

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



White Wolf

David A. Gemmell

About the Book

Skilgannon the Damned had vanished from the pages of history. Taking his legendary Swords of Night and Day, he rode from the lands of Naashan. No-one knew where he had gone.

Three years later, as a mob intent on murder gathers outside a distant monastery, they are faced by a single unarmed priest. In a few terrifying seconds their world is changed for ever, and word spreads across the lands of the East. Skilgannon is back.

Now he must travel across a perilous, demon-haunted realm seeking a mysterious temple, and the ageless goddess who rules it. With assassins on his trail, and an army of murderous foes ahead, the Damned sets off on a quest to bring the dead to life. But he does not travel alone.

The man beside him is Druss the Legend.

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Map

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One

Epilogue
About the Author
Also by David A. Gemmell
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White Wolf

David A. Gemmell

White Wolf is dedicated with love to
Linda, Karl, Kate, Jade and Andrew,
for the joy of the barbecue, and the gift of family.
And also to two men I have never met,
Ken and Malcolm, the Gemmell brothers.

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Prologue

Caphas the merchant was frightened as the stranger approached his campfire in the woods to the north of the capital. Caphas had picked the spot with care, in a hollow away from the road, so that his fire would not be seen. Although the civil war was now ended, so great had been the losses on both sides that there were few troops left to patrol the wildlands, where renegades and deserters looted and stole. The merchant had thought long and hard about this journey, but with so many of his colleagues too terrified to enter the lands of Naashan he had seen an opportunity for huge profits from his goods: silks from Chiatze and spices from Sherak and Gothir. Now, as the full moon shone over the hollow, those profits seemed a long way away.

The rider emerged from the tree line above the camp, and angled his horse down the slope. The man's hairstyle - the lower part of the head shaved clean, the upper hair swept into a fierce crest - showed him to be a Naashanite swordmaster. Caphas began to relax. It was unlikely such a man would prove to be a robber. There were far better ways for skilled fighters to make money in this war-torn country than by waylaying travelling merchants. The man's clothes further reinforced this judgement. Though functional in appearance - a dark leather jerkin, the shoulders edged with chain mail, leather leggings and high riding boots also adorned with mail - they were richly made. His black horse was Ventrian pure bred. Such beasts were rarely seen on the open market, but would sell privately for between two hundred and four hundred gold raq. The rider was quite

clearly no thief. Thoughts of robbery drifted away, only to be replaced by a fear of another kind.

The man dismounted and walked to the fire. He moved with the grace common to all swordsmen, thought Caphas, who rose to greet him. Up close the rider was younger than Caphas had first thought. In his twenties. His eyes were a piercing sapphire blue, his face handsome. Caphas bowed. 'Welcome to my fire, sir,' he said. 'It is good to find company in such bleak surroundings. I am Caphas.'

'Skilgannon,' said the man, offering his hand.

A deep, sickening terror struck Caphas. His mouth was suddenly dry. Aware that Skilgannon was staring at him he managed to say: 'I . . . was about to prepare a small meal. You would be most welcome to share it.'

'Thank you.' Skilgannon's blue eyes scanned the campsite. Then he raised his head and sniffed the air. 'Since you are not the person wearing the perfume I suggest you invite the women to join us. There are wild beasts in the woods. Not as many wolves as once there were, but still some bears and the occasional panther.' He swung away from Caphas and walked to the fire. It was then that the merchant saw the strange ornament he carried slung across his back. It was around five feet in length, slightly curved, the centre polished black. At each end were set beautifully sculpted ivory sections. Ornate and exquisite, it would - had he not heard the man's name - have seemed to Caphas to serve no purpose.

Swinging the ornament from his back, the stranger placed it on the ground beside him as he sat down by the fire.

Caphas turned towards the dark woods. His heart was heavy. Skilgannon knew the girls were there, and if he intended rape or murder they would not escape him. 'Come in, Lucresis. Bring Phalia. It is all right,' he called, praying it was true.

A slender, dark-haired young woman moved out of the trees, holding the hand of a girl of around seven. The child

broke clear of her sister's grip and ran to her father. Caphas put a protective arm around her, and drew her towards the fire. 'My daughters, Phalia and Lucrexis,' he said. Skilgannon glanced up and smiled.

'Always wise to be wary,' he said. 'The girls are very beautiful. They must take after their mother.'

