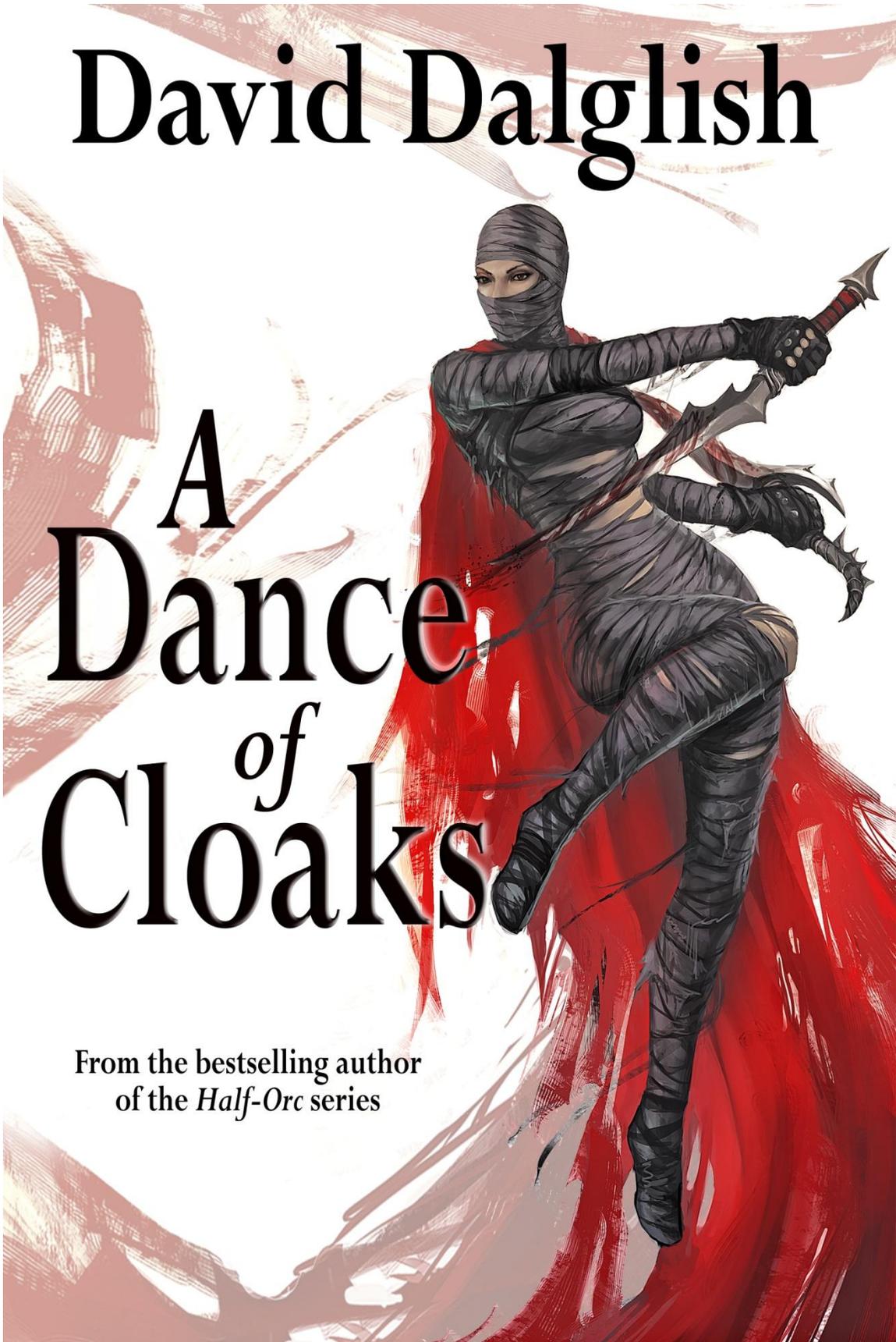


# David Dalglish

## A Dance of Cloaks

From the bestselling author  
of the *Half-Orc* series



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## Prologue



**F**or the past two weeks the simple building had been his safehouse, but now Thren Felhorn doubted its safety as he limped through the door. He clutched his right arm to his muscular body and fought to halt its trembling. Blood ran from his shoulder to his arm, cut by a poisoned blade.

“Damn you, Leon,” he said as he staggered across the wood floor, through a sparsely decorated room, and up to a wall made of plaster and oak. Even with his blurred vision he located the slight groove with his fingers. He pressed inward, detaching an iron lock on the other side of the wall. A small door swung inward.

