

THE
GOD
TATTOO

ALSO BY TOM LLOYD

THE STORMCALLER

BOOK ONE OF THE TWILIGHT REIGN

THE TWILIGHT HERALD

BOOK TWO OF THE TWILIGHT REIGN

THE GRAVE THIEF

BOOK THREE OF THE TWILIGHT REIGN

THE RAGGED MAN

BOOK FOUR OF THE TWILIGHT REIGN

THE DUSK WATCHMAN

BOOK FIVE OF THE TWILIGHT REIGN

TOM LLOYD



THE
GOD
TATTOO

UNTOLD TALES FROM THE
TWILIGHT REIGN



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For Fiona and Pickle

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INTRODUCTION



THE TWILIGHT REIGN was never intended to be about one person—not even a group of people. For better or worse in literary terms, I didn't just want to do a series that followed Isak's story. He was the fulcrum about which history turned and changed, but that would be meaningless without the events themselves taking centre stage. Stories are about people first and foremost; I've written that often enough in critiques of manuscripts, yet in part I've ignored my own advice. The Twilight Reign is about people and events; each shaped by the other and inextricably bound together.

Most of these stories touch upon the plot of the Twilight Reign and at very least they're part of the world the story exists in, with many of the characters and locations also appearing in the novels somewhere. Some are only referred to or had died prior to events, but when a series is on a scale such as this one there are countless stories surrounding and leading up to the overarching plot—I've just picked a few.

Several, like "Velere's Fell" or "A Man from Thistledell," influenced the course of the novels rather than the other way round, being stories I'd just wanted to get out of my head at the time. Only later did they reveal themselves as significant to the greater plot, but that's part of the pleasure found in writing a series like this. Others, like "A Man Collecting Spirits," were aspects I wanted to pursue further, and some just happened because my mind is a rather dark and random place.

You won't find many major characters from the series here, but during world-changing events it's not just a few people who're touched by them so I wanted to show some of the broader picture. I guess it's no real surprise that before *Stormcaller* had evolved into its final incarnation, three of the longest stories in this collection were already written—despite the longest concerning events at the end of *Ragged Man*. There are at least half-a-dozen ideas that I just can't get right on the page yet, so they haven't made it into the collec-

tion. One day I might have the luxury of finishing stories such as “Dead Man’s Gold,” or one of the most important to the series; the ill-fated expedition when Morghien met Rojak and Cordein Malich. Until then however they’ll just have to exist only in obscure references only I’ll be able to spot.

Don’t see this collection as required reading for fans of the novels—it isn’t. But nor is it, I believe, an attempt to squeeze extra profit out of the world of the Twilight Reign; that would have probably been the prequel trilogy covering the Great War several fans have asked for. Just for the record, it would be quite interesting to see that trilogy I suppose, but most people know how it ends and several years of my life dedicated to writing something I’d find “quite interesting” . . . well, I doubt I’ll ever be convinced.

As it is, this collection shows a flavour of my (Twilight Reign-related) thoughts over the twelve-odd years I’ve worked on the series. They’ve always been a part of the story I wanted to tell, but I didn’t ever really expect them to see the light of day. Whether or not you’ve read the series, I hope those thoughts will prove entertaining.

A BEAST IN VELVET



SOME MEN KNOW IN THEIR BONES WHAT LAW THEY SERVE, what fibre or faith determines their actions. Others are a product of circumstance; hammered into shape by the life they lead or the family they were born to. As a child I was a lawless brat—I've always held it was my profession that moulded me and few would dispute it. As an old man, consigned by a game leg to watching the Land as it passes me by, I realise the truth is more elusive than that. A single moment is sometimes enough to break such bonds.

For those who do not live in this glorious whore of a city, I was a captain in the City Watch of Narkang; that sprawling miasma of humanity forged into a nation by one man's iron will. Over the years of his reign I witnessed a rate of change and growth perhaps unequalled throughout history, moulding the city-state of my birth into the capital of a nation to rival any in the Land.

For a man of the Watch, this meant ancient enemies now lived side by side; gangs of immigrants and locals waging silent wars of conquest and survival. Gold flowed into the city and caught every man, woman and child in its deceitful grasp; birthing a thousand new crimes unheard of when I was a boy.

Without the divine mandates handed to the Seven Tribes we had only ourselves, our faith in our ruler and no more. Our laws were the product of fine minds, not scripture, while the very imposition of the law on Narkang was a yoke the people chafed under.

Growing up in the lawless time before the conquest, I gave myself body and soul to this new order for reasons more than idealism. Narkang had changed. Narkang had become better for all the simmering tensions it contained, far from the city of violence and corruption it had once been. I spent many a faithful year in the service of truth and the law, but then a day came when my world changed—the day I discovered truth was not the holy absolute I had once trusted it to be.

By the time of the following events I had found myself content with life as

never before. A wife, two daughters and a son gave me a happy home, while a collection of promotions and unfortunate demotions had seen me to my most comfortable post; fifty officers and modest diocese under my command. The politics of the city I happily left to those better suited to it, and in turn I was rarely bothered by that treacherous world. It was in this capacity that I awoke one crisp autumn morning, head fogged with wine and wife growling like a she-bear at the exuberant youth who'd barged his way past the maid who answered the kitchen door.

Crimes within my district are normally under my sole authority, but this morning I was dragged from my bed to find my horse already saddled and myself well behind events. An undiplomatic order, relayed verbatim by that dear foolish boy serving as my assistant, told me that my superiors were waiting upon my arrival.

