

*Excerpt chapter from Domovina draft...*

## The Boss

*“A good criminal can expect to be a boss for a decade, if he survives his apprenticeship, and if he kills his enemies before they kill him. It’s all a matter of luck in the end.”*

J’Keem the Carver

from *Daily Musings*

Ven gazed into Emir’s blue eyes, and asked, ‘How does it feel?’ Emir gaped back, wide-eyed, shock overwhelming his face, silent. ‘I can only imagine,’ Ven said quietly. ‘You can go now.’ He released his grip on Emir’s shaggy forelock, and Emir’s head dropped onto his chest, dark blood pouring from his slashed throat in a fanning wave across his cream linen shirt. Ven straightened, wiped his bloodied blade on Emir’s shoulders, and turned his attention to three men standing behind Emir’s chair. ‘So, gentlemen, Trader Emir has paid part of his debt. I’ll leave you to clean up. Organise some cheap labour to shift the bulk of his warehouse stock down to the wharf. It can go in Shalem’s warehouse. Make sure you account for everything. That shark Shalem will steal from his mother.’ He slid his knife into his grey belt, beside his pistol, pulled his tan leather coat over them, and crossed to the door, where he stopped to add, ‘The body needs to be found. Put it somewhere obvious so others

can be reminded that unpaid debts won't remain unpaid.' He flashed a cruel grin and left the office.

On Sar'en Street, he paused to take in the apricot and purple hues of the fading sunset. The narrow street was busy with workers and locals heading towards their homes, bustling past the night hawkers who were lighting their stalls and organising their product. A small truck lurched towards him, dull headlights momentarily washing his outfit with light, before it chugged past, its exhaust hissing a warm steam cloud. He fetched his silver fob timepiece from inside his jacket and flipped it open to check the time. Timepieces were the property of the Carski family. Ordinary people weren't allowed to own them, but his came from one of his constituents who supplied cogs and springs to the Carski watchmaker, a gift for business protection. He smiled, as he closed it, and returned it to his pocket, musing, *The rich don't own everything*. Satisfied no one was showing interest in him, or in Emir's Porcelain Wares, he strode towards the intersection, into the main throng. One matter was resolved. Another pressing task awaited his attention. It was a busier than usual night.

Fifteen minutes later, outside the Restless Nights pub on The Docks Road, he waved to a familiar heavy-set individual who put aside his bottle of ale.

'Anything I can do for you?' the man asked.

'Don't be too funny, Kareem,' Ven warned. 'Is it busy inside?'

'Usual,' Kareem replied. 'Few workers, a couple of girls.'

'Watch?'

‘Nup.’

‘Good. You’re about to have a change of employer,’ Ven announced quietly. ‘You have an issue with that?’ Kareem chuckled, his white teeth shining in his black beard. ‘I take that as no,’ Ven concluded.

‘That bastard Afram won’t be missed by anyone. Who’ll be the new boss?’

Ven smiled. ‘Me.’

Kareem nodded approvingly. ‘What can I do for you, Mister Boss?’

‘Where’s Afram?’

‘Not at the bar.’

‘Is he in?’

‘In his back room is my guess, or the back yard.’

‘Keep the clients occupied. Start a fight. Make sure someone has an eye on the street for the Watch. Before you start, yell your challenge so I know.’

Kareem nodded again. ‘It will be a pleasure, Mister Boss.’

‘So, get to work. I’ll be out back, talking to your former employer.’

As Ven waited for Kareem’s bulky frame to disappear through the pub entrance, he checked the street for the City Watch, and, when he was satisfied they weren’t in earshot, he slipped down the narrow alley separating the pub from a carpentry shop, catching a whiff of the sweet smell of freshly-planed wood. He opened a gate at the rear of the building, startling a pair of tabby cats, but Afram wasn’t in the yard. Ven unlocked the establishment’s back door with a skeleton key from his

pocket set, and entered a narrow hallway, and was immediately beset by the odours of roasting meat and garlic. The gas-lit kitchen, to the left, was busy with three cooks and four scullery hands toiling over the early evening meals, and the ambient heat poured into the hall as the dishes clattered and oil bubbled. Pub noise spilled through the partly open door at the end of the hallway, a small crowd talking and ordering drinks. He glimpsed the back of the barmaid, Ashyn, a dark-haired woman in a blue dress, serving an obscured man. To the right, in the hall, a closed door leaked light. He crept to it and pressed his ear against the wood. Muffled voices. Afram had company. *Unfortunate*, he thought, as he drew his pistol from his belt and waited. A voice boomed in the pub, 'I saw you feel up my woman, you bastard!' and glass shattered.

As the bar talk erupted into yelling and the clash of fighting bodies, Ven swung open the door and started firing. Five shots. Three men toppled from their chairs, sprawling on the floor. He strode in, and put a sixth bullet into the head of one who was thrashing his arms and legs against the floorboards in a vain effort to run from death. A glance at the second confirmed a clean headshot. The last was Afram, a weighty man lying on his back, blood gargling in his throat. The victim's terrified gaze, when he saw Ven lean over him, made Ven smile. 'Sold your wares in the wrong district again,' he said. 'Warned twice. Didn't listen.'

Afram gurgled, swallowed, and frantically rasped, 'It was a mistake. I'll give back the money, Boss. All of it. Please.'