The master of the Spider Guild collapsed in a chair and removed his gray hood and cloak. He sat in a much larger room painted silver and decorated with pictures of mountains and fields. He removed his shirt, carefully pulling it over his wounded arm. He felt lucky the toxin was meant only to paralyze him. Most likely Leon Connington had wanted him alive so he could sit in his padded chair and watch while his ‘gentle touchers’ bled him drop by bloody drop. The fat man’s treacherous words from their meeting ignited a fire in his gut that refused to fade.

“We will not cower to rats that live off our shit,” Leon had said while brushing his thin mustache. “Do you really think you stand a chance against the wealth of the Trifect? We could buy your soul from the gods.”

Thren had fought down his initial impulse to bury a shortsword in the fat man’s throat. A terrible mistake in hindsight. They had met inside his extravagant mansion, another mistake. Thren vowed to correct his carelessness in the coming months. He had tried to stop the war from erupting, but it appeared everyone in Veldaren desired chaos.

*If the city wants blood, it can have it, Thren thought. But it won’t be mine.*

“Are you in here, father?” he heard his elder son ask from an adjacent room. Thren held his anger in check.

“And if I was not?” he asked.

His son Randith entered from the other room. He looked much like his father, having the same sharp features, thin nose, and grim smile. His hair was brown like his mother’s, and that alone endeared him to Thren. They both wore the gray trousers and cloaks of their guild. A long rapier hung from one side of his belt, a dagger from the other. Randith’s blue eyes met his father’s.

“Then I’d kill you,” Randith said, a cocky grin pulling up the left side of his face.

“Where is the mage?” the guildmaster asked. “Connington’s men cut me with a toxin, and its effect is troublesome.”

Troublesome hardly described it, but Thren wouldn’t let his son know that. His flight from the mansion was a blur in his memory. The toxin had numbed his arm and made his entire side sting with pain. His neck muscles had fired off at random, and one of his knees kept locking up during his run. He had felt like a cripple as he fled through the alleyways of Veldaren, but the moon was waning and the streets empty, so none had seen his pathetic stumbling.

“Cregon isn’t here,” Randith said as he leaned toward his father’s exposed shoulder and examined the cut.

“Then go find him,” Thren said. “And where is Senke? He was supposed to bring me word from Gemcroft.”

“Maynard Gemcroft’s men fired arrows from their windows as we approached,” Randith said. He turned his back to his father and opened a few cupboards until he found a small black bottle. He popped the cork, but when he moved to pour it on his father’s cut, Thren yanked the bottle out of his hand.

“Why isn’t Senke here now?” Thren asked.

“I sent him away,” Randith said. “With war brewing, I figured it best he help protect our warehouses.”

Thren grunted as he dripped the brown liquid across the cut. When finished, he accepted some strips of cloth from his son and then tied them tight around the wound.

“You should have kept him here,” Thren said when the pain subsided. “Where is Aaron? If you won’t fetch the priest, at least he will.”

“Lurking as always,” Randith said, contempt in his voice. “Reading, too. I tell him mercenaries may soon storm in with orders to eradicate all thief guilds, and he looks at me like I’m a lowly fishmonger mumbling about the weather.”

Thren held in a grimace. “There is a reason I am letting the priests have him. We will need their good graces whispering in the ears of the king. He must be nine, for whatever superstitious reason of theirs. It won’t be long now.”

He turned his head and raised his voice.

“Aaron! Your family needs you, now come in here.”

A short child of eight stepped into the room, clutching a worn book to his chest.

*A shame Marion never saw him grown, Thren thought. He is her son, not mine.*

Aaron’s features were soft and curved, and he would no doubt grow up to be a comely man. He had his father’s hair, though, a reddish blond that curled around his ears and hung low to his deep blue eyes. He fell to one knee and bowed his head without saying a word, all while holding the book.

“Do you know where Cregon is?” Thren asked. Aaron nodded.

“Where?”

Aaron said nothing. Thren, tired and wounded, had no time for his younger son’s nonsense. While other children grew up babbling nonstop, a good day for Aaron involved nine words, and rarely would they be used in one sentence.

“Tell me where he is, or you’ll taste blood on your tongue,” Randith said, sensing his father’s exasperation.

“He went away,” Aaron said, his voice barely above a whisper. “He’s a fool.”

“A fool or not, he’s my fool, and damn good at keeping us alive,” Thren said. “Go bring him here. If he argues, slash your finger across your neck. He’ll understand.”

Aaron bowed and did as he was told.

“I wonder if he is practicing for a vow of silence,” Randith said as he watched his brother leave without any sense of hurry.

