

BLACKTHORNE
by Stina Leicht

CHAPTER ONE (sample)
Caius

Novus Salernum

The Regnum of Acrasia

28 August

The Twenty-first year in the Sacred Reign of Emperor Herminius

"That is not good," Cadet Warden Fortis Caius muttered. The stench of death assaulted his nose. His heart chilled, and his stomach seized into a tight leaden knot.

The tan brick walls lining the narrow alley off of Five Sisters Road were splashed with blood. The ground, comprised of dried piss, old shit, and assorted city grime pulverized by time into something resembling dirt, was black where the gore had pooled. Insects buzzed in the damp mud. His gaze kept skipping over the primly arranged body lying at the center of it all.

He didn't want to look too closely at her ruined, eyeless face.

How can one person have that much blood in them? he thought. Warden school, as rigorous as it was, hadn't prepared him for anything like this. He listened to the thudding of his heart while a metallic taste slimed the back of his tongue. His partner, Tavian, choked and turned away.

Caius swallowed an urge to be sick too. He took a long shuddering breath. *Focus. Remember your training. Follow procedure, and you'll get through this. Show no weakness. Remember Tavian is watching.*

Glancing at the hunched and retching Tavian, Caius reconsidered that last thought. Still, this was their first corpse in the field, and Caius was determined not to give Tavian any opportunities for advancement at his expense. *Not like poor Severus.*

Steeling himself, Caius resumed an air of professionalism. "This can't have been a malorum attack. There's too much blood." He scanned the ground for an assassin's token that might explain

the body, but didn't find one. His gaze drifted over her eyeless face once again. Her lips formed a serene smile.

This is the work of a rogue.

His gut muscles knotted yet again. To combat the nausea, he checked the roofline for trouble. Lamps bolted to the alley's walls cast long shadows thinned by a full moon.

He told himself he was calm, and with the exception of his stomach, he discovered with a shock that it was true. Having only recently graduated from the Academy, he wasn't certain if he had training to thank or the unreality of the situation. He forced himself through the next steps, nonetheless. Making note of the time for the report, he checked his pocket watch.

The lid snapped shut with a precise click that seemed far too loud.

A quarter to eleven. Wiping palms slick with sweat on his uniform coat, he stepped closer to the corpse. He was sure it was a corpse. He wouldn't bother checking for her breath with a mirror.

No one can live through that much violence.

She seemed to have been laid out for her funeral. She lay on her back with her legs straight and together. Her stained and well-worn dress had been smoothed in a tidy arrangement around her. Her wounded left hand rested on her chest. Her right arm lay at her side, ending in a fresh stump at the wrist. Her severed right hand rested a foot or so away. The two shortest fingers ended in jagged wounds. A short distance from that, a tiny gold earring glittered in the lobe of an amputated ear. The ear was pointed.

It seemed odd to Caius that so much care would be taken in arranging the body but not those stray parts. It was as if they'd been discarded and forgotten once they were no longer attached to the whole. At last, he let his gaze travel up her bruised neck to her ravaged face. Not only were her eyes missing, but both ears had been removed as well.

He turned his attention back to the lone, severed ear. *Why take one and not the other?*

Malorum never take trophies. Neither do assassins.

At that moment, the race of the victim registered. *An Eledorean slave. What was she doing out alone at night?*

With a jolt he understood he'd been so intent on what he was seeing that he'd forgotten where he was. *There may be malorum nearby. Check your partner. Your partner is all you have*

in the field. Those words began to make sense in ways that they hadn't before. "Tavian?"

"Just. Give me a moment. Please."

All right. What's next? Valarius, their supervisor, wouldn't be far. Caius set the hooded lantern he'd been carrying on the ground near the remains before wriggling out of his pack. "Tavian?"

Tavian spat and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his coat. "What?"

Caius avoided gazing at Tavian's weakness. *That could've been me,* Caius thought. *But it wasn't.* "Do you have the spare lanterns?"

"Of course."

"Get them out." Caius waited for Tavian to protest. Tavian was of higher social rank, and it was his place to give orders, not Caius's.

To Caius's surprise, Tavian closed his eyes, swallowed, and nodded.

They worked together in silence as they unfolded, assembled, and arranged five camp lanterns in a half-circle near the body. The additional light would make the alley safer and would provide illumination for the investigation. With that done, Caius half-checked the small, barred windows above for witnesses. Anyone who hadn't lived in Novus Salernum for more than a week would wonder why the neighbors weren't awake. The Eledorian girl would have most certainly screamed for help, but Caius knew perfectly well why the windows had remained dark. No honest person would risk themselves and their family by indulging their curiosity. Anyone out after curfew was either a criminal or stupid, and therefore, deserved what they got.

We must finish before daylight. It was clear the alley was going to require a great deal of cleaning. *We should start now.*

Or should we wait for Valarius? Undecided, he thought to consult Tavian but hesitated.

Tavian's marks were the highest in the cadet class. Caius, himself, hadn't placed nearly as high. *Maybe Tavian will get better with time?* But Caius knew there was little chance that Tavian would have the luxury of time. If Caius knew it, Tavian certainly did.

