

## **In the Service of the People**

### **Chapter I**

#### **The Voice for a Nation**

Resting his staff lightly on his shoulder, Nalaar shaded his eyes as he studied the massive stone walls that loomed before him. He had come a long way since the last time he laid eyes on Terial. There was no one left who remembered the thin dark-haired boy who'd begged and stole in the bustling streets all those years ago. But he remembered. No matter how far he'd come, Nalaar had never forgotten his experiences within those walls.

Power stirred inside him at the flood of memories. Thin wisps of flame coiled through his fingers before he quieted them. He had returned a far different man than the boy who had left these walls behind, yet this was where it had all begun. His journey had come full circle. It was fitting that he would make his new beginning here.

He was a tall man, gaunt but straight-backed with a commanding presence. He looked to be near thirty years of age, although it was somehow difficult to be certain. His hair was of a deep jet-black with a pair of coal colored eyes to match, staring out from a strong angular face. A light burned in his eyes that seemed to see more, or perhaps deeper, than those around him. His short beard was neatly trimmed and dark to match his hair, only enhancing the quiet authority that hung around him. His clothes were cut to fit and finely made, black satin trimmed with silver, always black to contrast the white robes of the Magaerin.

It was a simple conceit, a symbolic gesture of his defiance that accomplished nothing, yet somehow it mattered all the same. It mattered that people saw the difference between he and

they. There had been a time when he had worn the white with pride, but he had since learned that beneath those snowy garments lay selfishness and arrogance so vast it would be the shame of kings.

With a sigh he lowered his staff, running his long hands over the finely polished wood. Stepping forward, he mingled with the crowd that thronged the wide road approaching Terial's yawning gates. The staff clicked the ground easily as he walked, clearly more affectation than necessity. Drifting casually among the heavy traffic, Nalaar followed the steady stream of men and wagons toward the imposing gates. Armored soldiers manned the entrance to Terial, keeping a dispassionate watch over the flow of people entering the city. Nalaar observed them absently as he drew near, passing calmly beneath their indifferent eyes and into the streets beyond.

Leaving the gates, Nalaar paused at the enormous sprawl that rose before him. The great city of Terial, seat of power for the mighty western kingdom of Morshal, one of the Five Realms born out of the shattering of the ancient empire of Akileon. The city teemed with life and activity. The great wagonyards bustled with the enormous flow of goods that passed in and out of their warehouses, destined for all corners of the West.

Ahead, he could see the expansive manors of the nobility, and the elaborate shops and residences of the wealthy merchants that cluttered the districts around them. Above them all, the rising spires of the Royal Palace loomed on a hillock overlooking the city core.

Surrounded by its towering battlements, the King's Fortress was a daunting sight, a powerful symbol of Morshal's might and a constant reminder of their King's presence to the citizens of Terial. Nalaar's eyes lingered on the palace, his grip on the staff tightening almost

imperceptibly. *She* was there, somewhere within those walls. It was strange to think that Terial had become her preserve. He wondered what she would think if she saw him now. After all, she was the one who had set him on his current path. Yes, he thought, it was right that he had returned.

Turning from the grandeur of Morshal's wealthy and powerful, Nalaar instead walked north and eastward into the narrow, cluttered warren of streets where the laborers and poor of Terial made their homes. The rough streets were busy with the activity of midday. Children in varying quality of dress dashed and skipped among the throngs. Sweat-stained workers pushed rickety carts while peddlers cried their wares to passersby. Small wagons destined for unknown deliveries rumbled over the rough stones, their bulk crowding the streets as hard-bitten drivers cursed loudly at any delay. From the street sides and alleyways, wretched-looking beggars murmured and moaned piteously, thrusting out their wooden bowls in desperate search of alms.

Shops stood open for business, their weathered signs swaying in the slight wind. The myriad sounds of men at work dimly penetrated the bustle through the open doors. The occasional pair of watchmen could be seen in their crisp uniforms, long cudgels swinging at their sides. Rough, dangerous-looking men lounged in front of buildings. Their cold gazes lingered on the watchmen, who hurried on without so much as a glance in the watchers' direction. Their hard eyes followed Nalaar as well, his passing often sparking bouts of whispering but in the end they merely watched suspiciously.

