



A DRAGON AGE NOVEL

HARD IN HIGHTOWN

"SO MANY PEOPLE GET SHIVVED!"

— Merrill

**VARRIC
TETHRAS**

WITH MARY KIRBY



HARD IN HIGHTOWN

They say coin never sleeps, but anyone who's walked through Kirkwall's Hightown Market at midnight would disagree. The pickpockets and confidence men head to the taverns at dusk, the shouts of the hucksters fade into echoes, and the dwarven businessmen go back to their tiny palaces to count the ways they got cheated and polish their ancient grievances. The market falls silent except for the sea wind whistling its lullaby through the empty shop stalls.

The only souls who visit the market late at night are looking for trouble. One way or another.

Donnen Brennokovic knew every angle of the market with his eyes closed. He was a man composed entirely of differing shades of faded brown, from the gray-sprinkled brown of his bushy sideburns, to his perpetually squinty hazel eyes, to the freckles dotting his nose and cheekbones, and even down to the stained and sun-bleached uniform that had once, in better times and with better care, been red. Twenty years of patrols had chiseled the stones of every street and alley in Kirkwall into him, so that he walked a beat even in his dreams.

The recruit was another story. The ring of steel striking stone told Donnen that Jevlan had stumbled into a column again. His new armor

would be full of dents by sunrise. Donnen tried not to smile. Usually Hightown was the safest patrol in Kirkwall. But usually guardsmen didn't go three rounds with gravity and lose. Jevlan was closer to round six by now.

The sound as Jevlan hauled himself off the pavement was like a tinker's cart going down stairs. Jevlan was tall and shaped like a badly blunted arrowhead, broad across the shoulders and tapering down to his feet. None of his armor fit, and every piece seemed to be alternately attempting to leap from the recruit's body or smother him. His pale, blue-eyed face was lost under his immense, bucketlike helmet. Donnen watched him struggle to his feet from the dull black flagstones and wondered if the quartermaster gave Jevlan that gear as a joke.

"Torches would make this easier," Jevlan muttered.

"Torches make you night-blind. You'll adjust." Donnen crossed the square to help the kid to his feet. "Just try to stay away from the stairs, would you? With your luck, you'd fall all the way down to the quays."

"How many years do I have to walk this patrol before I stop tripping?" Jevlan grumbled, "Thirty? Forty?" One of his pauldrons had been jammed at an awkward angle by his fall. He smacked his shoulder repeatedly, clanging like a cheap dinner bell, trying fruitlessly to shove the plate back into place. "Why would you *ever* want to retire and give all this up?"

Donnen grabbed the recruit's arm and pulled the errant pauldron back into position. "Hard as it is to imagine, kid, you'll get tired of all this excitement and glamour eventually."

A breeze whisked across the plaza, sending the satin banners and pennants of the merchants' stalls shivering and carrying an old, familiar scent. Donnen stopped in his tracks.

"Something's wrong." His voice was low and hushed. He peered into the dark, at the mezzanine just above the square. "Follow me. Be ready for trouble."

With Jevlan somehow managing to stumble only twice, the two guards climbed the dark stairs.

The recruit caught his breath, leaning against the low stone balustrade of the mezzanine, squinting into the dark as if that might improve his night vision. "What is it?" he whispered. "What are we looking for up here?"



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Donnen didn't answer. He didn't need to see, following his nose like a hound. It was close, he knew. The air was heavy and still up on the mezzanine, almost sticky with a sweetish smell like raw meat. And there, in a puddle of shadow, he found the body. Gold-trimmed satin glittered through the blood.

Donnen let out a weary sigh. "Get the captain. We've got a dead magistrate."

"Who is he?" Jevlan asked as the older guardsman knelt and carefully turned the body over onto its back.

"No idea. That's why you need to go get the captain." Donnen replied as he carefully pulled the torn, blood-soaked fabric away from the dead man's chest to get a better look in the dim moonlight at the wide, ragged stab wound beneath. "We need someone who knows the city's officials to identify him."

"But you know he's a magistrate?" Jevlan asked as he leaned over to peer at the corpse.

"*Now*, recruit!" Donnen snapped, "This guy's not getting any fresher."

The kid looked like he was about to argue for half a second, then saluted and ran for the keep, armor clattering like a wagon full of pans. He disappeared into the dark, and quiet settled back into the plaza.

Donnen stretched and watched the moon drift behind the choir of the chantry, casting the market into even deeper shadow. In his experience, while everyone from the beggars in Darktown to the viscount himself might say they hated their local magistrate, the people most likely to take a swing at one were other magistrates. Untangling this mess could take months. Months he didn't have left.