Caphas forced a smile. 'Ah yes, she was the beauty. No doubt of it.' He was dismayed to see Lucrexis staring boldly at the handsome young man. She tilted her head and ran her fingers through her long hair. She knew she was beautiful. So many young men had told her so.

'Lucrexis! Come and help me fetch the pots and pans from the wagon,' he ordered, his voice showing his stress. Confused by his fear, the young woman followed him. As he reached the wagon he hissed at her, 'Stop making eyes at him.'

'He is very handsome, Father.'

'That is Skilgannon the Damned. You want nothing to do with him. We will be lucky to escape this with our lives,' he added, keeping his voice to a whisper. He handed her several pots.

Lucrexis glanced back at the man by the fire. He was chatting to little Phalia, who was giggling at his words. 'He won't hurt us, Father.'

'Do not judge a man by his looks. If only ugly men committed crimes it would take no effort at all to find offenders. I have heard tales of his excesses. Not just on the battlefield. It is said he once had a large house, and all the servants were trained whores. He is not the sort of man I would want near my daughter - had I a choice in the matter. Which I don't,' he concluded miserably.

'I wish I had a choice,' said Lucrexis.

Returning to the fire, Caphas prepared a broth. The smell of it hung in the air, rich and tempting. Occasionally he would stir the contents of the large pan, then take a sip

before adding a little pepper and spice. Finally he sprinkled rock salt into the pot. 'I believe it to be ready,' he said.

After the meal Skilgannon put his plate to one side. 'You are a truly talented cook, Master Caphas.'

'Thank you, sir. It is a hobby of mine.'

'Why do you have a spider on your arm?' asked little Phalia, pointing to the black tattoo on Skilgannon's left forearm.

'Do you not like it?'

'It is very ugly.'

'Phalia, that was rude!' snapped Caphas. 'It is the mark of an officer, dear heart,' he added swiftly, realizing he had shocked the child. 'The fighting men of Naashan adorn themselves in this way. An officer who has . . . defeated . . . eight enemies in single combat is awarded the Spider. Generals have panther tattoos upon their chests, or eagles if their victories are great.' He knelt beside the child. 'But you should not make such comments.'

'I'm sorry, Father. But it *is* ugly.'

'Children say what they think,' said Skilgannon softly. 'It is no bad thing. Be calm, merchant. I mean you no harm. I shall spend the night in your camp and be on my way in the morning. Your life is safe - as is the honour of your family. And, by the way, the house you told your daughter of was not mine. It was owned by a courtesan who was, shall we say, a friend.'

'I did not mean to offend, sir.'

'My ears are very keen, merchant. And I am not offended.'

'Thank you. Thank you so much.'

They heard the sound of horses in the distance. Skilgannon rose and waited.

Within moments a column of cavalry rode into the clearing. Caphas, who had journeyed in Naashan throughout the years of civil war, knew them for the Queen's Horse, black-clad warriors in heavy helms. Each carried a lance, a sabre, and a small round shield decorated with a spotted

snake. At the head of the column was a civilian he recognized: Damalon, the Queen's favourite. His hair was long and blond, his face lean. The fifty riders sat their mounts silently, while Damalon leapt lightly to the ground.

'It has been a long ride, general,' he said to Skilgannon.

'And why did you make it?' asked the warrior.

'The Queen wants the Swords of Night and Day returned.'

'They were a gift,' said Skilgannon. He shrugged. 'However, be that as it may.'

Lifting the curious ornament he held it for a moment, then tossed it to Damalon. In that moment Caphas saw a spasm of pain flicker on Skilgannon's face.

The handsome courtier glanced back to the soldiers. 'No need for you to stay, captain,' he told a tall man sitting on a chestnut gelding. 'Our task here is concluded.'

The rider edged his horse forward. 'Good to see you again, general,' he said to Skilgannon. 'May the gods be with you.'

'And with you, Askelus,' answered Skilgannon.

The cavalry swung their mounts and rode from the clearing. All that remained were four riders, dark-garbed men carrying no swords. Long knives hung at their belts. They dismounted and walked to stand alongside Damalon.

'Why did you leave?' Damalon asked Skilgannon. 'The Queen admired you above all her generals.'

'For reasons of my own.'

'Most odd. You had it all. Riches, power, a palace a man might die for. You could have found another wife, Skilgannon.' Damalon curled his hand around one of the ivory handles, then pulled upon it. Nothing happened.

