



BOOK TWO

THE SCARLET
BISHOP



JEREMIAH W. MONTGOMERY



THE SCARLET
BISHOP



THE DARK HARVEST TRILOGY

The Dark Faith

The Scarlet Bishop

The Threefold Cord



THE SCARLET BISHOP



JEREMIAH W. MONTGOMERY



P U B L I S H I N G

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To Dad, Donald, and Douglas

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PART I



FELL WINTER

PROLOGUE

Outside, the sky was falling in small white shards.

It had been years since Mereclestour had seen snow for Adventide, and even longer since the city's Great Cathedral had hosted a royal wedding. But never in the history of the land of Mersex had the cathedral hosted a royal wedding on the holy feast day.

Until today.

"It has been a remarkable year, sire." Stonoric stood before the window with his younger companion. In contrast to the clear glass, his tone was opaque.

"Indeed it has, cousin. And it is not over yet."

"No." Stonoric lingered over the word, hoping the king would invite him to speak freely.

Wodic picked up the cue. "You wish to say more. Tell me."

Stonoric gazed through the high window as he gathered his thoughts. Great gusts of wind buffeted the snow as it fell, unseen fingers menacing the white flakes. For its own part, the snow was helpless. Overwhelmed by forces beyond its control, it could but plunge to an uncertain landing.

Stonoric sympathized with the snow. Loyalty to king and country flowed in his veins. He would no sooner contradict the former than betray the latter. But what if the *king* were in danger of betraying the country? Surely those who loved both must speak, even if they risked contradicting their sovereign?

He took a deep breath. It was now or never. “Sire, I am . . . disquieted by the events of the last four months.”

“*Disquieted* is the language of an ambassador.” Wodic did not turn from the window, but his eyes glanced sideways, up to Stonoric’s face. “It ill befits a duke. We are not at court, cousin. Speak your mind.”

“As you wish, sire. I put it to you plainly—I do not like the way events have unfolded since the arrival of the new archbishop. His agents are everywhere, and his embassies to the Dyfanni have been numerous. He has brought these barbarians to your court, and—”

“And today he will bring one to my bed.” Now Wodic did face him. “That’s what this is really about, isn’t it, cousin? You do not wish me to marry Caileamach.”

Stonoric inclined his head. “I confess that I do not.”

“Do you object to all Dyfanni, or merely to her?”

“The last time the Dyfanni crossed their mountains, it was to attack my city and your kingdom.” Wodic had been Stonoric’s ward and had fought alongside the duke at Hoc-caster. “Surely you remember.”

“I do. But that was twenty years ago.”

“And in these twenty years, they have refused all parley-men. Now, suddenly, they offer their high princess in marriage? *Now* they are pleased to make a Mersian king their high chieftain? I am suspicious, sire.”

“And we are just as pleased to make a Dyfanni princess our Mersian queen!” Wodic laughed. “The world is changing, cousin. The old guard of the Dyfanni are dying.”

“Your bride’s own father among them.”

“Yes, exactly. And besides this, the Red Order is very persuasive.” Wodic glanced back out the window. “All monks claim to work for God, but in this case I actually believe it. They have been a godsend to us, at least! Have you heard the reports of their miracles?”

Stonoric snorted. “Perhaps the death of Princess Caileamach’s father was one such ‘miracle!’”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you not find it remarkably coincidental that those who would have most opposed this union—your own father, and now hers—have died under questionable circumstances?”

“Remarkable, yes. Coincidental? Perhaps. Or perhaps supernatural.” Wodic shrugged. “Either way, cousin, it has worked to our advantage. My marriage will cement a union between Mersex and Dyfann. What my father could not do with myriad swords, I have done with mere words. Think of it!” The king’s eyes flashed. “Who will call me Wodic the Weak now?”

“No one, sire. But that is not the point.”

“Perhaps not for you, cousin. But for me it is *the* point. A king must project strength in order to protect his people. One who is perceived as weak invites invaders. Do not think I haven’t heard the whispers, Stonoric!”

