

DESCENT
LEGENDS OF THE DARK™

Zachareth

*Power corrupts even the
mightiest of heroes*

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

This is an excerpt from

ZACHARETH

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of the Dark Novel

BY ROBBIE MACNIVEN

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The first in an exciting new series of heroic fantasy novels, Zachareth, explores the past of one of Descent: Legends of the Dark's most notorious villains.

Zachareth, Baron of Carthridge, is a driven, ruthless and obsessive man – a man who could be a hero, but he wants so much more. Having watched his father fall under the sway of a sorceress, Zachareth grows up craving knowledge and power. When his tutor at Greyhaven introduces him to forbidden magics, Zachareth discovers there is more to power than meets the eye. As he returns home to a barony on the verge of rebellion and beset by necromantic foes, Zachareth must choose his true path – the path of virtue and heroism, or that of darkness and villainy; the line between the two is finer than most imagine.

CHAPTER ONE

Highsummer, 1822

The first punch didn't draw blood, but the second did.

Zachareth felt it across his lips and in his mouth, warm and bitter. He spat, smattering Mikael's face with red.

The heir to the Barony of Cailn had been astride Zachareth in the dirt, but he recoiled. Zachareth seized the advantage, heaving against him with both hands and kicking out with his feet. The boy was thrown off, sprawling in the dust.

The surrounding stable hands jeered and shrieked. Zachareth was only half aware of them as he scrambled back to his feet. His ears were full of a dull ringing sound, and his cheeks burned. He spat more blood, cuffing it from his lips.

"Is that the best Cailn can do?" he demanded.

Mikael was back on his feet as well, his blond hair unkempt, his jerkin dusty and askew. He bared his teeth and flung himself at Zachareth.

As was so often the case, it had all happened fast. Castle Talon was hosting the Silver Tourney, a contest of arms

held every four years between the northwestern baronies of Carthridge, Cailn, and Rhynn. Mikael, Cailn's heir, had arrived with his father's entourage the day before and had quickly sought out Zachareth along with several of his squires. Sharp words had been exchanged, Zachareth's own father insulted, and the honor of Carthridge questioned.

Zachareth couldn't actually remember who had struck the first blow, but just then he didn't much care. He tumbled in the dust with Mikael, grappling furiously, his long, dark hair half blinding him as he tried to rip himself free from the other boy's hold and land a blow of his own.

Mikael was a year older and quite a bit taller, but Golfang, the lieutenant of Baron Zelmar's guard, often told Zachareth that he was broad and strong for a thirteen year-old. He used that, trying to bear Mikael back down into the dirt, his teeth bared, pink with blood. Slowly, agonizingly, he overcame his rival's resistance, his limbs shaking with the strain as he pressed him against the ground. He managed to throw a leg over to straddle him and poised one fist, his thoughts keening with vengeance.

Something struck him in the ribs below his raised arm, not painfully so but sharp enough to make him yelp. He twisted astride Mikael, expecting to find one of the Cailn squires intervening. Instead, he was confronted by Bernard.

"Don't make me bloody your nose as well as your lip, boy," the heavy old tutor exclaimed, ruddy faced and brandishing his walking stave like a spear. Zachareth glared at him, cursing the fact that he had found him and was, predictably, now interfering. The cursed tutor was always interfering.

"You wouldn't dare hit me," he said.

“I just did, and I will again,” Bernard replied, jabbing the stave threateningly.

Zachareth didn’t get a chance to respond. Mikael heaved against him, throwing him off. Once again, the two boys sprawled, and Zachareth cursed the loss of his advantage.

Bernard waded in, rapping the tip of his stave across Mikael’s knuckles as he grabbed the front of Zachareth’s doublet before physically wrapping one forearm around Zachareth’s throat and hauling him up and away. The baronial heir struggled and choked on the musty wool of Bernard’s long robe sleeve, finding his feet but remaining clamped in the tutor’s grasp. Despite his age, Bernard possessed a fearsome strength.

“Cease your squirming, you accursed worm,” he exclaimed irritably, keeping hold of Zachareth with one arm.

“That’s quite enough from you too, Master Cailn,” he added, using the stave in the other hand to ward off Mikael as the boy made to lunge at the pinned Zachareth. “Another twitch from either of you and I’ll call for Captain Travas and have you both dragged before your parents. I’m sure they’d appreciate hearing that you’ve been fighting in public again just two days before the start of the tournament!”

Thoughts of parental chastisement took the edge off the furious energy coursing through Zachareth. He had no wish to stir his father’s anger. He forced himself to be still and was rewarded with a loosening of Bernard’s grip. He pulled himself free, glaring at Mikael, who glared right back.

“Be gone to your chambers,” Bernard snapped, pointing the stave at the Cailn contingent before addressing the gawking pages and serving boys surrounding them. “And the rest of you, back to work! You should know better than

to indulge these highborn dolts!”

As they scattered, Bernard grabbed Zachareth’s shoulder and steered him firmly into the nearby stable block, the smell of both horses and straw hitting him. The beasts loomed on either side, snorting and stamping, seeming to tower over him. Bernard marched him between their pens to the trough at the far end of the outbuilding, wheezing and muttering under his breath, stave clacking against the straw-scattered cobbles.

“Avoiding your lessons is one thing, but scrapping like a feral street dog? For shame! By the flames of Kellos, if I could still travel, I would have taken up that posting at Greyhaven. At least there my students would wish to attend my classroom of their own volition!”

