

The Story of Powdermaw

The Last Thunder of the Blood Road

A Thirnavar Chronicle of Verrek Sovk, Powdermaw, Triumph, Death, and Kerrin's Folly

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Chapter I - Before the Blood Road

Long before anyone called him the Last Thunder of the Blood Road, Verrek Sovk had already spent most of a lifetime becoming difficult to kill. He was Deccan, a fighting man by profession and inclination, and by the time age began to settle into his joints his name had been known across the country for decades. He had money enough to stop. He had reputation enough to retire. He had offers that would have put him in comfortable rooms, teaching younger soldiers how to survive mistakes he had already made for them. He wanted none of it.

Thirty years before his death, during the final hard years of the House Wars, Sovk was still young enough that strength came from muscle rather than magic. He commanded Stormhammer fighters and earned the sort of reputation that spreads because survivors repeat it independently. At Veyr House he was hired to reopen a river road and recover warehouses trapped between rival forces. He did not become another House partisan. He broke the obstruction, forced the immediate battle to end, and left behind the saying later repeated by men who had watched him work: send ordinary troops if you need a battle; send Sovk if you need the battle to stop.

The House Wars eventually ended in the lasting peace Deccan still valued in his old age. Sovk survived them, and survival became part of the legend. Ten years later the fighting along the Aarakiel border added another layer. At the Broken Ford he recognized a trap before a larger column walked into it, used the Stormhammers to break the prepared position, then refused the pursuit that would have led into a second ambush. Officially the action solved less than ballads later claimed. Among soldiers it mattered more that he had known when not to chase victory.

Those campaigns made him nationally known. They also made retirement harder. Sovk had spent his life being the man called when plans failed. Peace left fewer such places, and age arrived whether he respected it or not. He could still think faster than younger men. His judgment was better than it had been in youth. His body was not. He hated that bargain.

Magic allowed him to cheat it for a while. A belt of giant strength made the aging mercenary physically stronger than he had been in his prime. Adamantine plate let him accept impacts that would have ruined ordinary armor. A heavy maul enchanted with lightning suited him better than ceremony ever could. He carried pistols because Deccan had learned the value of powder, but he remained a hammer man at heart. He was wealthy, famous, and increasingly unwilling to let anyone remember him as an old hero politely fading from usefulness.

He did not seek death. He sought a victory large enough that, if death came with it, no one could mistake the manner of his ending. That distinction mattered to him even if it mattered less to the people who loved him.

Chapter II - The Reach Burns

The chance came during catastrophe. The explosion at Thalasson Reach tore apart an unclaimed warehouse near the common docks and turned a working port into a disaster zone. The core blast was vast, fed by stored powder and alchemical fuel rather than divine or arcane attack. Thirteen major secondary fires followed. Drains and sewers drew air through the burning districts like bellows. More than a hundred buildings were destroyed, dozens of ships lost, hundreds killed, and the port effectively shut down for weeks while food, timber, medicine, and every other necessity backed up behind the damage.

The Houses needed investigators, engineers, guards, laborers, artificers, carpenters, healers, and anyone else capable of turning ruin back into a city. What they did not need was Verrek Sovk sitting in a

command room. He had no taste for administration and no desire to become a ceremonial symbol while younger people did dangerous work elsewhere.

Outside the Reach, the roads remained vital. Supplies had to move. The route later called the Blood Road was already infamous for predators, ambushes, bad ground, and the long memory of caravans that never arrived. During the disruption it became even more important. The Houses increased protection, established more posts, and paid heavily for reliable escorts.

One danger stood above the rest. Powdermaw had killed soldiers, servants, caravan guards, travelers, and gunners over years of attacks. A House had once hurt it badly with concentrated gunfire. The animal survived, learned from the encounter, and thereafter treated armed escorts and powder weapons as threats to remove first. By the time Sovk studied the records, Powdermaw was not merely a dangerous beast. It was a veteran predator with a history.

The bounty rose accordingly. The kill alone was worth a fortune, and the House wanted the body intact enough for mounting. The combined value of bounty and trophy payment reached the scale of a minor estate. Sovk negotiated one provision with particular care: if he killed Powdermaw and died doing it, the money still went to his family. He did not expect to need that clause. He insisted on it anyway.

Chapter III - Powdermaw

Powdermaw was a Tree Stalker, but descriptions that compared it to a wolf or bear missed the creature entirely. Tree Stalkers were long, low, canopy predators, feline only in the broadest sense and reptilian in the same unsatisfactory way. Their bodies were lean and elongated, the limbs long enough to cross broken ground in frightening bounds, the tail nearly a weapon by itself. Dark shaggy filaments and stiff bristling spines ran along neck and back, breaking the outline beneath branches. The head was broad, the mouth built for taking hold of prey that expected trees to offer safety.

Powdermaw was enormous even for its kind, roughly eighteen to twenty-two feet from head to tail, with perhaps twelve to fifteen feet of true body before the tail. Size alone did not make it exceptional. Age did. Experience did. So did the collection of wounds it had survived.

One side of the upper jaw had been ruined by old gunfire. The eye on that side was gone or useless. A shoulder carried another old injury from the same history of violent encounters. None of those wounds made the animal harmless. They made its habits asymmetric, cautious, and increasingly difficult to predict.

Earlier Tree Stalker attacks often began from above. Powdermaw had learned that men watched the branches. It adapted. By the years of the Blood Road campaign it favored hard lateral rushes from cover, striking escorts from the side, testing the edge of formations, and withdrawing before organized return fire could build. It watched gunners. It recognized powder. It learned that the loudest weapon was often the first one worth killing.

No one credited it with human reasoning. It did not need human reasoning. It possessed the intelligence of a very clever predator and the advantage of surviving long enough to refine successful behavior. A hunter who assumed an animal could not learn because it could not speak was precisely the sort of hunter Powdermaw tended to remove from the world.

That history was why the intact body mattered. The House wanted more than proof. It wanted the scarred old predator mounted publicly, not cleaned into some generic monster but preserved with the ruined jaw, dead eye, old shoulder wound, and final injuries visible. Powdermaw had become part of the road's identity. Killing it was a practical victory. Displaying it would become a political and historical one.

Chapter IV - The Hunt

Sovk signed with the House Powdermaw hated most. The decision was deliberate. The animal had survived that House's guns and had learned its colors, formations, and habits through repeated encounters. Sovk wanted to be recognized as part of the threat it already understood.

He spent somewhere between a year and a half and two years on the Blood Road. He did not ride at the head of caravans. He walked. A horse beneath him would have smelled the predator before he did and panicked at the wrong instant. On foot he could make himself the first obvious target and keep the wagons several hundred feet behind, close enough to benefit from him but far enough that their movement would not interfere with the fight he was trying to force.

His escort orders were simple and unpopular. If Powdermaw came, close the wagons, control the animals, watch for a second attacker, and do not rush forward to save Sovk unless he signaled. He did not want twenty brave men turning one ambush into a stampede.

He studied every surviving House report he could obtain. He spoke to men who had been mauled and to the companions of men who had not survived. He walked old attack sites. He examined tracks, trees, slopes, escape corridors, and the places where the predator had broken contact. He wanted to know not merely where Powdermaw attacked, but what made it decide an attack was finished.

The Blood Road gave him other lessons. Lesser Tree Stalkers still hunted there, and at least one of them tested the old mercenary before Powdermaw did. That fight taught Sovk the difference between theory and impact. Adamantine plate could prevent teeth or claws from tearing through the main plates and still leave the man inside badly hurt. An attack that would have penetrated lesser armor became crushing trauma, torn straps, damaged joints, and bruising deep enough to make breathing an argument. Armor mattered. It did not make him immortal.