“Sire—”

The king held up a hand. “To repel this perception I was prepared to invade Dyfann at great cost of blood and treasure. Now, thanks to the Red Order, almost all of Dyfann has submitted *voluntarily*—without a single drop of Mersian blood spilt. Word of their surrender will travel across land and sea. Those who hear will marvel. Those who contemplated moving against us will stay home. And you, cousin, will not even you yourself sleep easier without the constant threat of an enemy beyond our borders?”

“Not if it means an enemy within our borders.”

Wodic snorted. “The Dyfanni will not attack us. After today, they would have as much to lose as we.”

“It is not the Dyfanni who concern me, sire. It is the Red Order.”

Irritation entered Wodic’s voice. “The Red Order has given us Dyfann. Is that the stroke of an enemy, cousin?”

“Yet think of the speed with which they gave it, sire!”

“What of it?”

“It took the archbishop and his red monks but four months to bring the barbarians to capitulation. Four months! And how did they do it? Missionary labors and miracles, they say. But the truth is, we don’t know.”

“Do you deny the supernatural, cousin?”

“In the present case I neither affirm nor deny it.” Stonoric let the urgency within him kindle his words. “Sire, here is my point—our own country is teeming with these same red monks. They are everywhere, and most of them are foreigners. We can be sure they have power, but what we *cannot* be sure of are their loyalties. Across the sea they serve the emperor. How do we know they do not do so here?”

“The Church has no teeth without the patronage of the throne. The Red Order’s loyalties lie with the hand that feeds them. On Midgaddan that hand was the emperor’s. Here it is mine.”

“I worry that you are wrong, sire.”

“You worry too much, cousin.” Wodic turned from the window. “The Red Order intends to build new cathedrals in each of the royal cities. Does that not show good faith?”

“It depends. Who will pay?”

Before the king could answer, footsteps echoed in the corridor behind them.

“Your Majesty.” The clear voice spoke Vilguran.

Stonoric and the king turned. Two men approached, and Stonoric commanded his features to remain neutral.

Speak of the devil . . .

“Archbishop Simnor.” Wodic smiled his welcome. “We were just talking about you.”

“Is that so, Your Majesty?”

“Duke Stonoric has just asked how the Red Order intends to pay for our new cathedrals. Would you care to answer for yourself?”

Apart from his splendid vestments, the Archbishop of Mereclestour was a man of average appearance. Except for his eyes. Like most people, Simnor had black pupils. But unlike anybody else, the irises of the archbishop's eyes were also solid black. These eyes now turned to Stonoric.

Gaping eyes—like looking into a pit. The thought had crossed Stonoric's mind more than once.

"You have a question, my lord?"

"I do, Your Grace. Grand edifices demand grand sums. Who will pay for these new cathedrals? More taxes would not be popular."

"Very true, my lord." Simnor smiled. "Thankfully, more taxes will not be necessary. The Dyfanni have opened both their hearts and their coffers to the message of the Saving Blood. Their contributions will build the new cathedrals."

"The last time the Dyfanni came to Mersex, they tried to burn my city—including its church."

"That was a long time ago, my lord. Long before the Saving Blood came to Dyfann."

"Quite. Now the Dyfanni are going to build *five* new cathedrals . . . in *Mersex*?"

"Yes."

"Their gifts must have been prodigious to afford so much."

"My lord underestimates both the wealth and the generosity of the Dyfanni people."

Before more could be said, there was a cough. It came from the hooded red monk standing a few paces behind the archbishop.

Stonoric had barely noticed the man before, for the archbishop seldom lacked the company of the Red Order. But as he looked at the hooded figure now, he noticed that the man's robe was of a fine and glossy material rather than the ordinary dyed wool.

Must be of some rank. I wonder who he is?

But the red monk neither lowered his hood nor opened his lips. He simply turned his faceless head toward the archbishop.

“Though he knows it is not his place to speak,” Simnor interpreted, “my brother reminds us that we have little time before the ceremony begins. That is why we came to find Your Majesty. Are you ready, sire?”

“We are.” Wodic put his arm on Stonoric’s shoulder. “Come, cousin. It is time for us to make history.”



