

HEROES OF TIME LEGENDS

A NOVEL OF THE HEROES OF TIME SERIES

MURDOCH'S SHADOW

BY WAYNE D. KRAMER

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PROLOGUE

ONLY THE WORTHY

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Jagged lightning speared through the sky like tridents of doom. High Count Carnelian Shaw craned his neck outside their carriage as it bumped along the rugged, precipitous route to Astralsin Citadel, built within the ledges of dueling mountain ranges. To call this a road would be generous. It was more like a trail, with unkempt ground beaten down by the years and elements, better suited to ibexes and mountain goats than humans. Few dared this climb, a trek reserved only for the most worthy.

Some considered the ancient site to be the anchor which pulled the Ba'ar and the Cairn Mountains together, bridging them, forcing accessibility from one range to the next where there was otherwise a deadly chasm.

This site was a prize of the Brumm province within the kingdom of Tuscawny. Brumm was unlike the other provinces in that it was further divided into five enclaves, each ruled by a kith, among the kingdom's highest houses of nobility. Carnelian presided over Kith Shaw of the Gaul enclave, a beautiful domain with plentiful forests and an expansive coastline.

Today, Astralsin Citadel was the location of a lavish gala, the

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perfect place to meet with his long-time rival, Vidimir Tefu, high count of the Volga enclave.

For over two years, both Carnelian and Vidimir had sought the same treasure: the Grimstone, a powerful relic of the long-past Shadow Age, when the power of Void first entered the world of Eliorin.

Most considered it fable. Others believed the Grimstone was long gone. Plenty of fools dismissed the Shadow Age entirely. Vidimir, just like Carnelian, not only believed the Grimstone existed but that ancient forces of darkness churned within the world even now, seeking their chance to rise again.

The ascension of Shadow was but a matter of time. Most were deaf to it. Vidimir, however, had kept a sharp ear. As with Carnelian, he had heard the subtle siren of bygone voices in the air. Ancient things long thought dead were stirring, rallying allies.

How great the promise of power and dominance to those who answered the call!

No greater opportunity for influence existed than the Grimstone. Carnelian was not about to let Vidimir beat him to it.

Not only that, but by the end of the night, he intended to convert Kith Tefu's rivalry into loyalty.

Rain pattered about Carnelian's face and splashed against the white teeth of his grinning mouth. He smoothed the water through his cropped, silver-brown hair and relished in the danger of their flight. It was a story in the making, a rush of adrenaline propelling them to the realm of the upper echelons.

Wet dapples formed rapidly upon his tunic of orange velvet. Patterned upon its breast, in tiny-faceted gemstones, was the familial crest of Kith Shaw: a gryphon in flight, with a fish in its talons.

At Carnelian's orders, the carriage sped along the route, even as it became ever more treacherous. They were not far now. It was time to be ready.

Beside him, rigid as a board, sat his latest mistress, Zuzanna.

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The elegant plaits of her dark-brown and golden hair rested stiffly about her shoulders. Adorned with hundreds of hand-polished sapphire shards, her gown sparkled with each lurch and jostle of the carriage. Her magnificent dress left bare one shoulder, the sides of her waist, and a circle around her navel, tailor-made to fit her form perfectly.

Across from Carnelian sat Tack, his tweedy butler, legs crossed and a book in his hands. Tack had been on at least a dozen such trips with Carnelian before. He was well-tempered, fully acclimated to the charge, accepting of the risk. You would make it to the gala or die a glorious death in the process. Might as well enjoy a good book along the way.

This was Zuzanna's first gala. To her credit, she had the good sense to keep quiet as the carriage bounced ominously forward. No yelps or squeals like so many before her. It was much more than could be said of the last woman he was with. She had never made it back from the noble soiree preceding this one. After she'd stumbled into the chasm like the klutzy trollop she was, he hastened to distance himself from the screams, and he never looked back. He immediately shoved her name to the back of his mind—a thing not worth remembering.

The carriage jumped with such force that his head bumped the ceiling, Tack's book launched from his hands, and one of Zuzanna's shoes flew across the carriage, nearly spearing Tack with its heel.