Ven pressed the barrel against Afram's temple and Afram closed his eyes. The chamber clicked. Afram winced, but opened his eyes when he realised the gun didn't fire. 'That was naughty of me,' said Venn, grinning. 'This should fix it.' Afram grunted, and his eyes bulged, as Venn drove his knife beneath Afram's sternum and upwards with a twist. Afram's breath hissed and sputtered out of his mouth, as the blade was wrenched out. 'That's better,' Venn announced, straightening. 'Another debt paid.' He wiped his blade on the blue tablecloth, noting the cash and cards. 'Gambling game, gentlemen,' he said to the corpses, as he scooped up the money. 'You always lose when you gamble.' He rolled over the second body, recognising Denar the butcher, whose shop lay across the street. 'Took you for an honest man. Shows I can't pick everyone.' He looked up to discover a cook standing in the open door, staring. 'What's your name?' he asked, as he methodically reloaded his pistol.

'W'nan,' the cook answered nervously.

'And what did you see?'

'Nothing,' W'nan replied.

'Good,' said Ven, approaching the door. He stuck his head into the hallway to find that the kitchen staff were crowded in the kitchen doorway. Fighting in the pub was in full swing. He pushed past W'nan. 'When the Watch comes to clean up this mess, you'll have the kitchen door closed, and you'll say you didn't hear anything but the fighting out the front. Is that clear?' There were nods. 'I know every single one of you, and I know your families. You all know who I am.' More nods. 'As of now, you work for me.'

You will have a pub manager to oversee business, but I will be checking in on all of you from time to time. Make my visit to your house a pleasant one.' He patted W'nan on the shoulder, before he left by the back door.

A short time after, as he walked quietly along Car's Way, heading for the J'Ekrim district and his current lodgings, he heard the City Watch shrill alarm whistles on The Docks Road. It was time to find a new place.

Staying anywhere, longer than a few days, was risky. While his reputation kept the fearful away, his enemies were numerous, and those who lacked personal courage to hunt him down hired others willing to do it for them.

'Hazard of the business,' his mentor warned him, when he was being coached to take over the trade. And it was. His mentor disappeared one night, and although Ven failed to find his mentor's body he did find out who killed him. And evened the score. That's when he became his own boss.

He rounded a corner into Potter's Lane, where his rooms were, and stopped. The lane was lit with gas lanterns and torches, and a small crowd blocked his way. The men at the centre of the crowd all wore yellow robes. One, with a clean-shaven head, was exhorting the crowd. 'You cannot escape the Cleansing! None of you! The great dragons are coming, and you will bow before them, and they will judge each and every one of you! And if they find you lacking in faith, you will be consumed! You will be burned to ash and purified! But if you have faith, if you believe in the dragons, you will be cleansed of your worldliness, and you will rise to become servants of the Dragonkin, and you will have eternal life!' Ven

spat and turned on his heel. The Fire Priests were a new and irritating phenomenon in Grad, and he had no time for their preaching. Neither did he want to push through a crowd. He abhorred crowds. It was a longer walk, but he would go around the block and enter Potter's Lane from the other end.

He followed the streets, weaving away from the bustle of the major thoroughfares, until he found a long, unlit alley that he knew was a shortcut through to the next street that cut back to Potter's Lane. Dark alleys, alone at night, were not wise choices - he knew that - but expediency was necessary. Besides, no one knew where he was right at that moment.

As he stepped in, he heard shuffling on loose cobbles. He rocked sideways, against a stone building. Instinct saved him. A pistol barked, and a bullet ricocheted off the stone near his head. Shadowy figures charged. He thrust his arm to fend them off, but their impetus smashed him against the wall and he tumbled into the alley. Hands grappled for his arms, as he frantically fumbled for his knife. He lifted his knee, digging it viciously into something soft, but his head exploded with pain as a fist smashed against his cheek. Searing agony in his thigh followed another gunshot. He wrestled his left arm free, and pulled his knife from its belt, but a boot crushed his wrist to the earth, and another blow smacked against his left temple. He kicked, trying to spin from under the weight pressing down on him, and his heart hammered against his ribs. Steely, determined fingers pried his knife from his grip. He jerked his right knee

up as hard as he could, felt it connect, and wrenched his pistol out. A hand grabbed his wrist, but he twisted the gun and pulled the trigger, hoping it would hit something. He fired again. A body collapsed on him, the weight, winding him, and writhed, screaming in his ear. A boot smashed viciously against his left ribs and he felt them break. Pinned to the ground, he fired blindly towards the invisible kicker and heard a man yelp. 'I'm not dying like this!' Ven wheezed defiantly. *How many more of them?* flashed through his mind. A gun barked again and his left side erupted in more pain as a bullet tore through his busted ribcage. *Doggo*, he decided, and let his legs jerk and twitch briefly, his right hand with the pistol slipping to the ground, as though he was dying. *Maybe I am dying*, he thought. *Stupid way to die*. He lay still, fighting the pain wracking his crushed body, and strained to listen. *If I'm lucky*, he pondered. *If I'm lucky*.

Approaching boots crushed the earth, but he kept his eyes wide open, mimicking the frozen stare of death, allowing him to see the shadowy bulk of his antagonist loom warily over him, framed against the starry sky. He couldn't see it, but he knew there was a pistol aimed at his head. *That's what I would do*, he decided. *And I'd be pulling the trigger to make sure about now*. He wrenched up his right hand, pistol primed, and his attacker's weapon flashed.