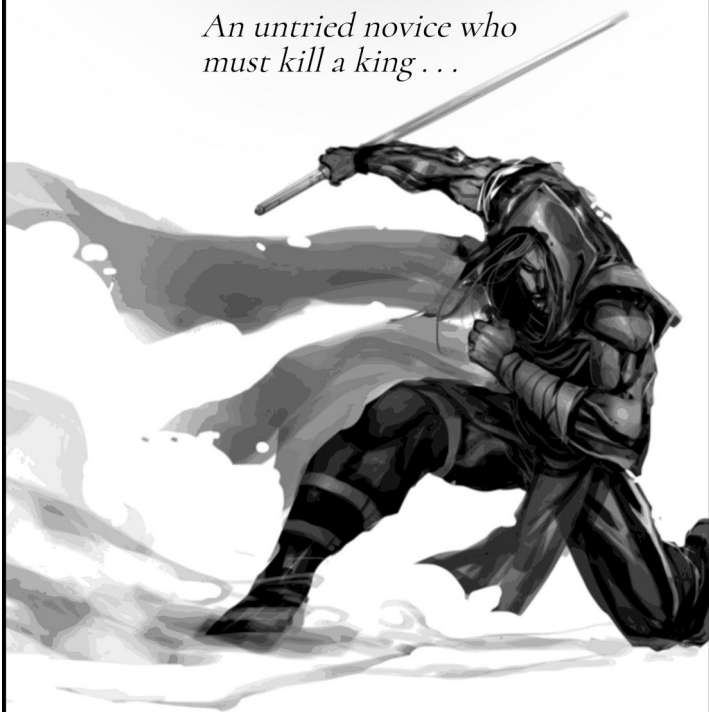


# ASSASSIN'S OATH

*An untried novice who  
must kill a king . . .*



J.T. Moy

## CHAPTER 1

### THE NIGHTWRAITH

Vixhana Rauhalik balanced at the top of the wall she'd just climbed and glanced down at the two slavering dogs that had been chomping at her heels for the last city block. "Stupid mutts. I'd kill you if I had enough time."

She then scowled at the reddening sky as she recalled her commander's last words: "The ship sails at dawn. You better run." The bastard had left it until the last minute. She respected the head of the Order of Nightwraiths, of course. But dammit. If he'd summoned her from the barracks an hour earlier, she would've had plenty of time to join her team. However, the commander of the king's assassins never missed the chance to turn a task into a test—even when the task was to prevent a rebellion and the deaths of thousands of innocent people.

She dropped to the pavement on the other side of the wall, leaving the dogs barking in frustration, and sprinted.

In the distance, the *Buzzard* coursed through the harbor.  
*Blast.*

With the three-masted ship already halfway to the outlet to the open ocean, she needed a change of plan. She nodded to herself as she formulated a new boarding procedure. *It'll work. I'll make it work.* But if it failed, her armor, backpack, and weapons would drag her down to the bottom of the harbor. *Father would laugh if I died drowning.* She shook her head. *No way I'll give that tyrant the satisfaction.*

As she pounded along a land-bridge toward an ancient keep, a chill ran up her spine on recalling the mission details from the commander. How could the man make a game out of it? Surely, he could see how serious the situation was? A rebellion was stirring in the coastal province of Cerik a decade after it'd been liberated from a vile reign of blood and human sacrifice. If the religious fanatics successfully brought back their priest-king from where he waited in exile, armies would have to fight and die once again. The nightwraiths' mission was to track the man down and kill him. "Captain Dravin and specialist Kikarnos could complete the mission themselves, I'm sure. But another blade won't do any harm. Go to it," Rikus had instructed her. Then, almost as an aside, he'd added, "Complete the mission successfully and you'll earn your *blood dagger.*" It had been her lifelong goal to attain the symbol of a true nightwraith. She had grinned for a moment, then had panicked as she'd realized that failure was as simple as failing to reach the ship to join her team.

A shout drew her attention back to the keep at the end

of the land-bridge. A pair of startled guards yelled again and lowered their spears at the ferocious warrior charging toward them.

