

— CASE 3 —

THE CURSE OF CASTLE RAEITHORNE

By Douglas Seacat

Caspia, mid-autumn

PRINCESS KAETLYN DI LA MARTYN perched at the edge of an ornate chair positioned before the large mirror on her dresser while one of her ladies-in-waiting adjusted the jeweled necklace around the princess' neck. Kaetlyn adjusted her coiffure, ensuring all stray strands of hair were pulled back and secured and that her coronet was perfectly situated atop her brow. She was attired in a considerably more elaborate gown than was her habit, preparing for what promised to be a long and tiresome state dinner. She would strive to be pleasant and amiable, despite the deeper concerns she held regarding the fate of Llael, her distant homeland, which was once again being torn apart by war.

The lights in the chamber flickered low before slowly rising again, and she glanced sharply at the gas-fed lanterns behind her. Jyless, her maid of honor, paused and turned to glance at them

as well. Kaetlyn's eyes narrowed as the normally steady flames within the polished and cut glass seemed strange. It was the fire itself that was moving oddly, not holding steady but wavering and undulating as if the flames were slowed. Then they began to gutter lower and lower before several went out to cast the room into near-darkness and shadow.

She was still looking into the mirror, but a movement attracted her attention, and her eyes focused not on something behind her but rather on the mirror itself. A growing darkness, like a spill of ink across the center of the reflective surface, and within it emerged a pair of gleaming points of light that in a moment resolved themselves into eyes. Not her own but other eyes staring and the hint of a mocking smile, a twisted and impish face. The mirror cracked with the sound of splintering glass.

She gave a startled noise and leapt back, nearly knocking over Jyless, who scrambled to avoid falling and to steady her mistress. The room went dark, and Kaetlyn could not suppress a terrified shriek, even as she scrambled toward where she knew the door to be. Something was behind her, closing on her. The door to her chamber flew open, and her guards stepped inside. She ran through and past them.

...

SEATED AROUND THE LARGE TABLE deep within Castle Raelthorne were several of the most influential leaders in the realm. It was not the king's entire Inner Council but a portion of that body held responsible for the most pressing and important matters of higher governance. The youngest by several decades was King Julius Raelthorne himself, seated at the head of the table and looking distracted as he listened to an argument between his key advisors. The most vocal were Navarch Galten Sparholm III and Lord Treasurer Lars Corumny, who were debating the merits of devoting a larger portion of the Cygnaran Navy to protecting the Mercarian League's trade route to the continent of Zu.

"I'm not asking you to compromise Broken Coast patrols," Corumny said. "But we need to make an example out of the most

organized of the pirates sapping the kingdom's economy."

"The League's own fleet is adequate to its defense," Sparholm retorted. "Bear in mind some of the ships harassing the League have letters of marque from King Baird of Ord, and our involvement could strain relations with that kingdom while we're trying to negotiate shared fleet actions against Cryx."

Julius frowned and turned his head; he had heard an unusual scratching noise. His right hand rested atop the thick oaken table, and he felt something beneath his fingertips, a slight vibration. He winced at a high-pitched sound, like glass scraping on glass, followed by a popping noise and a flare of heat and light. He turned to see one of the glass-enclosed lanterns in the chamber as it exploded. He raised a hand, but none of the sharp fragments reached him. The other lanterns in the room guttered and failed while this naked flame leapt higher, dancing erratically. The men all stood in alarm.

"What the—?" Sparholm said, his hand going to where a blade would ordinarily rest at his waist, though even a man in his position was not allowed to attend the king while armed.

Julius felt a sudden cold sweep through the chamber, as if he were struck by a northern wind, though he realized the air was in fact very still. A tightness clenched his stomach, and he swayed, reaching out to the table to steady himself. The nausea passed. The chamber doors then opened as members of the Royal Guard stepped in to ensure the safety of their lord. One of their attendants checked on the lights while one of Julius' protectors urged him to step outside until they could be assured the room was secure.

The king left as bid, though he felt more puzzled than alarmed. There was no sign of a threat, though as he left, his eye went to the vases and planters set around the periphery of the room. He barely noticed such décor under ordinary circumstances—but he could see the flowers and ornamental plants had blackened and died, dropping wilted leaves to the floor.

...

THE NIGHT AIR WAS SHARP AND CHILL atop the battlements surrounding the castle. The pair of royal long gunners marched at an even pace on their patrol, their steps making a clean, even rhythm. From their vantage, they could look out upon the sprawling expanse of Caspia, the capital of Cygnar, the famed City of Walls, where countless lights gleamed from windows and torches. Though the city itself was bustling with activity, even at night, from the great height of the castle walls it was quiet and calm.

“Heard some odd things going down of late,” said Sergeant Krofter, pausing for a moment a few paces from the nearest heavysset tower door. He peered down over the edge of the wall as he placed his hands on the nearest crenellations.

“Yer tellin’ me,” Corporal Halgin said. “Some say the ghosts are stirred up. It’s no secret this castle’s seen a number of strange deaths over the years.”

“Like all those that had bad deaths in the Lion’s Coup,” Krofter agreed solemnly. “Could be burned alive, electrocuted, crushed to death, left to bleed out after getting stabbed in the gut. No thanks.” After a pause he added, “I’ve seen a ghost before. On these very ramparts, no less. Didn’t do nothing but stand there in the moonlight staring at me, but still scared the piss out of me. Had the look of an old soldier with a white beard, face haggard and eyes empty. It raised a hand and reached toward me, then—”

Halgin watched as Krofter’s eyes widened and looked past his own, over his shoulder, his own mouth now hanging open.

“Come on now,” Halgin said. “I’m not falling for that.”

But his resolve to ignore the other man’s reaction faltered when Krofter stumbled backward with a choked cry.

Feeling icy dread, Halgin turned to see something his eyes and mind could not reconcile. A bizarre and enormous serpentine creature rose from the darkness, its head festooned with wriggling black tendrils. Before he could do more than suck in a breath to scream, its slaving mouth opened, and it struck too swiftly for him to follow, crunching into his chest with a rib-shattering

impact. The wind flew from his lungs, so he couldn't even scream as he felt its teeth punch through his breastplate and take hold of his flesh.

...

WITH A SCREECHING OF METAL ON METAL and then a shriek of released steam, the train slowed and eventually stopped along the elevated platform of the central Caspian station. Duncan Grimes was one of the first to his feet, eager to be done with the swiftly chugging engine of death that had been barreling along the tracks at an ungodly speed for so many hours. Despite his fears, they had arrived safe and sound without being derailed and sent careening into a mountain or attacked by trolls or any number of other scenarios he had considered during the hours while the landscape swept by.

Mel gave him a cheerful smile and also stood, putting a hand on Kincaid's shoulder to leverage herself up. "See, nothing to worry about. Safest way to travel! You are such a worrywart, Grimey. It's not like you've never traveled by train before."

"Unavoidable nowadays," Grimes grouched, cracking his knuckles. "Doesn't mean I like it."

Kincaid smiled. "What's not to like? Better than bouncing around on horseback or walking. You get to relax as the miles go by."

Grimes just grunted.

Mel put her hands on her hips and looked back at the sizable stack of crates taking up the rear of their passenger compartment. "If you'd be obliged, I could use help getting all of this unloaded. I wasn't sure what we'd be facing, so I brought everything I thought might come in handy."

"That's no exaggeration," Grimes mumbled. But he was already moving to help Kincaid. The two of them had done the lion's share of loading the crates in the first place. "Kincaid, I'll follow your lead. Point me at a box."

"That one," the bouncer said, "and I'll take the other end. Careful, there's lots of glass in this one."