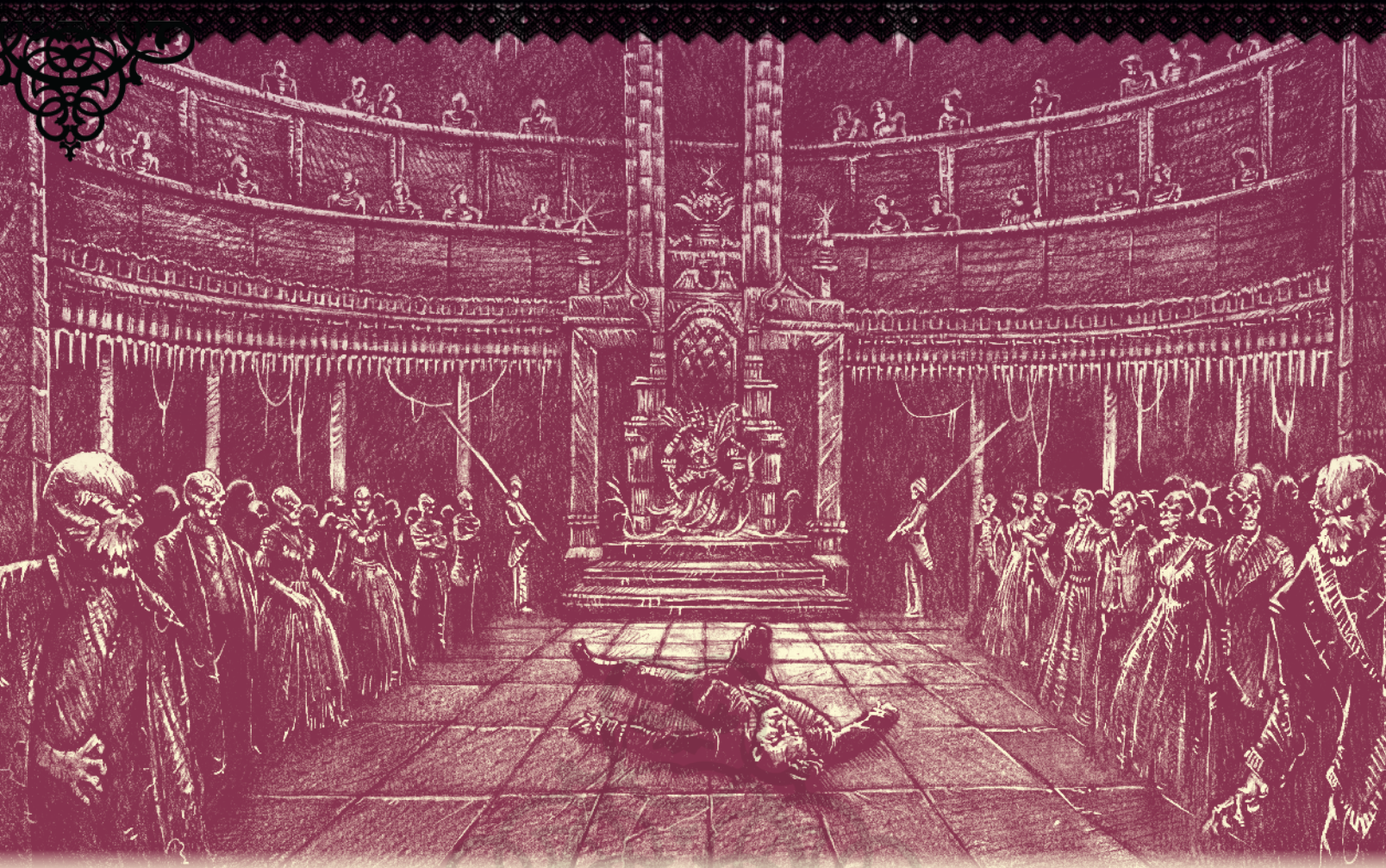


## Carion Crown



# Guilty Blood, 6 of 6

## Traitor's Blade

Ms. Kindler's command echoed through the auction hall, ringing even over the clamor of the dozens of attendees straining for a better view of the ruckus. Through the hall's double doors—opened wide to accommodate the dowager and her wheeled chair—danced the lobby's prism-filtered lights. Beyond that, streetlamps glinting through a light fog—a cloak to cover my escape, if only I could reach it.