The carcass from a lesser kill was valuable in its own right. Tree Stalker hide, bone, organs, and an intact skeleton had collectors waiting almost before the blood cooled. Sovk's maul was particularly useful because blunt trauma and localized lightning left much of the hide and internal anatomy recoverable. The lesser kills remained his salvage unless someone bought them. Powdermaw alone was reserved by contract for the House.

Around the middle of the campaign Sovk finally met Powdermaw and failed to hold it. The encounter was brief. He hurt the beast and discovered something his training could not change: Powdermaw was too large for the tricks that displaced ordinary opponents. The old animal withdrew. Sovk saw the ruined jaw clearly, the blind side, and the old shoulder damage. Powdermaw saw him too.

After that, the hunt became mutual. Powdermaw began avoiding the lone armored man walking ahead of caravans. Sovk refined his position, looking for ground that would force the predator to pass close enough that he could lock it in place if it attempted to retreat. Months passed. The road remained dangerous. The Reach continued burning, clearing, rebuilding, and arguing over blame. Sovk kept walking.

By the final months, both hunter and hunted knew the other's outline. Sovk had become a recurring danger in Powdermaw's territory. Powdermaw had become the only ending Sovk considered worthy of the years he had spent preparing for it.

Chapter V - The Last Thunder

The final attack came from the side, as Sovk expected. Preparation did not make the first impact gentle. Powdermaw rushed from cover with enough force to make the road itself seem too small for it, and Sovk's protective magic flared as claws and mass struck adamantine plate. The armor held where

lesser steel would have opened. The force still drove through it. Plates dented. Straps strained. Flesh beneath took the punishment the metal refused to take for him.

Sovk survived the opening seconds. That was the first victory.

He found the damaged side of the animal and committed to it. The ruined jaw and dead eye created a narrow blind quarter. The old shoulder gave him another landmark. He stepped beneath the danger rather than away from it and brought the lightning maul into that weakness with everything he had.

The strike was extraordinary. Later examination showed that the visible damage understated what happened inside. Bone and tissue around the old shoulder gave way under the blow. Internal bleeding began immediately and at a scale the animal could not survive. The lightning that followed hurt Powdermaw further, but the killing injury was the hammer strike itself.

Sovk knew it.

Powdermaw did not fall. That was the terrible part. A mortal wound is not the same thing as an immediate one, especially in something that large. Sovk drove more lightning into it at close range, but the predator remained on its feet and came for him.

He had positioned himself to prevent retreat. It never tried to retreat. The maneuver he had spent months preparing for simply did not matter. Powdermaw had decided that Sovk himself was the threat that needed to die.

The final exchange ruined them both. Claws hammered armor. The surviving side of the jaw found an articulation beside the backplate and caught him badly enough to damage the spine. Sovk kept fighting, healed himself once, and remained in front of the beast because there was nowhere else he wanted to be.

Powdermaw finally killed him.

He died before the beast did. That distinction mattered to people who later wanted the story to be cleaner. Reality was not interested. Sovk's critical blow had already decided the outcome, but Powdermaw still possessed enough life to finish the man who dealt it.

Witnesses later said Sovk smiled before the end. Not broadly. Not triumphantly. A tired expression, seen at distance, after he recognized the signs in the animal's movement and breathing. He knew the wound he had inflicted could not be survived. He knew Powdermaw would not outlive him by much. For a man who had spent years refusing to fade politely, that knowledge was enough.

Powdermaw staggered away from the road and into the trees. It did not travel two hundred paces. Internal bleeding finished what the maul had begun. Less than a minute after Sovk died, the old predator collapsed and did not rise.

Without the great hammer strike, Sovk would have died and Powdermaw would have lived. The people who understood the fight best never pretended otherwise. Preparation brought him to the moment. Skill let him use it. Luck, providence, or whatever name a witness preferred gave him the blow he needed.

Chapter VI - What Gallin Karil Saw

Gallin Karil was fifty-six when he told the account that became the version old soldiers trusted. He was a veteran caravan master, sober by temperament and offended by stories that improved themselves each time they crossed a tavern. He had watched the fight from several hundred paces away with the wagons held where Sovk had ordered them.

Karil always began by separating sight from examination. 'I will tell you what I saw,' he would say, 'and then what we found. They are not the same thing.' It was an important distinction. At distance he saw Powdermaw hit Sovk, saw the old man survive it, saw the hammer land under the ruined shoulder, saw

lightning flare, and saw the struggle continue far longer than anyone watching wanted it to continue. He saw Sovk fall. He saw Powdermaw leave the road. He did not pretend he could see internal bleeding through hide and distance.

The carcass told the rest. The hammer blow had crushed deep structures around the old shoulder and started the fatal hemorrhage. Lightning marks were localized. Powdermaw's hide remained largely intact. The ruined jaw and blind eye were old injuries. So was the shoulder weakness Sovk used. The fatal damage was new.

Karil also rejected the cleanest heroic lie: that Sovk slew Powdermaw and then died afterward. Sovk died first. Powdermaw simply had no future left in it. The animal traveled less than two hundred paces and collapsed. Men who followed cautiously found it dead soon afterward.

When Crem later heard Gallin Karil tell the story, he accepted it as the truth. He had known Sovk by the older Storm Hammer reputation and knew the kind of men who invented glory after the dangerous part was finished. Karil did not sound like one of them.

The core of his account was never that Sovk had been invincible. It was the opposite. Verrek Sovk did everything a mortal man could do, and it was still barely enough.

Chapter VII - The Trophy Hall

The House recovered both bodies. Sovk went to his family. Powdermaw went to craftsmen who understood that they were preserving history rather than merely mounting a monster.

The finished display stood in a grand public hall. Powdermaw was posed so the head turned toward the viewer, making the old injuries impossible to miss. The eye on the ruined-jaw side was destroyed. Old gunshot damage scarred the mouth and shoulder. The final crushed shoulder and localized lightning marks remained visible. Nothing about the mount suggested an unscarred beast created for spectacle. This was the same animal that had survived the road for years.

Verrek's name stood above the others on the plaque: Verrek Sovk, the Last Thunder of the Blood Road, who slew Powdermaw and died beneath its jaws. Beneath it were names of House soldiers, gunners, servants, caravan guards, and travelers killed by the predator over the years. The trophy was victory, memorial, and accusation all at once.

The display survived longer than the circumstances that created it. The road itself improved. Bridges replaced dangerous crossings. Patrol posts multiplied. Grading and widening made travel less murderous. Eventually Blood Road became an old, almost insulting name for a route that had acquired a cleaner official title.

Powdermaw remained. Decades later the mounted animal still told visitors what the road had once been, and Sovk's name remained tied to the older world in which a caravan could disappear because one intelligent predator had learned how men defended themselves.

The House offered Sovk's family fair market value for his equipment so that the maul, armor, belt, and other famous pieces could stand beside Powdermaw. The family refused. Later the House particularly wanted the lightning maul. The answer remained no.

The equipment had returned home. That should have been the end of it.

Chapter VIII - The Belt Comes Home

The belt was the most dangerous piece of that inheritance for reasons that had nothing to do with curses. It was simply too valuable, too useful, and too famous. Worn beneath armor it had let an aging man possess the strength of a fire giant. Even without Sovk's history it was worth well over a hundred thousand gold pieces. With the history attached, collectors could argue themselves into ruin.

At the funeral it was displayed in the family trophy room. Many Deccan officials, House staff, guards, family retainers, and respected guests saw it. No foreign collectors attended, but the fact that the belt had returned home became common knowledge among people who cared about Sovk's equipment.

