

# STEVEN BRUST

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# DRAGON



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*When all is in harmony the army can withstand natural attacks and those that appear to be supernatural.*

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

## **1—Memory Is Like a Watchacallit**

No shit, there I was ...

We'd been cut up so many ways and so many times we hardly had a skirmish line, and the enemy kept getting reinforced. I, like the rest of the outfit, was exhausted and terrified from swords buzzing past my ear and various sorts of sorceries going "whoosh" over my head, or maybe it was the other way around; and there were dead people moaning and writhing on the ground, and wounded people lying still, and that was almost certainly the other way around, but I'm giving it to you as I remember it, though I know my memory sometimes plays tricks on me.

More on that in a second.

First, I have to ask you to excuse me for starting in the middle, but that's more or less where it starts.

So there I was, in a full-scale battle; that is, in a place where no self-respecting assassin ought to be. Worse, in a full-scale battle with the keen sense that I was on the losing side, at least in this part of the engagement. I stood on Dorian's Hill, with the Wall about two hundred yards behind me, and the Tomb (which is not a tomb, and never was, and ought not to be called that) about a quarter of a mile to my left. I wanted to teleport out, or at least run, but I couldn't because, well, I just couldn't. I had a sword, and I carried enough other weaponry to outfit half of Cropper Company (my unit, hurrah hurrah). In front of us was The Enemy, getting closer with each step, and

looking like this time they meant to stay. There were so many of them, and all I could think of was, "If they want this damned hill so badly, let them have it," but I knew that was wrong, and certainly my messmates would have argued with the sentiment; we'd worked hard enough to take it away from them the first time. (And we had failed. So why did we now occupy the hill? I don't know; they don't explain these things to foot soldiers.)

Then, as if that wasn't bad enough, I heard the rip of the juice-drum playing "Time To Be Alive," which meant to form up for a charge. I guessed the Captain had decided we weren't strong enough to defend, or else he wanted to go out in a blaze of glory. I don't know: it seemed to me that if you already had the high ground, why waste it by charging? I wanted to call him an idiot but I knew he wasn't.

I relaxed my grip on my sword and took the requisite Three Deep Breaths as he positioned himself in front of us. I found myself right next to Dunn, the alternate bannerman, which put my life expectancy at just marginally above his, and his was just about the same as the bannerman, and *hers* was mathematically almost indistinguishable from zero. Well, they had both wanted the job; now they had it.

The Captain gave no speeches this time; I guess he'd said everything he had to say over the last couple of days. He gave the signal that started us moving forward.

As before, I discovered that I was moving, although I don't remember ever deciding to; I wondered, as I had several times before, if there was some sort of subtle magic involved, but I don't think so. I recall that I really, really, *really* wanted to bolt, but I still couldn't, so of course I did the only thing I could: I started praying. It was far too late for that, however, and nothing happened. Or maybe something did; I'm not sure. Oh yeah, I was going to talk about memory. Maybe memory is where it starts. I don't know where it starts; that's part of why I'm doing this, hoping to put it together and make some kind of sense out of the whole thing. Of course, the gold ingots are a bigger part of why I'm doing this. Where was I? Right, memory.

I woke up one morning remembering something I'd forgotten the day before. I'd been having a one-sided conversation with a metal box, much as I'm doing now, in exchange for a good sum of raw gold and various useful oddities and trinkets, and I'd felt like I'd fulfilled my part of the bargain, but then, the morning after I finished, I realized what I'd forgotten, and my first thought was that someone had been playing with my memories. My second thought was that, if this were true, I was going to hurt someone. My third thought was to consider, if someone *was* repressing my memories, who that someone had to be. This was chilling, and it brought me fully awake, which led to one of those irritating sessions of "How much was a dream?" After several minutes I had it sorted out in my head so I got up.

Loiosh, my familiar, was just stirring. He gave his bat-like wings one lazy flap, hissed at me sleepily, and said, "*How 'bout something to eat?*" into my mind.

I said, "*Do you remember Deathgate Falls?*"

"*No. I'm senile. Of course I remember—*"

"*As you approach the Falls, do you remember there being a large statue?*"

"*Sure, Boss. Where Morrolan performed that embarrassing ritual. What about it?*"

*"Nothing."* Right. The ritual. I had forgotten that, too. I hate having disturbing thoughts before breakfast. I hate having thoughts before breakfast.

*"Is it important, Boss?"*

*"Let it go, Loiosh."*

That was then, and it illustrates what a tricky thing memory is: I had forgotten something important that had happened just days before, yet now, more than three years later, I remember waking up and talking to Loiosh about it. Interesting, isn't it?

