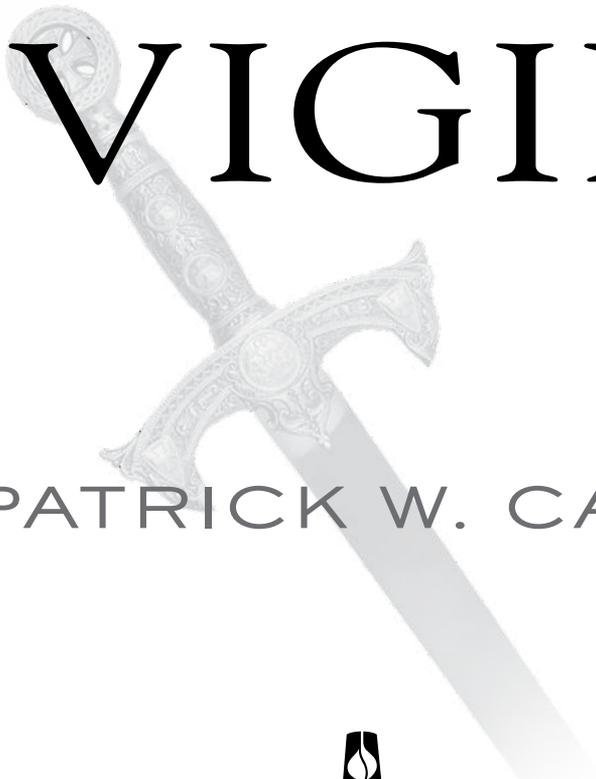


THE  
DARKWATER  
SAGA 

# THE SHATTERED VIGIL



PATRICK W. CARR



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To my wife, Mary:

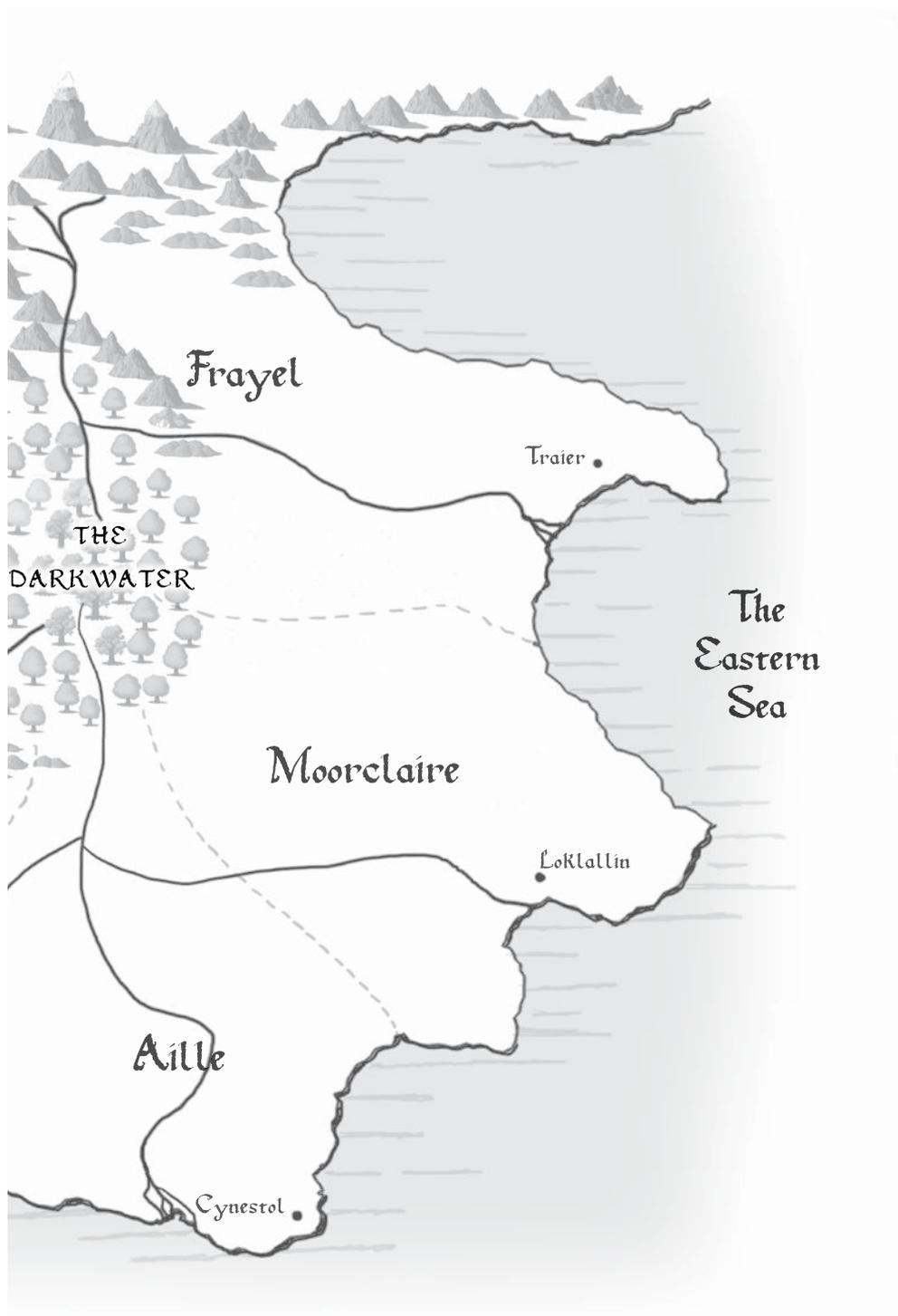
The only problem with knowing I married “up” is conceding that you must have married “down.” I’ll try to bear up somehow.