Zachareth didn’t respond. He was still angry, but he knew better than to test Bernard any further. Right now, the tutor’s goodwill was all that was stopping him from reporting Zachareth’s misdemeanors to his father and, worse, to the baron’s advisor, Leanna. That was a conversation he wanted to avoid at all costs.

Bernard stood him before the trough and planted a hand against the back of his head. Zachareth began to protest, then was forced to seal his mouth shut as he was plunged into the tepid water. The shock slammed through him, and it was an effort not to instinctively exhale the air he’d trapped in his lungs.

Bernard held him under for a few heartbeats, then hauled him back up. Zachareth gasped as water poured from him, drenching his doublet and running from his lank hair. His lip stung.

The tutor turned him around and snatched his jaw, angling his head left then right.

“It’s stopped bleeding at least,” he said, squinting at Zachareth’s lip. “If you’re lucky, the swelling will be gone by the time you’re called to the hall for supper.”

He let go. Zachareth scowled up at him and swept his sopping hair back out of his eyes.

“You look just like your father when you do that,” Bernard said, his tone finally losing its hard edge.

“I know,” Zachareth replied. Bernard often said such things, and he was never sure if it was meant as a compliment or not. He had no wish to turn out like his father, not now anyway.

“You’re late for today’s lessons,” Bernard continued, pulling Zachareth’s doublet straight. “I’ll avoid telling Zelmar why, but in exchange, you have to make an effort with your readings this time. Do we have a deal?”

Zachareth knew he didn’t have much of a choice. He nodded.

“We have a deal.”

In the end, Zachareth didn’t get far with the day’s assigned text. They had just settled into Bernard’s makeshift classroom – a cluttered, dusty garret in the north tower – when a sharp rap sounded at the door. Zachareth paused halfway through a ponderous recitation of the epic poem *The Foxes of Kell* and looked at Bernard, seated across the scroll-scattered lectern from him.

Had the old man betrayed him after all? Zachareth’s expression clearly made the accusation for him because Bernard held his gaze for a moment before shaking his head.

He picked up his staff and headed for the door.

Golfang was waiting beyond it, his craggy face unreadable. Like the rest of the baronial guard, the massive orc had been fully armed and armored since the arrival of the Cailn and Rhynn delegations, and he had to stoop slightly just to look in through the crooked attic door. Zachareth doubted he'd actually be able to fit through it, certainly not with the heavy-bladed falchion hanging at his hip.

"The baron wishes to see him," Golfang said to Bernard, nodding at Zachareth.

"He's in the middle of his studies," Bernard protested, even his heavyset bulk appearing tiny before the hulking warrior. Golfang wore a battered breastplate and a chainmail skirt over leather breeches, but his arms were bare above the vambraces that clad his wrists. To Zachareth, his arms appeared like mighty tree trunks, gnarled and axe-hewn, each ringed by dozens of white tattoo bands. The orc had once told Zachareth they represented every enemy's skull that he had crushed with his bare hands, though Bernard had confided that the more prosaic truth was that each band represented a year's service on the baronial guard.

"Still, the baron wants him," Golfang reiterated, his expression stoic as he looked past Bernard at Zachareth. Despite himself, he felt his heart quail at the thought of what awaited him.

"Is it actually the baron who wants him, or Leanna?" Bernard asked, seemingly unwilling to give up his charge. Golfang offered the merest of shrugs.

"You would have to ask the baron that yourself. Now, am I going to have to come in and take him myself?"

“No, you are not,” Zachareth said before Bernard could answer. He forced himself to get down from behind the lectern, pausing to pointedly close the heavy cover of *The Foxes of Kell*. He wasn’t going to let Golfang see he was afraid. He valued the guard’s opinion more than he feared his father’s summons.

Golfang nodded and moved aside for Zachareth to descend the creaking wooden staircase beyond the garret’s door. He heard Bernard calling out behind him.

“Don’t think this means you’re done with your studies. I’m leaving this book in your bedchamber, and I expect the next three chapters read by the time we meet again tomorrow!”

“Then I pray to Kellos that my father’s punishment involves making me wear a blindfold,” Zachareth called back, ignoring Bernard’s irate response. Golfang chuckled as he followed him down the stairs, his chainmail clinking heavily.

“You are wise to only bait the word teacher when out of reach of his stave,” he said. “If you had not come quietly, I fear I would not have been able to wrestle you from him.”

“You never had to learn letters,” Zachareth complained, disgusted at life’s unfairness. “And look what you’ve achieved! You’re second-in-command of the baronial guard of Carthridge!”

“True,” Golfang admitted. “But I am not a tiny little raven-haired human pup like you.”

Zachareth half turned to lash out at Golfang, but the orc simply swatted him away, laughing.

“Enough,” he said. “It is not for idle merriment that your father summons you.”

They passed through the echoing corridor that ran around

the inside of the keep's western wall, evening sunlight streaming through the arrowslits to dapple the smooth stonework. As they went, Zachareth tried to gauge how bad things were.

"You might be in the hot stew this time, pup," Golfang admitted. "Your father knows about your scrapping."

Zachareth looked up at the guard as they walked, a frown crossing his face. "Did Bernard tell him?"

"No," Golfang responded. "Who do you think?"

"Leanna," Zachareth growled. It made sense. She seemed to know everything, her presence within the baronial court of Castle Talon all encompassing. She was a Latari elf but had advised Zelmar Carth for almost a decade. She was also a sorceress. Zachareth hated her for how she had wormed her way into his father's life, for how she now seemed to rule the barony more assuredly than he did. The emotion was so raw it momentarily came close to eclipsing his fear.

