

TOM LLOYD

THE
RAGGED MAN
9



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ENDGAME
THE DUSK WATCHMAN
DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Also by Tom Lloyd from Gollancz:

The Stormcaller
The Twilight Herald
The Grave Thief

The Ragged Man

TOM LLOYD

Orion

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For Fiona, with all my love

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WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

The Grave Thief

In the aftermath of the firestorm that consumed the city of Scree, it soon becomes clear that Rojak's magic has left a legacy beyond death and destruction. While the followers of Azaer scatter and Isak leads the Farlan Army home, a strange mood takes hold of those remaining outside the city. The city's six principal Gods - Death, Karkarn, Nartis, Vasle, Belarannar and Vellern - are furious at having been driven out of Scree during the city's last days, and their rage badly affects those most closely aligned to them, including the Knights of the Temples and King Emin himself - he had been ordained a priest years before. In their temporary madness, they turn on the civilian survivors and butcher them.

When King Emin returns home to Narkang he is not only guilty about the slaughter he participated in, but distressed by the continuing echoes of Lord Death's rage, which is still affecting his judgement. He responds to intelligence about Venn, Azaer's follower, and the manipulation of Scree's population by Rojak's plays, by ordering a mass assassination of the Harlequin clans, only too aware of their potential influence in the Land. Even as he is doing this, Venn is returning home to the clan with the mage Jackdaw bound to his shadow, about to do exactly as Emin fears: to twist the Harlequins' purpose and deliver to Azaer a small army of unparalleled warrior-preachers who can erode the authority of the Gods on a Land-wide scale.

King Emin's agent, Doranei, discovers the Crystal Skull they recovered from Scree might not have been Azaer's goal there, after all - worse still, they might even have done Azaer a favour by killing the Skull's owner, for they left the path clear for Azaer's followers to retrieve the journal of Voriz Vukotic.

In Tirah, as Isak's thoughts grow increasingly morbid, the Yeetatchen white-eye Xeliath arrives in the city, and the trial of Duke Certinse looms. On the first day of the trial a squad of mercenaries break into the Temple of Law. Although the duke fails to escape, he is able to die fighting, instead of being executed. More worryingly for Isak, when Certinse's mother releases a huge daemon, two of Death's violent Aspects appear from Isak's shadow to kill it before Isak himself can, confirming his fears that he has somehow managed to tear the five Aspects known as the Reapers from Death's control.

In Byora, Ilumene and Aracnan engineer a meeting between the ruler, Duchess Escral, and a newborn baby, Ruhen, whose body is now inhabited by Azaer. The duchess adopts Ruhen as, far to the north, Venn begins preaching about such a child to the now-susceptible Harlequins, matching his words to Ruhen's actions.

Elsewhere in Byora, while the Farlan agent Legana is waiting for Zhia Vukotic to arrive in the city, the Goddess Fate - the Lady - appears to her and makes an unprecedented offer: that Legana should become Fate's Mortal-Aspect. After Legana accepts, her first mission is to murder a high priest with undue influence over Duchess Escral - but the mercenary Aracnan beats her to it. He attacks her

trying to hide his crime, and Fate steps in - only to discover, too late, that he owns a Crystal Skull. The Goddess cannot save herself, but she can save her new Mortal-Aspect, and before Aracnan kills her she throws Legana from the building.

Further south, Lord Styrax, the Menin ruler, crushes the renowned defences of Tor Salan in a single blow and heads north towards the Circle City, determined to bring the trading heart of the West into his empire, whether the rulers of Byora, Akell, Ismess and Fortinn, the quarters that make up the Circle City, want to or not.

Back in Tirah, Isak has called all of the Farlan nobility to his official investiture as Lord of the Farlan. Each must swear allegiance to him. To keep the tribe's increasingly troublesome clerics in check he makes a bargain with Cardinal Certinse. Isak has revealed he is dreaming of death at Styrax's hands, so after the ceremony, Mihn goes to question the witch of Llehden. Their conversation results in the witch tattooing magical charms over Mihn's body, linking him directly with both Xeliath and Isak.