But here, I've left you, you odd, shiny contraption with presumed ears at both ends, confused about who and what I am, and generally what I'm on about. Okay. I'll let you stay confused a little longer, and if you don't trust me to clear everything up, then you can go hang. I've been paid.

I whipped up a quick omelet, ate it, and washed up, considering whether to ask someone about my odd memory lapse. I'd made two acquaintances recently who might know, but I felt loath to ask them; something about expressing weakness, I suppose. But it bothered me. I was still thinking about it when I finished donning my Jherereg colors (grey and black, if you're taking notes) and making sure my various weapons were in place; after which I stepped out onto the street I all but owned.

I don't usually travel with a bodyguard. For one thing, it would be hard to find anyone who could give me more warning of danger than Loiosh; for another, I'm not important enough to be a real threat to anyone; and for yet another, it's humiliating. I know that to some in the Organization the number of bodyguards is a status symbol, but to me they are only an irritation.

But I'm different. I wasn't born into the Organization. I wasn't even born into House Jherereg. In fact, I wasn't born a citizen; I'm human. They aren't. This is enough of a difference that it can explain all others.

So you can look around as I did. See the Teckla running around like the small rodents they are named for, doing things they think are important, selecting fruits at the fruit stands or pieces of fabric from the weavers, laying a bet with the local bookmaker, rushing to work in a garden or at a weaver's, and, directly or indirectly, feeding me. See the Chreotha or the Jhegaala, with titles of the nobility but lives of the bourgeois selling the fabric or the fruit or buying brain-drugs or trying to get a bargain from the local fence and, directly or indirectly, feeding me. And, rarest of all, see the nobles themselves, strutting about like Issola in spring, scattering pennies to the paupers, having servants buy select wines and the more exotic brain-drugs, and, directly or indirectly, feeding me.

It's surprising that I stay so thin.

None of them gave me any special regard as I strolled by for another day of extracting from them everything I could. I like it that way.

The walk from flat to office was short, yet it was enough time for me to get a feel for what was going on in the neighborhood; on that day there was nothing worth noting—not the least clue, as it were, of the events that had already been set in motion. I arrived, as I recall, early that day. The Jherereg operates all day, but the real action is mostly at night, so things get started correspondingly late; I rarely see my office before

noon. That day I arrived before my secretary, hung my cloak on the cloak-rack, set my rapier against the wall, and sat down at my desk to see what, if any, correspondence had arrived during the morning.

There was one item: a piece of expensive parchment sat in the middle of my desk; on it, in a neat, elegant hand, was written, "V. Taltos, Baronet." I picked it up and inspected the back, which showed a Dragonshead seal.

I set it down again and considered before opening it. I may have been a bit afraid of what it would say. No, I most certainly was afraid of what it would say. I picked it up and broke the seal before Loiosh could start on me.

Baronet—

It would give me great pleasure to see you again. It may also prove profitable for you. If you would like assistance in transportation, you may inquire of Baron Lokran e'Terics at the House of the Dragon. Arrive today between noon and the tenth hour, and I will take the time to see you at once.

I Remain, my dear sir,

Cordially

Morrolan e'Drien

P.S.: You expressed a preference for a formal invitation over our last method of asking for your help; I hope this meets with your approval—  
M.

I set the letter down again and thought about many things.

As always when dealing with Morrolan, I didn't quite know how to take him. He calls his home Castle Black, which is either pretentious to the point of being silly, or a just and reasonable statement of his power; take your pick. He was unusual—perhaps "unique" would be a better word—in that he was a Dragaeran, and a Dragonlord no less, who studied Eastern witchcraft, which either showed that he did not share his compatriots' attitude toward humans, or showed that he was so contemptuous of us that he could offhandedly learn our secret arts; take your pick. The "last method" he referred to had been offensive enough that we had almost killed each other over it, so this reference was either a nasty cut or a peace offering; take your pick.

However, it never occurred to me not to accept his invitation.

*"We're going to Castle Black, Loiosh."*

*"I can hardly wait, Boss. When?"*

I consulted the Imperial Orb through my psychic link. It was less than an hour before noon.

"Now," I told him.

I strapped my rapier back on, not terribly reassured by its weight hanging at my side and the scabbard's tapping against my leg. Melestav, my secretary, was just arriving. He seemed startled to see me. I said, "I have an errand. If you never see me

again, blame Morrolan of the House of the Dragon. See you."

I stepped back out onto the street—the first steps, as it were, that began the journey that led me toward war and death. I hired a cabriolet to cut down on the number of actual steps involved. I gave the runner no particular attention, but I tipped him well. This is probably significant of something.