Many of those he passed looked at him askance. Their expressions conveyed their unease as they looked furtively for his guards. Nalaar ignored their looks, letting the feel of the city

wash over him. These streets were as wild and ruthless as any wilderness, rife with the constant struggle for survival. How many like him had been swallowed by these streets, their lives devoured or discarded without notice or mention. How many sparks that might have flared to greatness had gutted out for lack of tinder upon these uncaring stones. It was only the chance touch of luck's indifferent hand that had spared him and caused his power to flare into flame.

Letting the thoughts stir slowly, Nalaar's eyes drifted as he wandered. The state of the buildings he passed was illuminating, the structures ranging from neat and serviceable to ruin and squalor. The disrepair was unmistakable, the buildings scarred by rotted wood and patchwork thatching, with crumbling mortar spilling into the streets where the neglect had been allowed to fester unchecked. Yet there were subtler signs of regular maintenance, care and even pride about some of the shops and homes. It was important to remember that there was hope, determination and strength in the people of Terial as well as weariness, fear and despair.

After a time, his wandering brought him to a large market that covered a wide plaza. Nalaar walked slowly among the vendors and peddlers before finally seating himself atop an overturned crate. He rested his staff across his knees and watched the flow of people scurrying busily about the marketplace, his dark eyes sharp with quiet consideration. People glanced at him, observing the fineness of his clothes with a mixture of uncertainty and puzzlement. Some hesitated, as if to inquire further, but each time caution prevailed and they left him alone. Ultimately, it was a group of children that broke his silence.

Nalaar spotted them readily enough, an especially ragtag band of urchins watching him from across the way. They were whispering conspiratorially among themselves, glancing

frequently in his direction. Nalaar studied them, intrigued by their brashness as they approached him in a disorderly file until they stood in a loose pack in front of him. After a brief bout of pushing and shoving, a thin, earnest-looking boy of no more than eight was thrust before him. Large eyes looked up at Nalaar with a pleading expression, the child shuffling his feet before asking in a piteous little voice. “Hey, Mister, can you spare a few pence for us?”

Nalaar looked down at the small child solemnly, his masterful voice was deep and sonorous but he kept it even when he spoke, as if addressing an adult instead of a child. “What is it you intend to buy?” he asked, watching the ragtag bunch thoughtfully.

The boy paused, gripped by a moment of indecision when faced with Nalaar’s level gaze. “A pie!” a small voice shouted excitedly before the boy could decide on his reply, and the young child nodded vigorously.

“I see,” Nalaar said, considering them, “and where would you purchase these pies of yours?”

His gaze followed the movement as the urchins turned in unison, pointing toward where a large pleasant-faced man stood behind a stand laden with all manner of pastries. “Bramby,” several of the children cried loudly.

“Well,” Nalaar said, lowering the silver-capped end of his staff and rising smoothly, “let us see what your friend Bramby can do for us.” Smiling faintly at the excited shouts, Nalaar made his way to the pastry stand with the pack of children skipping and flocking around him.

Bramby’s expression was uncertain as Nalaar descended upon him with the disheveled mob in tow, but faced with a customer he forced his unease aside, a welcoming, if slightly

nervous smile spreading across his face. Nalaar reached the counter and clapped his hand down firmly on the hard wood. "How much for your pies?" he asked, fixing the man with his strange dark eyes.

"They are four pence apiece, Milord," Bramby replied with an anxious bob of his head.

"There are no lords here, my friend," Nalaar cautioned. His tone was light but a firm authority permeated his words. With a swift glance at the dozen children arrayed behind him, Nalaar returned his attention to Bramby. "I would like twelve," he responded firmly. The children gasped and Bramby's face displayed his surprise. Nalaar removed his hand to reveal the silver half-crown that lay beneath and Bramby's eyes widened further.

Stepping away, Nalaar's expression grew solemn as he examined the children looking up at him in eager amazement. From all corners of the market people had drawn close, pausing to watch the strange scene. Nalaar ignored them, his attention on the children as Bramby fetched out the pastries. "Why don't you form a line?" Nalaar suggested, watching with a faint smile as they scrambled to comply.