They descended the next set of spiral stairs and passed along the guest chamber corridor, pausing to let a pair of serving maids hurry by with bundles of used linen. This part of the castle was usually quiet, but now it bustled with the presence of the Rhynn and Cailn entourages. They encountered more chattering chambermaids, a scurrying errand boy, and a member of Greigory of Rhynn's household, bearing the Grandmother Oak on the chest of his jerkin. There were also retinue guards posted outside the bedchamber doors, who stiffened to attention as Zachareth and Golfang went by. Zachareth half hoped he would run into Mikael leaving his room. They'd see how that Cailn whelp fared with Golfang to back him up.

Their route took them to the antechamber outside Castle Talon's great hall. A taperer was lighting the braziers bolted to the walls, their kindling flames illuminating the graven expressions of Zachareth's grandparents and great-grandparents, rendered in Carthmount stone in alcoves on either side. He always looked at them whenever he passed, trying to imagine his own likeness alongside them some day. It was difficult because he so rarely felt that he wanted to become baron like his father. He wanted more than a lifetime of duty and leadership. He avoided the hard, stony eyes.

They halted outside the oaken doors that led into the hall. Golfang placed one massive hand on them, but before opening them, he paused and looked down at Zachareth.

"You are afraid," he said.

"I'm not," Zachareth replied, scowling. The guard was too perceptive for his own good. His heart was racing.

"You are a poor liar too," Golfang continued. "Which does not bode well for what is about to unfold. Have courage, little pup. There are worse things in this world than a father's scorn."

"If that's so, I have yet to encounter them," Zachareth said heavily, steeling himself and staring straight ahead. Golfang let out a short laugh and opened the doors.

CHAPTER TWO

“Don’t just stand there, boy,” Zelmar Carth barked, his voice ringing from the timber rafters. “Come here where I can see you.”

Zachareth stepped across the threshold and into the great hall. It was a high, wide space, the finest of its kind in northern Terrinoth. Though the arching ceiling and its rafters were built from timber, the walls and floor were fashioned from stone, great slabs that had been set in place centuries before. Tapestries decorated the flanks of the long room, massive lengths of woven cloth depicting moments in time from both Carthridge and from wider Terrinoth. There were hunting scenes with loping hounds and boars and soaring hawks as well as representations of the marriages and deaths of the noble line of Carth, interwoven alongside the construction of Castle Talon upon its crag, the defeat of terrible dragons wreathed in flame, and silver knights driving into the legions of Waiqar’s undead. Zachareth loved to sit and stare at them and imagine himself in the midst of each depiction in turn, but right now, he was too afraid to even glance at them.

The floor underfoot was covered by a wide red and gold

rug, worn and faded but still soft underfoot. Zachareth's great-great-grandmother had, according to the chronicles Bernard made him read, been a princess from far-off Al-Kalim. The rug had been part of her dowry. A section of it had been removed so it didn't rest up against the vast fireplace that dominated one wall, its blackened bowels freshly rekindled. A heavy timber feasting table, each leg carved with the likeness of one of the Carthridge barons of yore, sat unoccupied along the opposite wall. Zachareth passed by it on the way to the room's far end.

It felt like a long walk. Golfang didn't go with him but remained by the doors. Zachareth suddenly felt very alone as he passed beneath the gallery of beasts and ancestors adorning the walls.

Zelmar waited. He was reclining on his baronial throne, clad in a white gown with silver trim, one leg raised and planted on a footstool. His face hinted at the fact that it had once been like Zachareth's, the features formerly strong and well defined, but it had long lost the freshness of youth. His eyes were hooded and sunken, his jaw fattened, his long, black hair thinning and rooted in gray. He was not yet forty Highsummers old, but he seemed older. Again, as he approached, Zachareth found himself wondering when and why his father's love for him had turned so bitter.

Leanna was with him, as ever. She sat on the consort's throne beside Zelmar, the place Zachareth knew would once have been occupied by his mother before her death. She wore a dress of silver scales that shimmered in the firelight, its skirts widening into great folds of black silk. A staff rested in one hand, designed like a twisting length of root knots and

enameled black. Her hair, a dusky red, was piled high upon her crown. Her face always left Zachareth feeling cold. It was beautiful, in a deadly sort of way, high-boned and sharp-eared, her elven heritage unmistakable. She reminded him of one of the hawks woven into the hall's tapestries, cruel and keen and deadly. Her golden-yellow eyes rarely seemed to blink.

Zachareth's step almost faltered. He managed to make himself look at Leanna and noticed the small smile on her lips. It sent fresh anger burning through him, momentarily scorching away his fear. He carried on until he was standing before the pair.

"Your lip is swollen, boy," Zelmar said. "Who hit you?"

Caught somewhere between fear and defiance, Zachareth said nothing.

"Answer me," Zelmar demanded.

"Mikael."

"Did you hit him back?"

"I tried."

Zelmar's expression darkened further.

"Once again, you embarrass me," he said. "Brawling like a street urchin with the heir of one of our closest allies. The Silver Tournament begins in less than two days, and I have to apologize to Wilem and Maria because their son was set upon in my own castle's bailey!"

"Mikael insulted you," Zachareth blurted, his cheeks beginning to burn with anger and shame. "He called you an old, weak fool who couldn't even mount a horse anymore. He said Carthridge was tarnished, and its might spent. That I would inherit nothing that wasn't rotten or crumbling!"

"And I'm sure you said much the same in turn," Zelmar

sneered, his voice rising to fill the hall, making Zachareth flinch. “You think I am so hopeless, so weak that I need a scrawny youth like you to defend my honor? You offer me greater insult with your pathetic lack of control!”