After the funeral the family moved it. They did not tell the House where. When investigators later asked, the answer was simple: it is safe. The family would say nothing more, and after what followed few officials pressed them hard.

Someone came for it anyway.

The intruder entered the estate competently enough. The failure was not getting in. It was intelligence. He had learned where the belt had been displayed, assumed it remained there, and discovered too late that funeral information was stale. Rather than leave, he searched.

A staff member surprised him and was struck unconscious, suffering a serious concussion but surviving. A House guard confronted him afterward. The intruder killed the guard with one committed thrust from a broad, rigid magical blade. The entry wound was nearly three inches across; the point passed through ribs, lung, and heart and left a much smaller wound at the back. The weapon was not a useful national clue. It was an adventurer's acquisition, not a heritage blade, and could have been carried by anyone who had won, bought, or found it during a career.

The belt was never taken. The intruder fled with nothing except the consequences.

The House offered five thousand gold pieces and a mark of honor for information leading to identification and recovery of property connected to the attack. Investigators kept several identifying details of the belt private to defeat false claims and counterfeits. They checked brokers, artificers, fences, smugglers, inquiries about giant strength, and everyone who had shown unusual interest in Sovk's equipment.

What they did not find became important. No wealthy commissioner. No paid lookout. No bribed servant. No obvious fence preparing for a famous artifact. No crew scattering under pressure. The burglary looked increasingly like the work of one capable man who had mistaken field experience for criminal expertise and then fled when his bad plan turned into murder. His name was Kerrin Van Holt.

Chapter IX - Kerrin's Folly: The Confession

Kerrin Van Holt came through the door hard enough to make Dorrik look up from the half-disassembled lock spread across the table.

Kerrin was a Mithrin human, broad through the shoulders and built like a man who had spent most of his adult life settling dangerous problems with weapons. Old scars marked him in several places, some plainly visible and others hidden beneath clothes and armor, the accumulated record of a long adventuring career. He had begun life with considerably less: a street urchin who learned early how to palm a key, lift a purse, slip through a window, and

recognize when running was wiser than fighting. Years of mercenary work and adventuring had made him formidable, well equipped, and prosperous. They had not made him kinder.

It was not the hour that caught Dorrik's attention. Kerrin had kept stranger hours than this, and in a port city there was nothing remarkable about a man returning after midnight. It was the way he shut the door behind him. He put his shoulder against it, threw the bolt, checked it, then stood listening for several heartbeats with his head turned toward the street.

Dorrik Kallio watched him in silence.

The Kadathe' dwarf sat behind a table that looked more like a craftsman's bench than anything belonging in rented lodgings. Dorrik was a mountain dwarf, compact and powerfully made even by the standards of his people, but the most remarkable things about him were his hands. Thick-fingered and callused, they could nevertheless manipulate a lock spring or tiny pin with exquisite precision. He was a guild locksmith by trade and a burglar when circumstances, commissions, or his own judgment made that distinction negotiable. He understood locks because he built them, understood buildings because he had entered them, and took a craftsman's pride in doing both properly. Tonight a small brass mechanism lay opened before him on folded cloth, every piece arranged in careful order.

Across the room, Shalara had been bent over sheets of calculations weighted at the corners with cups, a brass compass, and one of Mara's spare iron wedges.

There was no mistaking Shalara for anyone else in the port.

She was a centaur, her humanoid torso rising from the powerful four-legged body of her people, and even in the cosmopolitan Reach she attracted attention wherever she went. She had learned to tolerate that with varying degrees of patience. A traveling wizard, astronomer, and field scholar, Shalara had crossed countries because certain observations of the heavens did not agree with what she believed they should be. The recovering Reach had drawn her for the same reason it had begun drawing other scholars: catastrophe had torn open old places, displaced archives, exposed foundations, and made information accessible that had lain buried beneath ordinary life.

She had spent the better part of the evening comparing observations taken from the waterfront with a set she had made farther east, muttering occasionally about angles and atmospheric distortion. She raised her head when Kerrin entered, ears shifting forward before the rest of her expression changed.

Mara Tesk sat near the little stove with one boot off and her stockinged foot stretched toward the heat.

Mara was Deccan, a human woman in her late thirties with the heavy shoulders and strong hands of someone who had spent most of her life moving timber, climbing scaffolds, and working around ships. She was a shipwright, not an adventurer by profession, though militia duty, dock violence, and a few genuinely dangerous incidents had taught her how to fight when necessary. An old slashing scar ran along the outside of one upper arm toward the

shoulder, a reminder of one such incident that she rarely bothered explaining. She had a husband, three children, steady work in the yards, and a life rooted deeply enough in the Reach that leaving it had never been an abstract proposition.

She had spent eleven hours at the yard that day and smelled faintly of pitch, fresh-cut timber, and the harbor. She had stopped by because Shalara had another question about local metalworkers and because Dorrik had acquired a bottle he claimed was worth drinking. Her husband expected her home before the children woke.

Until Kerrin entered, the most serious problem in the room had been whether one of Shalara's measurements was wrong or whether the southern stars were doing something they ought not to be doing.

Kerrin said, "Get your things."

Nobody moved.

Dorrik's eyes dropped automatically to Kerrin's hands, then his boots, then the hem of his coat. It was an old habit and one Kerrin usually mocked. Tonight he did not.

There was blood on the right boot.

Not much.

A streak along the leather and another darker smear across the cuff of his trousers.

Dorrik looked back up. "Whose?"

Kerrin ignored him and crossed to the corner where he had left the rest of his equipment. He dragged out his armor and began fastening it over the padded coat.

Mara pulled her bare foot back from the stove. "What are you doing?"

"We're leaving."

Shalara slowly straightened. "Leaving where?"

"Doesn't matter."

That answer made all three of them still.

Kerrin frightened easily in only one sense: when he believed a threat was real, fear became action. He had survived the streets that way long before he learned to fight properly, and the habit had never left him. Panic in Kerrin rarely looked like panic. It looked like weapons checked, armor buckled, exits measured, and somebody else being told to move faster.

Dorrik set down the lockpick.

"Kerrin."

"Pack."

“No.”

Kerrin looked at him.

Dorrik nodded toward the blood. “Whose?”

For the first time Kerrin hesitated.

Mara saw it too. She pulled her boot back on without taking her eyes off him. “What happened?”

Kerrin fastened another buckle. “A job went bad.”

Dorrik’s expression changed immediately. “What job?”

Kerrin did not answer.

Dorrik stared at him for a moment, then sat back in his chair. “You were working tonight?”

“I said it went bad.”

“You did not say you were working.”

“It wasn’t something I needed help with.”

That offended Dorrik before it frightened him. “Then why are you here telling me to run?”

Shalara folded one sheet of calculations carefully over another and moved them out of the way. “Perhaps it would be useful if you explained what has happened before ordering everyone to abandon the city.”

Kerrin gave her an irritated glance. “There isn’t time.”

Mara stood.

“Then make time.”

Kerrin stopped with his sword belt in his hands.

He looked from Mara to Dorrik, then to Shalara.

None of them moved toward their belongings.

He had expected them to.

That realization irritated him almost immediately.

“I went after Sovk’s belt.”

The room became silent.

Dorrik blinked once.

Shalara's ears went fully forward.

Mara simply stared at him.

Kerrin continued because none of them said anything. "The fire giant belt. The one they had displayed after the funeral."

Dorrik's mouth opened.

Nothing came out.

Kerrin mistook that for confusion.

"The family moved it."

Dorrik slowly rose from his chair.

"You went after Verrek Sovk's belt."

"Yes."

"Tonight."

"Yes."

"By yourself."

"Yes."