Narrowing my eyes at Kindler, I charged toward her. Her arm was still outstretched, accusing. “Bitch,” I mouthed, exaggerating the silent word to make sure it was clear on the unfamiliar lips of Mr. Baldermol's illusory face. The tug of a suppressed smirk assured me she caught my meaning as I sped up the aisle's thick trail of red. With no time to

slow and squeeze past the old woman, I sprinted to within a yard of her and launched myself. Ms. Kindler snapped her extended arm back, a mousey squeak escaping her lips as my feet brushed the far armrest. The commotion from the hall behind me confirmed what I imagined was a ludicrous sight: Mr. Baldermol's ungainly body balling up upon itself to vault the old woman with uncanny agility.

I landed with a skid but barely lost any speed, the pillow wrapped around the infernal dagger still slung soundly under my arm, and sped on. My breath momentarily caught in my chest as something clattered heavily behind me and I heard Ms. Kindler wail. Venturing a glance I saw the old woman's contraption upset across the floor, wheels spinning impotently, with Ms. Kindler thrown headlong



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onto the thick carpet, her spindly limbs flailing with uncharacteristic helplessness. I almost halted, but was sure I hadn't struck her with enough force to unseat her so.

Then came the house guards, their chipped black batons drawn from disheveled cummerbunds. The first reached the door at a rush, the upthrust wheel of Ms. Kindler's chair catching him just above the knee, spilling him over it in an awkward tangle of ill-fitting formalwear and curse words. The next guard was right on his heels and nearly trampled Ms. Kindler, halting just in time to avoid her, but too fast to prevent one of his compatriots from crashing into his back. Both toppled to the floor, even more thoroughly jamming the door with bodies.

Suddenly no one was pursing me. I couldn't help but chuckle, shaking my head at the wily old woman's distraction. I nodded to a pair of baffled footmen minding the house doors and raced onto the street and into the night's fog.

While I'd waited for the illusion of the ringman's features to fade, I'd wound my way back to my usual haunt and stripped out of the maid's uniform and into a better-fitting change on clothes. I'd considered dallying there, relatively sure no one had followed me in the night, but the evening's excitements had put me on edge. With no idea when Ms. Kindler would be able to get home, I decided to at least check in on Lord Troidais. Before leaving, though, I discarded the pillow I'd been smuggling the stolen dagger in, slipping it into an old leather sheath. Touching the thing made my skin crawl, and I handled it like I might a snake, keeping it at arm's length, telling myself I was only imagining the sensation of my blood being tugged toward the narrow gemstone handle. The sheath wasn't a perfect fit, but it was considerably better than leaving the accursed blade exposed and risking a prick that might imprison my eternal soul.

Heading back onto the street, I started toward Rarentz's home. Halfway there, my active imagination turned on me. I started to jog, but that didn't last long. The city sped by me in a fever dream of half-formed apparitions and muffled noises, the fog off the river dense and growing thicker, as though it would smother the city should the promised dawn come one moment too late. Through my midnight run I could hear the dagger rattling at my side, clinking incessantly in its ill-fitting sheath. It almost seemed to be vibrating, tingling at my side, the vile thing agitated by the activity after so long a slumber.

The Troidais house was dark, its outline only visible by the shape it displaced in the night's fog.

I bounded up the big house's stairs and rapidly bludgeoned the door. Should Rarentz be home and asleep, this would be unforgivably discourteous. But urgency seemed to be outweighing courtesy with some regularity as of late. My first volley not having been immediately answered, I launched another barrage, not giving the door time to recover.