The traders of the Kingsroad all recognised my uneasy style of gallop and called bawdy encouragement as I passed. Arriving at a warehouse close to the docks it was instantly obvious that something dismal was afoot. The building was as any other in those days; young, untreated wood made with as much haste as skill.

Though newly-built and in the flower of its youth, the building seemed to sag under the weight of its existence and the grime of the area. My men lingered silently outside under an oppressive fog of gloom, as thick in the air as opium-smoke. By contrast my journey had been through that invigorating crispness one only finds in autumn, so their manner was all the more unexpected.

I clattered to a halt and was immediately struck by a sense of guilt at violating the quiet. When Count Antern exited the building to greet me, even he seemed to wince at the sound of his own voice. As adviser to the king and member of the City Council, Antern was far my superior, but one I had met frequently in the course of city business. The Commander of the Watch reported to him in effect so Antern's presence at the scene of a crime was an ill omen, one compounded by the silk handkerchief he held to his mouth and the grip he had on his rapier hilt.

My relationship with the count was reserved. He had the attitudes and ideals that came with a long pedigree, but an intelligence worthy of respect. For his part I was a commoner no different in status to his manservant. To his credit Antern didn't dismiss me as worthless or a fool as many of his peers

did, but we would never be friends and it was a fact neither of us needed to acknowledge.

Today he was as affected by the atmosphere of this place as the rest. He gave me only a distracted nod before gesturing me inside. A yellow lace curtain that bore the establishment's ill-reputed name hung over the door. I pushed it aside and entered an opulent common room of lounging chairs and sofas surrounded by brightly coloured drapes. On the walls was a host of paintings. In the light of day and this strange mood, the images looked ridiculous and grossly crude.

The corrupting stench of opium rushed up to greet me, laced with the scents of fire-spices and rich tobacco. Two young ladies sat weeping gently with my sergeant looming over them. His expression was grave and he stood so close I wondered for a moment whether the girls were suspects or in need of protection. Both were wrapped in yellow shawls patterned by songbirds—the mark of the house—but aside from those they wore only plain shifts. Without the powder and paint of their trade I was struck by their plain and childlike faces. My daughter was older than both and the thought of her working in such a place sent a cold chill through me.

I caught my sergeant's eye, but that place had even got to my grizzled deputy. He kept his silence as I was ushered up a thin stairway off to the left.

"Word is out about this already," commented the count wearily. "Only the two who found them are still here, the others ran for the nearest tavern."

"Just what has happened?"

Trepidation had banished the last vestiges of sleep's peace and I turned to look Antern in the face. He waved me on, nudging my elbow to direct me up the stairs.

"Best you see yourself."

The closest to a warning of what awaited me was a puddle of vomit just outside the doorway to the highest room. When I raised an eyebrow at Antern I saw no trace of embarrassment on his ashen face, he merely indicated that I enter.

When I had finished bringing up my hurried breakfast, my sergeant appeared at the top of the stair. For a man who had fought on a score of battle fields, even he was reticent about re-entering that room. I shall refrain from describing it. Suffice to say that when the door had been broken down, it was clear that no simple drunk did this. I could hardly believe any man capable of such a thing.

“Do you recognise those symbols on the wall?” The count spoke to me through his handkerchief and I quickly followed his example. The stench of torn bowels was nearly overwhelming.

On the wall above the bed was some semblance of writing and a variety of arcane shapes, bloody lines painted in haste. Not anything a simple thief-taker could understand, but I noted them down all the same. The script had an arcane styling, grouped into four distinct sections and centred about a cross within a circle.

I stepped closer; observing that the centre symbol had not merely been painted on as the rest appeared. The killer had employed some sharp tool to scratch lines into the wood, numerous short straight cuts that combined to form the whole symbol. This design had then been carefully smeared with the life-blood of these fallen women. The implement had cut deep into the wood, but left a wide path. I compared it to the edge of my dagger. No knife produced such a mark.

“Three glasses.”

My sergeant indicated the table below the window with the stump of his left wrist. His practised eye drank in each inconsequential detail as he moved about the room, careful not to disturb anything. He paused over a platter of food and inspected it carefully before crouching to inspect the large stain on the rug below.

“This ain’t blood here—it’s wine,” he said, sniffing the dried red mark.

“But that is,” I replied, pointing to the congealed mess in one of the glasses.

“So we have a murderer who threw away his wine to fill the glass with blood. A person who tore these girls apart and left with the door secured from the inside. Damn.”

I opened the window. There was blood on the outside too, smeared above the lintel and towards the roof. It wasn’t a climb I’d have liked to attempt.

The room was a scene beyond anything I had ever imagined. Scarred into my memory, the horror was to plague me in the dark corners of night for years to come. The week that followed the discovery was spent in a tiring and thankless hunt for clues or witnesses—to the profit only of stern notes from my commander and the City Council. Meanwhile terror had gripped my ward and a name haunted the streets as it did my dreams.

Vampire.



Sunset on the following Prayerday found me on the balcony of the watch-house. Beside me stood my assistant, the innocent fourth son of a suzerain who was to be groomed for the office of Commander of the Watch. Brandt was good company for a man prone to melancholy. A light-hearted and spirited youth, he had served me well for two seasons by then and remained undaunted by the horror of the monster we sought. At the tender age of fourteen winters Brandt still had a lot to learn, but already had developed the unswerving loyalty that made many love him. It is a cruel irony that this devotion to duty would be the very reason he died, when over the years he had become one of the finest young man I had ever known.

