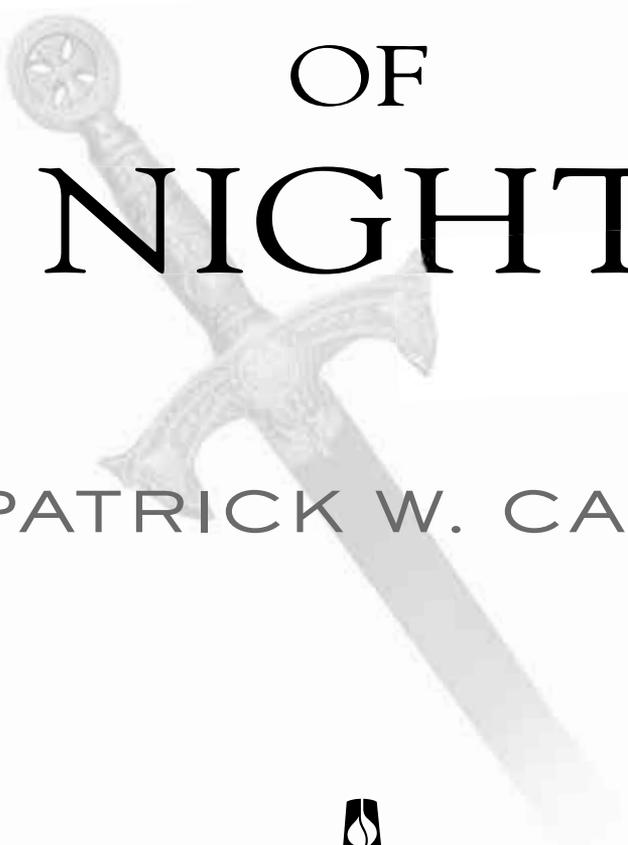


THE
DARKWATER
SAGA 

THE SHOCK OF NIGHT



PATRICK W. CARR



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To my father, Major Joe William Carr, USAF,
and to all the other men and women who
carry the wounds of war on their body and in their spirit.

Thank you





THE EXORDIUM OF THE LITURGY—



The six charisms of Aer are these:

*For the body, beauty and craft
For the soul, sum and parts
For the spirit, helps and devotion*

The nine talents of man are these:

*Language, logic, space, rhythm,
motion, nature, self, others, and all*

The four temperaments of creation are these:

Impulse, passion, observation, and thought

*Within the charisms of Aer, the talents of man,
and the temperaments imbued in creation
are found understanding and wisdom. Know and learn.*



PROLOGUE

Elwin stopped at the edge of the forest, his eyes scanning the trees for any movement that might presage an attack, though the man at his right, Robin, would surely be doing the same and better than he. Still, no one living stood in a better position to appreciate their danger. Within the shadowed canopy of twisted black-leaved trees nothing stirred. No bird called its summer cry, no squirrel foraged the floor, no fox hunted.

Elwin almost touched the sliver of metal tucked away in his cloak, stopping just short of brushing the shiny yellow fragment of aurium, afraid to confirm its impossible existence.

“A blacksmith,” he muttered.

Robin turned from his inspection of the cursed forest to give him a questioning look. “Eldest?”

For a moment he considered brushing aside the invitation to explain, but Robin’s insight had proven valuable before, despite his youth. “The dead man back there was a blacksmith. Soot marked the scars of old burns on his hands, and his clothes still held the smell of fire and quenching oil.” Elwin tapped his cloak pocket where the shard of metal rested, the man’s death sentence had he not already been dead. “That still doesn’t explain how he managed to survive as long as he did.”

Robin nodded. “How does a blacksmith come to be in possession of aurium?”

Elwin nodded and then shook his head. “How does anyone come to possess the forbidden metal?”

They continued riding north, their horses ascending out of the fertile valley stretching east and west that marked the border between Owmead and the northernmost kingdom on the continent, Collum. The question lay between them, unanswered, like the death of a patriarch no one dared mention, but they’d left the torn and mauled body of the blacksmith behind as a warning, according to the law of the kingdoms that bordered the Darkwater Forest.

They kept to the edge of the forest as the landscape grew rockier, defying the efforts of those who farmed it. After another mile, Robin pointed. “There. Another one,” he said in a tone of voice like the crushing of rock.

