

R.A.  SALVATORE

*The Cleric
Quintet*
BOOK
IV

The Fallen Fortress

Cover Art by
DUANE O. MYERS






ONE

N O T I M E F O R G U I L T

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The spirit heard the call from a distance, floating across the empty grayness of a reeking and forlorn plane. The mournful notes said not a discernible word, and yet to the spirit they seemed to speak his name.

Ghost, it called to him, beckoned him from the muck and mire of his eternal hell.

Ghost, its melody called again.

The wretch looked at the growling, huddled shadows all around him, wicked souls, the remains of wicked people. He, too, was but a growling shadow, a tormented thing, suffering his eternal punishment for a life villainously lived.

But he was being called, being carried from his torment on the notes of a familiar melody.

Familiar?

The thin thread that remained of Ghost's living consciousness strained to better recall, to better remember its life before that foul, empty existence. Ghost thought of sunlight, of shadows, of killing. . . .

The *Ghearufu!* Ghost understood. The *Ghearufu*, the magical item he'd carried in life for so many decades, called to him, was leading him back from the very fires of the Nine Hells.

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"Cadderly! Cadderly!" wailed Vicero Belago, the Edificant Library's resident alchemist, when he saw the young priest and Danica at his door on the huge library's third floor. "My boy, it's so good that you have returned to us!" The wiry man virtually hopped across his shop, weaving in and out of tables covered with beakers and vials, dripping coils and stacks of thick books. He hit his target as Cadderly stepped into the room, throwing his arms around the sturdy young priest and slapping him hard on the back.

Cadderly looked over Belago's shoulder at Danica and gave her a helpless shrug, which she returned with a wink of an exotic brown eye and a wide, pearly smile.

"We heard that some killers came after you, my boy," Belago explained, putting Cadderly back at arm's length and studying him as though he expected to find an assassin's dagger protruding from the young priest's chest. "I feared you would never return." The alchemist also gave Cadderly's upper arms a squeeze, apparently amazed at how solid and strong the young priest had become in the short time he'd been gone from the library. Like a concerned aunt, Belago ran a hand up over Cadderly's floppy brown hair, pushing the always unkempt locks back from the young man's face.

"I'm all right," Cadderly replied. "This is a house of Deneir, and I am a disciple of the Scribe of Oghma. Why would I not return?"

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His understatement had a calming effect on the excitable alchemist, as did the serene look in Cadderly's gray eyes. Belago started to blurt out a reply, but stopped in mid stutter and nodded instead.

"Ah, and lady Danica," the alchemist went on. He reached out and gently stroked Danica's thick tangle of strawberry-blond hair, his smile sincere. Belago's grin disappeared almost immediately, though, and he dropped his arms to his sides and his gaze to the floor. "We heard about Headmaster Avery," he said, his expression clouded with sad resignation.

The mention of the portly Avery Schell, Cadderly's surrogate father, stung the young priest profoundly. He wanted to explain to poor Belago that Avery's spirit lived on with their god. But how could he begin? Belago would not understand. No one who hadn't passed onto the Fugue Plane and witnessed the divine and glorious sensation could understand. Against that ignorance, anything Cadderly might say would sound like a ridiculous cliché, typical comforting words usually spoken without conviction.

"I received word that you wished to speak with me?" Cadderly said, in an effort to change the subject.

"Yes," Belago answered. His eyes widened when he looked into the young priest's calming gray eyes. "Oh, yes!" he cried, as if he'd just remembered something. "I did—of course I did!"

Obviously embarrassed, the wiry man hopped back across the shop to a small cabinet. He fumbled with an oversized ring of keys, muttering to himself all the while.

"You have become a hero," Danica remarked, noting the alchemist's movements.

Cadderly couldn't disagree with Danica's observation. Vicero Belago had never been overjoyed to see the young priest before. Cadderly had always been a demanding customer, taxing Belago's talents often beyond their limits. Because of a risky project that Cadderly had given the alchemist, Belago's shop had been blown apart once.

That had been long ago, however, before the battle in Shilmista Forest, before Cadderly's exploits in Carradoon, the city to the southeast on the banks of Impresk Lake.

Before Cadderly had become a hero.

Hero.

What a ridiculous title, the young priest thought. He'd done no more in Carradoon than Danica or either of the dwarf brothers, Ivan and Pikel. And he, unlike his sturdy friends, had run away from the battle in Shilmista Forest, fled because he couldn't endure the horrors.

