



CHRONICLES OF THE DEMON LORD

EDITED BY
JAMES LOWDER AND ROBERT J. SCHWALB

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Introduction

For much of the last century, J. R. R. Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings* provided the default template for the fantasy adventure tale: An unlikely group of heroes takes up an epic quest involving some heretofore presumed lost artifact of incredible power. The plucky band treks across a landscape dotted with feudal kingdoms, one step ahead of an evil power's minions. (You can tell they're evil minions by their fangs and warty hides and the general bad sportsmanship they display.) Against all odds and despite the requisite clashes of personality within the troupe itself, the heroes succeed in righting the cosmic balance—or at least in rescuing the princess and putting the proper king back on his throne.

In these sorts of fantasy stories, the message is consolatory. That is, they offer comfort. Beneath all the fighting and the fleeting chaos, there's an order to things and that order can be restored. Good can triumph in the end so long as the heroes embody the correct virtues. The important answers to everything have been discovered; they all rest in the past, if you know what arcane tome to consult or obscure ruins to explore. In the end, everything will be made right again.

Readers looking for that sort of reassuring message from their fantasy fiction won't find it here.

Introduction

A very different strain of fantasy storytelling inspired Rob Schwalb in the creation of the marvelous *Shadow of the Demon Lord* roleplaying game. The dark fantasy tradition that includes *Shadow* hearkens back to writers such as Mervyn Peake, Clark Ashton Smith, and Michael Moorcock, rather than C. S. Lewis or Tolkien. You can see it on display in the *Song of Ice and Fire* novels and *Game of Thrones* HBO series. Here, the heroes and the villains are much more difficult to tell apart, and the moral challenges they confront are made all but impossible by a complicated universe. Returning a monarch to his throne won't banish the doom hanging over the world. In *Shadow*, that doom is all but certain, leaving the protagonists to decide how to face it: stand tall in futile, but noble defiance or join in the mayhem and madness before the void swallows everyone and everything?

For the tales collected here, Rob reached out to a half-dozen authors known for their work with epic fantasy. He threw open the RPG's setting, the world of Urth, for exploration. Richard Lee Byers took him up on that aspect of the challenge and set his story in Caecras. (Given the setting's richness, there are more stories or even a novel or two to be developed using Urth as a backdrop, perhaps by Mr. Schwalb himself.) Rob was also interested in doing the unpredictable, so he gave the authors the option of borrowing more limited aspects of the setting, like the Underworld details utilized by Erin M. Evans in

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"Shadows in the Void," or of writing about the cosmic menace's impact on a fantasy world entirely of their own devising. Those stories honor the theme of *Shadow of the Demon Lord* and offer glimpses into other corners of the multiverse threatened by the Destroyer of Worlds.

Look up. No, you aren't mistaken. The dark is spreading, and the stars overhead are going out one by one. They won't be coming back.

Welcome to the end.

What do you do now? 🐉

—James Lowder
November 2016



Elizabeth Bear

Elizabeth Bear was born on the same day as Frodo and Bilbo Baggins, but in a different year. She is the Hugo, Sturgeon, Locus, and Campbell Award-winning author of twenty-nine novels (the most recent is *Karen Memory*, a Weird West adventure from Tor) and over a hundred short stories. She lives in Massachusetts with her partner, writer Scott Lynch.

Bear notes: "This story was inspired in part by the works of Fritz Leiber, and heavily influenced by the idea of a malevolent force working across time, space, and reality to create chaos and heartbreak. As a long-time gamer myself, I wanted to write something that could even serve as a story seed for a campaign, complete with a few interesting potential NPCs."

Storm Petrel

I'm an atheist. By which I mean, I spend most of my time dodging introductions to gods.

By introductions, I mean the involuntary kind, usually performed through the sacred intermediary of a pointed metal object—or a heavy one moving at a fair velocity. And that's various and sundry gods, not just the one god. Seeing as how I haven't got one of my own, I have to rely on not meeting other people's. Being, as I said, an atheist and all.

So I definitely wasn't praying even slightly as I dropped half my bodylength and dangled—unintentionally inverted—from a single remaining cord of spidersilk seventeen storeys above the rocky midnight streets of Sania Tenabrys. The frayed ends of the primary cord untwisted with the sort of calculated laziness one generally prefers to see in an undressing lover. This was a hell of a lot less likely to get me hot.

Slanting rays of sun flashed across my eyes, thick and coppery, briefly dazzling. To the west, last light tumbled an orgy of mountainous clouds, the horizon stretching to a thin band of rose-gold behind a sea of marching chop. The colors were slate, twilight, bruises, blush, and flame. The first sparks of night kindled overhead in an indigo bowl. I turned beneath one of the most beautiful skies of my life. Even I, Jany's Cordero, sometimes called the Storm Petrel (largely because so few people know my name), was having a hard time enjoying it, because I was busy wondering if it might also be the last sky of my life.

A bag of rubies clinked at my belt. Precious stones

make an odd clattering when they rub up against one another in a sack. Or maybe it's not that odd: they are, after all, just rocks.

Rocks that people will steal and fuck and murder for.

That wasn't the sound that was making me nervous, though. The clinking of a ruby-glass flask in a silver chain-net holder against my dagger's guard: that was giving me heartburn.

Or maybe the heartburn was from being suspended upside down. It'll do funny things to a lass, and your system isn't as robust at thirty-seven as it is at seventeen. Perhaps it was time I admitted that I was getting damned old for a cat burglar. If I was ever privileged to get any older, that was.

I should have slung the damned flask someplace safer, and I should have padded it, and I know that. In my defense, I had been in a hurry, and the flask was an impulse steal, and above all I hadn't planned on being inverted this evening. Still, as Grampa used to say, it isn't the hardships you plan for that cause trouble in the long run. It's the ones that get up on your blind side and under your guard without you spotting them.

Also, I knew perfectly well that it was a bad idea ever to steal something you hadn't come in planning on taking home with you. Much worse than impulse purchases at the market, which can only bankrupt you. But I was, after all, Janys Cordero, the Storm Petrel. You don't wind up with a reputation like mine if you're the sort of person who finds it easy to pass up the opportunity to enhance it by stealing a legendary object.

Such as a blown-glass flask, stained crimson by infusing it with gold, reputed to be the source of the powers of the Cloister of the Inchoate Beast (whose tower I was presently engaged—I hoped—in escaping). And it had been such an excellent, unplanned opportunity: the priest-warrior guards no better than they should have been, and obviously enjoying each other's company. People do get complacent about security when nobody tests it for a good long time.

A slick sawing sound floated down from the top of the tower I swung and banged against. Somebody with a sharp knife was working on my other line. It was good silk, with a wire core against just such an eventuality, but that hadn't saved the first one. And it wasn't going to save the backup for long.

Fortunately, the loot wasn't the only thing on my harness belt. Self-rescue would have been easier if I'd been upright instead of indisposed, but I didn't have time to struggle into a more traditional and dignified orientation. With my right hand, I scrabbled at my belt until I located an odd-shaped hexagon of metal with a hole drilled through the middle and a cured leather strap leashed to it. With my left hand, I grabbed for the masoned stone blurring before my eyes. My gloves were snipped off at the tip, so I could feel what I touched. I felt a little too much now: my fingertips scoured on roughness, skin tearing as I hooked a sharp edge with the middle and third fingers. A crack, and cracked mortar, too. I guess that's only to be expected of a four-hundred-year-old tower inhabited by the priests of entropy.

Maybe their religion was why they were so bad at posting a guard.

I swung hard against the outstretched arm, the crooked fingertips, and yanked my shoulder hard enough that I whimpered.

My grip slipped in blood, but it held.

Upside down and panting, I pulled myself back parallel with the wall and jammed the hexagonal nut into the crack between stones. It went in tight—I could have used a smaller one, but there was no time to be picky—and as it did I turned it sideways hard, so it wedged. I ran my hand back along the leather strap toward my harness belt.

I felt the weak spot in the leather just as the rope above me parted and I began to fall.

I clutched convulsively at the stone and at the leather. I didn't drop far before my weight hit the strap, but it was far enough. The weakened leather snapped under my hand. The frayed section ripped with such force it stung my palm through the glove. The sensation of my weight falling on my shoulder was so sudden and so intense it wasn't even really pain. I still don't know how I kept my grip on the wall *and* on the end of the strap that was attached to the nut, especially when I twisted so my feet were down and my head was up again, and my arm was turned right over.

Dangling there, gasping in pain and shock, my fingers slipping in blood, what I felt most was outrage. That strap had been fine—had been in perfect condition—when I put the harness on and checked my equipment. How could it possibly be damaged enough to snap now, not even an hour later?

The outrage didn't rule me long. I had work to do if I wanted to avoid dying, and that seriously focused

my attention. I hauled on the strap—pulling on your protection is the sort of thing you'll never live down among the Dishonorable Sisterhood of Footpads and Burglars, but this was a special circumstance, and anyway I'm nice and I know better—and got a little more purchase with my slipping fingers, and a toehold on the edge of one of the rough-cut blocks. Enough that I could let *go* of the strap without dying and get my other hand on the stone.

That slanted sunlight fell across the rock, making the tiniest details of edge and chisel-scar look like holds you could sink an entire hand into. Mica sparkled in the red-gray granite—the famous rosy towers of Sania Tenabrys. I poked at three miniscule ledges before I found one that offered a good enough grip that I breathed a sigh of relief.

That was when they started dropping rocks on me from above.

I cursed—in the names of several of the Shadow Gods this time. As an atheist, I don't worship any god in particular, so I try to spread my blasphemy around, and "Zahar's purple dick!" is particularly satisfying, so I try to reserve it for special occasions. I was just reaching for the lip of a hopelessly shuttered window a little to the left of me, thinking that if I could get under the ledge then it would be shelter of a sort, when the shutters swung wide. They missed knocking me off the wall by a hands-breadth.

A little man, round-faced and sweating on shiny red cheeks, poked his head out and said, "Storm Petrel. Come with me if you don't want to die tonight."

It was a compelling offer, but he was wearing the

layered and embroidered robes of the Cloister of the Inchoate Beast—whose temple, I believe I mentioned, I was currently trying to escape—and so I was necessarily a little bit cautious about accepting it at face value. Grunting with effort as I pulled myself closer in to the tower's face, I answered, "Give me one good reason why I should trust you."

He rubbed a hand across his bald pate, then, despite the chill of the evening, shook droplets of sweat away. "I know a way out."

My head's full of razors on my best day and there are reasons why I work alone. This was all too fucking tidy and convenient by half. Then there was the coincidence of my harness strap. Which only seemed like a coincidence until I remembered that the people throwing rocks at me were also priests of entropy. And demons.

A fist-sized rock thumped off my shoulder. Fortunately, it had already spent most of its force bouncing against the wall, so I managed to hold on. I looked the little man in the eye and said calmly, "Show me."

He stuck a hand out the window. I stared at it dubiously. It was crusted with rings and seemed soft, not strong—and he was already puffing with exertion. Then the last red light of the sun that had been sliding up the Cloister tower vanished into air and I was bathed in blue twilight and sudden cool.

I slapped my palm into his palm and was surprised at the ease with which he pulled me inside.

I didn't go through the window with my customary grace, it's true. But I managed to break my fall and not my face—or the flask. In the process I landed

on my left arm hard enough that it jolted itself back into place.

That hurt. Exceptionally.

I lay on the rushes on my back, panting heavily, trying not to scream again, cradling my left arm protectively with my right. The rushes were slimy and stank. There were some gnawed chicken bones beside my face, fresh enough that the rats hadn't gotten them but not so fresh that they smelled exactly appetizing.

The gray-pink walls around me darkened and closed to a tunnel. I heard the shutters bang shut once more and tried to pull myself together as the monk's footsteps shuffled closer. I managed to draw my knees up, but the wind was out of me entirely. My diaphragm cramped in agony and I couldn't get a breath.

He grabbed me by the shirt collar, over my leather vest, and hauled me to a sitting position. I tried to reach my knife and grabbed the flask instead. I probably would have hit him with it anyway, except he belted me hard between the shoulder blades and I suddenly started moving air in and out of my lungs again.

He withdrew to a respectful distance, leaving me sitting curled up around my folded arms. Three great, whooping breaths later, I wanted to kill him less. I looked up and knuckled the tears from my eyes with my right hand. Trying to move the left just made the tears come faster than I could get rid of them.

The little round priest's eyebrows were gray, and spectacles as little and round as he was perched on the tip of his nose. He was obviously much more . . .

experienced than the handsome but excitable young acolytes who had been sawing my ropes in twain. That gave me an idea of why he might have rescued me. But not why he'd thumped me on the back when he could have just recovered the flask while I struggled for air.

"You ought to be more careful with that," he said, indicating the flask still clutched in my palm. "My whole order exists to protect it, you know. What's left of us."

I knew what he meant. The tower didn't seem to house even a third the people it had been designed for. Recruitment problems, I wondered, or attrition?

I looked down at the little thing. It was fluted—it looked as if it had been blown into the cage that enclosed it, and lobes of glass bulged between each golden wire. There was a lantern tucked into a mirrored wall sconce, which did an excellent job of illuminating the little chamber. If I held the flask up to the light, dark echoes of disturbing motion seemed to flicker within.

"I thought the flask was the source of your chaos powers," I deadpanned. I considered hooking it back to my belt, but instead let it dangle from the golden chain. "Let me guess. You hauled me inside because the fall would have broken it, in addition to killing me, and now it's all I have to barter with if I want to ever find my way out of here."

"The fall wouldn't have broken it," the priest said easily.

"That explains why your colleagues seemed to have no problem with dropping me fifteen storeys. But in that case, why did you save my life?"

He bowed slightly, tucking his hands inside his fur-lined sleeves. The fur was squirrel, and the red wool over it was threadbare but still serviceable. The embroidery bands at the cuffs were worn to fraying, and the whole thing was too big and had been inexpertly hemmed. A hand-me-down from some more senior priest, no doubt, and even then the squirrel was more for warmth than fashion. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Brother Wils. Some people call me the Heretic."

Now, that was interesting. I put the flask chain between my teeth, tucked the wrist of my dislocated and relocated arm under my belt, and yanked it tight to support the injury. When I had the flask back in my hand, I slid it inside the bottom band of my halter for safekeeping, between tit and ribcage, instead of hanging it back on my belt. Despite the assurances of little Wils-the-Heretic, it seemed smart to cushion a precious glass object before any more acrobatics. Breasts were the best packing material I had handy.

It only pinched a little. If it did break, I was asking for some serious lacerations, but let's be honest here: nobody takes up a life of high-profile cat burglary because they're averse to risk.

Brother Wils watched with undisguised interest. I tried to remember if the priests of the Cloister of the Inchoate Beast were supposed to take an oath of celibacy or not. The word *cloister* made me think they probably did, but you never know with these religious types. The guards-priests had certainly been distracting each other, but I was pretty sure they weren't supposed to be doing that just then either way.

I smoothed the hempen shirt and leather vest down again and checked how my injured arm was hanging. That hurt a lot more than the bottle in my brassiere did, but I pretended that the streaks in the dirt on my face were from sweat and said, "You're a rescuing-people kind of heretic? Or a courtesy-to-thieves kind of heretic?"

He rolled his eyes, turned his back, and changed the subject over his shoulder. "Come this way. There's a secret stair."

Jewels sparkled on the backs of soft fingers as he raised and rippled them, insouciant beckoning. I wasn't climbing down the outside of the tower with no ropes and an arm that wouldn't bear my weight, so I fell in behind like a dog.

The mirrors in the alcove made the shadows spastic as he lifted the lantern down. I swear I felt the flask tucked into my halter twitch in response, as if something inside were kicking like a babe under my heart. The sensation was horribly familiar and made me suddenly, brutally sad.

No, Janys, we don't think about such things. You're the fucking Storm Petrel, and you've just pulled off the heist of your career. All you have to do is live to get out of here, preferably with the loot you were hired to spring, and the loot you decided for reasons of egotism you needed to take too, and you can retire on your legend and your savings. Just up and disappear, and smirk quietly to yourself whenever people wonder whatever became of that famous thief, what was her name?

But grief isn't reasonable, and we can't control when it will flare up savagely from unfed embers we

can reasonably expect to be long cooled. The pain under my breastbone was worse than the pain in my shoulder, which at that point was really saying something. I bit my lip hard and was so busy blinking back tears that I didn't see what Brother Wils did to open the wall. That *would* get me censured and reprimanded by the Dishonorable Sisterhood.

It was a good thing I was planning on retiring after this score, if this was the best I could manage in my dotage.

As advertised, there was a secret stair. It was cleverly done too because before I'd broken in here, I'd found a way to get a peek at the old vellum plans in the files of the seventeen-times-great-granddaughter of the mason who built the place. There hadn't been a hint in them of space saved to make such a thing.

After the manner of secret passages, it was narrow, uneven, and full of cobwebs—and it hadn't been dusted in approximately four centuries, because letting the maids in to scrub down your concealed escape routes is a great way of ensuring they don't stay secret for long. My shoulders brushed the walls, and the steps were ragged and steep enough that *I* found them terrifying, despite the fact that that whole Storm Petrel thing got started originally because there are those who say I must have wings to get into the places I get into.

Little Brother Wils was surprisingly light on his feet and surefooted, though—much more so than I would have expected—and I moved well enough despite the anguish every time my left shoulder brushed the wall. I couldn't scream. I was sure it

would echo and carry forever in this narrow, stony space. So, in an effort to distract myself, I spoke in a flat, conversational tone that would not carry.

"How many people know about this passage?"

He, too, spoke in a prison mutter, making me wonder where he'd learned it. "I've never met anyone else in here. It leads outside. I suspect that when the tower was built it was needed as an escape route. Or a way to get food and water in when the Cloister was under siege, which happened a lot in those days. Anti-priesthood riots, you know. And there were a lot more of us then."

