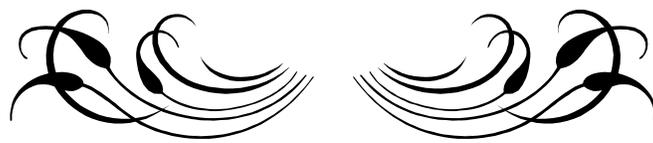


Kern Heights

Book I

The Citadel of the Griffins



Kenneth Allan Rath

Prologue

A Viper in the Roost

The 546th year by the Norwinese Calendar (1123 A.F.)
Triosday, the 6th of Winter-Month
Around the tenth hour of the morning
Freedmansville, the Duchy of Gorset, Norwinon

The cluster of men waited outside the scraggly clump of coppiced trees, avoiding the blanket-covered mass within. Two stepped forward to meet the newcomers, but the rest remained where they were, eying the horsemen bleakly. One, the man who had stumbled upon the deed less than half an hour before, sat with his back against the trunk farthest from it, staring at nothing. He did not look up at the newcomers like the others, nor did he move when the horses came to a stop.

The leader of the riders, Darred Mountram, a tall, bearded man with chiseled cheekbones and nearly white hair, dismounted, dropping to the snow-covered ground. He wore a long, black cloak over a mail shirt and a steel blade hung loosely from his belt. As he strode toward the gathered men, the rings of his mail clinked with every step. Behind followed the others, three grim-faced men as well-armed as their leader.

“Master Mountram,” The leader of the waiting men greeted him. His were the fields that abutted the copse, and it was he who had sent the runner. “He’s this way.”

Darred let the man lead him beneath the shade of the trees. The farmer stopped at the edge, gesturing him forward but unwilling to proceed. Derrick gave Quinto, his swarthy-faced deputy, a curious glance, but the other man merely shrugged. He knew no more than Darred himself.

In moments they had crossed the remaining ground. The body lay in the shadow of a barren oak, its branches stretched overhead like long, knurly fingers clawing at the cloudless sky, throwing strange shadows over the stained, threadbare covering that hid the dead man from view.

With one quick motion, Darred threw back the cloth.

He heard a gasp from one of the deputies and saw the second turn away, making the sign of the sceptre over his breast as he turned away. Even Quinto, who in his youth had been a slave in an Imperial fighting school and experienced things that would quash the spirit of a lesser man, muttered an inaudible prayer beneath his breath. But Darred merely stared as black dread washed over him like a river bursting through a levee.

On the ground, his hair caked with blood where his head had struck a root, lay Ulland Whiteman, a local husband and farmer whose eldest child was of an age with Darred's younger daughter, though had Darred not recognized the man's cloak and hair he might never have known him. His once congenial face, given to spreading good cheer through a never-ending supply of good-natured jokes and jovial conversation, was twisted into something almost unrecognizable as human, a tortured mask of screaming horror, as if he had been witness to all the Plagues of Haegys in one moment. His hands, too, had contorted into twisted claws, and every muscle and sinew strove against the skin of his neck and forearms.

"What could have done this?" Quinto asked, his voice betraying a slight tremble.

Darred shook his head, though already he had his suspicions, too dark to share with his second without evidence. "Did you find anything?" he instead asked the farmers, forcing himself to turn from the dead man.

"No sir," Their leader answered. "Just him. No tracks, even, least none as were human."

Darred nodded, the news adding to his fears. But he didn't want to leap to conclusions. There could still be some other explanation.

"Men," he addressed his deputies, "search the area. Start here and work out."

"What are we looking for? The ground's been roiled up too badly to see much."

"I don't know," he answered. "But someone killed him, unless it was a ghost, they had to leave *some* trace behind."

“Right,” the man answered, glad not to have to get any closer to the body. “All right, let’s see what we can find.”

“You sure he was murdered?” Quinto asked. “How? What could do this?”

“That’s what I aim to find out,” Darred replied, returning to examine the corpse more closely.

After only a few minutes of searching, one of the men called out in triumph. “I found something!”

“What is it?” he asked, looking up from his examination of the bruises that stood out starkly against the pallor of the dead man’s neck.

“This.” The man trotted over, displaying something small and dark in his gloved hand.

Darred joined him quickly, leaving Quinto to continue the inspection. It took the object, a brief look all that was necessary to confirm his worst fears. For in his hand was a small, thin dart, fletched with black feathers, and something dark and sticky oozed out of a hollow near the tip. He could feel his body start trembling as bile rose into his throat, but he fought it back, fought to keep calm.

“Go to the villa,” he commanded, trying his best to keep his voice calm. “When you get there, tell Serrith that she needs to leave, that *everyone* needs to leave, even the kitchen staff and the stable hands. *Everyone*. And right away. And then I want you to make sure she gets safely away, do you hear?”

“But sir...”

“Just do it! Now! And tell her, tell her there’s a viper in the roost. She’ll know what to do.”