Taking the first pie, Nalaar faced the eager line of children. "I have a choice for each of you," he said solemnly. Holding the pie in one hand, he fished in his purse before drawing out a pair of copper pennies. "This pie cost four pence, you may each take a pie or you can have these two coins." Kneeling down before the first child, a scrawny boy of perhaps eleven, Nalaar held out both hands. "It's all right," he encouraged, "take whichever you prefer." The boy hesitated briefly before eagerly taking the pie and skipping away. Nodding, Nalaar took the next pastry and again held out his hands, repeating the process, and each time the child selected the pie.

Finally, a boy rather glumly reached for the coins but before he could take them Nalaar closed his fist, holding his hand up in caution. “Why do you choose the coins?” he asked. His voice was encouraging but with an undertone of command.

“I don’t like pie,” the boy mumbled, his expression downcast, “it makes me get sick.”

Nalaar smiled ruefully. “Is there something else you would like?” he asked.

“Honey bread,” the boy said eagerly, his gloom vanishing beneath his excitement.

Nodding agreeably, Nalaar turned back to Bramby and made the purchase, handing the pastry to the boy who dashed off happily to join the others. The process started again, each child taking the pie until only one was left, a thin waif of a girl, perhaps eight years old, who had hung back behind the others. Now, however, she shuffled forward, her eyes fixed wistfully upon the pie. She glanced at where the others were eating with tears threatening to spill from her eyes as she reached for the coins.

“Why do you choose the coins?” Nalaar asked gently, stopping her and looking into the girl’s large hungry eyes.

“For my family,” she whispered, although her eyes still lingered longingly on the pastry. “My mom and sisters are hungry too. We all need the money.”

Nalaar smiled, tilting his head slightly in surprise. “What’s your name, Child?” he asked approvingly.

“Lina,” the girl responded, with a shy smile.

“You are a rare girl, Lina,” Nalaar said, opening his hand. The two coppers had been replaced by silver crowns and the girl’s eyes widened to the size of saucers as he pressed them

firmly into her hands. Lina clutched the coins tightly to her chest, looking up at him. “Not a word to anyone except your mother,” Nalaar cautioned so only she could hear, holding her gaze until she nodded solemnly. “Very good,” he said with a faint smile. “Now eat your pie and then I want you to hurry straight home. Will you do that for me?” he waited until she nodded affirmatively before handing the stunned girl the remaining pastry and rising to his feet.

A curious crowd had gathered around Bramby’s stall, grinding the market to a standstill. As Nalaar straightened to his full imposing height, a loud murmur swept the throng. He ignored them, retrieving his staff before facing the watching crowd for the first time.

“I want you all to consider what you’ve seen,” Nalaar declared, his black eyes flashing, his commanding voice like the crack of a whip as it hit the occupants of the market. “No doubt many of you would take the pie as well. Why would you not? Are they not worth the price? If I had given my spare coppers to these children it was pies they would have bought. Yet to this single girl, what two meager coins could buy was more valuable than what a pie was worth. Ask yourselves what that means and my coin will have been spent wisely.” Looking over the onlookers for a long forceful moment, Nalaar firmed his grip on his staff and strode into the crowd that parted before him.

“Who are you?” a distant voice shouted as he passed. “What is your name?” Nalaar made no move to answer, leaving the marketplace without a further word.

He walked briskly, ignoring the pair of unsavory-looking men that shadowed him from the market. The city around him deteriorated rapidly as he pressed deeper into the poor districts of Terial, the homes descending from the serviceable buildings of the Laborer Districts into the



outright squalor of the slums. The rough pair seemed to grow bolder as the moments passed, drawing nearer until they were only a few paces behind. As they started to close, however, Nalaar abruptly stopped.

“Would you knife a man for the pieces of metal he carries?” Nalaar asked hollowly. Turning slowly, he fixed them with his strange black eyes, the slender staff of blackwood held firmly in his hand. “What are your stories, I wonder?” Nalaar continued, his voice rising and falling compellingly as he faced the two men who glanced at one another uneasily. “What first drove you to your path? Was it desperation or greed? What sustains you now? Is it the cold thrill of your petty brand of power or the bridges burned behind you?”