It cracked open with the meekest slowness, making me think for an instant that I'd knocked it loose. As though doing so took some effort, pale hands reached around the door and pulled it fully open.

Liscena Ferendri slouched in the entry of the lightless house, wrapped in a blanket like a child just unmasked while playing at being a ghost. She might as well have been one for all the noise she made and the lifeless blankness of her eyes.

My words came out in a rush, interrupted periodically as I strained to catch my breath after the run. "Liscena! Thank the Lady. Is Rarentz here?" When she didn't respond immediately, I surged on. "Rarentz? Lord Troidais? Upstairs maybe?" Her vacant stare deflected each question. "Do you know—anything? By the goddess, girl, say something!" I was trying not to be short with her. I know she'd lost much, but if what I imagined had occurred, Rarentz's time might be as short as my patience.

Still she just stared, her head lolling slightly, casting her blank gaze into the dark. I pinched my lips together until I could feel my pulse in them, resisting the urge to slap the words out of the girl. An extended sigh helped me gain some small amount of ground on my rapidly retreating composure. I put my hand firmly on Liscena's shoulder, physically but gently guiding her attention back to me.

"Liscena. I need to find Rarentz." I strove to keep my voice even and words simple. "I think he's in danger. I'm trying to stop something terrible from happening to him." I paused, hoping the idea just needed a moment to sink in. "Something like what happened to Garmand."

That last bit was a cheap shot—Liscena looked up at me immediately—but it worked. The tears that welled up in her eyes washed away the blankness. Though I hadn't wanted to make the traumatized girl cry, it was good to see there was still something of a person hiding behind that corpse's stare.

Her first attempt at words was nothing but a dry whimper, but the second was a little better, each sob given a measure of meaning. "The thing from the crypt was here. The one that got..." She halted. The lake of tears in her eyes overflowed their shores and ran in a cascade down her cheeks. As a credit to what strength was left in her, she continued on. "With men. Silent men in old, dark cloaks. They came out of the night and took him."

"Took him? Where!?" I gripped her tight, grasping for any details before she lapsed back into her stupor.

"Coronation," she breathed, the words dripping out almost as softly as her tears. "It said it wanted them all there... for its coronation."

For thousands of years, the near-legendary kings of Ustalav ruled their people from the nation's heart, the city—this city—of Ardis. And for much of that time, the regalia

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adorning the country's royal city was Stagcrown. Called a palace, the seat of the nation's rulers came from a different time, when ancient lords feared that any day barbarian hordes might surge back across their newly marked borders and their dalliances as kings might come to a bloody end. Although it had been rebuilt and renovated countless times over the centuries, Stagcrown's silhouette was still that of a frontier fortress, its spires and battlements just as ominous after courtiers and aristocrats replaced the knights and barbarians battling for its walls.

But now even those days were gone. Stagcrown stood abandoned, the nation's royal court having relocated decades ago to the city of Caliphas over the mountains to the south. Now the former throne of Ustalav stood in state, the city's rulers holding it as a monument to the nation's idealized history, ensuring its safety and preparedness for the unreciprocated promise of the court's return.

Tonight, its gates stood open once more.

That didn't make any sense. I'd witnessed Prince Lieralt pass through stone and bars. This gate should have proven no barrier. Who, then, were the prince's collaborators? After a hundred years, could the ghost still have vassals? The thought of facing Prince Lieralt again had been dreadful enough, but I'd always expected we'd share even numbers. This was a most unwelcome turn, but my curiosity about who might follow a dead prince was piqued.

I slipped through the towering black doors and into the fortress.