'Press the ruby stud on the hilt,' said Skilgannon. 'It will release the blade.' The moment Damalon pressed the stud a sword slid clear. Moonlight shone upon the silver steel and the runes engraved there. Caphas stared at the sword with undisguised avarice. The Swords of Night and Day were legendary. He idly wondered what they would fetch if offered to a king. Three thousand raq? Five thousand?

'Most beautiful,' said Damalon. 'It stirs the blood.'

'My advice to you - and your followers - would be to remount and leave,' said Skilgannon. 'As you say, your mission is concluded.'

'Ah, not quite,' said Damalon. 'The Queen was very angry when you left.'

'She will be angrier still if *you* do not return,' said Skilgannon. 'And I am tiring of your company. Understand me, Damalon, I do not wish to kill you and your creatures. I merely wish to ride away and leave this land.'

'Your arrogance is overwhelming,' snarled Damalon. 'I have your swords, and four men skilled with the blade, and you threaten me? Have you lost your wits?' He glanced at Caphas. 'Such a shame you were here, merchant. Fate, I suppose. No man can avoid it.' Damalon pressed an emerald stud on the second hilt. The black scabbard fell to the ground as a second blade slid clear. It shone like gold, bright and precious. For a moment the blond courtier stood very still, drinking in the beauty of the swords. Then he shook his head, as if coming out of a trance. 'Kill the old man and the child,' he said. 'The girl will prove an amusing distraction before we return to the capital.'

In that moment Caphas saw Skilgannon move towards Damalon. His hand flicked forward. Something bright and glittering flashed through the air. It struck Damalon lightly in the throat.

Blood sprayed from the severed jugular. What followed Caphas would never forget, not in the tiniest detail.

Skilgannon moved in on Damalon. As the dying courtier dropped the swords Skilgannon swept them up. The four black-garbed killers ran in. Skilgannon leapt to meet them, the sword blades shimmering in the firelight. There was no fight, no clash of steel upon steel. Within a matter of heartbeats five men were dead upon the ground - one virtually beheaded, another cut through from shoulder to belly. Caphas watched as Skilgannon cleaned the gold and

silver blades before sliding them back into the single black scabbard, which he swung onto his back.

'Best you find new markets, Caphas,' he said. 'I fear Naashan will now be dangerous for you.'

The man was not even out of breath and there was no trace of sweat upon his brow. Turning from Caphas, he walked back and searched the ground around Damalon's body. Stooping, he picked up a small, circular piece of blood-smearred metal no more than two inches in diameter, and wiped it clean on Damalon's shirt. Caphas saw then that the metal had a serrated edge. He shivered. Skilgannon tucked the weapon into a sheath hidden behind his belt. Then he moved to his horse and saddled it.

Caphas approached him. 'They were going to kill us too,' he said. 'I thank you for saving my daughters and myself.'

'The child is frightened, Caphas. Best you go to her,' said Skilgannon, stepping up smoothly into the saddle.

Lucrexis ran to his horse. 'I too am grateful,' she said, staring up at him wide-eyed. He smiled at her, then leaned down, took her hand and kissed it.

'Be lucky, Lucrexis,' he said. 'It would have been most pleasant to spend a little more time in your company.' Releasing her hand he looked back at Caphas, who was holding his younger daughter close. 'Do not stay here tonight. Prepare your wagon and head north at speed.'

With that he rode away.

Caphas watched him until he was lost among the trees. Lucrexis sighed and turned to her father. 'I wish he had stayed.'

The merchant shook his head in disbelief. 'You just saw him kill five men. He is ruthless and deadly, Lucrexis.'

'Perhaps, but he has beautiful eyes,' she replied.

Chapter One

SMOKE FROM THE burning buildings still hung in the air, but the rioting mobs of yesterday had dispersed now, as the two priests walked slowly down the hill towards the town. Heavy clouds were gathering over the eastern mountains, promising rain for the afternoon, and a cool wind was blowing. The walk from the old monastery buildings to the little town was one that Brother Braygan usually enjoyed, especially with the sunshine glinting from the white buildings, and glittering on the rushing river. The chubby young priest loved to see the colourful meadow plants, so small and ephemeral against the backdrop of the eternal, snow-capped mountains. Not so today. Everything seemed different. The beauty was still there, but now an underlying sense of menace and real peril hung in the air.

'Is it a sin to be frightened, Brother Lantern?' he asked his companion, a tall young man with eyes of cold and brilliant blue, upon whom the pale robes of the acolyte seemed out of place.

'Have you ever killed a man, Braygan?' Lantern's reply was cold and disinterested.