My heart broke as I heard of his foolish bravery on the walls of the White Palace. So many times I had told the eager youth to leave battle to his soldier brothers, but he had stood back to back with the Lord Isak against that final ferocious breach. It is said he saved the entire city that day; certainly the king himself gave thanks at Brandt's funeral and his ashes still occupy pride of place at the temple of Nartis. His heroism, and I call it nothing less, was the inspiration of my greatest fury; the democratic decision of Brandt's watchmen to seek glory with their king on the field at Moorview. Perhaps his example went even further than that. They also suffered terrible injury, but emerged in glory.

At the time, slate roofs were still infrequent in this burgeoning part of the city. Though Narkang is now famed for its purple slate, it was predominately thatch that bore a gilt edge for those precious minutes before the ghost hour. Wrapped warm against the breeze we could see much of this side of the city and almost the entirety of our district. What we thought we might see amid the gloaming I am unsure, but there Brandt and I stood—waiting for our questions to be answered.

From that balcony I could smell the sea's salt and spices roasting in the market. I stood with my elbows upon the wooden rail, staring out into the reddening sky while Brandt rested his chin and scrutinised those below. He was a fine mimic and constantly studied the manners of others, taking great pleasure from his unseen vantage even as the shadows obscured his view.

When the whistles started to call a second act of tragedy he and I were among the first to hear the piercing calls of my officers.

“Do you think it’s happened again?” he asked me, a tremor of anxiety in his young voice.

The calls were clipped and repeated—a crime discovered and help required rather than officer in danger. The difference between the two was speed. The latter brought your comrades riding as though the creatures of the Dark Place were close behind, while in the second they would canter, eyes scanning for anyone hurrying away.

“Gods, I hope not,” murmured I, with a thought to going home. The scents on the breeze had reminded me of the dinner that would welcome me there.

“If it has, what will you say to the commander?”

“What I said last time, I suppose. I’m a thief-taker. Not a priest, not a mage, not a soldier. I understand the minds of men. Who can say how a monster thinks?”

Brandt strained his eyes in the fading light to place where he thought the choir of whistles was coming from.

“It is rather close to the whorehouse,” he ventured.

“Sure?” I asked, a cloak of doom settling about my shoulders.

The boy turned his hazel eyes up to meet my gaze and nodded. “It’s close.” His ears were sharper than my own and the evening was clear. “Nearer to us I’d guess, but close.”

With a sigh I returned to the cramped corner that served as my office, retrieving my sword, cloak and gloves before descending to the stable.

“Well, Captain, what do you make of that?”

I looked at my trusted ser geant, a gruff war veteran not much prone to displays of emotion. Now his face was thunderous, his one great fist clenched so tight the effort caused his whole body to tremble. When I peered into the room my sentiments echoed his.

“I don’t think I’ll be wanting my supper no more. Gods what a mess. If it weren’t for the symbols I’d say this was a whole new problem.”

The room was a ruin. What had probably been a family meal was now utter devastation. Whatever had been in here had torn the furniture apart in addition to, what according to the neighbours, had once been a family of four.

Those same neighbours had refused to investigate the tumult emanating from these rooms, the top floor of a building that contained three other families.

Such was the thrall fear and rumour had over the district, they had barred the doors and sat in prayer through the chaos. This had happened late at night, yet none had dared investigate until morning and only then gone to fetch the Watch. No doubt donations to the temples would again rise once word got out, something that was likely to be soon with the crowd gathering.

“Tell me what happened,” called Count Antern, as his bodyguards battered a path for himself and another man I didn’t recognise.

I was unsurprised to see Antern there so soon, he was said to be the king’s spy master after all. No doubt half the guard were in his pay. With a glance at his companion—a slender individual wearing expensively tailored clothes and an eye-patch, the shadow of his wide-brimmed hat extending down to the small point of a beard common among the city’s duellists—I began to tell what I knew.

“A family now. The same creature I assume. More of those symbols, but this time it looks like a bear went berserk in there. Only clue—a scrap of velvet snagged on a chair. You had word of those symbols yet?”

Antern had promised to enlist one of the king’s wizards to decipher the bloody writing, but no word had been forthcoming, much to my annoyance.

“A bear you say?” purred the other man, cutting Antern’s attempted reply short. “I’ve never seen one that could write before, might be a valuable creature. Still, I suppose that explains why it’s able to dress in velvet.”

My temper almost got the better of me, but Antern came to my rescue and got there first.

“This is, ah, Nimer. A man of special qualities the king feels. He is here to assist the investigation—you will extend him every courtesy.”

Only then did I notice the golden clasp that held Nimer’s cloak and marked him as a servant of the king. Unassuming in size, but a contrast against the black silk and velvet of his doublet, the bee device was the personal emblem of the king. It declared him as a bad focus for my ire for only clerks of the council and King’s Men wore the bee emblem.

From the way his hand lounged on the hilt of his longsword, I could tell which Nimer was. Clerks tended to do little that endangered their eyes, while king’s men were not expected to grow old, let alone emerge from their service unscathed.

“Very well,” was the best reply I could muster.

“Now then, Captain, what is your best guess?” Nimer asked in a clear, aristocratic tone. He was perhaps not quite as young as I had first thought, the small beard and clipped moustache belonging to a younger generation, but still I felt old by the way he looked at me.