The nave of Mereclestour Cathedral was a long hall of white stone. Great columns ran along both sides of its length to support the high ceiling and two long balconies that faced one another across the center aisle. Above these balconies, the windows alternated between clear and stained glass.

Similar to the windows, the hangings below the balconies alternated between two new banners. The ensign of Archbishop Simnor contained a large white cross with the roots of a tree, set amidst a field of scarlet. The new royal standard took the traditional banner of Mersex—the diagonal cross of Saint Aelbus, colored in gold on a field of red—and replaced two of the four triangular sections. The top section had changed to white, and the bottom was now green.

“*A symbol of unity between our peoples,*” Wodic had explained. If Stonoric had not been standing next to the king in front of the altar, he would have scowled. He hated the new flag.

The royal wedding rites took longer than most. This was not only because of the necessary pageantry involved with royal persons, but also because of the languages involved. As a service of the Church, the rites were in Vilguran. Yet because of the public nature of the occasion, a translator repeated each portion of the archbishop’s words in Mersian. But since most

of the Dyfanni guests did not speak Mersian, yet another translator repeated the ceremony in Dyfannish.

Thus echoed in two languages, the archbishop was somewhere mid-homily when Stonoric let his gaze and attention drift out over the crowd. Despite its size, Mereclestour Cathedral was full. Churchmen, nobles, and other courtiers from both Mersex and Dyfann sat on the balconies and in the front rows. Behind them, buffered by several ranks of soldiers, were the commoners. The contrast between the nobles in their finery, the soldiers in their red tunics, and the rest in their best rags was striking.

Stonoric's eyes stopped near one of the walls at the front of the commoners' section. There, just under one of the balconies, something stirred one of the hanging banners. The duke focused his eyes on the spot.

The danger was not immediately obvious. A man handed a bundle to somebody behind the hanging. The bundle was wrapped in a shawl of some sort, and the recipient looked to be wearing a bonnet.

The duke relaxed. *Just a nursing mother.*

He was about to look away when he saw the shawl fall. Immediately the bundle vanished behind the banner, but not before Stonoric caught a glint of metal in the motion.

His hackles stood on end. That was no baby!

He glanced down at the two guard captains standing at the foot of the dais and tried to convey urgency with his expression. But it was no use. Both men were looking up at the archbishop, who was nearing his conclusion.

“By the power vested in me by Almighty God, I now pronounce you man and wife. What therefore God hath yoked together, let not man put asun—”

Twin shouts resounded from the far back of the nave.

“Traitorous king!”

“Barbarous wench!”

All eyes turned to see two men, one on either side of the hall, standing beneath a hanging banner. Each man carried a lit torch, and in the next moment each had put fire to the banner above him. The flames seemed to leap onto the long cloth.

Both captains standing below Stonoric jumped into action, calling out orders as they dashed down the aisle.

“Give way!”

“Get water!”

“Seize those two men!”

Chaos erupted. The line of soldiers dividing nobles from commoners broke as every guardsman hastened to obey his superiors. At the same time, the crowd of commoners, stuck between the fire and the soldiers, surged toward the doors to escape. Men were shouting. Soldiers were cursing. Women were screaming. And babies were crying.

The sound of crying children brought Stonoric’s mind back to the front of the commoners’ section—to the place where he had seen the men handling the bundle.

The place was empty.

Where did they go?

A woman screamed again.

Looking up, Stonoric found the source of the noise on the balcony opposite him. There he saw a rough fellow holding a Dyfanni noblewoman from behind. The man held a gleaming knife to her throat.

“Back off!” the man growled to the Dyfanni chieftains starting to close in around him. “Back off, I say, or the barbarian wench bleeds out!”

By this time, the fire at the back of the nave had been put out, and a semblance of order had returned to the nave floor. All eyes turned to the drama unfolding on the balcony.

Beside Stonoric, the king was apoplectic. “Unhand the lady, you vermin! Whatever your game, you cannot possibly hope to win.”

The man spat out over the balcony. “That’s where you’re wrong, king! We’ve won already!” As he spoke, the man’s eyes darted to the balcony facing him—the balcony directly behind the duke!

Stonoric turned his head to follow the man’s gaze, and his breath caught in his chest.