"You worship the God of Entropy," I replied.

"Not so much worship," he argued. "More appease."

"Semantics."

He shrugged. The light of the lantern he held low before him to illuminate the treacherous steps jiggled around us. Perhaps it wasn't such a great idea to irritate the person who was saving my neck. I thought about asking him again why he was helping me, but I suspected I wouldn't get a much better answer than last time, so I saved my breath for more focused questions.

"How are you so sure that the flask is unbreakable?"

He didn't laugh out loud, confirming my suspicion that sounds in here would carry. But I saw his shoulders and head shiver. "If it were easy to break, it wouldn't have survived half a millennium."

"It's been sitting on a silk cushion in a guarded tower for most of that."

"The only way to open it is by an act of will on the part of the owner," he said.

"Owner? Wasn't this thing sealed away by the Mad Baron back in 907, before your order stole it?"

"The Cloister didn't steal it," he said, indignantly.

"Would I hold it against somebody if they were thieves?" I deadpanned. He didn't answer, so I tried again. "Anyway, I thought you were a heretic."

"A heretic is still a believer." Wils swallowed the affront, though, making me wonder what he wanted from me badly enough to choose not to take offense at such a transparent provocation. Grudgingly, seemingly in an attempt to mend fences, he said, "You know your history."

"All I'm saying is that the Cloister has a bad reputation in Sania Tenabrys." A really bad reputation. Bad enough that the priests almost never came out into the city.

"So do you."

My turn to shrug, though he couldn't see me. "Mine's deserved."

He let that hang. I was curious, so I filled the silence with a question. "If they didn't steal it, what happened?"

"The Cloister didn't exist as an order yet, then. Several priests of various gods learned that the Mad Baron had captured whatever devils reside in that flask and planned to use their transferred powers as weapons."

"Right," I said. I'd heard that before. I wanted to ask more, but I kept imagining that I could just feel a heart-beat next to my own. I pushed the thought away from me. Many women miscarry, after all. The sensible ones put the grief behind them and go on.

It's not as if a cat burglar can really raise a child, anyway.

"Now you worship the Inchoate Beast."

He changed the subject. "Who are you stealing it for?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I just had a mad idea. I was here for the rubies."

"You came after the offering from the Council of Altheania." Wils didn't seem surprised. I supposed it *was* the clerical equivalent of robbing the payroll. Thieves rob banks because banks are where the money is. "We'll still pray for them, if you were hired to interfere in that. Unless it turns out that they hired you to steal their offering back. Then we might pray against them."

"Pray whatever way you want," I answered. "I'm an atheist."

That made him visibly struggle to keep in a bark of laughter. "And you were stealing the rubies for—?"

"The rubies were their own reward." I leaned on the wall, dizzy with pain. "I'm retiring. Just one big score to round out a career." The gems clinked satisfyingly when I dropped my hand and squeezed the bag. "Isn't the Mad Baron the owner? Or his heirs?"

"An argument could be made that whoever has the flask in their possession is the owner."

"But perhaps not the *rightful* owner?"

He stopped so suddenly I almost walked into him, which would have been a disaster for both of us. These stairs felt like they had been going on for considerably longer than fifteen storeys at this point. He half-turned and his eye glittered in the light. "You're a direct descendant, you know."

The thing inside the flask heaved against my

ribcage. No mistaking it this time. Something in there was kicking to get out. Eager to meet the world.

"What?" I asked, when I could manage to ask anything at all.

"The Corderos are a cadet branch of the Mad Baron's line, but the only one remaining after the Purge." He still had his back to me and seemed unconcerned in a manner that was starting to make me feel worried rather than like I had the drop on him.

"What makes you think I am related to the Corderos?" Playing dumb is usually a bad idea. This time was no different.

"Janys Cordero," he said, giving me a chill. My name, as I said, is not well-known. So how did he know who I was? And why had he been waiting in just the right place at just the right time, as if he expected me?

Because he had been expecting me.

I was reaching for my dagger when the lantern died, and I felt the edge of a step crumble underneath my heel—as suddenly and dramatically as my safety strap had frayed outside.

There was no hand rail. My foot skidded out from under me and I went down. As I was falling, before the stone stairs struck and bruised me, I remember thinking what an idiot I'd been. Of course, the monks of the Cloister were priests of chaos, of entropy. Of *unmaking*.

And if the bottle really could survive a fifteen-storey fall, there was no reason at all for them to have any care about killing me. If they could find me. And apparently they had.

I—and Brother Wils, whose soft form I barreled

into after bouncing off the third step—were extremely lucky, though. We were only about twice our height from the bottom when the staircase crumbled. We skidded down, limbs entangled . . . but in the darkness at the bottom I hauled myself up, weeping with the pain, and found Brother Wils by feel. He had a pulse and when I touched him he stirred.

Having stirred, he moaned. “I guess we’re not sneaking anymore.”

“I don’t suppose you have any healing magic at your command?”

“Priest of the Chaos Gods.” I could hear the mock-apologetic shrug in his voice. “Sorry about that.”

I grabbed him by the elbow and hauled him to his feet one-handed, despite his complaints. “Move.”

We moved—not fast, not in the dark—but as fast as we could manage, Brother Wils guiding us by guess and feel. I did have flint and steel in my kit, and could have kindled a light and possibly even recovered and relit the lantern. But I was pretty sure we were walking into an ambush, and I didn’t want to give them any help. Anyway, I have excellent night vision—especially for an old lady—and I was starting to make out shades of paler black ahead of us.

We followed air currents, and they led us out, eventually, into a place where I felt the wind on my face and smelled grass and the sea. The sky above was indigo and speckled with stars, and the moonless night seemed actually bright after so long spent in darkness.

“Not much farther,” Brother Wils was saying, just as a dazzling beam, far too bright to be a suddenly unhooded lantern, flashed over the ground and

caught us both full on the face. Another blossomed beside it.

We had been holding hands like children in the dark. Shamefacedly, Wils let go. He stepped away, limping heavily. Through the dancing spots of my dazzlement, I could see his purpling eye and the blood streaking his face. He looked to have broken his nose in the fall.

"Halt," someone called out to us from behind the lights. "Who is it?"

"Help!" Brother Wils called. He walked toward the voice and the lights, hands upraised. "Help! I'm Brother Wils! The thief has me hostage!"

I probably would have done something similar, in his shoes. That realization didn't make me any happier to find myself on the receiving end of the trick. I thought about kicking him in the kidney, but he'd stepped away from me and I was feeling confident that whoever was on the other side of those lights that weren't lanterns would have crossbows. I didn't feel like getting feathered for my troubles.

The flask lurched so hard I gasped. My eyes were adjusting to the brighter light, and I could see that we were surrounding by a half-circle of robed priests and priestesses, some armed. As I had surmised, the light came not from lanterns, but poured from the upraised fingers of two of them, cold and summoned. Demonic, I thought, and hid a shiver.

As I had *also* surmised, there were at least three crossbows. The Cloister doesn't have the reputation of a modern martial order, but it doesn't take much skill to use a crossbow. Reputation or not, they've held out against numerous sieges in their

half-millennium history. No matter how far they had fallen, somebody there probably still remembered how to swing a sword.

Slowly, I raised my uninjured hand. The other one was belted down firmly enough that it would have hurt too much to get it loose. I thought I would probably faint if I tried, and if I fainted they would probably shoot me for falling over.

Brother Wils kept walking forward. The circle shifted, and two or three hands reached out to draw Brother Wils into their midst. I tried not to glare after him as he was enveloped, but a cool temper has never been one of my problems. I glared long and hard and hot. If I'd had the powers of a member of the Cloister, whatever hair he had left probably would have fallen out. As it was, I just developed the sort of throbbing headache that makes you feel as if your eyeball is about to explode, and the flask felt like it was throbbing too.

I was still sneering after him when the circle shifted again. This time it parted to reveal a small round woman in robes more than the equal of Brother Wils's for excellence of workmanship. In fact, she might have been the original owner of the hand-me-downs he had been suffering. I wondered if Chaos priests went through clothing faster than ordinary mortals, or if they could stave off the action of time so their things lasted longer.

The woman said, "So you're the Storm Petrel."

She had a perfectly ordinary voice, except that some force amplified it so it carried very clearly across the distance between us without sounding

strained or raised. Possibly she had very good diaphragm control. "Is your next line going to be, 'You don't look like much'?"

She swept closer. She had graying hair and a nut-brown complexion. She said, "Trust me, I'm suitably impressed."

We eyed each other.

"There's no good way out of here, Petrel. Even so, you have the reputation of being a canny operator. I'd rather not tangle with you. Or make an enemy. What if you return the relic to its rightful protectorate, tell us how you broke into the Cloister and how you researched that route. In return, we determine that the rubies from the tithe are sufficient payment for your efforts and let you go without further compromises?"

"What's your name?" I asked.

She tilted her chin. Her eyes sparkled in the torchlight. She smiled slightly, as if she considered the request a positive sign for our continued association. "Mayse. Sister Mayse, if you feel formal."

"Sister Mayse," I said. "So if I give this thing back—assuming it's on my person, of course—there will be no further reprisals?"

She shrugged. "If you run around telling everyone you stole from us with impunity, I can't make any promises. But I think you'd hate to have to mention that you didn't quite get away."

I would. I'd hate even knowing it myself.

The flask shivered again, as if it were fidgeting to get my attention. I remembered what Brother Wils had refused to say, about the flask being

the source of the Cloister's powers. The sons of bitches had used those powers to fray my strap, and they'd nearly killed me on the stairs—and as I've said a thousand times, I'm an atheist. Why the hell should anybody else get the help of gods when I have to do everything all by myself?

I yanked my bad hand out of the belt that supported it. I'd been right: it did hurt so badly that I fainted. Or nearly fainted. I came back to myself on my hands and knees, shivering, aware that a quarrel has whisked over my head as I collapsed. Sister Mayse was advancing, though she had raised one hand to signal the archers to hold.

"She's hurt," she said, her voice actually sounding concerned. I liked her better than Brother Wils already, which made me sorry I was apparently on his side. "Petrel, how bad is it?"

"Bad," I said. I snaked my injured hand under my untucked shirt and got my fingers on the flask. The digits didn't want to close properly, but I made them. I pulled it out. Was the flask throbbing, or was it my hand? "Is this what you want from me, Sister Mayse?"

She smiled. "I knew you'd see reason."

"Open!" I yelled, and in a gesture of unnecessary drama, dashed the thing on the stones.

It was already open by the time it left my hand. I could tell by the ribbon of glowing red smoke that trailed behind the neck as it tumbled, turning. A wave of dread swept over me, a supernatural chill. I watched Sister Mayse dive forward with no concern for her dignity. She went to her knees, trying to catch the flask.

She caught it, but it didn't matter. She knelt, her fine robes spread around her, and the smoke bubbled out and swirled into the air from the neck of the flask between her hands. It rose and rose, boiling, seething like the column of ash from a conflagration: huger than anything that could have been contained in that tiny bottle. A hard reek of burning blood and scorching urine choked me. Tears streaked Sister Mayse's face.

Flitting black shapes broke from the column, swirled, expanded—so dark they were visible silhouetted against the indigo night.

It should have shrieked. It should have wailed. It should have hissed.

It should have made any sound at all. But all I could hear was the sound of Mayse's breathing, great pained rasps. And the thumping of my own heart in the echo chamber of my aching chest.

Mayse looked across at me. We were both kneeling, so our eyes were at a height.

"What the hell was in there?" I asked.

"The Inchoate Beast," Brother Wils cried as he rushed forward. "Free at last! I knew you could do it, Janys!"

I stared at him. He was smirking in triumph, and I remembered him saying, mockingly, that he was a heretic.

"Careless bitch," Mayse said, sadly. "The Beast is many; the Beast is one. They worm into unguarded minds. Warp the will. They feed off the pain they cause when one creature harms another for no reason."

I said, "Oh."

She met my eyes. Her face was still and grave. "And now they're loose in the world again. It will be the Eaten Time all over. Our order was founded to keep that thing—those things—locked up, you know."

I did. Now. I realized that the light the priests had summoned to their hands still blazed bright and steady. So much for the flask being the source of their powers.

I thought of all the rumors of what went on inside the Cloister. All the rumors of worship of demons and the occasional skinning alive of missing children or shopkeepers. As true as everything Brother Wils had told me?

He'd manipulated me. Gotten me to do exactly what he wanted. I'd go so far as to bet he made sure the rubies from the tithe were kept in the same vault as the reliquary flask. Probably even arranged to have those two guards on duty together, knowing what would happen.

Mayse raised her hand, in an apparent signal to the archers. I waited for the quarrels.

But they did not come. Instead, the sister picked herself up slowly. She was bleeding from skinned palms and knees. She waved me to my feet and I obeyed.

She didn't ask for the rubies back. Her voice was flat, exhausted, as she said, "*We* have a cloister. We will be safe enough, until we can find a way to recapture what has been freed by your stupidity, Storm Petrel. *Your* punishment is to live in the world you've created. I hope you can also live with the legend of what you've done."

It wasn't the legacy I would have hoped for.

"Well," I said. "All in a day's work, I guess."

I turned my back. I looked up as I walked away. Black shapes flitted over the stars, like petrels on the wing: heralds of the coming storm.

As the priests surged together and seized Brother Wils-the-Heretic by the elbows, I dusted off my hands. 🐛



Richard Lee Byers

Richard Lee Byers is the author of over forty fantasy and horror novels including *Pathfinder Tales: Called to Darkness*, *Blind God's Bluff: A Billy Fox Novel*, *The Reaver: The Sundering Book IV*, *Black Dogs* (first in his new Black River Irregulars trilogy), *The Ghost in the Stone*, and the books in the Impostor series. His novel *The Spectral Blaze* won *Diehard GameFAN's* award for the Best Game-Based Novel of 2011.

Richard has also published dozens of short stories, some of which are collected in the eBooks *The Q Word and Other Stories* and *Zombies in Paradise*. *The Fate of All Fools*, his first graphic novel, will be out soon. He is also working on new electronic games.

As an author who generally writes either fantasy or horror, he was happy for the chance to contribute to a mythos that straddles the two genres. He hopes his story effectively fuses the action and wonder of the former with the darkness and bleakness of the latter.

Richard lives in the Tampa Bay area and is a frequent guest at Gen Con, Dragon Con, and Florida SF conventions. He invites everyone to Follow him on Twitter (@rleebyers), Friend him on Facebook, and add him to your Circles on Google+.

The Dark Thing

Hugh's eyes stung. Something was burning somewhere, quite possibly because the orcs had set it on fire just for fun. He was glad that, skulking through the benighted back streets of the city of Caecras, he and his sister Fiona had already traveled some distance from their gunsmith shop. The flames were unlikely to spread that far, although, in a time when everything turned to ruin, only a fool would be certain of that.

Hugh blinked away the moisture blurring his vision and looked up over the rooftops. Drifting smoke obscured many of the stars, but not the Tower Arcane suspended high above the city on its floating island with the waterfall streaming over the side. Reflecting the conflagration Hugh was smelling or some other one, the cataract gleamed orange. The slender spire glowed white with its own inner light. The degradation of the metropolis below hadn't sullied it, and as always, the sight gave Hugh hope.

Auburn-haired with a round, freckled face like his own, Fiona tugged impatiently on his hand. "We should keep moving," she said, and she was right. Orcs accosted humans whenever they felt like it, but humans wandering abroad at night were particularly apt to find themselves harassed and searched for valuables.

Should Hugh and Fiona be searched, the orcs would discover the revolvers concealed under their cloaks, and humans, even human gunsmiths, were forbidden to carry such things. They'd either be taken prisoner or killed on the spot.

Keeping to the shadows, the pair crept onward.

Occasionally they passed another human bold or foolhardy enough to venture out after dark. A ragged street preacher raved to an empty plaza about holes opening in the walls of the world and demons crawling through to bring about the end of all things. Madness, surely, although when Hugh thought about it, the ascendancy of the orcs felt like it truly could be one manifestation of some universal and inescapable doom.

No. He refused to think in such demented, defeatist terms. Like a gun in need of repair, the current state of the empire was a problem that could be fixed.

Two blocks farther on and somewhere off to the right, a woman sobbed for mercy. Mockery and laughter answered her pleas. Scowling, Fiona balked as if tempted to go to the woman's aid. She'd done such things before.

"Easy," Hugh whispered. "It angers me, too, but we've sworn to free the *whole* city. The whole empire."

"'Angers' is too soft a word." Still, she suffered him to lead her onward. Then, glancing backward, he glimpsed something moving behind them.

He resisted the impulse to instantly turn around for a better look. Instead, he paused as if to consider the obscene graffiti defacing a looted and abandoned shop. Meanwhile, peering from the corner of his eye, he looked back up the cobbled street.

This far from the orc king's palace, no streetlamps burned. The lamplighters were gone, killed in the orcs' slave uprising or fled to the countryside, and, shadowed by the buildings to either side, the narrow thoroughfare was dark. Still, it looked empty, and few orcs would bother to *sneak* in pursuit of humans.

"I don't see anything," Fiona breathed.

"Neither do I," he answered. "I guess my nerves were playing tricks on me."

They prowled on and in due course turned down an alleyway even narrower and murkier than the streets they'd just traversed. In better times, Hugh would have avoided such a passage, but now it made him feel marginally safer than he had a moment before. Unlike the human thieves who'd once infested the city's hidden corners, the orcs were free to commit outrages wherever they liked.

"Psst!" someone hissed. Hugh and Fiona peered in the direction of the sound.

A goblin leaned out of a doorway. Even in the gloom, Hugh had no difficulty recognizing Spit. The stunted creature had a long nose that zigzagged like a lightning bolt and bandy legs of unequal length that made him roll back and forth when he walked.

"Hello," said Hugh, keeping his voice low. "Is it all clear?"

"Yes," his friend replied. "What about with you?"