He was back in his scriptorium, or at least that’s what he called it. It really deserved no such ostentatious a title, being merely a table and chair in a corner of the small building that served simultaneously as Freedmansville’s sheriff station, postal depot, armory, and jail, but it was a comfortable space and afforded some privacy. Darred sat at the table staring at the half-empty sheet of refurbished parchment that stared back at him, scouring his mind for more things to write that wouldn’t sound too suspicious. He had already babbled on at length about the children and various inconsequential matters around town

and had reached the end of his admittedly small store of meaningless gossip.

The door opened, flooding the room with mid-afternoon light.

“Yes?” Dared asked, looking up.

“Sir,” Quinto replied from the doorway, “something’s been seen, out by Badger Hill. Not sure quite what, but Rooster said he thought it might’ve been the killer. Didn’t see him himself, though. Sent two of the men out already, but thought you might want to come, see for yourself.”

“Yes, of course. I just need to finish this first. I won’t be long.”

“I’ll ready the horses,” Quinto acknowledged as he shut the door behind him.

“I’ll be there soon,” Dared called after him, then returned his gaze to the parchment, clenching and unclenching his hands, his breath feeling short in his chest. Hastily, he returned to the letter and scribbled down some thoughtless platitudes wishing for the recipient’s good health and fortune that sounded forced and flat when he read them back. But there was no help for it now. They had to be warned. Quickly, he bundled it with the other two before sealing it in wax.

“Violet?” he called.

“Yes, Master Dared?” the woman replied, appearing from the back room where she had been tending to the fire.

“See that this reaches the post no later than Fastday,” he directed, handing her the scroll.

“Yes sir.”

“And be discrete. Send it alongside another delivery. I don’t want it attracting notice.”

The woman regarded him quizzically but said nothing. Dared was thankful for that; he couldn’t tell her the truth, and she would quickly have seen through any falsehood he attempted. Though still young, Violet had been working with him for some years now, and was both brighter and more trustworthy than any of his deputies. He had always thought it a shame that she had been born with a twisted leg that kept her from walking at more than a hobble. Had she been of sound body, she might have made as fine a knightly candidate as his own daughter.

“Of course, sir.”

“Good,” he said with a smile.
“Oh, and Master Darred?”
“Yes?”
“Be careful.”
He nodded, then left the building.

The three men met them several yards from the base of Badger Hill, a rounded mound topped by a grove of denuded oaks. No one else was in sight.

“Where are the others?” Quinto asked as he brought his animal to a halt beside them.

“We couldn’t find them,” one of deputies answered, clearly agitated. “The place was deserted when we arrived.”

“But they *was* here,” Rooster Fernway averred, his voice tinged with panic. An odd fellow in the best of times, the tics in his neck and right eye were well in evidence now. “There was nine of us when Colin said he’d seen something and they sent me to you. But now there’s nothing, not even tracks. It’s like they disappeared into thin air. We looked all over.”

“Must be *something*,” Quinto snarled. “Was at the place of Ulland’s murder. Maybe what happened can be reconstructed. Where’d you see it?”

“I was standing right over there,” Rooster said, “right by them bushes. And I didn’t see nothing, but Colin, he says he’s seen a man or something, up there.” He pointed to the top of the hill. “And after that’s when they sent me to you and they went to take a look. Last I saw, they was walking up together. But we looked up top all over and didn’t see nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Show me,” Darred bade.

They dismounted and followed Rooster up the hill, their boots crunching in the scattered patches of icy snow between the clumps of knee-high grass. After a few minutes, they reached the summit, cresting some twenty feet above the surrounding fields. From there they could see Freedmansville along with the fields and woods for some ways around. But as they had said, of the missing men there was no sign.

“Something’s very wrong,” Quinto muttered.

“Colin said he thought he saw someone up here?” Darred asked.

“Yeah.”

“Did he describe him?”

“Didn’t see much more than a shadow, I don’t think.”

Darred grunted. He had no doubt Rooster was speaking the truth, but there should have been *something*. He let his gaze sweep across the empty land around him... And then his eye caught something, over by a clump of trees, some ways to the northeast. He couldn’t describe it exactly, but there was something out of place, something *wrong* in the landscape, though the trees and surrounding field looked just like everywhere else. Except they weren’t. It was almost like the woods were somehow folding in on themselves there, capturing the light and dragging it in...

He nearly jumped.

“Darred? Something wrong?” Quinto inquired, nudging his shoulder.

He blinked several times as he regarded the other man dully, trying to bring some moisture to his suddenly inexplicably dry eyes.

“No,” he mumbled. “Why?”

“You were staring at something, like you’d seen a ghost. Colin’s shadow?”

He shook his head, trying to reconstruct what he *had* seen, but it was no use, the image kept changing. “I don’t know,” he answered slowly, his tongue oddly heavy. “I thought I saw something over by the brook, over there.” He pointed, trying to find the spot again, until...

“Darred!”

Quinto was directly in front of him, despite being at his side mere moments before. His dark, kind features were lined with concern.

Darred squeezed his eyes closed, a sharp ache blossoming behind his temples and eye sockets. “What?”

“You were doing it again.”

“At what?”

