



THE
WIZARDS
BLOODWALK
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PROLOGUE

The Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)
Early Autumn (Uktar)

Nuressa clung to the low stone wall, facing the sea. She stared at dark ships that approached on reddened waves as chaos erupted in the streets behind her. Shouts, screams, and inhuman roars faded into the background as the tide swelled, carrying its ominous burden closer.

The crimson light of early sunset grew deeper and more inflamed, casting the small town of Log-fell in tones of blood as she struggled to pull herself up on weakening legs. Her pale, sickly skin was covered in red welts and painful lesions, signs of the blush, a plague that had sprung to grim life a little over a tenday ago.

Clouds of steam rolled atop the lethargic waves of the Lake of Steam, carrying the handful of strange longboats closer. But Nuressa's eye was drawn by a lone figure clad in tattered red robes walking

barefoot upon the sea ahead of the shadowy fleet. It was a woman with flowing dark hair and eyes that were flooded with red. The woman extended her arms outward as she neared, as if gathering the town in a distant embrace.

Warmth flowed across Nuressa's lips and she tasted blood. Her nose dripped, succumbing to the bleeds the blush induced as its grip grew stronger.

A droning chant drifted on the air, emanating from the longboats behind the woman in red. No words could be made out in the menacing litany, but power rippled in the syllables that reached her. The sound of the deep voices rose gooseflesh across Nuressa's body, and the chant drove a chill wind, early for the season. Nuressa shivered.

The steady drip of Nuressa's nose became a bloody stream as the woman in red's voice joined the macabre chorus. The waves around the woman pulsed in a circle as she spoke harsh words in an arcane language. Blood spilled from her eyes and curled across her cheeks in unknown symbols and sigils, runes of power that changed from one to another as she spoke.

The fear and terror Nuressa had been numb to just moments ago returned with a vengeance. She gasped as pain lanced through her chest, arms, and legs, a dull ache that crawled up her neck as the chanting grew louder. The chorus washed across the town and raised screams from the maddened masses behind her. Paralyzed by horror, she could not tear her eyes away from the woman in red, who rose in the air, her toes barely touching the water. Closer now, Nuressa could see strange, scarlike designs and markings on the woman's body, horrific and beautiful, like a poem of fine lines and old pain.

The chant reached a crescendo that throbbed behind Nuressa's eyes, and just as she considered acting on her fear and running away to find shelter or sanctuary, the noise stopped. Silence crashed across Logfell as the woman in red tossed her head and arms backward, arching her back in ecstasy or pain, the focal point of some dark working.

Then the blooded eyes lowered, seeming to meet Nuressa's. Crimson lips smiled and whispered a single syllable, releasing

an energy that thundered across the water's surface in an ever-widening wave. The ground shook as the force crashed against the coast, flooding across the town like a choir of swarming locusts.

Nuessa fell from the low wall, trembling as her veins pulsed and became visible beneath her skin. Muscles throbbed and strained against tendons and bone. Her mind was full of the sound of the chant, unable to escape it as she crawled toward the mass of limbs and stampeding terror that filled the street in front of her.

Her friends and neighbors had become like animals, clawing and biting at one another to reach the gates. Nuessa did not look at their faces, pale shadows of the people they'd once been. She focused on going home, finding her daughter, and praying for release from this incursion of chaos, pushing and screaming through the crowd, and trampling across the bodies of the fallen as she passed.

The same scene lay in the streets beyond—people fleeing or fighting one another. All of them were held in the grip of the blush, the plague excited to growth by the chant they could all hear playing in their minds. Nuessa stood and stared at her small home for several moments, searching her memory, unable to imagine what it must have looked like before the blush. Frustrated, she pulled the door open and fell to her hands and knees inside, holding her breath as fresh pain washed through her head, and gulping for air as it passed.

On her stomach, she crawled through the simple kitchen, pushing chairs out of her way in the dark. Down the hallway, darker still, the bedroom door was open, allowing the dying light of the sun to illuminate her path.

Whispers surrounded her and she realized they were her own, a stream of nonsense, spilling out the contents of her mind in a rush so fast she could not cling to one thought before the next was gone. An emptiness hovered in the back of her mind, growing larger as she poured out the myriad details of her life, until the empty thing filled her head.

She imagined it behind her, some creature crawling and mewling in infantile tones as it pawed at her ankles in the dark. It seemed she could hear its claws echoing her own

fingernails as they strained to pull her weight. She sobbed in pain and fear as she reached the doorway at the end of the hall. Gripping the frame, she slid her body into the room and kicked the door shut against the imagined demon that hounded her.

