

Do Not Wake The Beast

Patricia I. Williams

First few chapters preview

Provided by Mythical Legends Publishing

DO NOT WAKE THE BEAST

The tavern door opened, then smacked against the wall so hard the timbers shivered and creaked. The startled inhabitants could only gape as the storm rushed in chilling their already wet bodies. Sleet and icy rain swirled through doorway and spat upon the patrons relegated to the dirt floor near it. Some grumbled and scuttled away from the muddy puddles as ice and rain pelted the interior. The barkeep rushed to close the door only to shriek when a dark shadow detached itself from the storm, moving into the common room.

The shaggy apparition moved the frightened man aside by stepping into his space. The door swung back and closed with another bang. The bar dropped across it, leaving the bitter weather to slap and push from the outside. A rough cloak dropped from a set of massive shoulders. The collective sighed with relief at the tall male figure. Oh, well not a demon, just another mercenary.

Raven hung his dripping cloak on the hook near the door and rung the water from the dark braid draped around his neck. He already knew how many men sat at the greasy tables and that any women here had long since gone to bed in the cramped musty upper rooms. He turned on the still stupefied bartender.

“Boil some water, now.”

“Water, boil water?”

“Water, now.”

Raven crossed the dark room, removing the sword

hanging from his back to a table nearest the soot darkened back wall. He pulled the table away and settled in the rickety chair that groaned under his weight. He ignored the bleary eyes peering at him and the stench of wet unwashed bodies. He took a leather pouch from the thick belt he wore and placed it on the table along with his damp travel bag. The barkeep rushed to the table holding a battered kettle, the handle wrapped by the bottom of his dirty apron.

“A tankard and the kettle before the water’s cold.” Raven growled at the seemingly witless man.

“Oh, yes, a tankard. Yes...yes sir...I yes.” He scurried away again the kettle swinging wildly, causing swearing occupants of the floor and tables to duck and move from his path. Raven glared. The man finally stumbled back, dropping the tankard so it rolled across the table. The warrior’s hand closed around it. The kettle banged against the side of the table, splashing water on the hapless bartender. He managed to put the kettle down and back away. One more glance from the warrior at the table sent him back to his duties on trembling legs.

Raven poured a portion of dried herbs into the tankard and filled it with water. He warmed his cold hands in the steam from the cup. After a few minutes he raised it to his lips. The first sip nearly forced a groan from the exhausted man. He had to really control the urge to gulp the bitter liquid down and scald his throat. The heat settled in his belly, warming him completely after a while. He finally relaxed against the wall and let his eyes travel openly around the room. Most of the inhabitants avoided his gaze.

There were just as many brigands as honest travelers in the room. His size and the gleaming steel of his sword

should prevent any one from getting ideas about lifting his purse. He chuckled out loud at the thought because his purse was painfully thin right now. He was hoarding what remained in anticipation of a new job, hence the smelly hovel having to do for for this moment. He rested his head on the wall to doze, at least content the tavern was shielded by a hill that blocked the winds from blowing through the ill fitted logs at his back. He did not move as the people in the room finally settled once more before the meager fire.

The strong slept near the flames, the not so bold lay shivering in the cold and enduring the draft whistling through the ramshackle walls and around the ill fitted door. After a while, Raven pulled a woolen blanket from his pack and wrapped it around himself. He allowed himself to relax, just a little, in the heavy folds and went to sleep.

Silence awakened him. The storm was over for now. He folded the blanket tightly and stuffed it into his pack. He knew the sun had risen, although he expected the day would be sullen with clouds, fog and more rain. The slide of metal on leather stirred some of the other wayfarers. Grabbing his still damp cloak, Raven stepped across bodies on the floor and lifted the bar from the door. He slipped into the chilly morning, crossing quickly to the shed to fetch his horses. The animals were nosing around in ice-rimmed hay. He slipped a bag of oats over their noses and rubbed them down before tossing blanket and saddle on his mount. Very soon, the animal would refuse the grains and need to hunt or Raven would have to buy fresh meat. He reloaded all his gear on the shaggy packhorse and stepped into the saddle.