Vixhana strode one last step then channeled gravmancy magic to assist her leap up and over their heads to the battlements above. The guards' astonished shouts disappeared below as she vanished from their sight and landed on the top level of the keep. If her mission had been to steal a relic or kill one of the mages inside the keep—the Academy of the Arcane—the hapless guards would've been in deep trouble.

A small blue dragon, the size of a dog, hissed and then screeched at her from atop one of the four towers of the keep. *Good morning to you, too, beastie.* Pumping her legs past the creature—probably a pet of some mage—she dropped to a stone pier on the far side of the keep.

Sixty yards beyond the end of the pier, the *Buzzard* continued to cut through the waters of the harbor.

She assessed her chances. She'd jumped distances twice that far, using her gravmancer powers—but not onto a moving ship with wooden masts that could potentially knock her out of the air. A moment of doubt seized her mind. What if she missed? She hated water. Bravado wouldn't stop it gushing down her throat and choking her. She shook her head. *Fear is the enemy. Scram!* Freeing herself of remnants of the emotion, she jogged in even strides along the pier and timed her final leap to the ship.

At the end of the pier, she grunted and hurtled into the air toward the frigate with her arms and legs balled to

her chest. A sailor on the ship stared at her with his face twisted in amazement.

Seconds later, she stretched out her limbs and landed on the ship with a thump. Too heavy. *Could've broken an ankle. Lucky.* Skidding to a halt, she spiraled her arms for balance.

Voices shouted out in alarm all around her.

“What the hell!”

“It’s an ambush!”

“Boarders!”

The rasps of blades being drawn had Vixhana doubting the wisdom of her dramatic entry.

A blow from behind struck her to the deck. A heavy weight then crushed each of her arms to the hard wood and cold steel pressed against her neck. Two assailants holding her down.

“Who the hell are you?!” an angry voice sounded over her head.

She couldn’t turn enough to see the man who spoke. She could throw him off and recover her bruised dignity, but the action would likely provoke a protracted fight. No point hurting innocent sailors.

Instead, she replied as she’d been trained. She was a professional.

“Novice Rauhalik reporting for duty, sir,” she said as best she could, with her cheek pressed awkwardly against the wooden deck.

“What?”

“Novice Vixhana Rauhalik reporting for duty, sir,” she said in a louder voice.

After a brief silence, there was a roar of laughter.

“She’s one of ours, Dravin. Look at her armor.” The weight on her left arm lifted away.

Then the weight on her right arm lifted, and Vixhana pushed herself up to her feet, to the sound of more laughter and a shouted order for the sailors to return to their duties.

Turning around, she met the stares of the two men who’d been restraining her. Armored in the black leathers of the Order of Nightwraiths, they each hefted a blood dagger. She glanced at the prized weapons with their foot-long blades and berry-sized runestones clasped in claws of steel.

Her gaze returned to the men. The first was lean and graceful and a half-foot shorter than her. The second was even shorter still. She felt clumsy and oafish in their presence. Assassins shouldn’t be tall and bear-like, as some of her fellow novices often reminded her.

“I’ve got papers, sir.” Vixhana fumbled for the letter Commander Rikus had given her.

The taller man sheathed his dagger and snatched the document from her. After reading it, he frowned in annoyance at her. “Absurd. You’ve only completed half the training. Has Rikus gone insane . . . jeopardizing the mission with an unblooded novice?” he said. His hand clutched the letter she’d given him and thrust it in her face. “This is no training mission. If it goes wrong, the south will raise a rebellion. I can’t have you along. You can go back in a rowboat.”

Vixhana Rauhalik firmed her jaw as she replied to the

man, who she assumed was Captain Dravin. Although the Order had only a couple hundred men and women, she hadn't met either of the men before. "Commander Rikus revealed no sign of madness, sir," she said in a level tone. "And I have mastered all of Master Potak's training techniques." She could have spoken of flattening the master with swift kicks in training or sweeping past the King's Guard in full daylight as examples, but she knew she'd have to prove herself to every doubter if she were to be accepted into the king's elite order of assassins. "I'll complete the mission with you or die trying. You have my word."

Dravin lowered the letter and examined Vixhana's face as recognition set in. "You're the one the commander has been so spirited about. What makes you so special? I can see it isn't your charms or looks. In fact, you're oversized for this kind of mission. You lack the profile for subtlety."

