



The Book Of Shadows

PROLOGUE

Death was all.

It showed no preference for good or bad, hero or coward, high-born or low. All were united by its cold embrace.

For three days the Reaper gathered his harvest of countless souls amid the fearful carnage, leaving in exchange only the putrid stench of decaying corpses.

Yet still the battle raged.

The final battle in a savage war between the forces of Light and Darkness. A battle upon which rested the fate of a world.

As did the destinies of the realm's greatest champion and its blackest magician.

The tide began to turn in Humanity's favour. The slaving remnants of the sorcerer's army retreated to the protective aura of his vile magic. They remained incomparably mighty, in numbers and fiendish wizardry, but they could not triumph.

Their master's wrath was terrible to behold.

The gods of war were no kinder to the opposing humans. Slaughter had taken its awful toll, and they too were cheated of success.

Evil had been halted. It had not been conquered.

Reckless and brave in equal part, the champion led his elite band of mounted warriors, the Wolverine Corps, in a last assault. The price was heavy. Of all his company, the champion alone survived the charge.

He resolved to plunge his blade into the magician's black heart.

If heart he had.

The warrior threw himself at the diabolical legion surrounding his quarry, flashing sword and thrusting dagger cutting deep the Hellspawn's corrupt flesh. And they replied with spell-hardened steel, with fang and claw, and a rage born of the Pit.

Blades clotted with gore, body rent by a score of wounds, he came within sight of his foe.

The wizard lord stood haughty in a war chariot of ebony and beaten gold, adorned with magical symbols picked out in precious gems. Wickedly barbed scythes jutted from the hubs of its wheels. A pair of massive plains lizards, pink-eyed albinos, strained and snorted in the harness.

Certain now that the defenders could not be overcome, the warrior determined to sell his life dearly.

As he renewed the attack, he saw the sorcerer's hand rise. The infernal bodyguard fell back and lowered their weapons. Unholy silence smothered the field of conflict.

Great champion and black magician locked gazes.

Then the wizard's eyes, dark pools of infinite foulness, banished time and space.

In that instant stretched to eternity, a fiery bolt of lightning crawled slowly across the tortured heavens.

It had not always been this way.

The land of Delgarvo had known peace and prosperity for generations.

Justice held sway under the benign rule of King Eldrick of the Lance. His subjects lived free of tyranny or want. The capital, Alderhaven, was the seat of all knowledge, with poets, artists, songsmiths and philosophers thronging its ancient streets. Delgarvo became the undisputed cultural and mercantile centre of the known world.

There was plenty, and more.

In the twenty-third year of Eldrick's reign, strange portents troubled the kingdom. Rivers ceased to flow and wells ran dry. A two-headed stallion was born in a remote village of the Eastern province. Showers of living fish fell with the rain. The harvest was laid waste by a plague of white ants, each the size of an outstretched palm. A dealer of spices, known for his honesty, swore he heard a statue of the goddess Thyra utter dire prophecies. Frolicking dragons were seen high above the monarch's palace.

And a dazzling comet transformed night to day for almost a week.

Eldrick summoned mystics, diviners and soothsayers to interpret these omens. He was trying to make sense of their contrary opinions when word came that his wife had gone into labour with their first child. But joy at the birth gave way to despair when Queen Nerissa was seized by a fever.

She died before cock crow.

The King, veteran of countless military campaigns, a man who had never wavered in the face of an enemy, now surrendered.

To grief.

He found some comfort in his new-born daughter. And in the counsel of Avoch-Dar, one of the seers he had gathered about him.

Shortly before dawn the Commander of the Imperial Guard, leading a routine patrol, stopped short at the entrance of a temple dedicated to the twin deities Yorath and Eleazor. Upon the steps, bundled in coarsely woven cloth, lay a freshly-born baby. The officer went to Eldrick with the abandoned boy child and begged him to give the orphan royal protection.

Suspecting the gods may have played a part in this discovery, King Eldrick consented.

He also let it be known that henceforth Avoch-Dar would fulfil the role of Court Magician.

Delgarvo regained its former glory, and the passing years helped soften the pain of its ruler's loss.