Carnelian reared back with laughter, even as two of the carriage's wheels nearly slipped over the ledge, where naught could be seen but an abyss of fog. Up ahead and to their right, he glimpsed the peaks of turrets hewn from the mountain's rock.

"You see that, my darling?" he said as Zuzanna fumbled with her shoe. "A fortress rooted in the rocks of *two* mountain ranges! What could possibly be more majestic?"

"I'm sure I don't know," she said with a taut voice. "Living, perhaps?"

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"Keep us at full speed, Reyson!" he called to the front, his window open again. He squeezed Zuzanna's thigh with a glower of mischief. "Not a hair slower until we're right upon the entrance!"

"Sir, there's mud t' be considered!" Reyson replied in the common dialect of Brumm serfdom. Most nobility throughout the province avoided this speech pattern to distinguish themselves, instead leaning into the more refined influence of Sharm, the province which housed the Throne of Light within Metsada Palace.

"Right!" Carnelian called back. "Do try to keep the splattering to a minimum." He turned to his fellow riders. "We are attending a gala, after all, not a gulobeast rodeo. *Ha HA!*"

They rounded the apex of their climb, and the carriage ground to a halt. They had arrived. At least, it was as far as they could go by carriage. From here, they could not see the façade of the citadel. Instead, a narrow walking path of bare dirt stretched before them. That path converged with a long series of switchback stairs that scaled a rocky wall all the way to the top, continuing beyond their current view. Other attendees of the gala already traversed the stairs, many of them looking toward the newly arrived carriage.

Carnelian's hand rested upon the door handle. "I shouldn't need tell you that some of the most influential eyes in the province are now upon us. We shall exit, composed . . . calm . . . unaffected. Do you understand?"

"Of course, sir," Tack said at once.

Zuzanna merely nodded.

Carnelian surveyed her face. She was far too stiff, too pursed, like a lemon had been shoved in her mouth. He brushed her face with the backs of his fingers, gently running them up and down her jawline, then her cheeks, back down aside her nose, and to the corner of her mouth. "Relax, my dear. You came a mistress. You shall leave nigh a princess."

He shoved open the door and let it slam conspicuously against the side of the carriage. The rain had reduced to a mist, but the

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ground here was a muddy disgrace.

He inhaled a quick breath of revulsion. “Tack, the vaporite.”

“Right away, Your Excellency.” The butler produced from his pocket a translucent-white, rectangular rod, which appeared to have tiny bubbles entombed within. He placed thin, gray gloves on his hands and stepped out onto the iron footplate.

Tack snapped the rod like a twig. He placed the two pieces between his hands and rubbed, faster and faster, until the vaporite glowed—softly at first, then brighter and brighter. Once at their peak brilliance, Tack dropped the pieces of vaporite onto the path.

A blast of energy rippled through the ground, spraying water droplets into the air from the carriage to the base of the stairs some fifty yards away. The result was a walkway of perfectly dry dirt cutting through the surrounding mud.

Carnelian cackled. “Very good, Tack! Very good, indeed!” He proffered an arm to Zuzanna. “Come. Let us dazzle the peerage.”

They emerged from the carriage, tall and dignified. Stray rays of sunlight jabbed through the clouds and made their outfits glisten. “Even Zun smiles upon us,” he said quietly.

By virtue of their now dry and easy path, they soon reached the stairs. A short, balding man with a thick, yellow and gray mustache, a pipe in hand, and a black, red-trimmed coat nodded in greeting. “Peace be the day.” Carnelian recognized him as Lord Mayor Bannister of some midgrade town in the Wolof enclave.

This was no mere salutation. It was code for “the baron of Brumm, Arlo Day, is on his way out.” Of course, among this crowd, the even deeper meaning was implied: “and I shall be the one to succeed him.”

Baron Day, a feeble-minded old man, had entered a rapid state of physical decline over the past year. He rarely appeared in public. When he did, he might wave to the masses and stand for a few minutes before retreating back out of sight. His end was but a short amount of time, and the kiths of Brumm smelled blood in the water.