The mound of torn and matted fur, buzzing with flies in the sun, brought a surge of bile to Elwin’s throat, and he looked away to bring his stomach under control. “Check it,” he ordered in a voice that sounded hollow and strangely far away.

Tying a strip of cloth across his mouth and nose, Robin dismounted. The flies shifted at his approach—and for a moment Elwin’s guard wore a dark halo—but no other carrion eaters defiled the carcass. The body of the sentinel, larger than a wolf by half and more heavily muscled as well, had been left untouched this close to the forest. The sentinels sparked fear even in death.

Elwin nodded to himself—animals were wise in such things. He saw Robin’s chest rise and fall in a sigh even before he turned from the body.

“Like the others,” Robin said. “It bled to death. There are cuts all over it.” He stooped to pull the lips back from the muzzle, its triangular shape a testimony to the power in the jaws. “Clean. Whoever killed it managed to do so without taking any injuries.”

“Any sign of the pup?” Elwin asked.

Robin surveyed the landscape for a moment, then pointed to a smaller mound some twenty paces away. “There.”

With a mental wrench that rose almost to the level of physical pain,

Elwin abandoned another hope. Fantasies and delusions would no longer help them. “Could you do such a thing, Robin?”

To anyone else the question might have been an accusation. That Robin had never left his side since becoming his protector cast the query in a different light. His guard cocked his head, his eyes growing distant, and Elwin knew he fought the beast at his feet within his mind, playing stroke and parry before answering. “Yes,” he said finally. “But not alone.”

“Are you saying there is someone out there better than you?” Elwin asked.

Thankfully, his guard shook his head, leaving him one of his few remaining hopes. “No. Some of the wounds on the sentinel are on the back flanks and legs. I would think three or four men attacked it. I do not think any one of them to be my equal.”

He caught the slight emphasis on *think* and tried to keep the surprise from his face, but Robin had only paused.

“I wouldn’t want to come up against these men without my brothers to help. They’re certainly gifted.”

Elwin growled a curse that had nothing to do with his time in the priesthood of the Merum order. “Or something like it. That’s a half dozen sentinel deaths in the past year. We don’t have the replacements.” He tapped the sliver of aurium in his pocket and looked at the forest as if the trees might uproot themselves and attack there in the noonday sun. “Faran can’t keep up. It takes years to breed and train a sentinel.” Despair clogged Elwin’s throat, and for a moment it broke free of his ability to contain it. “I wish Cesla were here.”

Robin turned away at the mention of Elwin’s brother, unwilling, perhaps, to intrude upon the grief that still seemed so recent. “What of his gift?” he asked softly.

Elwin nodded in approval. His guard possessed a talent for knowing others in addition to his more obvious physical ones. Descending into that familiar grief wouldn’t serve them. “We follow the trail as best we can,” he said with a sigh. “Sometimes I think we did our job too well. We’ve hidden ourselves so completely that the gift becomes difficult to find if it goes free.” He patted a pocket. “But there’s a rumor from the village of Cryos.”

“Convenient,” Robin said without explaining.

Elwin nodded. “Yes, we can visit Faran and see if there is any way he can replenish the sentinels more quickly.” The thought of the journey north wearied him. He carried too many memories, and his mind bowed beneath their weight, like a wagon axle trying to support too many bags of grain.

Elwin held out his hands to survey them in the muted sunlight that filtered through the cloud cover. The prominent veins and the skin, as thin as the papery outer layer of an onion, still surprised him. “I’m almost ready to move on, Robin. I’ve used the gift too often, and now it’s used me up.”

The sentinel lying dead at their feet brought a surge of anger, and he straightened in his saddle. “But before I go, I need to bring justice to the men who did this.”

He twitched the reins, and they rode northwest, following a trail only he could sense, deeper into the kingdom of Collum.

CHAPTER 1



The Twentieth Year of King Laidir's Reign

The pounding on my door pulled me from slumber, and I drifted toward waking, my mind a piece of sodden wood floating toward the surface of a lake. I had one hand on the door latch and the other clutching a dagger behind my back before I managed to get both eyes open. Through the peephole I saw a guard—one of the king's by his dress—standing next to Gareth, a night constable. I snuck a glance out the window of the apartment the king provided me as a lord of his employ. The glass wasn't of sufficient quality to offer me anything more than an impression of what lay beyond, but I could tell the sun wasn't up yet.