Above him, less than ten yards distant, stood two men with loaded crossbows.

The weapons were pointed at Wodic and Caileamach.

Curse my stupidity. It was all a ruse!

Stonoric leapt at the king and queen.

“Your Majesties, look out!”

From the balcony, the crossbows fired.



It is a rule worth remembering as long as one lives: the past may be forgiven, but it cannot be outrun. Those who face their history with honesty may obtain pardon and power. But those who refuse the truth find only fear and flight. True, they may escape consequences for a season . . . but they can never evade conscience.

Outside Urras Monastery, the waves of the northern sea battered high, solid cliffs. Where the land was lower, the cold water lapped over long, pallid sands. In the dark of the night, this steady assault beat a ceaseless, pounding cadence—the drum of general providence.

Inside the abbey, the light of many lamps fell between blazing hearths upon a long table in Saint Calum's Hall. Here the brothers and sisters would soon sit to celebrate the Midwinter Feast. Against the cold without, this seasonal observance was a steady, quiet reminder of providential preservation and provision.

Urien stood near one end of the table, gazing into the fire.

Though it had been less than a month since she had come to Urras, in most ways Urien already felt like part of the community. At first, the brothers' and sisters' natural curiosity had begotten many questions.

Her accent was Dyfanni, wasn't it? How had she come to arrive on a ship from Caeldora?

How had she met Morumus and Oethur?

Where had she learned Vilguran?

But the brothers and sisters soon learned that Urien did not wish to discuss her prior life. And from that point forward, inquisition gave way to a compassionate welcome.

Some stories are best told in silence.

Yet there was one way in which Urien still felt separated from the monks of Urras. For all her integration, she remained an outsider here in one very significant respect. She had renounced the Dark Faith while she was yet in Caeldora, but she had not embraced what the monks insisted was the True Faith.

I am not an Aesusian.

This difference created far more tension for Urien than it did for the rest of the community. For their part, the others did not treat her any differently. Though they knew of Urien's unbelief, and though they did not in any way condone it, they yet showed her the same love and respect that they demonstrated toward one another. Urien found this . . . remarkable.

Also remarkable was the fact that she was encouraged to ask hard questions. Unlike her brother, Somnadh, the inhabitants of Urras never got angry when their faith was questioned. They did not evade her challenges by changing the subject, nor did they dismiss her difficulties with pious flufferies. Instead they responded with calm, reflective answers—and if they didn't know the answer, they admitted it.

Urien found such honesty both refreshing and frustrating. Refreshing for its humility. But it was frustrating because these monks were so insistent that their god spoke in Holy Writ. How could they be so sure?

For a time Urien had been certain it must all be a pretense. For a while she had believed that if she pushed hard enough,

she would find a crack. Yet try as she might, she had not managed to exhaust anybody's patience.

Except her own!

It is their confidence. That is what frustrates me. Yet Urien knew frustration was but the tip of her feelings. And the memory she couldn't escape rose unbidden.

That girl in Caeldora was confident, too . . .

Urien turned away from the flames. About halfway down the table on the opposite side, Abbess Nahenna was setting out plates for the feast. Urien hurried along the length of her own side to catch up, leaving a line of wooden dishes clattering in her wake.

Hearing the noise, the abbess looked up. "There is no need to rush, child."

"Yes, ma'am." Urien slowed her pace.

Like the hall in which they labored, Abbess Nahenna was a woman of light and warmth. She was one of those people who smile with their eyes, and hers nearly always bore the spark of some quiet delight. Though the lines on her face hinted of many seasons, the contours of those creases told a joyful tale. There was a strong motherly aura about Nahenna, though she and abbot Nerias had never had children of their own.

As Urien and the abbess reached the far end of the table, a loud crack in the near hearth sent one of the logs tumbling out of the fire.

The abbess grabbed for a poker.

"Urien, would you go and begin fetching the goblets? I will follow you as soon as I fix this fire."

"Yes, ma'am." As she moved back down the length of the table to exit the room, Urien's gaze drifted back toward the fire, where she had started—

"May Aesus forgive you!"

The murdered girl's words seemed to echo from the flames. Urien whisked out the door of the hall into the corridor beyond, trying to outrun the whispered memory . . .

