

DUNGEONS
& DRAGONS®

BILL
SLAVICSEK

THE MARK OF
NERATH



1 DARANI, IN THE SHADOWFELL, TWILIGHT

Kalaban marched through the streets of Darani, head held high and eyes straight ahead. He realized long ago that this was the last remnant of the ancient empire of Nerath, the human-ruled utopia that once covered most of the known world. The familiar buildings, with architecture that borrowed freely from elf, dwarf, dragonborn, and tiefling, somehow remained uniquely human in design. The cobbled streets. Even the smells. It all combined to create an illusion of a time that had come and gone. And sometimes Kalaban felt as though he was the only person in the whole place who realized it. If not for his duty, he would have tried to find a way out of this weary existence long ago. He sighed and tried to ignore the insignificant and sorry peasants who scurried around him as they performed tasks out of habit. They were shadows, echoes of lives lost long ago.

Just like him.

Few others in the city might understand the truth of their existence, but Kalaban knew. He imagined that this knowledge was in some way tied to the hell he had been consigned to. Because Kalaban, knight-commander of Nerath and captain of the Imperial Guard,

was dead, as was every other entity that inhabited poor, lost Darani. Or, to be more accurate, they were all undead.

Time had lost all meaning for Kalaban, but he remembered the day he had failed in his duty. That was the one blemish on an otherwise spotless record that had resulted in this unending nightmare from which there was no way to awaken. It had been a day like most other days for the Imperial Guard, which was charged with protecting Emperor Magroth: boring and glorious . . .



Kalaban stood beside his brother, Krondor, on the steps outside the Imperial Palace in Darani. Each of Nerath's imperial cities had a palace set aside for the emperor's use, in case Magroth was traveling. Magroth traveled often, and the members of his most-trusted Imperial Guard were always by his side. He was not a sit-in-his-castle ruler, not Magroth. The emperor enjoyed surveying his vast holdings almost as much as he enjoyed conquering neighboring lands and squelching rebellion. Kalaban sometimes wondered if the insults whispered by the crowds were true. They called Magroth "insane" and "mad." They likened him to a tyrant, and a few called him "demon." Kalaban knew that Magroth ruled with an iron fist, but the rest? His duty didn't allow him to question the methods or the orders of his emperor, so he tried not to think about such things.

The crowd this day seemed more nervous than usual. Rumors were rampant that the emperor had tracked a group of political malcontents to the walls of Darani, and now Magroth and his Imperial Guard were going to punish the entire city because of the supposed actions of a few. As usual, Kalaban had no idea what his emperor had in mind for today, but he knew that cruel punishment was not beyond Magroth's repertoire. He glanced over at Krondor,

who was younger than Kalaban by two years, and noticed that his brother had a haunted, distant look in his eyes.

“Something bothering you, brother?” Kalaban asked.

Krondor continued to stare over the crowd, not turning to face his brother as he said, “What could possibly bother me on this fine day, Kalaban? Why, look at all the potential victims that have dutifully gathered before the palace for Magroth’s amusement.”

Anger flared in Kalaban. His little brother was very good at making him angry. “Lose the attitude, Krondor, and act like the Imperial Guard you’re supposed to be.”

“I’ve earned my post, Kalaban,” Krondor said, “just as you have. Now leave me be so I can perform the duties assigned to me. Isn’t that your credo? Duty above all?”

Before Kalaban could reply, the palace doors began to swing open. He glared briefly at his brother, and then stepped to the side to flank the stairs in anticipation of the emperor’s appearance.

