

# THE BLACKMOON SHARDS

BOOKS BY ELDON THOMPSON

THE LEGEND OF ASAHIEL

*The Crimson Sword*

*The Obsidian Key*

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WARDER

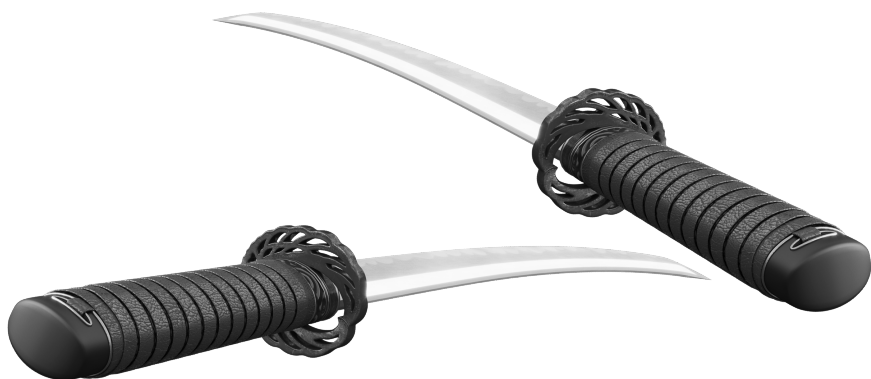
*The Ukinhan Wilds*

*The Blackmoon Shards*

*The Sundered Isle*

# WARDER

THE  
BLACKMOON SHARDS



ELDON  
THOMPSON



THE BLACKMOON SHARDS

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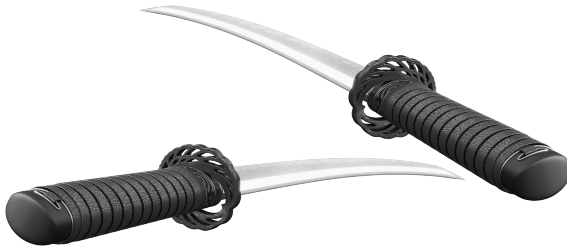
# ADDARANTH

*The Sundered Isle*





# PROLOGUE



**T**HE SHRIKE PEERED BACK AT HIM with unmistakable bloodlust, its eye a crimson garnet burning with reflected torchlight and gleaming with primal hunger. Matching red markings painted its breast, its pinion feathers, the tips of its ashen talons and the scimitar curve of its ebony beak. Stark against an otherwise obsidian sheen, the vivid splashes of color seemed to pulse with the rapid ebb and flow of its breath. The magnificent raptor knew that it had once again served its purpose with unerring strength and efficiency. All that remained was to collect its reward.

The morgrats caged along the far wall of the rookery could sense it as well, mewling as they clambered anxiously about their kennel, fleshy forms writhing over and around one another in search of escape. Once plucked from their prison, the amphibious rodents would be given to make a mad dash down the broken hillside, racing to find a crack or crevice in the pitted slope in which to burrow their way to freedom—a jagged, coal-hued ground littered with the splintered bones of those who had made similar attempt before.

The only salvation lay in continued captivity.

“Well?” Temerius asked.

The harsh edge in his voice caused the shrike to rear back on its open perch, puffing in challenge. He might have reached out to stroke

its nape or crop in reassurance, but not before the unsettled bird had sated its hunger. To do so sooner might cost him a finger.

Kriehl failed to respond. Sensing his hesitation, Temerius rounded with an asp-like turn, gaze kindling a fire of its own. Far below, the surf crashed against the razor-edged shoreline, echoing a dull roar while shooting skyward to form a briny, windborne spray that reached clear to their position near the open cave mouth.

He found the wizened shrikemaster hunched over his stone lectern, worrying still over the piece of lambskin the great bird had delivered. Rare, that it should take him so long to decipher an incoming dispatch. Perhaps his already compromised eyesight had finally failed him.

Nonetheless, he wisely spoke before being prompted again to do so. "Fell news, my lord."

Temerius grimaced. He had sensed as much the moment his lookout had alerted him to the shrike's imminent arrival. His intuition had formed at once a cold dread in the pit of his stomach that churned like rancid meat. He had not hastened from his ship's cabin in the cove below, abandoning Lehmyra's ebon-skinned warmth and braving the rookery's perilous stair in the dead of night, to hear a shriveled scow such as Kriehl prattle a general misgiving.

"Are you to determine for me now but the *nature* of this writ? Or is it within my province to know the content?"