She pulled herself to a sitting position and winced as the dim sunlight found her eyes. A growing twilight colored the sky in violets and reds as she muttered uncontrollably, trembling and shaking as pain wracked her body. Her eyes rolled, trying to recognize the room she sat in, seeking some memory to link it to herself. Her whispering slowed and the words became meaningless and distant—a language she could not recognize though she'd spoken it all her life. The last dregs of her mind bled out as silence surrounded her.

The stabs of pain intensified, but she was no longer fully aware of their ebb and flow, nor could she identify where she hurt. Her eyes, now blank and unmoving, stared at the darkening sky, and though her heart still pounded madly, her head slumped forward, limp and lifeless, privy only to the darkness.



Soft scratching came from beneath the bed and small hands appeared at its edge. Young eyes, rimmed in tears, peered over the rumpled blankets at the intruder whose lifeless head now slumped forward. The girl, frightened and alone, stared at the body of the strange woman who'd entered her home. Listening carefully, she could no longer hear the droning chant or the screams and wails outside.

She stood, tiptoed to the door, and eased it open, wincing as it creaked. The door was soon ajar just enough that she could slide her small figure through the crack. She stared down the hall, shaking in fear, the darkness of early evening undisturbed by candle or lantern. Moments passed like decades as she gathered the courage to step out into the ebony terrain.

Slow footsteps thumped by the door to the outside, and the girl froze in place, listening and waiting. She stared into

shadows that danced with the shapes of imagined beasts. A low moaning rose on the wind, and she knew this would not be her mother or father coming home.

She turned away, easing herself back into the bedroom, intent upon returning to her hiding place. Halfway through, she glanced at the fallen woman against the bed, and in the soft darkness of early evening, found glossy eyes staring back at her.

CHAPTER ONE

He remembered playing games as a child. Or rather, watching other children play games as he stood alone.

Quinsareth threw himself into a dive, sailing over the rail around the high balcony of the Red Cup Inn. His tattered cloak trailed behind him like a shred of shadow, twisting with his tumbling form as he negotiated the fall. He prepared his outstretched arms for impact with the stone floor below. Flashing knives followed his descent, spinning and whistling past him, narrowly missing. He could almost hear the clicking stones of the Fate Fall, its intricately carved pieces falling to the ground, as the floor rushed up to meet him.

His fingertips touched down and he rolled, somersaulting and catching himself in a low crouch as knives clattered to the ground around him.

The Fate Fall had been the game of choice among those petty children. He had not been allowed to play, but he had watched—and learned.

Those startled few drunks still in the common room stared wide eyed at his cloaked figure, surrounded by several lazily spinning blades on the stone floor. A quick glance beneath the rim of his well-worn hat told them it was time to leave, and the almost inhuman voices cursing from the balcony above punctuated the idea with sobering clarity.

Glancing over his shoulder, he watched the shadows on the ceiling as his foes gave chase. He stood and leaped toward the front door, shoving several stumbling drunkards ahead of him, making sure that all those capable of escape did so. The others, too long in their cups for the evening, snored in blissful ignorance. These he forgot as Vesk, leader of the assassins known as the Fallen Few, reached the balcony's railing, near the ancient altar that gave the Red Cup its name, and stared down with black eyes and readied daggers. His three companions joined him, their horrific appearances made more so in the guttering light of the torches below them.

Quinsareth turned back to face them, breathing calmly. The game had become both his meditation and his mantra—a game he'd never played with stones that he watched resolve in blood and steel.

The striking blue eyes of the pale one were on him. Sniffing the air and spitting, Blue-Eyes's wide mouth scowled as his raspy voice broke the silent stand-off.

"Sweetblood," Blue-Eyes muttered.

The game began by placing the small rectangular stones on end, one at a time, in neat little rows and twirling designs across the ground.

Quinsareth held his head low and walked backward as the assassins descended into the common room, drawing cruel weapons and moving into place. Vesk walked down the stairs behind Blue-Eyes, who in turn followed a hulking brute with scaly gray skin and a jaw and brow lined with little spines. Their fourth crawled along the opposite wall, hidden in a living cloak of shadows.

Each stone in the game each held a different meaning, inscribed in a symbol or rune.

Quinsareth could feel their hate, like an aura reaching for him with clawed fingers, eager to squeeze the life from this “sweetblood,” a devil’s term for the angel-touched, the aasimar. His feet found the small wooden bridge that separated the entrance from the common room and he continued, stopping about halfway across.

The game the children played was random, unknowing of the rules and nuances of the game.