Chi walked carefully, wary of the cracking ice and

mud sliding beneath his hooves. Raven looked around at the dull winter landscape and figured he had at least a six-hour ride to the next tavern along the twisting, treacherous track passing for a road. He hoped to make it before the weather soured again. Another night in a filthy roadside tavern would not improve his mood. Sighing heavily, he guided his animals off into the tall pines, growling as wind blown water cascaded down from the trees. The rumble of distant thunder herald another round of storms.

The mercenary had heard a local lord, new to his position, was hiring men-at-arms to shore up his troops. Fighters from all over the Midlands were finding their way to these sparsely populated mountains. NorBlad raiders would be scouring the land very soon. It was said the old master of the lands paid tribute to the northern fighters but the peasants and lesser nobles still lost too much to the raiders. There should be fighting aplenty and gold for his war bag.

From time to time he dozed in the saddle aware that Chi would let him know if trouble approached.

Like him, the animal stood out in this land of dark pine forest and snow. Iron gray with black stockings, mane and tail, his muzzle and face were black as well. Chi hailed from the far western plains. The animal enabled the mercenary to charge twice the fees offered for only his sword. More than once Raven had literally been plucked from death's jaws by his oft times vicious guardian. Chi was heavily boned and muscled with deceptively gentle dark eyes. His teeth were dagger long and sharp edged, dealing deep and grievous wounds. Tales were told that they were not true horses, but demon spawn erupting on the western plains during a fight between the gods. Raven always wondered if there was more truth than not

to the tale. The demons chose their riders and seemed to anticipate their needs. They also had a sack of gall in their throats, which injected into a bite caused a lingering agonizing death. No one else rode him, no one dared. Savage, the animals were known to kill other four legs for food including their own kind.

Torches were just being lit within the timber walled city of Virgilia when Raven finally reached the gate days later. The guardsmen paid little attention to Chi. In the dark he appeared just like any other horse and Raven was grateful. He had no wish to spend the evening in the cold arguing with superstitious men. Once inside he realized the city was teeming with people.

Observation determined many of the farmers from the countryside had moved into the city. Resigned to a longer wait for bed and a meal, Raven traveled through the town until arriving on the paths just below the high road to the lord's residence. Taverns, choked with smoke and rank odors, rang with off key music and fighting. The upper paths hosted the higher priced inns for the more sedate clientele. There would be people from the richer farms, merchants and nobles. Raven listened to the chatter from the throng pushing and shoving along the narrow torch lit way. Though disconcerted at finding a horse barring their way, most of the people were too inebriated to do more than stumble from his path. Hawkers stood in front of the doors, shouting about the best wines, feather mattresses and of course who had the fattest and cleanest bed warmers. He pondered over the gold left in his purse and finally decided to move a little closer to his goal. The best place would have a large barn where Chi could rest away from the majority of animals. Oddly, though he was

a stallion, the animal did not insight other horses to fight, but they were very nervous around him.

He came to a place with a gate and a wall nearly his height surrounding it. Lamps and a bell hung from the posts. Further along the wall he could see an even wider gate, probably for carriages and wagons to come and go. Faint music could be heard over the rabble in the road. Decision made, he rang the bell.

After a time, a small head popped up under the bell.

“An ya bizna bein’?”

“What else would I be here for? Open the gate brat!”

“Tha li ya havin’ na coin!” The guardian of the gate assessed Raven with an exaggerated leer only to have a hand surround his head and lift him from his perch.

“Open the damn gate, or I will open it with your head.” Raven growled, squeezing the bug-eyed boy’s skull. Torchlight reflected in the catlike eyes of the monster crushing his head. Frightened spitless, the youngster scabbled at the wooden bar, arms and legs flailing wildly. He managed to lift it just enough that Raven dropped him and grabbed the heavy log. It was little effort to toss the bar over the head of the boy. He flinched as it hit the ground, one end narrowly missing his head. Chi pushed through the gate and the boy scrambled from his path.

“You don’t decide for a man where his coin is spent brat. Keepers of gates can be slaves on the morrow.”

The gulp was audible as the boy scrambled to his feet and hurried to get the bar back up on the gate. He would endure the dampness of his ragged britches for the remainder of his shift, but have two fights later on unable to endure the taunting about his smelly condition.