Zachareth choked up. He desperately didn’t want to cry, but his eyes were stinging. He had been dreading this. He screwed them shut, trying to master himself. Zelmar let him suffer for what, to Zachareth, felt like an age before carrying on.

“Fortunately for you, I have already apologized to Baron Cailn, and he has accepted it. I have yet to decide on your punishment. I’ve a mind to give you the rod.”

“Perhaps a practical redress might prove more beneficial,” Leanna said. It was the first sound she had uttered since Zachareth had entered the hall. He managed to cuff his eyes dry, glowering at her. Every time she spoke, he feared the worst.

“I believe Master Carth got into his dispute while avoiding the tutelage of Bookkeeper Bernard,” she continued. “Perhaps extra lessons are in order to make up for lost time?”

“Bernard’s lessons hardly seem to be having an effect,” Zelmar pointed out, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “I pay the old fool too much as it is.”

“Nevertheless, Zachareth needs an education,” Leanna urged, placing a hand lightly upon Zelmar’s. “Maybe while the tournament is on? I would call that punishment both fitting and sufficient.”

Zelmar grunted noncommittally, waving his free hand. “If you think it’s for the best, Leanna, then let it be so.” He fixed his eyes once more on Zachareth.

“I will inform Bernard, and you will report to him at the second dawnbell tomorrow. He’ll keep you as long as he wishes. Your swordplay with Golfang is also canceled for the foreseeable future, and you’ll not dine with us tonight. Nor will you attend any of the jousts or contests-at-arms over the coming days. You can consider all this a mercy. Were it solely my decision, I would have you confined to the western tower until the tournament has ended.”

“It should be solely your decision,” Zachareth declared, managing to find his voice. He felt a small sense of satisfaction as he saw Zelmar’s eyes widen with shock.

“I will take the master to his chambers,” Golfang said. Despite the orc’s size, he had approached Zachareth from the doors without him noticing. He placed one massive hand on the boy’s shoulder, an act that might have appeared threatening but from which Zachareth took silent comfort.

“That might be for the best,” Leanna said, a warning note in her voice. Zelmar was gripping the arms of his throne now, on the verge of a fresh tirade.

Holding him firmly, Golfang steered Zachareth out of his father’s hall.

It turned out Bernard was as good as his word. Zachareth returned to his room to find the weighty text of *The Foxes of Kell* resting on the table beside his bed.

He was tempted to throw it from the tower window, but it was so large he realized he would have struggled to fit it through. Instead, he ignored it, slumping on his bed.

He felt miserable, and even worse, he was frustrated by what had passed in the hall. Braced for his father’s wrath, he’d

instead been offered a degree of clemency thanks to Leanna, which somehow seemed even worse – it felt as though it had put him in her debt. Even without using her magic, she was too powerful, too influential. He was certain she was poisoning Zelmar against him. The fact that he was going to have to spend the duration of the Silver Tournament in Bernard’s musty garret was the final blow.

As the sun set outside, he wallowed in his unhappiness, trying to ignore his hunger, until a soft knock at the door dredged up his thoughts from where they had sunk. He ignored the first summons but at the second got up and freed the latch.

Leanna was outside. Zachareth immediately tried to close the door again, but she planted her lacquered staff between it and the frame. Zachareth heaved on it, but despite the elf’s painfully slender build, the door showed no hint of budging.

“We should talk,” she said.

“You should leave,” Zachareth replied.

“If only it were that easy,” Leanna said. Zachareth frowned, not understanding.

“What do you want?” he asked acidly.

“To be friends,” Leanna replied. “Or at least to stop being enemies. A truce, if you will, with an eye to a lasting peace. May I come in?”

Zachareth considered his options. Leanna rarely spoke to him directly, especially in private. As much as his anger still simmered, a part of him was curious about why she had sought him out after having him banished.

“Leave your staff at the door,” he told her. She arched one wicked eyebrow.

“You have nothing to fear from me, Master Carth,” she said. “I am your family’s most loyal servant.”

“Then, as my family’s most loyal servant, I’m telling you to leave your staff at the door,” Zachareth repeated. Leanna offered a terse smile, clearly stung by his stubbornness, but she released her staff, propping it against the inside of the doorframe. Zachareth stepped back, allowing her in.

“If you want to be friends, you could start by releasing my father from the spell you have him under,” Zachareth said, backing up to sit on the end of his bed without taking his eyes off Leanna. She laughed, the sound cold and clear as a Deepwinter morning in the Carthmounts.

“The arrangement between your father and I involves no spell,” she said, easing the door so it stood only slightly ajar before facing Zachareth, smiling down at him. “I told you, I am your family’s servant. I fulfill my duties by advising him.”

“You weaken him so he relies on you more and more,” Zachareth said accusingly. “You think I am too young to remember a time before you came to Carthridge, but you are wrong. He was strong once and kind. He did not stay in his chambers day and night, never leaving Castle Talon. Now he can do nothing unless you first suggest it.”

“Even my people are not immune to the passage of time,” Leanna said, speaking slowly as though he were still a small child. “And humankind most certainly is not. Your father is not an evergreen ironbark that stands unbowed through the ages. Ruling this barony is a weight he has borne since he was your age. That he still conducts his duties, despite the lance injury he suffered as a youth and his ailments, is a credit to him and to his forebearers.”

Zachareth was hardly listening. He'd heard the sorceress defend his father, along with her own presence at his court, before.

"One day he will stop listening to you," he told Leanna. "And I pray to all the gods that day is soon."