His words might have offended another woman, but Vixhana didn't care what anyone thought of her appearance. As a child, she had always been mistaken for a boy; as a teen, she had punched out youths who sullied her mother's reputation; and now, at nineteen years old, her hard face, dark hair, and broad shoulders with corded muscles lent her the looks of a street thug. Inherited from her father, her strong features reflected her Vorosian heritage. And, like her father, she towered over most men, intimidating them with her stature. However, the captain was unimpressed and openly disdainful of her size.

"I don't ask for special treatment, sir," she replied, stiffening at his question. "And I assure you, when I'm in

the shadows, I am just as little as you are.” Her tone bordered on insolence, but she’d not let the captain get in her way. Since first learning of the mysterious Order of Nightwraiths at ten years old, while training with wooden swords with her uncle, it was her personal quest to become one of the weavers of light magic and masters of blade that terrified dark alleyways, foreign palaces, and battlefields with their ghostly weapons.

She wouldn’t be refused from this final test to join the Order.

“She’s the double mage, Dravin . . . gravity and light,” the second assassin spoke up as he finished circling Vixhana in his examination of her. He was the smaller man, around the same age as his senior, both some ten years older than Vixhana. But where Captain Dravin was brisk and abrupt, the other man appeared relaxed and open. He smiled curiously at Vixhana as though she were an exotic animal at a market.

“We already have a double mage . . . you.” Dravin stared pointedly at his shorter colleague.

By requirement, all nightwraiths were illumancer mages—masters of illusion—essential for stealth and disguise. But a rare few were gifted with additional forms of magic. A nightwraith who wove shadows and light *and* manipulated gravity to augment sword strikes, wield giant axes, or crush a target barehanded was a lethal force that could overpower almost any foe.

The shorter assassin shrugged. “I might be injured. A stray arrow could take me. A dragon sentry might catch my scent,” he replied in an offhand tone. He reached up



and patted Vixhana's shoulder. "I'll take care of our overgrown ironwood here. I'm sure she's not as clumsy as she looks. We *doubles* never are."

"I'll do what needs to be done, Captain. I won't let you down." Vixhana frowned and brushed the man's hand off her shoulder; he seemed overly friendly for an assassin.

The nightwraith captain stuffed the commander's orders into a chest pocket and shook his head a final time. "Bad luck taking along a novice," he muttered at Vixhana. "Go on then. Go store your things."

Restraining a smile, she hefted her backpack and pressed past the puzzled sailors—now returning to their duties—and found her way belowdecks.

She had no reason to smile. It was her first official mission, and her senior officer was already regretting her presence. She gritted her teeth. She welcomed the challenge. She would prove him wrong and prove she was good enough to earn her blood dagger.

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AS THE *BUZZARD* headed toward a horizon now bright with the morning sun, Vixhana returned to the ship's deck. With Dravin occupied in conversation with the ship's captain, she sought out the short, smiling assassin Kikarnos—the other nightwraith the commander had mentioned in her briefing.

Sea spray salted the side of Vixhana's face as she shifted with the rolling deck. Moments later, she grabbed the

wooden handrail beside Kikarnos as he stood gazing over the wake of the ship at the diminishing silhouette of Dunberrin City. Three giant structures pierced the city's outline: the royal palace, widening as it reached skyward like a fluted glass, balancing on an impossibly thin tower; the giant signaling tower of the military district, which communicated the king's orders to the edges of the expanding realm; and the great runic furnace of the Academy of the Arcane.

Kikarnos grinned in amusement as his gaze lifted from her white knuckles to her equally pale face. "You've never been on a sailing ship?"

"Several times before. I just don't like them . . . especially if it sinks." She'd traveled to the Northern Isles with her mother years ago, but had never enjoyed being confined to a vessel that wasn't under her control.

He laughed. "Let's pray it doesn't."

She glanced at him in appraisal. Although Kikarnos was short and lean, he was the ideal assassin. In regular clothing, he looked harmless—a tool merchant, perhaps, or a wiry cabbage farmer visiting the city. But crawling over a moonlit rooftop with his blade in hand, he was in his element. His small stature slid him through tight windows and gaps with ease, and his magic gravleapt him to heights that no one else could reach.