“Staring off at nothing, like some kind of statue,” Rooster added. “We was calling, but it was like you didn’t hear us or nothing.”

“Calling?” Darred repeated. “I didn’t hear anything. But I was only looking for a moment.”

“More like several moments,” Quinto replied softly. “We were calling to you for a while, once we noticed.”

“But that can’t be...”

“Hey!” one of the men exclaimed. “Down there, by the brook. Something’s moving.”

Quinto gave Darred one last look of concern, then joined the other man. “Don’t see anything.”

“It’s gone now. But it could’ve been one of Colin’s, or maybe Ulland’s killer.”

Quinto turned to Darred. “Sir?”

“I’ll manage. Let’s take a look.”

“You okay?” Quinto asked.

“It’s nothing,” Darred replied.

Quinto frowned again. But really, it was just a headache, nothing more. Surely it would dissipate after a few hours’ rest once he was home. Not that he would go *home*, not after he had bidden Serrith and the servants to leave...

“There!” Rooster announced.

“What in God’s name...?” Tom began.

Somehow, Darred knew exactly where to look, though there was little to distinguish one tree from another in the orchard that clustered around the banks of the brook. But on the wrinkled bole of a high-reaching apple, someone had stripped away a section of bark and etched on the naked wood a curious design, a pattern of whorls and spirals that twisted and joined together, intertwining into deeper and deeper shapes that pulled the eye in, like water draining from a hole in a bucket. But there was something else beneath that, something deeper...

“Caw! Caw caw!”

The noise shocked him enough that he closed his eyes, and was suddenly overcome by a wave of uncontrolled vertigo that left him unable to discern up from down as his legs gave way beneath him.

Sudden pain shot through him as his shoulder struck the ground, slicing through the numbness that was fogging his mind.

“Caw caw!” the bird squawked insistently from somewhere above him, clearly agitated by something. What on earth...? He shifted his weight, moving blearily, and opened his eyes.

There was a sudden rustle of feathers, and he saw a dark shape flutter away. He groaned, pulling himself up to his elbows.

Something was wrong. The shadows, they hadn't been so long before. And several yards away, in the shade beneath a gnarled trunk...

A body. Short, spindly, and with a shock of unkempt red hair.

“Rooster?” Darred croaked, fighting the dizziness. “Rooster?”

He saw the red now, staining the patch of snow. And the other body, some ways back...

“Oh God,” he whispered when he recognized the dark skin of the man's hand, though his face was hidden by a low-hanging branch.

He rose to a sitting position, still too light-headed to stand. Something was pulling at him, tugging insistently at the back of his head, a pressure, dragging at his mind like a fisherman's line. That pattern on the tree. There was something familiar about it.

He stopped suddenly, his heart hammering in his chest. A sound, the crunching of ice beneath a heel. Swallowing, he glanced over. “Tom?” he whispered.

But the voice that answered was not Tom's. “Darred Mountram.” He couldn't place the accent, but it definitely wasn't Norwinese.

“What do you want? How do you know my name?” Darred countered, turning to the newcomer. The man was huge, tall and broad like a bear and clad in dark clothes and fur. A thick beard and moustache framed his broad, unlovely features, but his eyes drew the gaze most of all, deep yellowish-brown eyes that seemed to peer into his skull, piercing into the recesses of his mind.

“You will tell me where she is,” the man commanded.

“I...”

A cruel smile crossed his face, and Darred saw something flash in the sunlight before the man fell on him and the blade plunged into his shoulder, sliding beneath the mail of his shirt. Darred shouted hoarsely as the pain shocked through him, searing his breast and arm.

“You will tell me where she is,” the man demanded again, his eyes boring into Darred’s as wave after wave of agony sliced through him. He fought, for a long while he fought, at first refusing to speak, then blurting out whatever place names he could come up with, but the man was always unsatisfied, and the knife plunged again and again while he lay stunned, immobile, barely able to think, his will slipping away as the pain from within and without tore into his consciousness and blood poured out from his wounds, drenching his tunic and splattering the one bearing down on him.

“Kern Heights,” he gasped finally when he could bear no more, the syllables escaping his lips more as sobs than words. By then he would have said anything to stop it. Anything.

Suddenly, the pain stopped. Darred gasped, his breath ragged, as the man smiled and withdrew the blade. He could barely feel his right arm now, and he was cold, so cold.

“There, you see? You can be reasonable after all.”

Darred stared back at him, trembling.

“But you did give me a bit of trouble there,” the other noted. “And honestly, *Darred*? Did you think I was a complete fool?”

“No...” Darred pleaded.

The blade fell again, and Darred screamed, again and again, until his voice no longer worked. But the cruel-faced man did not stop, not until the ground was inundated with red and Darred’s eyes had grown glassy and unseeing. Only then did he rise and stalk off, having found what he came for, leaving five corpses in his wake, the others already stiff from the action of the elements.

In the high branches of a nearby tree, the raven with the spot of white upon its beak eyed the dark-clad man as he passed. When he was well out of sight, disappearing into the gloom of the coming twilight, it rose into the cold winter sky, fluttering east into the growing darkness.