“Was he smart enough to shut the hidden door?” Thren asked. Randith checked.

“Shut and latched,” he said. “At least he can do that much.”

“We have bigger concerns,” Thren said. “If Gemcroft is firing at our men, that means he knew what would happen tonight at Connington’s. The Trifect have turned their backs on peace. They want blood, our blood, and unless we act fast they are going to get it.”

“Perhaps if we up our offer?” Randith suggested.

Thren shook his head.

“They’ve tired of the game. We rob them until they are red with rage, then pay bribes with their own wealth. You’ve seen how much they’ve invested in mercenaries. They want us exterminated. No bribe, no offer, and no threat will change that. Their minds are set.”

“Give me a few of your best men,” Randith said as his fingers touched the hilt of his rapier. “When Leon Connington bleeds out in his giant bed, the rest will learn that accepting our bribes is far better than accepting our mercy.”

“You are still a young man,” Thren said. “You are not ready for what Connington has prepared.”

“I am seventeen,” Randith said. “A man grown, and I have more kills to my name than years.”

“And I’ve more than you’ve drawn breaths,” Thren said, a hard edge entering his voice. “But even I will not return to that mansion. They are *eager* for this. Entire guilds will be wiped out in days. Those who survive will inherit this city, and I will not have my heir run off and die in the opening hours.”

Thren placed one of his shortswords on the table with his uninjured hand. Although old for a guildmaster, he was still full of strength and vitality, a fact proven by Aaron’s birth so late in his marriage to Marion. He dared his son to meet his eyes and challenge him. For once, he was wrong about his elder son.

“I may leave the mansion be,” Randith said. “But I will not cower and hide. You are right, father. These are the opening hours. Our actions here will decide the course of months of fighting. Let the merchants and nobles hide. We rule the night.”

He pulled his gray cloak over his head and turned to the hidden door. Thren watched him go, his hands shaking, but not from the toxin.

“Be careful,” Thren said.

“I’ll get Senke,” said Randith. “He’ll watch over you until Aaron returns with the mage.”

Then he was gone. Thren struck the table and swore. He thought of all the hours invested in Randith, all the training, teaching, and lecturing in an attempt to cultivate a worthy heir. *Wasted*, he thought. *Wasted*.

He heard the click of the latch, and then the door creaked open. Thren expected the mage, or perhaps his son returning to smooth over his abrupt exit, but instead a short man with a black cloth wrapped around his face stepped inside.

“Don’t run,” the intruder said. Thren snapped up his shortsword and blocked the first two blows from the man’s dagger. He tried to counter, but his vision was blurred and his speed a pathetic remnant of his finely honed reflexes. A savage chop knocked the sword from his hand. Thren fell back, using his chair to force a stumble out of his pursuer. The best he could do was limp, however, and when a heel kicked his knee, he fell. He spun, refusing to die with a dagger in his back.

“Connington sends his greetings,” the man said, his dagger aimed for a final, lethal blow.

He suddenly jerked forward. His eyes widened. The dagger fell from his limp hand as the would-be assassin collapsed. Behind him stood Aaron, holding a bloody shortsword. Thren’s eyes widened as his younger son knelt, presenting the sword. The flat edge rested on his palms, blood running down his wrists.

“Your sword,” Aaron said.

“How...why did you return?” he asked.

“The man was hiding,” the boy said, his voice still quiet. He didn’t sound the least bit upset. “Waiting for us to go. So I waited for him.”

Thren felt the corner’s of his mouth twitch. He took the sword from a boy who spent his days reading underneath his bed and skulking within closets. A boy who never threw a punch when forced into a fight. A boy who had killed a man at the age of eight.

“I know you’re bright,” Thren said. “But can you read a man’s meaning from his words? Not from what he says, but what he doesn’t say. Can you, my son?”

“I can,” Aaron said.

“Good,” said Thren. “Wait with me. Randith will return soon.”

Ten minutes later the door crept open.

“Father?” Randith asked as he stepped inside. Senke was with him. He looked slightly older than Randith, with a trimmed blonde beard and a thick mace held in hand. They both startled at the bloody body lying on the floor, a gaping wound in its back.

“He waited until you left,” Thren said from his chair facing the entrance.

“Where?” his son asked. He pointed to Aaron. “And why is he here?”

Thren shook his head. “You don’t understand. One too many, Randith. One fatal mistake too many.”

Then he waited. And hoped.

Aaron stepped toward his older brother. His blue eyes were calm, unworried. In a single smooth motion, he yanked Randith’s dagger from his belt, flipped it around, and thrust it to the hilt in his brother’s chest. Senke stepped back but wisely held his tongue. Aaron withdrew the dagger, spun around, and presented it as a gift to his father.

