

[Ed Greenwood Presents Waterdeep: Circle of Skulls]

Extended Ending

“Speak of the Devil”
by James P. Davis

3 Hammer, the Year of the Grinning Halfling (1481 DR)

Its blade was a dark, metal gray with tiny flecks of glittering silver, invisible until one held it close and studied it. The edge was sharp, but not especially so, nothing like one might expect of an enchanted weapon. The crossguards were curved downward, toward the edge, with a series of fine grooves following the curve all the way to the wedge-shaped ends like stylized wings. Within each groove, written in an unknown alphabet of symbols and runelike characters, were mysterious phrases, though whether they were of arcane or divine origin, Jinnaoth could not be sure. All he knew was that he had spoke them once and that they had assisted in the killing of an angel—an angel like he had once been.

Jinn pulled his hood low as he and Quessahn worked their slow way through the crowds of Waterdeep’s central market. Snow, muddied by constant traffic, crunched beneath their boots as they wove in and out between merchants and their potential customers. The eladrin kept her features covered as well. Though those that pursued them had no interest in Quessahn, they had been watching her for seven days, waiting for the deva to show himself. He squeezed her hand tightly, fearing he had placed far too much danger in her life despite her protests to the contrary.

The Watchful Order of Magists had been her constant shadow, taking over the investigation where the City Watch had left off. Whereas unexplained magic running loose in the city had made the officers of the Watch a bit apprehensive, it made the Magists practically obsessive. Jinnaoth couldn’t blame them, but he had little desire to become locked up in a cell and bombarded with questions for which he had no answers. The sword was cold at his side, as it always seemed to be lately, but more and more the blade felt like a presence, something sentient crouching at the edges of his sight, just beyond detection.

“Any sign?” Quess whispered.

“Nothing yet. Let’s move southeast, through the Trade Ward, to avoid making any straight lines,” Jinn replied.

“Will that make a difference?”

“Perhaps, perhaps not, just indulging a bit of paranoid caution.”

“Fair enough.”

Turning left they altered their course, giving Jinn a brief moment to spy the path they had left behind. He scanned the crowd for purple cloaks, the signature dress of the Watchful Order, but saw nothing of them. Many times he hoped the information gathering abilities of the Magists were better than his suspicions, that they might allow Quess and him to leave the city without incident, carrying the mysterious sword with them. His journey beyond Waterdeep would be lengthy enough without having to worry about more pursuit than he’d already attracted.

For days they had entertained various sages and historians within Pages Curious, the bookshop Jinn called home. He had remained hidden from them for safety, but since the sword could not be taken from him for long before finding its own way back, house calls had become necessary. They had learned only that the sword was of a make unknown to the greatest experts

they could find. It bore no hallmarks of dwarf hammer or elf magic, no particular design to match with any popular style in recorded history.

Most claimed the language on the crossguard and the silver symbol at the base of the blade to be gibberish, merely an artistic affectation to give the appearance of some enchantment. Others thought the sigils to be familiar, though they could not place their origins. Though each of these experts had been paid well for their services and their silence, it was during these visits that Jinn first noted the priests lingering outside the shop.

“Tempurans,” Jinn muttered angrily.

In the press of people around the edges of the marketplace, he’d spotted the telltale dirty-white tabard of one of the priests, the symbol of the god Tempus emblazoned over the man’s heart. At first he’d thought it mere coincidence, but the bearded man’s eyes had fixed pointedly upon Quessahn and him. He cursed and Quess pulled him to the right, along a less crowded street where they could gain some breathing room.

“The priests then,” Quess said. “It had to be someone to complicate things.”

“Hardly priests, more like sellswords, hired thugs toting prayer books.”

“Either way, we have them at our backs for now. Let’s keep it that way until we can get beyond the South Gate. If they’re still lingering at our heels after that, then we can deal with them more openly.”

“Agreed.”

“What I don’t understand is how they found us, but the Magists haven’t?” Quessahn asked. “We’ve only seen six or seven of the priests, they can’t have near the resources the Watchful Order has.”

Jinn nodded, perplexed by the strange warrior-clerics of Tempus since first sighting them outside the shop. They wore soiled tabards, unpolished armor, and moth-eaten cloaks, hardly what one might expect of a priesthood devoted to the god of war. Only one detail stood out from the rest, a small mark they all bore beneath the deity’s symbol on their tabards: a solid black circle. Neither he nor Quessahn had ever seen its like, nor did anyone seem to know anything about whatever sect of the Tempurans the priests identified themselves with.

“I think what they lack in resources they make up for in tenacity. I just hope they keep their curiosity at a safe distance and don’t try making a scene,” Jinn replied at length, eyeing the rooftops that leaned over them in a narrow alley.