His daughter, Princess Bethan, grew from an awkward girl to a young woman of graceful beauty. Blue-eyed, fair of form, she was outgoing and open in nature. Her good sense and charm won the love of the people.

The boy, her constant companion, also possessed a quick wit, though in character he differed greatly from Bethan, being inward-looking and want to brood. While still a youth he revealed a genius for the fighting arts. By early manhood many believed him to be the greatest, and deadliest, of warriors. A taste for dark apparel made more striking his olive eyes and raven locks.

He was given the name Dalveen Leandor. But all men knew him as *Nightshade*.

If he had a fault, it was the sin of pride. He was too easily impressed by his own reputation. Most forgave him this, knowing his heart to be true and his sword ever

loyal in service of the kingdom. And they recognised the tender, civilising influence Princess Bethan had over him. No one was surprised when the couple announced their betrothal.

The King was content. His subjects were happy with their lot. Life in Delgarvo was good again.

But there was a viper in the nest.

Avoch-Dar, sorcerer to the court, secretly dabbled in the black side of magic. He trod the left-hand path of necromancy and was drawn in by it; as Dalveen Leandor had fallen prey to arrogance.

His soul corrupted, and reason warped, the magician plotted to overthrow the King and seize his realm. By chance, Dalveen learned of the plan, and denounced him. Even in betrayal Eldrick was merciful. He banished Avoch-Dar to Vaynor, a burning desert far to the south.

King Eldrick's leniency was misplaced.

The wizard used his Hell-sent talents to build an empire of blood. Within a year he stood at the head of a huge army on Delgarvo's borders. Driven by lust for power, and hatred of the man called Nightshade, he intended taking by force what he had failed to gain through treachery.

The war had begun.

Thunder boomed. The lightning vanished.

Dalveen Leandor tore his eyes from Avoch-Dar's.

The wizard's scarlet cloak billowed in a gust of chill wind. His slave protectors remained motionless in the unnatural hush.

A thin line of blood trickled from Nightshade's brow and touched the corner of his mouth. He spat away the salty liquid in a show of scorn and hefted his sword. Resolved to trade his life for that of the villain's, he rushed forward to seal the bargain.

Avoch-Dar's lofty disdain gave way to naked mockery.

The champion reached the chariot unhindered. Hope kindled at the prospect of his blade drinking greedily of a poisoned soul.

The sorcerer drew up his hands to swiftly make arcane gestures.

At this display of the highest form of conjuration, Nightshade steeled himself for some magical onslaught.

In that endless moment, what could have been a gentle breeze caressed the sword arm he held aloft.

The feeling grew more intense. A stinging numbness set in. Soon it felt like the grasp of a fiery talon.

He let go of the sword and stared at his right limb. Intense pain racked him. He sank to his knees in unspeakable suffering.

Through mists of agony he watched as the arm twisted and spasmed.

His clenched fist paled, turned translucent, became crystalline.

Then crumbled to dust.

Fine grey ash fell from his silk sleeve.

He made out the magician's cruel face beyond his universe of torment. Falling insensible to the ground, the champion was sure he would not wake again in this world.

But Avoch-Dar did not kill his enemy.

He would not allow him that release.

Powers drained and forces depleted, the sorcerer withdrew, leading his army back to Vaynor.

For the time being.

When Nightshade came to his senses among the numberless dead he was overcome with shame. Shame at his wretched failure, at his dishonour, at allowing himself to be maimed by a spell.

Delirious and near insane, he found a horse and fled.

And the sky wept blood.

Chapter I

Life was returning.

The tree had started to bud.

A single leaf grew at the end of an otherwise bare branch, a splash of green swaying delicately in the constant wind.

The hermit, sitting cross-legged beneath, meditated upon it.

Unmoving and silent, he had watched for two days and two nights, awaiting the moment.

His shirt, jerkin and breeches were black in colour, and likewise his thigh-high leather boots. The garb matched the cast of his eyes, and the hue of his hair, hanging waist-length in a plaited ponytail. He went against custom in not wearing a beard.

A sword jutted from the ground beside him.

The wind seemed a little less fierce than of late, the air a trace milder. Even here, on the slopes of Hawkstone mountain in rugged Cawdor, Spring had arrived. Though it made little difference to the testing nature of this bleak place.