'Of course not.'

'Or robbed, or raped or stolen?'

Braygan was shocked and stared up at his companion, his fears momentarily forgotten. 'No.'

'Then why do you spend so much time worrying about sin?'

Braygan fell silent. He never enjoyed working alongside Brother Lantern. The man said very little, but there was something about him that was wholly disturbing. His deep-

set sapphire eyes were fierce, his lean face hard, his expressions unyielding. And he had sword scars upon his arms and legs. Braygan had seen them when they worked in the fields in the summer. He had asked about them, but Lantern had ignored him, as he ignored questions concerning the harsh and warlike tattoos upon his back, chest and arms: an eagle with outstretched wings and open talons between his shoulder blades, a large spider on his left forearm, and the snarling head of a panther upon his chest. When questioned about them Lantern would merely turn his cold eyes on the speaker and say nothing. Yet in all else he was an exemplary acolyte, working hard and never shirking his duties. He never complained, or argued, and attended all prayer and study meetings. When required he could quote verbatim from all sections of holy script, and knew also much of the history of the nations surrounding the Land.

Braygan turned his attention back towards the town, and his fear returned. The soldiers of the Watch had done nothing to stop the rioters. Two days ago the mob had attacked Brother Labberan and broken his arms when he went to teach at the church school. They had kicked and punched him, then struck him with rods of iron. Labberan was not a young man, and could easily have died.

The two priests came to the small bridge over the river. Braygan trod on the hem of his pale blue robe and stumbled. He would have fallen, but Brother Lantern's hand grabbed his arm, hauling him upright.

'Thank you,' said Braygan. His arm hurt from the iron grip and he rubbed it.

There were some people moving through the rubble. Braygan tried not to stare at them - or at the two bodies hanging from the branches of a tall tree. They looked like foreigners, he thought. 'I *am* frightened, Brother,' he whispered. 'Why do people do such hateful things?'

'Because they can,' answered the tall priest.

'Are you frightened?'

‘Of what?’

The question seemed ridiculous to Braygan. Brother Labberan had been beaten close to death, and there was hatred everywhere. In the capital, Mellicane, a group known as the Arbiters had grown in power. Priests there had been murdered, or accused of treason and hanged. Now a representative of the Arbiters had arrived in Skepthia, touring taverns and meeting halls, speaking out against the church and its priests. And the terror continued to grow.

Crossing the bridge, Braygan and Lantern moved past the smouldering buildings and on to the main street. Braygan was sweating now. There were more people here, and he saw several dark-garbed soldiers standing in a group by a tavern door. Some of the townsfolk stopped to stare at the priests as they made their way to the apothecary’s. One man shouted an insult.

Sweat dripped into Braygan’s eyes and he blinked it away. Brother Lantern had reached the apothecary’s door. It was locked. The tall priest tapped at the wooden frame. There was no answer. A crowd began to gather. Braygan tried not to look at the faces of the men. ‘We should go, Brother Lantern,’ he said.

Somebody spoke to Braygan, the voice angry. He turned to answer, but a fist struck him in the face and he fell clumsily to the ground. A booted foot caught him in the chest and he cried out, and rolled towards the wall of the apothecary’s.

Brother Lantern stepped across him, and blocked the path of Braygan’s attacker. ‘Beware,’ said Lantern softly.

‘Beware of what?’ asked the man, a heavily built and bearded figure, wearing the green sash of the Arbiters. It was the representative from Mellicane.

‘Beware of anger, brother,’ said Lantern. ‘It has a habit of bringing grief in its wake.’

The man laughed. ‘I’ll show you grief,’ he said. His fist lashed out towards Lantern’s face. The priest swayed. The

blow missed him. The attacker stumbled forward, off balance, and tripped over Lantern's outstretched leg, falling to his knees. With a roar of rage he surged upright and leapt at the priest - only to miss him and fall again, this time striking his face on the cobbles. There was blood upon his cheek. He rose more warily, and drew a knife from his belt.

'Be careful,' said Lantern. 'You are going to hurt yourself further.'

'Hurt myself? Are you an idiot?'

'I am beginning to think that I might be,' said Lantern. 'Do you happen to know when the apothecary will be arriving? We have an injured brother and are in need of herbs to reduce his fever.'

'You're the one who'll need the apothecary!'

'I have already said that I need the apothecary. Shall I speak more slowly?'