The usual swarm of advisers and attendants were absent today. Emperor Magroth strode out of the darkness of the palace entry into the daylight, walking alone, wearing his robes of office and carrying the staff that hinted at the arcane power he possessed. Sometimes Kalaban wondered why the emperor even kept the Imperial Guard. He never really seemed to need the protection. Kalaban had seen the emperor in action, and Magroth was a deadly foe. He easily tossed spells around that devastated single enemies and attacking armies alike. Kalaban had even seen Magroth survive wounds that would have killed any other man ten times over. The knight-commander had never determined if it was the wizardry or the emperor’s own stubborn determination that allowed him to shrug off sword wounds or arrow or spear piercings, but Kalaban had seen the emperor survive such attacks with his own eyes. Sometimes the powers demonstrated by his emperor frightened him, and on those occasions he felt a bit closer to

the common folk of the empire. But Kalaban couldn't dwell on such thoughts, and he forcibly turned his attention back to the emperor.

Approaching his fiftieth year, Magroth was hearty and robust. Tall and thin, his gaunt features were sharp and his eyes blazed with intelligence and—yes, Kalaban had to admit it to himself—a touch of madness that sometimes chilled the knight-commander to his core. The emperor took a few steps and stopped so that he stood directly between the two brothers who were his most trusted Imperial Guard. Magroth nodded at Kalaban, and then he turned to survey the crowd. The corners of his thin lips turned upward, and Magroth seemed to breathe deeply of the fear that rose from each man and woman gathered at the base of the palace steps.

Kalaban scanned the faces arranged before them, watching for any signs of treachery or danger. All he saw, though, was fear. It was etched into the expressions of the humans, dwarves, scattered elves, and halflings, and the few solitary dragonborn and tieflings in the crowd. They were afraid of their emperor. And Magroth relished that fear.

“People of Darani,” Magroth said, his voice strong and loud, “a terrible danger to your emperor and to Nerath itself festers in the shadows of your fair city.”

Muttered expressions of disbelief and denial reverberated through the crowd. Magroth allowed the people a few moments before he tapped his staff three times on the stone step, signaling them to fall silent.

“How hard it is to see the truth,” Magroth said, “but that is why your emperor has come. I shall help you eliminate this danger. I shall help you become better citizens of this great empire.” He paused, letting his words sink in, and his thin smile pulled back ever farther across his sharp, narrow features. “Though only a handful of malcontents hide within Darani's walls, you are all guilty of not seeing the signs. Of not taking action. Of forcing my own hand in these

matters. For that, each family must sacrifice one of its own. Fathers and mothers, bring forth one child each. I want to see this square painted red in their innocent blood before the sun sets this very day, for their innocence is the price of your guilt!”

The crowd let out a shocked gasp. Kalaban reached for his weapon, certain that this announcement would elicit some kind of hostile response. If not for his own duty, Kalaban himself might have reacted as the crowd was to this unexpected punishment from Emperor Magroth. From the corner of his eye, Kalaban saw that Krondor was also drawing his blade. Suddenly, Kalaban’s senses were screaming at him. Something was wrong! He turned to face his brother, his sword slipping free of its scabbard in one swift motion. But he was too late.

Krondor’s dagger flashed once, twice, three times. The final time, Krondor left the bloody weapon sticking in the emperor’s back. An expression of surprise replaced the smile on Magroth’s face, as blood began to trickle from the corner of his mouth.

“This . . . is . . . not . . . possible . . .” Magroth sputtered, spraying crimson droplets with every hard-fought word. “No natural power . . . can . . . harm me . . .”

“I am no longer natural,” Krondor spat, “and your reign of evil ends today!” He began to pull his sword free as Magroth dropped to both knees and blood stains spread across the back of his robes.

Kalaban struck then, driving the blade of his sword deep into Krondor’s flesh, finding the exposed portion at his side where the armor didn’t completely cover him. Krondor had assassinated the emperor, and Kalaban had killed his brother.

