

PROLOGUE
THE WARLOCK'S SHADOW

Kasmin didn't see the three men come into the tavern but he knew they were there almost at once. There was a subtle stutter in the mood of the place, a difference in tone, conversations falling quiet, tankards pausing for a moment as heads turned. Strangers. He didn't get strangers very often. The press of dark narrow streets and alleys that was The Maze had made an unfriendly name for itself, one it mostly deserved. The inside of the Barrow of Beer was a safe enough place to be – it was Kasmin's place and he had a reputation to keep – but the outside was a wholly different matter.

He tried not to look but he couldn't resist. Three men had come in together. He couldn't make out much through the press of his regulars but they had an air to them, the sort that said they were used to trouble. They didn't look like they were local, either. Not city folk. Most likely they were sailors up from the docks, although the Barrow of Beer was closer to the market side of the Maze and not many sailors made it this far. The taverns and the Moongrass dens and the brothels and the muggers and the press gangs saw to that.

The three of them settled into a corner near the door, crowding tightly onto wooden stools around a tiny table. An unspoken accommodation was reached and the mood in the Barrow sighed and relaxed back to its usual loudness. Three men who were used to trouble, but they weren't

looking for it here and that was all that mattered. Kasmin finished what he was doing, wiping empty tankards and poured a couple more. Most of the men in here passed as friends, people who'd been coming to the Barrow for years. They were his family, his safe place. He took comfort from that. Strangers made him uneasy. He hadn't always kept a tavern.

That done, he did what was expected of him and wandered across the floor, easing himself between the knots of drinkers until he reached the three strangers by the door.

'Evening, gentlemen ...'

His words froze in his mouth. He'd never seen two of them before, but the third ... the third he knew all right. It was a face ten years older than when he'd seen it last, but there was no mistake. If Kasmin had had a sword with him, there would have been a fight, right there and then, and one of them would have been dead.

But he didn't have a sword and the three men had knives. Long curved knives, a sort he knew all too well. They were looking at him blankly, wondering what was wrong with him. The man he wanted to kill didn't remember him!

'Ale or wine?' he asked brusquely.

The man he wanted to kill spat on the floor. 'Wine.'

The voice. He remembered that voice, too. Shouting out orders across the deck of a ship and swearing murder over a narrow gap of sea. Kasmin had sworn something back, something about revenge.

'Wine.' He gave them a curt nod and pushed his way back to the other end of the tavern, almost stumbling in his own house. There was a fury inside him now, a rage he hadn't felt for – how long had the Emperor sat on the throne of Varr? Eleven years now? That long and a couple of years more. A killing rage. His hands were shaking. Men who'd known him for years were looking at him, brows furrowed.

‘You all right, Kas?’

He shook them away and steadied himself, then took a bottle of wine and three cups from a shelf. He looked at the secret place where he kept his own long curved knife, exactly like the ones the three men had on their hips. He hadn’t used it, not in anger, not for the same number of years since he’d felt this fury, but he still knew how. Straight into the neck of one of them, into the face of the second . . .

And then the third man, the one with his back to the wall, the one sat in the corner with the table in front of him, the one Kasmin *really* wanted to kill, he’d be on his feet by then, blade drawn and ready for a fight. It wouldn’t take much to go wrong for Kasmin to be the one who came off worse from that.

His eyes left the knife. He took a deep breath. There were other ways. Syannis – he’d have to tell Syannis. *Then* there would be blood, no two ways about it. Syannis would come like a hurricane and carve them into pieces.

He wormed his way back to their table and put the cups and the bottle down in front of them. ‘Half a crown.’

The man he wanted to kill tipped a handful of pennies out of his purse. Kasmin counted them. Too many. He left a couple behind. The man was watching him, peering at him, looking too hard for comfort.

‘Better be good, this,’ he grunted. ‘Came here special, we did. You must be right friendly with that weird old fellow down by the river. Said this was the best place in the Maze for a drink. Don’t look it.’

