

THE OUTCAST CROWN



BY DAVE DOBSON
A TALE OF THE INQUISITORS' GUILD

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TRAINING DAY

“You’re going to die young. Tell your mother now. It will prepare her.” Mistress Fennick tapped at a girl’s wooden sword with her baton. The girl raised it higher, but she looked more confused than fierce. “Kinder that way.”

As Fennick moved down the row of apprentices, making further corrections and predicting more fatalities, I moved over to the girl and helped get her elbow and wrist into the right place. She gave me a scared smile. “Like a serpent,” I said. “*Viper Rears to Strike.*”

She nodded. “Thanks, Inspector.”

“Call me Boog,” I said. I didn’t think she would.

This was the class of first-years, in the program for only a few months. I’d been helping Fennick conduct training for the past week, because my partner was out of commission. Again. Some in the Guild called us the Mismatch. I was tall and broad, among the biggest inspectors in the Guild, while Marten was far smaller and slighter. Where I was better with weapons and standing around looking intimidating, he was skilled with magic, with research, and with locks. We made a good team, and he was a dear friend. But we were far more miss than match these days. Marty spent nearly all his time giving lectures on the nature of magic, and when he wasn’t doing that, the Augur had him bottled up working on the Augur’s Pool, an ancient artifact

in our headquarters. It could provide visions of objects and people, sometimes going back in time. A really useful object for the Inquisitors' Guild to own.

But I was talking about Marty. About a year ago, Marty and I – well, truth be told, mostly Marty – had saved the city of Frosthelm from destruction by demonic incarnations of an imprisoned god. There aren't good descriptive words for that, so people were now calling it the Faeran Incident. As a result of our efforts, we'd been pretty popular, especially for guys who'd been sentenced to death at least twice in the four months prior. During our grand misadventure, as he called it, Marty figured out a lot more about how magic worked, so the scholars and mages were all over him trying to get him to explain things. He didn't let it go to his head – at least not much – but he really didn't have any time to investigate anything other than old books and lecture halls. I had no role there, and I'd been missing just doing our regular job, investigating crimes. The job we signed on for.

Our last case together, where a merchant sold the same nonexistent fancy painting to six different people, had closed more than two months ago. I had worked without Marty on a few other cases, being added onto teams when I was needed. Two burglaries, an embezzler in a tax office, and the sad case of a woman who'd killed her wife after discovering diaries that professed a rather torrid love for another. But those were all wrapped up, and I was waiting on Marty again.

Fennick set the apprentices to dueling, and the air rang with the clack of wooden weapons. The vipers rearing to strike looked mostly sickly, drunk, or confused, but they were getting a little better. Fennick turned her attention across the courtyard to the much smaller group of fifth-years. These apprentices were nearly adults. Most were seventeen or eighteen years old, only a year or two younger than Marty and I. Quite a contrast from the first-years, many of whom were little more than children.

There were seven fifth-years remaining in this class. Our class had produced only four provisional inspectors, and it was likely that at least one or two of these seven would still be cut. The group before me, putting on their padded practice armor,

held only six. Perhaps I'd missed hearing about a recent cut. I tried to remember the roster to determine who was missing.

"Where's Wender?" asked Fennick. "Asleep? Gave up? Sick?" She slapped her baton into her palm. "Maybe he's lost the will to live, and just wants to get killed in the field. No better way than to skip training."

"I don't know," said a gangly boy named Asper. "He didn't come to breakfast."

"He's got a single room," said a short blonde girl. Helia, I thought. "On account of his parents." She made a face. The Guild's apprentice program was open to all people in the city, which was one of its great strengths. That's how Marty and I had gotten in, despite our humble backgrounds. But it wasn't immune to Frosthelm's social hierarchy, and Wender's parents had offered a significant endowment in support of the Guild library upon his enrollment.

"I'd ask for a single room if I had the kind of money and standing he does. Why not use your advantages?" This was Oura, a thin girl with a pinched face. I didn't like her much.

"Fine with me if he's got one," grumbled a doughy lad named Breunis. "Kid's a chalker. I wouldn't want to live with him." I wasn't sure what a chalker was, but Breunis made it sound pretty bad.

Another one, Gert, gave a noncommittal shrug. Only one stayed quiet. Zekra Kalem. With long black hair, today tied up in a knot behind her head, and rich brown skin, she stood apart from the others. Zekra was Turzek, from a distant land across the sea. There were very few Turzeks in Frosthelm, although occasional merchants, scholars, ambassadors, or other travelers visited, and some of the townspeople were descended from earlier visitors who'd stayed, or those who found love while visiting. They were a small minority, though, and very few who lived in Frosthelm shared the hint of a lilting accent that Zekra had. I'd only talked with two other Turzeks before her, not immigrants, both descended through several generations of Frosthelm natives. Neither had as dark skin as Zekra did, maybe because their blood had mixed with that of us pasty northerners. There were some who ran a food stand in the market, so I'd

heard the language and seen folks congregating, but I'd never eaten there. There were no Turzeks at all in the Guild, native or by descent, other than Zekra.

I studied her face, but it was placid, her eyes downcast. Either she was unusually focused on her gear, or she knew something. I suspected the latter.

I'd have asked her, but an odd sound crept into the courtyard. It sounded like a swarm of bees, but there was no sign of any insects. The younger apprentices stopped their drills, confused, looking around the area. We all paused as well, but despite its growing volume, there was no hint of a source. As the buzz hit a crescendo, the sound seemed to shift around, as if in motion. Several apprentices took a step back, and Fennick looked at me sharply.

"Sorcery, Eggstrom?" she asked. I shrugged. Not my department - that was all Marty. I had been a witness to a lot of magic, but the cause of hardly any, and the explainer of absolutely none. The sound circulated around the courtyard, the pitch wavering up and down as it moved. I thought I saw the air shimmering in a spot in the direction of the sound, but I couldn't be sure. Then, after a few moments, it faded away to silence.

"File a report," she said to me, still peering about. "That was strange."

"Yes, Mistress," I replied. I tried to imagine what such a report could say, and how I could write it in such a way that I didn't end up looking foolish. I failed on both counts. This was going to go poorly.

Fennick rapped her baton on the stone wall of the Guild Hall which made up one side of the practice yard. "Pay that no heed," she called out. "Distractions get you killed. Killed even faster if you're incompetent, which most of you are." The younger apprentices returned to their drills.

Zekra tied the last lace off on her padded armor, adding another impeccable knot to the series she'd already tied. She was extraordinarily skilled in this regard. I didn't know if it was a cultural practice, or if she was just gifted, or perhaps obsessed. A year ago, at Master Wigg's request, Zekra gave a seminar on ropes and knots to the whole Guild. At the end of it, she tied the

wrists of ten of her classmates with a single length of rope in about fifteen seconds, all of them perfectly trapped, unable to free their hands. An impressive and unusual display.

Zekra picked up her sword. She looked up at me. “Wender is detained. In his room. He may require assistance.” She fell into a perfect version of *The Mantis Waits* and started progress through her forms.