While Mihn is learning of the afterlife, Vesna is ambushed by fanatics. After he has killed them all he discovers the 'ambush' was in fact a test, engineered by Karkarn, the God of War, to see if he is indeed the right man for the high honour the God wishes to bestow upon Vesna: to become his own Mortal-Aspect. Vesna, shocked, finds himself unable to make an instant decision.

In Byora, the Lady's death has sparked an increase in the tensions between the ruling nobles and city clerics. An assassination attempt on Duchess Escral fails, thanks to Ilumene's help, but her husband is killed. The clerics follow this personal attack with a full-scale assault on the Ruby Tower, which Ilumene uses to massacre the city's mage-priests - and as another demonstration of Ruhens' supernatural powers.

Legana is being slowly nursed to health by a priest. When she is well enough, he helps her escape from the Temple District, just as Duchess Escral orders the symbolic barring of the door to Death temple and Ilumene leads a crackdown in her name on the city's clerics. Outside the Temple District Legana encounters Doranei, and they exchange information before Doranei goes in search of his lover Zhia Vukotic. Now they know who's pulling the strings in Byora. Legana reports that to Isak.

Religious fanaticism and active reaction against it are both on the increase, and violence is breaking out in all the Land's cities. To avoid outright civil war led by a white-eye as powerful as he is, Isak is forced to persuade one of his most loyal subjects to start a crusade against the Menin. Legana's report makes him realise he is being drawn inexorably towards the man he believes will kill him - but he refuses to shy away from his destiny any longer, and he adds his forces to the crusade.

As Isak heads south, Lord Styrax reaches the Circle City and his decisive action forces the surrender of its most powerful quarter. Once in control of the city, he begins to investigate the secret at its very centre, the Library of Seasons, which sits in a valley between the city's four domains. By the time Isak's army reaches them, he has solved the mystery, and just as the crusade attacks his forces he retrieves a Crystal Skull from the library and wakes the dragon set to guard it. Isak is intent on

disrupting Azaer's plans by attacking Byora, but he is drawn into battle with the Menin and becomes the dragon's target, just as the Menin Army springs a trap.

Isak, realising the danger they're in, accepts that he is going to die. He has been dreaming of this for too long. He orders Vesna to lead the army out of danger, while he delays the Menin and attacks the dragon. When he is unable to persuade Isak to change his mind, Vesna finally accepts Karkarn's offer and leads the Farlan Army away as Mortal-Aspect of the God of War, while Isak advances on the Menin alone, but with the full power of his Crystal Skulls unleashed. He knows he cannot defeat Lord Styra, so he takes the only choice remaining to him: the manner of his death. He kills Kohrad, Lord Styra's white-eye son, and even as he himself is being cut down, he boasts about Kohrad's death to Lord Styra. The grief-stricken Menin lord retaliates by using his own vast power to send Isak directly to Ghenna, the dark place of eternal torment, instead of just killing Isak and ushering him to the final judgement of Lord Death. As Isak is cast down to the realm of daemons, far away in Llehden, Milrealises his last desperate gamble must now be played.

PROLOGUE - PART 1

Death stalked the field. As the last of the sun's rays winked out of the sky, a heavy shroud settled over the fields beyond Byora. It was followed by an unnatural hush that rolled in like sea-fog. Bird calls became distant before gradually fading into nothing, but as the gloom deepened there came other sounds: whispers and low, mournful cries from the torpid fens. Uncertain lights winked in the misty distance in cold imitation of life, but then even the voices of spirits and daemons quietened in the presence of something more terrifying yet. In the broken silence the darkness on the edge of the fens slowly deepened and took form.

A hooded head surveyed the still battlefield. The scarce fauna of the fens kept quieter than even while the baleful creatures that roamed it nightly fled. The newcomer did not notice. They were not what He sought.

The night-robed figure strode forward, pausing a while to look left and right, as though scenting the air. The stink of decay was unmistakable: the rot of butchery that lingers on a killing ground long after the last corpse is buried. He saw the freshly dug heaps all around, unmarked barrows that would soon be beaten from the Land's memory by wind and rain. Around them hung pale shapes, the shades of those robbed of life and senses, unaware of everything but the emptiness within. In a fit of generosity He gestured towards them and watched the handful of lost fade to nothing, ushered towards the Herald's Hall and their Last Judgment.