“With the last one, a vampire. With the two sets of symbols, a sacrifice for summoning daemons. With the mess and noise he made here, no fucking idea. I don’t think the symbols are even the same, ’cept for that cross in the centre.”

Nimer gave a strange little smile and tapped his cheek with one finger in exaggerated thought. After a few seconds he looked up and stepped through the wrecked doorway, into the despoiled kitchen. Curiosity was all I saw on his face at a scene army veterans found sickening. I tried not to wonder what were these “special qualities” Antern had spoken of.

“Interestingly enough I’m informed the symbols are most commonly used in the banishing of daemons, not summoning as you had quite logically surmised. As for the cross, it looks to be an elven core rune.”

“Meaning?”

He looked up at me with the look a spider might give to a fly that had spoken out of turn.

“Runic systems are not my forte, but leave the matter with me. If it proves to be important I shall rush to inform you. Now, don’t let us keep you from your duties.”



And that was my first meeting with the man called Nimer. A man with special qualities. A man who had answers to the strangest questions, and asked even stranger ones. A man whose mind seemed to be able to shrug off all concerns and mould itself to any bent or problem he required at the time.

I have no doubt that in another life Nimer could have been an actor without peer, but his stage was a greater one. I saw him most days after that, we even ate together once or twice. I found myself truly liking the man—for all that not once did I come close to understanding his brilliantly reflective mind. Some days he deferred to me and acted as my young assistant would, on

others he adopted a regal authority that I obeyed without thought. The only consistent feature of the man was the remarkable colour of his one good eye, a pale blue glow that both bewitched and chilled.

One conversation we had during that time remains perfectly clear in my mind. Nimer had arrived at the watch-house one afternoon about a week after our first meeting. He claimed to have been just passing and called in to collect a copy of a statement. Having secured the papers he required, Nimer looked me straight in the eye and asked a most curious question.

“When I was younger I knew a man who claimed to be a native of no single place. Having lived in this city from an early age, he nevertheless claimed lineage from four separate states, and called each one home. When I asked him why, do you know what he said?”

I could think of no suitable answer and merely stared in puzzlement. Nimer’s face blossomed to life for a moment and he gave me an affectionate pat on the shoulder before turning to leave. As he approached the door, his cool mocking voice called out.

“He said, that way, no matter how successful he was in life, he would always have a cause to fight for.”

That was not the only time he bemused me, nor the only time I suspected I did not understand the full implication of his words, but it stayed in my memory as my lasting impression. That was Nimer’s way; to bewilder and puzzle those about him, and keep any answers he might have close, but always it was clear that he would have not bothered to perplex someone he lacked respect for. In themselves, I saw his games of condescension as a mark of respect and felt glad he was not my enemy.

The fact that he was a well-travelled, highly educated Narkang native—possessing a face I didn’t recognise despite glimpses of the familiar—deepened my suspicions that he was an assassin of the king’s, perhaps separate even from his elite agents, the Brotherhood. A killer of breeding who possessed a ruthlessness none of the vermin on my streets could hope to match. It was an aspect I could never quite reconcile with the countenance he shrouded himself in, but I think I could have been a friend to the man I got to know over that time.

Over the next few weeks, two more attacks occurred; connected to the others by a variety of strange symbols, scripts and the rune. Nimer spoke sparingly of them, his one eye glittering to tell me he withheld as much as he was

revealed. Instead he would expound upon irrelevant points of scholarly antiquity. He was well aware such tomes of research were not available to me and took some obscure amusement in the fact.

I say obscure because he held no notions of class that I ever heard, only those of intellect. While I could not match him there either, Nimer still gave a measure of respect for what I did possess. I did my best to ignore those clues that were beyond my scope and hoped ultimately they would prove unimportant. My belief was that if I caught this fiend, evidence would probably be either in abundance, or unnecessary.



With ten bodies on our consciences we had come no closer to stopping the horror, and the pressure was mounting on all sides. Panic reigned on our streets and riots brewed, with vigilantes already responsible for the deaths of four more men. There was also the more subtle anger over our failures, in the eyes of my friends and family as well as city officials, although of course Nimer exhibited no sign of the weight I felt bearing down. To add to our problems the last two victims were a scion of some eastern suzerainty and the son of a marshal. Obviously they had been seeking the glory of catching whatever beast we hunted, but they had instead been deprived of their heads.

Powerful families now bayed for blood with the commoners, only louder and with pointed words. Count Antern had taken it upon himself to berate me daily for our lack of progress in the name of the king, but in Nimer's company he was far more restrained—a disquieting observation considering Antern's position in the government.

The royal assassin, as I now termed him privately, had advanced a theory that for the latest two attacks, the third being the slaying of two beggars in the next district, the symbols and invocations were growing more extreme. His reasons for this were either continued failure, or a ritual to culminate later. Neither theory gave us much cheer but we had very little else.

Nimer's time with a prominent mage had proved as equally fruitful as my own surveillance and draconian hours for my officers. The rituals were impossible to decipher. "A mess of complexity" was how the mage had described

them. The consensus among his select colleagues was that an ancient and forbidden text was involved, one beyond their experience.

As for my efforts: glory hunters, the morbidly curious and a variety of religious fanatics had actually swelled the numbers walking the streets of my district. How to watch for suspicious behaviour in that collection? They suspected each other and fought, incited mobs and, on two occasions, managed to fall from rooftop vantages. Blood ran freely across the city and the frenzy of fear continued to build—while through it all, Nimer sauntered with a cold, distant interest and my officers feared to tread.