And failing.

Her own reply haunted her as much as the girl's grace.

"How can you say such things to one who will soon carry your blood in a basin?"

"Because I must. Even as he has forgiven me, so I forgive you. And I pray that he might yet rescue you from this darkness."

"No! No, you cannot!"

But she had.

And then there had been that other monk, Donnach, the same day. . . . No. With a firm effort, she refused to relive any more of it.

For years Urien had held faith in the Mother. For years she had served the great goddess tree.

Wasted years.

The Mother had proven to be just a tree. In the end, Urien had put the fire to it herself.

Could she ever believe in anything again?

She rounded a corner in the corridor—

And nearly toppled a monk traveling in the opposite direction.

"In a hurry, sister?"

The monk, who had drawn back just in time to prevent the collision, smiled at her. Urien recognized him at once.

"Landu." Somehow, she was not surprised.

"Urien. What a coincidence." The Lothairin had black tonsured hair and clear blue eyes.

"Coincidences must be more frequent here than elsewhere."

Landu laughed. "It is a small island, is it not?"

Too small. Urien could not seem to go more than a day without a 'coincidence' bringing Landu into her company. "I have to go."

"May I sit with you tonight at the feast?"

"No. I am to sit beside the abbess."

"Oh."

Urien stepped past the disappointed monk and continued her way down the corridor. Though she did not look back,

she could feel Landu's eyes watching her departure. He was not an unhandsome monk. She simply was not interested.

I won't be here long enough.

Despite the generosity of the abbot and abbess, Urien knew she had to leave the monastery. For all the kindness demonstrated toward her, she did not belong here. She was the fallen servant of a fallen goddess . . .

The Mother is just a tree, and I am just a murderer. Would they accept me so freely if they knew?

In the spring, she would ask to leave. It was the only way.

What will the abbot and abbess say then, when they realize I won't convert?

Her brother had treated her well, too—until she had denounced his faith . . .

"I hate the Mother! I hate her, Somnadh! Do you hear me? I hate her!"

The echo of her last words to her brother lay like a millstone on Urien's heart. Where was Somnadh now? Would she ever see him again? Would he want to see her, after what she had done?

She sighed.

Do I want to leave Urras?

For now, the question did not matter. It was midwinter, and ships did not venture to or from the mainland except at direst need. Until the weather broke, she needn't make the decision.

Urien picked up her pace.

For now, all she needed to do was find goblets for the feast.



A few hours later, life and light filled Saint Calum's Hall as Urien took her place next to Abbess Nahenna, near the

center of the long table. Across from them, Abbot Nerias rose to his feet.

“My beloved brothers and sisters, it gladdens my heart to see us all gathered here this evening.” The abbot swept his gaze from one end of the hall to the other as he spoke. “Though the days be cold and short without these walls, here within we have hearths and hearts warmed by the bounty of our God.” He gestured to the full spread on the board before them. “Taste and see that the Lord is good; the man is blessed who in him rests!”

The brothers and sisters continued the quotation in reply. “Fear the Lord, his holy sons, for those who fear him have no want!”

Nerias intoned the concluding verse: “Lions do suffer and are hungering, but those who seek the Lord want no good thing!”

With these words, the Midwinter Feast began.

The Midwinter Feast was a celebration peculiar to the Church in the North. Abbess Nahenna had explained it to Urien thus:

The Church in Nornindaal and Lothair, which included the island of Urras, took its faith and practice only from Holy Writ. According to Holy Writ, the only religious holy day commanded in Writ was Aesusday—the first day of every week. The Church and her members were free to observe other occasions of thanksgiving if they chose, but they were not to elevate such celebrations to the same spiritual level as Aesusday.

For this reason, the Church in the North did not celebrate Adventide—a religious holy day observed by the Church in Mersex and on the continent of Midgaddan. Instead, they held a regular feast on the next day. At this Midwinter Feast, the monks of Urras would give especial thanks for the birth of Aesus—but they would do so without adding to Holy Writ.