“Do we know when Maranyuss will be joining us?” Quess asked. “Or *if* she will be joining us?”

“The hag has . . . her own issues to deal with,” Jinn said. “We shouldn’t count on her help if things get bumpy. And just as well,” he added as an afterthought, “I never trusted her much before Sathariel’s death and now . . .”

Quessahn said nothing, her silence speaking volumes to Jinn. The night hag and the eladrin did not get along well, each only barely acknowledging the usefulness of the other. They worked together in attempting to unravel the mysteries of the sword, but kept things strictly business, a task to focus on and nothing more. Luckily, in those quiet times between research, Mara had her own distractions to keep her busy.

Jinn chanced a look over the eladrin’s shoulder and cursed again. The one Tempuran had become two, and the pair kept pace a block behind them. Reluctantly he let go of Quessahn’s hand and reached beneath his cloak, unhooking the leather clasp holding the sword in its scabbard. When his fingertips brushed the silver pommel, a storm of memories from countless battles rushed through his mind.

It was his recent waking dreams that had inspired his plan to escape Waterdeep and go seeking answers about the blade. He would have visions of the silver symbol on the sword, the same mark mirrored on his left wrist. Each time he smelled the strong scent of tall grasses and rushing waters. Wide blue skies seem to stretch for forever in all directions, but would swiftly turn purple and deep red as the vision took him west, to the end of a long road and a wide field on the edge of a deep, blue-black ocean. A presence hovered in the dream, like invisible burning eyes watching his every move and he knew, briefly, the name of that presence and why it was there. Though why he was there he could only guess, for his only true memory of that field had been of blood and glory. Voices surrounded him in that place, unfamiliar voices speaking a language he had known once and still understood, saying:

“Akh’meriu seraph-keht senrasekh.”

Over and over again, the words were spoken as the sun set beyond the edge of the ocean and he knew that he stood on holy ground, a site forgotten by the modern world. A place he could never forget, on the edge of the once-mighty empire of Mulhorand, where he had taken his first steps in a mortal body. He repeated the words in the Common tongue for Quessahn one night after first hearing them in the dream.

“This is the field of gods and angels, where the sun sets.”

The next morning he had begun making plans to leave Waterdeep, to discover the secrets of his stolen blade which he had decided to name after feeling the eyes of that presence in the place where the sun sets. He named the sword for the angel left behind, the watcher at the veil pierced by gods who walked and did battle in the world.

He called it Raziel so that he might not forget again.

“They’re getting closer,” Quess said, a harmonious edge lingering in the wake behind her words as magic swirled with potential through her throat and around her tongue.

Jinn picked up his pace, plotting a course five streets ahead as he contemplated the area between them and the south gate. After dismissing a refuse strewn alley on the left he caught sight of purple cloth fluttering in a cold breeze around the corner, the color standing out against the snowy ground. He abandoned the previous route and prepared to trust to his instincts.

“And they’re not alone,” he said.

“Plan?”

“We split up. Less than half a bell to gateclose, but plenty of time to get lost and make our way out.”

“We could take the wall,” she replied. “Lots of other ways to get out of the city.”

“On foot, yes, but we’ll need the horses.”

Another purple cloak appeared in the crowd to their right, another Tempuran hiding in a corner to their left. Jinn’s pulse quickened, his breath steaming even and slow as he strode toward a crowded tavern, the Broken Drum, and flexed his fingers, lengthening his stride.

“Meet at the end of the High Road and Dragon?”

Quessahn pulled up short and grabbed his arm, turning him to face her. She smirked as she pulled her hood away, leaning in to press her lips tight against his. Her tongue playfully tugged at his upper lip before she withdrew.

“I’ll race you,” she said, her eyes sparkling a moment before being overcome by misty black shadows.

“Fair enough.”

Quessahn’s body dissolved into trailing wisps of darkness that Jinn charged through, clearing the distance to the front door of the Broken Drum in a heartbeat. Briefly he sensed a

commotion of movement at his back, but swiftly forgot it as he shoved open the tavern door and crashed inside. He overturned the first table in his way, sending it rolling sideways as ale splashed into the air amid curses and shouts. Rage and surprise reddened the faces of those falling to the floor in his wake, but none of them made a move to stand in his way or stop him.

He leaped atop another table, kicking food and drinks to the floor. A mug sailed past his head, narrowly missing him and striking another patron. The tavern was split between those watching in absolute shock and those on their feet, ready for violence. Jinn heard the sound of balled knuckles striking flesh and smiled, turning once as he cleared the bar to see the brawl's beginning and the dirty tabard of a Tempuran at the door, blocked by a chaos of bodies.