The man swore loudly then rushed in. The knife lanced for Lantern's belly. The priest swayed again, his arm seeming to brush against the charging man's shoulder. The Arbiter surged past Lantern and struck the apothecary's wall head first. Slumping down, he screamed as his knife blade gouged into his own thigh.

Lantern walked over and knelt beside him, examining the wound. 'Happily - though I suppose that is arguable - you have missed the major artery,' he said, 'but the wound will need stitching.' Rising, he turned towards the crowd. 'Does this man have friends here?' he called. 'He needs to be attended.'

Several men shuffled forward. 'Do you know how to treat wounds?' Lantern asked the first.

'No.'

'Then carry him into the tavern. I will seal the cut. And send someone to fetch the apothecary. I have many duties today and cannot tarry here long.'

Ignored by the crowd Braygan pushed himself to his feet, and watched as the injured man, groaning in pain, was

carried to the tavern. Lantern glanced back. 'Wait for the apothecary,' he said. 'I will return presently.' With that he strolled towards the tavern, the crowd parting for him.

Braygan felt light-headed and vaguely sick. He took several deep breaths.

'Who was that?' asked a voice. It was one of the black-armoured soldiers, a thin-faced man with deep-set dark eyes.

'Brother Lantern,' answered Braygan. 'He is our librarian.' The soldier laughed. The crowd began to drift away.

'I do not think you will be further troubled today,' said the soldier.

'Why do they want to harm us? We have always sought to love all people, and I recognized many in the crowd. We have helped them when they were sick. In the famine last year we shared our stores with them.'

The soldier shrugged. 'Not for me to say.'

'Why do *you* not protect us?' asked the priest.

'Soldiers obey their rule, priest. The martial code does not allow us to obey only those orders we like. Were I you I would leave the monastery and journey north. It will not be long before it is attacked.'

'Why would they attack us?'

'Ask your friend. He seems to be a man who knows which way the wind will blow.' He paused. 'During the fight I saw he had a dark tattoo upon his left forearm. What kind was it?'

'It is a spider.'

'I thought so. Does he perhaps also have a lion or some such upon his chest?'

'Yes. A panther.'

The soldier said nothing more, and walked away.

For three years now Skilgannon had sought to recapture that one perfect moment, that sense of total clarity and purpose. On rare occasions it seemed tantalizingly close,

like a wispy image hovering at the corners of vision that danced away when he tried to focus upon it.

He had cast aside riches and power, and journeyed through the wilderness seeking answers. He had entered the priesthood here at the converted castle of Cobalsin, enduring three mind-rotting years of study and examination, absorbing - and largely dismissing - philosophies and teachings that bore no relation to the realities of a world cursed by the presence of Man.

And each night the dreams would haunt him. He would be wandering through a dark wood seeking the white wolf. He would catch a glimpse of its pale fur in the dense undergrowth and draw his swords. Moonlight would glisten on the blades, and the wolf would be gone.

Instinctively he knew there was a link between the swords and the wolf. The moment he touched the hilts the beast would disappear, and yet such was the fear of the wolf that he could not resist the lure of the blades.

The monk known as Lantern would awake with a start, fists clenched, chest tight, and roll from his narrow pallet bed. The small room with its tiny window would seem then like a prison cell.

On this night a storm was raging outside the monastery. Skilgannon walked barefoot along the corridor and up the steps to the roof, stepping out into the rain. Lightning blazed across the sky, followed by a deep rumble of thunder.

It had been raining that night too, after the last battle.

He remembered the enemy priest, on his knees in the mud. All around him were corpses, thousands of them. The priest looked up at him, then raised his thin hands to the storm. Rain had drenched his pale robes. 'The tears of Heaven,' he said.

It still surprised Skilgannon that he remembered the moment so powerfully. Why would a god weep? He recalled that he had laughed at the priest, and called him a fool.

'Find yourself a god with real power,' he had said. 'Weeping is for the weak and the powerless.'

Now on the monastery roof Skilgannon walked through the rain and stared at the undulating landscape, gazing out towards the east.

The rain eased away, the clouds clearing. A bright, gibbous moon illuminated the glistening land. The houses in the town below shone white and clean. No rioting crowds tonight, no rabble rousers. The fires in the merchant district had been doused by the storm. The mob will gather again tomorrow, he thought. Or the next day.

What am I doing here, he wondered? The fool in the town had asked whether he was an idiot. The question dogged his thoughts. He had looked into the man's eyes as he had stitched his wounded thigh. The glint of hatred shone there. 'We will sweep your kind from the pages of history,' the man had said.