He looked down at Danica again, her brown-eyed gaze comforting him as only it could. How beautiful she was, Cadderly noted, her frame as delicate as that of a newborn fawn and her hair tousled and bouncing freely around her shoulders. Beautiful and untamed, he decided, and with an inner strength clearly shining through those exotic, almond-shaped eyes.

Belago was back in front of him then, seeming nervous and holding both his hands behind his back. "You left this here when you came back from the elven wood," he explained, drawing out his left hand. He held a leather belt with a wide, shallow holster on one side that sported a hand crossbow.

"I had no idea I would need it in peaceful Carradoon,"

Cadderly replied, taking the belt and strapping it around his waist.

Danica eyed the young priest curiously. The crossbow had become a symbol of violence to Cadderly, and a symbol of Cadderly's abhorrence of violence to those who knew him best. To see him strap it on so easily, with an almost cavalier attitude, twisted Danica's heart.

Cadderly sensed both the woman's gaze and her confusion. He forced himself to accept it, thinking that he would probably shatter many conceptions in the days ahead. For Cadderly had come to see the dangers facing the Edificant Library in ways that others couldn't.

"I-I saw that you had nearly exhausted your supply of—of darts," Belago stammered. "I mean . . . there's no charge for this batch." He pulled his other hand around, producing a bandoleer filled with specially crafted bolts for the tiny crossbow. "I figured I owed it to you—we all owe it to you, Cadderly."

Cadderly nearly laughed aloud at the absurd proclamation, but he respectfully held his control and accepted the very expensive gift from the alchemist with a grave but approving nod. The darts were special indeed, hollowed out in the center and fitted with a vial that Belago had filled with volatile oil of impact.

"My thanks for the gift," the young priest said. "Be assured that you have aided the cause of the library in our continuing struggle against the evil of Castle Trinity."

Belago seemed pleased by that remark. Head bobbing once more, he accepted Cadderly's handshake eagerly. He was still standing in the same place, smiling from ear to ear, as Cadderly and Danica walked out into the hall.



Cadderly could still sense Danica's continuing unease and could see the disappointment etched in her features. The young priest's narrowing stare attacked that disappointment. "I have dismissed the guilt because it has no place in me," was all the explanation he would offer. "Not now, not with all that is left to be done. But I have not forgotten Barjin or that fateful day in the catacombs."

Danica looked away, down the hall, but hooked Cadderly's arm with her own, showing her trust in him.

Another shapely, obviously feminine form entered the corridor as the pair moved toward Danica's room at the southern end of the complex. Danica tightened her grip on Cadderly's arm at the scent of an exotic and overpowering perfume.

"My greetings, handsome Cadderly," purred the shapely priestess in the crimson gown. "You cannot imagine how pleased I am that you have returned."

Danica's grip nearly cut off Cadderly's blood flow, and he felt his fingers tingling. He knew his face had blushed a deep scarlet, as red as Priestess Histra's revealing gown. He realized, sensibly, that it was probably the most modest outfit he'd ever seen the lusty priestess of Sune, the Goddess of Love, wear, but that didn't make it modest by anyone else's standards. The front was cut in a low **V**, so low that Cadderly felt he might glimpse Histra's navel if he got up on his toes, and though the gown was long, its front slit was incredibly high, displaying all of Histra's shapely leg when she brought one foot out in front of the other in her typically alluring stance.

Histra did not seem displeased by Cadderly's obvious discomfort, or by Danica's growing scowl. She bent



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one leg at the knee, her thigh slipping completely free of the gown's meager folds.

Cadderly heard himself gulp, but didn't realize he was gawking at the brazen display until Danica's small fingernails dug deep lines into his upper arm.

"Do come and visit, dear young Cadderly," Histra purred. She looked disdainfully at the woman on Cadderly's arm. "When you are not so tightly leashed, of course." Histra slowly, teasingly moved into her room, the door's gentle *click* as she closed it lost beneath the sound of Cadderly's repeated swallowing.

"I—" he stammered, at last looking Danica in the eye.

Danica laughed and led him on down the hall. "Fear not," she said, her tone more than a little condescending. "I understand your relationship with the Heartwarder. She's quite pitiful, actually."

Cadderly looked down at Danica, perplexed. If Danica was speaking the truth, then why had little lines of blood begun their descent on his muscled arm?

"I'm not jealous of Histra, certainly," Danica went on. "I trust you, with all my heart." Just outside her room, she stopped and faced Cadderly, one hand brushing the outline of his face, the other tight around his waist.