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Carnelian gave the mayor a curt nod, and they continued up the steps, passing by the man as he puffed his pipe.

Once atop the first round of stairs, Carnelian set his eyes upon the massive, gaping façade of Astralsin Citadel now visible in the distance. Exactly one thousand seven hundred and seventy-seven steps comprised the ascent. They were relatively small steps, most of the stretches not terribly steep, but still the climb was not for the faint of heart. Their path would take them to the chasm's edge via a series of narrow arch-bridges and landings of precipitous rock spires.

The structure itself was suspended over the chasm atop a massive, protruding formation of rock that was said to have been reinforced in ancient days by some of the world's hardest substances.

It was, in effect, a portion of manmade mountain.

Carnelian felt Zuzanna's arm tense as their route came clearly into view.

"You . . . come here often?" she asked.

"Enough to be familiar," he answered. "Not so often that the sight is any less majestic."

Halfway up their first arch-bridge, Zuzanna slipped on one of the steps. Her startled yelp carried into the chasm, an echo of Carnelian's boiling vexation. Their arms were still locked, but he held his footing, quickly yanking her upward.

He pulled her closer, until his mouth was just beside her ear. "Remember, my sweet, *we* are the dominance here. Others think the same of themselves, yes, but we prove it in our steps, in our fearlessness, in our every move and interaction. There is a saying: "The daring may reach the citadel, but only the worthy return from it." He gave her ear a kiss, and they continued.

Minutes later, the rain returned.

The route's final stretch was a straight, narrow bridge from the mountain's natural end to the citadel's platform. They stood ten steps above it, where they could see its entire length. No more than

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two people could walk it abreast. There were no rails. It appeared as a mud-covered plank, longer than a fallen roastwood tree, made increasingly treacherous by the falling rain.

Carnelian and Zuzanna watched for a moment as others made their way across. They all attempted to appear indifferent to the danger, most of them failing by their uncertain, teetering steps.

Just beyond the halfway point, a tall man in a silver jacket slipped on a muddy patch. As he staggered, he attempted to grab his escort, who stepped nimbly aside and allowed the man to tumble over the edge.

“That was the lord mayor of Helkath,” said Carnelian. He chuckled. “An old fool, and clearly his accompaniment knew as much.” The man’s scream vanished into the fog below. “He will be succeeded. It was time.” He urged Zuzanna down the steps.

“Sir,” said Tack, “shall I use the vaporite?”

Carnelian glared at the muddy path. “No, Tack.” Zuzanna gasped, her wet head whipping to face him. “Falter not, the both of you.”

“Very good, sir.”

Carnelian felt dozens of noble eyes aimed at them from the stairs and balconies of the citadel. He knew that Vidimir could well be among them.

Zuzanna played her part well. How powerful the forced, multi-pronged sense of self-preservation—that primal, inevitable urge to simply avoid death.

They made their way across, maintaining an air of confidence. Carnelian paid special attention to Zuzanna as she stepped over a small pit in the surface. With a half-smirk, he remembered exactly where his escort of the past had tumbled to her disgraceful end.

Then they were on the other side, with only a single broad stairway between them and the citadel’s gallant entrance.

“Now use the vaporite, Tack,” Carnelian ordered.

“You are truly maniacal,” Zuzanna said.

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It was as grand an entrance as he'd hoped for. Sprays of water erupted from the stairs, forcing loiterers to shield their faces and their dignities. A fierce gust blew the moisture from their clothes and bodies.

They returned scowls of loathing. Carnelian didn't care. These were not people that currently mattered to him.

Like figures of imperial power, Carnelian strode up the stairs with Zuzanna in tow, dry as fallen leaves in the sun.

Like a figure of legend. By the end of the night, he would be just that.

Crossing the threshold was like entering another world. Dark-green and white-veined marble slabs made up the floor before them. The interior was a massive, open expanse tiered with balconies and stairways running throughout the walls. Huge columns of red and silver travertine appeared throughout.

