwhelm. In that midnight cacophony, Haern pulled his knees to his chest, crossed his arms over them, and stared at the man that had been his father.

“Why did you never kill me?” he asked, softly enough he wasn’t even sure if Thren would hear. But he did hear, and after a moment, he answered.

“My men whisper that I couldn’t even if I tried. Your reputation has surpassed mine, or have you not noticed?”

Haern swallowed, and he felt naked as he spoke.

“For years, I struck at your guild, killing those loyal to the Spider. I ended your war with the Trifect, effectively putting all thief guilds on a leash, and no matter what Deathmask tells me I know it was against your wishes. Yet night after night, I prowl, and never once have you tried to bring me down. No ambushes. No plots. Tonight, you ask me for my name... have you not once searched for it? You ask of my face... have you never looked for those who have seen it? I know you, Thren. I know you were never afraid of me, so why was I left alone? Why did you not crush me when you had the chance?”

On and on droned the cicadas.

“Your inaction can only be two things,” Haern whispered. “Either I meant something to you... or nothing at all.”

A lengthy silence, followed by a sigh.

“You presume much,” Thren said without ever opening his eyes. “You want to know why I never did? Because I didn’t want to.”

“That’s not a reason.”

“You’re right,” Thren said, rolling over and putting his back to Haern. “It’s not a reason. It is *the* reason for all we mere mortals do, and it is the only one I’ve ever needed in my life. Perhaps you’d best learn that yourself.”

Haern rose from the fire and stalked off into the forest. He'd done it before when they first traveled, needing space, needing a winding path between him and the fire so he might sleep feeling safe. The following morning, he'd find Thren waiting for him on the road west, tired and in a sour mood. He always did.

Picking a tree at random, he put his back against it, wrapped his cloak about himself, and tried to sleep. Sleep didn't come easily, and it wasn't that much of a surprise. Instead, he heard his father's voice echoing in his ear, again and again.

You convince no one but yourself.

... no one but yourself...

... no one...

At last he slept, and his dreams were of Robert Haern, teaching him in the darkness.