"We're fine."

"Good. I'll take you in."

Up close, Spit stank of sewage. Not wanting to offend him, Hugh suppressed the urge to wrinkle his nose at the smell. The goblin proffered a stubby candle, and Hugh lit it with the spark of a mechanical match, one of the several inventions he'd tinkered together in his shop when custom was slow.

Spit then led his human charges through the interior of a now-vacant tenement, down a staircase, and into the cellars beneath.

Eventually the yellow glow of a lantern wavered in the gloom ahead. "You can find your way from here,"

Spit said. "I should get back on watch." He clapped Hugh on the forearm and shambled away like a land-lubber aboard a ship tossed by heavy seas.

The half-dozen men and women waiting in the lantern light were ragged and haggard. Appearances to the contrary, though, they were leaders, each speaking for as many as a dozen resisters.

"You're late," Margery said. "Was there a problem?" Thin with unbound mousy hair that was going gray, she wore mourning black in memory of the husband an orc had disemboweled for looking it in the eyes. A naked short sword lay across her knees awaiting the day when she'd finally get to use it.

"Orcs were carousing in our street," Fiona said. "We couldn't leave the shop until they moved on."

"Understandable," Margery said. "How much black powder have you managed to stockpile?"

"Half a barrel," Fiona said.

"You know the plan," Margery said. "That's not enough."

"The orcs keep track of our supplies. It's slow work to hide away much without them realizing."

"Since we last met, how many guns have you made for the cause?"

"Nine," said Hugh.

"Nine. And during the same period, how many guns did you make for the orcs?"

"If we didn't make them," Fiona said, "we'd be dead."

"Still, you weren't exactly toiling long into the night, were you? We all know what you were doing instead. Watching the wind. Making models out of parchment and plywood and tossing them through the air."

"Look," said Hugh, "let's say Fiona and I gave you all the powder and guns you've asked for, and you succeeded in killing all the orcs in the bastion by the Great Arena. What would that actually accomplish except to set them on another rampage?"

"It will show people what's possible," Margery said. "What will your mad experiments accomplish?"

"Once I tell the archmage and the other wizards what's happening in Caecras, they'll come down and help the city as they did in times past."

"Don't you think they already know?"

"They must not understand how bad things really are."

"You don't even know if they're still up there," the widow in black replied. "Nobody's seen any sign of them since the uprising. I don't want one of our only two gunsmiths falling to his death trying to reach them."

"I won't. People make balloons and gliders in Lij."

"Even if that's true, have you ever even seen such a thing with your own eyes, let alone had anyone teach you how to build or fly one?"

Hugh scowled. "Clearly, it's risky, but it's a risk worth taking. I've seen drawings, listened to the accounts, and I've figured it out. I'll release the balloon at night, and it will rise swiftly. Before the orcs notice me, if they ever do, I'll be higher than they can shoot. Once I reach a higher altitude than the Tower Arcane, I'll launch the glider, take advantage of the prevailing winds, and swoop down onto the island. I promise, the idea's sound."

"If you're truly convinced you ought to go, do it safely. Wait until you find a magus who can make

you fly like a bird or shift you instantly from one spot to another."

"Do you even hear yourself?" Hugh replied. "All the people who can do such things are up in the tower already. That's the point!"

Aengus raised his hand. Formerly a prosperous merchant, he had the loose, sagging skin of a man who'd lost considerable weight quickly. "Friends, please. We don't need to quarrel when both plans are moving forward. Hugh and Fiona are stockpiling powder and firearms to the best of their ability *and* constructing their inventions."

"The problem," Margery said, "is that the foolhardy plan is ahead of the sensible one. As I understand it, the flying contraptions are almost complete. The raid is nowhere near ready to proceed, and how will it ever become so if we lose Hugh?"

"You'll still have Fiona," said Hugh. "But I'm not going to fail. Give or take a tweak or two, the balloon and glider are *entirely* ready. I just want a little more study and optimal weather conditions before I go up. Then you'll see."

Margery sighed. "I hope so. People have risked their lives to bring you this far."

"I know and I'm grateful," Hugh said. Resisters had procured wood and canvas, sneaked it to the rooftop of the abandoned tenement he'd chosen for his work, and sawed, hammered, sewn, and sealed them whenever he could slip away from his shop to direct them. "I won't let them down."

Suddenly, Fiona turned and peered back in direction from which she and her brother had arrived. "What was that?"

Hugh listened. After a moment, he too caught the patter of footsteps, uneven but fast. A small, misshapen silhouette appeared at the periphery of the lantern's glow.

"It's coming!" gasped Spit, still running. "It—"

A creature like a living shadow leaped on the goblin's back and bore him down. Though its form was indistinct, it seemed to possess a manlike body but a panther's head. It sank black teeth into Spit's neck and shook him. Bone snapped. Spit shuddered and went limp.

At once, his killer leaped away from the body. Bounding on all fours, it charged the humans clustered around the lantern.

Fiona pulled out her revolver, thumbed back the hammer, and fired. The reports echoed. She was a good shot, and Hugh assumed the rounds were hitting the target, but the beast didn't falter.

He snatched out his own weapon and fired. He was sure he was hitting the creature, but his shots didn't balk it, either.

Meanwhile, it raced closer. It still looked like a living shadow, with no gleam of eyes or saliva or any hint of texture in its murky form. The hammer of Hugh's revolver clicked on an empty chamber when the creature was just a leap away.

Screaming, perhaps believing the bullets had missed, Margery rushed in on the shadow's flank and stabbed with the short sword. The blade pierced the flowing, smoke-like flesh, but, silent as it had been all along, the creature still rounded on her. It reared up into a manlike stance and raised a hand with long, curved claws.

Aengus rushed in and bashed at it with a mace. Daggers in hand, Walter and John rushed it, too. Fiona reloaded. Refusing to accept that weapons were useless, Hugh did the same.

Margery fell backward with one of her breasts torn away. She shuddered, heels drumming on the floor. The dark thing caught hold of Aengus's mace as the merchant swung it, yanked it from his grasp, and jammed the butt end into the human's mouth. Aengus pawed at the shaft but couldn't pull it out. Reeling, he made wet, choking sounds.

The carnage flipped something inside Hugh's mind. He grabbed Fiona by the forearm. "Run!" he said.

"No!" she said.

"*We can't kill it!*" He hauled her backward. A sister screamed, staggered, and fell. Fiona sucked in a breath and finally fled of her own volition.

As the pair ran from the creature, they were also moving away from the stairs. Hugh hoped there was another set somewhere up ahead, but even if so, the trick would be finding it when they were leaving the lantern behind as well. The light dimmed with every stride they took.

There! An opening in the wall! He and Fiona scrambled toward it, and he made out the ascending steps on the other side.

Upon reaching the top, they found themselves in a plaster-walled hallway. A trace of light shined through the small octagonal window in the door at the far end. They hurried to the door and threw it open.

Beyond was an empty moonlit street lined with abandoned businesses. Once Hugh and Fiona dashed

far enough to turn a corner, they put their revolvers away and slowed to a brisk walk. Had they not, they would have been too conspicuous to anyone they encountered, and the guns hadn't helped them anyway. Even so, Hugh had to pry his fingers from the weapon's grip and fight the urge to keep fleeing as fast as he could.

He and Fiona rounded another corner and another after that. Finally they paused to catch their breath.

"We shouldn't have run," Fiona panted.

"It was the right thing," Hugh answered.

She glared. "How can you say that? Whatever the shadow beast is, don't you think it's working for the orcs? At some point in the last few days, one of us slipped up and gave them cause to suspect we're part of the resistance. They set their creature to follow us if we went out at night in the hope we'd lead it to a meeting. As we did!"

"That's just your guess," said Hugh. "There was that moment when I thought I glimpsed something, but when we looked back, neither of us could see it." Possibly because the shadow beast blended into the darkness, but he didn't want to feed Fiona's guilt by admitting that aloud.

"Either way, we abandoned our friends to die!"

"Keep your voice down! If we'd died with them, there would have been no one left to fly to the Tower Arcane."

Her mouth twisted. "You and your precious tower."

He blinked. "You sound like you think it's a stupid idea. You never doubted before."

"*You* were sure. That was good enough. Until now."

He put his hands on her shoulders and looked her in the eye. "I understand how you feel, but if we don't finish what we started, that will make everything even more terrible."

She lowered her gaze. "I suppose. It's just . . . never mind. What do we do now?"

He looked up to see how the clouds and smoke were moving. "The wind's right," he said. "Not perfect, but good enough."

"You want to fly tonight?"

"It may be my only chance. Whatever brought the dark thing to the cellar, it and the orcs now know for certain we're part of the resistance. They've got no more reason to let us run free."

She nodded. "Let's get you into the air."

Skirting corpses and the rats that fed on them, detouring when they spotted orcs up ahead, Hugh and Fiona skulked onward through the blighted city with its toppled statues and fallen lengths of aqueduct. Until, once again, something flickered at the very periphery of his vision.

Turning as though to peer past a splintered door hanging crookedly from a single hinge, he tried for a better look at the source of the motion. All he saw was the dark, vacant stretch of street behind him.

But he doubted it was really vacant. His dry mouth and quickening pulse suggested the dark thing was hiding in the gloom just as he'd imagined it doing before.

"What's wrong?" Fiona whispered.

"I think the beast is behind us."

"What should we do?"

"Walk on while I come up with a plan."

He tried, but nothing came to him. He wondered how much longer it would be before the creature grew tired of stalking them and charged.

Then Fiona murmured, "Turn left at the next street. Just a few steps farther on, there's an alley that twists off in both directions. You go left again and hide. I'll go right and lure the shadow after me. Wait a while and then go on to the balloon."

"No!"

"I know this part of town. The alleys branch every which way. I'll lose the creature."

"You can't be sure that will work! We thought we'd gotten rid of it before, and here it is again. I'll be the decoy, you fly."

"You understand the glider better than I do. Please, don't make this harder than it already is."

He swallowed. "Make sure you really do get away."

They separated at the alley. He hid in a recessed doorway.

Half a minute later, Fiona's gun banged twice, no doubt to draw the dark thing in her direction. Despising himself for letting her be the bait, Hugh nonetheless kept his shoulders pressed to the door at his back.

Fiona's revolver barked again, this time from farther away. After that, the night was silent.

Hugh waited a while longer and then sneaked on to his secret workplace. The bodies of the tenants still rotting inside shrouded the building in stench. He made his way up to the broad, flat roof

and lit the brazier that would inflate the black bag that was the balloon.

It was possible someone passing below would spot the firelight, so he kept watch over the sides of the roof as the balloon swelled and tugged at its tethers. When he peered over the parapet on the south side, a shadowy figure was standing on the street below. From the way its head was tilted back, it was plain that it was looking up.

Hugh turned toward the balloon. It was ready. He dashed to it and buckled himself into the glider of white pine and canvas attached underneath it. As he reached to untie the master knot securing the mooring lines, the dark beast sprang from the top of the stairs onto the roof.

Hugh pulled the rope. With a jerk, the balloon rose, and the glider rose beneath it.

The dark thing charged and leaped, but not high enough. Its claws tore the air an arm's length short of Hugh's body. The next moment, it fell, even as he climbed higher still.

Then, down on the rooftop, the thing's vague form smudged and blurred even further. When it steadied again, to the extent that steadiness was consistent with its nature, it spread batlike wings, lashed them, and flew upward.

For want of any true defense, Hugh reached for his revolver. By the time he had the weapon in hand, the shadow creature was streaking past on his left. He snapped off a shot, and then the thing was behind him.

He tensed with the expectation that it would land atop the glider. Instead, the balloon made

a bumping sound. When he looked up, the dark thing was clinging to the side of the bag and ripping with its claws.

The balloon was already deflating. Hugh had to detach the glider from it, lest it drop on top of him like a net. He jammed the revolver back inside his clothing, jerked the release to untether the glider, and gripped the control bar with both hands. When he pulled it, the glider leaped forward and the balloon fell rattling behind him. A trailing rope lashed his ankle like a whip.

The island with its shining tower and waterfall floated ahead of him. Ahead, but far above. He'd separated from the balloon too early to descend on it as intended.

Hoping to land on a rooftop, he dipped the glider's wings. He overshot and ended up streaking through a canyon defined by the street below and the buildings to either side. Worse, he was drifting sideways into the wall on his right.

He dipped his wings the opposite way and for an instant thought he'd avoided a collision. The next instant, something crashed, jolting him. He'd overcompensated, and the left wing had clipped the wall on its side of the street.

He smashed down hard enough to pound the air from his lungs. He gulped in a fresh breath and scrambled up out of the glider's wreckage. An instant later, the dark thing landed twenty or so paces away. Wings melting, it shifted shape. Soon it resumed the manlike but cat-headed form it had held in the cellar.

Shooting was useless, but with nothing to

distract or delay the dark thing, so too was running. Better to go down fighting. Hugh pulled out his revolver, thumbed the hammer, and fired round after round into the creature's smear of a face. No matter how close the dark thing bounded, only the leonine jaws and long black fangs were entirely visible.

The creature froze. Its substance seethed and thinned until nothing remained.

Somehow, *finally*, Hugh had hit a vital spot. He slumped in relief and then spotted the second dark figure creeping up after the first.

The figure thrust out its hand as though it too had a gun. Hugh dived onto his belly, and something black streaked through the air above him. He fired his last round, and his new assailant staggered and toppled.

Hugh reloaded and stalked closer. The second attacker was no shadow. He was a man feebly pressing a gloved hand on the wound in his chest. His robe, mask, and hood were the garb in which the mages of the Tower Arcane visited the city.

Hugh scurried to him, stooped, and pulled down the cloth concealing the lower portion of the pallid face. Blood bubbled from the wizard's mouth.

"Why?" Hugh asked. "Why would *you* try to kill us?"

"We have . . . seers," the arcanist wheezed. "This morning, they sensed you and your plan to fly to the tower. That can't be allowed. I brought my . . . servant to stop you."

"Is my sister alive?"

"I'm sorry," the wizard whispered. Then the blood stopped flowing over his lips, and his all-but-colorless eyes fixed on nothingness.

Hugh wept. The sobs wracked his body until grief, though no less keen than before, made room for rage and self-loathing.

Margery had been right. The wizards knew very well what had befallen the city. They just didn't care. They cared so little that they'd sent agents to kill the people who hoped to pester them about it. That made Hugh even more responsible for Fiona's death and the deaths of the other conspirators than he could ever have imagined, all for the sake of a scheme that had never had the slightest chance of success.

He looked at the revolver. It seemed like the biggest, most solid thing in the world. Everything else was small and wispy by comparison. His hands still steady, he reloaded.

He pressed the muzzle up under his chin. It was hot from being fired, but he didn't flinch or pull it away. Rather, he thumbed the hammer back.

He put his finger on the trigger. Someone said, *Do it*. He supposed the voice was actually in his head, not that it mattered.

There was no reason in the world not to obey. Except . . .

He and Fiona had run away and let their friends die in their place. Then he'd allowed her to sacrifice herself. Even with his grandiose scheme in ruins, he still owed it to those he'd lost to make their deaths count.

Maybe he could. He'd imagined the wizards

of the tower as mightier than lesser mortals could ever be, the only people mighty enough to save Caecras, and yet he'd just killed one. Surely he could kill orcs if he turned his hand to it.

Hugh put the revolver away, rose, and hurried down a side street. He wanted to get away before anyone arrived to investigate the disturbance. 🐾





Erik Scott de Bie

Erik Scott de Bie is a fantasy writer, game designer, and confirmed geek from the dark wilds of the Pacific Northwest. He ventures far and delves deep for forbidden secrets and lore, wrested from the gnarled hands of those who have come before. He is also very tall. The author of ten books and counting, Erik keeps his library among the dusty tomes and tables covered in dripping wax of his website: erikscottdebie.com/bibliography.

He is particularly honored (or is that defiled?) to write this tale, using the dark themes of *Shadow of the Demon Lord*—one of his favorite RPGs—in his own World of Ruin setting. World of Ruin is home to his ongoing apocalyptic fantasy series of the same name, which begins with *Shadow of the Winter King*. He and Rob both like shadows, it seems. Find him on Twitter ([#erikscottdebie](https://twitter.com/erikscottdebie)) or Facebook ([erik.s.debie](https://www.facebook.com/erik.s.debie)).

Apostle of the Crimson Destroyer

There's a certain magic to an axe sinking into flesh. When a well-honed blade sinks cleanly into a skull, the sound is faint. Listen hard, or you miss the soft crinkling of bone reduced to powder under the edge. The blade separates thought and memory, unraveling the victim's world into a churning, bloody whirlpool. Until the axe moves from the wound, little enough damage can be seen. The crescent of steel merely looks out of place in the victim's head, like a poor child's drawing in the dirt of a world that should not be. Finally, when the axe is ripped out, the sound is thick and wet: a deep slurp of fresh meat split on a butcher's table. Blood wells in the wound and cascades forth like a fountain, spilling bits of brain, and a man becomes a corpse.

Warden Raestr thought these things as she awaited the last wounded Child of Ruin to come crawling through the breach. The brute had a dozen arrows in her mangled, muscular torso, and yet she kept coming, jagged blades in hand. Raestr waved off the other defenders as the woman wrenched her way forward, slaving like a rabid dog, staining the snow with her blood and spit. As she approached, she dragged a hundred clinking, barbed chains through the bloody snow behind her. Perhaps she wore them as armor, or perhaps they had become part of her body during some profane ritual. Either way, even as the barbarian's bloodshot yellow eyes glared up at her, Raestr ended the woman's suffering with one

elegant downward chop. The barbarian's body froze when the axe went in, only to shiver and jerk when Raestr wrenched the weapon free to bring up a fresh geyser of blood.

She'd been right about the sound—that subtle, sweet *slink*.