She smiled her cold, condescending smile.

"I did not come here to spar with you, Master Zachareth," she said. "In truth, I came to advise you."

"Advise me?" Zachareth repeated incredulously. Leanna moved across the chamber to the chair beside the window, lowering herself onto it and pausing a moment to rearrange the heavy black folds of her dress. The last of the evening sunlight was shining in through the window's small, cloudy panes. It made her red hair look like fire and left her angular face half shadowed. The silver scales of her dress glittered.

"I told you, I serve the Carths," she said, her tone serious. "That includes not only your father but you as well. Someday I will advise you in your role as ruler of this barony."

"You seem very sure that day will come," Zachareth said.

"Fates willing," Leanna replied. "It occurred to me recently that part of our antagonism might spring from the fact that you have never really witnessed just how effective my advice can be. Take today's... unfortunate events for example. You attacked Mikael outside the stables."

"He attacked me," Zachareth responded sharply, though in truth he still couldn't remember who had struck first.

"Who began it has little relevance," Leanna said. "The story that has spread is that you attacked Mikael of Cailn in a rage and had to be restrained. You are now experiencing the consequences of those actions."

“You have your own version of events,” she went on before Zachareth’s outrage had a chance to vent. “You were attacked in your own home by a larger, older rival who insulted both your honor and your family’s. You defended yourself and, by extension, Carthridge. In such an account, your actions appear wholly understandable, possibly even laudable. Such a story would have reaped different consequences.”

Zachareth tried to make sense of what she was suggesting. He felt as though he was being lectured in Bernard’s classroom.

“Why has your account lost out to the other?” she said. “Perhaps it fits the perceptions others hold of you? More importantly, though, no one has backed your claims. What do you think might have happened in the great hall if I had spoken up in your favor? If I had told your father that what you had done was bold and brave? Do you think he would still have punished you so?”

“You want to prove to me the power you hold over him,” Zachareth said, trying to get to the heart of the matter. He didn’t trust the sorceress’s words, and he didn’t want to be drawn into a verbal game with her.

“No,” Leanna replied. “I want to show you that people’s opinions matter. Even more so than the truth. That is the first thing I might teach you. The next is how you could have avoided your current censure.”

Zachareth found himself listening. The elf’s words flowed so easily, so precisely. For a moment, he did want to know more. It was tempting to let go of his reservations, to just sit and allow her to speak.

“You and Mikael have shared your disputes for as long as either of you can remember,” she said. “Whenever the Silver

Tournament takes place, you fight. Such a thing is hardly unusual. But I would caution you to be more aware of when and how you come to blows with him. If you must clash – and sometimes, in your future role, you will indeed be left with no choice other than to resort to strength of arms – you should do so wisely.”

A furtive note had entered the conversation, Zachareth realized. It felt underhanded yet ever more intoxicating. He leaned forward slightly on the edge of the bed.

“Go on,” he said carefully.

“If you fight Mikael again, do not do so in the middle of the castle courtyard,” Leanna said. “Far too many will see. Strike instead when it is dark, and quiet, and when only those whose loyalty you are sure of stand nearby.”

“There is no honor in that,” Zachareth pointed out, trying not to admit that a part of him was intrigued by the idea.

“Honor is an abstract notion, Master Carth,” Leanna said, her tone steady and patient. “It has its uses, but a ruler who is hidebound by it will soon come undone. Honor does not have an answer to many of the situations you will face when you are Baron of Carthridge. It will not gather the harvest, or raise taxes, or mine the Carthmounts for silver.”

Zachareth said nothing, considering her words carefully. For once, what she said seemed true enough. With the ease of hindsight, he could see that his attack against Mikael had been foolish. He could still remember the fury that had gripped him, the unreasoning heat of it. His father had blamed his lack of control. He resolved not to be so weak in the future.

“Now, on to the final reason I am here,” Leanna said, her

hawkish smile returning. The sun had almost faded behind her, the shadows within the room deepening. "It does involve matters of honor, I suppose. Mikael insulted you and, through you, your father, and this very barony. You sought redress, but it was clumsy and ill considered. It is my duty to offer more effective solutions."

"Speak plainly," Zachareth said, repeating a phrase he'd heard his father use in council. He still wasn't entirely certain the sorceress wasn't mocking him.

"Mikael of Cailn is due some form of misfortune," Leanna said. "A minor one, of course. Perhaps a trip near the bottom of the stairs leading to his chamber corridor or a jammed entrance to the garderobe privy."

"You could make that happen?" Zachareth asked with a note of incredulity. He was listening intently, his thoughts turning over the possibilities. All his life, he'd viewed Leanna's presence as a threat, her abilities a challenge to be overcome. He had never once considered utilizing them for his own benefit.

"Say it, and it will be done," Leanna said. "I told you, I am your family's servant."

Zachareth frowned again, pondering what was being offered. The temptation to strike back at Mikael was overwhelming, but other thoughts troubled him.

"He wouldn't know I was the one who caused his misery," he pointed out.

"Which is for the best," Leanna said. "If you wish to avoid the likelihood of further punishment."

"Then it loses its point," Zachareth said. "Cailn must know it cannot challenge Carth."

“Now you are speaking like the future ruler of this barony,” Leanna said.

“You would put me in your debt as you have done with my father,” Zachareth replied, realizing abruptly how close he was to falling into the sorceress’s trap. “With little deeds, you would control me as you control him.”

“You are perceptive,” Leanna said. “But still mistaken. A lord cannot owe his servant a debt.”