In the centre of the mounds was a crude monument: upraised spears set in a circle, within which fresh skulls were piled. Above them all flapped a flag of black and red depicting a stylised skull with long, curved canines.

Buried beneath was a corpse, a young man killed before his time, but that was not why He lingered. There was a scent on the air, one unsuited to a cold, muddy field where the promise of rain hung in the air. It spoke of fire and pain: an echo of horror etched into the earth.

The stench of daemons was strongest at a fissure barely twenty paces from the monument. The jagged tear in the ground was no more than a few yards deep, and stained by their corrupt touch. He stood over the rent, unmindful of the distant shrieks that shuddered up through the ground. It took on him as strong as He to notice them at all; no mortal would ever be so attuned to the Land, not even the strongest of witches.

He did not speak. He had no words for the dead, or the deed - it was done now, and He was all too aware of the damage done by revenge. Instead He reached out His bone-white arms out into the night. In His left was a double-headed spear studded with glinting gems; the right was empty. The air seemed to contract and reel around Him, though His robe was barely ruffled by the assault, and when the spear cut an arc through the air the darkness was beaten back.

He grabbed with His free hand, which closed about a spitting thread of light. The night boiled on the thread like black smoke, but He ignored it, and twice more grabbed at thin air, each time capturing a new thread, a slightly different tint, in His fist. The empty black cowl regarded the three threads for a while as He stared intently at His catch.

Then, with shocking speed, He spun about and swung with the flat of the spear at the darkness behind. A momentary burst of light tore through the gloom and a fourth thread appeared. This too was scrutinised, but no further violence was required. He jerked the threads closer, and as he tugged almost carelessly, four figures from the empty night air appeared to cower and stagger before Him.

A hump-backed wolf cringed from His presence, squirming on its belly over the blood-soaked ground until it reached His side. The others came less easily, but by the force of His will He dragged them close and wrapped the threads around the spear shaft. He ran a long, bony finger over each, and the newcomers flinched as though they had been struck, then stood still, finally resigned to their fates.

‘One is missing,’ Death said.

The Headsman raised his head, his poise subservient though his voice betrayed no emotion. ‘She has grown stronger. Our sister has made bargains to keep herself from you. She is gone far from this place.’

‘Broken from my grip and teased away,’ He said, looking to the northeast, ‘but we all shall pay the price of such a bargain.’

He turned abruptly, heading back towards the fens. The others could not help but follow, and within a few steps all five had faded from sight. The night returned and the breeze dared sweep over the battlefield once more, the chill air empty of all now but the voices of the lost.

PROLOGUE - PART 2

As the light began to fade in the Great Forest, miles east of the closest Farlan outpost, bloodlust broke the silence and an old woman ran through the rising shadows, then vanished. They pursued with eagerness and abandon, spreading left and right to sight their prey once more and run her down. Orders were called out in sharp and ugly syllables barked in an alien tongue. She crouched low behind a tangled briar for a while longer, hands pressed flat on the damp carpet of leaves, and listened to their confusion. Not waiting for one to chance upon her the woman broke cover, her feet kicking up a flurry of debris as she raced through the trees.

She plunged downslope, her ragged dress billowing in the wind as she skidded down a channel carved by the rain, then slewed left to drop over a rise flanked by a pair of tall beech trees. With a howl the rider in front recklessly followed, only to find the ground fall sharply away. Horse and rider pitched forward and dropped ten feet down the vertical bank. The creature's desperate kicks twisted it around and as it fell on its rider a brief scream pierced the air.

Their voices changed in an instant. The game had become serious and now they drove forward with mounting anger. Again the woman disappeared, melting into the shadows like a will o' the wisp, while they cursed and screamed threats at the empty forest. The flanking riders wheeled in a circle, furiously searching for a flash of movement until, finally, they were rewarded. Fifty yards downslope she broke from cover again and the chase was on again, the riders crouching low over the necks of their horses as they closed the gap.

They grinned when she darted over another rise and scabbled down the slope on the other side, trying the same lure again, only to find herself penned in on three sides. The old woman lunged for the only escape route but one rider was quicker and cut her off. She headed in the opposite direction, but floundered in the soft, sodden earth that sank beneath her feet. She slithered down on her belly to the floor of the gully, ending up behind a long stone protruding from the bank, and there she cowered.