An elated cry went up among the defenders perched along the grimy palisades of Baelen. Half a hundred Children of Ruin lay dead or dying in a forest of arrow shafts and spears just outside the walls, the dark clouds pouring forth snow to cover them over. The rest were in full retreat. Raestr expected they would stitch some of their wounds just enough to leave vicious scars and accentuate their maiming wounds, so the next wave of attackers would boast even more horrific deformities. She did not look forward to that.

"We did it," said her squire, hardly able to speak for excitement. "We did it!"

"I did it," Raestr said, shaking the blood off her axe.

Her squire snapped to attention at her sharp voice. "Sorry, Master," he said. "I didn't mean—"

The warden just shook her head. Fool boy. His face and fine blond hair had always been better than his mind. No wonder he hadn't yet earned a name. He'd followed her and learned at her feet for four years now, the longest any squire had lasted under her, and she had some small affection for the boy. Enough, at least, not to spoil him with praise he'd not earned.

Along the walls, some chanted for the Bael himself, some for the glory of Raestr. The Warden found

the words hollow. She had killed half a dozen barbarians herself that day. None of it had been glorious. And now she had only the messy ending of that day's battle to see to. Fortunately, she had a squire ready for just such a chore. When she looked for him, though, she found he had gone.

Locating him only took a few moments. As expected, her squire had stepped into a nearby alley along with his lover, a warrior from the northern wall that Raestr had purposefully reassigned to avoid these sorts of distractions. The two lads giggled and murmured and kissed as the long-suffering Raestr stood, arms crossed. She tried to maintain her patience for young men of that age, and resist a resentment at their happiness that had been growing for some time. Perhaps she needed to give the boy more real responsibilities to occupy him.

Finally, she cleared her throat, drawing her squire's yelping attention. His lover took one look at her and scurried away.

"See to this." Raestr gestured vaguely at the field of corpses, while she wiped the blood from her face absently with her other hand. "Repair any damage to the walls and ready for another assault."

Her squire looked confused. "Should not the Blades of Baelen celebrate their victory?"

Blades of Baelen. Raestr grimaced. "Follow my orders," she said.

Heedless of his stammered questions, Raestr headed toward the center of the fort, not meeting the eyes of any of the city's defenders as they saluted her. She led them, yes, but she had no great loyalty or affection for them. They could fight howling barbarians

and rabble touched in the head by Ruin's kiss well enough, but Baelen would lie in rubble within half a day if the armies of a Mage-City marched against them. No three of the "Blades of Baelen" could match a single Knight of Winter or a southern Dustblade. Raestr had fought both in her fifty years and had the marks to show for it. Some nights, looking at her scarred body, Raestr wondered if the only things that distinguished her from one of the Children of Ruin were her battered ringmail and iron discipline. They were all that buoyed her in a sea of madness.

It fell to her to defend one of the last bastions of civilization in a world spiraling into doom. There was no beating back the inevitable demise of the world—only staving it off for a time.

Even the greatest powers must fall eventually. Raestr had been on hand to watch Luether fall to the Children of Ruin nearly fifteen years past, and the Winter King in Tar Vangr—Baelen's ostensible liege—hadn't sent a messenger in almost as long. She didn't know if the Mage-City yet stood, but they certainly would not send aid to a fledgling town many leagues distant. If the Children of Ruin stormed Baelen the next day—or the next—would anyone even know of their fate, much less care?

They were on their own, stranded on the frontier, surrounded by barbarians, and peopled by cowards and weaklings. Without Raestr, Baelen would have fallen long ago. She did not know how long she could keep holding it above the pyre.

Ultimately, *she* was all Raestr had, and they both knew it. Her only worthwhile reward, an

occasional dalliance to ease the tension of her position. The responsibility pressed on her shoulders and seemed to grow heavier by the day

* * *

The darkened chamber stank of sex and stale wine wafting on the breath of too many who had drunk too much. A dozen candles burned almost to nubs gave the room its only light, and their smoke curled lazily around a low ceiling black with soot and pitch. Raestr had to duck to navigate the claustrophobic den, which put her more in mind of a rat's burrow rather than a man-made building. Windows might have relieved the oppression, but Lord Protector Bael had ordered them boarded and nailed shut a decade ago. His notorious paranoia would permit no compromises of his safety. Raestr had to leave her weapons with his burly guards before entering his decrepit throne room, and she had just spent three days bleeding and killing for the lord's sake.

Raestr smelled the Bael's filth before she saw him. It drew her eye to the rotund form pulling a robe around itself deeper in the chamber, behind the stout, rosewood chair that thankfully blocked half her view of him. The place reeked of sour sweat, dirty feet, and a distinctive musk that she recognized all too well, even though she had never personally ventured near his bed. Raestr looked away, wondering when he had last bathed.

"Ah, my Warden." After a perfunctory attempt to straighten his disheveled robes, the Lord Protector smoothed the frizz of gray hair over his balding

pate. Both were useless gestures that catered to his unfounded vanity. "Another great victory, I trust."

"An acceptable one, Lord Protector." Raestr worked to hide her distaste and the lingering resentment the battle had instilled. At least the Bael had had the sense to send away whatever scullery maid or whore he'd busied himself with during the battle when, in Raestr's opinion, he should have been outside fighting for his people. Perhaps he'd do something useful like catch an axe with his massive belly.

The Bael himself was an unpleasantly fat man—corpulent, she'd heard him described, and she liked how the sound of the word seemed to match. The smell revolted her more, and even the smallest details of his person. The sweaty pores in his face had been left too long without scrubbing, so that they produced oily pus that smelled of mold. His skin was perpetually slick, shining in the candlelight in the way his flat, gray eyes never did. But he was the power in Baelen and Raestr was his right hand. She was his servant, but at least she was not his squire, obligated to wait upon him every moment of every day. She personally toasted her good fortune in that matter every night with a brandy.

The Bael lit a candle, which illumined his wilted face—thick jowls, sloped brow, more than two chins—and gestured for her to follow him deeper into the building. This Raestr did, trying hard not to scratch at numerous invisible itches. The place always made her feel contaminated in a way a battlefield did not, as though she had walked through spider webs she knew were not real but

could still feel. He moved to his desk, covered over with long-ignored papers and scraps. She tried not to think about the lascivious deeds this room must have seen.

Even so, Raestr did not hate the Lord Protector—not truly. He held the folk of Baelen together and provided important continuity and focus to the community. She was not naïve enough to think the town could survive his passing, in battle or otherwise. Without him, they would all be just as dead as if Raestr herself fell. When she fell, she would cease to care. While she lived, she could tolerate him. Every time, though . . .

Raestr stood at attention. “You’ll want a report on the day’s assault.”

The Bael waved. “I’m sure you did admirably, to the best of your ability,” he said. “I have a different purpose in mind for you.”

Raestr resisted the urge to scowl at the casual condescension. “Indeed.”

He shuffled some papers as though trying to look organized. It didn’t work. “What do you know of Shiris, the emissary of Aertem, Goddess of Summer? She leads the Last Rays temple.”

At the name, Raestr felt a little twinge of heat deep inside her gut. She suppressed any signal of anxiety, however. “The summerborn madwoman?” she shrugged. “Her temple’s a cult. They distract decent warriors from their duties. Fewer show up at the wall every day, and those who do tend to be deep in their cups or drowsy from too long a night with one of Aertem’s ‘sacred celebrants.’ Or more than one.”

As she made her distaste for the temple clear, she

covered the slight tremble in her hands by cracking her knuckles loudly. "Do you want me to get rid of her? For the good of Baelen?"

"Hardly," the Bael said. "She intrigues me. I would know more of her."

Raestr raised an eyebrow. "The defense of your city is more important, Lord Protector. I have a siege to defend against, a coming battle to command. I can't waste my time at a glorified brothel. Surely some lesser functionary—"

"You," the Bael said. "I can trust no one else in this matter."

Raestr did not like the twinkle in his eyes. "Very well," she said. "What would you have me do?"

"Go to the Temple of the Last Rays," he said. "Invite its mistress to . . . attend me."

Raestr managed to keep her face blank until she was out of the Bael's loathsome presence. That he trusted her was obvious. She had never failed him or betrayed his trust, it was true, but in this . . . As had happened rarely in her long life of duty and sacrifice, Raestr found herself uncertain what to do.

As she headed out into the swirling snow, her heart beat faster and faster.

* * *

The building in Baelen's north end stood out among the other ramshackle buildings due to its long, billowing banners of crimson silk emblazoned with the image of towers rising against a sunburst. They undulated in the winter wind, tracing drunken, suggestive patterns in the evening air. Try as she

might, Raestr could not quite pull her attention away from their sensuous meanderings. The thoughts they stirred made her decidedly uncomfortable.

Raestr spat in the snow at her feet. "Has the woman no shame at all?"

The foreign priestess Shiris had established the Last Rays in an old tavern that had folded under uncertain circumstances the previous winter. Raestr herself had drunk at the old Full Trough regularly, but since the Summer zealots took over ownership, she'd visited only rarely. Also, Raestr made it a point to discourage Baelen's warriors from patronizing the supposed temple. What sort of general would she be if she openly visited while the sun was in the sky, just after a battle?

But it was her duty this day.

And so, under the awning and out of the snow, Raestr took a deep breath to steady herself and pushed through the doors.

In contrast to the Bael's sweaty den of iniquity, the Last Rays boasted a surprisingly tasteful, comfortable common room hung with ceiling-to-floor silks like a pleasure den for the well-heeled in the far away Mage-City of Luether. Raestr had been to the City of Flame many times before it fell into ruin and became the City of Pyres, so she recognized the purpose of such frippery. The silks granted some measure of privacy while filling the room with vibrancy and movement. The temple boasted more than a few supplicants today, along with a dozen or so men and women of varying degrees of southern heritage, all dressed in diaphanous red robes to denote their faith. Nothing obviously sexual was going on—just a great

deal of flirtation and smiling, some caressing and the like, but it was there in the offing.

Raestr recognized several of the conscripts she'd commanded on defensive maneuvers over the last few days. Those who saw her turned away or buried their attention in their cups or company. Wise. She had half a mind to pull them thrashing from the temple and shame them in front of their peers. How dare they neglect their duty in this way?

In truth, however, Raestr was hardly one to judge.

She took a few steps into the room before a celebrant appeared to greet her. The man was half her age and chiseled out of marble, his muscles taut beneath the thin cloth of his robe, his blade large and standing tall. Raestr recognized his expression and stance as an attempt to arouse her, but it missed the mark. Rather, she found his masculine beauty off-putting.

"Welcome, mistress," he said. "Lady Shiris expects you."

"Lady, is it?" Raestr strode right past him, despite his startled look. "I know the way."

She made for the stairs that led to the large private chamber at the back of the hall. Reserved for wealthy merchants or visiting nobles in years past, the private room had been truly something before the constant bad weather and neglect took its toll. Though a bit shabby these days, it was the finest room remaining among Baelen's worn buildings. Where else would Shiris hold court?

She shoved the doors wide and pushed into an intimate chamber forested with pillows and hung all around with silks, as in the common room. Here, folk had drunk to ancient battles and told increasingly

unlikely tales of Baelen's bloody history, pointing to stolen standards and mounted heads of beasts as proof. When Shiris took over, she hid these trophies behind silks, thereby turning them into vague, subtly threatening faces that rose from the red fabric like half-carved reliefs. The effect unsettled Raestr.

Her abrupt entrance startled a portly man she vaguely recognized as a local merchant sitting in a comfortable chair in the center of the room. He sat bold upright, breathing fast and heavy, turning his head just enough so he could look over his shoulder. Another man's head appeared around him from the front of the chair at around the same level as the armrest, face hungry, eyes enraptured.

"Get out," Raestr said.

The merchant was quick to comply, stumbling to his feet and pulling up his breeches. She dimly recognized the younger man—a good-looking Baelenese lad who'd seen perhaps two dozen winters. He was supposed to have reported for duty a fortnight ago; she'd assumed him dead or deserted. Now she knew the truth, and it did not surprise her one prick to see him ensnared under Shiris's roof. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as he looked into the shadows for approval, then made his way out. Raestr looked purposefully away.

"Warden of Baelen," came a rich, husky voice. Vaguely, Raestr saw the woman move behind two crimson silks hung diagonally. "I trust you've some purpose interrupting my Master's ritual?"

Raestr sniffed, assuming she meant her summer goddess, Aertem. Raestr had only met a few people over the course of her life who believed in any sort

of divinity, and she herself certainly wasn't one of them. "I fail to see how sucking a man's cock empowers a goddess," she said. "But if it does, maybe Aertem should start defending the walls in the place of her worshipers. That would at least be useful."

"As you say."

Loosely swathed in red and gold damask, Shiris slipped through the falling silks into the room, her skin gleaming like burnished mahogany and hair simmering as red as fresh, hot blood. She wore a tiny jeweled dagger that hung on a chain around her neck. The ornament would have drowned out anyone else who wore it, but upon Shiris, the beautiful weapon only heightened her vibrancy. Had this been the first time they had met, Raestr would have gasped in awe, but she knew better.

And yet she had come anyway.

The tales of Shiris's great beauty held a certain truth to them, but over time Raestr had come to see the exaggerations. There was something entirely too vulpine about her angular features, her black eyes narrow, and her gaze constantly hungry. She was a bit too thin for Raestr's taste: her body drawn and taut, every drop of fat consumed in her inner fire. And yet Raestr could not look away from her. The priestess was a voracious predator stalking slowly in her direction. Raestr took a step back, both drawn to Shiris and intimidated by her.

"One of your lads tried to entice me," Raestr said.

"That was clumsy of him." She spoke in a dark, husky drawl that made Raestr's ears tingle. Pausing, she poured two goblets of a thick red wine and handed one to Raestr. "You are only for me."

Raestr stood up a little straighter. The wine was thick and dark and tasted like blood in her mouth. Strangely enough, that only made her burn hotter. "You know what I want."

"Do I?" Shiris stepped close to the Warden, allowing her vestments to slither down from her shoulders until she stood naked, skin glistening, sweat beaded in the fine red hair under her arms and between her legs. "Is it what you've wanted each of the dozen times you've come to me?"

Raestr eased her stance and let Shiris mold into her. Their bodies fit together surprisingly well, considering how much larger Raestr was than Shiris, and their selves sparked against each like flint against steel. The Warden was a child of the frozen tundra: pale in skin and eyes and blond hair gone mostly silver, cold in feel and temperament. The priestess of the summer goddess came from the fiery lands to the south: dark of flesh, of eye, and of humor, madly passionate in all she did—especially sex. Shiris hid her true age beneath powder and rouge, but none of it mattered when they touched. All those differences melted away when they held each other—when their lips met and Shiris slipped her warm fingers up under Raestr's skirt.

"You are warm and wet from battle," said the priestess. "Do you taste that way, as well?"

"You know I do." Raestr unbuckled her sword belt and let it fall around her ankles.

Despite being physically smaller and weaker, Shiris forced the Warden back onto the chair and devoured her: kissing, licking, kneading. Her fingers were devoted only to pleasure, and her tongue . . .

Raestr could only breathe in short, shallow gasps as Shiris plied her dexterous tongue, teasing and tasting and building her pleasure. The wine made her dizzy and the caresses drove her mad.

When she had first come to the Last Rays, in the depths of the previous winter, Raestr could not have said what called her. Anger, she had told herself at the time, but she thought now that it had been desperate loneliness. She'd had lovers before, of course, but it had been years since someone had touched her heart and soul in this way. All her discipline—her need to be in command and in control—vanished and she could just let go. In Shiris, she had found someone who awakened a part of her she thought long buried under bones and blood and ash and snow. The part of her that still lived—that was still a woman—that part *hungered*. She consumed Shiris, even as the priestess fed upon her, and both were filled.

"I have . . . I have a message for you," Raestr said. "The Bael himself. He wants—uhnn . . ." Her words trailed away as pleasure rippled through her.

"Oh?" Shiris raised her head, face shiny, and continued with one hand to emulate what she had been doing with her mouth. Raestr almost wept aloud with need. "Wants *what*?"

Raestr tried to focus, but the room refused to right itself. "You—" She flailed for the words. "He wants . . . you."

In the flickering candlelight, Shiris's face took on a darker aspect that highlighted her angular features and made her a predator. Raestr had only seen such an expression on the faces of the slaughter-mad on the battlefield. And then she couldn't think, only feel wave upon wave. Her head lolled back and she

stared up at the ceiling, stained with smoke and grime above the web of silks. She saw the ugliness behind the beauty, and somehow neither diminished the other.

In her stupor, Raestr thought she could see the sky above through the rafters. The clouds opened far above her and something—something terrible—peered down at a broken world and smiled.

When Raestr came back to herself some moments later, she realized Shiris had moved to the table and filled both their cups. She held them up in a toast to their tryst.

“Did you hear it?” Shiris asked.

“Hear what?” She took the proffered wine from Shiris and tasted it. Now that Shiris wasn’t distracting her as much, she frowned at the bitter and salty taste. “What is this?”

“Bloodwine.” The priestess’s eyes were wide, her lips smeared. “Listen.”

The Warden canted her head. She heard the wind whistling above them, the murmur of voices in the other room, and the rattle of bowls. She drank more wine. “Listen to what?”

“My Master,” Shiris said. “He tells me the time is now.”

“He?” Raestr frowned. “But you serve some sort of summer goddess . . .”

“No goddess—no god.” Her eyes seemed crimson. “Only *Him*.”

Raestr realized Shiris was not drinking. Even now, she held the goblet to her lips but merely smiled over it. The priestess’s lips were smeared, yes, but with lip paint and spit and love, not the red-black wine.

Almost immediately, churning fire spread through the Warden's gut, and her head turned over and over. The world shivered, rocking back and forth dizzily. "What—what is this?"

"The end," Shiris said, her voice almost sad. "Let it in."