Thren’s eyes twinkled as he rose from his seat and placed a hand on Aaron’s shoulder.

“You did well, my son,” he said. “My heir.”

Aaron only smiled and bowed as the body of his brother bled out on the floor.



Maynard Gemcroft paced the halls, his bare feet cushioned by the thick carpet. He paced far from the windows. Even though he had paid handsomely for thick glass, he did not trust it. A thick stone followed by a single arrow was all it'd take to lay him out on the carpet, bleeding red on the blue weave. A thin, wiry man, he lived within his castle-mansion protected by over a hundred guards. Only the king was as well protected.

Yet two days prior, he had nearly died.

A guard opened a door and stepped inside. He wore chain armor with a dark sash wrapped around his waist signifying his allegiance to the Gemcroft family line. His teeth were crooked, and when he talked the sight of them disgusted Maynard.

"Your daughter is here to see you."

"Send her in," Maynard said as he checked his robes and smoothed his hair. He always prided himself on his appearance, but lately he found less and less time to primp and preen. It seemed like every other night he'd awake to alarms and cries of trespassers. Come the morning, yet another guard would lie dead somewhere on the grounds.

The guard stepped out, and then in came his daughter.

"Alyssa," said Maynard as he approached with open arms. "You've returned early. Were the men in Kinamn too boring for you?"

She was short for a lady, but her slender body was supple and strong. Maynard had never seen a man best his Alyssa in any feats of dexterity, and he knew many she could out-drink as well. Her mother had been a wild one, he remembered. A shame she had slept with another man. Connington's gentle touchers had never been given a woman so fine.

Alyssa brushed a hand over her red hair cropped around her neck and interwoven with tight braids. Her fingers pulled aside her bangs and tucked them behind an ear. Her green eyes twinkled with mild amusement.

"Very much so," she said in a husky voice. "Their women preen and prattle like they've never heard of a cock, and so the men oblige by never pulling it out to teach them otherwise."

She snickered at her father's blush. In truth, she had found many men eager for her bed, but he didn't need to know that. She wanted him feeling awkward, not mortified.

"Must you use such...such...*common* language?" Maynard asked.

"You sent me to live with common women. Fosters and sitters whose entire wealth couldn't buy the privilege to clean the...filth from my bottom."

She winked at her father.

"I did so for your own safety," Maynard said. He caught her nearing the windows and put himself in the way. When he opened his mouth to explain she pressed a finger against his lips and kissed his forehead.

Servants arrived informing them that the evening meal was ready. Maynard took his daughter's hand and led her through the mansion to the extravagant dining room. Suits of armor lined the walls, holding erect lances decorated with silken flags of kings, nobles, and ancient

members of the family. Over a hundred chairs waited at the giant table, their dark wood upholstered in purple. Decorating the top were twelve roses in ruby-encrusted vases.

Twenty servants stood ready although only the two Gemcrofts would eat first. Maynard took a seat at the head of the table as Alyssa sat to his left.

“Don’t worry about the food,” the older man said. “I have everything tasted.”

“You’re the worrier, not me,” Alyssa said.

Maynard thought she might have held her tongue if she had known four tasters had died over the past three years, including one only two days ago.

The first course was steamed mushrooms smothered with gravy. Servants flitted in and out of sight, always bustling, always hurrying. Alyssa closed her eyes and sighed as she bit into one of the mushrooms.

“You have your quirks, but at least you ensure quality meals,” she said. “The Pensley’s servants seemed to think a skinned cat a delicacy. Every other meal I spent the evening pulling hair out of my teeth.”

Maynard shuddered.

“They have always been fair when dealing with me, so I felt them a safe home for you. Besides, they had a daughter your age. Please, don’t jest about such crude things while we eat.”

“Their daughter spent too much time with her ankles around her neck to be of much entertainment for me,” Alyssa said. “But you’re right. We should talk business.”

The next course arrived, an unknown meat smothered with so much gravy, sauce, and seasonings that she could barely see it underneath. The smell made her mouth water.

“Business is exhausting,” Maynard said. “And in more ways than one. I would prefer we not discuss it while we relax.”

“You would prefer we not discuss it at all. You may have sent me away as a fool, but I’ve had plenty of time to learn. How many years has this embarrassing war with the thief guilds lasted?”

“Five years,” Maynard said, frowning. “Five long years. Don’t be bitter with me for sending you away. I just wanted you safe.”