The first snows of the season arrived after another ineffective week, to find me again on the watch-house balcony, staring out over the city in late afternoon and praying for a clue. In truth I knew I was praying for another death. That tells a sad tale of desperation, but desperate we certainly were.

As I watched the soft flakes drifting slowly past my face, the morbid depths of my soul tried to see how many of the murder sites were visible from where I stood. From my high vantage I easily picked out the sharp peak of the whorehouse, and the chimney marking where that poor tailor's family had been butchered. The other two were hidden from my sight; resting on a lower plane and hidden by buildings since they had occurred in alleys that faced away from my chilly sight.

It was an almost casual observance that reminded me both the first two scenes bore windows that looked in that same opposite direction. A cold prickle of realisation and dread accompanied the thought. For a moment I felt light-headed, as though the breeze had swept up my soul and lifted it into the air before I grasped the balustrade and steadied myself. Still my knees trembled as I pictured what type of man would have an opposite view to myself.

In the distance I could see only one building of sufficient elevation; one point to see each and every mark that featured on my map downstairs. I knew there could be no coincidence—whatever skill or instinct had earned me my position over men of family connections, it strained at the bit now. I was in a saddle within twenty seconds, bellowing incoherent orders to a bewildered sergeant and galloping off so fast they had neither a clue where I was headed, nor the time to pursue.

I reached the city offices in record time, knowing I would feel the full fury from the Watch's master of horse, but determined to retain the frame of mind that had produced my revelation. The building then housed all of the admin-

istration needed to run the city and support the Public Assembly, which presided from the famous domed chamber at the heart of this place.

Of all the city's high officials, only the Commander of the Watch was not based there and the bustle and swarm around the wide stone stairway was typically chaotic. A statue of our king wearing armour and a flamboyant hat, atop a rearing warhorse, stood at the centre of the courtyard, the few yards surrounding that bronze sculpture the only part of this gravel arena that was deserted. Coaches stood on hand for the important people, an odd assortment of citizens scuttled around in all directions and I added to the problem by walking up to the huge stone stairway with my head nearly turned around on my shoulders.

Uncaring of who I collided with I barged my way up, head craned up to look out at my city over the courtyard wall and unheeding of cries and curses flying my way. To my intense irritation I found my view blocked by the pocked face of a soldier of the Kingsguard at the summit of these steps, who earned a tap around the cheek for his impertinence.

In the ensuing struggle with a pair of guards who had no better way to fill their day's duty, it was none other than Nimer who pulled them off me, his bee device sufficient to halt their interest in damaging me further.

"I hope you hold greater respect among your own men," he declared with a thin laugh. "And what brings you here? Have you any news?"

I looked deep into that inscrutable gaze for a moment while I regained my breath and was struck by a most disagreeable, but palpable, sense of suspicion.

"Ah, no. It was another matter. I've been neglecting my other duties and found a task I'd forgotten, so I wasn't in the mood for bored guards."

Nimer, as I have already mentioned, was master of his own demeanour, but I hope it is not mere vanity when I say he accepted my words with no further question.

"Can I offer you a drink before you go about business?" he asked, guiding me inside to the high corridor that ran down the side of this whole building.

To my left was the city, visible through a row of eight immense windows. The lead lining of the panes was inlaid with gold leaf so that, as one looked out, the view was framed in rich border. To the right was a blank wall of the great chamber covered with enormous tapestries. I felt unaccountably revolted by the opulence of the place all of a sudden and turned to the view instead. Hands on the sill I looked out to where I could just make out the tower of my guardhouse in the distance.

“This is where you work?”

“On occasion. I have an office down this hall,” Nimer said, joining me at the window.

“Do you still notice the view these days?”

I gestured towards the scene framed in gold. My hand was trembling at that point so I ended up pointing more with a fist than a finger as I strove to control my emotions. Without making it obvious I raised myself up a little on my toes, to better appreciate the view of a man one or two inches taller than I.

Nimer frowned. “What a curious question.”

“But do you?”

“I suppose not,” he said with a shrug, “when one is accustomed to the sight there is little need to take in the panorama daily. Are you sure you’re all right? Your colour’s decidedly odd all of a sudden.”

“Oh yes, just tired. I can see the watch-house from here—all I can think about is crawling under my desk to sleep for the rest of the shift. How about you? Now that you’re looking, what draws your eye?”

The cold blue of his eye seemed to glitter in the light. It reminded me of when he had mimicked my voice and manner for the benefit of my men, but now bereft of humour. Another wave of nausea gripped me, but I was too far gone to stop now and forced myself to look him straight in the eye.

“Well, let me see,” he said, peering past me through the increasing gloom of dusk. “Ah yes, the tavern on the far side of the Queen’s Square. If I could choose I’d soon find myself there with a jug of wine and a girl. Unfortunately, my working day appears to only be beginning. We’re due for another unfortunate occurrence, likely you’ll be sending for me later unless some humble watchman gets lucky.”

I took one further look at the city and affected a weary nod to the prospect before turning back to face the King’s Man. That drink sounded decidedly less attractive in his company, no matter that I could almost taste the brandy he usually carried in a hip flask. I muttered some excuse about waiting outside for the Commander of the Watch and he made no question of it, also eager to be elsewhere.

My legs carried me back to the guardhouse in a dazed meandering, the horse I had ridden there walking patiently by my side. A sickening whirl of emotion and confusion filled my head, with one image burned into my memory for ever.