Raestr looked down at the wine, which rippled in the cup, then up at Shiris. Her face and body expanded and contracted before Raestr's eyes, the skin stretching and tearing into ribbons. Then Shiris's flesh started to burn and flake off her face. Her eyes were pools of anger and madness and doom.

"He comes," Shiris said, her voice broken and roiling. "And I must receive Him."

The goblet toppled from Raestr's hand, ringing against the floor and spraying bloody wine across the pillows. The Warden tried to get up, but her body refused. Her legs went out from under her and she slithered to the floor. There she lay, staring up at Shiris's wavering form, her mouth gasping and working impotently. The silks hung above and behind the priestess looked like blood-smeared wings sprouting from her shoulders.

"I want you to know, I intended this all along," Shiris said, her voice waning to a breeze and waxing to thunder. "You were a good lover, but you were also too good a Warden, and His will is all."

Raestr's world burned away, center to edges, like a slip of paper held over a candle.

* * *

The Warden came back awake with a horrible,

wrenching pain from her mouth to her belly, and she immediately emptied her stomach all over the pillows and carpet.

She lost awareness again, directly into the sticky mess of blood and vomit, and awoke within heartbeats, her mouth filled with her own sick. She tasted blood and spat out as much as she could. Colors drained from her vision, reducing the chamber to grays and dull reds. The world around her seemed fluid, pulsing and breathing like a living thing. A *dying* thing.

Raestr should be dead. Why was she not dead?

Thunder rolled all around her, and she wondered if she were awake or dreaming. Something else was there with her: a dark presence that lurked just behind her, unseen but not unfelt.

Raestr peeled herself off the floor, smeared in blood and bile, her hair matted against her head and neck. Her legs felt hollow inside and itched on the surface, but the more she scratched the more it hurt. She slipped and slammed face-first into the floor. Her heart thundered unevenly in her ears, beating against the poison trying to end her.

Shiris had *poisoned* her.

Raestr stuck two trembling fingers down her throat and retched all over the floor, spewing a little more bloody vomit. She seemed to have got most of the toxin the first time—at least, what she was going to get out of her. She still felt woozy and weak. Her limbs barely obeyed her commands, but she had to move. She found her discarded clothes and weapons belt and headed for the exit.

The common room of the Last Rays had become

a sex and charnel pit: a mess of writhing bodies, gasping mouths, and sweating flesh. Bodies littered the floor and hung over tables and chairs, spewing entrails and drooling gore. Atop the carnage, men and women screamed and moaned, heedless of the devastation that was their bed. Some even seemed to take increasing pleasure from the horror. It reminded Raestr of watching blighted insects twitching in the last throes of life atop the corpse mound of their colony.

The distortion of Raestr's vision made the Last Rays celebrants look inhuman: their faces contorted and burned away as Shiris's had, their limbs stretched impossibly, and they sprouted fangs and slavering tusks. They grappled and feasted on the brothel's patrons, their every touch spreading poison that manifested in their victims as creeping veins of gray-black that rotted the flesh around them. The creatures impregnated the patrons with their own vileness. The corruption spread like a disease.

Raestr staggered and pushed through, batting away at the grasping talons that reached for her. Surely her heart would explode with each step, she thought.

She had almost reached the door when one of the creatures grasped her arm. Overbalanced, Raestr caught herself on something and pulled desperately to free herself. A creature that was half-man, half-monstrosity lay sprawled on a table, another creature bucking atop it. It clung to Raestr and looked up at her with eyes that both pleaded and promised. There was madness in those eyes. They filled her with unreasoning panic that threatened to rip her apart.

Without a thought—thought was long gone—she drew out her axe and hacked down at the thing's arm, gouging a deep red furrow in its flesh. Blood sprayed and the stench made her cough and vomit again, this time just in her mouth. The creature yowled in pain but didn't let go. A second, then a third strike severed the man's arm, and it flopped twitching to the floor. Raestr staggered back, looking around dazedly, but few of the others seemed to notice her, including the one fucking her attacker. Those that did look up at her did so with grins of fiendish approval, their eyes glowing and their fangs dripping. The dismembered man's yowls of pain mixed with his moans of pleasure.

Raestr backed against the door and managed to unlatch it with shaking fingers. She plunged through and fell to coughing in the thick smoke.

The warded palisades had become a curtain of smoke and flames, and even at this distance Raestr could see waves of barbarians pouring into the city. Screams and the ring of steel punctuated the droning crackle of flames. The barbarians had struck sooner than anyone had anticipated, and without her there to coordinate their efforts, the defenders had fallen.

By going to Shiris, Raestr had let Baelen fall to the Children of Ruin.

Somewhere deep in her churning guts, Raestr knew this was her fault, but now wasn't the time to wallow. Now was the time to fight.

Her Warden's mind went through her priorities: find the Bael, rally whatever warriors remained, fight back, save those she could. Find a way to survive. Get revenge.

A scream drew her attention to a scuffle out in the street in front of the Last Rays. Two barbarians had pinned a young man and were taking turns driving daggers into him, smiling as blood spurted onto their faces. The mangled half-corpse might have meant nothing to her, until she saw the shock of smeared blond hair and recognized her nameless squire. Her heart ached. He must have been searching for her and found this death instead. He was just a boy. Damn it all.

Near him in the street lay his warrior lover, eyes wide and staring, throat torn open.

Raestr turned away. Even if she had the strength to fight, she could not save her squire. The barbarians would only kill her too. Instead, she slipped past while they were finishing him off, focused on getting to the Bael's tower, limping through the streets on legs that felt as though they would crumble at any moment. She made her way among the buildings, taking cover when she needed to stay out of sight, pausing to cough up blood and spit. Her priorities had boiled down to two.

Survive.

Revenge.

* * *

The priestess's brown body danced through the semi-darkness, scribing a tale of rut and ruin with its own calligraphy. She swayed atop the brutish hulk of the Bael like a graceful bird of prey perched on a carcass, showing off its golden plumage even as it shot its beak down to take bites from a kill. Like the celebrants in the Last Rays, she consumed him and

corrupted him at a touch. In the bleary nightmare of a fracturing world, her darkness diffused into his wretched body like a living thing.

So focused were the two on the sex that they didn't even see the gory horror of Raestr leaning against the frame of the servant's door. Her arms and legs felt like bone and fire, and every bit of her middle ached like it would split open and spill out onto the floor. All but dead herself, Raestr watched Shiris singing a symphony of depravity over and to the grunting Bael. The horror cut deep inside her.

This. This is what she had fought for.

She'd slipped past the guards at the fort using an entrance even the Bael himself didn't know about. She'd watched Baelenese warders cut down under the steel of barbarians—watched the Children of Ruin riddle houses with burning arrows and rip out the entrails of children who fled from the smoke. She'd borne witness, unable to act, as the only life she had known for years crumbled to ash and shit, torn and pissed upon by the madness of a world that should have died centuries ago. And for what?

To watch her lover fucking her former master as it all burned around them.

Shiris had betrayed her—or possibly loved her, Raestr could not say. Perhaps the poison was the greatest gift Shiris had bestowed. Or perhaps there was no poison, and Raestr simply basked in their shared monstrosity.

Shiris had opened the gates of Baelen and destroyed its defenses, whether by commission or omission. Perhaps Shiris was one of the barbaric Children of Ruin. Or perhaps all of them.

Shiris had brought darkness and vileness into a world that had seen so much pain. Perhaps she worshiped Ruin. Or perhaps she *was* Ruin.

Horribly, all these things Raestr could have forgiven.

In the end, Shiris was all Raestr had left. And now, to have thrown her away—to have destroyed everything that mattered . . .

Thunder rolled and the darkness swirled. Enticing. Inviting. Demanding. Perhaps . . .

Perhaps this was how she survived.

Gripping her axe, Raestr hobbled toward the Bael's throne. Shiris saw her coming and moved aside just as the axe fell. Unlike a skull, the lord's fat belly had no bone to hold it together around the blade: it split, guts slithering out like skinned snakes. The Bael shrieked and flailed impotently. Raestr hacked right through one warding arm, sending the hand and part of the forearm tumbling away into the shadows. She plunged the axe into his guts again, ripping through his bloated stomach and loosing a flow of bile and stinking, half-digested food. Blood and worse spurted in her face.

Like a butcher without any skill, Raestr kept hacking at the meat of the Lord Protector. The axe went slick in her hand from all the blood and stomach fluid, making her aim clumsy. She cut into his chest, severing muscle and bone, then slipped and cut deep into his groin, severing his swollen cock. Black blood poured out after the fifth strike, and she realized she must have cut into his liver. The axe got tangled in his intestines, slipping out of Raestr's hand

more than once. When she couldn't hold it any more, she tore with her bare hands.

She hoped Ruin was pleased.

By the time Raestr was done, there was nothing left of the Bael himself that was remotely human. She'd lost her axe somewhere in the mess. Her arms burned with weariness.

She looked over at Shiris, who stood in the shadows, hand pressed over the tiny dagger that hung around her neck. Her face had a celebratory ecstasy on it that Raestr had once found alluring. Now, it seemed vulgar. Disgusting.

"You hear Him," Shiris said. "He embraces you. He has chosen you! You and I together!"

Raestr clambered out of the remains of the Bael's scattered corpse and stood shakily, slipping twice and righting herself. Three contorted fingers on a severed hand brushed against her leg. She gave the hand an absent kick and leaned on the broken, bloody throne, breathing raggedly.

Shiris's hands slipped around Raestr's back, onto her breasts. Raestr felt the hard length of Shiris's dagger pressing against her spine. "You and me," the priestess said. "Together."

Raestr turned in the priestess's arms. The dark ardor lifted Shiris's predatory beauty to new heights, and a frenzied madness danced in her red eyes. The priestess was victorious, all of her dreams blossoming. She wanted to fuck on and in the Bael's body. She wanted to fuck on this rotting corpse of a world. Love had blinded Raestr before, but no longer.

Raestr took the dagger that Shiris wore and

broke the chain with a sharp snap, making the priestess gasp in surprise and pleasure.

"Listen." Raestr plunged the blade to the hilt in the hollow below Shiris's jaw. "Did you hear it?"

The priestess stared at her with wide, confused eyes. Shiris tried to speak, choking on blood, then slumped back onto the floor. Raestr considered the shuddering corpse. The diaphanous robes were ripped open, exposing a jagged line of flesh from nipple to thigh. The once-succulent breasts were now deflated and vulgar. It didn't look like a person anymore. Raestr wondered that it ever had.

Slowly, in awful imitation of the dead priestess, Raestr ripped open her own clothes, baring her breasts and loins to the awful, beautiful, glorious world. It would be ending soon, and she would revel in its ruin. So much work to be done first. For the glory of her new lord.

* * *

An hour later, when the barbarians burst through the barricade and into the throne room, they found the place dark, lit only with the crackling coals of braziers long since overturned. Two naked bodies hung upside down in the chamber: a pale husk that had once been a fat man, now little more than a mess of torn flesh, and a brown-skinned woman, her throat and face a mass of sticky blood, her eyes wide with shock.

The twin corpses that decorated that room, and the terrible things that had been done to them, made even the Children of Ruin pause on the doorstep, for

though they were cruel and violent, they still nursed some small, flickering flames of humanity within their hearts.

Then they saw the blood-soaked woman seated on the throne atop the gory dais, the woman who had transcended such constraints. For she had made the sacrifices of herself and of the world and become the vessel of the Demon Lord's will.

"Welcome, children," she said, her voice tremulous. She put one leg over the arm of the chair, taking power from her nakedness. "Kneel before your mother."

Slowly, one by one, they knelt. 🐾



William King

William King lives in Prague in the Czech Republic with his lovely wife Radka and his sons Dan and William Karel. He has been a professional author and games developer for over a quarter of a century. He is the creator of Gotrek and Felix for Black Library. He is also the author of the World of Warcraft novel *Illidan*. Over a million of his books are in print in English.

He has been nominated for the David Gemmell Legend Award. His short fiction has appeared in *Year's Best SF* and *Best of Interzone*. He has twice won the Origins Awards for game design. His hobbies include roleplaying games and MMOs, as well as travel.

As soon as he saw the cover for *Shadow of the Demon Lord* he knew he wanted to be part of this project. Giant demons, a world on the verge of destruction—what's not to love? He immediately backed the Kickstarter and jumped at the chance to contribute a short story to *Chronicles of the Demon Lord*.

The Wizard Hunters

“You’re not the most imaginative of men, are you?” the wizard’s former apprentice said. His name was Alanor and he was a short, wiry youth, his hair unnaturally white, doubtless from all the evil magic he had worked. His round glasses still hung from his beaky nose. One of the lenses was broken where I had smacked his head into a wall. His face had that depraved look that wizards get when they’ve cast too many dark spells. You must have seen it a hundred times.

“Nope,” I replied. “But I am not the one wearing runic shackles either.”

I gave the chain a jerk to indicate that now was not the time to slack off and think of sarcastic retorts. It was almost dark and I had no intention of getting caught on the path through the Dark Forest if I could help it. It was cold, and it was going to rain, and I was looking forward to a hot meal and my first bed under a thatched roof in almost a week.

I checked the sky. Through the branches I caught sight of the stormy face of the emerging moon. Swirling patterns danced across its surface. Scholars say a whole other world exists up there. I wondered if it was as shitty as this one down here.

“Was that really necessary? I am quite aware I am your prisoner,” Alanor said.

The mulch of fallen leaves squelched beneath my feet as I walked. The wetness seeping through my boots was annoying but not as much as his whining. “When I get you back to Good Fortune, you’re going to burn at the stake.”

"That doesn't bother you?"

I shook my head. "Why should it? I'll get paid when you get cooked."

"It doesn't trouble you that you might be taking an innocent man to be burned alive?"

"You'd be surprised how many innocent men I've taken to be executed." I pretended to count on my fingers. "Pretty much all of them, come to think of it. If you believed their stories."

"But I am innocent," Alanor said. "In a way."

"Of course you are. You never stabbed your master in the back and burned down his house and fled from the city. That was somebody else. Pure coincidence that you legged it at exactly the same time."

"No. I killed him."

"Difficult to see how you are innocent then. I'm no lawyer, but that seems like a real flaw in your defence."

"My master was summoning demons. He wanted me to join him."

"So you planted a dagger in his spine to teach him not to do that again. Very virtuous."

"It was me or him. Once you get that sort of invitation it is join or die."

"He must have thought you a likely candidate then. Or did he just pick random people off the street and make them that offer?"

Alanor paused for another long moment. In the darkness of the woods something big moved. I heard it crackling through the undergrowth.

"I *was* a likely candidate," he said. "At least I thought I was. I thought I was capable of anything. Until the moment came."

I scanned the woods, just in case something nasty was coming. I leveled my crossbow to my shoulder.

"The crossbow's not loaded, you idiot," Alanor said.

"It's a wonder I ever caught you, isn't it? Still, what does that make you, if you can be outwitted by an idiot?"

"It was pure luck. If I hadn't been sleeping off the Black Lotus you'd never have got me."

I continued to scan the woods, looking through the sighting ring on the tip of the crossbow. "I must have been lucky scores of times, then, with all the people I've caught."

He studied the crossbow in the gathering gloom. Doubtless he noticed the bolt magazine and the clockwork mechanism. "That's artificer work, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is. Cost me a pretty penny, too."

"What's the mechanism do?"

"Cocks the crossbow and drops a bolt into the channel when I pull the lever. I can fire this thing faster than an archer draws a bow. It hits harder as well. Just in case you are thinking of legging it while my back is turned."

"You must be successful to afford that."

"Successful enough." The noise stopped. Probably just a deer or some birds in the undergrowth. I kept the weapon at shoulder height for a minute anyway. There was still a chance of beastmen lurking even this close to the forest's edge. I also paid attention to the stealthy movements of the shackled man behind me. "I can turn and shoot you before you hit me with those chains. Put a bolt right through your heart if I need to."

"I am surprised you haven't done it already. I am sure the reward says 'dead or alive.'"

"I prefer not to have to drag your corpse through the Dark Forest in this weather. Dead bodies get horrible stiff. A bastard to carry."

"But you would do it if you had to?"

I nodded. "At least until I found a bucket and some salt."

"What?"

"I could just take your head back then, packed in salt."

"Then I am surprised you have not done that already."

"You have a bucket or salt anywhere in that ruined tower you were holed up in?"

He fell quiet after that and we trudged on down the forest path. He wasn't very cheerful company. Few of my roadside companions ever are.

"Why did you not bring a bucket and salt? You seem equipped for everything else—artificer cross-bow, runic chains to contain my magic. Concealed weapons, too, unless my eyes are going." I could tell the question had been preying on his mind as we trudged along the muddy road.

"Usually it's not worth it. Salt's expensive. Heavy, too, when it's by the bucketful."

"Why not just take the head then?"

"Is that what you want? I could arrange it if it would make you happy." My little joke did not make him look happy.

"No. I don't. I am just curious."

"If the head isn't packed it will go off—get battered, too. I've had clients refuse to pay up because

the head wasn't recognizable. They said it might belong to anybody."

"And a man like you would never do that, right? A cheap thug would never just go out and take somebody's head for a profit."

"I'm not cheap. I'll be getting a hundred and three gold for you. Somebody on the city council back in Good Fortune really wants you."

We rounded the bend in the road and the inn came into view. I caught the flicker of firelight through the windows. Heard the chatter indoors, too. Wood smoke hung in the air. It was a relief to see the place. I am usually pretty good at finding my way but there are times and places in the Dark Forest all tracks look the same.

"I don't like the look of this," Alanor said.

"Not up to your high standards, eh? I would have thought you'd be grateful to get in out of the cold."

"There's something wrong here," he said.

"Wrong?" I wondered if he was trying to put me off because he thought he might have a better chance of escape if we were camped out under the stars. That didn't seem right, though. He had made no attempt to get away over the past two nights. Maybe he had just been lulling me into a false sense of security. Some prisoners try that.