The shrikemaster gave a cursory bow, gesturing vaguely for his liege captain's forgiveness. Too old to observe propriety, it seemed. Else too certain of the status he enjoyed as one of Grendavan's favorites. Temerius wondered briefly what that status might be worth if he were to pop Kriehl's remaining eye from that petulant, leather-wrapped skull of his.

Kriehl straightened. A laborious effort. As if encumbered suddenly by an invisible yoke draped over his bony shoulders. The seawind gusted, sending a shiver through his gnarled, whipcord frame. "We have been betrayed. Your great father is slain."

An abrupt tightness seized Temerius's chest, like an invisible fist clenched around his heart. His lungs fought the sudden pressure, while a gushing warmth flooded his veins. His mind filled with images of his not-too-distant boyhood, while his thoughts sputtered a



denial that struggled desperately for release. But he found his tongue trapped behind gritted teeth, and the cords of his voice strung taut with pain and fury.

The lie echoed as he felt himself plummeting.

*Your great father is slain.*

“They bade him welcome, led him and his party into their cathedral, conducted the ceremony, and . . .”

The shriekmaster trailed off as Temerius strode forward, a swift, certain movement of unconscious command. He reached out as Kriehl withered in reflex, and snatched the lambskin writ from the interpreter’s gnarled, age-spotted grasp.

He looked at the figures scrawled there, searching. Though he could not read them, he recognized the hand. Sabrynne. The Stormweaver. Which meant there could be no mistake, no error in the interpretation of events. Unless . . .

He whirled on the cringing Kriehl, who withdrew another step. The recently returned shrike let loose a shriek of impatience. The members of its cast, locked in their various cages around the limestone chamber, echoed in sharp chorus.

“You err, old man,” he heard himself rasp. “The Pretender had neither the strength nor the will to oppose my father.”

“’Twas not by his hand,” Kriehl admitted. “An outlander. Some rogue assassin dredged up from foreign shores. Nara’s doing, not Darr’s. A mere youth, by the account you hold, but formidable, unpredictable, treacherous. ’Twas *his* hand that came to Nara’s defense, *his* blade that—”

“Assassin.” The word reverberated amid the pulse of hammer strokes raging in his skull. “A mere youth, you say.” His gaze blurred as he strained to read the unfamiliar markings inked upon the lambskin, to decipher for himself the story they revealed. Liege captain, he was, of the *Kraken’s Reach*. Chief steward of this outpost atoll, Rannuthrok—the Ravaged Maiden. Yet it was not given to him to know the arcane language by which a dispatch of this magnitude was communicated. That privilege belonged only to the Core—a handful of elevated shriekmasters and arc captains sworn to the Great Grendavan.

His father. His father could have read this. But not him. He had

not yet earned the right to—

A drop of water hit the lambskin. *Not water*, he realized. A tear.

The neglected shrike squawked another reminder, its call filled this time with mockery.

Kriehl frowned a similar disapproval. “We foresaw this possibility. Your father, chief among all, understood that it—”

“This rogue. Assassin. Has he a name?”

“That and more. He has made off with the *Vengeance*, profaning its decks with a crew of the Pretender’s landsnakes. He means to rescue Thane.”

“His name.”

The shrike squawked again, insistent, and again its surrounding cast carried the cry. The morgrats whimpered and writhed in their kennel. The patch-eyed Kriehl scowled. “Kronus, it is written there. Kylac Kronus.”

“A name I shall carve in my bowsprit, once I have carved my father’s in his flesh.” He crumpled the lambskin in his fist, and turned back to tend to the shrike.

“That is not your reigning order,” Kriehl argued, shuffling after him as if to retrieve the message. “Yours is to make for Pammelthrok.”

There to join Arc Captains Irravius and Cortrus in the mobilization of an armada that would proceed upon command to the mouth of the Gorrethrian Sound. Temerius stopped as he came eye-to-eye once more with the starving shrike and its livid bloodlust. A mere candle now, compared to his own. “And these orders hail from whom, when our overlord, the Great Grendavan, is dead?”

Behind him, Kriehl stiffened at the derision in his tone. “Ware your tongue, Temerius, and the treason it would sow. Your father may be gone, but this changes noth—”

“It changes everything,” Temerius snapped, as the shrike’s gaze pierced him. Softly, he repeated, “Everything.”

He lashed out, gripping the shrike about the neck. The great seabird screeched, a shrill cry taken up by its cast. It thrashed and beat its powerful wings, and Temerius shook it in turn. While blood-dipped talons tore furrows in his forearm, he held fast, squeezing.