The air had suddenly grown icy cold and an ominous echo sounded through Nalaar’s words as the two men shrank before him. “What is it that fills your hearts?” Nalaar demanded, his eyes burning with cold fire. “Is it the empty hunger of simple cruelty or the twisted wreckage of the need to survive? Perhaps the proper question is, should any of it matter or should your actions alone be enough to damn you?”

The men were cowering now, with Nalaar a vengeful figure towering over them, considering them coldly. “You are mere symptoms of the sickness that holds this city in thrall,” he said finally, the biting chill fading away. “For too long your sort of foulness has been allowed to spread unchecked, but the end of those days is near. You will trouble the people of this city further at your own peril, for one day the wrath of those you wrong will find you. Now leave me be.” Dismissing the trembling men without another glance, Nalaar turned his back on the shaken pair and continued on his way.

He walked slowly through the abject ruin of the slums as the sun continued its long descent. The poor watched in disbelief as he made his way silently among them. A path opened before him as he wandered and although eyes followed him, he was allowed to pass through the rough streets undisturbed. As his watchful gaze drifted over the dismal surroundings, the emotion behind his thoughtful expression remained unreadable. When the shadows began to lengthen, however, Nalaar finally left the wretchedness of the slums, his wandering taking him back to the edge of the Laborer District. The streets here were still poor but there was a grim resiliency about them that staved off the despair he'd left behind.

Nalaar's thoughts were interrupted by the sudden sounds of a loud disturbance nearby. The people around him started at the commotion and immediately began to hurry away from the turmoil. Nalaar watched them emotionlessly before striding purposefully toward the noise. Moving against the steady stream of people, Nalaar rounded a corner into a small side street and halted at the scene before him. A group of toughs wearing dark hoods and thick jerkins of rough leather stood in the empty street before a storefront, keeping a watchful eye on the surroundings. The sounds were coming from the store. A harsh series of crashes and thuds emanated from the door that had been left visibly ajar.

Suddenly the door banged open and a rangy, vicious-looking man burst into view, dragging a weakly struggling figure into the street. A pair of muscular thugs followed close behind, thick cudgels still clenched in their fists. The men guarding the street cleared a path as their leader hurled the battered figure bodily onto the street stones.

"I don't come here to listen to you talk, Harval," the leader snarled at the prostrate man,

who held up a hand pleadingly. "I can't spend your excuses so don't tell me you don't have the money. That's not how this works. I tell you what you pay and you pay it or else we communicate in other ways. I've been gentle with you in the past, Harval," the man said ominously, "more understanding than I am with most cause I like you. But when I don't get paid I start to think you don't appreciate all I do for you, and that makes me angry, you understand?" The leader paused, looking down at the beaten form expectantly.

"Yes," the battered man managed hoarsely in a quavering voice.

"Good," the tough said grimly. "You have three days to get me the money, otherwise a beating will be the least of your worries." Rising, he kicked the prostrate form once more for good measure before turning away contemptuously, his men falling in around him. "Three days," he called back over his shoulder.

The group stopped at the sight of Nalaar, tall and imposing in his rich garb. The leader started forward menacingly but one of the others grabbed his arm. "Careful Sarn, you know the rules," he warned, his voice low.

Shaking his arm free, Sarn glared at his companion before turning on Nalaar. "What do you think you're doing here?" the leader demanded harshly. "Are you lost or just slumming?"

"Neither. I am going to help that man," Nalaar replied evenly, his face emotionless as he studied the half-dozen men before him.

Sarn barked a rough laugh that was joined by several of his companions. "That one needs more help than you're willing to spare I'd wager," Sarn said darkly, thumbing back at the beaten man. Stepping forward, Sarn's voice became cold and deadly. "Do what you want, Stranger, but

you'd best be getting back where you belong. The Hand doesn't want trouble with the nobles but it's getting late and the longer you wait the more likely someone is to make a mistake." Stepping around Nalaar, the group filed swiftly past and vanished into the warren of streets.