"It smells off."

"I thought you didn't like the look of it. Now it's the smell?"

"Someone's been working magic in there. Not pleasant magic, either."

"You'd be the expert on that."

"I would, although I don't expect you to believe me about this."

"You'd rather sleep in a ditch than in this inn? Even though you're not being asked to pay and you might get a hot meal out of it?"

He licked his lips. "You never said anything about a meal."

"Got to keep your strength up if you're going to walk all the way back to Good Fortune."

He stood there, undecided. Something really did seem to have him worried. It was all over his face. But he was hungry, too, and cold, and that warred with his caution and eventually won. I could almost see the thought written on his brow. He was going to die soon anyway, why not get a hot dinner in his belly along the way?

It worried me, though. He might just have been a good actor, but if so, I could not see the point of it, and things I don't understand always trouble me.

* * *

The door was barred when I tried it. Not too surprising for an inn in the middle of the Dark Forest. The walls were as thick as those of a fortress, too. The place was defensible if beastmen came out of the woods or robbers came along the road.

I banged on the door, and the sounds of conversation on the other side stopped. Someone shuffled closer. The peephole slid open. A bloodshot eye beneath a caterpillar eyebrow looked out at me. It was underlit by a lamp, judging by the glow.

"What do you want?" The voice was gruff and not at all friendly.

"Well, this is an inn and I am a traveler," I said. "What do you think?"

"Wait a minute." The metal sheet slid back into place over the slot. I leaned against the door, hoping to hear what was going on inside. My hearing is good, but these guys were muttering and the wood was thick. I wondered if I could kick it down.

I turned to Alanor. "Looks like you might get your wish: You could be sleeping in a ditch tonight."

"They'll open the door," he said. "More's the pity."

"Care to expand on that?"

"Somebody's worked magic in there and they are just getting started. There'll be a ritual performed here tonight. We'll be taking part in it, whether you like it or not."

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you were trying to scare me."

"Too late for that. If we run now, they'll just get suspicious and chase us, or, worse, send something to chase us. I wouldn't get far anyway." He raised the chains in both hands. It took effort. The tendons on the side of his neck stood out. He was not a strong man and those shackles were heavy.

"You wouldn't be trying to convince me to run so your friends inside can free you, would you?"

He grimaced. "I don't think I could do that, do you?"

"Nope."

"Then why would I even try?"

Keys rattled. The bar lifted. The door swung

open. Faces peered out at us. A large, balding man with a glistening pate held a lantern so it illumined us. He was the owner of the caterpillar eyebrows as well as the inn. I could see that there were people behind him clutching swords and daggers. I held the crossbow easily in my hands, prepared to lift it at the first sign of trouble. The innkeeper looked sweaty and nervous.

"I know you," said the innkeeper. "You're the bounty hunter passed through last week. Looking for the cultist."

"I am a wizard," said Alanor from behind me. He sounded outraged.

"I see you caught him," said the innkeeper. "Surprised that he's still alive."

"Too heavy to carry," I said.

The innkeeper snorted. "Told you you should have rented a horse."

"Not at your prices and not when the beast might have broken its leg going through the woods. The New God alone knows what you would have charged me for that."

A chill passed over the assembled crowd when I mentioned the New God. A couple of the men behind the innkeeper showed their teeth in smiles that held no humor. Maybe they were followers of the Old Faith. I didn't think so, though. They gave me a look. You, of all people, must know the one. It was as if they were thinking of sticking a knife in my ribs and twisting it around to see what sort of noises I would make.

"You going to come in or are you going to stand there all night letting the heat out?"

"I don't fancy shouldering through all your customers," I said.

"Can't be too careful," said the innkeeper. There was a tremor in his voice and he swallowed his words as he spoke them. "There are bandits all over the place these days. Things have been going to the dogs ever since the Orc King slew the Emperor."

"You got that right."

He shoed his companions back from the doorway and made a bow and a flourish, indicating I should enter. I prodded Alanor in first. He shuffled along, movements restricted by the chains. All eyes in the place focused on him. A captive murderer is always a good topic for discussion in an isolated inn.

Except that this one wasn't. Nobody jeered. Nobody tried to trip him up. Nobody made any jokes or asked him about what he had done. They just watched him with cold, hard eyes. I looked at the innkeeper until he stepped out of the door and away. Something in here wasn't right; I wasn't going to have him at my back.

Once I had a clear space I stepped over the threshold. I walked along the edge of the room all the way to the bar. I set myself in the corner with the wall to my spine and studied the other customers.

The place was full for a lonely inn in the middle of nowhere. There were at least a dozen men. Some of them looked like they might be locals. They had the leather tunics of woodsmen and the soot-smudged faces of charcoal burners. One of them was a noble and two of them might have been his bodyguards, judging by their mailshirts and the well-maintained weapons they were just sliding back into their

scabbards. There were no women, and all of the men looked odd. There was something about them, but at that moment I could not quite put my finger on it.

I grew more uneasy. Maybe it was the fact that the innkeeper's wife and two buxom daughters were not to be seen. Last time I passed through they had been serving ale.

The innkeeper looked at me. "What'll it be?"

"Food, if you have any, and a room for the night. One with a lock on the door."

"You don't trust us?" one of the mercenaries asked. The whole company laughed. It was not a reassuring sound. It was as if they were all sharing a joke that I could not understand.

I indicated Alanor with the tip of my crossbow. "Prisoner. You would not want him getting loose in the middle of the night. He's a wizard."

"Is he, now?" The voice belonged to the nobleman. It has all the fruity arrogance you'd expect.

"Yep," I said.

"What was his crime?"

"Killed his master with a dagger. Ran off with his gold."

"That's a bad business. Why'd he kill his master?"

"Because he was wearing the same ring as you," said Alanor. All eyes in the room swiveled to look at the captive wizard. I glanced at the innkeeper. He swallowed and would not meet my gaze. Definitely scared. Most likely of his hard-looking guests rather than me.

I looked at the man at the nearest table. I caught a glimpse of his ring. It was silver with a skull in a circle on it. It was a strange thing for a wood's ranger to be wearing.

The room went quiet. All you could hear was the crackle of the log on the fire and the clink of chains as Alanor shifted his weight. The wizard and the noble were the centre of attention. Nobody was looking at me. I took advantage of the moment to flick the lever on my crossbow. The steel wire bow-string drew taught, a bolt dropped into place.

"Well, this is unfortunate," said the nobleman. "You know about the Pale Prince?"

"I know who he is," Alanor said.

"Your master was a devotee."

"You are, too."

"What did you do with the books?"

"Burned them."

"You don't really expect me to believe that, do you?"

"I don't give a toss whether you believe me."

I turned the crossbow on the nobleman and said, "You would not care to tell me what you're talking about, would you? I'm starting to feel a little left out."

The nobleman did not look terribly worried for a man standing in the sighting ring of an artificer-made weapon. "There's no need for any trouble, bounty hunter. I'll take your prisoner off your hands. Pay you the reward, as well. No need to go all the way to Good Fortune to collect it."

"You'll never live to spend the money," Alanor said. "He's just trying to get your guard down."

That thought had crossed my mind too. I kept the bow pointed at the noble. I caught sight of one of the foresters moving, out of the corner of my eye. The bodyguards looked ready to leap in front of their

master and take a bolt for him. Now that's the sort of loyalty you don't see every day. I was impressed.

"I might settle for double," I said. "What's your interest in him and this book, anyway?"

"I'll pay you double if you know something about the book."

"I might."

"Idiot," Alanor said.

"Good," said the noble. "Then surely there's no need for you to point that rather nasty weapon at me. If you're interested in coming to an arrangement, we can all relax."

"I've always found negotiations go more smoothly when I have a weapon in my hand. Tell me about the book."

"Yes, tell him," said Alanor. There was nasty edge to his voice that I did not like at all.

"All you need to know is that it's worth a lot of money."

"Pity I burned it, then," said Alanor. The noble rose to his feet. His hand went to his sword-hilt. His bodyguards looked ready to pounce.

I pulled the crossbow right back to my shoulder and aimed it at the nobleman's head. "You haven't paid for him yet," I said.

"He's not going to pay you, idiot boy. He's going to slit your throat and offer your blood to the Pale Prince first chance he gets."

"Not necessarily," said the nobleman.

"No. You're just going to let a wandering bounty hunter go his own way knowing you're all a bunch of demon worshipers. He'll run to the first Inquisitor he can find and see what he can get for the information."

The nobleman slapped him again. A thought struck me that should have occurred to me earlier. "I recognize the accent. You're from Good Fortune. You here because you are looking for this murdering bastard."

"Guilty as charged."

"You followed the same trail I did. Talked to the same people. Found the same tracks."

"Didn't have to," said the nobleman. "We followed yours. You have a reputation, bounty hunter. We knew that if anyone could find him, you would."

"I am flattered."

"So, do we have a deal?"

"I want to know about this book."

"It is none of your concern. It's magician's business."

"It contains the spells for summoning the Pale Prince, among other things," Alanor said. "They are not the sort of magics you want to fall into the hands of this man and his pets."

"So, you did read your master's book," said the nobleman. "Where is it?"

"I told you. I burned it. I did not want those secrets abroad in the land."

"That's unfortunate. I suppose there's only one more use we can put you to."

That sounded ominous. "He's still my prisoner until you pay for him," I said.

"Take him," the nobleman said. His hand pointed at me and his bodyguard started to move.

I pulled the trigger. The bolt flew straight at the noble. It should have punched through his eye and out the back of his skull. Instead it impacted on

something a few inches short of its target. Iridescent light flickered as the missile deflected at right angles and ricocheted into the wall. It narrowly missed a stuffed stag's head hanging there.

The rest of the crowd did not waste any time. One or two of them leaped to their feet. The cleverer ones tipped tables to use as cover. I put a bolt into the chest of the nearest one, pulled the lever, dropped another bolt into place, and pinned another one's hand to a table. It looked spectacular but I was aiming for his chest. Guess he was moving too fast.

I put another bolt into the head of one the charcoal burners when it popped up over the table he was hiding behind. The rest of them kept their heads down after that.

"Enough," the nobleman said. The air around him shimmered and swirled like oil moving on the surface of water. "Do I have to do everything myself?"

I decided to try for him again, in case whatever protective magic encased him had been weakened by my last shot. No such luck. This bolt ended up buried in the floor between Alanor's feet.

The nobleman gestured. The air chilled. Sparkling lights encircled his hand. He pointed in my direction, and excruciating agony smashed through my chest. I caught sight of a line of rainbow colors fading in the air between us as I fell forward into deep darkness.

* * *

The air smelled of wine when I opened my eyes. My chest burned. My head ached. I had some difficulty moving my limbs. I felt curved wooden slats at my back.

"You're awake," said Alanor.

"I am starting to wish I wasn't. Where am I?"

"The wine cellar, I think." His speech had that mushy quality that voices get when their owners have taken a heavy beating.

"I am surprised I am still alive."

"You won't be for long," he said.

"You seem pretty sure of that."

"They're going to sacrifice us. Or maybe just you and the innkeeper's family. They might keep me alive a bit longer and torture me more to see if I am lying about the book."

"You're not, are you? You really did burn it and all the rest of your master's stuff."

His laughter bubbled in his throat as if something had broken loose inside his body and was obstructing his breath. I'd heard sounds like that before. They were never a good sign.

"I did."

"Why?"

"Because there are some things that should not be allowed in this world. The spells in that book were among them."

"You didn't always feel that way."

"I am a wizard. I wanted knowledge. I wanted power. I *thought* I was prepared to pay any price for it. It turned out I was wrong."

He did not have much reason to be lying. We were both in the same boat. "What changed your mind?"

"I couldn't make the sacrifice. It was a little kid, scared shitless. I could not look in her eyes and use the knife."

"That's when you stabbed your master?"

"No. I stabbed the old bastard after he stabbed the little girl. Took me too long to work out what I was going to do."

I tried to move my hands. They were bound tight. The rope was thick.

Alanor said, "They've already started with the innkeeper and his daughters. They're saving us for last. It'll be you and then me."

"Why?"

"You're strong and I am a wizard. My death will pull the demon right into the summoning circle."

"What are they up to? Why here? Why now?"

"Just showing their loyalty, proving their worship, paving the way."

"For what?"

"There are many worlds," Alanor said. "The distance separating them is as great as the width of the universe in one direction, thin as sailcloth in another. They are punching holes in the skin of this world so that power and *things* can flow in from the Void. Every little pinprick weakens the fabric of reality. Eventually it will just tear and the Demon Lord and all his minions will flood through. That's the day our world will end."

"What sort of madmen would do that?"

"The sort that thinks they will become a demon or a god when it happens. That's what our noble friend is up to. He was part of the same coven as my master."

I remembered what Alanor had said upstairs. "That's what the rings are — signs they belonged to the same cult. Seems a bit dumb to wear a badge saying I belong to a cult of evil sorcerers."

"They only wear them when they are on cult

business and prepared to butcher anybody who might recognize them for what they are."

"You really did go through all the initiation rites, didn't you?"

"All but the last one."

"Well, I suppose we had better escape then."

He laughed. Although it might have been just a wheeze. It was difficult to tell. "How are we going to do that?"

"You're going to pull off my boot. In the heel there is a key to your shackles."

He did as he was told. "They searched you. Took away your daggers and your crossbows. What are you going to use for a weapon?"

"Let me worry about that. Can you do something about the magician?"

"Maybe. I'm in rather bad shape. I haven't eaten. I've been beaten. And that's on top of being exhausted from struggling along in those chains for three days."

"I'll take that as a yes."

"Good to know you're so confident."

My boot came off. I heard clinking.

"I can't use the key on the shackles," Alanor said. "I can't reach the lock."

"Give the key to me. Don't drop it. I don't fancy fumbling around in the dark."

After what felt like an eternity, the key was in my hand. I reached out with my fingertips, found the shackles and the lock. There was a click as it opened. The chains fell away. I hoped I was not making a terrible mistake.

Alanor spoke a word. Light shimmered in the air around us. I saw a faint glow in his eyes. He looked

as if he had been beaten pretty badly but he was still able to focus.

"They're going to be coming for us soon," he said. The light flickered and dimmed. He frowned in concentration and it came back. As he did so I heard footsteps coming down the corridor. They stopped right outside the door.

"You're going to need to untie my hands."

He did so. I flexed my fingers and finished unlocking the chains on his legs. His ankles were chaffed and a bit swollen.

"Thank you," he said.

"I didn't do it for you," I said. The door opened. One of the mercenaries stood there. He had a cowed robe on. It was heavy and it looked like it would restrict his movements.

"What the—?" he said. I cut him off with a blow from the chains. The links were big and heavy and made of hard metal. They smashed him in the face and broke his nose. He dropped his dagger, and I kicked him in the nadsgers.

I could see a strange glow coming from the far end of the corridor. It resembled the witchlight surrounding Alanor but it was brighter, a mixture of puce and sickly green. The sensation of cold increased. Mist swirled through the air. Something told me it was not just the chill of the cellars.

"What is that?" I asked.

"They're working the ritual. They must be ready for another sacrifice. That's why the guard came."

"We need to get out of here."

As if on cue, the sound of chanting coming from the other chamber intensified. The door at the end of

the corridor swung open and another cowed figure looked out. He was clearly impatient and wondering when the next sacrifice was going to appear. His cowl fell back and his eyes went wide when he saw me.

There was nothing for it. I charged along the corridor fast as my legs would carry me. The cultist brandished the wavy-bladed dagger he held. I lashed out with the chain, unfurling it as if it were a whip. The last link caught him on the chin. He toppled into the room, landing flat on his back.

I jumped through the door, bringing the heel of my boot down on his stomach. He groaned as his diaphragm ruptured. I tumbled forward, lashing out with the chain again. I tangled it around another robed man's legs and pulled him from his feet. Then I kicked him in the jaw. It probably wasn't necessary since his head hit the flagstones pretty hard, but it gave me some satisfaction.

There were five robed cultists left. They had wavy-bladed daggers. Greenish light glittered in their eyes but it was not the light that held my attention.

A bunch of bodies lay piled outside a pentacle in the center of the room. Their chests had been opened and the hearts ripped out. It was easy to see that because one of the cultists was squeezing the blood out of the last one. The droplets did not have a chance to hit the floor. They swirled through the air and were drawn into a floating globe of light that hovered in the middle of the chamber. It looked about as big as man's head but it gave the sense of being much larger. In the depths, something lurked, sentient, hungry, and coming closer. My gaze met its gaze. The contact had the force of a punch. I felt vertiginous, as if I stood

on the edge of a great abyss and was about to tumble in.

This was the thing Alanor had talked about, a demon. It saw me and it smiled and I knew then it was going to hunt me down and consume my soul.

The nobleman pointed his dagger at me and once more magic swirled. More by chance than design, I flicked the chain toward him at the exact moment the spell's energy left the weapon point. It impacted on the chain. My hand tingled as the runes on the links absorbed the mystical energies. I swung the chain again and it crashed into the mage's head.

There was an awful crack. The nobleman screamed as he fell over the edge of the pentacle. He seemed to be sucked into the hole in reality as if by a mighty wind, and he receded into the distance, shrinking like a man vanishing at speed toward the horizon.

"You've done it now," I heard Alanor shout. "You've broken the pentacle. The demon is free."

Obviously the remaining cultists agreed with him. They moved toward the door slowly, as if something impeded their steps. It was easy to understand what that was. The howl of the wind from the Void increased. There was terrible suction drawing us all toward it. One by one, the cultists were pulled in and went flying to greet the demon they worshiped. I felt myself being dragged in, too. I tried to resist, but I couldn't. No matter how I exerted my strength I could not break away.

"The chains!" Alanor shouted. "They disrupt magic. It's our only chance."