“My lord!” Kriehl gasped. “Temerius!”

The morgrats mewled and whined as if it were they being strangled. The meaty wings of the other shrikes slapped against the iron bars of their cages. Far below, breaking waves surged and crashed, bellowing their dull roar.

A sharp crack, and he felt the bones give beneath his jerking fist. The shrike's head fell limp, even as its body shuddered through a final series of violent convulsions. Its talons raked at him once, twice more, then ceased to struggle. Triple eyelids sagged, half-drawn shutters against the reflected torchlight.

Hoping the impertinent creature could yet feel a measure of pain, Temerius shoved the lambskin dispatch clear down into its crop, drawing blood across his hand where it scraped against the shrike's beak.

"What have you done?" Kriehl asked breathlessly.

Temerius released the carcass, watching it tumble from its perch to lie in a feathered heap upon the stone of the cavern floor. Its wizened master rushed forward, stooping to cradle its broken form, while the cries of its kin sang of fury and accusation.

"Fool!" Kriehl hissed. "This bird was worth more than mine own life!"

Temerius Seahammer reached for the dagger sheathed at his waist—a long, bone-handled blade of steel gifted him by his father. As dark rivulets streamed from the riven flesh of his forearm, he wondered if, with only one good eye, the shrikemaster of Rannuthrok could see the flaming bloodthirst that consumed his own.

"To that," the captain growled, "we are agreed."



## DARKNESS ENGULFED HER.

Her head spun. Her stomach churned. She clenched her eyes, her jaw, gritting her teeth in a determined effort to hold the expulsive forces in check. But the lightless void in which she found herself rose and fell, rose and fell, rocking at the same time from side to side in ceaseless rhythm. A roiling pressure mounted from within. Building . . . squeezing . . .

She lurched forward, vomiting in the blackness, cringing at the sound of her wretched heaving and the splash of half-digested food chunks spilling into the bilgewater at her feet. The stench of her own sickness washed over her, summoning another wave. She gave it vent, having no choice now, succumbing to her body's urgent need.

She gasped for breath before retching again, and again. When a subsequent spasm produced only empty sputtering, she spat and rolled back against the coarse-grained wall, gripping her knees in surrender and self-loathing, allowing her dizziness to take her.

*To the depths, she hoped. This entire cursed ship, and me with it.*

The mere thought ignited a fire in her belly, a coursing warmth set to greedily consume pain and weakness. Nara grimaced, shivering there in the dank blackness of the cramped bilge while scathed from within by the flames of self-reproach. A mere two days had they been at sea, by her estimation, though it felt like weeks, and may in truth have only been hours. Whichever, too soon to be praying for death or elsewise relinquishing commitment to her purpose.

*Would you let them win? Would you see them go unpunished?*

Their faces paraded through her mind's eye, as if to remind her of her course. Thane, her brother. Ulfund, her faithful shadow. Abinama, her love's light and devoted companion. Pain stabbed at her with the memory of each, and new faces emerged—vile, disgusting. Grendavan, the Grenarr overlord, dark and imposing as he leered at her from across the altar. Ledron, her father's mindless lapdog, expressionless and bull-headed in the execution of his assigned orders. And Kylac, the impertinent mercenary, so reckless and cocksure. Undaunted. Undisciplined. A marvel in action, true, but those actions had cost her everything.

*Not everything,* came the inner voice, as her brother's face pushed to the fore. A plea, it seemed, as she envisioned again his dismembered ring finger—presented to her in Wingport. If she would see him returned by the Grenarr unkilld, they had said, she must forfeit all resistance and return to Avenell to seal the accord with their hated enemies. This, she had done, never truly believing that it would come to pass as her father or Ledron had planned, knowing that her light roamed free, trusting that he would find a way to liberate her.

Her heart clenched in concert with her stomach. She bucked forward and offered another involuntary heave. Liberate her, he would have, save for Kylac. For it was the rogue alone that had made Abi wary. Barring his presence, her Ukinh love would have made short-enough work of Ledron's tattered company, likely before she had ever been led from Kuurian shores. She would have yet had a chance to put her request before the Imperial Council, to beseech her father's aged cousin, Emperor Derreg, for aid against the treacherous Grenarr. The voyage home, the trek across the Harrows, the confrontation within the Ukinhan birthing warrens—

None of it would have transpired.