The riders approached at leisure, two with arrows nocked on the off-chance she might find the strength to try the slope again. Teeth bared and weapons raised, they formed a half-circle as the woman cringed behind the stone. Her face was covered by a tattered shawl and her fingers tapped the stone's surface, as if seeking reassurance in its strength.

At a guttural command from the leader one rider awkwardly dismounted and lurched towards her.

The Elf was more deformed than most of his kind, his shoulders twisted so that his shield almost dragged along the ground, but his spear was swept back, ready to stab. She flinched and peered up at him through a long tear in her shawl. Her fingers were still dancing over the stone. As he neared she heard a frantic whisper, too quiet and hurried to make sense of, but he guessed what it was.

'She prays,' he announced to his comrades, sharing a grin with the nearest. 'Do they hear, humans?' he called out to her in poor Farlan, his malformed throat mangling the flowing sounds of each word. He switched back to Elvish. 'Where are your fucking Gods now?'

Abruptly she stopped.

He cocked his head at her, suddenly aware of eyes like pale blue ice shining up at him through the twilight gloom. Her hands flat against the stone, she pushed herself up with a strange, crab-like movement, stopping only when he levelled his spear and held it inches from her face.

‘Where are my Gods?’ she repeated softly, peering out through fronds of matted grey hair. ‘I am more interested in your Gods now.’

He took a step back; she had replied in perfect Elvish, something he had never heard from a human before. The Elf glanced back at his commanders, the warleader and his sister, the mage. Sensing danger the mage wasted no time in summoning the spirits bound to her; three wispy forms like puffs of smoke, one black, two white, appeared in the air near her.

‘And there they are,’ the old woman announced with a smile. She offered the spirits a bent-back bow.

‘Kill her,’ ordered the mage.

The soldier turned and lunged, but the old woman dodged his spear somehow. As the shaft slipped past she caught it and tugged it, jerking the soldier off-balance and within reach of a backhand slash that sent him crashing to the ground.

‘We are not so different,’ the crone mused as she turned to the others.

The two archers drew back their strings as she edged forward, grinning toothily. One bow shattered in the hands of its owner. The other managed to fire before he did likewise, but he snatched at the shot, and it skewed a yard wide. A spear was thrown, but she twitched it aside with a flick of her long fingers and it buried itself deep into the soft earth. When no more were thrown she took a step forward and grinned down at the dazed Elf at her feet.

‘Not so different indeed,’ she continued. ‘Both once tied to the Gods, both now free to learn a new way.’

She hesitated, her tongue flicking out like a snake catching a scent on the breeze. The fallen Elf touched a grimy hand to his face then held it up for inspection. His eyes widened as a discoloration on the skin deepened before his eyes and swelled in an instant to become a bleeding sore.

‘And how well have you learned!’ she cackled, gesturing towards the spirits circling the mage. ‘You have found new Gods, ones weak enough to be controlled and enslaved - and so you become the thing you hate most.’

The Elf at her feet began to keel in fear, pawing at his face as the disease spread, ravaging the skin faster than the eye could follow. He tried to howl, but his throat was already ruined and in moments he was unable to even whimper like a dying puppy.

None of the rest noticed; they were transfixed by the sight of the old woman shaking out her ragged clothes and straightening. Her appearance changed in seconds as she grew taller before their eyes. A thick stink of putrefaction filled the air and her skin paled to the chalk-white colouring of a corpse. Her body juddered like a plague victim. Then the transformation was over and she looked up, her blue

lips twisted into an uneven smile. A tarnished crown appeared in the tangled thicket of her hair.

‘So I shall learn from you all,’ the Wither Queen announced to the terrified Elves. The quickest witted of them wrenched his horse around to flee, but the Wither Queen was faster. She raked her nails through the air in his direction and was rewarded with a scream from his horse. She followed it with a flurry of slashes directed at the remaining soldiers and in a heartbeat they were all lying on the ground, some crushed, others merely dazed. The Wither Queen spat on her palms and flung the spittle out with an incantation and riders and horses alike coughed bloody foam. The horses reeled, sinking jerkily to their knees.