“How did my father find out about the fight?” Zachareth asked her, deliberately changing tack. It was now too dark to clearly make out whether Leanna’s expression changed when he asked the question.

“Perhaps your tutor told him?” she said.

“I do not think Bernard would have betrayed me. Either way, I wish to know. Were your sorceries responsible?”

Leanna leaned forward so the light from the door caught her face. Zachareth saw that she was smirking.

“Indeed,” she said. “I sacrificed one of the stable boys and anointed myself with his blood, then used my enchanted mirror to scry your whereabouts.”

Zachareth recoiled in horror before realizing that she was jesting. She laughed, and he glowered.

“I saw you from my chamber window,” she said. “There is nothing more to it than that. Magic has many uses, but it does not make me omnipotent. Not yet, anyway.”

Zachareth stood up, making a mental note to ask Bernard what *omnipotent* meant when he was next caught by him. He thought he knew, but if the tutor was angry at the time, then asking an educational question would probably help distract him.

“It has grown late,” he said, using an excuse he had heard his father employ with unwanted company. “Time for you to leave.”

Leanna rose, brushing down her skirts. She stood wholly in darkness now, only the torchlight coming through the crack in the chamber door offering any sort of illumination, spilling across Zachareth and his bed.

“Consider again the fate of Master Mikael,” she said, moving past him to the door, momentarily blocking off its light before she opened it wider. “Let me know before the feast tomorrow. And, oh, I almost forgot...”

She reached into one of the pockets of her voluminous skirts and drew out something bound in a square of linen. She unwrapped it to reveal a slice of bread and cheese. She left it on the stool by the door. The sight of it sent a pulse of hunger, unbidden, through Zachareth.

“I wouldn’t want you to starve, Master Carth,” she said, before picking up her staff and easing the door shut behind her.

CHAPTER THREE

The Highsummer sun was beating down on Castle Talon, making the stone bake and turning the rolling valley the citadel guarded into a patchwork of green, gold, and purple.

Zachareth had spent his morning hiding from Bernard in one of the turrets in the castle's northeastern tower. He'd paid the guard who was supposed to be on watch, Skerrif, a silver half star to take an hour off, promising to keep a good eye on the approaches to the citadel's crag. Alone, he had instead contemplated life's miseries. His father cared nothing for him. He was too busy drinking the poison Leanna dripped into his mind, day by day. That was what Zachareth told himself, though he was afraid that, in truth, even if Leanna hadn't been a part of the court, Zelmar would still have hated his only son. He just wished he understood why.

Bitter thoughts coiled through his mind as he leaned against the turret wall, gazing out over the valley. Its flanks were mottled with northern heather, just coming into full bloom, while the stream that coiled around the base of the

castle's rocky outcrop stretched away like a glittering blue ribbon along the valley floor, fading eventually into the haze. In the distance, the Dunwarrs stood out against the azure, a craggy parapet of far-off white peaks.

He watched the mountains for a while, his mind finding refuge as he conjured up epic fantasies of travel and adventure. He wished he could go there, could go anywhere really, anywhere that wasn't Castle Talon. Bernard and Zelmar spoke only of his duties, of how important it was that he became a strong ruler when he was baron. He didn't want any of that, though. Right now, he just wanted a life beyond cold stone walls and musty old books.

His fantasies were banished by a flurry of feathers, making him yelp. A pigeon had just tried to enter through the turret's arrowslit, veering off at the last moment as it spotted Zachareth within. Judging by the twigs and droppings on the stonework around him, he realized the creature probably used the tower as a refuge just as frequently as he did.

Growing bored, he wandered down through the keep toward the bailey, no longer caring if he was apprehended. As he stepped out the main doors and into the sunlight, he caught the ring of steel and the flash of bared swords.

Two men were fighting in the castle courtyard. One was in his forties or fifties with a bushy beard, edged with white. He was dressed in a leather smock bearing the oak of Rhynn and carried a longsword, his weathered face creased with concentration as he used it to defend himself.

His opponent was younger, perhaps in his late twenties. He wore blue hose but was naked from the waist up, his lean musculature glistening with sweat. His hair was long, thick,

and blond, and it flew as he swept his own longsword in a series of scything motions toward his opponent, the wide blows driving the older man back. He fought with a grin on his face, and Zachareth suspected he knew why.

The heir of Carthridge slunk into the shade of the castle's curtain wall and planted himself on one of the barrels being loaded into the kitchen. The cook's assistants hefting the produce had paused to watch the clash, as had an increasingly large number of the citadel's servants, keepers, and staff.

A gasp went up as the topless combatant appeared to overextend with one of his arrogant, sweeping blows, leaving himself exposed. The older man lunged in for the kill.

Zachareth had been expecting as much, and so had the other fighter. Golfang had always taught him that the most important parts of the body during single combat were the feet. Zachareth had already noted that the younger fighter had been moving his lower half conservatively, even while making a great show with his lunges. He wanted to appear overly aggressive and lacking in control, but he had kept his balance, his center. As his rival sought to take his chance, the other fighter twisted his toned form and, with only a small flick of his wrist, brought his sword back in, scraping along the lunging blade and diverting it off to one side. At the same time, he stamped his foot in close, meeting the attacking thrust and snatching the wrist of the bearded man's sword arm with his other hand, pinioning it away from his body.

"Almost, uncle," the younger man panted, his grin staying fixed as he released his bested rival and shook his blond hair from his eyes.

Zachareth had seen him fight before. He knew them both.

