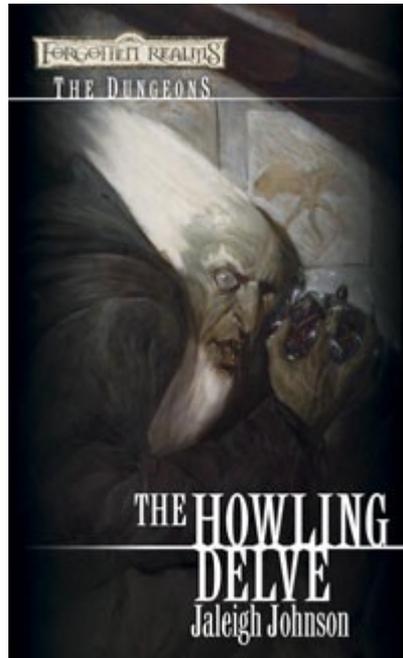


Wraith: A Short Story

By Jaleigh Johnson



Keczulla, Amn

Run, little Wraith. Run. But there is nowhere you can hide.

In the cool shade of the alley, a dozen gray bodies waited, little shadows tensed to spring.

The children ranged in age from four to twelve, the elder children taking the younger in hand, to show them how the trick was played. Without the knowledge, they would soon starve or be taken by the Keczullan Guard.

"That's 'im," said Meisha. She singled the young merchant out to the others, though they could hardly fail to notice such an easy mark. The young man walked with an unhurried stride down the stretch of alley behind The Thirsty Gnome tavern. The fool was idly fingering a coin-sized garnet, its soft facets drawing light and the eager gazes of twelve hungry Wraiths. He had no idea he was about to be picked clean.

"Wait for the signal." Meisha drew her four-year-old charge, Eklen, against the wall beside her. The others ranged on either side of the alley, pressing their mud-covered bodies against the buildings.

"What we waiting on?" the little one whined. Meisha shushed him with a sharp elbow to the ribs. "Stop it."

"Be quiet!" Meisha hissed. "Pay heed or it'll be upside your head next. Now look, you have to be patient, see? Let them come to you."

The merchant stopped, hesitating in the sudden, cool dark of the alley. He was going to turn around, Meisha thought. He might have heard something. Damn the man for having half a wit.

"Quick, he's gettin' away." Eklen sprang up, but Meisha hooked a bony arm around his waist and jerked him back.

"He's not going anywhere," she whispered, "watch."

Silent as a dust cloud, one of the older Wraiths slipped away from the wall. Darting up the alley, he put himself squarely in the path of the merchant. Dull light glinted off his shaved skull. Sweat and dried mud left dirty tracks down the sides of his gaunt face. To the merchant, he must have looked like a tiny demon, escaped from some deep Hell.

To Meisha's eyes, he was the best pocket thief the Wraiths had. He was vital to putting bread in their mouths, yet Meisha didn't even know his name. There was no need for names, for identities, among the Wraiths. There was only the force of the group. They looked alike, boy and girl -- moved as one, ate as one, acted as one.

The young merchant, struck dumb by the sight of the little mud-covered demon, froze when he should have been running. That was the fatal mistake. By the time he'd recovered his wits, the Wraith had sliced his pouch strings with a small razor tied to his thumb. He flashed a toothless grin and took off running down the alley.

"Stop, you! Guard!" The merchant bolted after the thief, while the other Wraiths made ready. The poor fool stared straight ahead, intent on his coins, never looking around to see the trap closing in around him.

What was one half-starved child, after all?

The shadows in the alley darkened and shifted toward the merchant. Instead of one little child, suddenly there were two. And from the corner of his vision two more, jumping from their crouches like frightened, snarling cats. Eklen grabbed the merchant's leg, wrapping dirty arms around his thigh.

The merchant skidded up short and tried to wrench the boy off, but his fingers slipped and found no purchase on the mud slicking up and down the spindly boy's arms. The child raised his head and smiled at the merchant. Flies crawled over his shaved skull, but the boy didn't mind them. They were far preferable to fleas. None of them could have hair for long, because of the fleas.

Disgusted, the merchant released the boy and gagged at the smell now clinging to him. He dragged his burden toward the adjacent building, intending to bludgeon the boy against the wall.

He managed two paces before they were on him.

More hands grabbed his arms, pinning them to his sides. Monkeylike, a fourth Wraith crawled up his back. Their filth-covered hands were everywhere, in his hair, his clothes, picking off jewelry and purses wherever they could find them. They wrenched the rings from his sweat-soaked hands, breaking fingers when they couldn't free a prize. And still, they raked him for more.

Panting, unable to scream for the hands at his mouth, the merchant fell to his knees. He covered his head as best he could and made no attempt to resist their plucking. He just waited for it to end.

After what seemed an age, the weight lifted from his body, and the smell -- the cloying, wretched smell of waste and poverty -- finally began to ease.

The merchant lifted his head to see his tormentors retreating. A sharp pain hit him behind the ear, and he pitched forward, unconscious on the alley floor.