It seemed a subtle distinction, but Urien thought she understood the principle. The Aesusian monks believed their god spoke to them *only* in their book. If this were true, then it made sense that they should be careful to frame their devotion *only* in accord with their book.

As the feast got underway, Urien occupied herself with the simple pleasures of eating and drinking. All along the board, brown-robed brothers on one side and grey-robed sisters facing them did the same. Full jugs and platters passed up and down the length of the table, losing a bit of their heft at each stop along the way. Conversation was free and convivial—the brothers beamed and the sisters smiled. Although life in Urras Monastery was not always easy, on this night everybody seemed happy and content.

Urien saw Morumus and Oethur sitting side by side about halfway down the table to her right. Though inseparable, in many ways the two men were opposites. Morumus was dark featured and brooding. On most days his brown eyes and brow bore a grim intensity. Oethur, in contrast, was fair featured, tall, and gregarious. Though he could be serious—Urien had seen this in Caeldora—the Norn was not normally so disposed.

At present, for example, Oethur was engaged in pilfering a slice of buttered bread from Morumus's plate. He did this with gestures of exaggerated stealth . . .

Morumus was the closest thing Urien had to a friend, and normally she made it a point to sit with him and Oethur. Yet on this occasion, as Abbess Nahenna's special guest, she sat near the center of the table.

Across from Urien, the abbot's honored guest was Feindir, a large, silent monk.

"Would you like some bread, Feindir?" She offered him a basket of small dark loaves.

Feindir nodded and smiled.

Though he always seemed cheerful, Feindir never spoke—for most of his tongue had been cut out. The abbess told Urien that Feindir would reveal nothing of how this had happened. The one time he had been asked to write an account, he simply had copied down a verse from Holy Writ:

“But having knelt, Saint Steþrin cried out with a great voice, ‘Lord, set not this sin against them.’”

The moment before Feindir took the basket from her hands, the edge of Urien’s sleeve caught on a sliver in the table. The wool drew back, revealing an ornate tattoo on her forearm—

Urien jerked her arm back, her breath catching in her throat. Had anybody noticed?

She looked up, and her eyes met Feindir’s. He smiled again, shook his head, and looked away.

Urien sighed.

Meanwhile, back down the table, Morumus had noticed Oethur’s knavery.

“False grabber!” Morumus growled in an attempted Nor-nish accent and deliberately poor Vilguran.

As Morumus and Oethur erupted in laughter, Urien smiled.

Of all the people on Urras, only Morumus had any knowledge of her former life. But apart from asking her to translate that horrible book—no, she would not think of *that* tonight—he had spoken of her past only once, on the day when their ship had come within sight of Urras.

“I won’t denounce you, Urien. . . . No one here will learn of your past from me. Not even Oethur.”

“Thank you, Morumus.”

“But I cannot absolve you, either. . . .”

“I know. Nobody can.”

“No, that’s not true. Remember Donnach’s words: forgiveness is God’s free gift to those who put their trust in Aesus.”

“I don’t—”

“I know you don’t believe this yet. Grace doesn’t come to us naturally. But there are people here who are willing to help you understand, if you desire—myself included.”

Urien didn’t know yet if she could believe. Yet as she sat amidst these merry monks at their Midwinter Feast, she knew one thing for certain:

She very much *wished* all this joy might be true.

They said the Dark Faith was dead. They were wrong.

Hidden behind the holy robes of the Red Order, the shadow of the Dark Faith has returned. As it spreads with political cunning and preternatural power, war threatens to engulf the nations of Aeld Gowan. Meanwhile, Morumus and Oethur have narrowly escaped the Red Order and found refuge at Urras Monastery. With them is Urien, a young woman rescued from the clutches of the Mother. She alone can read the Bone Codex, an ancient book holding dark secrets. But even as she struggles to unlock the haunting text, the Red Order sets in motion plans to eliminate her protectors and to reclaim her . . .

The epic battle between good and evil continues in *The Scarlet Bishop*, the second book in the masterful Dark Harvest trilogy. It is a battle that will push three friends to the very limits of their strength—and their faith—as they fight to unearth the truth of an ancient evil, a tree rooted in bloodshed, and a fabled book that holds the secrets they seek.

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