The House of the Dragon faces the Imperial Palace, just a bit west of north, and is marked by a forty-foot-high marble likeness of Kieron the Conqueror holding his greatsword in one hand, its point off to the East; seeing it makes me tired. There is no discernible expression on Kieron's face, at least from below. There are (surprise surprise) seventeen steps up to the doors, which were standing open when I arrived, a bit footsore, just about noon.

When you enter the House of the Dragon, you are in the Great Hall, a vast, huge, booming, echoing place with murals on the walls depicting violence, skinny windows that don't let much light in, a marble floor, a single, very wide stairway planted in the middle of the Hall and running up out of sight, and many tiny hanging lamps way, way up on the ceiling where they do no good at all and probably require levitation to service; yet there is sufficient light to see the murals, begging the question of how they actually illuminate the place.

I didn't much care for it.

I hadn't been surrounded by so many Dragonlords since I was arrested after the death of my previous boss, and I didn't like this a lot more than I liked that. They were standing in groups and were all of them armed. They were talking quietly, I suppose, but the place echoed horribly so it seemed awash with noise. There was grey bunting draped here and there, which meant that someone had died. I stood there like an idiot for a long, long time—say half a minute—with Loiosh on my shoulder, and then noticed a pair of sentries, on either side the door—that is, either side of me—and observed that they were staring at me with decidedly unfriendly expressions. This made me feel much more comfortable, because I'd rather be hated than ignored.

I approached the man because the height of the woman would have put my eyes at breast-level and this didn't seem to be the right time for that. I put some jaunt into my step because Dragonlords, like many wild animals, can smell fear. He looked down at me (my eyes were level with his collar bone) and kept his eyes away from Loiosh; he probably thought I'd get too much satisfaction out of seeing him react to the Jherreg on my shoulder, and he was right. I said, "I seek Baron Lokran."

The Dragonlord swallowed, clenched his jaw, and said, "Who are you?"

I thought about making an issue of the question, but I didn't know the protocol and I didn't like the odds. "Vladimir Taltos of House Jherreg, on an errand for Lord Morrolan e'Drien." That should shut him up.

It did. "Up the stairs, straight back, last door on the left. Clap and enter."

I sketched a bow, resisting the temptation to make it over-elaborate.

*"What are you afraid of, Boss?"*

*"Shut up, Loiosh."*

The steps were set too high for my comfort, making it a challenge to climb casually



with, I assumed, the eyes of the two Dragonlords on my back. I managed as best I could. My footsteps echoed, and the stairway went on for much too long. When I finally reached the top I walked straight back to the end of a hallway longer than the building that houses my entire operation. It ended in a large door which I ignored; instead stopping at the one to my left, as directed. One clap and I entered.

Lokran turned; he had, apparently, been staring out the window. He was young, with bright eyes, and had a faded white scar above his brows—the scar obviously had some sort of sentimental value for him or he'd have had it removed. His hair was dark, straight, and brushed back in almost a Jherreg-cut. He had rings on four fingers of each hand, and the rings all had jewels in them. The room held four stuffed chairs, a sofa, and no desk; a plain grey banner hung above the window. Three or four short, black staves were leaning against the far wall, and a heavy sword in a black sheath stood next to them.

His eyes narrowed briefly when I entered, then he said, "Taltos?" pronouncing it correctly.

I bowed and said, "Lokran?"

He nodded. "Come a little closer."

I did.

He gestured casually in my direction, as if he were brushing away an insect, and my bowels twisted, and I was in the courtyard of Castle Black, standing, as far as I could tell, on thin air that felt like a hard surface, say flagstones, but looked like nothing was holding me up. Just like that. He could have bloody warned me.

I've given a lot of thought to the question of why teleports upset my stomach; why they seem to have that effect on all Easterners, but not on Dragaerans. In between teleports, I've often decided it is all in the imagination of the Easterner, but right after a teleport I've found that answer unsatisfying. The explanation that sprang to mind as I stood before Morrolan's castle, surrounded by his walls, towers, and guards, is that teleports also upset the Dragaeran stomach, but Dragaerans just won't admit it; how can having your innards flop around so violently that you can *feel* them sloshing *not* make you queasy? Could natural selection account for it? I don't buy it; I just don't think that nature had it in mind for people to get from one place to another without passing through the intervening area.

These thoughts, I should explain, were one way I occupied my mind while I gave my stomach time to settle down. Another way was to observe that the sentries in the towers were watching me, although they didn't seem especially surprised. Okay, so I was expected. Over one tower floated a single banner, all of grey.