Be careful. He'll turn on you. But looking into Tavian's eyes now, Caius understood otherwise, and in that instant, he knew he would forgive him.

Tavian's face was pale, and his uniform collar was unbuttoned. His expression bordered on panic. The unspoken question in his eyes was obvious. "Caius?"

Annoyed with himself, Caius already knew what he would do. *How often have I longed for an advantage over Tavian?* And now he had that, and he wasn't going to act on it. *I'm so sorry, Severus.*

Out loud, Caius said, "Don't worry about it."

"But I was the one that reported---I'm the reason they reassigned Severus."

Caius blinked. Severus was---*had been*---Caius's closest friend. The news that Tavian had been the one to speak to the Director wasn't shocking. Caius had known that for more than a month. What was surprising was that Tavian was admitting it. Honesty had been the last thing Caius had expected from Tavian. That, along with the past month's assignment, altered Caius's perception of Tavian. Caius didn't like it.

And that's why the lieutenant inspector assigned him as my training partner, Caius thought. *Mithras's blood.* He hated feeling manipulated. "I know."

Tavian said, "But now you can--"

"I said, don't worry." *Revenge won't bring Severus back.* The thought reminded Caius of his father's lectures on ethics. *Only Severus has that power now.* And knowing Severus, that wasn't going to happen anytime soon. Caius said, "Just... forget it."

"Thanks," Tavian said. "If I wash out, my father--he won't understand. Me being a Warden means everything to him. He--"

"Just pull yourself together before Valarius sees you." Suddenly, it occurred to Caius that he hadn't followed procedure as well as all that. "Shit."

"What's wrong?" Tavian asked.

Caius rushed to the street. Reaching for the brass whistle hanging from a chain at his neck, he then blew into it with one short and two long bursts. He paused for a count of five and made the signal again. *A body has been found.* With that done, he returned to the alley.

A series of distant whistles echoed in answer. *Delayed, but on our way.*

Caius signaled acceptance and returned to the alley. Tavian was lurking a few feet away, keeping his back to the body. One look at Tavian, and Caius knew Valarius would guess Tavian's

failure. Caius gave the situation some consideration. There were regulations for every scenario in the field, and it wasn't long before he had an idea. The only problem was that Tavian had to be seen as the one to act.

Caius said, "This is a special case."

Tavian blinked. "Are you sure?"

"Sure enough." Caius gestured at the remains. "No assassin would do that. Not to a slave. Not without a very large fee. Who would pay that much to dispose of a slave? Anyway, there's no token. And if an assassin did anything as showy as this, there would be a token."

"Oh."

Caius waited for Tavian to come to the appropriate conclusion. When it was clear he wouldn't, Caius continued. "Someone should fetch Captain Drake from the Watch House."

"We're cadets. You know the rules."

"We're Academy *graduates*--"

"Not yet."

"This is our second to last field exercise. We're supposed to act as full Wardens."

"You're my partner. I'll get into trouble for leaving you alone."

"Not if this is a special case. Anyway, the moon is full. The alley is well lit. I'll have my weapons at the ready." He drew his pistol and began loading it. "The Inspectors will be here soon." *And you don't want them to see you like this, Tavian.* "I'll be fine."

Tavian paused. He wiped his mouth with the back of a hand. The unbuttoned collar of his Academy coat gaped, and the hem was stained with his own vomit. It was clear he didn't want to be anywhere near the body.

Caius took the opportunity. "It'll get you away from here." Naturally, it would also mean that Tavian would be the one to pay Captain Drake, and Caius decided he was fine with that. Tavian could well afford it, and the Brotherhood would reimburse him anyway.

Eventually.

"All right." Tavian took a deep breath to steady himself. Then he fixed his collar and combed his fingers through his hair. "How do I look?"

"You'll pass. You know the Watch. It's not like they're all that observant."

"And you won't tell anyone I was sick?"

"Are you going to make me swear?"

"Thank you," Tavian said. "I'll remember this. And you must have something in exchange. Father says one should never leave a debt unpaid. Oh, I know. My new mare?"

"The blood bay?"

"End of the week, she is yours if you want her. I'll talk to Father. It's as good as done. I promise." He then sprinted to the street and was gone.

Maybe Tavian isn't so bad after all, Caius thought. Of course, his mother wouldn't approve. Horses were expensive to keep, but a horse would mean more frequent visits home. In the end, she'd be thrilled.

He walked back into the alley. Alone, he decided to gather as much information as he could while he had the chance. He got down on his knees next to the corpse's head. Next, he set his pistol down on the ground nearby, careful to not dislodge the shot in the barrel. Then he patted the pockets of his greatcoat, locating his graphite holder and sketchbook and prepared to take notes.

He started with the face. The wounds in and around the eye sockets were thinner than the ones in the torso, indicating they had been made with a second, smaller blade. Studying the bruises around the neck, he could make out hand prints. He stuck the graphite holder behind one ear and measured them with a tailor's tape. He hoped it might indicate the size of her killer. When he was finished, he moved on to her torso. Based upon the diamond shape of the cuts on the chest and the abdomen, he deduced the second blade used was double-edged.