Within stretched a lengthy courtyard, surrounded by ancillary buildings and the wings of the palace proper, all ornamented with the cathedral-like spires, statues of horned knights, and friezes of grim cherubs popular in centuries past. Above rose the Palace Tower, one of Ustalav's most famed landmarks and a national symbol, yet also the source of a thousand legends, tales of suicidal princesses and starved captives who stalked the palace grounds on foggy nights. Nights like this. I kept to the shadows of the walls, moving swiftly to elude what I imagined watched from above, or real spectators spying from any of the palace's hundred windows.

At the yard's end, the face of the palace extended in an elaborate porte-cochère, its symmetrical pillars supporting balconies studded with statues, anonymous in the fog. Something in those shadows moved. It was nothing more than a shifting of fog and shades of black, but I was sure it was more than just nerves and mist. I crouched in the dark, several breaths passing before I saw it again. It was a window, which something had passed by. Then again. And again. Figures walking in a line, as though in some grim procession.

Once the forms seemed to have passed, I crept under the portico, slipping between pillars patterned with knights and huntsmen. Here the main entrance into the palace stood partially open as well. Had the fortress's royal former

inhabitants been hosting a midnight ball, I imagined the entry might have looked much as it did now, inviting guests to partake of the festivities within. Yet I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd forgotten my invitation. Watchful for whatever had moved, I cautiously slipped inside.

Within rose a foreboding foyer, elegant with shadows and the silhouettes of darkened masterpieces. Chandeliers sprouting the antlers of dozens of stags and hundreds of unlit candles hung lifeless in the gloom. Whoever had been invited to tonight's event apparently wasn't interested in the royal decor. Yet that they hadn't tarried here was a relief, the dusty-smelling hall almost perfectly still. All that moved was the faintest flicker of light from the ornate doors at the long chamber's end. Light that, as I watched, was snuffed to a faint slit by the door's closing.

I chased after the light, doing my best to keep my footfalls from echoing upon the dark tile floor. Listening at the cold metal of the door, I heard nothing, and knelt to peer through the gap between door and floor. I could tell the room beyond was vast, but could see little more than a few inches off the cold stone floor. But it was enough for me to see the body in the chamber's center.

Fearful that I might be looking at Rarentz's corpse, I prayed for the hall to be as empty as it appeared to be and pushed open the door to peer beyond.

Twin braziers lit the ancestral throne room of generations of Ustalavic rulers, a crypt of forsaken opulence rising intimidating and forlorn. Columns marching along the chamber's edge supported tiered galleries above the business of the audience floor. Banners and decorations that once festooned the balconies hung moth-eaten and rotting, sagging from the shadowy heights like the webs of some massive, lurking spider queen. Yet the focal point of the chamber was the throne, a majestically grim thing of silver, ebony, and oily purple silk upon a frame of deepest black marble. And the figure upon the throne was Prince Lieralt Ordranti.

He was much as I had seen him in the alley two nights past, yet like then, he seemed even more there—healed, if one can say such things of the dead. Where my first sight of him had been of a corpse riddled with wounds, those marks had faded in the days since. Now only one marred his noble form, a gash at the center of his chest. One wound. One victim remaining—Troidais.

The prince wasn't alone, though. While I had been prepared for the terror of his wandering soul, the murdered royal had somehow drawn a vestige of his long-dead court from Stagcrown's haunted stones. Seeming to fade in and out of existence, chilling vapors as insubstantial as the night's fog floated through the hall, the shades of a hundred grim courtiers and aristocrats. The costumes of an age past adorned aristocrats whose very memory had rotted away, their spectral finery draping mere skeletons.



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Fleshless ladies and lords waited in uncanny silence for the commands of their spectral prince. A chill seized me as I wondered if I were glimpsing the afterlife itself.

Yet one figure was definitely real. Rarentz, lying at the room's center, unmoving and—I hoped—only unconscious.

"This place is no longer for the living, good lady," came the prince's slow, formal words, echoing through the crowded chamber's unsettling quiet. "Leave."