“Safe?” Alyssa said. She put down her fork, her appetite lost. “Is that what you think? You wanted me out of your way, you always have. Easier to plot murder and money when your little girl isn’t underfoot.”

“I have missed you dearly,” Maynard insisted.

“You showed it poorly,” Alyssa said. She stood and pushed her plate away. “But enough of this. I am a Gemcroft, same as you, and this pathetic conflict shames both our names. Gutter vermin and lowborn cutthroats defeating the entire wealth and power of the Trifect?”

“I would hardly say we are being defeated.”

She laughed in his face.

“We control every gold and gem mine north of the Kingstrip. They have bastards and whoresons robbing caravans and peasant workers. Connington keeps Lord Sully and the rest of the Hillock in his pocket. They have lice and fleas in theirs. And what about Keenan? Half the boats on the Thulon Ocean are his, yet I worry his sea dogs will start thinking the boats under better protection in their hands instead of his.”

“You forget your place!” Maynard said. “It is true we have much more than they, but therein lies our danger. We pay a fortune for mercenaries and guards while they bring in men off the street. We have our mansions and they have their hovels, and you tell me which is easier to hide? They are like worms. We cut off a head only to have two more grow from the parts.”

“They don’t fear you,” Alyssa said. “None of you. Spineless men, you will lose everything but what you hold in your hands, hands that shrink with each passing day. Do you know how many of your own mercenaries give a portion of their coin to the guilds?”

“And how would you know?” Maynard asked. He leaned back in his chair. His shoulders felt heavy and his arms made of stone. So many times he had heard this same argument from reckless fools. It saddened him to realize his daughter was now one of them. A bit of anger kindled in his heart. If Alyssa had such thoughts, he doubted they were originally her own. She had been out of the city for far too long to be so aware. Someone had fed her information twisted to fit their scheme.

“How I know doesn’t matter,” Alyssa said a bit too quickly.

“It is all that matters,” Maynard said. He rose from his chair and clapped for his servants. “Yoren Kull has been whispering in your ear, hasn’t he? I forbid Lord Pensley from allowing him contact with you, but where there’s walls there’s rats, isn’t that right?”

“I’ve had many fosters.” Her voice was losing a bit of her certainty. She did fine when on the offensive. Now that his eye was on her, she faltered. “And what does it matter? I stayed with Lord Kull during the winter months. His castle is closer to the ocean where it’s warm.”

“*Lord Kull?*” Maynard laughed. “He collects taxes from Riverrun. My servants live in a better home. Tell me, did he seduce you with whispers of power and a glass of wine?”

“You’re avoiding my...”

“No,” Maynard said, his voice growing stern. “You’ve been tainted with lies. We are still feared, but the guilds are feared even more. They are desperate. They kill without abandon. They have someone whispering in the ear of King Vaelor to convince him of our blame in all these matters. I have had as many men executed by the royal noose as killed by daggers in the night. Those who side with us gag on their food or have their children vanish from their bedchambers. Besides, we may have our wealth, but they have Thren Felhorn.”

He clapped again. Servants crowded around all of them. Alyssa felt uncomfortable by their presence, and then the guards arrived.

“Take her,” Maynard said.

“You can’t!” she shouted as rough hands grabbed her arms and pulled her flailing from the table.

He forced himself to watch her dragged away but refused to say a thing. There was too much chance he’d reveal his pain.

“What do you want us to do with her?” asked his keeper of the guard, a simple-minded man made useful by his muscles and sheer devotion to his work.

“Put her in one of the cells,” Maynard said as he sat at the table and picked up a fork.

“The gentle touchers would make her talk sooner,” said the guardkeeper. Maynard looked up, appalled.

“Under no circumstances,” he said. “She is my daughter. Give her time to cool underneath the stone. Once she’s ready, I can show her just how bloody this war has gotten. I should have brought her back to me, I see that now. She says she is a woman grown, and of that I have no doubt. Let us hope her cunning surpasses even my own. I will not have my wealth stolen from me by a pathetic *tax collector*.”



Aaron sat alone. The walls were bare wood. The floor had no carpet. There were no windows and only a single door, locked and barred from the outside. The silence was heavy, broken only

by his occasional cough. In the far corner was a pail full of his waste. Thankfully, he had stopped smelling it after the first day.

His new teacher had given him only one instruction: wait. He had been given a waterskin, but no food, no timetable, and worst of all, nothing to read. The boredom was far worse than his previous instructor's constant beatings and shouts. Gus the Gruff he had called himself. The other members of the guild whispered that Thren had lashed Gus twenty times after his son's training was finished. Aaron hoped his new teacher would be outright killed. Out of all his teachers over the past five years, he was starting to think he was the cruelest.