Dorrik stared at him long enough that Kerrin's face began to harden.

"Where did you think it was?"

"In the trophy room."

"How did you know?"

"I saw it."

"When?"

Kerrin said nothing.

Dorrik's eyes narrowed.

"When, Kerrin?"

"At the funeral."

Mara closed her eyes.

Shalara looked down at her carefully stacked papers as though perhaps they contained an answer to what she had just heard.

Dorrik gave a little breath through his nose.

“The funeral.”

“They displayed it there.”

“Yes.”

“So I went there.”

“Yes.”

“They moved it.”

“Yes, Kerrin. I understand the sequence.”

Kerrin’s jaw tightened. “Then stop repeating it.”

Dorrik stepped away from the table. “I am repeating it because I am trying very hard to discover whether I misunderstood you. You saw one of the most famous magical items in Deccan displayed publicly at a funeral and concluded it would remain in the same room.”

“It was a trophy room.”

“It was a funeral.”

Kerrin’s voice rose. “I got inside.”

Dorrik’s rose with it. “You think that is the achievement?”

“It proves I could do it.”

“No. It proves you can enter a building. The achievement was knowing where the thing worth more than most men earn in ten lifetimes actually was.”

Mara looked between them. “How much is that belt worth?”

Dorrik did not take his eyes off Kerrin. “More than a hundred thousand.”

Mara stared.

Shalara said softly, “Oh.”

Kerrin flicked one hand. “Which is why I went after it.”

Dorrik turned on him. “No. That is why you verify where it is before climbing through somebody’s damned window.”

Kerrin fastened the sword belt around his waist. The weapon hanging from it was no street thief’s knife but a fine magical sword acquired during his career, broad enough at the base for a powerful thrust and valuable enough that Kerrin treated abandoning it as nearly unthinkable.

“It could have been nearby.”

Dorrik stopped.

Mara saw the change in his face and felt the fear in her stomach deepen.

“What do you mean, nearby?”

Kerrin looked at them.

“I searched.”

Dorrik stared.

“How long?” Mara asked.

Kerrin shrugged. “Several minutes.”

Dorrik turned away, took three steps, stopped, and pressed both hands against the top of his head.

Kerrin watched him. “I was already inside.”

Dorrik spun back. “That is when you leave.”

“Why?”

For one extraordinary instant Dorrik looked genuinely unable to answer because the question was so absurd.

Then the words came.

“Because the target was gone. Your information was wrong. From that instant forward every assumption you made about the job was suspect.”

Kerrin started to speak.

Dorrik talked over him.

“You do not become an investigator inside the house you are burgling. You do not start opening doors because perhaps the family thoughtfully moved a hundred-thousand-gold-piece artifact into the next cupboard. You leave.”

Kerrin frowned. “I had time.”

Dorrik’s eyes moved deliberately to the blood on Kerrin’s boot.

“Apparently not.”

Mara followed his gaze. “Whose blood?”

Kerrin reached down and tightened a strap that did not need tightening.

“There was someone inside. Staff. He surprised me.”

Dorrik’s face went still. “What happened?”

“I put him down.”

“Dead?”

“No.”

Mara breathed out.

Dorrik did not.

“How?”

“Hit him.”

“With what?”

“My hand.”

“Where?”

“Head.”

“How hard?”

Kerrin’s irritation sharpened. “He’ll wake up.”

Dorrik closed his eyes for a moment. “All right.”

Mara did not look reassured. “You knocked a servant unconscious inside Sovk’s house.”

“He saw me.”

Then Kerrin said, “It doesn’t matter. There was a guard.”

Mara became very still.

Shalara did not move at all.

Dorrik stared at Kerrin.

The room seemed suddenly aware of the street outside. Wheels rattled somewhere beyond the wall. A sailor shouted in the distance. Someone laughed. The harbor smelled of salt, tar, smoke, old fish, and wet timber, all of it pressing through the shutters with the ordinary indifference of a city that did not yet know what had happened.

Dorrik asked, “What happened to the guard?”

Kerrin picked up his pack.

“He caught me leaving.”

“What happened?”

“He drew.”

Dorrik’s face had gone pale beneath his beard.

“What happened?”

Kerrin looked at him.

“He’s dead.”

Mara sat down.

It happened without decision. One moment she was standing; the next the chair caught the backs of her knees and she lowered herself onto it because her body had apparently decided she required support.

Shalara whispered something in a language none of the others knew.

Dorrik simply looked at Kerrin.

Kerrin had expected anger.

He had expected Dorrik to swear. Mara to ask whether he had been followed. Shalara perhaps to object in that precise scholarly manner she used when everyone else was discussing violence as though it were weather.

He had not expected this.

The silence felt almost accusing.

“I didn’t have a choice.”

Dorrik spoke first.

“You had nothing but choices.”

“He was armed.”

“You were robbing the house.”

“He blocked the door.”

“You were robbing the house.”

“He came at me.”

“You were robbing the house.”

Kerrin’s face tightened. “I heard you.”

“No. You haven’t. The guard was the situation. You get caught stealing, you put down the weapon.”

Kerrin gave a short, incredulous laugh. “You would.”

“Yes.”

“You would surrender.”

“Yes.”

“To a House.”

“Yes.”

“For theft.”

“Yes.”

“They’d ruin you.”

“Possibly.”

“Prison.”

“Yes.”

“Your guild could strip you.”

“Possibly.”

“You’d lose everything.”

Dorrik’s face twisted.

“And I would still have my neck.”

That silenced Kerrin.

Dorrik’s voice trembled now, not with fear but anger so deep it had begun to shake him.

“I have broken into houses. I have opened locks I had no legal right to open. I have taken property that did not belong to me. I have been chased over roofs. I have had watchmen put blades in my face. Do you know what I do when the job is gone and a man doing his duty has me cornered?”

Kerrin said nothing.

“I surrender.”

“You don’t know what he would have done.”

“I know what you did.”

“He was going to raise the alarm.”

“Yes!”

The word cracked through the room.

“That is what guards do.”

Dorrik struck his own chest with one fist.

“You get caught, you lose. That is the risk. You do not get to kill a man because you resent the fact that he noticed you committing the crime.”

Kerrin’s face had gone cold.

“I wasn’t getting hanged for burglary.”

Dorrik stared at him.

Then something in his anger collapsed into disbelief again.

“No.”

His voice was almost gentle.

“No, Kerrin. You weren’t.”

He looked at the blood on Kerrin’s boot.

“You are now.”

Mara covered her mouth.

Shalara’s eyes closed for a long moment.

Kerrin stared at Dorrik.

The dwarf’s expression had changed entirely. The professional anger was still there—the insult to his craft, the appalling lack of preparation, the childish assumption that being able to pick a lock made somebody a burglar—but beneath it was something worse.

Grief.

“You damned fool.”

Kerrin’s eyes narrowed.

“You damned, stupid fool.”

“Watch yourself.”

“No.”

Dorrik shook his head.

“No, I won’t. I’ve known you too long for that.”

He pointed at Kerrin’s sword.

“You killed yourself tonight.”

Kerrin took one step forward.

Mara stood immediately.

The movement was automatic. Years of dockside violence, militia work, and protecting people from men who thought anger entitled them to space had trained it into her. She did not draw a weapon. She merely placed herself where Kerrin would have to acknowledge her.

“Enough.”

Kerrin looked at her.

Mara’s face was pale now.

Not frightened for herself.

Frightened in the way a parent becomes frightened when danger stops being abstract and acquires a road leading directly home.

“You said we need to leave.”

“Yes.”

“Why we?”

Kerrin blinked.

“You know me.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

“You came here with me.”

Dorrik stared.