Nalaar looked after them for a moment before turning and striding quickly to where the injured man was struggling to climb to his knees. Kneeling beside the beaten man, Nalaar laid his staff on the ground and helped him rise to a seated position where he swayed unsteadily. "Are you all right?" Nalaar asked calmly as the man drew in a haggard breath, and wincing, began to probe his injuries.

"All right?" the man gasped hoarsely, a dark laugh escaping his lips. "I'm a dead man and you want to know if I'm all right?"

"You seem to be in remarkable health for a dead man," Nalaar replied, helping the man rise before retrieving his staff. "Those men who attacked you, would you like me to call the Watch?"

"The Watch?" the man said incredulously. "Do you want me dead or are you mad? They own the Watch and those they haven't bought would sooner wet themselves than cross the Crows." Brushing off his trousers, the man looked at Nalaar in consternation. His eyes widened as he took in Nalaar for the first time. "My apologies, your lordship," the man stammered desperately. "I didn't mean . . . that is, I didn't realize."

"I am not a lord," Nalaar said firmly. "Come, let's get you inside." Guiding the stunned man into the open store, Nalaar looked over the chaos that greeted him. The front room of the shop was a shambles, tables had been overturned, counters broken in, chairs reduced to kindling

by the heavy cudgels. It looked to have been a carpentry shop but Sarn and his men had done their damage well. Nalaar made no comment on the carnage, however, simply leading his companion through the destruction and helping him into one of the few surviving chairs.

“I’m ruined,” the man said numbly, gazing over the devastation in disbelief. “How am I ever going to pay Sarn now? He’ll kill me for sure next time and what am I going to tell Mela? She can’t take this, not now when she’s so weak. What will she do after I’m gone? There will be no one left to take care of her. What will my children do if they lose us both?” the man asked, his voice raw with anguish as he looked up at Nalaar. “How did this all happen to me?” he whispered, clearly shaken beyond words.

“Perhaps you should tell me what happened here,” Nalaar suggested, his eyes glancing over the ruin before settling on the man with compelling intensity.

“It’s the Crows,” the man said brokenly. “It’s always been the Crows. They practically rule the city or at least the portions I’m likely to see. It’s not the King or the Council of Lords that matters in the wagonyards and workers’ districts. It’s the Crows’ law that carries the real weight in the common streets. They’re the ones you deal with if you want to do business in Terial. If you don’t pay off those thugs and murderers you won’t last a week within the walls.

“They collect from everyone, but never enough to break you. They’re too smart for that. They want you to get by well enough that they can keep coming back for more. Damn me, but I paid them every month for almost fifteen years until Mela got sick. I couldn’t pay both Sarn and the healer, but now what do I do? She’s still sick and Sarn’s getting impatient, not to mention my shop is ruined.”

The man was trembling, his expression lost and haunted as he looked over the broken interior of the store until his eyes finally found Nalaar. “Who are you?” he blurted. “Why are you listening to me? If you’re not a lord then you have the money to dress like one. Why should someone like you care about my problems?”

Nalaar ignored the questions, instead stepping away from the man and glancing cursorily over the shop. “First, I think we should fix up this mess,” he said calmly. “We can’t leave things as they are. Besides, putting your shop in order would seem the place to start.” Wading purposefully into the devastation, Nalaar began righting overturned items and sorting through the disarray with a relentless efficiency. “Why don’t you fetch your tools?” Nalaar said, studying the broken countertop with a critical eye. “Some of this can be repaired easily enough and we’ll save what we can from the rest.”

The shopkeeper hesitated, watching Nalaar in astonishment before finally rising unsteadily and disappearing into the backroom. He returned a short while later with an assorted collection of tools and a cloth sack full of braces and nails. Handing Nalaar a hammer, saw and rasp without a word, the man joined Nalaar in sorting through the damage. They worked together in silence, their efforts growing to complement each other as they went, collaborating to repair and mitigate the damage done to the shop. The counter was braced and reinforced, the legs and surfaces of broken chairs and tables salvaged or replaced, the dents in dressers and chests sanded and polished over.