Only the mage was left, almost paralysed with terror as she cringed in her saddle. She was oblivious to the bound spirits darting frantically around her head. The Wither Queen stepped forward, a terrible hunger in her face. The mage’s horse collapsed and she was tipped forward to sprawl flat in the dark forest mud, senseless for a moment. When she came to, she tried to scabble away from the advancing Goddess, knowing it was far too late. Convulsions began to wrack her body.

Above her the spirits raced around in frenzied fear until the Wither Queen reached out a hand, fingers splayed as though to pluck them like fruit. The spirits stopped and hung in the air above the mage’s corpse, their shapeless forms coalescing into vague shapes of smoke. They sank to the ground and submitted without a fight, offering obeisance until they were mere puddles of mist.

‘They find themselves new Gods and bind them like slaves,’ the Wither Queen whispered with cold tenderness to the spirits. ‘That shall be their undoing. The dead one sought to use me, then leash me. I could smell his betrayal even as I could see Death’s hand reaching for his shoulder, but I will be a slave no longer. He freed me. He forced me to learn new ways and now he is not there to limit me.’

She reached down and stroked her fingers through each of the spirits in turn, bringing a piece of each to her mouth to suck down eagerly.

‘There are more of you, so many more - enough to carry my plagues to every corner of the Land,’ she said to her new Aspects. With them following at her heel, the Wither Queen began to drift forward on an unseen breeze, her body fading like mist until it was barely an outline in the shadows. By nightfall the first Elven encampment had been scoured of life.

PROLOGUE - PART 3

Doranei watched as shadows stole through the streets below, slipping through the alleys and coalescing into darkness. He blinked, and the curved avenues of Byora faded from his perception as the stepped city was swallowed by the dark.

Been taught my whole life to look for shadows, he thought. *Now they're all I see.* 'I saw another prophet today,' he said aloud, the sound feeling out of place in the high, silent room.

'I'm sorry? You saw what?' Zhia Vukotic came closer, her sapphire eyes shining in the light of a single candle.

'A prophet, didn't you hear?'

She ignored the edge in his voice. These past two weeks there had been an ever-present air of anger and antagonism about the Narkang man, even in bed. The scent of violence would have frightened a normal woman, but Zhia feared only for him. She tried to remember how long it had been since grief had consumed her every thought.

'I was watching your face,' the vampire admitted; 'I wasn't paying attention to the words. Tell me about the prophet.'

Doranei remained silent for a time, his face twitching slightly, as though words were fighting to get out but couldn't quite force their way through. Tsatach's eye had only just sunk behind Blackfang and the striated clouds over the mountain were tinged a startling burnished orange. It was a beautiful sight but Zhia realised he saw nothing, barely noticing even the bulky silhouette of a dragon, rising to circle on the high thermals like a hunting hawk.

There was a black need for destruction fizzing through Doranei's blood, not unlike that in the maddened beast Kastan Styra had awakened and left to devastate the Circle City. Zhia and her brother, Koezh, had caused its slumber; the spell they used had corroded what had already been an unknowable, unpredictable intellect. Now hatred filled its mind, arbitrary and unquenchable.

'A man this time. It struck him in the middle of the street,' Doranei said abruptly, no louder than a whisper. 'No warning. I thought he was drunk when he staggered into a wall.' Unconsciously he raised his goblet and drank. She saw his lips twitch just before the rim touched, a name spoken silently.

They stood alone in the high room on the topmost level of a whorehouse known as the Velvet Curtain. Doranei had pulled open the shutters on one side of the room to watch the sun set - at least, that was what he would claim. Zhia knew it was the sight of the Ruby Tower wreathed in shadow that obsessed him; that and watching the junction where his friend Sebe had died. The choice of vantage point had been pure chance, as was the direction Ilumene and Aracnan had taken as they went to lead Byora's soldiers against the Farlan. When you were angry at chance, and Fate had been murdered mere miles away, who could you take it out on?

'That's something I have never witnessed, not in all my years,' Zhia said, 'but I do not envy you it

‘He didn’t hurt anyone,’ Doranei continued, more to himself than in response. ‘There was detachment of Ruby Tower Guards at the crossroads; one of them laid him out as he made for a beggar. They manacled him to a pillar while they sent for orders, he stood there for an hour snarling like a rabid dog before they worked out what to do with him.’

‘Did he say anything?’