He could see the brief look of confusion on Vesk’s face and he pitied them, his celestial blood stirring at their nearness even across the stone floor of the broad inn. Obviously, they’d thought he would take flight into the darkness of the ruins outside. Vesk’s right hand formed a swift and intricate gesture, a sign in the quiet language of rogues and thieves meaning “caution,” and his companions halted and spread out, forming a semicircle around the bridge and their quarry.

But Quinsareth knew the game’s secret sense, reading the tales and stories in their chaotic patterns.

Beneath his cloak, Quinsareth searched a small interior pocket and withdrew a small sphere, holding it before him in the palm of his right gauntlet. Its surface was glass, but within, it looked rotten, veins of ochre tracing through the dark mass. Vesk raised a knife, prepared to throw but watching for the slightest hint of magic from the sphere. The dark tattoos across his neck and shoulders squirmed and twisted in anticipation.

Quinsareth turned and hurled the sphere at the front door, his left hand already resting on the hilt of the curved bastard sword at his side. Glass shattered on the doorframe, and he drew his blade, turning back as viscous liquid burst forth from the broken globe, the alchemical mixture reacting explosively as it gulped air. The liquid grew thick and tough, and roping tendrils of goo covered half the door in moments, sealing the entrance.

The sword he drew screamed in rage, a piercing shriek that pulled sweat from his skin. He swung the blade in a wide

arc, deflecting Vesk's thrown knife and sending it splashing into the dark waters of the reflecting pool beneath the short bridge. The two locked stares for a brief moment, Vesk's black eyes meeting Quinsareth's pearly gaze, then the scaled brute charged, raising a serrated long sword to attack.

Quinsareth reversed his swing, knocking the brute's sword aside, and spun. Crouching low, he brought the blade around to cut into his attacker's hips. The sword wailed as it passed neatly through the tough layer of thick scales and bit the soft flesh beneath. Humming in pleasure, it cleaved all the way through, spilling foul, black blood to the boards of the bridge.

Quinsareth had always watched that first stone, wondering at its simple descent, catching the image in his mind just before it struck the next piece.

The brute's top half fell into the dark water below, splashing into its rippled surface and following Vesk's knife to unknown depths, his legs left behind on the bridge. Quinsareth stood, raising the bloodied edge of the long, curved sword known as Bedlam in a defensive stance, and eyed the faltering resolves of his remaining enemies.

The first stone had fallen, now must they all.

Blue-Eyes hissed, his toothless maw opening wide as he spit forth a cloud of foul-smelling mist. It swelled quickly, turning a yellowish color and smelling of sulfur. Though he couldn't see them through the mist, Quinsareth could hear them retreating to the balcony, taking the higher ground. He sprang through the thick cloud, his lungs burning and eyes watering in the noxious vapor. Once through, he saw Vesk and Blue-Eyes running up the stairs. Blinking the moisture from his blurry eyes, he moved to follow them. He stopped as movement on his left caught his attention.

Barely ducking in time, he avoided a bladed chain that swung over his head. The dark folds of shadow surrounding the third assassin unfolded in midair as it attacked. Quinsareth struck at the shapeless foe, thrusting Bedlam into the center of the shifting mass. The assassin stepped back, avoiding the shrieking blade, but came back quickly, the chain once again lashing toward Quinsareth's legs.

Quinsareth rolled backward as the chain struck the stone floor in a shower of sparks. Standing again, he caught a brief glimpse of a man within the shadows as they shifted, revealing a masked face and thin shoulders. Learning that his opponent was corporeal gave him new confidence. Bedlam struggled in his hand like a wild dog on a leash. The sword's desire for battle was palpable, and Quinsareth allowed himself to be drawn into its raw emotions.

Rolling forward, he caught the end of the chain before it could be pulled back to strike again. He felt a tug on the other end and leaped into the shadows, now blind but fully in the thrall of Bedlam's rage. His weight slammed into the body within the darkness, knocking them both to the floor. They rolled as they struggled against one another. Quinsareth felt his opponent's hands around his throat, cold and clammy.

He reached up and felt the assassin's shoulder, judged the distance, and swung Bedlam's pommel into the dark where his foe's masked face should be. He was rewarded by the sounds of the mask cracking, a grunt of pain, and crunching bone. As the fingers around his throat loosened, he looped the end of the chain, still in his right hand, around the assassin's neck. The cold hands drew back and he heard a muffled cry of alarm from beneath the mask.

Quinsareth freed his leg and planted a boot on the shadowed man's torso, pushing hard while pulling on the looped chain. All resistance quickly went slack as the bladed chain tore through flesh and sinew. The shadows dispersed, exposing the damp, translucent skin of the man beneath. A crack in the white mask offered a glimpse of the disfigured face within.

