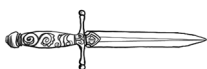
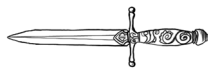


## CHAPTER



# 1



Haern returned home to the Eschaton Tower exhausted. He'd scoured the area surrounding the murder victim 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 showed no sign of lying. Leaving Veldaren for the tower beyond the city walls, 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. Besides, the thought of eating twisted his stomach. 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 filled 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 he was growing up, all so he could be a worthy heir to his father’s empire of thieves and murderers. He chuckled, then 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 very long.

“Hey, Haern.”

He opened an eye and 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 Haern 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 the man had been gone from Veldaren for a very long time. If Haern 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 Edwin 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, then 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, tossing the blankets aside. “Damn it all . . .”

King Edwin Vaelor fidgeted on his throne, eager for the meeting to begin. Beside him stood his aging adviser, Gerand Croid, looking tired and bored. They’d emptied out the grand throne room of petitioners and guests, per Gerand’s request. The adviser rubbed at the lengthy scar along his face, as if it bothered him. A sign of nervousness, belying the calm façade 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 talk about how they could do a better job policing Veldaren. A few had even tried, such as Alyssa Gemcroft, who had unleashed an army of mercenaries upon the streets for two deadly nights. Half the city had damn near burned to the ground because of it, too. If not for the Watcher’s agreement’s actually bringing about peace, as well as Alyssa’s paying for the damages done by her mercenary bands, Edwin might have tossed her into prison for a few hundred years.

Yet at least Alyssa he could understand, given her belief at the time that her son was dead. 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 over 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 a harsh 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, the like of 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 to whatever runty castle he came from. The thieves are like rats, and they’ve grown exceptionally skilled at hiding in the walls lately.”

On the opposite side of the room, at the end of the crimson

carpet leading to the 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, naïve 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 wide, and in stepped Lord Victor, flanked by the guards. 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 chain mail. A sword was strapped to his thigh, and Edwin felt his ire rise, this time at his guards for being so dense as 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. Failing to recognize a family crest would normally be considered an insult, but he 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 Edwin 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 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 as Lady Gemcroft did years ago. 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 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 executioners' blades," 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've 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 naïve," 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 of meeting the same fate as his parents, killed off because one of the guilds decided he was 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.