When they were finally finished the shop looked rough but serviceable. Most of the damage had been concealed or repaired, if not undone. The surviving wares were back neatly on

display and the salvaged wood placed in the workshop for storage. Looking over his shop with some amazement, the man wiped his brow with a weary sigh. “Well I’ll be damned,” he muttered. “It’s no prize but it doesn’t look half bad.”

Turning to Nalaar, his expression was somewhat awed. “I don’t know what to say to you, Friend,” he said after a moment’s search for words. “You don’t know me and you surely had no reason to help me, yet you may have just saved my life. I’m in your debt, Stranger. The name is Harval.”

Nalaar clasped the offered hand firmly. “The ability to make a difference was reason enough. You owe me nothing,” he said, meeting Harval’s eyes before releasing his grip.

“You’re handy enough with those tools but you’re no carpenter,” Harval said. Slowly turning the hammer in his hands, he appraised Nalaar. “I admit I haven’t the faintest idea what to make of you. You are like no one I’ve ever seen or even heard of for that matter. What are you, Friend?”

“I have done a great many things, but none are what I am,” Nalaar said distantly. “You could call me a traveler, I suppose, but now that I have come to Terial I think my travels are at an end.”

“A newcomer, eh?” Harval asked curiously. “Well by the looks of things you must have wandered into the wrong part of town. Still, I appreciate all you’ve done. What’s your name, Stranger?”

“I am afraid I do not have one to share,” Nalaar replied, retrieving his staff from against the doorjamb.

“No name?” Harval asked uncertainly. “Well then what do people call you?”

“Whatever they wish,” Nalaar answered indifferently, leading the way out of the shop. He looked calmly over the city while Harval locked the door behind them. Dusk had fallen while they worked and the street outside was all but empty, only the occasional passerby hurrying warily about some unknown business. Nalaar wore a vague frown, seeming to debate something as Harval joined him. “Tell me, where would one find the Crows?” Nalaar asked finally.

“Why would you want to find them?” Harval asked nervously. “Sarn’s crew and some of the others hole up at the Deadman’s Roost. It’s a tavern not far from here, but unless you have business with the Crows you’re only asking for trouble if you go looking for them.”

“Perhaps,” Nalaar replied. “Trouble has always held a certain amusement for me, however.”

“Well, I can tell you the way,” Harval said dubiously. “Be careful though, you’ve done me more than a good turn and I wouldn’t want to be sending you to an early grave in return. If you need anything speak to Kran, he’s the owner. Kran’s a good man if a bit hard, a former soldier and a good one too to hear others tell it, tough as nails. He’s helped me out of some trouble now and again. Even the Crows don’t bother him.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Nalaar said calmly. “You said your wife was sick. How bad is she?”

“She’s weak and the fever comes and goes in fits,” Harval said worriedly. “The herbs don’t seem to be working, I don’t know what else to do.”

“I will come by your shop tomorrow evening to see how you are doing,” Nalaar said



distantly. “I have learned a few things on my travels. I could look at her if you wish?”

Harval’s eyes had widened, his expression becoming one of desperate hope. “Please, if you can help her I’ll be forever in your debt,” he said fervently, his voice shaking with emotion.

“I make no promises,” Nalaar responded firmly. “If you wish, however, I will see what can be done.”

“Of course,” Harval replied, regaining his composure with a noticeable effort. “Any help would be more than I could hope for, but please, whatever you can do.” His voice broke again as he wrung his hands nervously, seemingly ready to jump out of his skin.

“Very well,” Nalaar said after a brief silence. “Go home to your family, Harval. I will return tomorrow.” Leaving the anxious man, Nalaar started off, following the directions Harval had given him. He paused momentarily upon turning onto the final roughly paved lane. The Deadman’s Roost stood before him; a large building with a well-thatched roof, neatly cut and trimmed wood and general signs of meticulous care and repair. The tavern stood in striking contrast to the air of ruin that lay around it on the rundown street, its freshly painted sign swinging gently in the breeze.