Doranei turned to face his vampire lover. Zhia frowned under his scrutiny as Doranei appeared to search for something in her face. Her black hair was tied up in a way he’d not seen before, braids woven together and bound by a thin copper band on the top of her head. It wasn’t quite the style many mercenaries used, but it was similar.

‘It was fast, too fast to follow properly. I only heard one scrap.’ He gestured at the Ruby Tower now just an outline in the evening gloom. ‘What your friend will have to say about it I don’t know.’

Zhia didn’t rise to the bait, knowing he was looking for an excuse to rage, to vent the grief he felt over Sebe’s death. He didn’t want to hurt her, she knew that, and anyway, any confrontation between them would leave Doranei injured, not her, but she suspected he’d prefer a beating to the pain of grief.

‘Ruhen is not my friend; you know that’s not the reason I cannot join your assault.’

Lord Isak’s death had resonated throughout the Land with enough force to turn a dozen men and women in Byora alone into prophets, but it was a death less than an hour before Isak’s that had cast this veil of anguish over the King’s Man. Zhia had seen the destruction of the junction of roads not long after; she could easily picture the wild storm of magic unleashed there by a maddened Demogod. Buildings had shattered at Aracnan’s touch; the cobbles were torn up as though fifty-foot claws had ripped through the street.

Sebe’s body was buried in the devastation, and the wrecked houses were still burning fiercely when she returned to the city and found Doranei, filthy and soot-stained, tearing his hands on the rubble alongside dozens of others. Only fifty bodies were recovered in the end; hundreds more, Sebe among them, had been lost to the ferocity of the flames.

Zhia had dragged Doranei to safety, all but imprisoning him in the tavern’s cellar to keep him off the streets, but he had barely slept since. He would lie in the bed they shared, his eyes wide; staring at nothing, while she lay powerless to help. At times he looked almost frantic, bewildered, as the tears refused to come, undone by a lifetime of stoicism and detachment.

From his own position three streets away Doranei had heard Aracnan’s crashing response to Sebe’s poisoned arrow, increasing in violence as the seadiamond venom burned ever hotter in the Demogod’s veins. It was a weak poison compared to most, but Aracnan had made the mistake they had been counting on. When he’d been struck in the shoulder he’d realised the bolt might be poisoned, and had used magic to counter the effects - but this particular venom was magnified by the presence of magic.

Witnesses had reported the stones cracking under Aracnan’s feet as he screamed in agony - the flesh of the nearest bystanders had blackened and burned even before he started lashing out with arcs of fire. The house where Sebe was positioned, most likely levelling a second crossbow at Ilumene, had exploded under the magical assault. Only Aracnan’s collapse into unconsciousness from the mounting

pain had saved the district.

Zhia's voice forced its way into his thoughts. 'Doranei, what did the prophet say?'

The King's Man looked down, knuckles white as his hand tightened on the window sill. 'A great lord falls, a new God rises.'

CHAPTER 1

A whisper of evening breeze off the lake brushed Mihn's face as he bent over the small boat. He hesitated and looked up over the water. The sun was about to set, its orange rays pushing through the tall pine trees on the far eastern shore. His sharp eyes caught movement at the tree-line: the gentle moving cautiously into the open. They were normally to be found at twilight, watching the sun sink below the horizon from atop great boulders, but today at least two family packs had come to the lake instead.

'They smell change in the air,' the witch of Llehden commented from beside him. 'What w attempt has never been tried before.'

Mihn had noticed that here in Llehden no one called her Ehla, the name she had permitted Lord Isak to use; that she was the witch was good enough for the locals. It was for Mihn too, however much it had confused the Farlan.

Mihn shrugged. 'We are yet to manage it,' he pointed out, 'but if they sense change, perhaps that is a good sign.'

His words provoked a small sound of disapproval from Xeliath, the third person in their group. She stood awkwardly, leaning on the witch for support. Though a white-eye, the stroke that had damaged her left side meant the brown-skinned girl was weaker than normal humans in some ways, and glimpses of the Dark Place hovered at the edges of her sight; a shred of her soul in the place of darkness and torment because of her link to Isak. Her balance and coordination were further diminished by exhaustion: Xeliath was unable to sleep without enduring dreams terrible enough to destroy the sanity of a weaker mind.