"Cadet Caius, where is Cadet Tavian?"

Caius dropped what he was doing, grabbed his pistol, and hopped to his feet. He spied an older Warden with a solid build and thinning grey hair under his tricorne hat. He stood in the street with his arms folded across his chest. *Inspector Warden Lucrosa Valarius.* "I'm sorry, sir," Caius said. "I didn't hear you coming."

Valarius frowned.

Shit. Caius inwardly flinched. *That's going to mean a demerit.* "Tavian went to get Watch Captain Drake."

"And why would he do that?" Valarius asked and waved his partner over.

"It's a special case, sir," Caius said. "Come. Look."

Valarius's expression remained flat. He gave a nod to his partner before joining Caius in the alley. The second inspector warden stationed himself at the corner of the building to the right.

"You two are not a full Wardens, Cadet. You've broken regulations and endangered yourselves."

"I know, sir," Caius said. "But I--he felt it was necessary. I'm armed and--"

"Don't make excuses," Valarius said. "Do you understand how few cadets survive their first year in the field?"

"Yes, sir."

"A pistol is very little protection against a malorum." Valarius stooped over the body. "One bullet won't stop an adult. It takes silver shot to bring one down. You weren't paying attention to your surroundings. If I'd been a malorum, you'd be dead now."

"Malorum don't venture out during a full moon, sir."

"They've been known to risk the light when hungry enough." Valarius paused, leaning closer to the corpse. "Ah. Been at it again, has he?"

"He who?"

"We don't know, yet," Valarius said. "He left the first kill two weeks ago. Near the Sector's northern wall."

"Is there a problem?" Valarius's partner asked in a loud whisper.

Valarius made a few hand signals in reply. Caius caught a piece of what was said before Valarius moved. *Watch is on the way.*

Caius asked, "Sir?"

"I told the Inspector Captain we had a rogue hunter on our hands," Valarius muttered. "It seems you did well to send for Drake, after all."

"Is it really a rogue?" Caius asked.

Valarius's expression softened. "I wouldn't go repeating that, if you know what's good for you."

"Yes, sir," Caius said. "What did the Inspector Captain do when you told him?"

"My partner and I were assigned to cadet training. That's what happened," Valarius hunkered down next to the body.

"Interesting. No rogue ever left anything like that before. What do you think it means?" He pointed to Caius's leather-bound sketchbook. It had landed on the girl's bloody chest.

"Sorry, sir." Caius retrieved his sketchbook and then searched for something with which to wipe off the cover.

Valarius asked, "More scribblings? Haven't you been cautioned for that?"

"I don't know what they're so afraid of," Caius said. "How is reading signs left on a kill any different from tracking targets in the field?"

"It is different," Valarius said. "Hunters are citizens. They pay a great deal for their privileges, and privacy is one of the things for which they pay. What they do is their business, not ours."

"But if there are signature differences between hunters, such information could help catch rogues," Caius said. "We should keep records of their methods."

"Which would only cause trouble for the Brotherhood in the long run." Valarius got to his feet and dusted off the knees of his breeches. "Besides, no rogue has escaped the Brotherhood of Wardens since it was founded. And neither will this one."

"But such information could be used to prevent repeated offenses."

"I don't think you understand the situation," Valarius said. "There are no repeat offenses. Ever."

"Officially."

"Officially."

"But you have to--" One look at Valarius's face told Caius that he'd made a mistake. He lowered his gaze. "I'm sorry, sir."

Valarius sighed. "I can't fault you for enthusiasm." He lowered his voice. "But you're making people uncomfortable. Take care, or you'll never rise above Patrol Warden."

"Who said I wanted otherwise?"

"Trust me. Your purse will. And if you've any expectation of a long, happy life, you will too."

"You survive. And it seems to suit you well enough, sir."

Valarius's half-smile was a little sad. "Never love an ideal more than your career, boy. Principled men are rarely happy in this world." He took a deep breath. "Now it seems we have a bit of a problem. A rabbit was reported less than a mile from here. We tracked him to Jacksons Mill Road, but Quintus and Noster are also on his trail. Bastards will collect the reward if we're not quick about it. And I have some hefty debts to pay." Valarius looked up at the night sky and then scanned the alley. "Can you take care of yourself until Drake arrives?"

"I think so." *Wouldn't leaving me here alone break regulation again?* Caius bit back the question lest he antagonize his superior again.

Valarius nodded. "All right. Blow an alarm if anything seems out of place. You hear? I'd rather lose the reward than a cadet."

"Yes, sir."

"And Caius?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Inform Tavian he's been issued a verbal caution."

"What for?"

Valarius pointed to the puddle of vomit. "Loyalty to one's field partner is admirable, but do it again, and you'll both go on report, understand?"

"Yes, sir," Caius said. "How did you know it wasn't me?"

Glancing over his shoulder, Valarius said, "Patrol Wardens survive on their ability to observe details. And I *have* been in the field for twenty years, cadet."