I'd be lying to say that I bravely stood my ground. Truth be told, I almost obeyed. Part of me was screaming for an excuse to flee, and now the greatest terror I'd ever known bid me do just that. But another part of me, a part I'm sure will someday kill me, knew that if I fled, I'd be saving my own life at the cost of another's. I held my ground, and took what I hope looked like a deliberate step into the crowd of souls.

Swallowing hard, I prayed my words wouldn't betray my fear. "Lord Ordranti, apologies, but I can't. Not when the one you've taken is innocent."

Dozens of gazes, eyes replaced by oblivion's absolute black, turned to face me, hollow and dispassionate. All but one. The prince's eyes smoldered.

The prince raised his hands in an imperious gesture. The crowd parted and three figures in heavy cloaks dragged themselves forth. These were more solid than the room's other terrors, things with form and flesh and faces. Yet I wish they weren't, for those features were what made two of them instantly recognizable: the corpulent Lord Halboncrant and the once proud Garmand Ferendri, both now lifeless, walking corpses.

"And these?" the prince tested. "Were these innocents as well?"

"Of your murder, yes." I tried to walk the line between respect and insistence. "Your highness, you were killed more than a hundred years ago. Those who betrayed you have met their punishment in death."

The prince shook his head thoughtfully. "Did they? And what do you know of death's punishments?" He waited, baiting me to test my empty religious rote against his deathless perspective. I deferred, and he continued. "Do these, then, look like the sons of traitors? The shamed offspring of criminals punished for betraying their families' most sacred duties?"

At another gesture the corpses staggered forward, ungainly and slow, but still with some measure of the dignity they held in life, the already reeking Halboncrant still draped in his silks and gaudy jewelry.

"This land's honor is dead. I knew that in my time, and was killed for daring to free my people from the exploitations of families called noble only as a matter of tradition. I see now that Ustalav has fallen from a nation of heroes to a nation of victims. So be it, then. It is my will that all be equally victimized, starting with those most deserving of justice: traitors to the crown."

He pointed, taking in the three dead men and Rarentz upon the ground. "Should the sons of traitors continue to enjoy the privileges of their titles? Should a master keep a servant who steals from him? And by extension, should a ruler heap favor upon families who repay him with treason? Just as the greedy servant is cast out of the house, so too will the traitor lines be ended."

"But these men didn't betray you or your family," I insisted, still hoping to make him see what seemed like such an obvious point. "You're condemning innocent men."

"That justice's execution has been delayed is regrettable, but guilt taints these families' blood, and only by spilling it might it be expunged." The prince's words were those of a judge. "Had this happened in my time, the result would be no different."

I took a step before I was even sure what I was doing, my flesh bristling with a chill. I knew I wouldn't convince him, especially as he defended his murders with the skewed logic of the entitled. The assembled dead looked on in silence, siding with neither the prince nor me.

"So good people should die for their parents' sins? Are we really nothing more than our blood?" I kept talking, trying to distract him, taking another slow step.

Lieralt didn't even hesitate, "My lady, you may never know the burden of your blood, and were I you, I would pray to the goddess daily for that mercy. Yet for some of us, our blood is a chain, one that binds us to duties that perhaps we would not choose. We are but links in such chains, bound to our fathers and our sons for generations into infinities past and future. I tried to alter the responsibilities of my blood, and for that I was punished, my place in my family's chain forfeited. Yet my murderers too denied the responsibilities of their blood, and so does justice demand their families' chains be severed. That their families were given one more link than they deserved should be seen as a mercy, not a reason to deny justice."

I'd neared the base of the throne, my locked eyes and slow nods hopefully suggesting I'd been listening intently. In truth, the prince's words were distant, nearly drowned out by the sound of blood pounding in my ears. I was close enough to see through him here. That he was a thing of ether and death and not flesh and blood maybe explained his cold vision of justice.

Looking at the floor, I shook my head, trying to look defeated, at the same time calling upon whatever nerve I had left. I only expected to have one chance.