He'd be safe enough until he awoke, Meisha thought. She threw away the stone she'd used to silence him. He'd been picked clean by the Wraiths. Nothing of value would be left for anyone else to scavenge.

Meisha had to run to catch up with the others. She wanted her share of the prize.

Rounding the corner, Meisha stopped, surprised to see the Wraiths still together. They were clustered in the shadows, talking in whispers. Meisha looked up the street and saw what had stopped them.

An old man meandered down the narrow street, following roughly the same route the merchant had taken toward the alley. Like the fool before him, the old man strolled the same oblivious route to ruin.

But a thread of unease passed through Meisha as she watched this one. As a group, the Wraiths could usually tell when a mark was no good. It might be a heavily armed or armored merchant, one who knew his way around the Harbor Moon Ward, or a Guard officer in disguise, looking to round up a gang of feral children. Sometimes it was just a feeling that kept the Wraiths away. Meisha didn't like this one, but all around her, the children were already making plans.

Meisha stepped forward, putting her hand on Eklen's small shoulders. "Not the old one," she said.

All the gray, gaunt faces turned to look at her like she'd sprouted an extra head.

"We've got a fat catch already," Meisha insisted. "This one's bad."

"Heat's touched ye!" spouted the pocket thief. He pointed to the old man. "Pouches swelled like pigs' bladders. I'm for it. Who's with me?"

The rest of the group nodded and filed after him. Eklen shrugged off her arm and followed.

Meisha trotted beside Eklen. "You stay with me on this one, hear?"

"I'm takin' his leg!"

She cuffed him. "You're mine, and you do as I say."

The boy rubbed the side of his face and gave her a hate-filled look. He wrenched his hand from her grasp and ran to catch up to the others.

Meisha took up her post against the alley wall. The old man turned into the alley. Meisha waited, her breath trapped in her lungs.

For an instant before he saw the trap, the old man's eyes met hers. Meisha felt a stirring in her gut, a strange, acid burning, as if she'd swallowed hot embers. The feeling was worse than hunger burns. She'd lived with those all her life. This was . . . unnatural, untamable.

This was happening too fast, Meisha thought. She couldn't breathe for the heat expanding in her chest. It was all wrong. Then she saw Eklen trundling forward to grab the old man's leg, just as she'd taught him to do.

"Stop!" Meisha screamed.

It happened so suddenly, and later, Meisha would never be able to describe it properly.

The old man spun toward her scream, and Eklen, confused, jumped in his path.

Why wasn't anyone going to help? Meisha thought wildly. The burning threatened to consume her. She pressed her body against the cool alley wall, but nothing helped. She was so hot, so helpless. She couldn't get to Eklen. The old man was reaching for the boy, and Eklen stood, so frozen . . .

"Don't touch him!"

And then it was gone. The heat left her body, detaching itself like a physical presence from her skin. Meisha could see the rush of hot wind spiral down the alley, a funnel of searing heat that stripped trash and sand from the ground, throwing it up in a furious vortex.

Had she been possessed by a demon? Meisha had never experienced anything like this before. Dazed, she watched the funnel pass over Eklen and the old man. The old man raised his arms, and the air seemed to part before him, steering the cloud harmlessly away.

A wizard, Meisha thought. He must be. She had never seen the dark ones, but the Wraiths had stories, just as other Amnians did, of the terror and destruction wrought by the arcane folk. To Meisha -- who lived daily with the darkness of ever-present hunger -- these stories seemed harmless fireside phantoms, too fanciful to be real.

The wind abated, shaking Meisha from her frozen trance. She pushed off the wall, trusting her feet would still support her.

Then she saw Eklen, strewn out like so much refuse on the alley floor.

She ran to him, ignoring the wizard who stood above them both. Let him strike her down as he had the boy. Meisha didn't care.

Meisha fell to her knees at the child's side. "Eklen!" He didn't stir. He was flushed but dry. Meisha put her head against his chest, searching for breath. There was none.

"Get up, you!" Meisha felt sweat pouring down her face. The air was thick and hot in her throat. Damn the Keczullan heat. "Listen, now. You're mine and I say when you move and when you don't, so get up! You hear me or I'll cuff you one, now get up!" Her voice sounded shrill and awful in her ears. Clinging to Eklen's small body, Meisha rocked back and forth, shaking him. He felt heavy and limp in her arms, a sagging, beached fish.

"Wake up, damn you!"

A shadow fell across them. Meisha looked up, squinting, into the wizard's face.

"Get away!" she croaked, when the wizard crouched beside her. But the old man ignored her. He felt the boy's skin, his chest, just as Meisha had. A speculative look came into his eyes when he finally turned his attention to Meisha.

"You could not have known," he said. "It is not your fault."

"You killed him!" Meisha spat in the wizard's face. The old man wiped the filth from his beard and only continued to watch her. It infuriated Meisha. She was a bird under the talons of a hawk. "I'll call the guards!" she screamed, dragging Eklen out of his grasp.

"Ah, but who will they take, I wonder?"

Meisha sprang at him, her hands hooked into claws. She would have his eyes, before she died.