He took two long strides toward a frowning bartender raising a crossbow from beneath the bar. He roared as his hood fell away, and he fixed the man with his flashing golden eyes. The bartender paled and fell back, the crossbow forgotten as the deva sidestepped into the kitchen and made his way to the backdoor. A hulking shadow appeared in his path wearing a blood-stained apron and wielding a wickedly curved butcher's knife.

Jinn suspected there must have been ogre in the cook's blood, but could tell by his stance there was more inhuman advantage hiding in the muscles of his new opponent than skill. The blade was raised and Jinn fell, rolling between the half-ogre's legs and grabbing a fistful of bloody apron. The butcher knife thunked solidly into the floor and Jinn pulled, sending the angry cook head over boots to land flat on his back.

The kitchen door had swung once, revealing the strengthening brawl and several Tempurans caught in the fray. Jinn headed to the back door and pulled a small pouch from his belt, suspecting the Watchful Order would not be so easily fooled. As soon as he put shoulder to door he drew back his arm to throw, already hearing the arcane mutterings of a wizard in the back alley waiting for him.

The pouch struck the mage in the center of his chest, its loose strings untying as the man's spell faltered in surprise. Before he could recover the magic a viscous, ropy substance exploded from the pouch, enveloping the wizard's limbs and face in an expanding mass of plantlike vines. Muffled curses accompanied the man's fall to the ground as Jinn darted right and followed the path of several mazelike alleys, burying himself in the apartment districts and make a steady progress south where, he suspected, Quess was already waiting for him.

She would gloat that she had won the race and he would kiss her again, begging to differ. At least, that is what he hoped would occur.

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Maranyuss strolled through the dark of the Pages Curious, contemplating shelves and the dust, eyeing the spines of the books as she passed, her long fingers tracing embossed titles like old lovers. Occasionally she would pull one from its shelf, leaf through the pages and whisper an arcane phrase as she re-shelved it, moving on to the next. At her belt hung a large black-bound tome on a silver chain with an ornate lock that seemed to murmur and growl each time she worked her magic upon another book. She patted its cover lovingly and came to the end of the shelves, her study of the bookshop complete.

The book at her side settled as though content and the night hag, unconcerned with concealing herself in the well-warded shop, stood quietly and resisted the urge to walk the shelves again. She had all that she needed and more, the shop held nothing else she would regret leaving behind. The task of packing for the journey done, her hands crept to the black chain

around her neck, the bauble at its end hanging beneath her robes, hidden close to her indigo-black skin.

She pulled it free almost without thinking, a reflex she could neither control well nor wanted to control as the cool, squirming green light fell over her and the shop. Shadows danced across the bookshelves as the strange ruby spun on the chain before her eyes. The red color of the gem was eclipsed by the light of the treasure inside and she imagined she could almost see the nine skulls of the circle, bobbing within, wreathed in green flame. But the circle itself remained where it had always been, still bound to Pharra's Alley because she willed them to remain in their place until she had use for them. What glowed from within the soul-stealing gem was the essence of their old souls.

And, as she had come to discover to her horror and delight, something else.

When the circle of Nine fouled their ancient spell and earned their curse, the power they stole from Asmodeus was unspent, waiting for them to try again. And three hundred years later they failed again. Now, bound to their souls, the ancient power of the arch-devil turned god surged in the palm of Mara's hand, throbbed against her skin and made her dream such things as would make a lesser being shudder and die.

She blinked and bit her lip, drawing a thin line of dark blood as she pulled the stone away from her sight with a low growl. Several days ago she had dubbed the gem the Ninestone and, having given it a name, she gave it ever more presence in her thoughts, speaking to it on occasion. She had caught herself murmuring quietly when deep in thought as though in communion with a spirit or in prayer to a god.

Frustrated by her own lack of control, she patrolled the perimeter of the shop once again, checking runes in hidden corners and pulling the curtains closed over the windows. She nodded at her efforts, finally prepared to leave. No sooner had she decided it was time to go than a slight tremor shook the floor and a shadow flitted through the entrance to the shop. Her hands curled into claws, spells at the ready as she held still, waiting for the intruder to present itself.

At length a young woman peeked around the corner, greeting the night hag with a radiant smile. Maranyuss did not hesitate for a moment.

At a word, flames leaped from her palm, streaming across the shop and roaring around the girl, reducing her simple white dress to blackened tatters, singeing chestnut hair to ash in a breath, curling pale, pink flesh from bone, and reducing bright blue-green eyes to twin streams of thick fluid. But in the quiet that followed, the young woman did not move or flinch, her smile less charming than before, but just as persistent.

"That was impolite," said the girl.