Ignoring my repulsion for the thing, I closed my hand around the dagger. The same motion that yanked it from its sheath sent it flying at the throne. The blade's gemstone hilt seemed to catch fire as it flew, looking more like the eye of some ravenous creature than ever before. When it struck, it embedded itself into the back of the throne solidly, quivering with a resounding thrum.

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Yet it thoroughly missed the prince.

In that second I knew I was dead.

Instantly Lieralt was in motion, rising from the throne, a blade materializing from the shadows.

“Can you imagine what hell it was, locked in that thing for a lifetime? Living for more years in my own corpse than in my living body?” He started slowly, even calmly, his voice growing terrible with anger until it was a resentful shout echoing through the throne room. “How could your words color me a tyrant, then your hands repeat an injustice a thousand times worse? Who are you to judge me, who should be your prince?”

He moved with such speed that I couldn't follow him. I cringed from the blow I expected to pierce straight to my soul. But it didn't fall. Swiftly I looked about the room. The

corpses, the spirits, they were all there—bar one. Prince Lieralt was nowhere to be seen.

Motion from the floor caught my attention. Rarentz. He finally seemed to be coming to. Escape suddenly seemed like a possibility. If I could get him to his feet and running, we might both be able to escape the palace, even the city, before the prince attempted to take our lives.

I rushed to his side and knelt to help him up, whispering urgently, hoping his groggy mind might understand my tone if not my words. He complied slowly, rising and taking a staggering step, still unsteady on his feet. I put an arm around his waist to steady him and he turned to look at me quizzically.

“Have you known betrayal?” came Prince Lieralt's voice from Rarentz's lips.

I gaped and staggered back, jerking my hands from the repulsive thing using Rarentz's body like a puppet. I stumbled into the rigid corpse of Garmand and tripped backward, landing on the first step of the throne.

“Have you known your vision, your life, ruined by the pettiness of the scared and weak?” The prince, or Rarentz, took a step toward me. The corpses parted to admit their master, and four dead men looked down upon me. I could feel the scream welling up in my lungs as I scrambled up the stairs until my back struck the base of the throne.

“Do you still think the traitor's dagger a suitable end?” He gestured toward the devil blade above me. “Would you exact the justice you claimed I was so unsuited to mete out?”

My mind grasped for options. With Lieralt and Rarentz sharing one body, who knew what the dagger might do? It might trap Rarentz, condemning him to a fate like the prince. Or it might trap both of them together, sealing them both away in an entirely different kind of damnation. I shook my head.

“Truly?” he said, reaching out to Garmand's corpse and drawing the dead man's own thin dagger from his belt. “But I find your idea so...” he lifted Rarentz's hand and ran the blade down the length of his forearm, drawing out the final word, “inspired.” Blood welled up from the long slash to run courses down Rarentz's arm, dripping from his elbow in a steady stream of heavy droplets.

I gasped my disgust, horrified by the sight of Rarentz's eyes, flickering between the blank dispassion of Lieralt and the panicked helplessness of one held prisoner in his own body. “Stop!” I shouted, knowing it sounded pitiful.

“How, dear lady?” he said mockingly. “How will they speak of him? How will his wretched family be remembered?” He swapped the blade between

**“Who are you to judge me, who should be your prince?”**





bloody hands. "Shall he have died in a duel from a dozen cuts?" As swift as a butcher, Lieralt sliced scores into his captive's arm.

Again I shouted, but was ignored.

"Or shall we indulge irony with an assassination?" he quipped, placing the dagger behind his back. He didn't wait for a response before gasping, "Ah, no. I have it." He put the blade to his throat. "A suicide. How the neighbors will talk." He laughed, vicious and terrible.

"Can't choose?" he taunted after a moment more. "I'll do it for you then." Placing the blade to Rarentz's temple, he pulled it across his brow and down his far cheek in a languid stroke. Again the crimson welled up and overflowed, covering Rarentz's face in a mask of blood, made all the more terrible by the prince's laugh coming from the noble's trembling lips.