Eventually I risked a look down. There were trees below me that looked like miniature bushes, and the two roads and one stream were lines of brown and blue respectively, meeting and crossing and running almost parallel to form a design that, if I tried, I could convince myself was a mark in some runic alphabet. Maybe it was a symbol that told the castle, "Don't fall down." That was a comforting thought.

I adjusted my cloak, ran a hand through my hair, and approached the double doors of Castle Black. They swung open as I approached, which I should have been



expecting, because they'd done the same thing last time. I cursed under my breath but kept a small smile on my lips and didn't break stride—there were Dragonlords watching.

I hadn't noticed it the last time, but one reason that it is so effective to see Lady Teldra appear when the doors open is that she is all you can see—the entryway is unlit, and except for her you might be entering the void that one imagines as the land of the dead. (The land of the dead, however, is not a void—it's worse. But never mind.)

"My Lord Taltos," said Teldra. "Thank you for gracing our home. The Lord awaits you. Please, enter and be welcome."

I felt welcome in spite of my more cynical side whispering, "Whatever."

I crossed the threshold. Lady Teldra did not offer to take my cloak this time. She guided me into the hall with all the paintings, through it, up the wide, curving stairway, and eventually to the library. It was big and full of stuffed chairs and thick books; three of the books, sitting just beyond the entrance, were massive jewel-encrusted objects each chained to a pedestal; I wondered but resolved not to ask. As I entered, Morrolan set a book down and stood up, giving me a small bow.

He opened his mouth, probably to make some sort of ironic courtesy, as a counterpoint to Teldra's sincere one, but I said, "Who died?" before he could get the words out. He shut his mouth, glanced at Loiosh, and nodded toward a chair next to his. I sat down.

He said, "Baritt."

I said, "Oh."

Morrolan seemed to want me to say something, so eventually I said, "You know, the first time I met him I had the feeling he wouldn't be—"

"Do not joke about it, Vlad."

"All right. What do you want me to say? I didn't get the impression he was a friend of yours."

"He wasn't."

"Well?"

Lady Teldra appeared with refreshment—a white wine that would have been too sweet except that it was served over chunks of ice. I sipped it to be polite the first time, and then discovered I liked it. The Issola glided from the room. There was no table on which to set the goblet down, but the chair had wide, flat arms. Very convenient.

"Well?" I repeated.

"In the second place," said Morrolan, "he was an important man. And in the first place—"

"He was a Dragon," I concluded. "Yeah, I know."

Morrolan nodded. I drank some more wine. The sensation of cold helps reduce the sensation of sweetness. I bet you didn't know that.

"So, what happened to the poor bastard?"

Morrolan started to answer, then paused, then said, "It is unimportant."

"All right," I agreed. "It is unimportant to me, in any case." I had met Baritt, or, more properly, his shade, in the Paths of the Dead. He had taken an instant dislike to Morrolan because Morrolan had the bad taste to be traveling with me, which should give you an idea of how Baritt and I had hit it off.

I continued, "I assume it isn't a request for sympathy that led to your invitation."

"You are correct."

"Well?"

He turned his head to the side and looked at me quizzically. "What is it you gave me, Vlad?"

I laughed. "Is that it? Is that what this is all about?"

"Actually, no. I'm just curious."

"Oh. Well, remain curious." I had, in fact, injected him with the blood of a goddess for reasons too complicated to explain now, and, at the time, I was in no condition to explain anything.

"As you wish. Baritt, as I say, died. In going through his possessions—"

"What? Already? He can't have been brought to Death-gate yet."

"And—?"

"Well, that seems awful quick for you long-lived types."

"There are reasons."

"You're just full of information, aren't you?"

"Were I to tell you matters pertaining to the internal politics of the House of the Dragon I should only weary you. And I should then have to kill you for knowing. So my thought was not to trouble you with such information."

"A good thought," I said.

Loiosh shifted on my shoulder, evidently getting restless. "As I was saying, in going through his possessions, certain items were discovered."

He stopped. I waited. He resumed.

"He had a large collection of Morganti weapons. A *large* collection. Hundreds of them."

I repressed a shiver. "I suppose the reason he had them is none of my business, too."

"That is correct. And, in any case, I don't know."

"Well then, what about them?"

"I spent a good portion of yesterday inspecting them. I have an interest in such things."

"Figures."

His eyes narrowed for a moment, then he evidently decided to ignore it. "Such weapons," he went on, "represent power. Some covet power, some are threatened by others coveting power."

"Which are you?"

"The former."