It took a moment for what he was saying to sink in. I gathered the chains together and tossed them

toward the hole. They flew through the air normally, as if whatever spell was affecting me did not affect them. They hit the floating bubble.

Suddenly the air stank of ozone. Lightning danced across the face of the Void. The chains turned cherry red, then white hot, as if they were back in the forge. The runes on them blazed so brightly that I could see their after-images even when I closed my eyes.

The wind shrieked. There was a sound like a thunderclap. I was jerked forward into the pentacle. The gate closed in front of me, and I sprawled down atop the bloody pile of corpses. My ears were ringing and my hair stood on end. I felt as if I was going to throw up.

I looked back and saw Alanor standing in the doorway. He nodded his head in satisfaction, then turned and limped away. I tried to pick myself up but I was too weak.

"Come back" I shouted. "You're still worth a hundred and three gold pieces to me."

He didn't come back. I knew I was going to have to go looking for him again, but right then I was just grateful to be alive. I heard screams from upstairs, and when I staggered up there myself, I found the men the noble had left on guard were dead.

I heard a horse galloping into the night. It looked as if the wizard had got away. I started to pick the skull rings off the men's fingers. Doubtless they would be worth something to the right man.

And that, Inquisitor, is how I came to have a wine barrel full of salted heads and all these lovely bits of jewelry. How much are they worth to you? 🐾



Erin M. Evans

Erin M. Evans received a degree in Anthropology from Washington University in St. Louis—and promptly stuck it in a box. Nowadays she uses that knowledge of bones, mythology, and social constructions to flesh out fantasy worlds. She is the author of the Brimstone Angels Saga, including the most recent title, *The Devil You Know*. She lives in Washington State with her husband and sons, and a demon in the crawlspace (she is pretty sure).

She was inspired by considering the ways the mundane, everyday evils we perpetuate spiral into greater injustices when left unconsidered. Also, she liked *Shadow of the Demon Lord's* Underworld cycle, so she stole it.

Shadows in the Void

The Underworld had no gate, the first confirmation that perhaps the Cosmogony wasn't perfect. One moment, Nita stood in the ruins of the village, eyes on Chloris and the knife shaking in her hand. The blade plunged into Chloris's belly, her blood spurting into the hollow they'd dug into the scorched dirt, and Nita flinched.

When Nita opened her eyes again, there were only shadows in an endless cavern and poor Chloris, only a fresh, sullen spirit gleaming in the darkness, amid the duller ghosts of the long-dead.

Nita gasped, and a gloved hand covered her mouth. "Don't breathe so loud that they hear you," Brand whispered in her ear. "Not unless you want to stay down here."

Chloris seemed not to notice Nita or Brand or brave Louvien, his squire, nor did the other ghosts. They clustered around the newcomer, drifting hands grasping at her for the last shreds of life, the hope that perhaps, perhaps, a living host had appeared among them.

Chloris's spirit drifted from the hungry ghosts, as if she remembered to be afraid of their touch, but not how she'd gotten to the Underworld. The ghosts must have smelled the memory of blood on her—that was the plan, wasn't it? Let Chloris be the sacrifice, let her forge the path into Lady Tanser's domain; she'd sworn herself to the gods, after all. The taste of leather and the potions they'd coated themselves in, bitter and earthy, filled Nita's mouth

as every part of her wished to scream into Brand's hand.

It's going to get worse, she told herself, clutching the amulet around her throat, before it gets better. Her thoughts sped with the legends of the Underworld's layers, its terrible guardians, the distance and dangers between she, Brand, and Louvien, and the ghost they sought.

As Chloris's flight led the thicket of ghosts away from her former comrades, the dead quickly pulled the memories of blood from her and found her to be one of their own kind. They lost interest and did not notice the three living mortals, standing off to the side, each hung with amulets of gold and precious magic that hid their true nature. Nita swallowed.

The Dead want form and breath, Nita thought, old catechisms suddenly become survival tips. The Living want knowledge. You must give up one to gain the other.

Unless the Apostles gave you the power to have both.

The young thief rubbed her thumb over the gem of the amulet, the first of the many gifts the church-masters had given them to stop the world from ending.

Brand finally took his hand from Nita's mouth. "Let's find Hedira's uncle."

* * *

Hedira had spent the better part of a bell studying the frieze along the temple's narthex before Nita interrupted her. "What are you looking at?"

Hedira gave a little shake of her head, the modest spread of her antlers exaggerating the motion. "All of it."

The frieze showed the twin pantheons, the division of the world. On the left, Shesbron, Lord of the Endless Skies, surrounded by his twelve shining children and the world of the Living. On the right, skeletal Queen Tanser, surrounded by the twelve monstrous Breathless Watchers and the world of the Dead. Between them, a shining wall with a single gate—the Living would die and pass on to the world of the Dead, the Dead would forget and become too light for the Underworld's grip, rising to be reborn in the world of the Living. And except for that passing, the two should never meet.

Unless the Church of Shesbron demanded it, Nita amended, though it toed blasphemy to acknowledge that.

"This is what they teach you?" Hedira asked.

"From the cradle," Nita said. She studied Hedira's face—looking for a hint of the disgust she would expect a Cythrine to have at the Cosmogony, or perhaps the awe of one who'd fled the creatures' wicked cult. But Hedira only looked pensive.

"Do they not teach the Cosmogony where . . . you're from?" Nita asked clumsily.

Hedira waggled a hand, a gesture Nita was learning meant an imperfect answer. "It's not considered to matter."

Because the Cythrines believed the Cosmogony and the cycle were of suffering, not of experience, to be borne but never honored. Because they believed the world was ending, and so the gods were of no consequence at all. Because of the demon they worshiped.

Nita's eyes swept the familiar image. "Where . . . Where does it fit in?"

For a long moment, Hedira said nothing, only kept her

eyes on the frieze. She reached a long-fingered hand out to stroke the gilded crest of the wall between the worlds. "Here is Suddath," she pronounced. "The Shadow in the Void."

* * *

Nita paused at the edge of a canyon that yawned into the darkness, deeper and wider than she would have thought possible. The floor of it writhed with ghosts and stranger things. The clack of carapaces, the whoosh of flames fed by stinking gases. Down at the deepest point, she could sense the shadow of something enormous, maybe endless. *Mocherad*, she thought. *The Everburning Darkness. Fourth among the Bone Queen's Breathless Watchers.*

She wondered if the gods or their guardians knew that the Shadow in the Void was drawing nearer. In the shadows below, she could imagine agitation, desperation.

"Could Hedira be down there?" Nita whispered, hardly letting her breath cross her lips.

"The Cosmogony says the Cythrines are confined to the deepest layers," Brand replied just as softly. "Their wickedness drags them down, slows their return to the world of the Living."

Nita looked back at him and Louvien. "Do you really think she was wicked?"

"She had a lot of years with them," Louvien pointed out. He scratched his stubby nose. "Just because she did a little better near the end, doesn't mean that she wasn't bad enough to be condemned."

Nita raised an eyebrow. Louvien might have been

a squire to a Knight of Shesbron, but she'd known him long enough to mark his avarice, his pride. "I don't think she did anything much worse than the rest of us," Nita said.

Louvien folded his arms. "How many blood sacrifices have you been to?"

"Regardless," Brand said, "we're not looking for Hedira, but the high patriarch. You won't insist, I trust, that her killer is too good for the deepest levels?"

Nita dropped her gaze. "No."

Then Louvien sneezed. The sound exploded through the canyon as though it had been something huge launched from a catapult, followed by the thunderous clatter of ten thousand legs against glass-smooth stone.

"Back!" Brand hissed. He pulled Louvien by the hood of his jerkin, back toward the jagged forest of stone behind them. Nita raced after, hands on her knives—as if it would make any difference, as if they weren't going to die. The amulets had the power to make the ghosts and Watchers ignore them, but the dead didn't breathe. There was no disguising the sneeze.

A terrible wind scattered the ghosts as Nita ducked behind a tree and Mocherad breached the edge of the canyon. A face the size of a cart bed, pale and expressionless with deep, empty eyes searched the ledge of the canyon, long segmented legs tapping against the stone. From each empty eye, a trio of ropey appendages bloomed, stroking the stone, as if searching for some inconsistency in the surface.

Nita clutched her amulet, not daring to move.

She looked between the stone trees, to where Brand and Louvien hid—much closer to the terrible guardian. The eye-feelers crept toward them, the pale face looming closer. Nita saw Brand's hand close more tightly on Louvien's shirt and for a terrible moment she waited.

Then the Breathless Watcher reared up, hideous and voiceless, and slid back down the canyon, legs clattering like a rockslide. Tears of relief flooded Nita's eyes as she rushed over to Louvien and Brand.

"I thought," Louvien whispered, voice shaking. "I thought . . . Well . . . well done, Apostles." He kissed his amulet. "Well done, Sir Brand!"

Brand sheathed his sword, nodding once at his squire. They would never speak of the moment, Nita knew, where Brand's hand had shifted, ready to push instead of pull.

* * *

The end began one spring day, just after the thindolt-horn burst into sick-smelling blossom and the roof-gardens became dry enough to spend the day in. They'd wintered in Eylant, in the shadow of the temple of Peruna, the Angel of Permanence. Hedira had been gone for months, traveling over the waters to the island where the Cythrines made their home. She returned thinner, an ugly bruise healing on her cheek and one spur of her antlers snapped off—Nita wondered if the Cythrines had done that because she was apostate or if someone between here and there had attacked her. But Hedira gave her no chance to ask.

"The world is going to end," she said. "We have to stop it."

"Isn't that what you people have been saying for centuries?" Chloris asked.

"And I thought we weren't meant to stop it," Louvien said. "That it was better to lie back and let it happen."

"You are oversimplifying."

"I thought," Brand said, one hand on the hilt of his sword, "that you had left such heresies behind you."

Hedira's black eyes narrowed. "You don't understand," she said. "They are not waiting. They have found a way to hasten the end."

"If so, the gods will stop them," Brand said with infinite patience. "There is no ending—everything is a cycle. Even if the Cythrines —"

"Suddath doesn't answer to the gods!" Hedira said, growing agitated. "The Shadow in the Void is outside this world! They will open the gate and he will devour us all, from the babes in their cradles to the ghosts in the Underworld!"

Nita looked to Brand—they all looked to Brand. Her heart scaled her throat, watching, waiting. The Knight of Shesbron had the ear of the Apostles, the power of the Church and the Cosmogony behind him. His position, his power bought them all a little comfort, but you'd have to be a fool not to see how badly it could go if he turned on you. Nita's chest tightened, waiting.

Brand regarded Hedira, seemingly unperturbed, but his expression had shifted, ever so slightly, as hard and cold as iron in the heart of winter, even if he smiled.

"That sounds," he said, "like a threat."

Hedira's shoulders tensed. "I wouldn't threaten you," she said, her voice softer now. "Please believe that. I'm only trying to warn you."

"Why would you need to warn us of something that

cannot happen?" Brand asked. "The Cosmogony dictates that all things are contained within the cycle. What is shall pass one day, what was shall return again. At no point in the history of the world has that been proven false."

"What happens the first time it is?" Hedira asked.

Brand smiled and patted her cheek. "That won't happen."

"If it does?" When he didn't answer, she went on. "The opening of the gates will not be a gentle process. The earth will crack. The mountains will wake. Storms and worse—"

"When that happens," Brand said, "I will take your warning to the Apostles myself."

Not even a full day passed before the first of the earthquakes crumbled Peruna's temple into rubble, and whatever peace Nita had gained from Brand's certainty began to crumble, too.

* * *

They had to be deeper than the Canyon of Mocherad, Nita realized, looking up at the endless void above her, swirling with ever-lightening ghosts. But even though Nita felt sure that their steps had traveled ever-downward, the darkness above seemed like a night sky that went on forever, and she found herself thinking of the depthless gaze of Suddath. She shuddered.

The souls of the dead drifted, slow and thin as distant clouds. *Older ghosts, Nita thought, souls that had almost forgotten their former selves, souls that were close to being reborn in the world of the Living, as the Cosmogony dictated.*

"Who do you think they were?" she whispered to Louvien as Brand stopped to consider their paths. "What do you think they've forgotten?"

Louvien gave her an odd look. "Does it matter? They're dead."

"It's best you don't know what they've forgotten," Brand said, not looking up from his notebook. "As far down as we are, these are surely souls with much to atone for and much to forget." He frowned at the book in his hand, the scribbled missives of the Apostle he served. "And we have much deeper to go."

Nita frowned. "I don't think we've come all that far from where Chloris brought us."

Brand looked back at her. "Quiet. Please." He flipped through the pages a little frantic. "It's in here—it must be in here."

Nita studied the ghosts, considering the catalog of her own sins. The Cosmogony enumerated the punishments for greater transgressions—blasphemy, suicide, betrayal, murder—but never the small sins, the admixture of failings a person committed through their days. How far down would she sink for stealing handpies as a child? How far for lying to spare the feelings of a boy back home in her forest village? How much more for stealing coin, for robbing Cythrine ruins, for looking away from Brand's indiscretions because the Knight of Shesbron meant she would be safe, secure?

How far for not believing Hedira, for not standing up for her when she did start believing?

If those transgressions weighed you down, then she wondered if Hedira would truly be all that deep,

Cythrine or not. Perhaps, when she first came to Eylant, Hedira had been a little distant, a little loathe to lower the mask. But quickly, she began to show cracks—at least to Nita. She was kind-hearted to a fault, buying beggar children apples, even as they taunted her, never arguing when Brand ignored her or referred snidely to her past. Nita still remembered the night before the first of the earthquakes shook Eylant to its bones, waking to find Hedira sobbing into her hands, trying to smother the sound. Weeping for the millions who would be ended.

For all she'd been taught the end was coming, no one could have said she wished for it. No one could say she was willing to let it happen. *In that respect, Nita thought, I deserve a much deeper place than she does.*

"We are in the Vault of Djaniva, I believe," Brand whispered. "Which means we go. . . ." He pointed across the cavern. "This way."

They wound their way between clusters of ghosts, avoiding coming too near for fear of their reaching, hungry hands. Closer to the center, where any hint of the cavern walls was swallowed in shadow, more of them clung to the ground, as though they were bored guests at a revel. With the cavern's name now spoken, all three of them kept glancing up, waiting to see the dark wings of the Eighth Breathless Watcher, Djaniva, the Wind of Memory. Every shift in the air, every faint gust, made every nerve of Nita's body leap, urging her to run. An unlikely prayer slipped through her memories like a ribbon in a stream. One of Chloris's: *O Holy Duzhan, verdant gift of the Lord of the Endless Skies, Angel of Prosperity. We implore your*

intercession. Grant us your beneficence and the fortune that proceeds from you.

Suddenly, Louvien stopped cold. "Rhodia?"

Nita looked back. The squire stood rigid, staring at the ghost of a woman whose dark, unbound hair wafted around her translucent form. Beyond her, the other ghosts had gone still at his gasp. Nita grabbed hold of her amulet, needing its reassurance.

She had only met Louvien's sweetheart three times in life—a brash young sailor torn between the sea and the boy she'd grown up loving—but there was no mistaking the ghost for another as she drifted toward the squire.

"No," he gasped. "No, no, no. What . . . what happened?"

Her luminescent eyes searched him. "A storm. My ship was lost, and I was tangled in the rigging as it went down. I swam with all my might, but even I can't tow a hulk, and not to so rough a surface. My mouth still tastes of salt. . . ." She tilted her head. "You aren't dead, my darling."

Louvien glanced back at Brand. "Do I seem different?"

"Your breath . . . it stirs the salt from my mouth." Rhodia drifted nearer. "Louvien, light of my heart . . . you had better run like you've never run before."

Brand's hand shot out, seized hold of Nita—*don't move, don't breathe, don't react*. Louvien fell back a step, reaching for his amulet. Rhodia's eyes seemed to brighten, to grow hungry. The still ghosts surrounding her surged forward, a tide of need. Louvien began to run, but there was no outpacing the dead. Nita stepped back and back and back toward the

shadows, Brand's hand pulling her along—even if she'd wanted to save Louvien, she couldn't have. Shouldn't have.

The ghosts tore his skin, trying to wrest the soul from the wandering body. One might have managed to kill him and take his skin, to free itself, but the crowd was dozens thick and the scent of blood intoxicating to the ghosts. Louvien screamed as if his lungs were burning with the ghosts' strange light. Rhodia herself reached into his mouth, tearing out his tongue as she tried to climb in. And Nita and Brand only moved back and back and back.

"Down," Brand ordered, and they both dropped to their bellies against the cool black glass.

The darkness above became a great wind, scattering the ghosts. A vulture big enough to carry off a temple bell peeled itself from out of the void, its head a fleshless skull, its wings smoke and char and iron blades. Where a claw would be, a bloodless human hand reached out and grabbed Louvien's bloodied, pale body by the legs.

The Living are not permitted to disturb the Dead, a terrible voice hissed from the marrow of Nita's bones. *Such is the Cosmogony*.

With that, Djaniva the Wind of Memory, cracked the squire's body like a whip, snapping his neck with an audible crack. Nita's gorge rose, hot and metallic in her throat, and she pressed a hand to her lips as the Wind of Memory flew off, taking Louvien with it.

"Like Chloris," Brand whispered after a moment, "he is blessed in death for his assistance to Holy Shesbron."

Nita hardly heard Brand. *I should have saved him*,

she thought. *I should have done something. But what was there to be done? Even if the spells could have fended off a single ghost, there was no stopping that many.*

You are nothing, she thought. A bit of dust swirling in the cycle of the Cosmogony. A mouse before a lion.

Brand squeezed Nita's shoulder. "Let us hope we have no more need for sacrifices, eh?"

* * *

How many earthquakes had they waited for? How many eruptions? Nita couldn't recall—enough that when she and the others reached the shores of the Cythrines' island, each of them knew there wasn't room for error. A year, two at most, Hedira said gravely, before all the prophecies came to pass.