Screaming, I found my feet and yanked the ruby-hilted dagger from the ancient throne, brandishing it before me in trembling hands. The prince called my sad little bluff, tilting Rarentz's neck up and moving his own blade to the lower corner of his victim's jaw.

"Know that I take no pleasure in this," he lied, smiling. "It's his duty to die."

"And it's mine to stop you," I said, lunging forward and driving the dagger into Rarentz's shoulder.

The dagger was suddenly as hot as flame, and I yanked my hands away. Its ruby hilt glowing a fearful, Hell red, it thrummed swiftly, like the pounding of a panicked heart. Rarentz's body went rigid, convulsing wildly as the screams of two men howled from the bloody wreck of his face. I could see a smoky wisp drawn along the exposed length of the blade, draining from the body and pouring into the flickering hilt. Then something snapped, the swift shriek of shearing metal, and the pounding light and shuddering body halted as if the moment had frozen, then collapsed. Rarentz fell in an awkward pile upon a floor already slick with his lifeblood, the dagger clattering from his wound to skid away.

I knelt at his side, gasping, apologizing, crying. I checked desperately for a pulse, found his heart still beating, and did my best to bind his wounds—not truly knowing whom I was trying to save.

When next I looked up, the phantasmagoria of forgotten spirits was gone, the dead men lay upon the floor as they should, and the dagger lay at the center of the throne room, pulsing a waning bloody light.

"No. You did well, dear," Ms. Kindler said, trying to disguise her lack of conviction. She still seemed to be working through the worst possibilities.

We were in our usual places back in Ms. Kindler's sitting room. I'd managed to get Rarentz here, and Ailson had been quick to send for a doctor. The old man had

just left, and to his credit had not asked how the young man had come by his wounds—he'd obviously dealt with Ms. Kindler before. He expected Rarentz to recover with several days of rest, though not without some weakness in his arms where the deepest cuts had been. The scars would never naturally heal.

Ms. Kindler had managed to resist interrogating me until the moment the door shut behind the doctor.

I leaned back on the settee and stared at the ceiling. I felt terrible, and still wasn't sure if we were nursing a monster just upstairs.

"Truly," she said, a measure more convincingly.

I huffed. My conscience wouldn't let me off that easy.

Something landed hard in my lap, jarring me back to attention. It was small book bound in black leather. I flipped through it. Every page was blank.

"Your next opus?" I needed.

"No," she said. "Yours."

I arched an eyebrow.

"It's an old Pathfinder trick," she said. "Live it, write it, share it. If you did right, people should know and learn from it. If you did wrong, others make far better judges—saves you the work and helps you move on. Best thing I ever learned from that lot of fools."

"They're really that bad?" I asked, having always been curious.

"You'd fit in just fine," she shot back without hesitation.

I looked at her, assuming she'd be smirking over her quip. She wasn't.

"Laurel."

I stepped into Ms. Kindler's darkened guest bedroom.

"Hey," I whispered in relief. "Didn't expect you to be up so fast. How are you feeling?"

Rarentz lay in bed, the covers rising shallowly but steadily. The bandages on his face and neck muffled his voice.

"Laurel?" he said again.

I came to his side and knelt down. "The doctor said you'd be out a while. Honestly, my coin was on you not coming back at all, but I've never been much of a gambler."

Rarentz rolled over in the bed, his one uncovered eye closed. He breathed a long, soft snore.

Still exhausted. I smiled and stood to leave. As I did, my eyes fell across the small writing desk. Something there was glowing, like an ember fallen upon a hearth.

"Laurel."

The dagger's light pulsed with the word, the infernal radiance illuminating the shape of the prince's dagger. This time there was no mistaking where the voice was coming from.

I moved warily toward it. "Prince Lieralt?" I whispered.

"So," the prince's spiteful voice murmured from the blade. "Now my captor has a name."