

# Warden

There was no doubt in anyone's mind, the entire region was in total agreement. Edighu brewed the best Ghugg. Vaeyssa was one of many Huaos-Dzaa troops deployed in Cerchae towns who had even abandoned his traditional drink for it. The Huaos-Dzaa roads and canals had allowed Edighu's Ghugg to be exported to the borders of Cerchae and rumour had it that the Huaos-Dzaa traders had even taken it eastwards into Rrtetua and south to N'airzeir. No matter how far it had gone, the export of Ghugg had made Edighu a wealthy man and as a direct consequence increased the prosperity of the clan. Edighu's success had been made possible by the infrastructure and traders of the Huaos-Dzaa so it angered Vaeyssa to discover that he was a traitor: a supporter and helper of the Angueth rebels.

Vaeyssa hammered hard on the door. "Open up Edighu or we'll break our way in." Dawn had yet to bless the world with colour and the birds hadn't yet emerged from their dreams, but the dark of night was beginning to recede. Vaeyssa struck the solid door hard with the butt of his sword, the sound incongruous with the quiet of the hour and he felt a pang of guilt as if he were a child making too much noise when his parents were trying to sleep. "Open up!"

Vaeyssa stood bathed in a pool of light cast from the lanterns he and his four soldiers were carrying. He'd sent another five around the back in case the old man sought to flee that way. A sudden clattering came from a neighbouring house, the owner threw back the shutters and opened the window. "What's going on out here?" he demanded.

Vaeyssa deflected the question with one of his own. "Is Edighu at home?"

"Well he was last night."

"Right, that's it," Vaeyssa addressed his men, "break it down!"

The soldiers levelled a small battering ram at the door and charged. The ram splintered the door and its centre caved in. A second charge and the door flew apart. Retrieving their lanterns, the men clambered over the smashed door and into the house.

"Search it," Vaeyssa ordered, "and let the others in the back." He waited at the entrance and listened to his troops as they moved noisily throughout the house. It wasn't long before one of the men reappeared at the front door.

"He's not here, sir."

"Okay, Thael," Vaeyssa said, "get me the Warden."

"Sir." Thael turned around and shouted into the interior, "Jeilkos. Out front, now."

The sound of boots clumping on floorboards came nearer and a third soldier joined them. "Sir."

"It's over to you, Jeilkos."

"Yessir," Jeilkos turned back to the house and entered the small hallway, studying his surroundings and taking note of all and any possibilities. The exterior wall was thick enough to have a hollow interior. A trapdoor may have been concealed in the wooden floor. Open stairs ran up to the first floor so the probability of concealment there was nil, but someone might be able to lie flat in a cavity between the downstairs ceiling and floorboards of the upper rooms. He began to methodically check every corner, wall, floorboard and ceiling plank. If there was a hidden chamber here, he'd find it.

The hall proved devoid of any secret hideaways, but in the main room Jeilkos uncovered a small hole cut into the outside wall and hidden in plain view beside, not behind, a tapestry. He admired the skill of the warden who had made it for the edges were almost impossible to see and it required the simultaneous pulling of a scone and the pushing of one of the stones at the bottom of the wall for it to open. When the stone door swung out the mechanism was smooth and silent. Jeilkos instinctively stood to one side as a trap activated and sent a poisoned dart flying into the room. The dart embedded itself in the wall opposite as he looked into the hole. He froze and a shiver ran up his spine as he recognised the four stylised figurines within. There was one for each of the old Cerchae demon-deities. Their presence in the old man's home disturbed Jeilkos, but it was some consolation that they would seal Edighu's death warrant.

A sudden creak from the ceiling caused Jeilkos to jump and there were audible footfalls crossing the room overhead. Not the loud thumps of boots but a soft padding like bare feet. His heart skipped a beat and his mouth went dry. "Sir, there's someone upstairs."

"You keep looking," Vaeyssa pointed at Jeilkos as he passed through the hall and vanished up the stairs. Vaeyssa's heavy tramping could be heard overhead as he started his inspection of the room. Jeilkos was on edge, glancing over his shoulder at the four wooden statues in the hole as if expecting them to come to life and attack him. He found it hard to concentrate but had almost finished when he heard someone coming down the stairs.

Vaeyssa appeared in the room. "There's no-one up there."

"I definitely heard someone walking across the room, sir, and I found these."

As Jeilkos began to lead Vaeyssa to the hole in the wall the footfalls sounded again. They looked to the ceiling. Jeilkos's heart beat uneasily in his ears. The footsteps moved and then stopped at what seemed to be the top of the stairs. Vaeyssa turned and charged back up to the first floor. Jeilkos followed as far as the hall and watched him run from room to room before he returned to the landing.

"Nothing," Vaeyssa said and shrugged.

A black shadow loomed out of the dark behind Vaeyssa. Jeilkos opened his mouth to shout a warning but Vaeyssa careened forward and tumbled down the stairs. Jeilkos helped his Captain to his feet and looked to the first floor. Nothing.

"Out!" Vaeyssa ordered as he stood up. "Everybody out now! This house is possessed. Get me the Nightwarder."