So far he didn't even know his name. He looked like a wiry old man with a gray beard curled around his neck and tied behind his head. When he led Aaron to the room, he had walked with a cane. Aaron had never minded isolation, so at first the idea of a few hours in the dark sounded rather enjoyable. He had always stayed in corners and shadows, greatly preferring to watch people talk than take part in their conversation.

Suddenly Aaron realized what was going on. He walked to the door and sat down. For a little while light had crept in underneath the frame, but then someone had stuffed a rag across it, completing the darkness. Using his slender fingers he pushed the rag back, letting in a bit of light. He had not done so earlier for fear of angering his new master. Now he couldn't care less. They wanted him to speak. They wanted him to crave conversation with others. Whoever the old man was, his father had surely hired him for that purpose.

"Let me out!" he tried to shout. The words came out as a raspy whisper, yet the volume startled him. He had meant to boom the command at the top of his lungs. Was he really so timid?

"I said let me out," he shouted, raising the volume tremendously.

The door opened. The light hurt his eyes, and during the brief blindness, his teacher slipped inside and shut the door. He held a torch in one hand and a book in the other. His smile was partially hidden behind his beard.

"Excellent," he said. "I've only had two students last longer, both with more muscle than sense." His voice was firm but grainy, and it seemed to thunder in the small dark room.

"I know what you're doing," Aaron said.

"Come now, what's that?" the old man asked. "My ears haven't been youthful for thirty years. Speak up, lad!"

"I said I know what you're doing."

The man laughed.

"Is that so? Well knowing and preventing are two different things. You may know a punch is coming, but does that mean you can stop it? Well, your father has told me of your training, so perhaps you could, yes, perhaps."

As his eyes adjusted to the torchlight, Aaron slowly backed into a corner. With the darkness gone he felt naked. His eyes flicked to the pail in the corner, and he suddenly felt embarrassed. If the old man was bothered by the smell he didn't seem to show it.

"Who are you?" Aaron asked after the silence stretched longer than a minute.

"My name is Robert Haern. At one point I was the tutor of King Edwin Vaelor, but he has since gotten older and tired of my... corrections."

"Is this my correction for not talking?" Aaron asked.

Robert looked shocked.

"Correction? Dear lord boy, no, no. I was told of your quiet nature, but that is not what your father has paid me for. This dark room is a lesson that I hope you will soon understand. You

have learned how to wield a sword and sneak through shadows. I, however, walk with a cane and make loud popping noises. So tell me, what purpose might I have with you?"

Aaron shifted his arms tighter about himself. He had no idea whether it was day or night, but the room felt cold and he had nothing but his thin clothing for warmth.

"You're to teach me," Aaron said.

"That's stating the bloody obvious. What is it I will teach you?"

He sat down in the middle of the room while still holding the torch aloft. He grunted, and true to his word his back popped when he stretched.

"I don't know," the boy said.

"A good start," Robert said. "If you don't know an answer, just say so and save everyone the embarrassment. Half-minded guesses only stall the conversation. However, you should have known the answer. I tutored a king, remember? Mind my words. You should always know the answer to every question I ask you."

"A tutor," said Aaron. "I can already read and write. What else can an old man teach me?"

Robert's smile grew in the flickering torchlight.

"There are men trying to kill you, Aaron. Did you know that?"

At first he opened his mouth to deny it but then stopped. The look in his teacher's eye suggested he think about what he said.

"Yes," he finally said. "Though I convinced myself otherwise. The Trifect want all the thief guilds dead, and I myself am a member."

"More than a member," Robert said as he put his book down and shifted the torch to his other hand. "The heir to Thren Felhorn, one of the most feared men in all of Veldaren. Some say he is the finest thief to walk the land of Dezrel."

"Is he?" Aaron asked.

"I don't know enough of such matters to have a worthwhile opinion," Robert said. "Though I know he has lived a long time, and the wealth he amassed in his younger years was legendary."

Silence came over them. Aaron looked about the room, but it was bare and covered with shadows. He felt as if his teacher waited for him to speak, but he knew not what to say. His gaze lingered on the torchlight as Robert spat to the side.

"There are many questions you should ask, though one is the most obvious and most important. Think, boy."

Aaron's eyes flitted from the torchlight to the old man.

"Who are the Trifect," he asked.

"Who is what? Speak up, I'm a flea's jump away from deaf."

"The Trifect," Aaron nearly shouted. "Who are they?"