Straight ahead was the peak of the main staircase, with thick banisters of white and gray quartzite and stairs of green marble. It led to the citadel's lowest level, where gleamed the ballroom floor of brilliant white basalt. Around all sides of the white floor were round tables set with the finest of crystal glassware and utensils of handcrafted, translucent-green peridot.

"Down there," Carnelian said softly, pulling Zuzanna gently toward the stairs. "That is where my quarry will be, down where squirm the slugs and worms, where the gryphon may feed of the lesser creatures." He surveyed the area below, maintaining his paced descent. "The crest of the Dark Diamond is in our midst. The slithering tongue of Tefu is nigh."

He kept in his expression a cool indifference as they descended the last step. A nod to a guild chief on his left. A one-word greeting uttered to a mayor on his right. They made their way around the dance floor, currently empty despite the veiled whispering of stringed instruments in the air. Sycophantic chatter and ringing crystal reached their ears as they strode between the tables.

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Carnelian stopped. His eyes locked on a table just ahead. There sat Vidimir Tefu, a tall-faced, pallid man with slick black and white hair, his mouth ever fixed in a smarmy grin. His suit jacket was dark purple with twists of black, while the lapels were black and lined with tiny black and violet-veined gems. A pendant containing a larger cut of the same gem rested snugly between the flaps of his collar.

Does he even keep byrne within his attire? wondered Carnelian.

Carnelian briefly watched from afar. Vidimir swirled his wine and took a sip, looking around with confidence in his eyes that seemed to suggest he owned the place. Little doubt he believed he did.

Carnelian allowed not another idle moment to pass and broke into long, deliberate steps toward the table.

“High Count Tefu,” said Carnelian, pulling a chair back from the table. “Just the man I’d hoped to see here today.”

“No need for such formalities among friends, Carnelian,” replied Vidimir. “We are on a first-name basis, are we not? Please, have a seat.”

“Very much obliged . . . Vidimir.”

Vidimir scanned Zuzanna up and down, and up and down again, showing no restraint. “What a lovely associate you’ve brought along. I daresay my favorite yet of yours. I do hope this one lasts.”

Zuzanna took her seat. “A pleasure to finally meet you, High Count Tefu,” she replied in her rich, sumptuous voice.

“This is Zuzanna. I had the fortune of finding her after a march through Lozellien. She stood out from the townsfolk like a diamond in the rough.”

Servants, having noticed Carnelian’s arrival, rushed to bring a selection of wine bottles for his choosing. “I’ll have the Oden Valley White.”

“The same,” said Zuzanna.

Vidimir showed white teeth, a playful glint in his eyes. “And

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why tarnish yourself with one so blemished as him?" he asked Zuzanna.

"I take a keen interest in political hierarchy," she replied. "It has always fascinated me. Before him, I was promised to a high reeve. Far too boring. Far too limited." She leaned enticingly toward Carnelian. "High Count Shaw enchanted me with his charm, and I traded up."

"Ah yes . . . *charm*," replied Vidimir, raising his glass. "Another word for riches and influence." He gave a slight tilt of his head, prodding Carnelian with a sharp eye. "And I'm sure other redeeming qualities. Ambition, for a start."

Carnelian relaxed against his seat. "My dear Vidimir, is there a single enclave leader among us who lacks ambition?"

Vidimir swallowed a draft of wine. "Well stated. It is not so much the ambition as being worthy to flaunt the ambition. *That* is what separates us from the other enclaves, even from the other provinces. Would you not agree, Carnelian?"

"Of course I would," he replied.

"And so we are in good company, you and I," said Vidimir. "The dominant among kiths. The alphas of the pack."

Carnelian took a swig of his wine and sat it gently back on the table. "And yet, every pack has only *one* alpha." His eyes met Vidimir's, daring his next response. It came even sooner than he'd expected, but his position among the enclaves was soon to be cemented. Carnelian's moment of triumph was nigh.

"Are we wolves, that we must adhere to such primal ways?" Vidimir lifted his glass, swirling his wine absently but not taking a drink. "I suppose some laws of nature cannot be broken. Even so, there is one thing I am very sure of. This night will not go as you expect . . . and I am so sorry if that disappoints you." In these last words, he broke into a laugh, an open-mouthed chuckle.