Five locations, all sitting on a golden line that this admirable and terrifying man passed each and every day. Four places of horror, and one tavern as yet unscarred by events.



The evening passed slowly for my impatient spirit. The only man I confided my thoughts to was my trusted sergeant. He agreed that Nimer seemed to have been laying down a challenge—to pit me against his aristocratic talents. An array of faces he'd come to know these past few weeks would merely drive him away. I was also unwilling to risk my men by setting them against a killer of such breeding.

My sergeant was an old soldier who knew how to stay alive, while the rest were good watchmen who had never dealt with sober trained swordsmen. Their job was to pacify and arrest rather than kill, and Nimer would give no second chances. As for myself I confess I failed to think; through arrogance or rage I cannot say but as many would have called it idiocy as gallantry.

We made our way to a private house overlooking the square, the only reputable corner of my district. We arrived well into the ghost hour when the lamplighters had already passed. Three of the four crimes had taken place deep in the night and it was unlikely he would have rushed now. I felt certain such a man would spring surprises only once his game had started.

As we waited I found plenty of time to think about these killings and the motives behind them—trying to piece together the meagre scraps Nimer had teased me with as he supposedly reported the conclusions of others. My head was pounding by the time our generous host—a man whose friendship I had earned two years previously by bringing a nobleman to justice—arrived with a cupped candle and his cook bearing sustenance.

His anxious face, tight with anger, reminded me of my purpose and I forced myself to focus on the task at hand rather than vague questions. The house afforded us an excellent view of proceedings and we spent a long while scrutinising faces, clothes and gaits for any sign of our foe. There were none for several hours, but the Queen's Square was well lit and the choices relatively few given the recent events.

As the tavern was emptying of all but a few regular drinkers and my eyes were wilting, a furtive figure in a long hooded cloak crossed the cobbled square. His path took him past the tavern and to the adjoining building—my instincts blazed at the very sight of him. The figure bore little resemblance to Nimer at this distance, but I knew to expect a disguise and had already assumed the tavern would only have been a starting clue. Clutching at my comrade's arm in wordless excitement I indicated the doorway and rose to leave. We both carried short-swords suitable for fighting in corridors or the cramped, overhung alleys of this city, while I hoped hand-bows would even the balance between us. Though neither of us were strangers to weapons, I feared meeting any King's Man in a fair fight.

I was a man of the Watch, trained to make my eyes my greatest tools so it had not gone unnoticed that for all his silks and velvet gloves, Nimer wore a proper soldier's blade at his hip rather than some duelling accessory. Though obviously a beautiful weapon and finished with all finery, it was no fop's toy but a heavy length of steel as cold as his stare. I was resolved to use my small crossbow to wound or arrest him. Once he was winged I might have time to think about what came next, or it might give me a fighting chance at least.

We slipped out through the servant's entrance of our hide and made our way through the shadows until we had reached the adjoining building. Despite this being my district I knew almost nothing of the place and had never seen the door even open. Some said it was a gentleman's club but even the best of those tended to witness duels and other foolishness that attracted the Watch's attention, this one had seen nothing of the sort and even its name was a mystery to me. It was a large building of three storeys that extended a long way back with a recessed and reinforced front door. Whatever breed of gentlemen constituted the members, they didn't encourage visitors.

The door was ajar when I reached it. I entered cautiously one hand on the iron-ring knocker to keep it silent, and found myself in some sort of reception area. A desk faced the doorway, unmanned, while a luxurious scarlet sofa stood up against the right-hand wall and a wide staircase led up to the first floor. There was a single painting on the wall, a romanticised scene of a coastal village, but no mirrors or other adornments; just expensive oak panelling and a polished parquet floor. It did indeed seem to be some sort of private club, but a wealthier one than to be expected in my district. I knew for certain it was

not one for any of the district's main trades, no dock guild or anything of the sort, but far from the richer parts of the city where the elite passed their days.

Feeling a pang of concern for whoever normally manned the desk, I wasted no time in heading for a pair of oak doors at the foot of the staircase, recessed slightly so as to be concealed from the entrance. With my bow at the ready I crept inside, easing the door open with my sword-tip and one boot advanced to catch it being slammed back. Inside, the impression of luxury was continued; a large welcoming fire and lamps illuminating an orderly reading room, but deserted.

With no signs of disorder or violence there, I abandoned the room and headed past the staircase to the more unassuming passageway at the end of the hall, one that looked like a servants' entrance to me. It was dark, but faint light flickered from around the corner at the far end. It outlined three doorways down the right-hand wall, most likely storerooms and all latched. I crept down the passage, keeping clear of each doorway and walking as silently as I could. At the corner I eased around it, pistol-bow first, to see a half-closed doorway four yards off.

Through the gap I saw my quarry, or rather a long cloak that looked like the one I was after. As I reached the door I realised it was a kitchen as the smell of fried onions and garlic wafted out, but there was also a scuffling sound like boots brushing a stone floor. With his back to me his long cloak obscured whatever he was doing, but just as I pushed the door open he put his arm out to shake it free of the cloak. In his hand was a blood-stained dagger.

I shouted for him to stop, but no sooner than the sound had left my throat he bolted—not even pausing to look around as someone taken unawares might but darting away with sudden, surprising speed. I fired as he disappeared through a doorway on the far wall, out of surprise as much as anything, but in my haste I missed. He vanished around the corner in the next heartbeat, leaving a twitching man splayed over a long table, his exposed chest pin-cushioned with half-a-dozen ornate daggers. I felt a red mist descend over my eyes and raced to pursue the monster, charging after him into a corridor lit only by the moon shining through a far window.