"That is an excellent question," Robert said. "They have a saying, 'after the gods, us.' When Karak and Ashhur were banished by the goddess, the land was a devastated mess. Countries fractured, people rebelled, and pillagers marched up and down the coasts. Three wealthy men formed an alliance to protect their assets. Five hundred years ago they formed their sigil of an eagle perched on a golden branch, and they've been loyal to it ever since."

He paused and rubbed his beard. The torch switched hands.

"A question for you, boy: why do they want the thief guilds dead?"

The question was not difficult. The sigil was the answer.

"They never let go of their gold," Aaron said. "Yet we take it from them."

"Precisely," Robert said. "To be sure, they'll spend their gold, sometimes frivolously and without good reason. They never give it away willingly, not ever. They tolerated the thief guilds

for many centuries as their three families grew in power. Now they control nearly all of Neldar with their wealth. For the longest of times they viewed the guilds as a nuisance, nothing more. That changed. Tell me why, boy; that is your next question.”

This one was tougher. Aaron went over the words of his master. His memory was sharp, and at last he remembered a comment that seemed appropriate.

“My father amassed a legendary amount of wealth,” he said. He smiled, proud of figuring out the answer. “He must have taken too much from the Trifect and was no longer a nuisance.”

“He was a threat,” Robert agreed. “And he was wealthy. Worse, though, was that his prestige was uniting the other guilds. Mostly your father tempted the stronger members and brought them into his fold, but about eight years ago he started making promises, threats, bribes, and even assassinations to bring about the leaders he needed. As a united presence, he thought the Trifect would not be strong enough to bring them down.”

The old man opened his book, which turned out to not be a book at all. The inside was hollow, containing some hard cheese and dried meat. It took all of Aaron’s willpower to keep from lunging for the food. From his time with his teacher, he knew such a rash, discourteous action would be rebuked.

“Take it,” Robert said. “You have honored me well with your attention.”

Aaron didn’t need to be told twice. The old man rose to his feet and walked to the door.

“I will return,” he said. His fingers brushed over a slot in the wall too fast for Aaron to see. He heard a soft pop, and then a tiny jut of metal sprung outward. Robert slid the torch through the metal, fastening it to the wall.

“Thank you,” Aaron said, thrilled to know the torchlight would remain.

“Think on this,” Robert said. “Eight years ago, your father united the guilds. Five years ago, war broke out between them and the Trifect. What caused your father’s failure?”

The door opened, bright light flooded in, and then the old man was gone.



**T**hren was waiting for Robert not far from the door. They were inside a large and tastefully decorated home. Thren leaned against the wall, positioned so he could see both entrances to the living room.

“You told me the first session was the most important,” Thren said, his arms crossed over his chest. “How did my son perform?”

“Admirably,” Robert said. “And I do not say so out of fear. I’ve told kings their princes were brats with more snot than brains.”

“I can hurt you worse than any king,” Thren said, but his comment lacked teeth.

“You should see Vaelor’s dungeon, sometime,” Robert said. “But yes, your son was intelligent and receptive, and most importantly he held no anger for being subjected to the room’s darkness. At least, not when he found out it wasn’t a punishment. A few more torches and I’ll give him some books to read.”

“The smoke won’t kill him, will it?” Thren asked as he glanced at the door.

“There are tiny vents in the ceiling,” Robert said as he hobbled toward a chair. “I have done this a hundred times, guildmaster, so do not worry. After so long in isolation, his mind will be craving my knowledge. Hopefully when his time with me is done, he will remember this level of focus and concentration and mimic it in more chaotic environments.”

Thren pulled his hood over his face and bowed.

“You were expensive,” he said. “As the Trifect grows poorer, so do we.”

“Whether coin, gem, or food, a thief will always have something to steal.”

Thren's eyes seemed to twinkle at that.

"Well worth the coin," he said.

The guildmaster bowed, turned, and then vanished into the dark streets of Veldaren. Robert tossed his cane aside and walked without limp to the far side. He poured himself a drink. With a grunt of pleasure, he sat down and gulped down half of the liquid.

He expected more time to pass, but it seemed people had gotten more impatient as Robert grew older. Two thumps against the outside of the door were his only warning before the plainly-dressed man with only the barest hints of gray in his hair entered the living room. His simple face was marred by a scar curling from his left eye to his ear. He did his best to hide it with the hood of his cloak, but Robert had seen it many times before and knew it was there.

"Did Thren leave pleased?" the man asked as he sat down opposite Robert.

"Indeed," Robert said, letting a bit of his irritation bleed into his voice. "Though I think that pleasure would have faded had he seen the king's advisor sneaking into my home."