At the instant that Krondor fell, at the instant that the emperor simultaneously sank to the cold, blood-soaked steps, dark clouds covered the sky and blotted out the light of the sun. Thick mist began to rise from the cobbled streets, making it hard to see more than a few dozen feet in any direction. Kalaban tried to make sense out of what

was happening. It seemed as though the entire city of Darani was sliding away, carrying them all with it as the dark clouds and thick mist consumed it. Even as the crowds screamed and wailed and prayed, even as Krondor's life slipped away, Kalaban could feel his own heart come to a sudden stop. The familiar beat was gone, but somehow Kalaban remained standing. Panic threatened to overwhelm him when he heard the strong, steady voice of his emperor at his side.

"Yes, Kalaban, we're dead," Magroth said. "Get over it and help me up." And then the emperor laughed. It was a crazed laugh, full of both sorrow and madness.



Now they were all trapped here, in a dread domain deep within the Shadowfell. The natural world has reflections, parallel planes of existence that have different laws and house different creatures. The Shadowfell, a dark echo of the world, was a place of the dead and the undead, as well as things of shadow and darkness. Not wholly evil, but certainly a place with a sinister side. Kalaban wasn't sure how much of this knowledge he had learned in the centuries since Darani slid into the Shadowfell and how much of it was just in his head as part of this afterlife punishment he believed he was suffering. No matter. He had the knowledge, and it was his particular burden to bear.

His and that of his emperor.

Which brought Kalaban back to the present. Emperor Magroth had sent for him, and he was already late in answering that summons. Kalaban picked up his pace. When he reached the palace steps, he mounted them two at a time. Images of his brother's body falling after his own sword struck flashed briefly before his eyes as he climbed the steps, but Kalaban refused to acknowledge them. He sometimes wondered why, of all of them, death had only truly claimed Krondor. But mostly he cursed his brother for bringing this disaster upon them

and then having the good fortune of finding a way to escape from it while the rest of them had been trapped.

At the top of the steps, Kalaban ignored the guards stationed there and entered the palace. As always, it was cold inside. Cold like a grave, he realized.

Kalaban slowed his pace as he approached the emperor's audience chamber. There were voices inside. One was clearly Magroth, but Kalaban did not recognize the second voice participating in the conversation. It was a woman's voice, but it wasn't the voice of any woman in Darani. How could that be? In all the centuries that had passed since Darani had abandoned the natural world and taken up residence in the Shadowfell, it had been a closed domain. No one ever visited Darani. And worse, no one could ever leave. They were all trapped in this shadow city, punishment for the wrongs they had perpetrated in life. Or, at least, that was what Kalaban believed. Now there was a new voice in the palace, and Kalaban was both excited and afraid.

He paused outside the door to the audience chamber to listen, trying to determine if the newness of the strange voice was just a trick of his imagination.

"You must complete three tasks in return for your freedom," the woman said, her voice exotic and soft, but with an undertone that Kalaban couldn't identify.

"And these tasks? Do I get to know what they are before I sign in blood?" That was Magroth's voice. Kalaban could recognize that the emperor was attempting to disguise his rising excitement.

"Of course," the woman continued, "Lord Orcus would never require anyone to agree to a deal that was not fully understood by all sides."

"No, of course not," Magroth replied sarcastically. "So, these tasks?"

“First, you must locate the Necropolis Stone,” the woman explained. “Called kelonite or dead glass, it is a fragment of crystal as black as a starless night, shaped into a triangular pendant encased in a gold frame. It resides in the tower of the wizard Moorin, in the town of Fallcrest. With the amulet, you will be able to track down Sareth, a creature who has turned away from Lord Orcus and abandoned its responsibilities. Take possession of the amulet and destroy Sareth. Do this, and your first task shall be complete.”

“The second task must be performed within the lost Necropolis of Andok Sur. The Necropolis Stone shall guide you to this lost city of the dead. When you arrive, you shall perform a special ritual. I shall provide you with a scroll describing the ritual.”

“Sounds easy enough,” Magroth said. “And the last task?”

The woman paused. Kalaban contemplated entering the chamber, but before he could take a single step, he heard the next words the woman uttered. “The third task requires you to eliminate the remaining members of Nerath’s royal bloodline,” she said. “You must slay your remaining descendents.”