"I trust you," Danica said again. "Besides," added the fiery young monk in very different, stronger tones as she turned into her room, "if anything romantic ever happened between you and that single-minded, over-painted lump of too, too quivering flesh, I would put her nose somewhere in back of one of her ears."

Danica disappeared into her room to retrieve the notes she and Cadderly had prepared for their meeting with Dean Thobicus. The young priest remained in

the hall, considering the threat and privately laughing at how true it could be. Danica was fully a foot shorter than he, and easily a hundred pounds lighter. She walked with the grace of a dancer—and fought with the tenacity of a bee-stung bear.

The young priest was far from worried, though. Histra had spent all her life in the practice of being alluring, and she made no secret of her designs on Cadderly. But she hadn't a chance. Not a woman in the world had a chance of breaking Cadderly's bond with his Danica.

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A blackened, charred hand tore up through the newly turned earth, reaching desperately for the open air above. A second arm, similarly charred, and broken at a gruesome angle halfway between the wrist and the elbow, followed, grasping at the mud, tearing at the natural prison that held the wretched body. Finally the creature found enough of a hold to pull his hairless head from the shallow grave, to look again upon the world of the living.

The blackened head swiveled on a neck that was no more than skin shriveled tight to the bone, surveying the scene. For a fleeting instant, the wretch wondered what had happened. How had it been buried?

A short distance away, down a little hill, the creature saw the glow of the evening lamps of a small farmhouse. Beside it stood another structure, a barn.

A barn!

The thin sliver of the consciousness that had once belonged to a man known as Ghost remembered that barn. Ghost had seen his body charred by that wicked Cadderly in that very barn. The undead corpse drew

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in some air—the action couldn't be called breathing where that undead thing was concerned—and dragged his blackened, shriveled body the rest of the way out of the hole. The notes of a distant, yet strangely familiar melody continued to thrum in the back of his feeble consciousness.

Unsteadily, Ghost loped more than walked toward the structure, the memories of that horrible, fateful day coming back more fully with each stride.

Ghost had used the *Ghearufu*, a powerful device with magical energies directed toward the spirit world, to steal the body of the firbolg Vander, an unwilling associate. Disguised as Vander, with the strength of a giant, Ghost had then crushed his own body and had thrown it across the barn.

Then Cadderly burned it.

The malignant monster looked down to his bone-skinny arms and prominent ribs, the hollow shell that somehow lived.

Cadderly had burned him!

A single-minded hatred consumed the wretched creature. Ghost wanted to kill Cadderly, to kill anybody dear to the young priest, to kill anybody at all.

Ghost was at the barn then. Thoughts of Cadderly had flitted away into nothingness, replaced by an unfocused anger. The door was over to the side, but the creature understood that he didn't need the door, that he had become something more than the simple material wooden planking that blocked his way. The shriveled form wavered, became insubstantial, and Ghost walked through the wall.

He heard the horse whinnying before he came fully back to the plane of the living, saw the poor

beast standing wild-eyed, lathered in sweat. The sight pleased the undead thing. Waves of a new sensation of joy washed over Ghost as he smelled the beast's terror. The undead monster ambled over to stand in front of the horse, and let his tongue drop out of his mouth hungrily. With all the skin burned away from the sides of the tongue, its pointy tip hung far below Ghost's blackened chin. The horse made not a sound, was too frightened to move or even to draw breath.

With a wheeze of anticipation, Ghost put deathly cold hands against the sides of the animal's face.

The horse fell dead.

The undead creature hissed with delight, but while Ghost felt thrilled by the kill, he did not feel sated. His hunger demanded more, couldn't be sated by the death of a simple animal. Ghost moved across the barn and again walked through the wall, coming into view of the lights of the farmhouse. A shadowy shape, a human shape, moved across one of the windows.

Ghost was at the front door, undecided as to whether to walk through the wood, tear the door apart, or simply knock and let the sheep come to the wolf. The decision was taken from the creature, though, when he looked to the side of the door, at a small pane of glass, and saw, for the first time, his own reflection.

A red glow emanated from empty eye sockets. Ghost's nose was completely gone, replaced by a blacker hole edged by ragged flaps of charred skin.

That tiny part of Ghost's consciousness that remembered the vitality of life lost all control at the sight of that hideous reflection. The monster's unearthly wail sent the barnyard animals into a frenzy and shattered the stillness of the quiet autumn night more than any

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violent storm ever could. There came a shuffling from inside the house, just behind the door, but the outraged monster didn't even hear it. With strength far beyond that of any mortal, he drove his bony hands through the center of the door and pulled out to the sides, splintering and tearing the wood as though it were no more than a thin sheet of parchment.