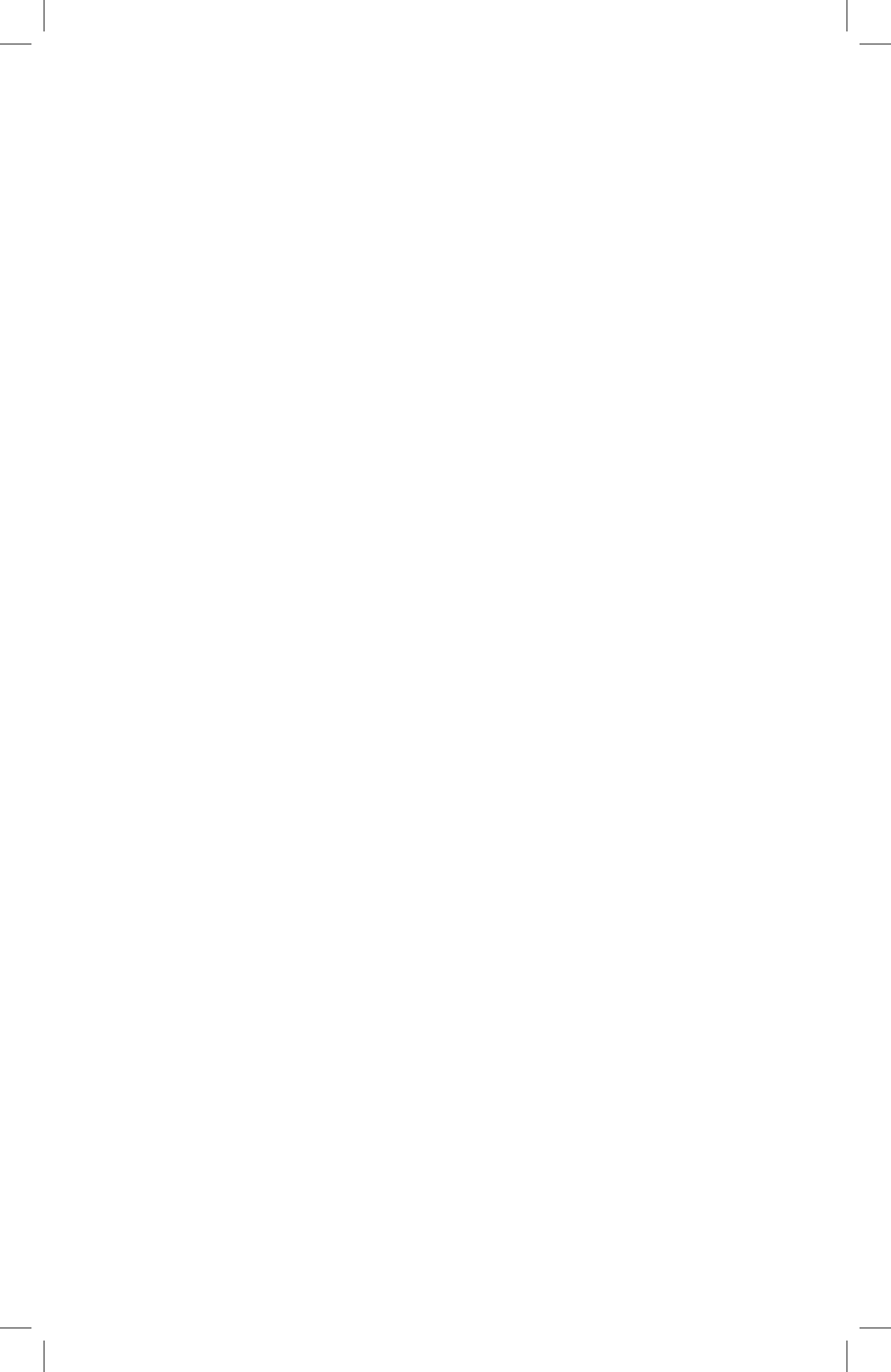
Kasmin shrugged. He took his pennies and backed away. So the witch-doctor had sent them here. Saffran Kuy, another refugee from a kingdom that didn’t exist any more. Syannis and Kuy, the thief-taker who hadn’t always been a thief-taker, the witch-doctor who hadn’t always been a witch-doctor. And him, the tavern-keeper who’d once been a soldier. They’d all come here because it was far, far away,

because they had no home and nowhere was safe any more, and it was all thanks to one man. Radek of Kalda.

And here, sitting in the corner of Kasmin's tavern was the Headsman. One of Radek's lieutenants. The one Kasmin hated the most.

✧ PART ONE ✧

A PRINCE'S GIFT



KELM'S TEETH

Deephaven! Great northern port of the Empire, young and vibrant and alive with a wild frantic energy! While cities like Varr slipped into decadence with a fatal resignation, Deephaven ran out to embrace it and offer up its heart. Here anything was possible, here north met south, all that was Aria collided with all that was not; it was a place where swords and lives and even kingdoms were bought and sold, a place always humming with anticipation of what the next moment would bring even as it revelled in the last.