"*That* was a warning, devil," Mara responded. "You've caught me in a moment of cautious curiosity. I suggest you make use of this fleeting emotion and escape before I burn the true form hidden behind the face of this little girl."

The young woman did not respond and Mara indulged her curiosity a moment longer, lifting an ornate candle holder from a nearby shelf as the features and clothing of the girl re-knitted themselves to their former state. She lit the candle's wick and held it high, letting the light fall on the girl's face. The girl did nothing, allowing the scrutiny with only a mysterious grin.

Where the flickering light fell horrors were revealed beneath unblemished pink skin. Deep red scales and spines glistened, monstrous teeth sat tight and neat in a fiendish maw, and slitted yellow eyes narrowed at the light beneath a crown of gleaming black horns. Mara was unsurprised at the fiend's appearance, focusing instead on the tingling magic that surged through

her hand from the candle. It whispered in her mind, telling her all of what fell within the circle of light.

“You are Belphegor, an agent of the Nine Hells, most recently in the service of Asmodeus, and you have a twin called Saeriel, both of you with similar tastes for . . . *younger* souls,” Mara said coldly, adding. “Asmodeus must enjoy you and Saeriel immensely, twins are not common among devils.”

“No, they are not, and you may call me Belle.”

“Fine, you have bypassed my protections and invaded my home, why should I not kill you Belle?”

“Because I have come to help you Maranyuss, formerly of the Feywild and banished to a mortal world by the wrath of Asmodeus,” Belle replied sweetly. “Your deva is in danger.”

“Jinnaoth? He is a trifle of passing interest, why should I care? Kill him if you wish, I have no more need of him,” she said, though inwardly she doubted her own words, a small needling fear traveling up her spine as she wondered what danger the deva’s death might pose to her.

“I believe that you believe some of that,” Belle said at length. “But you must know something of what he has become, of that sword he carries that you tricked him into stealing from the Vigilant Order. Its purpose was not spent in the slaying of Sathariel, only awakened. Surely you do not think that a trifle?”

Mara took a step backward, setting down the candle of true-seeing and fingering the Ninestone beneath her thick robes. Rumors had drawn her to the temple where the sword had been held, supposedly hidden in the care of the Vigilant Order, though she wondered why such a small sect would be allowed the honor of even seeing the weapon. She knew only that it had value to Asmodeus, that he had kept it hidden from the world, and she wanted merely to thwart him, to place the blade in the hands of a deva. It had been a brief moment of revenge, a small victory that had gone on to help slay one of the god’s favored servants, but now she wondered . . .

What if Asmodeus had planned for Jinn to take the blade all along?

Quiet curses escaped her lips as a crowd of faint voices laughed and jeered in her mind, mocking her foolishness.

“Be quiet!” she shouted, gripping the Ninestone tight until the voices subsided.

Her eyes burned with fury as Belle stepped closer, the girl’s earlier smile gone, replaced with an expression of grave seriousness.

“If the deva’s enemies have their way, the sword, now returned to the world by your scheming, will pass to a new wielder,” Belle said. “Suffice to say, you shall meet with Asmodeus again, far sooner than you ever feared.”

“Why should I trust you?” Mara growled. “Why should you care?”

“Because like you I am a creature of profit, and while there is always profit to be made in war, it is fool’s gold that fills coffers from the last war ever waged. Treasures would tend lose some of their luster with few left to appreciate their value. Understand?”

The night hag calmed somewhat, nodding as she considered whether or not to believe the devil. Despite herself, she was beginning to wonder about the rumors surrounding the stolen blade, or Raziel as the deva had come to call it in recent days.

“And why are you telling me? Why not go directly to Jinn?”

“In time, perhaps, but for now you have his ear. In spite of his nature, or perhaps because of it, he trusts you to some small degree. You can use that. Stay close to him, keep him alive

until such time as his life is no longer of value,” Belle said. “He is already on the right path, we must make sure he gets where he is going.”

“To Zazesspur . . . ,” Mara muttered thoughtfully, wondering what secrets might be uncovered in the southern city and how she might make use of them for her own profit. The night hag was not foolish. She knew that Belphegor intended to use her toward some end. But until she knew exactly what, she would be careful, wait for all the cards to be laid on the table. It was then that the devil’s words played again through her thoughts and she turned back to the fiend, “We?”

But Belle was gone, having disappeared as easily as she had arrived.

Cursing, Mara hesitated a moment, deciding whether or not to gamble on the devil’s words. Choosing her own path, separate from Jinn’s, had been her initial plan, but if there was profit, or better yet, some way she might take further revenge upon the schemes of Asmodeus by assisting the deva in his quest . . . Perhaps even gain something more valuable to the god than even the Ninestone, something to bargain her way back out of the mortal world . . .