“That’s all?” Magroth responded. “And here I thought that the demon prince Orcus was going to ask for something difficult and disturbing.”

Kalaban decided that he had heard enough. He entered the audience chamber and said, “You called for me, my emperor?”

Magroth turned to his knight-commander and a hint of annoyance played across his gaunt features. “Took your time, Kalaban,” the emperor said. “This is Barana Strenk, a death priest of Orcus, the Demon Prince of Undeath. She has come a long way to see me this day.”

Kalaban bowed before the woman. She was tall, shapely, and dressed in crimson robes. A streak of silver highlighted her otherwise black hair. Kalaban noticed two other things about the woman.

First, she wore a small, pearl skull around her neck, its mouth open as though in a scream. He assumed this was the symbol of her office as a death priest of Orcus. The second was that she was alive, and the warmth emanating from her was like a bonfire blazing within the death-cold of the palace. He was drawn to her warmth, her life, in a way that he had not experienced in countless centuries. It was all he could do not to rush over and bask in the life-heat that radiated from her.

Kalaban forced himself to say, “My lady.” Then he took his usual position beside the emperor.

Barana glanced briefly at Kalaban, then she ignored him and turned back to Magroth. “Do we have a deal, Emperor Magroth?” she asked, but to Kalaban’s ears it sounded more like a demand delivered in a soft, silky voice. Not unlike a sharp dagger hidden within a velvet glove.

Magroth rose from his throne, using his arcane staff to support his tall, gaunt frame. He had lost much of his vitality in death. His hair was totally white now, and his flesh was sunken and gray, stretched tight across his sharp-boned features. The handle of Kronдор’s dagger still jutted from Magroth’s back. Try as they might, neither the emperor nor his knight-commander had ever been able to remove the weapon that had forged this Shadowfell domain.

Magroth’s eyes were milky white, but they still shone with the intelligence and madness that Kalaban was familiar with. What was the term? Lich? Yes, that’s what Magroth had become. A lich. And Kalaban had become a death knight.

The emperor faced the priest of Orcus. “The deal is struck.”

“Very well,” Barana nodded, “You have your freedom from this place . . . for a year and a day. Complete your tasks, and your freedom is forever. Fail and you shall be drawn back into this domain of dread as a moth is drawn to a flame.”

Magroth laughed. “A year and a day? A year and a day? Does that sound like a fair amount of time to you, knight-commander?” The emperor suddenly turned serious as he faced the death priest. “And if that isn’t enough time to do these tasks you require of me?”

“It must be,” Barana said, “for that is all the time there is.”

2 NENLAST, FALON’S HOME, DAY

Falón came awake to the sound of his mother’s voice.

“Falón,” she called from the doorway. “Did Cleric Basku declare a special holiday and I just didn’t hear about it?”

“What?” Falón stammered, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. “No. Not that I know of. What are you talking about, Mother?”

His mother laughed. He loved the sound of her laughter, especially because he didn’t often have occasion to hear it. She wasn’t a sad woman, but she rarely laughed. He was sure it had something to do with his father’s death, even though that was a long time ago. Or perhaps the more recent death of his grandfather had made her more reserved. But here she was, laughing at something he said, and he had no idea why.

“Come, my favorite son,” she urged. “I’ve made the morning meal and if you don’t eat it and get moving, you’re going to be late. Cleric Basku has never been known as a patient and forgiving master.”

“Favorite? I’m your only son. I’ll be right out,” Falón said, giving his mother the look that said “a little privacy, please.”

She smiled, nodded, and stepped out of the doorway. “Don’t take too long,” she called back. “I have a feeling that you’re in for a busy day.”

Young Falón, fast approaching his seventeenth birthday, hopped out of bed and reached for his clothes. As Cleric Basku’s only apprentice at the small shrine dedicated to Erathis, the god