To my four sons,  
Patrick, Connor, Daniel, and Ethan:

No children ever inspired their father more.





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## 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

Darkness fell within the storyteller's room, the pain and light of day diminishing, though the heat remained, absorbed and surrendered from countless clay walls and tiled roofs. Nightfall. He relished the dying of the light, the way the sun that blinded him slid beneath the horizon with all the desperate clinging of a drowning child.

Somewhere within the confluence of memories within his mind a twinge of regret flashed through him like an unexpected strike of lightning. He ignored the stray emotion without so much as a grimace to mark its passing. Such vestiges of humanity manifested themselves less often as time passed, but the emotion served to remind him of his limitation and strengthened his resolve to conquer it. Until he could bend creation to his will, he would have to adapt. For now.

Rising from his bed, he removed the outermost cloth shielding his eyes from the unbearable brightness of day. The other, thinner cloth he left in place. It would allow him to function in the lantern-light of the expensive restaurant and tavern below, but there was another more important reason that had nothing to do with his disguise or the girl's expectations.

He grabbed the polished cane by the door and ventured into the hallway, thumping the wood on the floor with the regular rhythm of a blind man searching his way. The stairs had been split into sets of nine and he smiled. Of all those walking on the northern continent only he

and another knew the import of that number, knew its importance in relationship to the other two mentioned in the exordium.

A pop and flare from the fire in the center of the room caught him by surprise, and he squeezed his eyes shut against the pain, his cane serving its pretended purpose for a moment. He took the shadowed table at the back of the tavern, the one most shielded from the fire and lanterns.

She came through the front entrance, as he'd instructed her, when the last ray of light had vanished from the spire of the grand cathedral. It was a trivial exercise, but it served to reinforce the unquestioning obedience he would require, and it provided the time necessary to arrive before her and prepare the wine. She noted the dagger he'd placed on the table before him but said nothing. Attractive, she responded to power and drink as courtesans and sycophants had responded for countless millennia, with near worship of those who exercised dominion over them.

"Greetings, Magden," he said with a self-deprecating smile. "Do you never tire of an old man's stories?"

"Never." Flattered to think that her presence pleased him so much, she laughed, gazing at him with . . .

Devotion.

Despite his intimate familiarity, the library here in Vadrás, the chief city in Caisel, had proven difficult to penetrate—the sanctum where the priests stored the oldest writings even more so. In the end, he'd had to use a series of disposable intermediaries with instructions on which texts to find. Even then it had taken weeks to gather the names of those minor personages, individuals without fame or acclaim, who lived within the city and owned the particular gift he required.

A pure gift would have been simpler, the memories would have taken less time—the emotional responses more intense from the outset—but the end result would be the same. And for his purposes a partial gift served him better. Those with full gifts—in their arrogance they misnamed this parceling, this division, something so far less than what it had been—attracted attention. He required something less, a partial gift, whose owner moved freely and randomly through the city and court, one of the countless faces who'd left family and friends behind to make the journey to the second-largest city on the continent.

Someone whose disappearance would go unnoticed until it was too late.

Magden—he forced himself to remember her name only because it flattered her that he bothered to know it—leaned forward, anticipating his tale, her bare hand extended across the corner of the table, her offer implicit in the coy smile and tilt of her head.

