

**Chapter 1:**  
***The Watcher in the Night***

*My name is Desa Kincaid.*

Lightning flashed in the midnight sky, flashed but brought no rain. A fierce wind swept across the plains, flattening the stalks of tall grass. It swept into the city of New Kent, a burgeoning metropolis of hundreds of flat-roofed brick buildings. The wind rose high into the air, swirling above the River Eldrich, which wove a winding path through middle of town. It blew downward into the south end of the city, onto a rooftop, where it caressed the face of tiny woman.

She closed her eyes and lowered her head, frowning to herself. Desa Kincaid stood at barely more than five feet tall but she was all wiry muscle from head to toe. Her skin was fair in the silver moonlight. Her face was pretty in a gamine sort of way. She had waxed her hair into hundreds of little pixie spikes that stood out like the spines on a hedgehog's back. Tonight, she wore black, trousers, shirt and a cloak that reached down to the backs of her knees. She looked up to the building across the way.

It was time to begin.

Drawing up the hood of her cloak, she hid her face in the darkness. She went down on one knee, bowed her head for a moment, marshaling her power. Her every nerve seemed to crackle with an energy that pulsed through her. She rose.

Desa ran across the rooftop to ledge. She leaped, sailing across the cobblestone street below. Pivoting in midair, she turned her body straight as an arrow, stretching her arms out before her, her feet out behind. She descended to the building across the street, a small townhouse. Desa hit the roof and curled into a ball, rolling across its surface in a series of somersaults.

She came to a halt and rose up onto one knee.

Carefully, she stood, frowning down at her own feet. She slinked into the middle of the rooftop, where she found a skylight, the moonlight filtering down through its window. Desa peered inside. She could make out an ornate desk and a fine Veridian rug. The moonlight would have been insufficient for anyone else but, for her eyes, it served nicely.

Desa drew aside her cloak, revealing two daggers sheathed upon her belt. She closed her fist upon one of them and drew it slowly from its sheath. Her daggers were unique in that the crossguard was shaped like the sword-catching prongs of a sai, but the shaft retained the sharp edges of a knife. *They're called **vrekadi**: an assassin's weapon.*

She placed the tip of her blade against the glass of the window pane and slowly began to cut a square hole. She traced along the outline of the skylight, up, across, down and across again. The window fell inward and shattered on the floor with a crashing sound.

*That's all right, Desa thought. This job was meant to be high-profile.*

She hopped through the hole and descended into the study, landing crouched upon the fine Veridian rug. Desa rose and put her back to the desk, facing the room's entrance. She stood there like a shadow, her hood pulled up, obscuring her face. She looked very much like a phantom out of children's tales. Sheathing the *vrekadi*, Desa waited. *They'll be coming any moment.*

*The aristocracy has security for dealing with people like me.*

The door to the study slammed open. "It was probably a clumsy servant knocking over a vase." she heard one of the guards say. Two men stepped side by side into the room, one carrying an oil lantern that he had lit. They were both dressed in blue, the colour Benjamin Hoffer's household servants. They stopped short when they caught sight of Desa.

Simultaneously, each man reached for the holster on his hip, drawing out a six-shooter revolver. They both raised their arms, pointing their guns at Desa, drawing back the hammer's and curling their fingers around the triggers.

*Yeah, like that'll stop me...*

Desa concentrated, drawing on the power within her. Her senses seemed to sharpen beyond reasoning. The room felt brighter. The air seemed to thicken as if it was made of mortar. Time slowed and both men stood perfectly still before her, their arms outstretched, their eyes narrowed. Slowly, they squeezed the triggers.

*CRAAA-CRAAAAAACK!*

Both revolvers flashed, fountaining twin puffs of smoke. Bullets shot out of their barrels, spiraling

through the air as they inched their way toward Desa.

She turned sideways and dropped into a cartwheel, tumbling across the carpet toward the two men. When she was upside-down, her feet in the air, the bullets passed her on either side, sailing harmlessly away. She came out of her cartwheel and rose into a standing position.

Desa drew throwing knives from sheaths on her belts.

Her arms flung outward, the knives flying from her fingertips. They sailed side by side across the room, a knife taking the throat of each officer. The guards choked and dropped to their knees as time resumed its normal flow. They reached up, trying to clutch their throats, trying to gulp more air. One man's eyes were as big as teacups as he realized he was dying.

Desa drew herself up, her cloak hanging ominously behind her. She looked at them from the darkness of her hood, her face completely hidden. "Yes, I'm real," she growled, flowing toward them with an inhuman grace. "You should have trained more rigorously. You might have actually injured me." She walked between the dying men, out the open door and into the hallway.

*I love it when they wiggle,* Benjamin Hoffer thought.