Your kind.

Skilgannon had looked at him lying upon the tavern table, his face grey with pain. 'You might kill the priests, little man. It will not be hard. They do not fight back. But the pages of history? I think not. Creatures like you do not have such power.'

A bitter wind rippled across the rooftop. He shivered - then smiled. Pulling open his soaked robes, Skilgannon let them fall to the floor. Standing naked in the moonlight he stretched the muscles of his arms and back, then moved smoothly into the Eagle pose, the left foot hooked behind the right ankle, the right arm raised, the left arm wrapped around it, the backs of the palms pressed together. Motionless he stood, in perfect balance. In this moment he did not look like a priest. His body was well muscled and lean, and there were old scars upon his arms and chest, from sword and spear. His breathing deepened. Then he relaxed. The cold did not touch him now, and he began to move smoothly through the exercises that had sustained

him in another life: the Shooting Bow, the Locust, the Peacock and the Crow.

His muscles stretched, his body loose, he began a series of dance-like movements, leaping and twirling, always in perfect balance. Warm sweat replaced the cold sheen of rain upon his naked flesh.

Dayan's face appeared in his mind. Not in death as he had last seen her, but bright and smiling as they swam together in the marble pool of the palace garden. His stomach tightened. His face betrayed no emotion, save for a tightness now around the eyes. Drawing in a deep breath he moved to the edge of the parapet and ran his hand along the foot-wide ledge. Water droplets clung to the smooth stone, making it greasy. The man known as Lantern vaulted to the ledge and stood some seventy feet above the hard rock upon which the monastery had been built. The narrow ledge ran straight for some thirty feet, before a sharp, right-angled turn.

He studied the ledge for a few moments, then closed his eyes. Blind now he ran forward then leapt high, twisting his body through a tight pirouette. His right foot landed firmly on the ledge and did not slip. His left caught the lip of the right angle. He swayed, then righted himself. Opening his eyes, he looked down once more on the rocky ground far below.

He had judged it perfectly. A small part of his mind wished that he had not.

Turning, he leapt lightly back to the roof and donned his robes.

If it is death you want, he told himself, it will be coming soon.

For two days the thirty-five priests remained mostly within the grounds of the old Cobalsin castle and its outbuildings, only venturing to the meadows east of the town. Here they tended the three flocks of rare sheep and goats from whose

wool, and the garments they fashioned from it, the priests earned enough to support themselves and the headquarters of the church in the Tantrian capital, Mellicane.

The town itself remained ominously quiet. The bodies of the hanged foreigners were removed and the soldiers departed. Many among the priests hoped that the terror was at an end, and that life would soon return to normal. Spring was coming, and there was much to do, gathering the wild flowers to provide the dyes for cloaks and tunics, purchasing and preparing the secret blends of oils that would make the clothes they crafted waterproof, and help to maintain the depth of colour. The garments made here were highly prized by the nobles and the rich of the cities. Lambing season was also in full flow, and the spring cull was due. Merchants would soon be arriving to buy meat and deliver produce and supplies for the coming season.

The mood in the monastery was lighter than it had been for weeks, and the injured Brother Labberan had overcome his fever and – it was hoped – would soon be on the road to recovery.

Not everyone, however, believed the worst was over.

On the second morning Brother Lantern sought out the abbot.

‘We should leave and head west,’ he said. Abbot Cethelin, an elderly priest with wispy white hair and gentle eyes, beckoned Brother Lantern to follow him to his study in the high tower. It was a small room, sparsely furnished with two hard-backed chairs, a long writing desk and a single, narrow window, overlooking the town.

‘Why do you wish us to leave, Brother?’ asked the abbot, gesturing for Lantern to take a seat.

‘Death is coming, Holy Brother.’

‘I know this,’ answered the abbot softly. ‘But why do you wish us to leave?’

Brother Lantern shook his head. ‘Forgive me, but your answer makes no sense. This is merely a respite. The storm

is coming. Even now the rabble rousers will be encouraging the townsfolk to come here and massacre us. Soon - tomorrow or the next day - crowds will begin to form outside. We are being cast in the role of enemy. We are being demonized. When they break through the gates they will cut us all down. They will rage through these buildings like a fire.'

'Once again, Younger Brother, I ask: why do you wish us to leave?'

'You want to die here?'