“Tell me the story again.” She smiled. “The one about me. You’ve never finished it.”

“Well . . .” He lifted his hands. “It’s a story of some depth.”

She pouted. “But every night you start over at the beginning.”

“The most powerful tales require an attention to detail seldom found in other narratives.” He put a smile on his face but ignored the offer of her bare skin for the moment. Almost—almost she was ready. “Magden was born in the far north,” he said, beginning the same story he’d told her several times each night for the past two weeks. “There, like here, she danced and loved, and the love of her life was Count Orlan, brother to the duke and the most handsome man in the city of Bunard.”

His voice dipped, like the fall of notes from a mandolin just before the villain appeared on stage during a play. He paused, waiting for a sign that the story and the memories he’d planted had taken hold. It didn’t take long. Her brows drew together and her face darkened, her expression becoming murderous, no longer the aspect of a girl hearing a story, but a lover longing for revenge—real revenge.

“Until he killed him,” she snarled, her hand curling around the dagger, tightening until the blood drained from her knuckles.

Through the cloth that protected him from the stabbing glare of the lanterns he noted the pallor of Magden’s eyes, the way their rich green, like spring grass, had faded to the barest hint of sea-foam, and he withheld a smile. “Until *who* killed him?” he prompted.

She didn’t answer, and a look of confusion passed across her face as her mind attempted to reconcile false memories passed with real ones. He still had work to do.

“The peasant. Willet Dura.”

He reached out to take her hand and dropped into a delve, where he strengthened the false memories of love and betrayal and the emotions of rage and revenge that went with them. Pausing in the flow of her memories, he stooped to take one of the brightest-colored threads, yellow bordering on gold, and merged with it, finding himself in a

bright glade with Magden's father, where they played, their laughter as luminous as the sunshine.

With a twist of his mind, he destroyed the memory, pleasure at its loss pouring through him. He bent low to grab a score more, slashing them with his will until nothing remained. The most recent memories—those of the story he poured into Magden night after night—drifted by, dim and insubstantial by comparison.

Soon now. Soon those strands of recollection would be as strong and real and indistinguishable to Magden as her own memories. Soon they would be all she knew, all she was. At the last, he would destroy everything else.

Then she would be ready.

She left the tavern, and he made a mental check of the time. His next devotee would be coming soon. He smiled, filled with purpose, and one of the tavern girls smiled in response, an answering gesture to a kindly old man who told stories to some of the locals. He lifted his arm in a blind man's directionless wave, requesting another glass of wine.

There were hours of darkness remaining to him.

# CHAPTER 1



*Bunard, Collum*

*The first week of Queen Cailin's Regency*

How many shades of fear were there? I sat within the Merum cathedral, surrounded by the dusty, unused opulence of a church that had survived millennia of war, internal and otherwise, with my hand inches away from another hue of dismay. The woman before me had a face I wouldn't have looked at twice out in the street or the marketplace, but seeing it now, I imagined that the pinched lines decorating her mouth and perpetual squint to the eyes—as if she were more attuned to anger and jealousy than sunlight—spoke of darkness within her heart.

Those eyes leapt at me as I entered the delve. Memories washed past me of life in the lower merchants' section, days filled with relentless toil as a tanner's daughter and then a tanner, mired in the stench of the craft and bereft of love. I swallowed my indignation at the unfairness of life.

Bronach's skin lay warm beneath my touch, despite the chill of her prison, and I hurtled through her memories without bothering to search for the moment she gave up on her life. Bronwyn and Toria Deel had made it plain it was not my duty to understand—only to judge.

The time for mercy had ended when the sun emerged from the darkness of Bas-solas ten days prior. But in truth, Bronach had already been judged by her actions. On the day of Bas-solas, the festival celebrating the death and rebirth of light, Bronach had taken a knife to her family. Then she'd taken to the streets.

I couldn't retrieve the memory of her face out of the myriad people in Bunard who'd tried to kill me that day, but there had been plenty of others who'd witnessed her killing frenzy, had seen her turn into something evil and unrecognizable. A sigh whispered from me. Since I was a reeve, the gift passed to me by Elwin as he died—a gift that imparted an ability to determine guilt without doubt—should have made me happier than this, but how long could I bear living those deeds as though I'd committed them myself? I wondered if the doors in my mind were secure enough to keep their memories in check.