Kikarnos tilted his head and gave Vixhana a curious look. A moment later, he reached out and grabbed her elbow as though to lead her away from the railing.

His grin then turned from friendly to resolute.

“What are you doing?” Reflexively, she pulled away, but his hand followed her arm.

“Testing you,” he replied.

Suddenly, an invisible weight, like a hundred sandbags, pressed down on her. She collapsed to the wooden deck on her back. Her arms, legs, and head were so leaden that she couldn't move.

The assassin leaned over her, still gripping her arm. “Testing how much it takes to fell this mighty tree.” A snarl crept up the side of his mouth.

It was a gravmancer contest that Vixhana was familiar with, but today, she'd been caught by surprise. Usually agreed upon and initiated by a shake of hands, both gravmancers channeled their powers against the other until one sagged to their knees in a sorcerous “arm-wrestle” to prove the strongest mage.

Flat on the deck, she could barely expand her chest to breathe and was vulnerable to whatever her opponent wanted. He could plunge his dagger into her heart or torture her in any number of ways.

Kikarnos stared down at her with soulless eyes, dead and devoid of his intentions: a hint of the killer instincts behind his mask.

However, Vixhana would never surrender easily.

Each of the sorcerous energies was associated with an emotion. For a gravmancer, grief was the fuel that could be channeled into powerful magic. She summoned a flash of memory—a dead body, her crippled uncle's corpse lying in a filthy gutter—and with the sadness that flowed,

she focused it to repel the gravmantic weight pressing her down.

With an explosion of movement, Vixhana rolled to her side and sprang to her feet.

Kikarnos staggered backward as she shoved him away. The man fell and slid on his backside until he crashed into the portside railing with a loud grunt.

Vixhana towered over the small assassin as he breathed raggedly. She reached down to help him up, just as she'd offered previous challengers after she'd beaten them.

But contrary to etiquette, Kikarnos grasped her hand and pulled—and the contest began again.

Vixhana sagged for the second time as her leaden arm drew her downward. "There are rules—" she began, puzzled that someone her senior did not know them.

The small man laughed as Vixhana's knees buckled and she dropped until his breath was in her face. "Rules ensnare and entrap. You're thinking like a novice. A nightwraith doesn't honor rules."

She shook her head. Rules were everything. Without them, the world would be chaos, and the king's army would be nothing but a den of thugs and murderers.

Her face twisted into a snarl as a sense of indignation stirred Vixhana to anger. If she'd been a pyromancer, flames would've roared around her, fueled by that anger, but as a gravmancer, it was to the sadness of an unjust death that she drew on again. "There are rules," she repeated through gritted teeth.

Kikarnos's grin disappeared as Vixhana repulsed his magic and rose to her feet. Her gravmantic assault shoved

him down to the deck and flat onto his back. His limbs and neck bent awkwardly, as though crushed to the planks by a thousand invisible hands.

Vixhana released his hand and pressed her palm to his chest. Trembling with gravmantic effort, she crushed him into the deck even harder.

His eyes couldn't twitch, his chest couldn't lift. He was suffocating beneath her dominating power.

Even so, she could feel him countering her magic and pushing back. Despite his small stature, he was gifted with power that equaled her own.

"Soldier, stand down!" a voice shouted from behind her. A rough hand pulled on her shoulder and broke her focus. Kikarnos gasped loudly and his body unraveled as Vixhana ceased her magic. Captain Dravin stared at the nightwraith squirming on the ship's deck, then at Vixhana. "What the hell is happening here?"

She snapped to attention, saluting as she'd been trained, and groped for words to describe the situation. "He . . . we . . . he—"

Kikarnos interrupted her with laughter. He sprang to his feet like a fairground contortionist and dusted off his leathers. "She had the upper hand on me . . . is what happened, Dravin. Had me down like a flatcake. It'll take me more than my gravmancy to bring down this mighty oak!" He laughed as though they'd been playing a child's game of handslaps.

Dravin stared back and forth between Vixhana and Kikarnos. Eventually, he shook his head. "You sadists can play your little game later," he said. "Come with me. We

need to re-examine our plan, now that we've got to coddle a fledging on her first mission." He paced to the front of the ship and descended the stairs to the lower deck.