'What I *want* is not the concern. This is a place of spiritual harmony. We exist to offer love and understanding in a world too often bathed in blood and hatred. We do not add to that suffering. Our purpose is enlightenment, Younger Brother. We are seeking to enhance the journey of our souls as they yearn to be united with the Source of All Things. We have no fear of death; it is merely another step of the journey.'

'If this building was ablaze, Holy Brother, would you sit within it and wait for the flames to devour you?'

'No, Lantern. I would take myself to a place of safety. That, however, does not equate with the situation we are facing. Fire is inanimate and non-discerning. We are ordered to offer love in the face of hate, and forgiveness in the face of pain. We cannot run away when danger threatens. That would be like saying we have no faith in our own philosophy. How can we obey our teachings if we run in the face of hate?'

'It is not a philosophy I can share,' said Lantern.

'I know. That is one of the reasons you cannot find what you seek.'

'You do not know what I seek,' answered Lantern, a touch of anger in his voice.

'The White Wolf,' said the older man, softly. 'But you do not know what it is, or why you seek it. Until you do, what you seek will always be lost to you. Why did you come here, Younger Brother?'

'I am beginning to wonder that myself.' His keen blue eyes held to the abbot's gaze. 'How much do you know of me?'

'I know that you are a man rooted in this world of flesh. You have a keen mind, Lantern, and great intelligence. I know that when you walk through the town the women admire you, and smile at you. I know how hard it has been for you to obey the rule of celibacy. What else do you wish to hear?'

'I have tried to be a good priest,' said the tall man, with a sigh. 'I have immersed myself in this world of prayer and kindness. I thought that, as time passed, I would come to understand it. Yet I do not. Last summer we risked our lives in the plague to help these townspeople. Two of the men whose lives we saved took part in the beating of Brother Labberan. One of the women whose child we brought back from the brink of death was baying for her husband to break Labberan's face. They are scum.'

The abbot smiled. 'How simple love would be, Younger Brother, if we only had to bestow it on those who deserved it. Yet what would it be worth? If you gave a poor man a silver coin then that would be a gift. If you expected him to pay you back, then that would make it a loan. We do not loan our love, Lantern. We give it freely.'

'And what will be achieved if you let them kill you? Will that add one spark of love to the world?'

The abbot shrugged. 'Perhaps. Perhaps not.'

They sat in silence for a few moments. 'How did you know of the White Wolf?' asked Lantern. 'It is only in my dreams.'

'How do *you* know it *is* a wolf,' countered the abbot, 'when you have never seen it?'

'That does not answer my question.'

'I have a gift, Lantern. A small gift. For example, as we sit here now I can see you, but I also see glimpses of your thoughts and memories. They flicker around you. Two young women - very beautiful - one with golden hair, the other dark. They are opposites; one is gentle and loving, the other

fierce and passionate. I see a slender man, tall with dyed yellow hair and a womanly face.' Cethelin closed his eyes. 'I see a weary man, kneeling in a garden, tending plants. A good man. Not young.' He sighed and looked at Lantern. 'You knew these people?'

'Yes.'

'And you carry them in your heart.'

'Always.'

'Along with the White Wolf.'

'It seems so.'

At that moment came the sound of the bell, heralding morning prayer. The abbot rose.

'We will talk again, Brother Lantern. May the Source bless you.'

'And you, Elder Brother,' answered Lantern, rising from his chair and bowing.

There was so much about the world that Braygan failed to comprehend. People mystified him. How could men gaze upon the wonders of the mountains, or the glories of the night sky, and not understand the pettiness of human ambition? Fearing death, as all men did, how could they so easily visit death upon others? Braygan could not stop thinking about the hanging bodies he had seen before the burning buildings. They had not merely been strung up by their necks. They had been beaten and tortured first. The young priest could not imagine how anyone could find pleasure in such deeds. And yet they surely had, for it was said there was much laughter in the crowd as the hapless victims were dragged to their places of execution.

The young priest sat at the bedside of Brother Labberan, spoon-feeding him vegetable broth. Occasionally he would stop and dab a napkin to Labberan's mouth. The left side of the older priest's face was swollen and numb, and the broth dribbled from his mouth to his chin.

'Are you feeling a little stronger, Brother?' asked Braygan.

'A little,' answered Labberan, his words slurred. Splints had been applied to both of his forearms, and his hands were also swollen and blue with bruises. There was an unhealthy sheen on the man's thin face. Close to sixty years old Labberan was not strong, and the beating had been severe. Braygan saw a tear form, and slowly trickle down the old priest's face.