Berren sat slumped in the corner of a cold stone room, drumming his fingers on his knee. The world outside the sun-temple was rousing itself from the torpor of winter and sniffing the possibilities of spring. Barges from the City of Spires were riding the thaw down the river and the first boats from distant Varr wouldn't be far behind. The world outside was waking up.

The world *inside* the temple, however, had largely gone to sleep. At the front of the class, Teacher Sterm was droning on about something that didn't interest Berren in the least. Berren was daydreaming. If the little teaching cell had had a window, he'd have been staring out of it, counting the leaves on the trees. He could hear the hiss of rain, slithering in through the half-closed door. After a bit he started to count the drips falling off the lintel instead. Anything.

Whatever it took to make the seconds hurry on past. After all, it wasn't every day you got to meet a prince.

A stinging blow on his cheek summoned his thoughts back. Sterm had a cane and in the month since he'd first counted Berren among his students, he'd had a lot of practice using it. He was getting quite good with it, but Berren thought he'd best not tell him. Not yet. He was saving that.

'Your master pays me money to teach you, boy,' snapped the priest. 'It's no bother to me if you sleep through everything I have to say, but I imagine he will have a different view when I tell him. Get up.'

Berren wasn't so sure about that. Master Sy was a more religious man than some, but he generally had enough reasons to be annoyed at Berren without anything Teacher Sterm might have to say.

With a sigh, he got up. It was going to be one of those make-an-example-of-Berren afternoons. There were a lot of those with Sterm. He weathered them with an indifference that only made Sterm even angrier. In another month, he'd move on to a different teacher. They all knew him by now. None of them liked him. That was fine – he didn't like them either. He didn't like priests, he didn't like temples, he didn't like gods, didn't like any of it. They were all just something he had to put up with to get what he wanted. What he wanted was Master Sy, teaching him to use a sword.

'Come to the front, boy.'

Berren shuffled forward. He was here because nearly two years ago, Master Sy had promised to teach him swords on the day he mastered his letters; now, even despite his complete apathy, he could read and write. He was slow, he was clumsy, but he could do it.

'Right.' Sterm's voice was clipped and sharp. The cell smelled of damp but as Berren walked to the front, he

picked out a whiff of sugarleaf on Sterm's breath. 'Berren will now tell us everything he knows about Saint Kelm.' Sterm smiled, stepped back and stared at Berren. Around him, a dozen novices looked up. They all hated Berren too. They were envious, he thought. Envious because they had to stay at the temple every evening and every night with nothing to look forward to except more of the same for the rest of their lives, while he, Berren, was apprenticed to the best thief-taker in the city. *He* spent his evenings in taverns and markets and walking the twilight streets.

He sighed. Envious or not, when it came to letters and words and the histories of pointless saints that no one else cared about, they all knew a lot more than he did. He had no idea at all what Sterm had been talking about. Something about some priest who'd done something incredibly dull, most likely. Probably in some part of the world that didn't exist any more, and all so long ago that no one apart from Sterm even remembered it.

'We're waiting, Berren.' Sterm the Worm, Berren called him behind his back. Master Sy had tried to tell him off the first few times. He'd also been trying not to laugh, so it hadn't really worked. Here, though, the other novices all gasped and tutted. Such insolence! Such disrespect! Such a bunch of boring ...

'Kelm, boy!'

One of the novices at the front grinned and bared his teeth.

'Teeth!' blurted Berren. 'He had teeth!' *Kelm's Teeth!* He heard someone utter that curse almost every day.

'Yes, boy. And horses have teeth and so do little rats and weasels and sleepy little sloths who doze in the corner of my class. Sit down!'

The priest slapped his cane across Berren's arm, more out of a bored sense of duty than anything else. Berren ignored the sting. He got much worse from Master Sy when

they sparred. The wasters, the wooden practice swords they used, were about the same length as Sterm's cane. They were heavier and harder and Master Sy didn't pull his blows.

'Kelm.' Teacher Sterm grimaced and started to pace. 'The greatest saint in the illustrious history of the sun. Berren tells us he had teeth. I imagine we can do a bit better.' Somewhere outside, one of the temple bells started to ring, warning them all that it was an hour until sunset. Time for novices to ready themselves for their prayers; time for Berren to run through the city streets to the Watchman's Arms and finally see a prince. He could barely stop his toes from wriggling. None of the other novices seemed to be in the least impressed but surely they were just pretending; underneath they had to be green with envy. A prince! How many people ever got to meet a prince? How many poor orphans from Shipwrights' ... ?