Mihn had been spared that at least; the link between them was weaker, and he lacked a mage's sensitivity.

Together they helped Xeliath into the boat. The witch got in beside her and Mihn pushed it out onto the water, leaping aboard once it was clear of the shore. He sat facing the two women, who were both wrapped in thick woollen cloaks against the night chill. Mihn, in contrast, wore only a thin leather tunic and trousers, and the bottom of each leg was bound tight with twine, leaving no loose material to snag or tear.

Mihn caught sight of an elderly woman perched on a stool at the lakeside and felt a flicker of annoyance. The woman, another witch, had arrived a few days earlier. She was decades older than Ehla, but she was careful to call herself *a* witch of Llehden - as though her presence in the shire was on Ehla's sufferance alone. She had told Mihn to call her Daima - *knowledge* - should there be a need to differentiate between them. For almost fifty years Daima had laid out the dead and sat with them until dawn, facing down the host of spirits that are attracted by death in all its forms. She had a special affinity for that side of the Land, and had ushered ghosts and other lost souls even to the Halls of Death, going as far within as any living mortal Ehla knew of.

The old woman had reiterated again and again the dangers of what they were about to attempt.

particularly marking the solemnity and respect Mihn would need to display. That she was present puffing away on a pipe as she fished from the lakeshore did not exactly impart the level of gravity she had warned them was imperative to their success.

With swift strokes he rowed to the approximate centre of the lake and dropped a rusty plough-blade over the edge to serve as anchor. Once the oars were stowed the failed Harlequin took a moment to inspect the tattoos on his palms and soles of his feet, but they remained undamaged, the circles of incantation unbroken.

‘Ready?’ the witch asked.

‘As ready as I ever will be.’

‘The coins?’

He could feel the weight of the two silver coins strung on a cord around his neck. Mihn’s extensive knowledge of folklore was serving him in good stead as he prepared for this venture. It was common practice for dying sinners to request a silver coin between their lips, to catch a part of their soul. Whoever sat with them until dawn would afterwards drop the coin in a river, so the cool water could ease any torments that might await them. Daima had provided this service often enough to know where to find two such coins easily enough.

‘They are secure,’ he assured them.

‘Then it is time,’ Xeliath rasped, pushing herself forward so that Mihn was within reach. The young woman squinted at him with her good right eye, her head wavering a moment until she managed to focus. She placed her right hand on his chest. ‘Let my mark guide you,’ she said, stiffly raising her left hand too. That, as always, was half-closed in a fist around the Crystal Skull given to her by the patron Goddess of her tribe. ‘Let my strength be yours to call upon.’

Ehla echoed her gesture before tying a length of rope around his waist. ‘Let my light keep back the shadows of the Dark Place.’

Mihn took two deep breaths, trying to control the fear beginning to churn inside him. ‘And now —

Without warning Xeliath lurched forward and punched Mihn in the face. A sudden flash of white light burst around them as the magic humming through her body added power to the blow. The small man toppled over the edge of the boat, dropping down into the still depths. Ehla grabbed at the coil of rope fast disappearing after Mihn.

‘I’ve been looking forward to that bit,’ Xeliath said, wincing at the effect the punch had had on her twisted body.

The witch didn’t reply. She peered over the edge of the boat for a moment, then looked back towards the shore. The sun was a smear of orange on the horizon but it wasn’t the advancing evening that made her shiver unexpectedly. In the distance she saw Daima set her fishing rod down which was barely a dozen yards from the old woman, a pair of gentry crept forward to drink from the lake.

Ehla pulled the hood of her cloak over her head and did the same for Xeliath before helping the girl

to sit down in the curved hull of the boat. Above, the sky slowly darkened while they made themselves as comfortable as they could.

‘Now it is up to Mihn,’ she said quietly.

Legana felt the touch of Alterr’s light on her face and drew back a fraction until her face was again shadowed from the moon. With her half-divine senses open to the Land she could feel her surroundings in a way that almost made up for her damaged eyesight. The woman she was stalking was no more than two hundred yards off and coming closer. Like a snake tasting the air Legana breathed in the faint scents carried on the breeze. The spread of trees and the slight camber of ground unfolded in her mind: a complex map of taste, touch and other senses she had no names for. Within the other woman shone, illuminated by a faint spark within her that tugged at Legana’s weary heart.