It is worth the risk, she thought.

Turning in place, she chanted piercing words into the air around her, which began to bleed streamers of swirling shadow that enveloped her tattered black robes in a spinning, ebony shroud. In a breath she was gone, and the Pages Curious was left empty.

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Snow crunched beneath Jinn’s boots like thunder as he attempted to pass quietly in the narrow spaces between buildings. He kept his eyes moving constantly, darting in all directions for signs of pursuit. He gripped a wound on his arm, earned while evading a mage that had ascended the rooftops to attacks him from above. He had escaped, but not without injury. He slowed to the end of the narrow path, cursing as he saw the busy divide between him and the next large block of buildings.

Across the way he could see a wider parklike area spread behind several blocks of homes, taverns, and inns. He shrank back from the edge of the street, eyeing people as they passed, oblivious to his presence or anything amiss. Already he could imagine the trap such open ground might create—only he did not know who would be waiting for him, the Watchful Order, the Tempurans, or both.

As he contemplated how to proceed, a clump of snow fell to the ground several paces behind him, making the decision for him. He rushed into the flow of people in the street, startling several and rolling beneath the wheels of a passing cart. He hoped the Watchful Order would be to cautious to attempt any spells with so many people around, but as he caught the sound of charging boots from behind him he knew the Tempurans would have no such concern.

Cursing he spun around, drawing Raziel in one motion to level it upon the charging warrior-priest. Bracing for the impact of a blocked weapon or the initial strike of an attack, he was shocked when the priest pulled to a quick stop, his sword undrawn.

A hush fell over the street as people stopped to stare at the two men and the drawn sword. Most ran away from the confrontation and a few others fell back, calling for help, but some stayed, amazed and smiling, waiting to see blood drawn across the dirty snow.

The priest, a young unshaven man of maybe twenty summers never drew his weapon, nor did he look Jinn in the eye. His gaze fell in awe upon the blade drawn against him and he stepped back, speechless and raising his gloved hands absently in a show of reverence or peace. The deva

lowered the blade, edging away from the man slowly until he caught sight of purple robes overhead and more rounding the corner at both ends of the short street.

The priest saw them as well and, blinking the wonder from his eyes, drew his sword and rounded on the wizards as a handful of his brothers arrived. He waved toward the alley across the street, shouting over his shoulder.

“Run, deva! Run!”

Jinn hesitated, then took his chance, astounded by the strange turn of events. People screamed as the battle began, swords drawn and spells sizzling against brick walls. The deva did not look back, racing through the alley and the long courtyard beyond. His mind raced as well, trying to work out the Tempuran’s puzzling reaction to the sword after such a dogged pursuit. Near the end of the block of buildings, when the sounds of battle were lost in the distance behind him, he slowed to a more cautious stride. He sheathed Raziél at last, glad to have the blade hidden away. He was unsure of what he should worry about more, the Watchful Order’s arcane concerns over the weapon or the Tempuran’s apparent adoration of it.

“Jinnaoth, wait!”

The voice echoed between the buildings on either side, muffled somewhat by the thick snow on the rooftops and piled high against back doors. Jinn turned, prepared to draw again when another priest appeared behind him, hands upraised and walking slowly. The Tempuran’s tabard was slightly cleaner than the others, and his face was clean shaven. He had well-kept, reddish brown hair that fell in long locks around his almost noble features. He looked at Jinn with bright green, honest eyes that seemed narrowed with some quiet pain.

“What do you want priest? Why are you following me?” Jinn asked, anxious to escape, but feeling bound to discover the motives of at least one of his pursuers.

“I have been seeking you for several days now, my name is Ghaerus Khronen of Tempus, and I have no wish to harm you,” he said quietly, though his voice held deep, rich tones which he would have difficulty hiding even in a full tavern experiencing the worst brawl in Waterdeep’s history. Jinn suspected the man was rarely, if ever, disobeyed.

“Excellent, well met,” Jinn replied, noting the bright flashes of magic to the north and expecting the Watchful Order to have the Tempurans under control in less time than he might have hoped. “For now however, I must bid you good day.”

“It is indeed a good day!” Ghaerus shouted, a dark look in his eye that gave the deva pause. “For we have found each other and have business to discuss that will ensure many more good days to come.”

“I’m afraid I don’t underst—”

“No need to be afraid. Though I was told that when we met you would turn me away, I refused to believe that a good man, a man with the soul of an angel, could cast aside all hope of changing the world for the better.”

“Certainly not Master Khronen, which is why presently I must take my leave of you,” Jinn said evenly, though he did not turn his back on the man as he edged backward, detecting a gleam of dangerous conviction in the eye of the warrior-priest.