Raven rode across the yard and stepped down before the main doors of a very large inn. To one side he could

see a taproom filled with revelers. Well to do nobles and merchants communed together. Tomorrow in his lordships residence they would pretend ignorance of each other. He stepped through double doors. The main lobby was well lit and he was not surprised to see a very fat tavern keeper leaning against a podium. This one obviously trusted no one to collect his coin. How else could he maintain the mountain of flesh that covered his slim bones? Raven stepped up to the counter. Before the man could launch into his tirade the mercenary dropped a very small bag on the ledger book.

“See here now...”

“Look in the pouch before you give me any sass, old man.”

Insulted, the man just prevented himself from calling for his bouncers. He untied the drawstring and poured two gold coins into this palm. Instantly his expression changed, to suspicion.

“I’m no thief, you greedy bastard. Say I am and taste steel.”

“I, I would not dream of it. No sir, did...did not, er... cross my mind.”

Raven scowled at the innkeeper. The man visibly shrank under the pale silver gaze of the mercenary.

“How many nights will that buy me and care for my horses?”

The coins disappeared into the chubby hands, then the man sank his teeth into the coin. On further inspection a smile creased his face until his eyes disappeared. His bite left marks in the soft metal.

“Forgive me sir, a man cannot be too careful in these trying times. Come, come this way. Why I will escort you myself. Yes yes, this will afford you one of our best

rooms and food for at least a moon.”

“My animals need tending and my bags brought in.”

“I have ser...”

“I tend my own things.”

“As you wish...of course. Right this way.”

Raven followed the man up two flights of stairs and a turn to the left. The room was larger than expected and the bed even larger. Servants scurried in behind him, rushing to light the kindling in the fireplace and turn back the covers. The innkeeper lit the candles in the scones near the door. A pitcher of water and a basin were brought in. He checked the bed, pleasantly surprised to find it feathered and not filled with straw. The covers were soft wool and it even had pillows. There were no connecting doors and the one window looked out over the rear yard. That pleased him. The barn was directly across from his room.

“This will do innkeeper. Bring whatever you have left in your kitchen this hour for a hungry man. I do not expect a full meal this late. Listen closely to what I tell you. I do not require wine or ale. A good strong tea is all right, if you have it. If not, keep hot water on boil for me. I have my own herbs and I drink at odd times. I like my food cooked plain. Leave the fancy sauces for those in your taproom. A tub of hot water now, I would be rid of the trail dust. Tell your stable hands that my packhorse may be cared for, but my stallion is not to be touched. Curiosity will get them killed and I will not pay gold to the family of a stupid child. We understand each other innkeeper?”

“Perfectly, absolutely sir. I will give the orders at once. Come along everyone. There is much to get done, and other quest to see too. Come along, come along. Oh

sir, my name is Milty. Call on me whatever you need.”

He bowed and moved his sweaty bulk from the room. Raven opened the window wide to air the room before going down the stairs to tend Chi and the packhorse.

Raven walked the animals around the building to the barn. The innkeeper was already there yelling at the stable boys about his horse. All eyes bugged as they got a close look at the prancing war stallion.

The mercenary growled softly into one pricked ear.

“Stop making a spectacle of yourself, you conceited ass. I do not need to peel some stupid boy off the bottom of your horseshoe in the morning.”

Chi snorted and arched his neck, stepping higher, tail waving like a banner behind him. Suddenly his long neck snaked out and those talon sharp teeth snapped together. Everyone jumped in shock.

“You have been warned. He is trained for the battlefield. Don’t go near him.”

With that Raven led his animals into the barn. He unloaded the pack animal and gave her over to one of the stable hands. Then he went to the back of the barn, guiding Chi into an empty stall. Chi nibbled at Raven’s hair and pulled on his leather shirt during the removal of his saddle and the necessary rubdown. The mercenary ignored him, too tired to appreciate the animal’s joy at being out of the cold rainy weather. He did chuckle, however, when Chi’s ears lay flat discovering his trough was to be filled with fresh oats instead of meat.

“I will feed you in the morning horse. I am too tired to deal with a nosy landlord this night.” He was pushed into the side of the stall for his negligence and so removed himself rather quickly.