She replaced the blindfold and waited for the right moment to step out from the shadows. The blindfold hampered little, and it made her appear less of a threat; it did Legana no harm to remain cautious and look feeble. Her voice had been ruined by the mercenary Aracnan’s assault and normally she would be forced to communicate by means of the piece of slate that hung from a cord around her neck - but the woman had the spark within her, as Legana herself did. It was faint - she had clearly strayed far from the Lady - but Legana hoped it would be enough for her divine side to exploit.

When the woman was only a dozen yards away Legana moved out from behind a tree. The woman gave a yelp of surprise and drew an axe and a shortsword in one smooth movement. In response Legana leaned a little more heavily on her staff and pushed back the hood of her cloak so the woman could see the blindfold clearly.

‘*Not a good night to be walking alone,*’ Legana said directly into the woman’s mind.

The other glanced behind her, wary of an ambush. As she did so the scarf over her head slipped showing her head was nearly bald. ‘How did you do that? Who says I’m on my own?’

‘*I know you are.*’

‘You’re a mage without any fucking eyes, what do you know?’ the stranger snapped. She was shorter than Legana by some way, and more powerfully built. The lack of hair made her look strange and foreign, but as soon as she spoke her accent labelled her as native Farlan.

‘*I know more than you might realise,*’ Legana replied, taking no offence. A small smile appeared on her face: before Aracnan’s attack she had been just as prickly as this woman. It had taken an incurable injury to teach her the value of calm. The quick temper of her youth would do a blind woman no good whether or not she was stronger than before.

‘*For example,*’ Legana continued, ‘*I know you strayed from your path a long time ago - and I know I can help you find it again.*’

‘Really? That’s what you know, is it?’ The woman shook her head, confused by the fact that someone was talking thought to thought, but anger was her default state, as it had once been for Legana, and it presently overrode her questions. ‘Looks to me like you’re the one who’s lost the path.’

and being blind I'd say you're in a lot more trouble than I am out here.'

'What is your name?'

For a moment she was silent, staring at Legana as though trying to work out what threat she might pose. 'Why do you want to know?' she asked eventually.

Legana smiled. *'We're sisters, surely you can tell that? Why would I not want to know the name of my sister?'*

'The Lady's fucking dead,' the woman spat with sudden anger, 'and the sisterhood died with her. If you were really one of us you'd have felt it too, mad, blind hermit or not.'

Legana's head dipped for a moment. What the woman said was true. Legana had been there when the Lady, the Goddess Fate, had been killed. The pain, both of that loss and her own injuries that day were still fresh in Legana's mind.

'She's dead,' she said quietly, *'but sisters we remain, and we need each other more than ever. My name is Legana.'*

'Legana?' the woman said sharply. 'I know that name - from the temple in Tirah. But I don't recognise you.'

'I've changed a little,' Legana agreed. *'I couldn't speak into another sister's mind before.'*

'You were the scholar?' the woman asked sceptically. 'The one they thought would become High Priestess?'

Legana gave a sudden cough of laughter. *'If that's what you remember we were at different temples. I was the one she beat for insolence every day for a year-I was the one who excelled only at killing. I was sold off to Chief Steward Lesarl as soon as I was of age.'*

The woman let her shoulders relax. Grudgingly she returned her weapons to her belt. 'Okay, then. You were a few years younger, but we all heard about the trouble you caused. I'm Ardela. What happened to your voice?'

Legana's hand involuntarily went to her throat. Her skin was paler even than most Farlan - as white as bone, except for Aracnan's shadowy handprint around her neck. Underneath were some barely perceptible bumps: an emerald necklace had sealed her bargain with Fate when Legana had agreed to be her Mortal-Aspect, but the violence done subsequently had somehow pushed the jewels deep into her flesh.

'That I will tell you when I tell you my story,' Legana said. *'First, I want to ask you, where are you going by yourself in a hostile land? You don't strike me as the sort to be left behind by the army.'*

Ardela scowled. 'The army wouldn't have noticed if half the Palace Guard had deserted; they're in chaos after Lord Isak's death.'

'So why are you here?'

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