The bearded one was Augen Rhynn, and his smiling rival was his nephew, Greigory, Baron of Rhynn. Zachareth had been introduced to them on several occasions, including at the last Silver Tourney, when Rhynn had hosted the competition. This was the first time that Zachareth had encountered Greigory since he had taken on the mantle of baron, however. His father had died of the flux the year before.

Augen stepped away from his nephew, switching his sword to his other hand and flexing his fingers. Greigory stretched nonchalantly, gazing around at the onlookers as though only just noticing them. His eyes swept through the crowd before coming to rest on where Zachareth was perched.

He beckoned him with one finger. Childish instinct made Zachareth want to ignore the direct summons, but the bared steel still in Greigory's fist had caught his interest, gleaming brilliantly in the noonday sun. He hopped down off the barrel and approached.

"Bring me a gourd from the well, stable boy," Greigory said, stretching once more.

"I'm not a stable boy," Zachareth said indignantly. "You know full well who I am."

"If you're Zelmar's son, you've grown a fierce amount since I saw you last," Greigory said, laughing. "Did your father send you down from the keep to spy on me before the start of the tournament?"

"I doubt my father would trust me to spy on anyone," Zachareth responded, unable to keep the ice from his tone. Greigory looked down at him thoughtfully for a few moments, then gestured to Augen, who had been standing by, watching the exchange.

“Give him your sword, uncle,” he said. Augen seemed about to argue, then thought better of it. He turned his weapon so the blade was resting against his left forearm and the grip was extended beyond it, offering it down to Zachareth.

He took the handle, body tense as he fought to control its weight. He was able to hold it with both hands, but the grip was uncomfortable, a far cry from the sparring sticks he normally used with Golfang whenever they trained.

“Child’s too small for a longsword,” Augen said to Greigory, smiling. Zachareth glared at him.

“I am no child,” he said. Greigory’s own grin returned.

“No indeed, Lord Carth! How old are you now? Ten summers? Eleven?”

“Thirteen,” Zachareth said, trying and failing not to sound surly as he focused on keeping the sword’s tip raised. He knew Greigory was making fun of him. It stirred his anger, triggering that childish desire to lash out.

“Old enough to defend the honor of Baron Zelmar of Carth then,” Greigory said. “Or so I hear.” Zachareth felt an unexpected pang of embarrassment.

“You know about the fight with Mikael?” he asked.

“Mikael is a little rodent,” Greigory said in a low, conspiratorial tone. “His father indulges him too much while yours indulges you too little, I think.”

“He is preparing me for my role,” Zachareth said, becoming defensive, sensing Greigory’s judgment about his father. “To rule a barony, especially one as large and as powerful as Carthridge, requires strength.”

“Your familial loyalty does you credit,” Greigory said.

“Now let’s see if we can take your mind off such matters for a while, shall we?”

He raised his sword to salute Zachareth. Face tight with concentration, the heir of Carthridge returned the gesture, immediately adopting a low guard. His heart was pounding, and sweat was starting to bead his scalp. The sun felt infernally hot, amplified by the high stone walls surrounding them. He tried to remember everything Golfang had ever taught him all at once.

Greigory adopted a high guard and stamped his front foot forward. Zachareth recoiled, then glared when he realized Greigory hadn’t actually swung into the attack. He was taunting him.

The anger returned. He lunged in at the Baron of Rhynn, yelling, all lessons forgotten in an instant.

Greigory swept his blade downward, knocking the point of Zachareth’s longsword into the dirt. The clanging impact hurt his hands and seemed to shudder right through his body. He snarled and threw himself into Greigory’s legs and stomach, ignoring both guard and posture. The fact that he had been disarmed so easily frustrated him, his earlier desire to maintain his self-control evaporating.

The sudden charge caught the baron by surprise. They both went down together, Zachareth losing his grip on the heavy longsword. He was the first back up, about to leap on his opponent as he had done with Mikael, but Greigory lashed out a foot, kicking a cloud of dust up into Zachareth’s face. He recoiled, coughing and hissing, rubbing furiously at his stinging eyes. By the time he’d recovered, Greigory was back on his feet, sword in hand.

Zachareth's fury redoubled. He scrambled in the dirt to retrieve his own sword as Greigory watched, heaving it back up and lunging once more in an uncontrolled stab toward Greigory's guts. The baron sidestepped and deftly trapped the blade against his torso with his left arm as it slid past, twisting his body so it was wrenched from Zachareth's grip.

Disarmed, Zachareth was about to start swinging with his fists when Greigory's theatrical cry made him stop. The ruler of Rhynn dropped his sword and, with Zachareth's weapon still lodged under his arm, stumbled a few paces.

"I am slain," he announced to the onlooking crowd before collapsing in the dirt to a spate of laughter. One of the kitchen hands started applauding.

Zachareth stood over Greigory, fists balled, unsure whether he was still angry or not. The baron lay prone for a few moments, his eyes glazed, then he looked at Zachareth and winked.

"You play games," Zachareth said tersely, part embarrassed, part annoyed. Greigory pretended to be shocked as he jumped lithely back to his feet and released the sword, catching it.

"The murder of the Baron of Rhynn is but a game to this boy," he said to Augen, who was now grinning as broadly as his nephew. "Do the ambitions of Carthridge know no bounds?"

"You mock me in front of my people," Zachareth pointed out, remembering his father's anger over fighting publicly with Mikael. Greigory looked about at the dispersing crowd and leaned down to Zachareth's level, speaking in a stage whisper.

"In truth, I wanted to end this before you ran me through, little master."

“There is still time for that,” Zachareth said. Greigory chuckled and tossed Augen’s sword back to him.