“Don’t take your bad mood out on anyone I must bury

in the morning Chi.”

He noted the stable hands watching with some trepidation and knew he would sleep without worry. Raven hung his weapon's bag across his shoulders, picked up his travel bags and hauled the awkward load through the back door of the inn. As he suspected there were stairs to the left and right leading to the upper floors. Servants ran up and down, in and out of the kitchen, shifting around him like fish in a pond. The last of the servants were struggling up the two flights with buckets of water, possibly for him. Raven shivered at the thought of settling into hot soapy water. He walked in and put his bags on the bed.

On a low table near the fireplace was a cloth-covered tray. A kettle sat on a metal plate near the fire, steam rising from the spout. A chair with a high back had been placed before the flames. The warrior smiled to think of the landlord snatching it from the first floor rooms to grace a land less mercenary's dwelling. Raven was glad he hoarded the last fee. He could present himself well rested and there were enough silvers left to buy him new shirts and possibly new boots. A prosperous appearance would impress the uninitiated before tales of battles won.

The last of the servants bowed out of the room, so Raven barred the door. He stripped down and put his sweaty leathers and smelly cloak in the bag for that purpose. In the morning the cloak would be washed and he would clean and oil his leathers. From one pouch Raven sprinkled crushed green leaves over the steaming bath water. After a time, the smell of eucalyptus filled the room. Breathing deeply, the herbs eased the tightness in his chest. Illness dare not take hold when a job was at stake. He put a chunk of hard milled soap and a clean rag

on the floor by the tub. Then filled his tankard with herbs from another pouch and poured the hot water over them leaving it to steep.

The platter on the table had thick slices of warm bread spread with, from the smell of it, goat cheese and a bowl of venison stew. He sat down immediately to eat, wiping up the last of the gravy with the bread. Drank the hot tea and finally relaxed.

Raven lowered his body into the tub and sighed with relief. Too tired to soak without falling asleep, he washed his hair and soaped the grime of his journey away. He rinsed with the two buckets left next to the tub and dried off with the bath sheets left by the servants. For a fighter, used to bathing in cold streams, this was luxury indeed.

Hair drying and braided once more, Raven stowed his gear under the bed, except for a short sword that looked like a big dagger in his large hands. It would lie next to him in bed. He blew out the candles, leaving his window partially open and the curtains pulled back. Satisfied with his precautions, Raven crawled into bed and sank gratefully into plump pillows and clean bedding.

Light filled the room before he woke. He pulled the bar from the door and went about the business of dressing for the day. Almost immediately the door opened and men began to empty the tub of the dirty water. Once empty they would take the tub down and wash it out. He congratulated himself once again that frugality was such a part of his life. Too many of his ilk drank and whored all their earnings away. They would not be eating well or present themselves clean and correctly attired.

He paid but scant attention to the servants once he was aware they posed no threat to him. But they were taking in as much as they could for gossip later. The tavern girls

would love to know more about the big warrior that had pushed his way into Milty's Tavern and Beds. Like most they had known, his muscled body was covered with scars. One vicious burn marked his back from shoulder to buttocks. When he turned to watch another arrival deliver his breakfast, they noted he was not small in the place that mattered to wenches, but a ring of what appeared to be gold pierced it and his nipples!

Raven cradled his staff and balls into an odd quilted pouch and secured it by thin leather straps across his hips. He sat on the bed to pull on heavy stockings, wool breeches and boots. The tub was dragged from the room as he sat down to eat.

The landlord could be commended. He knew how to feed a hungry man. A half loaf of bread, a pot each of butter and honey, and hot porridge laced with nuts had been delivered. A metal platter held thick slices of ham, four boiled eggs and a serving of wild greens. He ate heartily washing it all down with another tankard of tea.

He finished dressing, putting on a thick wool shirt, his hunting knife and buckskin coat. He sat the tray outside the door and walked down the back stairs to the kitchen. Waving the cook over, he asked the woman if it was possible to purchase any fresh meat in town. She told him hunters came to the market during the winter. They went out everyday now because so many people had come to town. She gave him directions and he thanked her and went to the barn.