It was a laugh of mockery.

Carnelian frowned, his mouth a flat line, a sudden lump in his

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throat. He swallowed, recovering himself. This was no time to falter. “I rather think tonight will be splendid. You see, we of Kith Shaw have made a significant stride toward finding the Grimstone.”

“Oh?” Vidimir steepled his fingers over the table, looking calmly back at Carnelian. “You have my rapt attention.”

“I have the Eye of Shi’kha. By now, my men have already secured it within one of our vaults. I almost didn’t believe it to be real, you know. But I have seen it . . . held it . . . felt of its power. It is like having a piece of the Shadow Age in my grasp. Remarkable to behold.”

Vidimir slowly tapped the table with his fingers as he listened to Carnelian’s every word, his face a blank slate. Finally, he straightened himself. “That *is* remarkable. I am . . . intrigued.”

“I thought you might be.” In truth, he’d hoped to see Vidimir more rattled by this revelation, but he was not surprised. The high count of Kith Tefu was a master of the game. “Of course, you know what this means.”

Vidimir placed his elbows on the table, folding his hands. “When it comes to matters of the Void, I know a great deal.”

Carnelian took a sip of wine. “Then you know that I have the one thing that can locate the Grimstone.”

Vidimir raised a finger. “Careful that your ambitions don’t get the better of you. No eye, even a mystical one, can see *everything*, if what you seek is too well obscured.”

“*Ha!* No, Vidimir. My ambitions are the *best* of me, but I do try not to be shortsighted. I must admit that your grasp and knowledge of the Void are far greater than mine . . . and I have heard of this powerful mage you keep by your side.”

“Mazek?” asked Vidimir. “It is true—his devotion runs deep. What is it you want?”

“The Eye of Shi’kha . . . the Grimstone . . . These are no mere stones of byrne we are talking about. They are Void relics of the absolute highest order. They require great care. What I would like

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is your cooperation—that, together, we can ensure the Shadow Age rises again, with me at the forefront of it . . . and, for you, Vidimir, a lofty and safe position within the realm reborn.”

Carnelian paused for another sip of wine. “Of course, this also means Kith Tefu must renounce any claim to the barony and leadership over Brumm, and you will swear fealty to me.”

Vidimir arched an eyebrow. “It would seem you have the upper hand, Carnelian.”

Carnelian allowed himself a small chuckle. “It was inevitable, really.”

Vidimir stared calmly back at Carnelian. There was a sudden swell in the background music from various stringed and woodwind instruments. All around them, attendees stood from their chairs and made for the central dance floor.

“Well,” said Vidimir, “we must not breach decorum, after all.” He stood, came around the table, and offered his hand to Zuzanna.

Carnelian frowned. “You do not strike me as the dancing type, Vidimir.”

“Sometimes one must learn to play the part.”

Carnelian nodded to Zuzanna, who then accepted Vidimir’s hand and followed him to the dance floor. Carnelian, wine in hand, stood in silent watching from just behind the edge. Zuzanna was like a beacon of beauty, drawing looks from everyone around. Her movements were graceful and immaculate. Vidimir, in contrast, was precise yet stiff, with all the alacrity of a statue. She made him look better in every way.

As Carnelian watched, sipping his wine, he contemplated Vidimir’s reactions. He wasn’t quite sure what he’d hoped for. Upon learning that the Eye of Shi’kha was under the control of Kith Shaw, he had looked for some falter, some misstep, some hint of surprise. He got none of that. Vidimir remained calm as ever, and now he had Carnelian’s own mistress out on the dancefloor. Something seemed off, some detail that Vidimir had not yet revealed.

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Tack appeared by his side. "Is everything okay, sir?"

"Ah, Tack! Keep a close watch on the company and carriage of Kith Tefu. I need to know if they make any sudden or unusual moves." One could never be too cautious, not among this crowd. A sudden retreat or a stir within Tefu's servanthood might indicate a rash move.

"Right away, sir." The butler scurried off.

Three songs in, Carnelian's patience had finally worn thin.