The remnants of some dream I didn't want to remember cracked my voice as I opened the door. "What?"

The guard gave me an almost imperceptible bob of his head. My title was the least in Laidir's court. "You're needed, Lord Dura."

I tried to keep my temper in check. My unique position in service to the king seemed to require the same hours as a midwife's. "What about Jeb?" I asked, mentioning the chief reeve, the one who should have been awakened instead of me.

Gareth shook his head. "We thought we should wake you first. There's been a killing in the lower merchants' quarter."

A thread of panic shot through my chest, filling my heart with ice,

but I kept my gaze on Gareth with an effort. What had I dreamed? I kept my voice steady and played the part of the interrupted sleeper as best I could. “So? What’s so dire about some fool shopkeeper who can’t keep his money safeguarded?”

Gareth’s plain soldier’s face lost what little expression it held. “It’s a churchman.”

I stifled my next comment and turned back into the apartment to get dressed. It took me a moment to realize I already was. Only my cloak and boots were missing. Another surge of panic brought me to full wakefulness, and I moved quickly to prevent the guards from entering at my delay. I lit a candle and spotted my cloak lying across a chair on the far side of the room. I crossed over and lifted it.

An oath crossed my lips before I could prevent it at seeing spots of blood on the hem. I rolled it into a bundle and shoved it beneath the armoire before retrieving another and picking up my weapon. All of the city’s reeves wore a sword, but most of them didn’t expect trouble. Except me. I attracted it the way a lodestone drew iron. I moved to a small stand and tucked a pair of daggers into leather pouches stitched into the back of my belt and slid another into the inside of my right boot. Then I tried to reconcile myself to being awake before dawn.

Jeb ran the city watch and did it well. If it came to brawling or persuading some poor unfortunate to confess, Jeb’s methods yielded results. His fists served as a fair approximation of iron, and he enjoyed using them to convince people to mend the error of their ways. It was amazing how the sound of his knuckles popping loosened a man’s tongue.

But murder presented a different challenge, particularly one without witnesses or one involving people of importance. Jeb’s persuasion couldn’t quicken the tongues of the dead, which explained Gareth’s presence at my door. And I had proven my worth to the king. A year prior, I’d had the mixed fortune of solving a crime that earned me his favor. Over the objections of the rest of the nobility, the king raised me to lordship, though without lands or gift. I became the least in his service. My current duties were the price I paid for my nobility and another reward he’d given me that I esteemed more highly.

We exited the halls of King Laidir’s stronghold and came out onto

one of the blocky staircases that led downward, descending the massive tor on which it had been built, carved from gut rock. Enormous granite stones merged with the mountain that defined the ponderous edifice of Laidir's seat. The vertical walls were high enough to be impervious to ladders, and the surrounding landscape made it difficult to bring siege engines close enough to do any real damage.

The massive city of Bunard, King Laidir's seat of power, spread beneath us. The Rinwash River curved around the stronghold to the north and west, but the river had been diverted into channels to supply water to each quarter of the city. If the sun had been up I could have seen the bridges connecting each section of the city, but in the darkness only the ends were visible, illuminated by the watch fires at each bank.

I followed Gareth downward until we arrived at the king's stables, the smell of horse strong in the still air of the morning. Mounting quickly, we set out for the lower merchants' quarter as the sky showed hints of slate in the east, riding southwest, passing by the four massive cathedrals of the divisions of the church, each with their criers' stand out front—thankfully empty. I appreciated the silence. By the time I returned, the day's chosen lector would be out front, declaring each division's interpretation of the Word for the unbelieving.

After crossing the first bridge, we rode through the opulence of those living nearest His Majesty, structures just short of castles, with broad sweeping arches and stained-glass ballrooms. The scarcity of land precluded the types of formal grounds many of them maintained in their holdings, but their meticulously groomed gardens exuded wealth and order just the same.

They were as welcoming as iron.