Yet while the hermit looked on, the wind dropped and the leaf stilled.

He judged the time to be right.

And acted with a swiftness that defied logic.

In one fluid movement he snatched the sword with his left hand as he leapt to his feet. The razor keen blade severed leaf from bough, and as it fell he sliced twice more, quartering his target.

Then plunged the sword back into its resting place before the leaf's four parts touched earth.

A thin smile of satisfaction passed briefly across his sombre face. The year spent learning afresh his art had restored some of the skills.

But he knew how much better he had been when ... *whole*.

The thought, and memories of his previous life it stirred, returned him to melancholy. He decided to carry out the chores he had neglected and lose himself in mindless work.

As he took up the sword and turned away, something on the plain far below caught his eye.

It was a lone rider.

From this distance he could only make out that the stranger was coming in his direction, and that he had a spare horse in tow.

The hermit frowned. It was rare to see anyone in these parts. And he did not welcome having his solitude disturbed. Perhaps the intruder was an enemy; an assassin come to settle an old score.

There was only one path the rider could take to reach him.

He set out to confront his unwanted visitor.

It was late in the day and the shadows were lengthening. But the hermit knew the foothills of Hawkstone well and moved slyly.

He hid in a thicket beside the solitary track.

At the sound of snapping twigs he drew his knife and crouched low. A bulky figure was climbing the path, but the bushes were too dense for his features to be seen. One of the horses he led almost slipped on the gravelly surface and whinnied. The hermit saw his chance.

He sprang from his hiding place.

And froze.

'So *this* is how you welcome a guest is it? *Shame*, boy!'

The hermit gaped in astonishment. '*Golcar?*' he whispered. 'Is it really you?'

The older man thumped his barrel chest with a massive hand. 'Aye,' he grinned. 'And gladdened I am to set eyes on you again!'

The young man sheathed his dagger, then stepped forward and extended his hand in greeting. In time honoured warrior fashion they clasped flesh, the palm of each around the other's wrist.

But some of the joy went from Golcar Quixwood's weather-beaten face when he saw Dalveen Leandor's empty right sleeve.

'You seem ... fit, Dalveen,' the old soldier told him. He took in their barren surroundings and added, 'For a recluse.'

'Life here suits me well enough. And you, Golcar, look as hearty as when I last saw you.'

It was the truth. The year elapsed had hardly changed Quixwood. Perhaps his full beard was a mite greyer, and his back might have taken on a slight stoop, though his build remained robust and muscular. Overall he still appeared as tough as the sturdy cavalry boots he wore.

Except that his eyes held a world-weariness that hadn't been there before.

'But how did you find me?' Leandor went on. 'And why?'

'I followed a hint here, a rumour there. Most pointed to this accursed region. As to *why*, lad ...' His manner darkened. 'I think you must have guessed at the grave tidings I bring.'

'Tell me.'

'*He's back!*'

The firelight made grotesque shapes on the cave's walls.

Quixwood shrugged off his dusty Imperial Guard tunic and removed his leather gauntlets. Propped against a saddle, he reached into his travel pouch for an earthenware jug of wine with a large cork stopper. He placed it on the slate floor and continued his story.

'It doesn't take a fortune-teller to know Avoch-Dar wouldn't give up. But we never expected him to return so *soon*.'

Leandor lifted his gaze from the flames. 'You had no warning?'

'None. They appeared at the border in the space of a single night. He has an army as great as ever, and his magic is, if anything, stronger. We couldn't hold them. They swept into Delgarvo before we mustered our defences.'

'You're not a man to leave the realm in its hour of need. Why are you here?'

'On Eldrick's orders.'

'How fares the King?'

'This dire peril hangs heavy upon him. Yet he set about organising resistance with a zeal that would do credit to one half his years.'

'And what of ... Bethan?' Leandor hesitantly asked.

'There is bad news on that score. The wizard's agents have seized her as hostage against her father's surrender.'

'What?'

Quixwood laid a hand on his arm. 'Steady, son. To the best of our knowledge she has not been harmed. But you must see how important it is that you come back now!'