'Are you in pain still, Brother?'

Labberan shook his head. Braygan put aside the bowl of broth. Labberan closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep. The young priest rose silently from the bedside and left the small room. He took the broth bowl to the lower kitchens and cleaned it. Several other priests were there, preparing the midday meal. Brother Anager approached him.

'How is he?' asked the little man. 'Did my broth sit well with him? It was always his favourite.'

'He ate well, Anager. I am sure he liked it.'

Anager nodded and seemed relieved. Small and round-shouldered, he had a nervous tic that caused his head to twitch as he spoke. It was most disconcerting to Braygan. 'It was the boys, you know,' said Anager. 'They hurt him the worst.'

'The boys?'

'His boys. From the church school.'

Braygan was nonplussed. Two days a week Labberan would travel in to the community hall, offering lessons in writing and arithmetic. He would also tell stories of the Source and His wonders. Teaching children was Labberan's joy. 'Our future lies with the young,' he would say. 'They are the foundations. Only through the young can we hope to eradicate hatred.'

'What about his boys?' asked Braygan.

'After Labberan was beaten by the mob some of the children came to where he lay and kicked him. You think it is over now, Brother Braygan?'

'Yes. Yes, I think so. Everything seems calmer.'

‘It is these Arbiters, you know,’ said Anager. ‘They stir up trouble. Is it true that Brother Lantern thrashed one of them?’

‘He did not thrash anyone. The man was clumsy and fell badly.’

‘It is said that there have been many killings in the capital,’ said Anager, blinking rapidly. He lowered his voice. ‘It is even said they might loose the beasts. What if they come here?’

‘Why would they allow the beasts to come here? The war is in the south and east.’

‘Yes. Yes, you are right. Of course you are. They won’t send beasts here. I saw one, you know. I went to the Games earlier this year. Ghastly. Huge. Four men went in against it. It killed them all. Horrible. Part bear, they said. Dreadful. A monstrosity. It is so wrong, Braygan. So wrong.’

Braygan agreed, and thought it best not to point out that priests were forbidden to watch blood sports.

He left the kitchens and made his way up to the lower hall and out into the vegetable gardens. Several of the brothers were working there. As Braygan arrived they asked after Brother Labberan. He told them he thought him a little better today, though a part of his mind considered that to be wishful thinking. Brother Labberan was a broken man in more ways than one. For an hour Braygan worked alongside them, planting tubers taken carefully from large brown sacks. Then he was summoned to the abbot’s study.

Braygan was nervous as he stood outside the door. He wondered which of his many errors had been pointed out to the abbot. He was supposed to have organized the mending of the chapel roof, but the new lead for the flashing had not arrived. Then there was the error with the dyes. It had not been his fault. The sack had split as he was adding the yellow. It should only have been two measures. More like ten had spilled into the vat. The result was a horrible, unusable orange colour, which had to be flushed away. It wouldn’t

have happened had Brother Naslyn not borrowed the measuring jug.

Braygan tapped at the door, then entered. The abbot was sitting by a small fire. He bade Braygan take a seat. 'Are you well, Younger Brother?' he asked.

'I am well, Elder Brother.'

'Are you content?'

Braygan did not understand the question. 'Content? Er . . . in what way?'

'With your life here.'

'Oh yes, Elder Brother. I love the life.'

'What is it that you love about it, Braygan?'

'To serve the Source and to . . . and to help people.'

'Yes, that is why we are here,' said the old man, looking at him keenly. 'That is what we are expected to say. But what do *you* love about it?'

'I feel safe here, Elder Brother. I feel this is where I belong.'

'And is that why you came to us? To feel safe?'

'In part, yes. Is that wrong?'

'Did you feel safe when the man attacked you in the town?'

'No, Elder Brother. I was very frightened.'

The abbot looked away, staring into the fire. He seemed lost in thought and Braygan said nothing. At last Cethelin spoke again.

'How is Brother Labberan faring?'

'He is not improving as fast as he should. His spirits are very low. His wounds are healing, though. I am sure that in a few days he will begin to recover.'

The abbot returned his gaze to the fire. 'Brother Lantern thinks we should leave. He believes the mob will gather once more and seek to do us harm.'

'Do *you* think that?' whispered Braygan, his heart beginning to pound. 'It cannot be true,' he went on, before the abbot could answer. 'No, it is getting calmer now. I think