We crossed the next bridge over the Rinwash, heading into the upper merchants' quarter, and turned south, passing homes nearly the equal of the nobility, though they lacked the space for private gardens and they held about themselves the concentrated energy of those focused on profit.

When we passed over the next bridge, the buildings changed from heavy-cut granite to wood, first with several stories, then with just two or one, their plain windows already glowing as those within began preparations for their day in the marketplace or at their craft. The

ring of a hammer started somewhere off to my right, and the smell of bread drifted to me, reminding me I'd yet to eat.

Gareth took the opportunity our travel afforded to provide what little information he had around mouthfuls of dark bread. "We found two men, one dead from blood loss, the other nearly so." His mouth pulled to one side beneath a nose that had been broken so many times that it changed directions often. "A seamstress heard the clash of steel and started screaming, but by the time the night watch arrived, the attackers had fled."

I logged Gareth's pithy summary away. My heart beat faster with each step closer, and the abstraction I felt in the presence of the dead commanded my attention. I concentrated long enough to ask a proper question. "Do you have any names?"

He nodded. "The watchman recognized them. The dead man is Robin. He's the menial of Elwin, the man who got hit on the head. They're Servants."

I pulled the mist of predawn into my lungs and squinted through the darkness. Some might resent the studied aloofness of a Merum priest or the zeal of the Vanguard, and others might even take exception to the aggressive mercy practiced by the Absold. But no one in their right mind begrudged a Servant. They seldom preached—the only exception being their crier—wouldn't fight or try to change anyone. They served others. But for some reason, two men of the most humble of the four orders on the continent had been attacked. My heart quickened again.

We rounded a corner and came to the edge of a small grassy area bordering a clump of plain wooden buildings that huddled against the dark. A stone wall about eight feet high separated the area from the bank of one of the man-made branches of the Rinwash River.

Gareth pointed to a pile of limbs and cloth sprawled against the base of the wall. Here and there pale white skin showed against stone or fabric. Dark wet blotches covered the tunic. Gaping wounds assaulted my vision as the smell of blood hit my nose, and I fought to keep the remnants of my last meal in place. Gareth said something that almost penetrated the spell cast by the dead man, but none of the words registered as important.

I ignored him. Distraction was the enemy. Death begets death, and my job was to bring the killers to the gallows. I knew one thing immediately—Robin had been taken down by at least two men, maybe more. Deep slashes on his legs that matched those on his torso testified to as much. A single fighter would never risk a low-line attack that way. I pulled a breath heavy with mist off the river into my lungs as I counted the wounds. “They didn’t just kill him—they cut him to pieces.” Even his face. “How did anyone recognize him?”

Gareth shrugged. “I asked Ahden that same question. He recognized Robin’s clothes and the chip in his front tooth—and knows of his service to Elwin.”

I bent and shifted the hair to see his eye. I signaled Gareth closer with his torch. The details of death and the shadowed surroundings faded as I gave myself to Robin’s stare. Identical to the others I had seen at the end, regardless of the why or how of their passing. His eyes—a startling blue, like a potter’s glaze—focused on something so impossibly far away in death that he appeared to see through me, the city, and the kingdom. Even the stars were too close to capture his attention. A familiar longing awoke in me at the sight of it, and I desired nothing more in that moment than to somehow pull his attention from eternity so that he might answer my question. “Tell me, Robin, what do you see?”

Robin didn’t answer, of course. I was too late, as I always was. “Milord?”

Gareth’s voice pulled me from myself. He stood with the torch, shifting his weight from foot to foot, discomfited. No wisdom had been forthcoming from Robin, just as none had come to me from my family, Duke Orlan’s brother, or countless others. “Scan the area, Gareth. Tell me what you find.”

He wandered from spot to spot on the grounds, careful to avoid touching the body or disturbing the scuff marks in the turf where the earth bore witness. I turned from the pull of Robin’s gaze with an effort and climbed the steps to the top of the wall, my mind split between trying to understand what lay before me and worry. There’d been blood on my cloak.

From my elevated vantage point, the extremity of Robin’s defense

became clear. The grass, trampled by the attack, flowed back and forth like the strokes of a painter. My experience in battle didn't rival Gareth's, but even I could see Robin had fought bravely and well, very well. That last fact struck me, and I stopped to consider its implications. Too well for a Servant.