Catching my shin on a low table that stood just around the corner, it was fury rather than athleticism that saw me upright to the other end—a mad violent scrabble where I careened from one wall to the other before reaching the window. My foe was already halfway out by then so I leaped blindly grabbing at anything I could.

Fingers closing around the hem of his trailing cloak, I crashed in a heap below the window. I hauled back as best I could, body braced against the wall, and felt a great lurch as the man was wrenched back. My fingers sang with pain as I took his full weight, but a moment later the clasp popped open. The cloak billowed up in the moonlight like a vengeful ghost while a crash and clatter came from the alley below. A few moments later my sergeant pounded up the corridor behind, hauling me up but I hardly noticed. In my eyes the cloak hung on the air by a taunting breeze as I dragged it towards me to grip the top end—the silvery moonlight shining down onto one the broken clasp there. The broken clasp in the shape of a bee with wings outstretched. The king's bee device; worn by all in his employ.

With a roar of anger I threw myself through the window without a thought to safety. I fell heavily, a six-foot drop on the other side, but rage eclipsed the pain in my knees as I saw a door bang shut across a small courtyard. A woman shrieked from within the room and when I staggered to the doorway she pointed with mute terror to the right-hand choice on the far side of her kitchen. This brought me to a storeroom and a brief glimpse of my prey as he half-emerged—turning as I entered and dragging the door shut after him.

I gave a wordless bellow of triumph. He had to have run himself into a corner, most likely down in a wine cellar. There'd be no exit there and he'd retraced his steps too slowly. I stopped a moment to catch my breath and cock the hand-bow I somehow had managed to retain. My short-sword I had dropped somewhere so I drew my nightstick instead. It was a poor alternative, but better than a dagger and capable of cracking the thickest of skulls.

Forgetting to wait for my sergeant I wrenched the door open. No sooner had light crept through the breach than a curved blade lashed out, but I was ready for it and deflected it into the doorframe. With the knife trapped I launched myself forward and put the boot in, in the finest traditions of the Narkang Watch.

With a strangled squawk the man crumpled over my steel-capped toe and clattered backwards. For good measure I punched him in the side of the head and smashed him back down the short flight of steps again. He hit the dusty floor hard and collapsed in a heap.

Taking no chances I fired the fresh bolt into his thigh—just in case he thought me stupid enough to have never seen a man play dead before. I was rewarded by a scream of pain and the man scabbled at the floor, crawling

weakly towards the back of the cellar in a pathetic effort to escape. I didn't follow him yet, the cellar was a small one and contained no hiding places so I was happy to let the sick bastard fear the worst. My fury turned cold and quiet as I sat on the steps, reloading my bow before fetching a lamp from the store-room. He squirmed facedown on the cellar floor, sobbing and howling in a puddle of what wasn't just blood. The more he wept the greater my contempt became—he was nothing but a coward who couldn't stand a tiny measure of the brutality he'd meted out.

Anticipating this moment all evening, I'd expected better. The measure of a man is how he acts when he's down and beaten, but this wretch was worse than a cowardly child. As I watched him wriggle through the dirt the disgust welled up inside me so powerfully I raised the bow again; bending to temptation before oaths I had sworn years before returned to haunt me. The lamp illuminated the cellar with a fair glow and my eye was inexorably drawn to the wooden pillars that supported the low roof. In the lamplight, the pillars with their diagonal supports and my black mood, I was reminded of a gallows and that was enough to stay my hand.

"Now hear me you piece of shit," I struggled to say, my throat thick with rage until I took a few more breaths. "I got eight more bolts here. If you don't explain a few things right now I'll get some more practice in—then maybe go fetch one o' your knives till you start talking."

My hand trembled at the horrors the man had inflicted, as well as the cruel disdain of his affected concern. The bile rose in my throat and I tasted blood on my lips as I bit down in an effort to stop myself pulling the trigger. Evil was the only word I could muster and nothing in my years of these streets could compete with the scenes this man had left in his wake. I needed a reason, sane or not, for the indiscriminate violence he had inflicted—my hatred demanded that, demanded I know the full pathetic and contemptible reasons that had led him to do what he'd done. After years of seeing the worst of what folk could do to each other, I still wanted to believe there might be a reason for all of this. The alternative frightened me, it still does.

He said nothing and simply lay in a broken, wretched heap as I moved closer. I felt the revulsion tighten my finger as it did my throat. My vision darkened, my rage becoming a fierce pain behind my eyes and when the moment cleared I saw his body jerk in mortal agony.

For an instant I was sure I had fired. Then my senses returned and I spun

around. The bow was smashed from my hand, bolt unspent but now forgotten. I didn't even attempt to raise my stick as a gleam appeared at my throat.

"Dear fellow, that expression is most unbecoming."

"But you—I . . ." I stammered, unable to connect my thoughts to words of any form.

"But you thought that was me?" Nimer cocked his head, sword never leaving my throat. "I'm hurt; depravity is not among my 'special talents' and if it were, you would have not caught me so easily. That man is a clerk to the City Council, just one of many and unremarkable in almost every way. Oh my friend, hundreds pass that window each day, but you only had a mind for me. Perhaps I should be touched you keep me so close to your thoughts."

He wore a wide-brimmed hat that gave his face a sinister shade, but it was nothing compared to the sudden, unnerving smile he gave me. His cold, executioner's expression blossomed into some mad, cruel humour and my skin chilled at the sight.