The cane caught him round the ear and this time Sterm didn't hold back. Berren gulped down a squeal of pain.

'For the love of all that's bright, will you keep *still*, boy!' Sterm's knuckles were white. 'Kelm! You will devote your evening to study and you will learn about Kelm.' He gave Berren a withering look. 'You may wish to use the temple library. You may wish to learn from the wisdom of your forebears. You may wish to read their words and their histories. Unless you are Berren, of course, who believes he will attract knowledge like a lodestone; that it will appear out of the very air and force itself in through his ears despite his every effort to the contrary. Or is there some other explanation for your lack of attention, boy?' For a moment the priest looked pleased with himself. His eyes scanned the class. 'We will have visitors in the temple soon. The Autarch himself is coming from Torpreah. He plans a great summer tour of the empire. He will bring many priests and many holy artefacts with him and he has chosen

Deephaven as the place where he will begin. In a few days his dragon-monks will be coming here.' He looked at Berren now and smiled. 'Whatever else *some* of you may have heard, the Autarch's dragon-monks are the best swordsmen in the world. They are his personal guard and a score of them will be coming to make sure our temple is safe. Each monk will be given a novice to assist them in their duties.' Stern's eyes stayed on Berren. 'Those novices who are most gracious and penitent and have best applied themselves to their studies. For the rest of you ...' His smile turned sickly. 'The rest of you will still have me. And since our numbers will be so few, you will have the opportunity for some very personal teaching. You may go. Tomorrow you will tell me what you know of Kelm.'

On other days Berren might have patiently taken his place in the line of novices that filed slowly towards the door, heads bowed, mumbling prayers to themselves as they crossed the threshold into the open yard outside. Today he couldn't get out fast enough. He barged through the line, dashed outside into the rain and the smell of the sea blowing in from the harbour and ran for the temple gates. The soldiers who stood guard there in their bright yellow sunburst shirts threw him a half-hearted glare. Heavy grey clouds pressed down against grey streets. The cobbles were slick with water but Berren was far too busy to be worrying about that. He skittered and slid across Deephaven Square, splashing through puddles, paying no heed to the angry shouts that followed him. Down the sprawling Avenue of the Sun and into the city's second great square, the square of the Four Winds. Here men and women scurried back and forth, heads bowed against the weather. A steady line of carts trudged from one side to the other. They came up the Godsway from the river docks, then went down the Avenue of Emperors to the harbour and the sea. They were

the city's blood, the flow that never stopped, up and down from river to sea and back again, filling the coffers of rich men with gold.

Habit made him stop at the top of the Avenue of Emperors. Rain hissed into steam from the braziers pressed against the walls, smells of hot fat and butter and onions and spices mingling with the smell of the damp street and the ox-carts and the ever-present whiff of rotting fish. The noise was a cacophony of shouting, offers of everything from fried dough-balls to strips of pickled fish to spiced rat-sticks and baked weevils, all hurled and battered against one another by the whirl of the wind. Berren hardly noticed it. He came here every day, and every day here was the same, rain or shine.

You see those ships, boy? On the day the thief-taker had bought Berren from Master Hatchet and his gang of dung-collectors, they'd come here too. Before he'd even taken Berren home, he'd turned Berren around and pointed him down the Avenue of Emperors to the jumble of ships and masts anchored out in Deeaphaven Bay. When I'm done with you, you'll come here every day and you'll look at the flags. You'll tell me if you see four white ships on a red field. If ever you do, there's an emperor in it for you.

Back then an emperor had seemed like a fortune big enough to buy the world. He knew better now but it was still a lot, still worth a pause and a quick look every day. You couldn't make out the flags themselves from so far away, but the top of the Avenue of Emperors was as good a place as any to see if there were new ships in the harbour, to see whether it was worth a closer look.

Habit made him pause, but it was raining. The harbour vanished into a murky grey haze. If any ships had weighed anchor since yesterday, they'd still be there tomorrow. Berren's prince, on the other hand, might not.

Stopping to look at the ships wasn't the only old habit that refused to die. He snatched a hot dough-ball while no one was looking and ate it, laughing, as he ran on.