Chi stood with his head hanging over the stall door staring in Raven's direction. His black lips were drawn back, odd white fangs exposed and glistening with saliva drooling onto the floor. The hair on the mercenary's body stood up. He could only stare back. It took more than a

moment to shake off the instinctive fear that gripped him. Chi could still scare him and he hated that fact.

“Stop glaring at me you devil. If my life is so bad, go back to the plains.”

He physically shook off the shiver that raced down his spine.

“All right, I said I would get meat this morning and I will.”

Chi jerked his head back, and then trotted the length of the barn. He butted Raven gently, nuzzling his neck chest and belly. Chi was, maybe, a little contrite. Raven shook his head, caressed the soft muzzle and scratched behind the horse's ears. Chi's forked tongue slipped around his wrists and flickered about catching his scent. The mercenary stepped closer and wrapped his arms around Chi's neck. For a time, they communed together in silence, the horse supporting his weight.

Raven did not understand the connection. He sometimes wondered if he felt anything at all. But for an undetermined moment he was just not “here” when horse and rider made good morning. He would have gladly avoided this morning's appraisal, however. As surely as the sun came up Chi would never hurt him, but then Chi was and was not what he appeared. Like a well-trained warrior, the horse kept him on alert. Life had taught Raven much, a friend today could be stabbing you tomorrow. What ability to trust remained to the man centered on his steed. Chi instructed him as well as protected.

“Come along. The cook says there is a market off the high road. If the meat is not fresh kill we will go hunting together.”

Chi danced away, impatient to get moving. Raven left by the wagon gate, propped open to allow vendors

to bring in fresh supplies. The horse paced him, eyes surveying his surroundings. Cooks and helpers were coming and going, some with wagons of fresh goods for the inns and taverns. Raven picked up his pace. He ducked into a side road and followed it until he came to a field separated from the buildings by a low wall. It was nothing to hop over. The hunters were here, sharing the wide grassy lot with the tents of itinerant merchants and a few farmers. Chi would choose and Raven would buy whatever he wanted.

The hunters were cleaning the site after a morning of butchering. They were surprised by the big man and horse appearing among them. Quickly enough they realized he was actually there to buy. Chi sniffed and nudged deer, mountain goat and even bear. His actions garnered more than a few comments. Raven was beginning to think they would have to hunt themselves, when another hunter rode in, animals still strapped to his pack horses. Some of the men heckled him for his late arrival. Chi immediately turned to follow him. The hunter looked over his shoulder at the pair and scowled. He stepped from the saddle and turned ready to fight if need be.

“Wha ya want. I ha wor ta da.”

Raven frowned in return and growled.

“I came to buy meat. What else would I be doing here?”

“Humph. It loo lake na merchant.”

“What I am is no concern of yours. I have silver. You are late and money has already been missed. Do I buy or take my money someplace else?”

“Na dress ye. Ha ta wa.”

Raven looked to Chi. The horse was tugging at one of the carcasses.

“How much for that buck, now.”

“I ga gol fa buck.”

Raven laughed.

“By the time any cooks come back your meat will not be worth ten coppers. Sell me the buck. Two silvers and you don’t even have to dress it.”

“Sa silva loo silva.”

Raven slipped the silver coins from his pouch and tossed them in the air. A dirty bloodied hand caught them. He turned away to help Chi pull off the carcass.

“Whoa tha. I ga it, sta has slabber on evathi!”

Raven stopped the man’s advance with a big hand smacked against his chest.

“I will cut it down. You stay away from my horse.”

The man wanted to complain further, but the irritated squint from those hard eyes stopped him cold. He watched closely, however, making sure they did not take what was not paid for. Raven cut the rawhide tying the legs together and heaved the carcass over Chi’s back.

“Go beast and eat in private. I have clothes to buy.”

The horse snorted and walked away from the hunters toward a distant stand of trees. Raven rarely watched Chi consume his kills. It was enough to see what he did to enemies in battle. After a meal there was no more than skin, skull and hipbones left. Pretty much all activity stopped when the men realized the horse was leaving and Raven was walking back to the center of the market.

Signs to ward off evil fluttered from one hand to another. Speculation would be all over town by the time torches were lit for the night. A Thanatu warrior and his stallion had come to Virgilia.