“You have spirit, Lord Carth,” he said. “Which is more than can be said of some at this tournament. I hope you will be in attendance at the feast tonight.”

“My father will make sure of it,” Zachareth said. Just then he caught the sound of his name, ringing out from somewhere within the keep. He froze, looking up at the towering fastness. It was Bernard, hunting for him.

“Is that your tutor?” Greigory asked, noting Zachareth’s expression. “Best make yourself scarce. I’ll tell him I’ve seen neither hide nor hair of you.”

“Then I’ll consider us even,” Zachareth said, already making for the bailey’s outhouses.

Bernard finally cornered him hiding in the pantry beside the kitchen block.

“Class,” the tutor snarled, snatching Zachareth by the ear and twisting. Hissing with pain, Zachareth allowed himself to be led to the foot of the north tower before shaking Bernard off.

“It’s almost time for the feast,” he declared indignantly. “I’m banned from the tournament, not from the great hall! Zelmar will want me to be seen by the guests.”

“I’ve no intention of attending the feast tonight,” Bernard said, herding Zachareth up the tower stairs. “I’ve no time for scyophants and clowning and bad venison. And since you’ve wasted so much of my time looking for you today, I shall waste a little of your time in turn, Master Carth. Your father has put you at my disposal, feast or not.”

Back in the garret, Bernard attempted to apply Zachareth's thoughts to his spelling and lettering before eventually giving up.

"You are quite the most ungracious, ungraceful boy I have ever had the misfortune to teach," he said as Zachareth botched another word, throwing his hands up in despair. "Don't you want to achieve anything in your life?"

"You think I want to be like my father," Zachareth responded, tossing down his quill in exasperation. "Or like Leanna or like you. Always talking about prestige or power or learning. But I don't want to be like any of you. I want to be like Baron Greigory. I want to be a strong warrior. I want to be respected. I want a life beyond this place."

Bernard looked surprised for a moment, then scoffed.

"That knave. More concerned with his swordplay and his handsome face than with his duties. He inherited his role too young, I say."

"He is a good man," Zachareth replied, instinctively rallying to the Baron of Rhynn's defense. "He treats me like an equal. That's more than anyone else does. All you do is talk down to me and scold me! I am forbidden from playing with the servants, forbidden from sparring with Golfang, forbidden from leaving the castle on my own. Now I cannot even attend the jousting tomorrow! My only enjoyment is hiding from you!"

Zachareth expected an angry response to the outburst. Instead, Bernard pursed his lips, looking at him. Zachareth narrowed his eyes, wondering just what the tutor was planning, whether it was going to be some further form of punishment.

“You know I take my duties seriously,” Bernard said eventually. Zachareth was surprised by the hint of remorse in his voice. For a few moments, it seemed as though the stern tutor had withdrawn, leaving behind someone altogether less fearsome, less sure of himself.

“I owe the Carths a great deal,” he carried on. “I was but a young kitchen hand when I became friends with your grandfather. He funded my entry into Greyhaven. I found I had no aptitude for the runes, but I learned my letters and learned them well. When your father asked me to teach you, I thought of it as helping to repay the debt I owe your household. It is a serious matter, and I have always handled it as such. But perhaps in doing so, I have not treated you as you deserve.”

Zachareth didn’t know what to say. He vaguely knew the story of how Bernard had ended up employed at Castle Talon, but he had never had it delivered firsthand and not with such contrition. He found himself unsure of how to respond.

“I have something for you,” the tutor continued. He rummaged through several of the untidy mounds of books piled around the loft, then approached Zachareth’s lectern with one of the texts he’d unearthed.

Zachareth tried not to feel too disappointed. Another book, albeit one far smaller looking than the tomes he was usually assigned to read.

“This is *The Canticle of Rufus the Bold*,” Bernard said, placing the book down carefully in front of Zachareth. “Written by Malrond the Younger, one of the most celebrated storytellers in Terrinoth. You have heard of Rufus?”

“Yes,” Zachareth said, looking down at the book. He recalled

the name from the lineages Bernard had made him memorize. “He is one of my forebearers. A baron of Carthridge in the 1500s. He helped turn back the unliving armies of Waiqar, the dread necromancer.”

“He did,” Bernard agreed, opening the leather cover for Zachareth. The first page was a magnificent illustration of a mounted knight in silver armor, trampling over skeletal reanimates. Zachareth had seen its likeness before on the tapestries in the great hall. It shimmered on the page, almost mesmerizing in its color and detail.

“Rufus Carth was one of this barony’s greatest rulers,” Bernard said. “His story is a grand one, full of heroism and desperate daring, and it is well told by Malrond.”

“It is a chronicle, a historical account?” Zachareth asked, a little confused.

“Not entirely,” Bernard said. “The tale it tells is true, but it is conveyed with wit and passion. It is not one of the more... ponderous texts I have set you.”

“And I suppose you want me to read the first three chapters by tomorrow?” Zachareth asked, his heart sinking further.

“No,” Bernard replied. Zachareth looked up at him in surprise, wondering what sort of new trick this was. The tutor offered him a smile.

“You do not need to read it at all,” he said lightly. “I believe, if you give it a chance, you might enjoy it, though. But if it sits untouched, it is no great loss. Consider it a gift, yours to keep and do with as you please.”

Zachareth had never been gifted a book before. He looked at the image page a little longer, drinking in its detail, fascinated by it. He noticed he was staring and hastily closed

the cover, some instinctive part of him not wanting Bernard to see he was so intrigued.

“Thank you,” he said. “Does this mean I can go now?”

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