A man stood there, wearing the uniform of the Carra-
doon city guard and an expression of sheer horror, his mouth frozen wide in a silent scream. His eyes bulged out so far it seemed as if they would fall from his face.

Ghost burst through the broken door and fell over him. The man's skin transformed, aged., under the creature's ghostly touch. His hair turned from raven black to white and fell out in clumps. Finally the guardsman's voice returned, and he screamed and wailed, flailing his arms. Ghost ripped at him, tore at his throat until that scream was no more than a gurgle from blood-filled lungs.

The creature heard a shuffle of feet and looked up from the kill to see a second man standing beyond the foyer, in a doorway at the other side of the house's small kitchen.

"By the gods," the man whispered, and he dived back into the far room and slammed the door.

With one hand, Ghost lifted the dead man and hurled him out the shattered portal, halfway across the barnyard. The undead creature floated across the floor, savoring the kill, yet hungry for more. His form wavered again, and he walked across the room and through another closed door.

The second man, also a city guardsman, stood before the wicked thing, swinging his sword frantically

at the horrid monster. But the weapon never touched Ghost. The blade slipped right through the insubstantial, ethereal mist the assassin had become. The man tried to run away, but Ghost kept pace with him, walked through furniture that the man stumbled over, walked through walls to meet the terrified man on the other side of a door.

The torment went on for long and agonizing hours, the helpless man finally stumbling out into the night, losing his sword as he tumbled down the porch steps. He scrambled to his feet and ran into the dark night, ran with all speed for Carradoon, howling all the way.

Ghost could have rematerialized and torn the man apart, but he enjoyed the sensation of toying with his prey, longed for the smell of terror, even more than the actual killing. Ghost felt stronger for it, as though he somehow fed off the horrified man's screams.

But it was over and the man was gone, and the other was long dead and offered no more sport.

Ghost wailed again as the thin sliver of his remaining consciousness considered what he had become, considered what wretched Cadderly had created. Ghost remembered little of his past life, only that he'd been among the highest paid killers in the living realm, a professional assassin, an artist of murder.

And he had become an undead thing, a hollow, animated shell of malignant energies.

After more than a century of being in possession of the *Ghearufu*, Ghost had come to consider mortal forms in a much different way than others. Twice the assassin had utilized the powers of the magical device to change bodies, killing his previous form and taking



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the new one as his own. And somehow, Ghost's spirit, a piece of it at least, had come back to the Prime Material Plane. By some trick of fate, Ghost had risen from the dead.

But how? He couldn't fully remember his place in the afterlife, but sensed that it was not pleasant, not at all.

Images of growling shadows surrounded him, and black claws raked the air in front of his mind's eye. What had brought him back from the grave, what compelled his spirit to walk Toril once more? The creature scanned his fingers, his toes, for some sign of the regenerating ring Ghost had once worn. But he distinctly remembered that the ring had been stolen by Cadderly.

Ghost felt a call on the wind, silent but compelling. And familiar. He turned glowing eyes up to the distant mountains and heard the call again.

The *Ghearufu*.

The malignant spirit understood, remembered hearing the melody from his place of eternal punishment. The *Ghearufu* had called him back. By the power of the *Ghearufu*, Ghost walked the earth once more. At that confused, overwhelming moment, the creature couldn't decide if that was a good thing or not. He looked again at his shriveled, gruesome arms and torso, and wondered if he could withstand the light of day. What future awaited Ghost in such a state? What hopes could the undead thing hold?

The silent call came again.

The *Ghearufu*!

It wanted Ghost back—and by its power, the creature's spirit could surely steal a new form, a living form.

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Q

In Carradoon, not so far from the farm, the horrified guardsman stumbled to the closed gate, screaming of ghosts, crying for his slaughtered companion. If the soldiers manning the gate held any doubt about the man's sincerity, they needed only to look into his face, a face that appeared much older than their compatriot's thirty years.

A large contingent of men, including a priest from the temple of Ilmater, rode out from Carradoon's gate very soon after, hell-bent for the farmhouse, prepared to do battle with some malignant spirit.

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But Ghost was far gone by then, sometimes walking, sometimes floating across the fields, following the call of the *Ghearufu*, his one chance for deliverance.

Only the cries of the nocturnal animals, the terrified bleating of sheep, the frightened screech of a night owl, marked the ghost assassin's passage.