The clattering sound returned with a blaze of torch-lights.

Captain Hendallen barely needed a torch. Donnen suspected she could see in pitch darkness by willpower alone, but if that didn't do it, her fiery hair almost cast enough light to read by.

"Magistrate Seamus Dunwald." The captain sighed as if she might be disappointed in the man for dying on her watch, and she probably *was*. "You didn't hear a struggle? See anyone flee the scene?"

"No, ma'am. He's cold. Had to be lying here for at least an hour before we found him. The blood on the flagstones is clotting." Donnen studied

the dead man's face in the firelight. Young, sandy-haired, with wide, staring eyes. He'd probably been looking right into the face of his killer when he'd been stabbed. In the light, the gold-threaded embroidery of the Kirkwall sigil, a stylized dragon made from the most complicated of knots, gleamed from the breast of his coat.

"I'll have words with the last patrol." Captain Hendallen's tone suggested that the words might cause bodily harm on impact. "And I'll tell the Chantry to send someone for the body. Get everything you can from the scene before the dwarven merchants wake up. I want a full report of this on my desk first thing in the morning, Brennokovic."

"Yes, ma'am." He rummaged through Dunwald's pockets as the captain walked away and left Jevlan standing awkwardly behind holding a torch. Donnen found a ring of keys, a full purse of gold coins, a couple of paper markers, and a monogrammed silk handkerchief that smelled of lilacs.

"Do I . . . follow the captain? Or continue with the patrol, or . . . ?" Jevlan shifted uneasily in his ill-fitting hodgepodge of plate.

Donnen studied the kid in the torchlight for a moment. It would be impossible to even put a dent in this case before Donnen left the guard. The smart thing, the *wise* thing to do would be to follow the captain's orders: write up the report and finish their patrol of the empty market. Leave the dead man to someone else. Jevlan tried to scratch his nose with his gauntlet and narrowly avoided hitting himself in the eye. He was so green, he might as well have leaves. As a young guard, Donnen had once been made to patrol Lowtown for a month with a trained nug for a partner. The nug had been more battle-ready than Jevlan. Donnen let out a deep sigh and made a decision.

"I'm supposed to show you the ropes. So . . . let's investigate a murder, recruit."

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The mansion was in the neighborhood the locals called "the Garden." The houses along the boulevard were all covered in heavy thorn vines and the flagstones were carpeted in moss that muffled the guardsmen's footsteps and the sound of the waves in the distance, and made the air heavy and still. It was the most expensive gloom in Kirkwall. As the guards passed, half a



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dozen gardeners were out in the pre-dawn light, tying back thorns to the stone walls to make them stick, and watering the moss to keep it from drying out in the salt wind of the Waking Sea.

The houses of the Garden had no numbers. The nobles instead hung metal plaques with their heraldry over the lintels of their doors. Two houses past the rampant duck with a wing full of arrows and left of the dragon stomping on a field of wheat, they found Dunwald's door beneath a raven with two pens and sailing ship, and knocked.

Magistrate Dunwald's butler had the air of a man who had never risen before dawn in his life. He stared down his nose at the two guardsmen as if he were on some lofty balcony far above them, instead of standing in the doorway in his bare feet and dressing gown.

"The Magistrate is indisposed. This can wait until a reasonable hour." He gestured for the guards to leave.

"The Magistrate is dead." Donnen corrected him, pushing past the butler into the foyer. "Wake the household."

Jevlan stepped inside uneasily and closed the door behind him. "Shouldn't the captain be here?"

Donnen shrugged. "You want to go back to the barracks, be my guest." He opened the door to the parlor and his eyes wandered across the collection displayed around the room. Embroidered tapestries covered every inch of the walls and beneath them, a dozen ancient swords lay nestled in velvet display cases, protected from dust and prying fingers by brass-framed glass. Donnen moved to lift the lid of the nearest one. Jevlan started a sputtering protest, but then the doors to the family rooms opened.

She had eyes the color of aquamarines and dark hair that fell across her brow like sword-strokes. The scent of lilacs clung to her, dark and sweet like a spring evening. She strolled into the parlor with such dignified elegance that Donnen didn't realize for several moments that she was clad in a housecoat and not a ball gown.

"You have news about my husband Seamus? What's he done this time, forget to pay his bill at the tavern?" She seated herself in a silk upholstered armchair that looked like a close cousin to an Orlesian throne and gestured for the guards to do the same. Donnen stood and nodded at the recruit to speak up.