Shalara’s head turned slowly toward him.

Mara said, “I met you here.”

“You’ve been with us for weeks.”

“I live here.”

“We’re associated.”

Mara's face hardened.

"That is your reason?"

"They'll ask questions."

"They might."

"So we leave."

Mara laughed once.

It was bitter.

"My husband is asleep."

Kerrin said nothing.

"My children are asleep."

"Mara—"

"My eldest is twelve."

"We can take them."

She stared at him.

The words seemed to offend her more than anything he had said yet.

"We."

Kerrin heard it too late.

Mara stepped closer.

"You have decided that my husband leaves his work, my children leave their home, I leave my yard, my contracts, my family and every person I have known for half my life because you saw a belt at a funeral and decided you were a burglar?"

Kerrin's expression darkened. "I am trying to keep you safe."

"You came here."

"What?"

"You came here after killing him."

Kerrin said nothing.

Mara pointed at the floor between them.

"You brought it here."

“I needed to warn you.”

“You needed us.”

Kerrin’s jaw clenched.

“You needed Dorrik because he knows how to disappear. You needed Shalara because she has magic. You needed me because I know the port.”

“That’s not—”

“Yes, it is.”

Mara’s voice broke for the first time, then hardened again.

“You did not come here to protect us. You came because you expected us to help.”

Kerrin looked at Dorrik.

That was the mistake.

Dorrik saw it.

Years together passed between them in that look.

Roads. Ruins. Cheap rooms. Half-paid contracts. Nights spent taking turns awake because something outside the firelight was breathing. Dorrik had repaired buckles on Kerrin’s armor. Kerrin had once carried Dorrik miles after a bad fall left the dwarf unable to walk. They had cheated merchants together, fought together, laughed together, lied for one another.

Kerrin expected those years to mean something.

They did.

Just not what he thought.

“Dorrik.”

The dwarf’s face tightened.

“Tell them.”

“Tell them what?”

“You know me.”

Dorrik’s eyes filled with something close to pity.

“That is the problem.”

Kerrin stared at him.

Dorrik walked to the table and poured the drink he had abandoned earlier. His hand trembled enough that some splashed across the wood. He looked at it, swore under his breath, then drank the entire cup in one swallow.

When he turned back, his anger had become deliberate.

“You want to know what I know?”

Kerrin said nothing.

“I know you grew up stealing because otherwise you didn’t eat. I know you learned to lift purses before you learned to shave. I know you can get through a second-floor window without making enough noise to wake a dog. I know you think because you can palm a key and open a simple lock you understand what I do.”

Kerrin’s mouth tightened.

“You don’t.”

Dorrik stepped toward him again.

“I know you are brave when bravery helps and vicious when viciousness helps and sometimes you cannot tell those apart.”

Mara watched Kerrin’s hand.

It had moved slightly toward his sword.

Not enough to draw.

Enough that she noticed.

Shalara noticed too.

The centaur had said almost nothing.

That frightened Mara in an entirely different way.

Shalara’s arguments normally arrived in paragraphs. She explained. She qualified. She corrected herself halfway through a sentence when a more accurate word occurred to her. She could spend ten minutes explaining why a simple question had been incorrectly phrased.

Now she simply watched Kerrin.

Her hands were empty.

Mara knew enough about wizards to understand that this meant nothing.

Dorrik continued.

“And I know that if I had been in that room tonight, the guard would still be alive.”

Kerrin's voice dropped.

"You would be in chains."

"Yes."

"Maybe for years."

"Yes."

"And you call that better?"

Dorrik looked at him as though the answer were obvious.

"Yes."

Kerrin shook his head.

"You're a coward."

Mara inhaled sharply.

Dorrik did not.

He looked almost relieved.

There it was.

Something simple enough to answer.

"Maybe."

Kerrin seemed surprised.

Dorrik shrugged.

"If being afraid of a rope makes me a coward, then yes. I am terrified of being hanged."

He stepped close enough that Kerrin could have struck him without moving his feet.

"I am also terrified of becoming the sort of man who kills somebody because he caught me doing something I knew was wrong."

Kerrin's eyes hardened.

"He attacked me."

"And there it is again."

Dorrik shook his head.

"You keep saying that because you think if you repeat it enough the room changes around you."

Shalara finally spoke.

“It does not.”

Everyone looked at her.

The centaur’s voice was soft, but there was nothing uncertain in it.

Kerrin turned. “You weren’t there.”

“No.”

“Then you don’t know what happened.”

“I know what you have told us.”

“That’s not enough.”

“It is enough for this.”

Shalara gestured around the room.

“You attempted to steal an object you had not established was still present. When it was absent, you remained inside searching. You were discovered by a member of the household and rendered that person unconscious. You were then confronted by a guard and killed him rather than surrender.”

Kerrin gave an irritated shake of his head.

“You make it sound—”

“Like what?”

He stopped.

Shalara’s eyes remained on him.

“Which statement was inaccurate?”

Kerrin said nothing.

Shalara waited.

He looked away first.

Her ears shifted backward.

“I came to Deccan because observations made here might explain an astronomical discrepancy I have spent years studying.”

Kerrin frowned as though the statement were irrelevant.

Shalara continued.

"I crossed countries for that. I spent months traveling. I have letters I have not yet delivered, measurements I have not yet taken, archives I have not yet seen, and people I have not yet spoken to."

"You can come back."

"No."

"You don't know that."

"I know I will not flee a country as an accomplice to a murder I learned about minutes ago."

"I didn't ask you to kill him."

"No."

"I didn't ask any of you."

"No."

"Then you're not accomplices."

"Not yet."

That struck harder than shouting would have.

Dorrik looked at her.

Mara did too.

Shalara glanced between them.

"If we help him escape after knowing what he has done, the distinction becomes less comfortable."

Kerrin's face changed.

Dorrik closed his eyes.

Mara whispered a curse.

Shalara's voice remained calm.

"I am not making a legal determination. I do not know Deccan law well enough. I am describing the obvious."

Kerrin said, "So what? You turn me in?"

Nobody answered.

For the first time since entering, he looked genuinely uncertain.

Not frightened.

Wounded.

The difference was subtle and ugly.

He had expected outrage. He had expected arguments. He had expected Dorrik, eventually, to curse him and start making a plan. He had expected Mara to complain about her family and then help because that was what people did when someone they knew was in danger. He had expected Shalara to object morally but be practical.

Instead, the room seemed to have shifted around him.

He was standing among people he knew, yet somehow outside them.

Mara looked at Dorrik.

Dorrik looked at Shalara.

Shalara looked at Kerrin.

Nobody wanted to say the next thing.

Dorrik finally did.

“We decide now.”

Kerrin seized on it. “Good.”

Dorrik held up a hand.

“No. Listen.”

Kerrin’s expression darkened again.

Dorrik looked at Mara first, then Shalara, then Kerrin.

“If anybody here intends to go to the House, say it now.”

Mara stared at him.

Shalara’s expression tightened.

Kerrin became utterly still.

Dorrik continued before anyone could misunderstand him.

“I am not asking because I want to stop you.”

Kerrin’s head snapped toward him.

Dorrik ignored it.

“I am asking because there is no middle after this.”

Mara looked toward the shuttered window.

Dorrik continued.

“If you are going to report him, do it because you mean to do it. If you are not, then understand that tomorrow morning, when somebody asks questions and you choose not to answer everything you know, that is another choice.”

Shalara nodded slowly.

Mara looked sick.

Kerrin said, “You’re talking like I’m already convicted.”

Dorrik turned on him.

“A dead House guard is lying in the Sovk estate.”

The dwarf’s voice cracked.

“You think they are going to shrug?”