A blast of force slammed her back against the wall of the far building. Light pin-pricked her vision, but Meisha shook the pain away and got to her feet. The wizard remained crouched, serene, still watching her.

"My magic did not kill your friend," the wizard said after a moment. "Yours did."

Everything inside Meisha recoiled. The buildings pressed close around her. She wanted desperately to escape the wizard's eyes, but she couldn't.

"Liar," she whispered. "Your magic --"

"Is much too precious to waste on a half-starved street urchin," the wizard said reasonably. He pointed to Eklen's body. "This boy has not had good, fresh water in more than a day. That's death in the Keczullan heat. Your magic wind merely speeded up the process. The sudden burst took what moisture remained from his body. An impressive spell," he added, in tones that bordered on praise.

Meisha felt light-headed. "I'm no wizard!" she shrieked, and she came at him again.

The spell slap this time was more painful, and Meisha took a long time getting up from the ground.

The wizard towered over her. "I can teach you to control such power," he said. "Rather than be enraged at me, turn your anger to something useful. Redeem yourself for this one's death."

"You're mad," Meisha hissed. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw gray shadows gathering. The other Wraiths had returned to see what had become of them. Meisha hated them all for leaving her behind, but in that moment all she desired was to see the wizard in pain. The old fool who looked at her with only pity in his eyes.

"Such a talent, to be wasted," he said. "Come with me, little Wraith. I can save you, if you'll let me."

"Save me," Meisha crooned. "Mad wizard." She turned to signal the others and felt a stinging pain in her leg. She looked down and saw a sharp stone embedded in her calf. Bewildered, she looked up at the small Wraith who'd cast the rock.

"What are you -- don't!" She fell back as another missile bounced off her shoulder. Numbness shot down her arm. They were crowding around her now, forming a ring. They all clutched stones in their clawlike hands.

"Kill the wizard," the pocket thief intoned, and the others moved to obey. Stones flew, and Meisha covered her head with her arms. Pain filled her whole world. It was worse than anything she could have imagined. Whimpering, screaming, begging for it to stop, Meisha curled against the wall of the building, burying her head in the remnants of a wooden crate that had been discarded in the alley. It was the only thing that saved her life.

After a time, she lost consciousness. Death, she thought, would have been a blissful release, but instead she woke, breaths or days later, to find the Wraiths gone.

She looked around, and the world swam in front of her vision. She was still going to die, Meisha thought. She couldn't get food or water for herself. Without the Wraiths, the strength of the group to support her, it was only a matter of time. She stared up at the sky, waiting, listless.

The wizard did not mark his approach with footsteps, or a greeting, he simply appeared above her, blocking her view of the passing clouds.

"Not quite dead, are you?" he asked conversationally. "I hoped as much."

Meisha had no will to fight anymore. "Kill me," she pleaded. Blood crusted her mouth. She tasted the copper bite on her tongue.

"I don't want you to die," the wizard said. "You have too much potential. You have raw sorcery in you, little Wraith, and it's aching to get out. If I leave you here, you will die eventually, painfully, but it need not be so. I can save you . . . give you a new future."

Meisha forced her battered body to move. She rolled onto her stomach and crawled away from the wizard. Every shattered bone screamed in pain. Meisha cried out, agonized, but she had to get away from him and his mad ravings. She -- a wizard? Meisha would sooner die.

"Go ahead, then," the wizard called after her. "Run, little Wraith. Run. But there is nowhere you can hide, not from yourself."

Meisha collapsed, her face pressed in the dirt and sand, the pain unbearable. No. She didn't want to die. But she'd killed Eklen. Or the demon inside her had. Didn't she deserve death?

The wizard crouched beside her and pushed a vial of liquid under her nose. "Drink," he said. His voice was not unkind, but he invited no argument.

Meisha drank. The liquid spilled down her throat, cool and somehow sweet. Her shattered body welcomed the coolness, and the pain started to ebb.

She looked up at the wizard, dizzy and near-hysterical with relief. "What is that scent?" she asked. She was cool and drowsy. She wanted to sleep, to sleep and be safe.

"The healing potion has no scent, child," the wizard said.

"Then it must be you," she said. "Smells like . . ."

The wizard smiled. "Like cave moss and water trickling down an underground river?" He chuckled when she only looked at him blankly. "You've never seen either of those things, have you? You are starved and ignorant and have no idea what you could be, if you were properly reared." He leaned in close so that she would hear him. His voice still seemed very far away. "I can remove you from this sweltering heat, little one. I can take the pain away. Don't you want to live, little one? Won't you try?"

"Yes," Meisha said. She was drifting in a cloud of painless half-sleep. "I want to be . . . safe."

"Then you shall be. Come with me."

"Yes." Meisha could hear the wizard murmuring something softly. It might almost have been a prayer, but the arcane folk didn't have prayers, did they? Not those demons.

She forced her eyes open. The sun had disappeared. Darkness cloaked everything around her. Somewhere in the distance, she heard the drip of water echoing softly. The air was cold.

So very, very cold.

"Where am I?" she murmured, frightened.

Distantly, she heard the wizard's voice. "Welcome to my home, little Wraith. Welcome to the Delve."

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