"Well, come on, treetop," Kikarnos said and walked past Vixhana as she lowered her salute. "No hard feelings . . . even though I think you almost broke my neck!" He rubbed the back of his head and nodded to the ship's captain at the vessel's helm as they passed him by.

Vixhana followed quietly, vowing that despite what Kikarnos said about nightwraiths not honoring rules, she would be sure to keep them. She knew the army's charter and nightwraiths' creed by memory. They were the king's rules. They were the rules that she had vowed to obey.

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"WE ROW to the mainland and take the guise of a pumpkin farmer and his *two* sons," Captain Dravin explained to Vixhana. The nightwraiths knelt around a map laid out on the floor of a storage hold. Their only other companions were sacks of potatoes and carrots, crates of dried meats, and a rat that skittered somewhere in the shadows.

Vixhana frowned, thinking of an appropriate disguise. Her mother was one of the finest stage performers in the land, with illumancy skills that transformed her from the wickedest of empresses to the most beautiful of mythical elves in a second and had adoring audiences attend her every play. Though Vixhana had inherited her mother's gifts, her masquerades leaned to darker guises, and her

patrons were likely to be far less appreciative of her entrance.

The somber captain then flattened the map with the palm of his hand and placed a finger near the center. Several miles inland, a small city spilled over the countryside. “Chavers, the City of Towers,” Dravin said. “And in one of those many towers hides our target and his closest sympathizers. There’s an uprising of rebels in Cerik that are conspiring his return. If this priest-king gets back, there will be outright rebellion and war. We have to stop him before he returns.”

“How do we find the tower, sir?” Vixhana asked. The ship lurched and swayed beneath her boots and unsettled her gullet. She was glad she had not yet eaten that morning.

“Our spy reports that the tower flies the old Cerik flag.” The tall man folded the map and thrust it into his canvas backpack amongst the few provisions they had brought for their mission. “Shouldn’t be hard to find.”

“I’ve never seen its flag. Although I know of the battles to win the land,” Vixhana said. Cerik had been one of the first provinces annexed by King Silas at the start of his campaign to stop centuries of bitter war amongst the fragmented provinces of Ascoria. In fact, it had been her father, General Sicaro Rauhalik, who’d led the king’s army against the Skull Clans of Cerik and chased their leader into exile. And it’d also been the conflict in which her uncle had been hamstrung, relegating him useless except to garden at the family estate and crutch around while tutoring his niece in warfare.

“Unmissable. Six skulls around a two-headed swan.” Kikarnos raised an open palm. Above it, an image of the deathly flag flicked into being and waved as though being blown by the wind.

Captain Dravin interrupted Kikarnos to continue explaining his plan. “Once there, we’ll clear away any sentries outside the building. I’ll then stay outside as the two of you gravleap to the ramparts and work your way down until you find the target. You can identify him by his red hair and white eyebrows. A family trait, apparently,” Captain Dravin said. He turned his dark eyes to Vixhana. “You will conduct the kill. Don’t mess it up.”

She’d not killed a person before, even after two and a half years in the army. Although she’d beaten every opponent in practice duels, her skills had been wasted protecting caravans of army supply wagons, patrolling borders, and garrisoning captured towns. The closest she’d come to killing someone was when she’d fought off a rapacious sergeant who had wanted “the biggest cow of a recruit I’ve ever seen.” The monstrous man had cornered her in a castle’s abandoned kitchen, having tricked her there on a fictitious errand. Thinking to intimidate her with a wicked knife and his bulk, he had yelped in surprise as Vixhana grav-slammed him up to the ceiling, then smashed him down onto the edge of his own blade. He had likely thought himself fortunate that the superficial wound had been limited by his rolls of fat. But Vixhana hadn’t finished with him. She’d snatched up his bloodied blade and sliced off the flaccid member hanging out of his breeches. The would-be rapist, after months of recovery,



had devolved into a cowardly mess and never bothered her or any other female conscripts from then on.

She snorted. Despite a lack of experience in killing, she never doubted her ability to murder someone. There was a dark pool inside her that sometimes frightened her with its anger. She just hoped she could control it.

Vixhana nodded. "Thank you, sir. I'll make sure of a clean kill."

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