Kerrin did not answer.

Dorrik stepped closer.

“You didn’t steal from a drunk in an alley. You didn’t crack some merchant’s warehouse. You went into the home of one of the most famous dead men in Deccan, looking for one of the most famous pieces of equipment in the country, and left a House guard dead on the floor.”

Each phrase landed harder.

“The House is going to investigate.”

Kerrin’s face tightened.

“They are going to investigate properly.”

Dorrik pointed at him.

“And that is the part you still do not understand.”

Kerrin said nothing.

“You think killing the guard removed a witness.”

Dorrik shook his head.

“No.”

His anger had burned down into something cold.

“You made them look harder.”

The words settled over the room.

Outside, another wagon passed.

Farther away, a harbor bell sounded.

Mara looked toward the door as though she expected someone to strike it at any moment.

Shalara's gaze drifted toward Kerrin's sword.

Dorrik saw that too.

"Did you use that?"

Kerrin looked down.

His hand rested near the hilt.

Dorrik's face changed.

"Kerrin."

"What?"

"Did you kill the guard with that sword?"

"Yes."

Dorrik shut his eyes.

Mara swore.

Shalara stared at the weapon.

Kerrin looked between them. "What?"

Dorrik opened his eyes.

"You kept it."

"It's mine."

"You killed a House guard with it."

"And?"

"And you are wearing it."

"It's worth more than everything in this room."

Dorrik gave a broken little laugh.

There was something almost unbearable in it.

“Of course it is.”

Kerrin bristled.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means of course you kept the sword.”

“It’s magical.”

“Yes.”

“I earned it.”

“Yes.”

“I’m not throwing it into the harbor.”

“No.”

Dorrik rubbed both hands across his face.

“No, Kerrin. Of course you aren’t.”

The dwarf lowered his hands and looked at the man he had known for years.

The anger remained.

So did the disgust.

But beneath both was the terrible dawning recognition that Kerrin might genuinely be incapable of understanding why everybody in the room was reacting as they were.

The belt had been valuable.

Therefore stealing it had made sense.

The guard had threatened him.

Therefore killing him had made sense.

The sword was valuable.

Therefore keeping it made sense.

His friends were useful.

Therefore they should help him.

Each decision could be explained.

Placed together they formed a catastrophe.

Mara broke the silence.

“I am going home.”

Kerrin turned.

“No.”

The word came too quickly.

Mara froze.

Dorrik straightened.

Shalara’s head lifted.

Kerrin seemed to hear himself only after he had spoken.

Mara’s face hardened.

“What did you say?”

“I mean wait.”

“That is not what you said.”

“You can’t just walk out.”

“Watch me.”

“Mara.”

“My children are asleep.”

“I know.”

“My husband is asleep.”

“I know.”

“And I am going home.”

“If they see you leave here—”

“Who?”

Kerrin stopped.

Mara stepped toward him.

“Who is watching?”

“I don’t know.”

“Were you followed?”

“No.”

“You know that?”

“I checked.”

“Did you see anyone?”

“No.”

“Then you don’t know.”

Dorrik glanced at her.

That was exactly what he would have said.

Mara continued.

“You came here because you were frightened.”

Kerrin’s face reddened.

“I am not frightened.”

“You put on armor in a locked room while telling everyone else to abandon the city.”

Mara pointed at him.

“You are terrified.”

Kerrin took a step toward her.

Mara did not move.

Dorrik shifted toward the side of the room.

Shalara said nothing.

Again.

That silence entered Kerrin’s awareness.

He looked toward her.

The centaur was watching him with complete attention now.

Not arguing.

Not pleading.

Watching.

Kerrin’s hand drifted unconsciously toward the sword.

Dorrik saw it.

“Don’t.”

Kerrin looked at him.

“Don’t what?”

“Touch the sword.”

Kerrin’s face went hard.

“You think I’m going to draw on you?”

“I think tonight has already answered questions about what you are willing to do when you feel trapped.”

That hurt.

Kerrin’s expression changed before he could hide it.

“You think I’d hurt you?”

Dorrik stared at him.

“I didn’t think you would kill a guard either.”

Nobody moved.

The words seemed to remove the last bit of ordinary air from the room.

Kerrin looked from Dorrik to Mara and finally to Shalara.

For the first time, perhaps, he understood that they were afraid of him.

Not because he was the strongest fighter among them.

They had known that yesterday.

They were afraid because they no longer knew where his line was.

Kerrin opened his hand and deliberately moved it away from the sword.

“Fine.”

Dorrik exhaled.

Mara did not.

Shalara’s posture eased by almost nothing.

Kerrin looked at all three.

“So that’s it?”

Nobody answered.

“I come in here and tell you the truth, and suddenly I’m the enemy.”

Mara’s face twisted.

“You killed someone.”

“I told you what happened.”

“You killed someone.”

“He would have killed me.”

“You do not know that.”

“He had a weapon.”

“He was a guard!”

Mara’s voice rose enough that all of them glanced instinctively toward the walls.

She immediately lowered it.

“You were in the house he was guarding.”

Kerrin shook his head.

“So I should have let him take me.”

“Yes.”

The answer came from three voices.

Mara.

Dorrik.

Shalara.

At once.

The silence afterward was absolute.

Kerrin stared at them.

That, more than anything else, seemed to break something.

He had expected disagreement.

He had expected Dorrik at least.

Instead, all three people in the room had answered without hesitation.

Yes.

You should have surrendered.

Kerrin laughed softly.

There was no humor in it.

“You would all rather see me in chains.”

Dorrik shook his head.

“No.”

Kerrin looked at him.

“I would rather have visited you in prison.”

That landed.

Dorrik’s voice softened.

“I would have brought you food. Complained about the walk. Told you every time that you were a bloody idiot. I would have helped when you got out.”

Kerrin said nothing.

“I cannot help you get unhanged.”

For a moment even Mara looked away.

Kerrin’s eyes remained on Dorrik.

Something old and complicated moved through his expression.

Then pride smothered it.

“They haven’t caught me.”

“No.”

“They don’t know who I am.”

“Maybe not.”

“So I leave.”

Dorrik nodded.

“You probably should.”

Kerrin looked toward Mara.

She held his gaze.

“You are not coming.”

“No.”

“Shalara?”

“No.”

His jaw tightened.

“Dorrik.”

The dwarf stared at him for a long moment.

“No.”

Kerrin seemed unable to believe it.

“We’ve been together for years.”

“Yes.”

“I’ve saved your life.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve saved mine.”

“Yes.”

“And this means nothing?”

Dorrik’s face went tight.

“It means enough that I am standing here trying to stop you from making the next mistake.”

Kerrin looked toward the door.

Nobody stopped him.

That seemed almost as insulting as everything else.

He slung the pack across one shoulder.

Mara stepped aside, giving him a clear path.

Shalara remained where she was.

Dorrik watched him.

Kerrin put his hand on the bolt.

Dorrik said, “If you see an agent, surrender.”

Kerrin froze.

The dwarf continued.

“I mean it.”

Kerrin turned his head.

“If they stop you, put your hands where they can see them.”

“You think I’m stupid.”

Dorrik’s expression crumpled briefly into anger again.

“Yes.”

Kerrin stared.

Dorrik pointed at him.

“Tonight? Yes.”

Kerrin’s face hardened.

“You get stopped, you surrender. You do not run. You do not draw. You do not decide you can take them because you are stronger. You do not kill another person trying to get away from the first one.”

Kerrin’s voice went cold.

“I know how to survive.”

Dorrik looked at the blood on his boot.

“No.”

Kerrin opened the door.

For an instant the sounds of the port came flooding into the room.