'Golcar, I - '

'The King himself asks it of you! And what of the Princess' fate?'

The young warrior indicated his limp sleeve with a curt nod. 'Things must be desperate if you need help from a cripple. And a coward, at that.'

'No!' Quixwood flared angrily. 'I will not let you speak this way! You may be many things, Dalveen, but cowardly is not one of them.'

'No doubt it's what people think.'

'When did Nightshade care what people think? Or said, or did?'

Leandor permitted himself an arid smile. 'I hadn't thought to hear you call me by *that* name.'

'It never found favour with me, true enough. But I can't deny it has a certain power.'

'Yes. A warrior's name goes before him. It has served me well.'

'Exactly! So let it go before you again. Let the name of Delgarvo's greatest champion bring hope to our friends and fear to our enemies. Return with me, and fight!'

'And how much hope or fear will people see in a man lacking his sword arm?'

'If I know you, there's plenty of strength in the limb you have left.' Quixwood sighed. 'Look, Dalveen, granted you weren't our general in the first war against Avoch-Dar. But you *were* our inspiration. There was no better fighting unit than the Wolverines, because *you* led them.'

'Yes. Led them so well that not one survived.'

'You have nothing to blame yourself for.'

'Haven't I?'

'No, damn you! They were warriors, professional soldiers like me and you. They knew the risk they were taking. And there wasn't one of them not ready to lay down his life for his king, and for Delgarvo. And for you.'

'You always did make everything seem so simple, Golcar.'

'Well, isn't it?'

Leandor got to his feet and walked to the cave's entrance. It was raining now, and he couldn't see the stars for cloud. The fire reflected off the blade strapped across his back.

'Dalveen,' Quixwood said, his voice gentler, 'I know that Avoch-Dar's revenge on you was worse than mere death. The shame, the injury to your pride, were more punishing than the most horrible of deaths. And I think you know by now that it *was* your over-weaning pride, that cock-sure confidence of yours, that brought you down.'

'That's one lesson I've learned this past year, if nothing else.'

'Good. But don't go to the other extreme. I didn't bring you from the steps of that temple as a babe, nor teach you all I knew of the martial arts, to have you spend the rest of your days brooding on a gods-forsaken mountain.'

'No, please, don't spare my feelings.' The tone was sarcastic.

'I'm just a bluff old soldier. I say it as I see it. And what I see here is a youth wallowing in self-pity.'

'That's not just! I - '

'If you don't like the description, boy, too bad. And if you want to make something of it, well, I could tan your hide when you were a sprout and I'm willing to try again!'

Dalveen Leandor laughed. It was something he hadn't done for a long time.

'How I've missed you, Golcar.'

'And I you. But enough of this. I've brought you a horse, and there's some gold coin for our journey. What's your answer?'

'I'll give it tomorrow.'

'But speed is of the essence! While we gossip here, Avoch-Dar's horde could be massing at the gates of Allderhaven itself! And Princess Bethan - '

'I know,' Leandor told him grimly. 'Nevertheless it's late and the weather bodes ill. We couldn't set out tonight. Accept my hospitality. I'll be back later.'

'Back? Where are you going?'

'I have something to attend to. Now hold your peace and get some rest.'

'In this hovel?' Quixwood grumbled, drawing a horse blanket over himself. Then he brightened and reached for the wine jug. 'Like some?'

He gripped the cork between his teeth and grunted with the effort of easing it out.

Leandor's left hand shot to the hilt of the sword sticking out above his right shoulder. The blade came free and cut the air in a stinging arc. It cleaved through the neck of the jug, leaving Quixwood with the cork and a neatly separated chunk of pottery in his mouth.

His jaw sagged and the stopper fell away.

'Thank you, no,' the young warrior replied, smoothly replacing the sword. 'But you go ahead.'

Quixwood glanced at the decapitated wine jug in his hand. 'See, lad! You're as good as ever!'

'No, Golcar, not as good. But with luck, good enough to stay alive for a while.'

He wrapped himself in a cloak and left without further word.

The night was brisk and moonless. Leandor moved past the tethered horses and began making his way further up the mountain.

Leaving, for now, the man who was the nearest thing he ever had to a father.