Quinsareth swiftly abandoned any thought of the horrors that could have inflicted such injury and looked up to the balcony. Vesk stood there waiting, drawing his arm back to throw knives as the darkness disappeared. The assassin's wrist flicked like lightning, loosing three blades in the space of a heartbeat.

Bedlam danced upward to block the first knife as Quinsareth rolled sideways, dodging the second. The third opened

a ragged gash across his collarbone. He winced at the pain of the wound, but jumped forward, tumbling as he ran for the stone column at the base of the stairs. The last of Vesk's knives sang against the floor as he moved.

Putting his back to the column, Quinsareth caught his breath. He reached up to the bleeding wound on his collarbone with his right hand, which also bled from many small cuts inflicted by the bladed chain. Bedlam seemed to feel these pains and its handle twitched in Quinsareth's left hand, a sibilant hum emanating along its length.

Quinsareth looked to the front door. It was still covered by the tanglefoot mass, but he knew he didn't have much time left. The exposed liquid could last only so long before it would grow brittle and flake away. He'd tracked the Fallen Few's assassins for too long to allow these last two to escape.

He turned and ran up the stairs, Bedlam raised defensively and prepared to strike. Blue-Eyes awaited him at the top, smiling ominously with purple gums and inhaling a deep breath, mist curling at the edges of his mouth.

As the yellow mist belched from the maw of the assassin, Quinsareth charged through, heedless of the sulfurous smell and disorienting nature of the vapor. He threw his weight and momentum into a punch. The blow landed squarely on the pale man's chest, knocking the breath from his lungs. Quin held his own breath, but his eyes still burned in the yellow mist. He followed the punch with another, slamming Blue-Eyes against the wall. Bedlam immediately followed the strike, thrusting into the heaving chest of the deformed man. Blood and mist flowed freely from the wound once Quinsareth withdrew the blade.

When he turned around, Vesk was gone. Quinsareth cautiously sidestepped along the rail, peering into the shadows near the balcony.

He caught a flash of bright eyes watching him in the darkness, tucked in a corner between a stone column and the wall. Then they disappeared on a sudden breeze, causing the torches nearby to flicker and wave. A strange sensation passed through him, a kindred chill that he both loathed and recognized at the same time. He shook the feeling off

quickly as Vesk's silhouette appeared on the balcony near the top of the ancient altar.

Long ago, the stone building had been a temple to a dark deity, a fiendish lord demanding sacrifice and blood. In recent years, the remote location of the temple and the ruins that surrounded it had become a prime location for secret and unscrupulous meetings, catering to those with no wish to be found or heard. Much of the temple's macabre elements had been stolen or carted off as building materials, but the large sacrificial bowl and the twisted statue that supported it remained. Stained by years of spilled blood and now filled with a deep red wine called *erskilye*, or the oathwater, it was a reminder of the nature of the Border Kingdoms, a symbol of false permanence and ruin.

The unlit ground between the two attackers drew them forth. For Vesk, the darkness was a familiar field of killing and revelry, a place to contact the Lower Planes and bargain for the lives of those his masters wished dead. For Quinsareth, the darkness echoed a familiarity with the hunt, conjured a home for the part of him that called Bedlam brother, and played a dirge for the man he might have been.

The men ran to meet in the middle, Vesk's crawling tattoos glowing a faint green to mirror the turquoise glimmer of Quinsareth's shrieking bastard sword. Their blades clashed in a blur of slicing steel and sparks. Though he'd charged to meet the assassin, Quinsareth focused on defending himself, destroying those few moments in which Vesk was most effective. Assassins struck to kill, exploiting immediate weaknesses and imbalance. Quinsareth knew a prolonged fight would wear his opponent down. He could see frustration in Vesk's face already, the assassin's tattoos writhing and twitching.

Bedlam's magic tingled along Quinsareth's arm, infecting his senses with its voice and drawing forth his hidden emotions. He swayed forward as he pressed the attack back to Vesk, swinging his sword faster and more precisely. Vesk cursed as he was pushed back, backpedaling to avoid the shrill voice of Bedlam and its master's well-trained arm.

With two sudden strokes, Quinsareth disarmed the assassin leader. The first knocked his sword to the ground, which slid to rest in a corner. The second opened a deep wound in Vesk's arm as it swung wide without the weight of a blade. Bedlam halted before the middle of Vesk's chest, humming ominously and lying uncharacteristically still in Quinsareth's hand. Slowly he pushed the assassin back the few remaining feet to the wine-filled altar.