"You killed him," I managed to gasp. "Why? You killed my damned prisoner! Why?" My anger returned and at last I found some strength again. "You executed him before he even stood trial! For all that horror he gets a quick, clean death? He deserves to hear the whole city curse his name before he goes to the headsman, the king's justice—"

"The king's justice has been done," Nimer said sharply cutting me off, "and there will be no word of his identity ever revealed, do I make myself clear?"

"What? How dare you dictate my job to me? The Watch is the king's justice, not some sanctioned assassin . . ."

"Oh my dear Captain," came his cool, mocking voice. "I'm most appreciative of your help in this, and let me assure you your efforts will not go unrewarded," he said, holding up a hand to ward off my protestations, "but for a man of such insight you are extraordinarily naive."

To my look of bewilderment he merely laughed and sat back on the steps, sword resting against the wall within easy reach. He pulled a silver cigar case from an inside pocket and selected one, then offered the case to me. Defeated and baffled I took one of the slender cigars, all thoughts of violence evaporating from my mind.

I numbly permitted Nimer to take the lamp and light both cigars from the flame. He puffed ponderously at his, the satisfied air of a man whose onerous task was now complete, while I stared and tried to form coherent thoughts.

“If you want this kept quiet, why are we enjoying a cigar while the crowds assemble?” I asked, sinking down onto an oak casket. “Someone must have heard that woman scream, or she’s gone to fetch help. For that matter, where’s my sergeant?”

Nimer waved his cigar dismissively, leaning back with the poise of a man utterly at ease. “Oh, Coran will keep people away, I left him back there somewhere.”

“Coran? The king’s bodyguard?”

He smiled as if to a child. Offering the silver case once more, but closed this time, he showed me the engraved emblem and initials. A bee with initials inscribed on the wings. Emin Thonal—King of Narkang.

My throat closed dry. I stared first at the case, then him, then the corpse—all in a drunken haze as the world lurched treacherously beneath me. Nimer nodded at the look on my face and removed his hat, pulling off the eye patch to reveal a healthy eye as cold and arresting as its twin. He scratched at the thin beard and moustache.

“Strange how a few tweaks to one’s appearance can make all the difference, especially to people who’ve only ever seen you at a distance. I was a little concerned I might be too old to wear a silly little beard like this, but I suppose no one is likely to mock a King’s Man for affectations of youth.”

“This has happened before, hasn’t it?”

“Oh yes. Not so dramatically I’ll grant you, but my city grows so quickly and chaotically it is by far the best place for madmen to hide. People are missed less often and neighbours rarely know whom they live next to. And that is precisely why these murders were not the deed of some public servant but a vampire. One you caught and killed all alone.”

“I, I don’t understand.”

“Very well, I shall explain. I am building a nation and it grows at a rate I can barely control,” he smiled frostily, “despite my special talents. We do not have the luxury of a common heritage, only our own endeavour and unity. We cannot afford to wonder whether a killer walks amongst us, to live in fear our own kind, not when we have enemies out there who would exploit such a thing. The city is one step from revolt each and every day; this you know only too well. But when plagued by vampires, werewolves, daemons and the like, we know our enemy.

“Such creatures are rare in these parts, most of the time nothing more

than a story to keep the little ones in hand. But they are not the only monsters in this Land and it's those that are indistinguishable from men you meet every day are truly terrifying. A vampire is a banner to the population, as the Gods or the tribes of man are. You can see my busy bee waving from half the flagpoles in the city, but it is my enemies that fly the most important banner."

"What madness was this?"

"How to define madness?" his voice hardened suddenly. "The man believed he was possessed by daemons, that they drove his actions. His research into daemonology was extensive, if pursued with a less-than-scholarly instinct. Perhaps he was correct, perhaps not. Best that point be down-played."

"And the runes?"

King Emin hesitated, looking thoughtful for a moment before continuing.

"Unimportant. The reference was an obscure one to a false daemon cult that once had great power, but is now extinct. It crops up in several of the more deranged works, but has failed the test of time and research. Again, that is something you will not speak of again."

"And what if I won't keep quiet?"

"Then I will have sorely misjudged you. This clerk will be remembered as a spy, from Tor Salan or the Circle City perhaps, it doesn't matter. His memory will be reviled as you wished, just not quite for the reasons you've witnessed. What does matter is that truth is a weapon. Your job is not just to uphold the law, but also to protect this irrational and dangerous population from itself. My people's own imagination can cause them more hurt than they, or even you, could appreciate. You saw that when the vigilantes started to beat people to death. Folk need few enough reasons to panic and whenever that happens, someone gets hurt."

He reached out a hand. "So, are you with me?"

I stared numbly at the offer, knowing I was defeated. And for my sins I took it and all it implied; realising it was the truth I sought, as perverse a reason as that may seem. I had spent my life hunting transgressors, driven to put a name and reason to every crime. To illuminate the darkness for those who needed protection in my own small way.

Now I saw the truth from a king's sight—how he protects his realm, how he needs his own truth in the void he inhabits. Cloudy and shifting, there was a light to be found there, but sometimes uncovering it would only ever be a disservice to the people I served.

That has been my life ever since. Now, as I feel Death's hounds draw ever closer, I am prepared to kneel at my Last Judgement and hear His words—content in my choice for the sake of others.

It took a killer called Nimer to show me who I was. Many years later I thanked him for it. He merely smiled in that way of his.