Voices.

Wheels.

Water against pilings.

Somewhere farther down the street, laughter.

Ordinary life.

Kerrin stepped through.

Dorrik spoke one last time.

“Kerrin.”

He looked back.

Dorrik’s anger was gone now.

Only exhaustion remained.

“You should have surrendered.”

Kerrin stared at him.

Then he shut the door.

The bolt could not be thrown from the outside.

For several seconds nobody inside moved.

Mara was the first to breathe properly again.

Then she said, very quietly,

“I’m going home.”

This time nobody told her no.

Chapter X Half a Minute

Mara stood still for perhaps two breaths after the door closed, then reached for her coat. She meant to go home. She opened the door and saw Kerrin almost immediately. He had not made it blocks away. He was still on the same run of street, scarcely half a minute from the room.

Two men in long House coats stood ahead. One approached Kerrin without drawing a weapon. There was no shouted accusation and no charge. It looked like an ordinary stop. 'Sir, hold a moment.' The nearer agent put one hand on Kerrin's shoulder.

Kerrin turned and drew in the same motion. The first cut struck before the agent's hand had fallen away. The second followed almost immediately. Mara screamed Kerrin's name. Inside, Dorrik heard her. Shalara did too. A chair went over as Dorrik lunged for the door.

Half a minute. That was all the distance Kerrin had managed to put between himself and the people who had begged him not to make the next mistake.

Chapter XI The Port Street

The port did not go silent. It was too busy and too accustomed to noise. Wagons still rolled, dock crews still shouted, taverns still opened and closed. Then the nearest people saw the House coat darken with blood and the street changed in pieces.

Someone shouted 'House!' and that word moved faster than the others. People threw themselves behind barrels, wagons, stone stoops, market stalls, and doorways. A horse shied hard enough to nearly overturn its driver. Those farther away ran. Those closer often dropped where they stood.

The first agent tried to bring his registrar gun around. Kerrin struck again and the man collapsed beside a wagon wheel. Kerrin tore the weapon free. Mara was already running toward them, shouting for him to stop.

Kerrin brought the stolen registrar gun up and pulled both triggers. One barrel hit the surviving agent. The other went wide and smashed timber behind him. Kerrin was not a gunman; he knew enough to point two loaded barrels at a nearby enemy and trust volume more than skill. The gun was empty as soon as he fired it.

The surviving agent answered. Kerrin dropped the useless weapon, drew his sword, closed, and hit the man twice, almost killing him before the agent could recover. Then the agent fired both barrels of his own registrar gun at close range.

One of the shots hit Kerrin low. His right leg nearly folded. Blood began pouring through the cloth and into his boot. The wound was immediately wrong: arterial, fast, and impossible to hide. Every step would leave a trail.

Kerrin stayed upright. The agent threw a rapid volley of force into him and still he came on. The crowd made a sound between a scream and disbelief. The agent used the empty registrar gun as a club, smashed Kerrin's wrist, and knocked the sword from his hand. A second blow and a kick drove the blade out of reach.

Dorrik was close enough now to see the blood pumping from Kerrin's leg. His anger vanished. Mara had dropped beside Regin Zaul, the first agent, pressing both hands against his wounds and shouting at a dockworker to help. Shalara emerged behind Dorrik and saw Kerrin still trying to continue the fight.

She chose control rather than another attack. Her spell caught Kerrin and slowed him brutally. His injured leg became dead weight and his movements lagged behind intention. He twisted toward her. 'Shalara!' She held the spell. 'Drop it!' 'No.'

The final struggle began almost immediately. A registrar gun lay between Kerrin and the surviving agent. Kerrin reached it first despite the slowing magic. Both men seized the weapon. Kerrin was stronger even wounded, but strength no longer arrived at full speed. The barrels turned toward the agent's chest for one terrible instant.

The agent shifted first. He rolled his grip, tore the gun free, stumbled backward, and fired. The first shot stopped Kerrin. The second dropped him. The registrar gun fell from the agent's hands a moment later as he collapsed against the nearest wagon wheel.

For an instant the street seemed unable to believe the fight had ended. Then everyone moved at once.

Chapter XII Thirty Seconds

Mara was already on her knees beside Regin Zaul. She shouted for help until a dockworker finally broke from the crowd and knelt beside her. She seized his hands and placed them where pressure mattered. Between them they managed to slow the bleeding. Regin never woke during those minutes, but his breathing steadied enough that Mara knew he was not slipping away.

Dorrik reached Kerrin last. He dropped beside him so hard his knees struck stone. The leg was worse up close. Blood surged through his fingers when he clamped both hands over the wound. 'Kit!' he shouted. No one moved. 'MEDICAL KIT!' Someone finally shoved one forward.

Dorrik tore it open, packed the wound, wrapped it, pressed harder, and watched the bandages turn red almost immediately. There was no healer in the street. No priest arrived. No paladin came running from a nearby doorway. The port shouted for all of them and produced none in time.

For a few seconds pressure held. Then a few more. Kerrin opened his eyes. Dorrik told him not to speak. A stranger knelt beside them and helped brace the leg while Dorrik fed more cloth into a wound cloth could not truly close.

Kerrin lived far longer than the injury promised. Nearly half a minute passed in six-second scraps of hope. The bandages soaked through, were reinforced, and soaked through again. His skin lost color. His breathing slowed in the wrong way.

Mara glanced over from Regin and understood. She could not leave the agent she was keeping alive. Dorrik knew that. She knew he knew. Neither said anything.

Kerrin swallowed and managed one final concern. 'Don't... let them take... the sword.' Dorrik stared at him. Of course. The magical blade lay several yards away where it had been knocked from his hand. Dorrik almost laughed. Instead his voice cracked. 'Shut up, Kerrin.'

The next surge overwhelmed the packing. Blood forced through Dorrik's hands. Kerrin's chest rose once, fell, and did not rise again. Dorrik checked for a pulse, then checked again. He kept pressure on the wound for several seconds after he already knew, because he did not want to be the first person to stop trying.

At last he sat back, red to the wrists. Kerrin Van Holt had survived streets, ruins, monsters, ambushes, bad contracts, and roads that had killed better people. He died in a Deccan street because one night he refused to accept that being caught meant losing.

Dorrik looked down at him. 'You damned fool.' There was no anger left in it. Only grief.

Chapter XIII Under Scrutiny

By sunrise the blood had been washed from the street, though not completely. The Reach had become practiced at cleaning up after disaster. Buckets, stiff brushes, sand, replacement timber, and officials measuring damage appeared before the night's witnesses had finished giving their first statements.

Mara, Dorrik, and Shalara were separated and questioned under scrutiny. The same questions returned in different forms. Times shifted. Names came back out of order. Truth tests made deliberate deception harder. Their stories held because they were telling the truth.

Mara had known nothing until Kerrin returned. She had refused to flee. Witnesses saw her run toward Regin Zaul, not Kerrin. A dockworker could describe exactly how she placed his hands over the agent's wounds and told him where to press. Regin survived because the two of them acted quickly.

By late morning Mara was released. Her family had been worried sick. Her husband met her outside looking years older than he had the previous evening. She went home, returned to the shipyard when she could, and discovered that the Reach had already invented several versions of the fight in which she had done much more dramatic things than she remembered doing.

Dorrik received longer scrutiny. He was a foreign locksmith and an excellent one, a man who understood locks, entry, stealth, and burglary far better than Kerrin had. That made him look interesting on paper. The truth tests established that he had never known the burglary existed until Kerrin confessed after it failed.

An examiner eventually asked how Dorrik would have planned the theft if it had been his job. Dorrik refused at first, then surrendered to irritation. He would have confirmed the belt was still in the building, learned the household's habits, prepared exits, and left immediately if the target was absent. 'That was the entire damned problem,' he said.