I descended the heavy granite steps, my breath misting the air before me. Gareth stepped to my side. The presence of Robin's corpse didn't prevent him from munching on his bread, his face impassive. "Reminds me of the last border war. Even after the bodies had been hauled off and burned, you could tell where the worst of the fighting was by looking at the grass. Rough business. Robin didn't go down without a fight. He gave as good as he got, or nearly so."

I nodded to acknowledge Gareth's confirmation and reminded myself I only had three more months of duty as a reeve of the city watch. After my marriage to Gael, I would be more elevated among the nobility that despised me. I blew air through my hands trying to warm them. "What do you see?"

He smiled at the chance to display his veteran's knowledge once more. "Come. I'll show you." He led me toward a patch of earth. "Trace the scuff marks." He bent. "See how the grass is bent and torn, pointing toward the river? Robin and Elwin were backing away with a pair of men following. There's a bit of blood here. Robin's, I think, because just after you can see the scuffs turn a bit. I think Robin was trying to protect his wounded side. And then we come to this." Gareth pointed to a pair of bloody splotches on the ground. "See the space between there and here? Both Robin and his assailants found their mark." My lieutenant knelt and touched the grass. "They all struck hard."

Two puddles of deep vermillion, almost black in the predawn, each almost a foot in diameter, discolored the earth, perhaps a cupful, maybe two. "It doesn't look like so much."

Gareth shook his head. "When a man's bleeding through his clothes and moving, Lord Dura, this is enough to kill."

I nodded, convinced. He pointed at another spot between us and the body a few feet away. "Robin got marked again."

We traced and read the desperation of Robin's defeat written in

splashes of blood on the ground until we stood over him once more. A few feet away to Robin's left the grass had been flattened and a sluggish pool of blood marked one end of the spot. I knelt, searching the ground under the yellow light of Gareth's torch. Droplets of blood littered the grass, smudges really.

"This is where they found Elwin?"

Gareth nodded, but something seemed wrong. Elwin should have been behind Robin, but from the scuffs in the grass and the blood spatters, it appeared he'd been out to one side or possibly in front when his enemies took him. "Why would he be here?" I muttered, not meaning for my voice to carry, but Gareth heard me anyway.

"Men do strange things in the rush of battle, my lord."

My misgiving remained despite my silence. "Is there anything else?"

Gareth led me to a spot several paces away, pointing to a pair of shallow grooves on the ground running parallel to each other. "Someone was dragged away."

This was why I needed Gareth. Whatever he lacked in insight or intuition, he made up for in observation. With ten years more experience in the king's service, he'd seen enough dying to make him an expert, but the stares of the dead held no interest for him.

I retraced the track of Robin's struggle over to his body, where I rolled him over and searched his clothes. A heavy jingle drew my attention, and I cut his purse free and dumped the contents. My pulse quickened once more as a glint of yellow, so rare as to be almost illegal, tumbled into my hand.

I almost stood then, but something about the rents in Robin's clothing stopped me. I'd been in the last border war and had seen plenty of dead and injured, but the holes in his tunic and breeches were unique in their similarity. I examined a pair of wounds on his right thigh before unfastening the buttons of his coat and lifting his shirt to inspect the damage on his stomach and chest.

I shifted the body to get a better look. Whoever had cut him up had tried to kill him quickly and obviously failed. I probed one of the wounds on his chest. A slash, not a thrust, about a hand wide ran horizontally, or nearly so, across Robin's right side, the wound much deeper in the center than either side. Curious, I checked a

couple more, then compared them to the wounds on his thighs. Every wound appeared the same, a clean cut nearly a hand wide and almost as deep, like sword or dagger slashes, but something about the depth bothered me—like a face that should have been familiar but wasn't—and I stared, trying to place it.

Robin's fist still clenched a sword, and there was blood on the blade. By the light of Gareth's torch, I inspected the nicks on the edges. No, not nicks, something else. Nicks from sword parries left small triangular notches in the edge of a blade. Instead, Robin's blade had small arc-shaped dents, as if he'd tried to hack through the bars of a prison. I pried the sword from his grasp and tucked it into my belt, behind my own.

"Interesting."

Gareth looked at me in surprise. "Lord Dura?"