“You carry the blade of contract, deva,” Ghaerus said. “I cannot allow such a thing to escape so readily when the means to put it to good use are here, in the shadows and slums of this city. What better place is there to begin a better world?”

Ghaerus stalked forward, matching Jinnaoth step for step. A cold breeze gusted between the buildings, rustling the man’s hair and revealing a small glowing mark on the priest’s neck: a

spellscar. As the mark grew brighter the pain in Ghaerus's face would increase slightly, making his steps heavier, his course more determined.

"What would you have me do?" Jinn asked, stalling for time. The flash and echo of battle had faded; the Magists would be coming.

"One man can do nothing, I understand," Ghaerus answered, smiling and sincere. "It is too much to even comprehend every injustice, murder, theft, and fiend that hides in the alleys and cracks of an entire city. But we will not rely upon the limited faculties of mortals, we will call a god, Tempus, and he will answer us. He will answer to that sword and the good man that wields it."

"You would have me summon a god?"

"If not you, then I must."

There it was, Jinn thought, the gleam in the man's eye. Ghaerus seemed as if he'd once been a good and honorable soul, but the passion of fanaticism had clouded his sight. Jinn understood what ravages passion could inflict upon the best of intentions having toed that very same line for years, but he had, perhaps at most, endangered a handful of lives and threatened to stain only his own soul. The fever he saw in Ghaerus would burn Waterdeep to the ground, eradicating all trace of evil and taking everything else with it.

"Though I may work at being a good man, whoever told you my name and sent you here . . . was correct," Jinn said, loosening Raziel from its scabbard.

"As you wish."

Ghaerus crossed the distance between them in a few strides, drawing a simple long sword which Jinn deflected easily at first, but as the priest pressed his attack, his skill became evident. The deva worked only at defense, carrying the battle continually south as he was able, though if he had any mind to counter-attack he had precious few chances. He winced at the power of the priest's blows and the ringing clash that echoed throughout the long snow-covered park. Closer to the buildings that stood between Jinn and escape, Ghaerus's strikes became stronger and quicker.

In desperation, feeling time slip away from him, Jinnaoth pushed back, determined to put the priest on his heels that he might make good his escape. He succeeded at landing a cut on Ghaerus's wrist, twisting his arm to elbow the priest's jaw, but the opening to inflict injury was a ruse. Hooking the deva's leg with his boot, Ghaerus shoved him back, neatly tripping him into the snow and placing the long sword at his neck. Jinn had time enough to see the long sword draw back and to see the cold pity in his opponent's eyes before both men were enveloped in freezing shadows.

Jinn cursed as hands clawed at his cloak, lifting him off the ground. He raised his sword to fend off the Magist who'd taken advantage of the moment to make his move, but instead of purple robes he found himself facing more familiar, black tattered ones. The night hag kept a dark claw on his shoulder as she observed the priest struggling to stand several strides away.

Ghaerus crawled toward his blade, tendrils of cold shadow still clinging to his flesh as the spellscar on his neck flared bright. The priest's pain-filled gaze fell squarely on the night hag and he struggled to speak.

"Witch! Hag!" he shouted, spitting as he tried to stand, "Have you lost all sense . . . of honor deva?"

"Devils, Watchmen, Magists of the Watchful Order, and now priests of Tempus," Maranyuss said. "It seems lately that the only thing our enemies have in common is us."

“Speaking of the Watchful Order,” Jinn said, pointing to the purple robes gathering toward them, a number suggesting an equal amount taking up positions behind them as they spoke.

“Indeed, well, as for that,” Mara said and pulled forth a fine-crafted wand of silver wound around glass, fixed to a handle of black marble.

As Jinn began to wonder what terrible magic she might unleash upon the Magists, the hag muttered a swift incantation, dropped the wand on the ground, and crushed it beneath her foot. A tremor rolled through the ground, a small vibration, but enough that Jinn felt it in his knees. The late afternoon sky, gray, yet bright, became brighter still for a moment as a pillar of blue light erupted far to the north. The Watchful Order paused their advance, turning to watch the spectacle.

Azure flames curled among the clouds as a hush fell over all within eyesight of the strange magic. There was no smoke, yet Jinn suspected he knew all too well what had truly just been consumed by the hag’s magic.

“The Pages Curious?” he asked, incredulous.

“There will be other bookshops should they become necessary, that one no longer was,” Mara replied dispassionately.

Her grip on his shoulder increased such that he could feel her claws through his cloak. His instinct told him to twist away, that she had at last betrayed him and was working some other spell at his side that would end his days as Jinnaoth and send his soul to yet another form, another name. The idea of it, just for a moment, was appealing, but then the shadows around them both increased, clouding the deva’s vision.