The House did not charge him. It did, however, politely ask that he conduct future business somewhere other than the recovering Reach. Dorrik accepted with enthusiasm. Deccan had given him enough experience for one visit.

Shalara's interrogation failed in a different direction. The examiners had little difficulty establishing that she was not lying. The difficulty was getting her to stop explaining.

She reconstructed the room, the confession, the moment Kerrin's behavior became threatening, and the street fight with irritating precision. She had not known about the theft. She had not agreed to help him escape. In the room she had been unwilling to provoke an armed, unstable killer while Mara and Dorrik were within immediate reach of his sword. In the street the circumstances changed: Kerrin was actively trying to kill another badly wounded agent, civilians were close, and she possessed a way to hinder him without blasting everyone around him.

'I slowed him,' she explained. 'In my judgment it worked.' When asked whether that was intended to help the agents, she answered, 'It was intended to stop Kerrin. In that situation those were the same thing.'

When another examiner circled back toward the possibility that she had been recruited for the burglary, Shalara finally stared at him in disbelief. 'I am a centaur. In a foreign port. A centaur wizard. Precisely how do you imagine I was intended to assist unnoticed in a residential burglary?'

Her actual reason for being in Deccan was independently verifiable. She was an astronomer and scholar. The recovering Reach, with districts torn open, foundations exposed, archives displaced, harbor lines resurveyed, and old records dragged into temporary repositories, had become a magnet not only for engineers and artificers but for researchers. Disaster had opened doors that ordinary life kept shut.

Once the examination ended, Shalara asked whether she was under arrest. She was not. Was she prohibited from leaving Deccan? She was not. Then she wished to leave. Permission was not necessary, but she appreciated hearing that there would be no objection.

Chapter XIV - Roads Apart

Mara Tesk stayed in the Reach. There had never truly been anywhere else she meant to go. Her husband was there. Her children were there. Her work was there, along with the yards, timber stacks, half-rebuilt quays, and endless damaged vessels arriving faster than anyone could repair them.

For a while people recognized her as the shipwright who had saved a House agent during the Van Holt affair. Mara disliked the attention and corrected the exaggerated versions when she had patience. Eventually the story became one more thing the port remembered less clearly than the people who had lived it.

Years passed. Her children grew. The Reach rebuilt around her. Mara never saw Dorrik Kallio or Shalara again.

Shalara went north into Aarakiel and from there onward to Dracart. In the courts of Darsti she found generations of astronomical observation, old calendars, inherited charts, celestial records, and fragments of history copied from sources that no longer existed. For a scholar who had crossed the world because measurements did not agree, it was a treasure hoard.

She stayed. Kerrin became a painful memory rather than a defining one. Occasionally a date, a notation, or a sudden argument about the movement of a star returned her to gun smoke and a Deccan street. Then she would close the book for a while. Eventually she opened it again. There was always another question.

Dorrik left differently. He collected his tools, paid what he owed, finished the small locksmith job he had already promised, and departed openly after the House requested it.

After that, records became uncertain. No dwarf named Dorrik Kallio of Kadamthe' appeared where one might reasonably have expected him. No guild notice announced his arrival. No familiar locksmith's mark began turning up on later commissions. There were dwarven locksmiths, Kadamthe' dwarves, and traveling craftsmen with excellent hands and suspiciously good knowledge of locks. None admitted to being Dorrik Kallio.

Perhaps he went home. Perhaps he crossed a border and decided that one terrible night had taught him the value of becoming someone less easily found. Perhaps Dorrik Kallio had never been the first name he used.

Nobody in the Reach learned the answer. At least, no dwarf named Dorrik from Kadamthe' was ever seen again. Not by that name.

The Reach went on rebuilding. Powdermaw remained mounted in the House hall. Verrek Sovk remained on the plaque above the names of the dead. His belt remained somewhere his family refused to name. And one foolish attempt to steal it became a small, ugly footnote to a much larger story: the last triumph of a man who had spent his life refusing to fade, and the strange consequences that continued after both hero and monster were gone.

Appendix - The Known Record of Powdermaw

Nature and Scale

Powdermaw was a Huge Tree Stalker, a lean elongated canopy apex predator rather than a wolf - or bear-shaped beast. Canon length is roughly eighteen to twenty-two feet including the tail, with roughly twelve to fifteen feet of true body. It had long limbs, a long tail, a broad predatory mouth, dark shaggy or bristling filaments, and a low-slung feline-reptilian outline.

Intelligence and Behavior

Its intelligence was animal but unusually high for a predator, roughly comparable to a clever hunting beast capable of learning from repeated encounters. It adapted away from common vertical leaps and increasingly favored lateral strikes from cover. It watched escorts, learned to target gunners and powder weapons, studied escape routes and weak edges, and historically withdrew after short overwhelming attacks rather than remaining in prolonged combat.

Old Injuries

Powdermaw survived point-blank heavy gunfire from a Deccan House before Sovk's final campaign. One side of the upper jaw was ruined. The eye on that side was blind or destroyed. It also carried an old shoulder injury. These wounds remained visible in the final mounted specimen.

Blood Road History

Powdermaw killed House soldiers, gunners, servants, caravan guards, and travelers over years. Its bounty ultimately exceeded fifty thousand gold pieces, with additional payment for recovery of an intact body suitable for taxidermy. The House reserved Powdermaw's carcass by contract; lesser Tree Stalker kills remained Sovk's property unless purchased.

Sovk Campaign

Verrek Sovk spent roughly sixteen to eighteen months, perhaps as much as two years, working the Blood Road during the Reach Incident. He walked on foot ahead of caravans rather than riding. Wagons followed at significant distance. Escorts were ordered to protect wagons, control animals, watch for additional threats, and avoid rushing into Sovk's fight unless signaled. He studied House records, survivors, tracks, anatomy, terrain, side attacks, and Powdermaw's withdrawal habits.

Earlier Contact

Sovk killed at least one lesser Tree Stalker during the campaign and used those encounters to refine tactics. In an earlier true Powdermaw contact he struck the animal but learned that it was too large for displacement and trip methods useful against smaller foes. Powdermaw withdrew and thereafter recognized and sometimes avoided him.

Final Fight

In the last fight Sovk survived the initial side rush, then landed an extraordinary lightning-maul strike into the blind-side/old-shoulder weakness. Later examination showed that the blow created fatal internal bleeding. A close lightning attack further injured Powdermaw but was not the true killing wound. Powdermaw refused to run, so Sovk's prepared movement-locking tactic never mattered. It continued fighting, mortally wounded Sovk, and killed him before succumbing to the internal injury less than two hundred paces into the trees and less than a minute later.

Interpretation

The canonical account treats Sovk's victory as extraordinary rather than inevitable. Without the decisive maul injury he would have died and Powdermaw would have survived. Preparation put him in position, but luck, divine favor, or an exceptional moment was still required.

Carcass and Memorial

The body remained unusually good for taxidermy because the fatal injury was internal blunt trauma and the lightning damage was localized rather than broadly destructive. The mounted Powdermaw became a public memorial. Verrek Sovk's name stands prominently above the names of others killed by the beast. The display endured for decades and later became a historical marker of the dangerous preimprovement Blood Road era after the route was widened, stabilized, bridged, and more heavily patrolled.

Gallin Karil

Gallin Karil, a respected fifty-six-year-old caravan master, is the authoritative sober witness. He always distinguished what he personally saw from what was learned during examination of the carcass. His account became the factual version accepted by those who knew Sovk and distrusted embellished tavern retellings.