I replaced Robin's tunic, my movements as respectful as I could make them. This was why I was here. Despite Gareth's experience, he lacked the ability to extrapolate his observations. "You say Robin marked a man badly enough to kill. Yet there's no one else here. And his purse was full, very full."

I shook the purse and noted the clear ring of silver along with a richer sound I'd rarely heard. "So that leaves us with a set of attackers who have no interest in money and whose identities are so important they're willing to spend the time and effort necessary to drag away their dead comrade."

I pointed a finger at Robin, trying to accuse him of something that would matter. "He was a Servant of all things. They don't fight. They don't strike back when struck. But he fought." At this point Robin's death didn't bother me nearly as much as his occupation.

"People kill for all sorts of reasons," Gareth said. "Not all of them make sense."

The education I received before becoming a reeve gave me a perspective on history. In the life of the church, I knew just how short a few hundred years could be. The Order Wars represented a long and lurid part of history on the northern continent. No sane man would ever wish their return, but the Servants had refused to fight, even then. I sighed. "Does the king know about this?"

Gareth nodded his head. “If he doesn’t, he soon will. The castellan was writing his report when I came to get you.”

Tension crept its way up the back of my neck, and I kept myself from using Gareth’s soldierly vocabulary, barely. The best I could say about the new castellan was that he didn’t come from the Orlan family. Being gifted, he’d never gone to war and didn’t have the experience to understand the kind of violence Robin’s death represented. I’d served in the last fight with Owmead almost a decade ago. A stab of pain shot through my head at the memory.

I focused on the scene before me. Blood soaked the earth and stones like spilled communal wine. What I saw made me wince, but it wasn’t the violence or the blood. “Where’s the other man—Elwin?”

Gareth made a vague gesture with his hand toward the southwest. “They took him to the House of Passing.”

I chewed my lip. Elwin had been wounded in the attack and survived it, at least temporarily. But instead of taking him to the succor of his order, the city watch had taken him out to the House of Passing. “He’s a churchman. Why didn’t they take him to a healer? For that matter, why didn’t they take him to the Servants’ cathedral? They’re the best healers in Bunard.”

I led Gareth back to where I’d tied up my mount, my pace urgent. I needed to see Elwin’s body, and if the slim chance remained that he still lived, I wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to question him or observe his passing. “Has anyone else come forward as a witness?”

Gareth snorted. “In this part of the city? No sir. These aren’t the type of people that take an interest in another’s business.”

His reply failed to discourage me. There were more witnesses—they would just be harder to get to. Nothing happened in the city of Bunard without someone seeing. The observers might not be the type the king’s magistrates would hearken to, but they were there. Whether they were beggars, pickpockets, thieves, or prostitutes, someone had seen the attack.

“I’ll be married in three months, Gareth, my year of betrothal completed, the husband of a lady and a man with responsibilities within the nobility.” I spoke to my fear. “I’ll learn the work of a respectable lord.”

Gareth blew air through his lips. “Why would the king allow that? There’s no one else that has your talent for seeing the way of things.”

I shook my head. There was no use in putting it off. Gareth might not be able to see the problem, but the king would, and I’d learned firsthand the difficulty of shading the truth with him in any way. Gareth would have to make report for me. “How long has Robin been in the city, Gareth?”

He shrugged and took another bite of bread. Dark crumbs littered his pale beard. “About five years.”

“What were a church functionary and his helper doing out at night? How does a menial Servant come by the skill to fight more than one opponent and kill one of them? Did you see his wounds?” I tried not to leer at the memory of his stare. “He bled to death. Against two or more swords, intent on killing him, he bled to death, meaning they weren’t good enough to land a killing stroke against a *Servant*.”

I turned a slow circle, searching out the closest buildings. This section of town was home to many of the shopkeepers, those less-prosperous merchants who worked without ceasing but managed to maintain their status. Most of the buildings close by housed the proprietor’s business in the front and their living space in the back. Some few possessed a second story. I pointed them out. “Start with those. A few of them would have a view of the fight. We need information.” I didn’t bother sending Gareth after those who filled the shadows of the city at night. They’d never speak with him. Skittish, sometimes they wouldn’t even talk to me. I nodded toward the dead man. “And have someone take care of Robin.”