I searched the recesses of Bronach's mind, floating through memories of slights and insults from other goodwives in the city, wives whose husbands honored their marriage bed. She had treasured every jibe, real or perceived, until fantasies of retribution had consumed her.

Tracing the threads of memory, I finally found what I sought—a black scroll, wrapped and sealed with thousands upon thousands of black strands connecting it to every memory that defined the woman.

The script upon it, black written upon black, remained unreadable. I opened it and tried to make sense of the flowing strokes of midnight, but the whorls and loops of writing looked more like a child's attempt at art than an alphabet. With a pang of regret, I took the scroll in my hands—noting the strangeness of having a sense of them within someone else's mind—and tore it to pieces, smaller and smaller, until those disappeared from reckoning. At each tear, a black thread tying the scroll to Bronach's past snapped, and a bit more of her mind—the essence of who she'd been—flared and disappeared.

I searched as I destroyed, seeking some clue to the truth of the Darkwater. How had the evil gotten free of the forest? But nothing within her memories yielded information or insight. I came out of the delve with a prayer on my lips for Bronach's soul, just as I had the others, that somehow her mind might heal.

“Come back to us, Bronach,” I pleaded. Fear clenched my gut, and my silent plea to Aer continued.

The lamplight shifted over Bronach's shoulder, blinding me, and for the moment in which I tried to blink away the glare, I dared to hope this time might be different. It had happened before, once—it could again.

Her mouth gaped at me, slack and unresponsive, and her eyes had dulled. They might reflect the light, but they would never sparkle in it

again. Slowly, as if to mock my prayer and fear, a bit of spittle gathered at one corner of her mouth and started to trickle down her chin.

“That’s all, Willet,” Bolt said from behind me. “You can’t do any more today.” A sigh of disapproval ghosted from him. “Five. And you shouldn’t have done that many.”

I stood as Bolt gathered Bronach in his arms to take her to the apothecary one room over where the broken were taken to find release. I snorted the word in disgust at myself. “Release.”

“Willet?”

I looked at my guard, with his sandy blond hair going to gray and the light blue eyes that always shone as if he were looking into the sunlight. Not much got past him. Given his experience as a guard for the Vigil—the small group of gifted within the church who possessed the ability to see into the hearts and minds of others—not much would.

And now I was one of them, holding power within my hands that most men or women could scarcely conceive—power that would give kings dominion and lovers unimagined intimacy, ability that would give judges infallibility and confessors clarity. And I hated it. I answered as if my words could somehow cleanse me of Bronach’s death and all the others condemned to their final resting place in the caves beneath Bunard. “It’s not release,” I said. “It’s death.”

I shoved Bronach’s memories into the same room as the rest of those I’d delved that morning. A stab of guilt pierced me that I hadn’t even given the tanner woman the dignity of putting her memories in their own keeping place within my mind. I’d dumped the last essence of Bronach into a common grave with all the others who had tried to kill me. Pellin had warned me of the toll keeping them would exact, but a voice in my head, my own, accused me of taking the last vestige of Bronach’s dignity from her.

I couldn’t disagree.

“What was she like?” Bolt asked. He knew the answer to his own question. He couldn’t help but know. This was his way of affording the dead some final dignity. He always asked, and I always answered. As absolution went, it didn’t mean much, but it was all he could offer and I took it.

Breath whispered from me in a long sigh. “Like all the rest. Her envy ate at her spirit year by year until that was pretty much all that was left.”

“But why go to the Darkwater?”

I shook my head. “Those memories were wrapped within the scroll. I couldn’t read it, but I’m hoping Custos might.”

I’d stored the vision of the scroll in Bronach’s mind with all the rest behind a door as secure and impenetrable as my thoughts could make it. Two weeks before, during the attack on Braben’s Inn, I’d been trapped in the mind of a dying butcher, held there by dark threads as his life ebbed away from Bolt’s knife cast. If I had still been within the delve while he died, my mind would have died with him. The encounter had managed to teach me caution and fear.

I pulled a shuddering breath into my lungs. How had power managed to make me so afraid?

Bolt’s face might have been carved from living stone, but since he’d become my guard I’d learned to interpret the minute variations in his expression . . . sometimes. “Do you think the librarian will know something that Pellin doesn’t?” he asked. “The Eldest has spoken of the script before. There’s nothing written about it, not even in the Vigil’s library in Cynestol. Don’t you think the Vigil would have unraveled it by now? Pellin’s had centuries.”