Studying the structure thoughtfully, Nalaar seemed to reach some conclusion for he firmed his grip on his staff and approached the tavern, pushing open the heavy door and stepping through the narrow doorway. Entering the raucous interior of the common room, Nalaar paused while his eyes adjusted to the light. The room was large and crowded. Rough but strong and serviceable wooden tables and benches were pulled haphazardly together, their surfaces covered by heavy mugs of ale as the working denizens of Terial huddled around them on coarse stools

celebrating an end to the day's work.

The noise abruptly dampened, loud shouts and curses fading into hushed muttering as the common room noticed Nalaar, heads turning to stare at him in surprise and disbelief. Nalaar ignored the commotion, however, instead approaching the bar casually and seating himself on one of the open stools.

"You lost, Stranger?" the barkeep asked skeptically, considering Nalaar out of his one good eye.

"No more so than everyone else," Nalaar replied, leaning his staff against the bar. Tossing a pair of coppers on the counter, he said, "I'll take whatever this can get me."

The barkeeper nodded slowly, a faint smile twitching his lips. "All right, Stranger," he said finally, scooping up the coins deftly. Topping off a foaming mug of ale, he dropped it in front of Nalaar.

The man watched closely as Nalaar took a long swig, lowering the mug with a faint grimace followed by a shrug. "It'll serve," he sighed, taking another drink before setting the tankard back on the counter.

The barkeeper wiped the counter absently with his rag, studying Nalaar with interest. "So what's your story, Stranger?" he asked. "You're no lost dandy, I could tell that well enough from the moment you entered. No, you know how to handle yourself well enough. I'd reckon that just from the way you carry yourself. This isn't the first dive you've been in either, and that is passing strange for someone who can dress as you do. So what brings you to the Deadman's Roost?"

“I’m looking for something,” Nalaar said cryptically. “You have a sharp eye even for a barkeep, and you look as if you know your way around a touch of trouble. Soldier?”

“Was once,” the man said with a faint shrug. “I’ve got this to remember it by,” he added, tapping the black patch that covered his left eye. He was a fit, powerful-looking man of medium height, with considerable muscle on his build, his hands were quick and deft as he served the bar, working diligently to keep his barmaids’ platters filled with brown mugs of foaming ale.

His features were hard and difficult to read, not handsome but strong with a hint of danger beneath his crop of deep black hair. The black patch slung over his head gave him a slightly sinister cast. He kept his expression emotionless while he worked, his good eye sharp and alert as it surveyed the room.

“The name’s Kran,” he added to Nalaar after a pause. “I own this place. Seemed the thing to do when I left the army. I always wanted to own a tavern. It’s more work than killing but it’s a touch safer and the pay’s better.”

“Why the name?” Nalaar asked, inclining his head toward the front of the tavern. “A message for old friends?”

“Caught that did you?” Kran said with some surprise. “You’re a quick one. Most don’t see it. I lost a lot of friends in the recent Vale Wars. I wanted a place where they would’ve felt at home.” He shrugged. “It’s a bit of foolishness but that’s what keeps a man sane. Most folks think it’s a damned thing to scare people and that suits me fine. So how about you, Stranger – army, mercenary, or one of those nobleborn warriors missing the rough life?”

“None of those,” Nalaar said taking a long drink. “My father was a soldier, I suppose. He

started out a thatcher, but once the wars started again . . .” Nalaar shrugged. “He fought for Morshal in the Vale Wars same as you, although his time was a long while back. He caught an arrow in the neck they said, but he was no warrior, just a roofer with a sword, a man who was forced to leave his family behind. A life with purpose that died for nothing.”

“So bloody damn pointless,” Kran growled in disgust. “The Kingdoms have been fighting over that cursed ground ever since the Empire fell and what does it ever accomplish? The Valefolk have lived without kings for centuries, let them be I say.”

“You’re right,” Nalaar said quietly. “How much blood has spilled to capture a single village or field? What do the Valefolk care for any of the Realms? All it brings is war and strife yet the kings and nobles of the West throw lives by the thousands on the fire just to keep it burning. What does ownership of that war-torn land matter to the people who die for it?”

“You speak a good piece, Stranger,” Kran said with a sigh. “If the nobles want the Vale so badly it would be nice to see them bleed for it. Not that such a day will ever come. Still, if we’re the ones to fight it would be nice to have a cause we felt worth dying for. So, your father was from Morshal, eh? But then you’re a local after all,” he added with some surprise. “What about your mother then?”