The Cythrine cities climbed up the high cliffs, their paths carved into the rock, their avenues ropes and pulleys. Dark eyes stared openly at Nita and the others, as Hedira led them up, up to the top of the cliffs where the entrance to the Cythrines' cathedral delved down into the rock.

"They're lucky we don't arrive with the navy behind us," Chloris muttered, refusing to tuck the symbol of Duzhan into her robes. "Wipe this conspiracy from the maps."

"They're as innocent as we are," Hedira said, hauling hard on the ropes. "They have no more idea about what the traitors are planning than people on the mainland."

Beyond her, Brand watched Hedira with a jaundiced eye. No one knew—but Hedira knew. Hedira knew because one of her mother's brothers was among that inner circle. Because she'd been in the right place to overhear him. Because she knew enough to piece together the puzzle.

Or because she'd steered them into a trap.

"We can stop them from hastening Suddath," Hedira had said. They would break into the cathedral. They would find the ritual and disrupt it. If they couldn't, they would find the traitor among the patriarchs and wring the answer from him.

"If my uncle knows," Hedira had said, "he may be made to tell me."

"If he's mad enough to end the world, can you count on fond feelings?" Louvien asked.

Hedira shook her head. "A custom. When a Cythrine child is born, each of her . . . you would say elders grants her a boon. A favor, to make up for the trials ahead, to be called on when needed. I might demand this of him, but if he doesn't know the answer, then . . ." She had shrugged.

Then we kill or we die, Nita thought.

Before the temple of Suddath, Hedira cast a spell, an illusion to hide Nita from the sight of anyone passing by, long enough she might unlock the great doors with her picks and her wit. Her hands shook. It took longer than it should have, but then she was inside, and Hedira was beckoning to the others.

There was no one else inside the cavernous room. If it was a trap, at least she had time to —

Nita's eyes fell upon the colossal statue and her heart stopped in her chest.

Eternity seemed to yawn as the black, depthless eyes of Suddath fixed upon her through the cobweb-shield of a shroud. The shape beneath suggested arms with impossible joints, antlers like a Cythrine's, a writhing orgy of muscles—the shroud obscured everything into terrible possibility.

And yet the eyes—blackier still than the obsidian they'd

been carved into—penetrated the barrier, that lifeless gaze erasing Nita as easily as she might have swept dust from a shelf.

A hand closed on her arm and Nita gasped air, realizing only in that moment that she'd forgotten to breathe.

"Nita." Hedira turned her physically away from the statue. "Don't look upon it."

"How—?" Nita's voice wouldn't obey, wouldn't grow louder than a squeak. "Why . . . How do you. . . ?"

Hedira regarded her sadly. "It takes time to get used to. To accept what it is. And we don't have time right now."

Brand, Chloris, and Louvien slipped in through the cracked door, closing it soundlessly behind them. Hedira gestured them to the left, away from the statue and deeper into the temple. Nita followed, but then she glanced back at Hedira. The Cythrine was looking up at the statue. She kissed the nail of her right thumb, then pressed it to her smooth forehead.

Cold horror poured through Nita. "You still worship it."

Hedira regarded her with puzzlement. "Suddath doesn't ask for worship. Only appeasement."

"How is that different?" Nita hissed. "How can you show that . . . that thing obeisance?"

"Because I know when something is greater than myself," Hedira said. "There's a difference between knowing that and aiding it."

Nita laughed nervously. "I'm not sure I see it."

"I wish your version of the world were true," Hedira said. "I wish there were only simple answers, simple truths. I wish there were no Shadow in the Void—and maybe we have been so lucky for so long because this, too, is part of the cycle. Maybe it comes and we must force it

back. Maybe we can stop it." She looked up, startled. Nita followed her gaze, to Brand, standing in the shadows.

"Come along," he said. "As you said, there isn't much time."

Down and down through rough-hewn passages, they wound their way toward the secret rooms where Hedira said the traitors kept their vigil, coaxing wide the gate for Suddath to reach their world.

"What did she say to you?" Brand asked Nita.

Nita shook her head. "Nothing. Just trying to explain this madness. You can't blame her, right? The alternative is that everything she came from is—"

"Anathema," Brand finished. "It is. The Cosmogony is established. She's had long enough to learn that."

"But the Cosmogony doesn't mention the Shadow in the Void," Nita pointed out.

Brand smiled at her. "Soon there will be nothing to mention." But the depthless eyes that shone even through the shroud burned themselves into Nita's thoughts—she would smile when Suddath was ended.

The inner sanctum of the cultists held nothing so terrible as the statue above, nor anything so grand as the temples to the angels and Holy Shesbron, the mausoleums dedicated to Lady Tanser and her Breathless Watchers. Nita would have assumed it was a storeroom, fallen to disuse because of its distance from the entry, but for the pair of Cythrine men before the brazier in the center. The elder, a man whose silvered braids fell nearly to his waist around charm-strewn antlers as broad as his shoulders, looked up, startled. The younger, russet-haired and bearded, stayed seated, chanting in their singsong tongue.

"Hedira," the older man said, followed by a rattling of Cythrine, angry and dismissive. Hedira replied in the

same tongue, stern and unchastened. The man spat on the floor.

"My wife's daughter shames us," he said to Brand. "You are not allowed in this place. It must be cleansed now. You should go."

"They know what you're doing," Hedira said. "You must stop. You must close the gates."

The man looked amused. "Do you claim your birth-right boon then?"

Brand drew his sword. "By the light of Holy Shesbron, I demand you stop your foul rituals."

The patriarch chuckled. "I could. I could even tell you how to seal the gates again. What good would it do?"

"We would survive," Hedira said.

"And they can continue to press us into their Cosmogony. To mark us evil because we see the truth," he said. He turned to Brand. "You fool yourselves. There is no order. The longer you refuse to see that, the worse everything becomes."

"You owe me a boon," Hedira said. "Such is my birth-right. If you know the way to seal the gates, then that is what I demand. Tell me the secret."

But before the man could say another word, Brand lunged forward, stabbing his sword through the younger fellow praying by the brazier. Louvien stepped forward scattering the burning coals, the steaming herbs. Chloris's prayers rang out through the little room. Nita drew her daggers, started toward the patriarch

Hedira raised a spell, a barrier to block the exit even as her uncle sprinted toward it. "Tell me!" she shouted. "Else the whole of Shesbron's kingdom will descend upon us."

Her uncle spread his arms. "When Suddath comes, what will it matter?"

More Cythrines appeared, two women armed with cudgels and a man with a gnarled staff like Hedira's. He frowned, moving his hands over the barrier of the door.

"Go!" Brand shouted, shoving Nita toward them. Louvien followed her, blade ready. The wizard was too far into his spell to stop and, as the barrier fell, Nita's daggers caught him—one slash to the throat, one buried in his gut. The guards fell on Louvien, bludgeons swinging. He managed to force both back a few paces, and then a burst of flames streaked across the space, striking one of the women.

Nita turned—Hedira's staff pointed at the guards, her expression grim. For a moment, Nita wondered how she'd ever doubted Hedira's trustworthiness.

Hedira stepped forward . . . and stumbled. A moment of clumsiness propelled her toward the headman and his blade. Her uncle caught her, her back to his chest as he plunged a blade into her heart, wrenching it hard. Hedira's eyes widened in shock and pain. Nita screamed.

Hedira's uncle held her close, whispering in her ear. Nita struggled to read the syllables his lips shaped, but there was blood leaking out of Hedira's gaping mouth, pouring out of her chest. If they could get her away from her uncle, if Chloris could work the gods' magic on her. . . .

"There is your boon," the patriarch said, and kissed her cheek with odd fondness. "I am sorry. You cannot stop—"

He broke off, screaming as a bellow of rage matched his shouts. Brand's sword skewered both the patriarch and Hedira, through the chest. Hedira let out a last little cry of pain as blood splashed from the shared wound. Together they fell, collapsing into the cooling coals of the brazier.

"Fucking angels of peace," Louvien said, staring at the bodies.

"He knew," Chloris said, her voice rising. "He knew and you killed him and how are we supposed to . . . how do we. . . ?"

"Is she dead?" Nita started to reach for Hedira, but Brand caught her.

"The ritual is stopped," he said. "That alone should prevent this blasphemy from proceeding." He looked down at Hedira's body, her dark eyes staring at the stone floor. "Hedira is blessed in death for her assistance to Holy Shesbron. Let us all hope her deeds are rewarded in rebirth."

* * *

A great sea the color of milky glass stretched out before them, none of its shores evident beyond the one they stood on. The white pebbles under Nita's feet seemed like bones smoothed by waves but the water was still as glass. Behind them a cliff rose up into a curious sunset of grays and blues and greens.

We're going to die down here, Nita thought, the only thought she could hold in her head anymore. *We're going to die.*

She thought of that night in the temple of Suddath, of Hedira turning her from the terrible statue. Telling her not to look upon it, her heart was not strong enough. *The future is Suddath,* Nita thought. *And I am going to die of fear.*

Brand wasn't faring much better. The book of scriptures that the Apostles had given him, had led them here, to the Lake of Yasil-Fraga, but there was no sign of the Cythrine patriarch, nor Hedira, nor of anyone.

"He's here," he said, his voice growing frantic, mad even, with the weight of their task. "I know. The words of the Bone Queen are not false, even if they aren't for the Living—but then perhaps that's the problem; perhaps the issue is that only ghosts may make use of them. But no—no!" He laughed. "We have the blessings of Holy Shesbron. Everything will be right."

You're the only one he has left to push into danger, she thought, and wondered if she'd fight back, down here where Brand's titles and position in the church couldn't threaten her. She said nothing, but surveyed the still sea. The Cythrine souls belonged here. Drawn, perhaps, to the water. Like their island.

"Louvien left us because that is the will of Shesbron," Brand said rapidly. "Perhaps even the will of Lady Tanser. They work in concert. They *will* our success. So he *must* be here." He whirled on Nita. "Well? I know there are no idiots to pickpocket, but make yourself useful, you little mouse."

Nita looked up, behind where they stood to the cliff wall behind them. "There," she said. The horned ghosts of the Cythrines drifted over the sheer stone. Brand's wild eyes searched it, a smile twitching uneasily on his mouth.

Nita climbed more easily than Brand, lighter and more used to such work. The Cythrine ghosts considered them, but looked away as they passed, as if puzzled by their appearance, but unconcerned.

As if they know what's coming, Nita thought. *As if they know there is no point in stealing our breath or our memories.*

They found the patriarch at last, running his

hands over the choppy surface of the stone. He was fainter than the other ghosts they'd passed, the edges of the water beyond easily marked through the thickness of his chest. Brand hauled himself up the rope, grinning madly, and Nita's fear relaxed its grip on her breath. Success was upon them.

Brand pulled the pouch from around his throat, the last two gifts of the Apostles: a relic of Urbeth, Angel of the Spoken and Unspoken—a vial of holy oil meant to force the secret from an unwilling soul; and a relic of Stramuda, the Angel of Progression, that was meant to take them back out of the Underworld once they had the secret. Beside it hung the amulet that kept the ghosts from realizing what they were.

"Patriarch," Brand said. The ghost looked over. "In life you cast the ritual to free the Shadow in the Void."

"Yes." The ghost turned. "You killed me. I stood in the western chamber on the lowest level of the Cathedral of Suddath. I killed my niece to protect the ritual, to punish you. You killed her again, and me with her. I can still feel the blade against my ribs."

"What is the secret to closing the gates?" Brand demanded.

The ghost regarded him, silent, staring.

"How do we stop the appearance of Suddath?" Brand said.

Again the ghost said nothing, only watched with the same puzzlement of the previous spirits. Brand went to uncork the vial, and Nita tensed. The Apostles had warned them the scriptures spoke of the unrivaled pain it would cause the spirit, stripping their memories from them.

"He doesn't remember that anymore," a voice said. "That won't do anything."

Nita turned, sending the rope beneath her swinging. There was Hedira, hovering over a narrow ledge, her expression somber. A lump built in Nita's throat. *You're alive!* she nearly cried, so glad to see Hedira again. She caught herself in time.

"He's old," Hedira pointed out. "His life was full. He doesn't have the regrets, the angers and sorrows of the young with their lives cut out from under them. He won't be here long."

"That isn't how this works!" Brand snarled.

"Oh and you know?" Hedira said. She started to drift away.

"Wait!" Nita cried—too loud, too loud. The sea stayed calm. The ghost paused. "*You* know. You remember. He told you before you died."

Hedira turned, her eyes no longer dark but luminous as she considered Brand. "How many Cythrines have come to this place since I died?" she asked. "Do you know? This sea was a lake when I arrived, and in the span of a year it's grown and grown so that it can have a shore that accommodates all of us forgetting together. Why is that?"

Nita looked away. The fear of the coming Demon Lord had first sent the Apostles into a frenzy. Their forces destroyed whole cities of Cythrines as they tried to stop the increasing disasters, the surer signs that the Cosmogony as they knew it was falling apart. Nita considered the milky water, the cliffsides that stretched beyond her sight.

"Tell me the secret," Brand said. "Surely you want to live again."

"I don't," Hedira said simply. "The world is cruel."

"Not everything," Nita protested.

"Enough," Hedira said. She looked to Brand again. "Ask me how I died, Nita."

Cold dread, old fear poured down Nita's nerves. "How did you die?"

"I saved a comrade from death," Hedira intoned. "Then, in the moment after my casting, the breath I was unaware, Brand *pushed* me into the arms of my uncle. An offering and a distraction. I still feel the blade in my heart, the blood in my mouth. The sword of someone I called, if not *friend* then *ally*, cutting through the very last of my breath." She closed her eyes a moment. "Did you know?"

"I thought you slipped," Nita said, though it sounded so weak when she did. Of course Brand had pushed her. Hedira, Chloris, Louvien, herself—they were all sacrifices waiting to be needful.

Brand's cheeks burned red. "You selfish bitch. You'd damn us all for a moment of revenge?"

"I'd damn you all because it's what you deserve," Hedira said. "Call it the price of a hundred thousand Cythrine lives."

"Wait," Nita said. "That's not you. That's not what you think. I saw you weep the night of the earthquake. You saved Louvien. You do care."

Hedira regarded her sadly. "Caring doesn't change the fact that the world is full of monsters."

"Enough of this." Brand pulled the cork from the vial, scrambling up the cliff face. He pulled back one arm to throw.

Nita watched as if from a distance as her hand

shot out and grabbed hold of the amulet that masked Brand from the ghosts and Breathless Watchers. She had meant to do it as a warning, to try and stop him, but as her hand closed on the gem, all she could think of was the moment Hedira stumbled, the breath he'd stood with his hand on Louvien's back, ready to sacrifice him to Mocherad. She thought of Chloris sobbing before the altar, knowing what she had to do, what Brand had made impossible for her to refuse. All the times Nita had excused his transgressions because he was a shining lion of the god, and she a mouse. He might have been a Knight of Shesbron, but there was nothing good in him. She wondered how she could ever have thought otherwise.

Nita yanked hard on the amulet and the pouch with Stramuda's relic, snapping the delicate links of chain. All at once the ghosts surrounding them turned toward the armored human. For a moment, Brand was so stunned he only hung there, eyes wide.

The sea started to bubble.

He lunged at Nita, grabbing for her amulet, but the thief pulled herself up the rock, over to the ledge, out of reach. Hedira shifted out of her way, pointing down the ledge toward an outcropping. Nita clambered over it, tucked herself deep into the shadows beyond as the sea erupted and the force of Yasil-Fraga's rising churned the waters into steam. The Breathless Watcher rose up, a serpent of steel and bleached wood, propelling itself forward with razor-edged flippers. Hedira pressed closer to Nita, urging her along as Yasil-Fraga's masklike face—a stern, old man carved of splitting wood—loomed over them.

The Living are not permitted to disturb the Dead, a

chiding voice resonated along Nita's nerves. Her fists tightened in response, pressing the relics and the amulet against her palms. Nita turned her face toward the stone, but there was no masking the screams, the splinter of bone and the screech of torn plate. *Such is the Cosmogony*, Nita thought.

The ghost's cool hands brushed her arm, a tender, covetous touch. But Hedira didn't try to tear Nita from her body, the way the ghosts had done to the others.

"I think you're lying," Nita whispered, as the sounds of Brand dying faded. "I think you want to live."

"So I can suffer anew?" Hedira said bitterly. "Break my own bones trying to survive, or worse—so I can be reborn in a 'better' form, looking down my nose at what isn't like me?"

"You can stop this," Nita said. "You could have, if only they'd listened sooner. If I'd listened sooner. Do you still remember?"

Hedira hesitated. "Yes. But I meant what I said. I won't tell you. You should return, live what life you have left."

Nita unclenched her hands from the pouch and fished the relic from its hiding place—a browned little bone, from a hand or perhaps a foot of some dear Apostle of the Angel of Progression, Opener of the Ways. "This will take you back. There might still be time."

"It will take *you* back," Hedira said. "I am dead."

Nita felt dizzy with the pounding of her heart. "You can take my body. I'll stay here in your place. The Breathless Watchers might not notice that way."

Hedira's ghost tilted her head. "That is not how your Cosmogony works. The dead return when they've forgotten—not before."

Nita smiled uneasily. "We need you to remember. I'll stay here, and forget." She held out the bone again. "Please try. If nothing else, I think you deserve to live what life I have left. You would do better with it than I. I cannot lead. I can't change things. Maybe you can." She shook her head, beginning to feel as frantic as Brand had been, at the end. "If I go back I may just come right back down here. I shouldn't even bother. You're right—it's a terrible world."

Hedira tilted her antlered head, mouth drawn but considering. "It is, and it isn't," she conceded. "Suddath may come, regardless."

"Then you can live what life I have left," Nita said, taking hold of her amulet with one shaking hand. "Until Suddath comes." 🐾

FEAR THE SHADOW!