"I was not spotted," the man said with an indignant sniff. "Of that, I am certain."

"With Thren Felhorn you can never be certain," Robert said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Now what brings you here, Gerand Croid?"

The advisor nodded toward a door. Beyond it was the room Aaron remained within.

"He can't hear us, can he?" Gerand asked.

"Of course not. Now answer my question."

Gerand wiped a hand over his cleanly shaven face and let his tone harden.

"For a man living by the king's grace alone, you seem rather rude to his servants. Should I whisper in his ear how uncooperative you're being in this endeavor?"

"Whisper all you want," Robert said. "I am not afraid of that little whelp. He sees spooks in the shadows and jumps with every clap of thunder."

Gerand's eyes narrowed.

"Dangerous words, old man. Your life won't last much longer carrying on with such recklessness."

"My life is nearing its end whether I am reckless or not," Robert said before finishing his drink. "I whisper and plot behind Thren Felhorn's back. I may as well act like the dead man I am."

When Gerand laughed, his opinion was clear. "You put too much stock in that man's abilities. He's getting older, and he is far from the demigod the laymen whisper about when drunk. But if my presence here scares you so, then I will hurry along. Besides, my wife is waiting for me, and she promised a young red-head for us to play with to celebrate my thirtieth birthday."

Robert rolled his eyes. The boorish advisor was always bragging about his exploits, a third of which were probably true. They were Gerand's favorite stalling tactic when he wanted to linger, observe, and distract his companions. What he was stalling for, Robert didn't have a clue.

"We Haerns have no carnal interests," Robert said, rising from his chair with an exaggerated wince of pain. Gerand saw this and immediately took the cup, offering to fill it instead.

"We just pop right out of our mud fields," Robert continued. "Ever hear that slurp when your boot gets stuck and you have to force it out? That's us, making another Haern."

"Amusing," Gerand said as he handed Robert the glass. "So did you come from a nobleman's cloak, or perhaps a wise-man's discarded sock?"

“Neither,” Robert said. “Someone pissed in a gopher hole, and out I came, wet and angry. Now tell me why you’re here, or I’ll go to King Vaelor myself and let him know how displeased I am with *your* cooperation in this endeavor.”

If Gerand was upset by the threat, he clearly didn’t show it.

“Love red-heads,” he said. “You know what they say about them? Oh, of course you don’t, mud-birth and all. So feisty. But you want me to hurry, so hurry I shall. I’ve come for the boy.”

“Aaron?”

Gerand poured himself a glass of liquor and toasted the old man from the other side of the room.

“The king has decided, and I agree with his brilliant wisdom. With the boy in hand, we can force Thren to end this annoying little war of his.”

“Have you lost your senses?” asked Robert. “You want to take Aaron hostage? Thren is trying to end this war, not prolong it.”

Then the old man realized why Gerand had stalled. His eyes had swept every corner of the room, as well as peered through the doorways, his attentive ears hearing no other signs of life.

“You have troops surrounding my home,” Robert said.

“We watched Thren leave,” Gerand said. He downed his drink and licked his lips. “He was here alone, and now there are none. You can play your little game all you want, Robert, but you’re still a Haern, and lack any true understanding of matters. You say Thren doesn’t want this war of his to end. You’re wrong. He doesn’t want to lose, and therefore he won’t let it end. The Trifect won’t bow to him, not ever. This will only end when one side is dead. Veldaren can live without the thief guilds. Can we live without the food, wealth, and pleasures of the Trifect?”

“I live off mud,” Robert said. “Can you?”

He flung his cane. The flat bottom smacked through the glass and struck Gerand’s forehead. The man slumped to the floor, blood dripping from his hand. The old man rushed through the doorway as shouts came from the entrance to his home, followed by a loud crack as the door smashed open.

Robert burst into Aaron’s training room. The boy winced at the sudden invasion of light. He jumped to his feet, immediately quiet and attentive. The old man felt a bit of sadness realizing he would never have a chance to continue training such a gifted student.

“You must run,” Robert said. “The soldiers will kill you. There’s a window out back, now go!”

No hesitation. No questions. Aaron did as he was told.

The floor was cold when Robert sat down in the center. He thought about grabbing the dying torch to use as a weapon, but against armored men, it would be a laughable ploy. A burly man stepped inside as others rushed past, no doubt searching for Aaron. He held manacles in one hand and a naked sword in the other.

“Does the king request my tutelage?” Robert asked, chuckling darkly.

In answer, the soldier struck him with the butt of his sword, knocking him out cold.