“They hung her not far from here,” Nalaar said distantly. “She was caught stealing a time too many after my father died and our coin dried up.”

“A harsh lot was handed you, Stranger,” Kran said grimly. “If appearances are any judge, you’ve come far since then.”

“Traveled far and learned much,” Nalaar replied. “Yet I stand where I started, so how far

have I truly come?” His lips tinged with a faint smile as he finished his ale, settling his tankard firmly on the counter. “What is their story?” he asked, gesturing toward several large tables set at the back of the tavern.

Kran followed Nalaar’s look to where the rough group of dark-clad men sat around their tables, most were gambling or talking loudly over their ales. The man called Sarn was seated at the furthest table from the door. A collection of deadly-looking men sat with him, drinking their ales quietly and talking softly under their breaths. The others seemed to defer to a slender man seated mostly in the shadows.

They were watching Nalaar and Kran carefully over their tankards. When Sarn’s eyes met Nalaar’s cold gaze, however, his expression darkened and he made as if to rise before the man in the shadows motioned for Sarn to sit, saying something to the volatile man. Sarn started to protest but decided better of it. Lapsing back into his chair with a scowl, he glowered at Nalaar from across the room.

“Those are the Crows,” Kran said carefully, dropping his voice low so that only Nalaar could hear. “Damned thieves and parasites, the lot of them, but they run the city hereabouts. I let them do some of their business here and in return they leave me be. Can’t say I like the arrangement much but it serves me better than most. I suppose their coin spends as well as any other but the sight of those killers swilling my ale makes the bile rise in my gut. It doesn’t seem they’ve taken a liking to you, but Haren knows better than to cause trouble in my establishment. The lesser thugs are the ones you’ll have to worry about on the streets. Don’t go looking for trouble with them, Stranger, they’re ruthless and they’ve got the power and muscle to burn the

city down if they wished.”

“I shall remember that,” Nalaar said, turning his eyes from the watching men. “Do you have beds for rent?” he asked Kran suddenly. “I think I’d like to stay for awhile.”

“Aye, I have beds,” Kran said slowly, considering Nalaar. “There’s not many reasons why someone with your kind of coin comes to these parts and even less why they’d choose to stay. You say you’re looking for something and I say well enough, but I’d say you were waiting for someone or someone was looking for you?”

“Both true enough in their way,” Nalaar replied easily, unfazed by the barkeeper’s examination.

“I like you, Stranger,” Kran said after a brief hesitation. “You’ve seen the world and lived to speak of it. Besides, you’ve got a way about you that’s rare, a wisdom that I can respect. I’ll rent you a bed, but first I’ll need something to call you. I meet a lot of strangers in my work so I can’t have you claiming the title.”

Nalaar smiled faintly, a thought seeming to strike him. “You can call me Ayachi until you think of something you prefer,” he said, pressing a silver half-crown on the counter. “I can’t say how long I’ll be staying,” he added as Kran eyed the coin with a faint frown before sweeping it up and passing Nalaar a key.

“Ayachi, that’s a strange name,” Kran said slowly.

“It’s not a name,” Nalaar replied with an amused smile and a slight shake of his head. “It will serve for the moment, however.”

“Fair enough, Ayachi,” Kran said dryly. “I’ll ask no questions, but if you’re hiding from

someone you may want to change how you dress.”

“They are looking for me, true, but I am not hiding,” Nalaar replied. Standing smoothly, he took his staff and nodded in farewell to Kran. Feeling the watching eyes of the Crows upon him, Nalaar turned to face them, considering them openly for a long moment.

The common room grew quiet as the inhabitants witnessed the exchange, many shivering as the warm spring air grew icy cold. A faint smile twitched on Nalaar’s lips as he locked gazes with the Crows one by one, watching the deadly men struggle to meet his strange black eyes before looking away in disgust. Nodding ever so slightly in satisfaction as the last pair of eyes dropped to the table, Nalaar mounted the stairs, ignoring the glowers that stabbed at his back.