Quinsareth was reminded of the nobles in some of the larger cities to the north who trained hunting dogs to sit unmoving while small morsels were placed on top of their muzzles. The dogs would sit still until given permission to eat the tempting treats. He had needed several years to teach Bedlam the same trick, and even longer before that to teach himself.

Vesk took a breath, but found no words waiting to save his life. No bargain, no blackmail, nothing came to mind to sway the intent behind those pale, white eyes that stared at him.

Quin could smell the stink of the Lower Planes on Vesk, that faint aura of the fiendish. He did not begrudge the assassin for making unwholesome choices, but neither would he spare him. No quarter, no surrender, and no mercy would be offered. He imagined Vesk had never considered begging for his own life before that moment.

Bedlam scraped along the edge of the altar's bowl as it pushed through Vesk's chest with lightning speed. Quinsareth watched as the assassin's eyes faded and his head slumped. The strange living tattoos tried to crawl along the now-quieting blade of their master's killer, but they faded and turned black as they dripped to the floor, mingling with Vesk's blood.

Quinsareth pulled Bedlam free, cleaned and sheathed the sword, and let the assassin fall to the ground. He stood, smelling the horrible scent of the dying tattoos with grim satisfaction. They had provided the link between the Fallen Few and their fiendish lords, infesting the body of Vesk and making a once small-time cutthroat into an ambassador to

the dark courts. His nature, like that of those who followed him, was a twisted, perverse mockery of the man he had once been.

As the long-held chill in his body faded, Quinsareth felt his stomach turn. Fatigue claimed him, and he collapsed into a chair, breathing heavily and squeezing his eyes shut, his pulse pounding behind them. Sweat beaded on his forehead as the trapped heat of the underground temple-turned-tavern returned in a wave, and he rested, quiet in the knowledge that this long work was over.

He feared opening his eyes again, feared the hush, wind, and swirling darkness that would come soon, calling him elsewhere. The will of Hoar, a poetry of anger and sorrow burning in his heart like a dark prayer, telling him where he had to go, what he had to do, and who he had to kill next.

He stood lazily, stretching and flexing his sore muscles. The wound across his collarbone ached, and the blood was sticky beneath his breastplate. He winced and pressed down on the gash as he walked away from the gruesome altar. Though the remaining inebriated had not awoken and innkeeper was nowhere to be seen, he tossed several coins onto the table.

The tanglefoot on the front door had turned gray, and it crumbled to a flaky dust as he pulled on the door's handle. The temporary seal had been unnecessary. The Fallen Few had been more confident than he'd expected, apparently not having heard of the fate of their brethren in Theymarsh only a tenday earlier, but Quinsareth had been prepared. He'd spent long enough tracking them down and had no wish for them to escape and be aware of what pursued them.

Outside, at the top of the deep stairwell that served as the Red Cup's entrance, Quinsareth inhaled deeply, smelling the fresh night air. He could hear the crashing waves of the Lake of Steam from the abandoned town's north side, the water swaying the wrecks of the formerly swift boats that littered the small harbor. Those rotten hulls, bumping one another in the tide, were the only sounds that disturbed the peace of the ruins.

The town was one of many that dotted the lands of the

Border Kingdoms, overthrown, forgotten, and left to collect dust and fall apart—home only intermittently to those seeking solace between fell deeds. Quinsareth had come to enjoy them since arriving in the region and felt he might miss their emptiness when called away by the will of Hoar.

As if listening to his thoughts, the wind picked up, whistling through the broken windows of hollow buildings and rustling the tall brown grass that grew through cracks in the cobbled streets. He sighed as the eastern horizon caught his eye, distant shadows leaping to life and flickering like black flames. All he could see became wavy and insubstantial as the familiar call, visible only to him, whispered in the wind and shadows.

Something seemed different this time, more substantial, even slightly painful. His head ached as he felt himself almost physically pulled toward the east and the shadow road that awaited him. He spotted a strange red star on the horizon, bright and staining the night sky in a crimson glow. A tingling sensation covered his scalp, like the legs of a hundred spiders crawling and seeking entrance to his mind, to some weak spot in his will.

Gritting his teeth, he resisted, and the strange compulsion slowly disappeared, leaving him confused and curious. The red star remained in the far eastern sky, but it seemed translucent and dimmer than before, unreal and fabricated. He raised an eyebrow, interested in this little break from tradition, and focused on the tendrils of shadow that swirled before him. Recalling a prayer resting within him, he stepped forward, shifting himself into the Shadow Fringe and disappearing on a road of darkness.