He saw the blurry form of Ghaerus standing, swinging his blade ineffectually through black mist. A muffled roar escaped the Tempuran’s throat, but the sound was fleeting, seeming a hundred miles away.

Lifted from the ground they raced through the air, a streamer of darkness to escape the Magists and Waterdeep while the little bookshop on Suldown Street, their former home, was engulfed in arcane flames.

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The smell of smoke was thick on the evening air as Ghaerus trudged through the narrow lanes of the Field Ward, allowing himself to be chilled and accepting all discomforts as penance for his failure. He’d had such high and misplaced hopes for the deva, expecting to find a kindred spirit. Instead he’d found only more of what he found everywhere he went: selfishness, blindness, pride, the roots of evil. He winced as pain wrenched through his neck and shoulder, a slow burning sensation that spread outward to his chest and upper arms. He allowed himself the luxury of pulling the collar of his cloak over the brightening spellscar on his neck.

The world around him glowed red as he stared at it, his vision heating up when it observed certain individuals, but not others. He could see their corruption and it pained him, more as he drew closer, hotter as he sensed the nature of their sins. In his eyes the city was bathed in a sickly crimson glow at all hours as though it were slowly smoldering, fresh tinder just waiting for the inferno to come. He placed a hand tight over his brow, half-expecting his own arm to throb with ruddy light for the crime he had committed, for allowing Waterdeep’s only hope to be whisked away in the claws of a hag.

He followed the few street lamps that were lit until he came to a street that bore no light save for small fires that warmed the hands of motley groups of dwarves, elves, and humans.

Cheap chimneys beyond the better constructed sections of the ward filled the area with a haze of smoke, earning it the nickname Hells' Bricks, a name that Ghaerus embraced.

In the middle of the first block he stopped and leaned on a rusted iron gate, squeezing the bars before opening them onto a small entrance yard, overgrown and barely large enough to bury a man lying down. He opened the old wooden doors, having no need to keep his humble temple locked for no one came seeking his counsel and the only valuables he kept inside were the ideals he carried in his heart.

A handful of benches stood to either side of the small chamber within, seats for any who might wander in seeking guidance or justice for those few that didn't go to the larger temples, where gleaming armor and tales of bravery adorned the knights and warriors that frequented their halls. Ghaerus had little patience for small battles and the smaller men that fought them. His call to battle was constant, his sense of surrounding evil not the vision of some pious priest, but the blessing of Tempus himself! Others called it a spellscar, but he knew it was his destiny.

He fell to his knees between the benches, barely able to raise his eyes to the simple altar at the end of the isle. He dropped his sword on the floor and shook his head, ignoring the blurry forms that walked past his front door, the murderers and the thieves glowing crimson amid the cool forms of those they preyed upon.

"I failed you," he muttered, the words small and meek in his temple of dust and wood rot, "I doubted your wisdom and allowed the deva to escape. I was naïve."

All was quiet in the wake of his words, a crushing silence that slumped his shoulders and made his meager temple seem all the more inadequate. But soon the city's crimson tint faded, allowing him a moment of clarity to see the smaller details of the chamber around him. His pain subsided and all sense of the world's evils fled as a warm glow fell on the floor before his bowed head.

"You are forgiven, Ghaerus," a soft but powerful voice said. "For it is by our mistakes that we learn to shape our futures. You shall find the deva again."

"I will not cease to seek him out; my life is forfeit to this oath."

"We know. Your faith, unlike so many others, has never wavered. You shall be rewarded soon and you shall place this small temple in your past, for fields of battle shall become your temple, war cries your hymns, and the purifying edge of steel your prayer."

The warm glow grew brighter, descending from the altar on comforting waves of golden light. Ghaerus looked up into the blank stare of the angel, a radiant being of fiery spiritual energy that graced his humble temple with the favor of his god.

"Praise be to Tempus for guiding his favor to my small altar," he said, sparkling tears of joy and purpose welling in his sparkling eyes. "It is by your wisdom and my blade that we shall change the world. I am grateful for your counsel, Saeriel. Praise be."

"Praise be, indeed," Saeriel replied, his golden wings brushing against Ghaerus's shoulders, his fiery eyes dancing with mysterious joy.

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Jinnaoth squinted through the driving snow, barely able to see the dim outline of the Trade Way as he guided his horse south to the outskirts of Ardeep Forest. The blanket of snow stretched his torchlight far across the ground, but distinct features and landmarks were getting harder to come by as winter obscured the path. Speaking was nearly impossible over the howling

wind, but he kept his mount close to Quessahn's in case the snow grew thicker, so that they might not lose one another in the weather.