Nara spat again and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, permitting herself a voiceless, shuddering sob in the undulating void of her prison. Her broken thumb throbbed within its splint, an unnecessary reminder of the conflict in those subterranean caverns. Would that Abi had confronted Kylac sooner. Would that any number of the natural perils inhabiting the Ukinhan Wilds had done so for him. His very presence, shadowing hers, had kept a swarm of rival predators at bay. Kept her safe. But doing so had also served to shield Kylac from untold hazards, to make possible their continued trek, their pursuit underground in search of the lifesaving sageryst, into the domain of the merciless jaggeruunt . . .

Bilgewater soured by stomach fluids lapped at her feet as the ship continued to rise and fall in relentless rhythm. As unrelenting as the truth she kept fighting to deny. It stalked her even in her dreams, cold and implacable. He had claimed ignorance, the rogue, and genuine it seemed, not feigned. He had even tried to apologize, in his own rash and clumsy way. Far too little. Far too late. The attempt itself, though a blow to her enemies, had likely only made matters worse. While she might bear grudging respect for his refusal to cow to authority, and for his seemingly matchless skills, she could not abide his cavalier approach, or trust that he had truly taken her or Thane's interests to heart. A mercenary, for all his professed aims to set matters right. And even if he followed through in all that he claimed, achieved all that he intended, the most grievous harm inflicted upon her could not be undone.

Her precious Abinama would remain to her forever lost.

The ship rose beneath her, buoyed by a particularly large swell, increasing her lightheadedness. Her intestines knotted, but managed to hold onto whatever contents they had not already rejected. Vomit burned in her throat. She resisted the desire to quench the sensation, understanding that her freshwater supplies were limited. Only when convinced that her retching was finished would she wash the foul flavor from her mouth. Emptying her skins too soon would force her in search of more, greatly increasing the chances that she would be discovered. Be discovered too soon, and she was liable to be returned right back home to her father, who would no doubt shackle her in rusty irons, if need be, to prevent her from repeating this course.

She would have suspected him clever enough to do so before, had he not demonstrated otherwise. He had certainly kept a tight leash in the hours leading to her would-be wedding ceremony. But the chaos that had ensued, and the mad scramble with which the king and his inner circle had reacted afterward, had evidently chased such considerations from his mind. She had been all but forgotten, it seemed, once her protestations at being denied a berth aboard had been rejected. Shuttered in her chambers with a Blackfist to ward the door, cocooned in her own disappointment, had been caution enough, her father must have assumed.

The notion brought a smirk of grim pleasure to her lips, which even another abrupt heave from her stomach could not curtail. It wasn't the first time her royal father had underestimated her. Defying his refusal, she had stolen out the window and down into the bowels of the castle, there to treat with one who she believed would be sensitive to her wishes. He, too, had denied her at first, echoing many of the same driveling protests coughed up by the others, and adding to them the fear that his life would be forfeit should it be discovered that he willingly aided her in an act bordering on treason. But she knew that he himself had volunteered to join this mission solely out of his love for Thane, and that he had only done so to ensure to the best of his limited abilities that the endeavor met with success. For that, he would need all the help to be mustered. Once she had persuaded him of the value of having her present to oversee any negotiations with

the Grenarr—and of vowing to carry the secret of his involvement in her stowaway effort to the grave—he had capitulated and reluctantly agreed to see her smuggled aboard.

A fact she now had ample cause to regret. She knew not how long she might have to endure these torturous conditions, secreted away in the deepest recesses of the ship's bowels, punished by thirst and hunger and seasickness. She knew not how long she *could*. Eventually, her presence would be discovered, or she would be forced to emerge of her own volition. But she had sworn to herself that it would not be until they had crossed a point of no return, when reversing along their own wake would no longer be a tenable option. Before then, she would accept whatever pain, whatever illness, whatever horrendous discomfort could inflict itself upon her. Recalling Abinama's face and the certain agony of his final moments, she determined that she would feast on rats and roaches if she had to, choke down vomit and bilgewater, shiver and soak amid the dank, briny darkness until her bones cracked and the skin sloughed from her feet, ere she yielded to her enemies.

She owed it to her brother, her people, her Ukinh consort. She would see Thane rescued, delivered from his abductors without further harm. She would see the Grenarr punished, their ill-begotten attempts to invade her homeland foiled. Kylac, mercenary and self-assumed warder, would be her weapon, a willing instrument used to achieve these ends.

And when he had, when her brother and her people were safe, she would see him flayed and gutted, obtaining her vengeance with the song of his screams in her ears, and the taste of his blood upon her lips.