Bolt’s reminder of the longevity most of the Vigil would experience—as if they’d found the legendary third continent and its wellspring—brought a flash of heat to my face. I didn’t want to be reminded how Elwin’s gift had extended my own lifespan, thrusting a future upon me in which I would be forced to watch every friend die of age or war while I hardly aged at all.

I checked that thought. Friends came into a man’s life and they left it—that was the nature of the world—but I’d had the opportunity for something more. Elwin’s desperate, dying gift in the House of Passing had left me with two almost equally bitter choices. Marry Gael and watch her and my children age and die while I remained young, or grant her uncle, Count Alainn, his greatest desire and let her marry Lord Rupert.

“Don’t remind me,” I said, my voice tight. “And you’re probably right. Still, it can’t hurt to try.” I paused to look around the room that had been set aside for the Vigil’s grisly task. A few paces away, Bronwyn and Toria Deel—what remained of the true Vigil, along with Pellin and Jorgen—each delved one of the prisoners. “I need to get out of this room for a while.” A thought occurred to me. “And the cathedral.”

Bolt's face shifted into a look of mild disapproval, which was the same as saying that it lost whatever small expression it held. He could have given rocks lessons on how to be stony. "Are you going to see her again?"

He didn't have to say who *her* was—ever and always there would be only one. Gael. "No." I saw him relax, a minute shift in the set of his shoulders, as if he no longer anticipated drawing the sword at his side. "I haven't seen Ealdor since before Bas-solas." I sighed. "Pellin is going to send me from Collum once we're done delving everyone who went insane. I need to say good-bye."

He turned to signal Bronwyn, nothing more than a quick flutter of the fingers of his right hand and a tilting of the head, but I saw her rise and approach as if she'd been summoned. Her guard, Balean, shadowed her, protecting her against whatever threat might arise in a cathedral. My hackles went up. Pellin and Bronwyn were both old beyond belief. I didn't know just how old, but they accumulated their life in decades the way others numbered individual years. Neither of them trusted me for reasons I couldn't control any more than the color of my eyes.

"How do you fare, Lord Dura?" she asked. Not Willet or Dura, always Lord Dura. Lady Bronwyn never failed in the use of the title, a fact that had escaped my attention until I discovered her age. She and Pellin had been born in an older, more formal time. Even their speech carried hints of an accent that no one living would be able to identify, vestiges of the language all people had once spoken that had changed over the course of centuries.

"Well enough," I said. I briefly considered playing dumb and just as quickly rejected the idea. The events of the festival had taught me that I needed the help of others in the Vigil no matter how hard I might try to deny it. If trust could be established between us, it would be up to me to take the first step. "I'm going to visit a couple of friends, one here in the cathedral and another in the city."

She nodded in approval, but the corners of her eyes tightened just a fraction, giving the lie to her expression.

*"Friends are bless and balm to me:*

*One to mirror,*

*Two for strength,*

*Three to reveal what must be seen,  
Four of us in perfect unity.  
Different as we can be,  
Yet we command eternity.”*

She nodded her head as if there were some particularly deep wisdom contained within the singsong that I couldn't fail to see with her. She didn't dispense children's rhymes as often as Bolt invented his own militaristic quips, but it didn't take a gift to see that she had spent quite a bit of time with them. I couldn't help but feel Bolt saw me as a raw recruit while Bronwyn looked upon me as an untutored schoolboy.

“Who are you going to visit?” she asked.

The directness of the question surprised me, but I stifled my initial response. I had no secrets from the Vigil. None. They'd delved me and those closest to me. If I attempted to dissemble or refused to answer, I would only give them cause to believe that the dark scroll, the vault, in my head had taken control of me at last. The irony would have been laughable were it not so incredibly tragic. I held the same scroll in my mind that I had been charged with destroying in those who'd murdered others during Bas-solas.

No wonder the Vigil didn't—couldn't—trust me. “Custos and Ealdor,” I said.

She nodded. “I would like to accompany you, if you will permit it. The librarian is of particular interest to me.”

The request was lightly made, at least by her tone, but I could see Lady Bronwyn steeling herself, a soldier shouldering an unpleasant duty. She, like Toria Deel and me, had spent days breaking the vaults and minds of others, and yet my intention to visit a pair of old friends elicited this reaction.

My stomach started a promenade around my insides, my fear fighting against my curiosity. Why did she want to come? She'd left the choice up to me. I didn't want company, but questions crowded my discomfort aside. As usual, my curiosity won without breaking a sweat.

“Of course, Lady Bronwyn. I will welcome your company.”