Maranyuss kept to the rear, making Jinnaoth uncomfortable, but he needed her eyes to watch for signs of pursuit. He had no worries for her unguided horse; its rock-hard hooves needed little prodding from its rider as it slogged along. Its stone skin grated slightly when the wind was down and its fiery eyes granted a minute field of light. The hag's flowing robes and tall bearing in the saddle atop her magical construct made it seem as though death itself traveled at their backs, an image that Jinn did not like to dwell upon.

Pausing to gain their bearings, Jinn could just make out the faint outline of the forest in the cloud-muted light of the moon. They were close, but of the Beggar's Grove, a stand of trees to the right of the Trade Way, there was as of yet no sign.

"Who is this guide we are meeting?" Quess asked, shouting above the wind.

"I do not know exactly, the agreement was made through another party. Secrecy was insisted upon considering my status with the Watchful Order," he replied. "But few others would be insane enough to travel in this; they should not be hard to spot."

"Sounds a bit too much like a gamble, Jinn. What if the Watchful Order set this up?"

"I doubt it," Mara interjected. "The Magists wouldn't have chased us through half of Waterdeep if they knew they could easily have Jinnaoth captured outside the city."

"Still, I don't like it," Quessahn said.

"Good. We should stay on guard," Jinn said. "If we get too comfortable with anything or anyone on this journey we place ourselves in danger. Hope for a guide, but expect a trap."

"Where is this guide supposed to take us?" Quess asked as they continued down the snow-covered road, its edges barely discernable.

"The guide allegedly knows of a sage that lives in Zazesspur. A sage that is by all accounts immortal."

"Sounds like more of a gamble," the eladrin muttered, drawing her cloak tight against the wind.

Jinn agreed with the sentiment, but an immortal sage hundreds of miles away was the only lead that sounded even remotely close to what he'd been looking for. His informant, a trusted man, claimed their guide knew this sage and that he had, allegedly, escaped slavery thousands of years ago in the midst of a war between foreign gods. Jinn dreamed of such wars frequently and the fields where they were fought. He recalled the first time he had smelled blood on the air in the first hours of dawn after a battle.

He dreamed of ancient Mulhorand.

"There!" Mara shouted, pointing over their shoulders to a small grove of trees, a blot of darkness in a field of snow.

At the edge of the grove stood a smaller blot, a figure standing close to a saddled horse. Jinnaoth unhooked Raziel in its scabbard, prepared for treachery should it arise, but his instincts told him otherwise. They saw no other tracks as they approached, and besides the thick grove of trees, there was no place to hide an ambush party. If an attack came it would come from one direction only, and that they could either defend against or run away from.

The figure, wrapped in furs and hooded, waved as they neared, holding its horse steady as Mara's magical steed came into view, threatening to spook the beast.

"Jinnaoth Ir'Gadohn?" the figure asked in a lilting feminine voice.

"The same," he replied, eyes scanning the grove's edge. "You've come alone?"

“Besides my mount, yes,” the young woman answered, pulling herself into the saddle. “And if it’s all the same to you I’d like to leave immediately. I’ve arranged for a ship to carry us the bulk of the journey, and it would be unwise to be late.”

Jinnaoth merely nodded, his mind already imagining the long miles past and reaching the city of Zazesspur. The mystery of the blade he carried burned at the forefront of his thoughts and he demanded answers to sort out myth from fact, to discover if what he carried might indeed summon a god or gods into the world. And if so, he needed to know how to unmake its power, though there was another part of him that still stood on the rooftop of the House of Thorns, facing the angel Sathariel. That other part still considered Sathariel’s words and the prospect of one final war. He dared not say anything to Mara or Quessahn, for even they with their long lives could not fathom the thousands of years he had walked the world. They could not appreciate the idea of an ending, one last decision, light or dark, and then nothing more. It was the primary reason he had wanted Quessahn at his side, for when the time came, he needed to know that someone would be at his side to stop him should he succumb to temptation.

“And do we simply call you ‘guide’ or do you have a name?” Mara asked, drawing Jinn from his reverie to note the odd glint in the hag’s eye as she awaited an answer to her question.

“Forgive me,” the girl said and pulled back her furred hood, revealing a radiant smile and pale, pink-hued skin. Chestnut curls framed a kind face and bright blue-green eyes. “You may call me Belle. Shall we be on our way now?”

*“The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.”*

—William Butler Yeats
excerpt from “The Second Coming” (1921)

(Author’s Note: This tale is dedicated to Hunter Allison, without whom it might have died an ignoble death in the bowels of a corrupted hard drive. Many thanks, Hunter!)