He stared down at the girl who occupied his bed, his hands clamped around each of her wrists. Betsy Wingfield winced and clenched her teeth. She thrashed about like a fish out of water, trying to escape his grip. "Please, Mr Hoffer," she gasped, scrunching her eyes tight. "Let me go! Please! My da will give me a caning if he thinks I've compromised my virtue!"

Benjamin smiled. He was a tall man but still portly for his height. His face had a bit of fat on it. His eyes were a deep brown. Rich, auburn hair crowned his head, parted to one side in aristocratic fashion. "No, my dear," he whispered, his smile widening. "I'm afraid you don't understand. It won't be *you* who compromises your virtue."

She winced again and arched her back, trying to escape. "Please, sir!" she screamed. "I'm only twelve!"

*All the better,* thought Benjamin. *I love it when they're young.*

He clawed at her shift, tearing it open and exposing her breasts. "Now, Betsy," he chided. "You should think of this as a civic duty." Benjamin smiled, closing his eyes and shaking his head. "After all, I *am* a Member of Parliament. Wouldn't you like to serve your country?" He lunged forward and licked up the side of her neck, causing the girl to squirm.

"The Watcher in the Night will punish you!" she hissed.

Her fingers curled. She dug her fingernails into his back and clawed him, gasping and thrashing. Betsy's knee came up and struck him in the stomach.

Benjamin winced, gritting his teeth. "Foolish girl!" he cried, throwing his weight down atop her, pinning her to bed. "You proles and your misguided belief in your old legends. There is no Night Shadow in this city." He snorted and his whole body shook with laughter. "I'd be surprised if their order still exists. We've only been hunting them for the last millennium!"

Betsy squinted and squealed.

Suddenly, there was a sound like glass shattering.

Benjamin's eyes flared. He sat up straight on the bed, looked over his left shoulder to the bedroom door. "What's going on out there!" he shouted, his eyes narrowing. Scowling down into his own lap, he pulled his dressing gown tighter. "Damn the help," Benjamin muttered. "My kingdom for a decent night of privacy. Can't anyone do anything right around here?"

There came a soft knocking at the door.

A voice spoke from outside his room. "The noise seems to have come from the study, sir," one of his guards said. "Someone must have knocked something over. No need to trouble yourself."

Benjamin nodded curtly. He turned his attention back to Betsy.

She thrashed beneath him but he grabbed hold of her shift and continued disrobing her. Betsy was the daughter of one of his household maids. She had caught his attention the instant he had first seen her. On that day, several months ago, he knew he wanted to bed her. It hadn't been hard to achieve: give the girl a job in the kitchens, ask her to stay late one night preparing his favourite meal, have her deliver it to his chambers... A greedy smile grew on his face.

Benjamin lowered his lips to her exposed flesh.

*Crack! Crack!*

The sound of gunfire made him sit up straight again. His eyes practically popped out of his skull. His head whipped around and he stared at the door. "What's happening?" he muttered, placing a hand over

his mouth.

Betsy smiled up at him triumphantly. "The Watcher his coming."

He looked down at her, his eyes narrowed. "Shut up, girl!" Benjamin shouted. Raising his hand, he slapped her across the face, a blow that made her wince and turn her head. He hopped off the bed and stood, pulling his dressing gown tight. Looking down at his feet, he frowned. "I won't be made a coward in my own house."

He spun around, facing the foot of the bed. The door was in the wall to his right. He walked to it just in time to see it swing open. A shadow flowed into his room. In the flickering light of the oil lamp, she looked very much like a ghost. A hood obscured her face. But she was tiny! *Surely, this small thing isn't of any danger to me*, Benjamin thought.

He put himself in front of her. His hand lashed out and seized her shirt.

Benjamin leaned in close, brown eyes flaring. "You've made a terminal error."

She seized his wrist in one of her hands, twisted his arm and pain raced through his body. Stepping back, the woman snap-kicked.

Her foot stuck Benjamin in the chest.

He was lifted off his feet and flew backwards across the room. His spine hit the bedroom wall and he winced as it did so. Benjamin fell forward, onto his face.

Desa frowned down at him. She looked over her shoulder at the girl in the bed. "You were not the first of his victims," she said. "Their prayers have been answered and now so have yours." She drew aside her cloak, revealing the *vrekadi*. She drew one out of its sheath. Desa flowed toward him like the spectre of death itself.

Benjamin Hoffer looked up as she drew near.

Desa knelt down before him, slashed her blade across his throat. She frowned as blood spattered against her expensive, black clothing. Rising, she turned faced the foot of his bed. She angled her head up so that just a little light penetrated her hood, accenting her face. "Come," she said to the girl. "We have to get you out of here."

The girl trembled. "There'll be other guards."

Desa's lips curled upward. "I can deal with them." She walked forward, keeping her eyes on the young woman. "Besides, we won't be going down through the house." Desa glanced up at the ceiling. "We'll be going up..."