"Count Tefu," he called as Vidimir and Zuzanna swayed near, "I should very much like to recover my date."

Vidimir walked right up to Carnelian and gave his shoulder a firm pat. "Of course, Carnelian. We should discuss this matter of the Eye." He walked in the direction of the main staircase, Zuzanna trailing just behind. "Let's find a quieter place to settle this."

Overcast sunlight and the tall, majestic entryway scrolled into view as they ascended the stairs. Once at the top, Vidimir led them to the threshold, where few of the attendees congregated. It was not a typical location for conducting noble business.

"I am impressed that your doddering brood would manage to procure the Eye of Shi'kha," Vidimir said.

Carnelian cackled. "Call us what you will, Vidimir. It was our spy network that found it . . . in a remote anthropod village, of all places. For a good while there, I honestly believed you would beat us to it."

Vidimir leaned in very close. He spoke just over a whisper. "Oh, but I have."

Carnelian's smile faded. "We have the Eye. Of this there is no doubt."

"I am sure you're correct," Vidimir replied. "But the thing is, Carnelian . . . I have no need of it. How can I put this? You have followed a red herring . . . a misdirection . . . a set of clues which are no longer of consequence. You kept your focus on but one means to the end. I kept my sights on the end itself."

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Carnelian exhaled nervously, fighting to maintain his composure and the upper hand that he was so certain he'd held just moments before. "That is absurd. Only by using the Eye of Shi'kha can the Grimstone be located."

"The Eye is . . . *one* way to locate it," Vidimir answered, stepping slowly toward Zuzanna. "I have already located it. It turns out legend paved the way all along."

Vidimir clasped his hands around the sides of Zuzanna's waist, pulling her in for a firm kiss on the lips. She showed no distaste, no unwillingness. She made no move to pull away.

"Zuzanna, away from him!" Carnelian ordered.

"Come now, Carnelian," said Vidimir, the words slithering from his mouth. "You would not steal away my promised, would you?" With a lick of his lips, he slid his hands down the stones lining the lapels of his jacket, Carnelian gaping at him.

"Your *promised*? What is this?" Carnelian said. "I demand to know what is going on here!"

"Byrne," said Vidimir, fingering the larger stone of his pendant, "another gift of the Shadow Age. Its capabilities are multifaceted, really. So . . . untapped."

"*Tack!*" Carnelian shouted into the vastness of the citadel. His butler was nowhere in sight. "You fork-tongued infidel. You will answer for this treachery! The fury of a thousand torches will be upon your doorstep. We shall rip you from the noble ranks like a helpless fish in the talons of a great eagle!"

"A pity you are not more graceful in defeat. Have you never followed the roadmap of legends? If you know where to look, it can be as reliable as history itself."

Carnelian clenched his fists, his face flush with rage. Yet, he slowed his breathing, hoping that Vidimir might let slip some critical secret behind his claims. "And what legend is this?"

"The legend of the Heroes of Time, of course."

Calmly, casually, Vidimir began to draw in the air. Carne-

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lian squinted as thin purple lines formed a box between the man's fingers.

"And that roadmap led me clearly to one name," said Vidimir. "Think on it, as you leave this place."

"What name?"

"Macpherson."

Carnelian had time only to arch an eyebrow before the surge of biting cold overtook him. In that instant he was surrounded by dancing hues of purple. With each flail of his arms, the flames bit ever harder, driving through his skin like a thousand needles, bringing a frostbitten numbness.

He stumbled his way down the stairs from the citadel. The laughter of Vidimir and Zuzanna and other bystanders landed heavy in his ears.

He reached the narrow, mud-covered bridge and dashed forward to cross it. If he could move fast enough, perhaps the mountain breeze would relieve him of this misery.

He tripped over a pit in the pathway, and suddenly there was nothing solid beneath him at all. The breeze came from underneath. He saw all of his skin turn to frosty white before he saw nothing at all.

Suddenly he remembered the woman he'd watched fall from the cliff at his last gala.

Scarlet, he thought with grim recollection. *Her name was Scarlet.*

He could only hope the end would be swift and absolute. It was far too humiliating a defeat to live with.