

FORGOTTEN REALMS®



THE
PRIESTS

LADY OF POISON

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THE **N**RISTS

PRELUDE

Decay has a power all its own.

When the healthy and whole softens, crumbles, and liquefies, an indefinable essence wafts away like putrid steam off stagnant beach sand. Decomposing flesh of what once lived radiates an essential energy in its dissipation. That power of dissolution can be siphoned by those with the proper cruel knowledge, and the appropriate twisted desire.

The Rotting Man had both.

A crystal vase held a single flower, its petals the color of bone. The flower had only four petals, each knife-sharp and strangely heavy. The vase stood upon a slab of rough cut stone; it was an altar. There, in the heart of the Close, light penetrated, but not easily. Natural light was stained and filtered by petrified limbs and leaves of ancient trees whose hearts were pure rot.

A hand extended from the darkness toward the flower. The fingers, only a little less thin than the flower's stem, stroked a petal. The entire bloom turned black with decay in seconds, and fell, stinking, to the altar-top. Somewhere in the world, a servant died. Such was the power of the Rotting Man.

The Rotting Man was an artist of putrescence. For light, he had no use, unless he could squander its promise, turning light to malaise. In music, he preferred the decrescendo, always. Promotion was a rare event in the Rotting Man's organization, though the Blightlords, his foul lieutenants, did achieve their position through applied deceit.

The hand returned to the darkness, shaking just slightly. He was always in pain. Such was the price he paid for Talona's gifts.

A tangle of twisted thought sparked across the pits of his hungry mind. He sensed it then. It was coming. A prayer would soon be answered, the fulfillment of which would spell his end. Soon. Any moment . . .

A ray of light fell secretly into the world, shining from a place so far beyond the sphere of the world that miles could not be used as a measure of distance. The light was a shaft of burning hope, let down to banish what shadows it could. The light was so fierce that it could scour evil with its mere presence. It sought the Rotting Man.

He laughed with rare pleasure.

The Rotting Man was ready. To him, the light's arrival was not secret. In fact, he anticipated it.

He recalled the years during which he had bred the perfect vessel to contain that light. Spilled blood, the trace of failed enterprise, and the mournful cries of dying prisoners shorn of freedom and dignity, all these he had incorporated into his living prison. Such a wonder of grotesquerie. Oh yes, the Rotting Man was more than ready; he was primed.

Whence came the light, he cared not. Containing it

was all that mattered. Oh, the light was so optimistic, so imbued with good intentions, so ready to be corrupted by the Rotting Man. The sentient light was oblivious of danger when it arrowed down at him from heaven.

The golden ray was gulped down by the Rotting Man's living vessel in a single instant. Absorbed, but for a tiny glint that escaped his notice. A flicker of hope, shorn of the flush of full strength, fell to earth unmarked and enfeebled. Too enervated to retain knowledge even of its own origin, the remnant was accepted into the mortal world in a guise not intended.

The Rotting Man failed to realize that he had not captured the light in its entirety.

But eventually he began to suspect.



THE **A**RISTOS

CHAPTER I

Autumn, 1368 DR

Ash.”

Hemish nearly dropped the child. From her lips the word issued, as plain as day. He took a deep breath, and instead of dropping her, he stroked her baby-brown hair. He continued along the road away from the small village, shaking his head. It was not the first time she had spoken.

Hemish was a man of simple means, a keeper of cattle. He had seen small magic, wonders, and the flashy spells of hedge wizards. He'd even once visited the city of Two Stars, and there witnessed a duel between feuding sorcerers, but a baby that could speak? Never had he heard of such a thing, but in his hands he held just such a wonder, though in truth, the only word she ever said was 'ash.' Not knowing whence she came, Hemish had taken to calling her the name that she repeated at odd intervals.

When he found her, she lay silent on a bed of emerald moss that grew up around her like a tiny cushion. She lay on her back, reaching up with her baby fingers as if attempting to touch the overhanging forest canopy. Appalled to see a child exposed to the elements, he scooped her up and brought her back to his home in the village straightaway. It was only later that she began to speak.

No local farmer or forest hunter had since appeared in town to lament a lost child. There was no claim at all upon her, save his own, and he was uncertain that he wanted to press it. He had decided to seek once again the glade where she'd first come into his life. Perhaps he could discover clues of her origin that he'd earlier missed.

He cradled the girl in his arms protectively, despite his unease. Tree branches waved idly in the late evening breeze, stirring up the scents of pine, loam, and forgotten days of sunshine. The faint smell of the child, babyish and powdery, put Hemish in mind of his own daughter, before she was grown and married away.

Soon enough he arrived in the glade where he'd found the child. All was as he remembered, though the season had advanced, and seedlings and other forest growth were failing with the year. He scuffed around with his boots, looking to kick up any item or other telltale clue hidden beneath the layer of pine needles. When he turned up nothing, he moved to the base of the sapling where he'd found her.

His brows furrowed. The luxuriously soft bed of moss where he'd found her three tendays past was decidedly dead. What's more, it seemed afflicted with some brackish rot, which had eaten away at the heart of the bed before finally killing it. The rot had spread to the sapling, which drooped lifeless over the blackened moss bed. All in all, a nasty blight.

After a search of several minutes, Hemish admitted defeat. He could find nothing—he chalked the blight up

to coincidence. He sighed, chucked the baby on the chin, and made for town.

“Looks like it’s going to be you and me after all, tyke,” said Hemish, as he looked down into the face of the child.

The baby stared back with eyes the color of a cloudless sky. Guileless and pure they seemed, and Hemish felt his urge to protect the girl grow stronger.

It was a journey of less than an hour back to the village. In all that time, the child refrained from fussing or crying. Hemish headed straight down the main way. He turned a corner and spied Mausa. Before he could make a break for it, her gaze locked on him. She stood in the middle of the road, leading a nag with a bedraggled mane. He pushed on, accepting the inevitable. Mausa regarded him with a cruel turn of her lip as he moved closer.

At first, she was content to merely skewer him with her knowing gaze. Hemish cursed his weakness in asking the woman’s advice on the child. How could he have guessed she was so superstitious and hateful?

He hurried on, making as if to pass her. He attempted to fix an expression of defiance on his own features.

As he pulled up even with Mausa, she murmured, “She still talking?”

Hemish paused and sighed, “Yes. Only the one word, though.”

As if to demonstrate to Mausa, the baby in Hemish’s arms said, “Ash.”

As she did so, one of her infant hands reached toward the horse Mausa led.

“What’s she want?” scowled the woman.

Hemish moved a step closer to the bedraggled animal. Mausa was not a particularly kind master, and the draft steed was obviously sick. If Ash wanted to feel the horse’s mane, he saw no harm in it.

As the child’s hands combed through the equine’s tangled mane, a brilliant blue spark jumped between

her fingers and horse. The horse raised its head suddenly, neighing! Its clouded eyes cleared then sparked with vitality. The matted hair in its mane smoothed. The creature nearly danced, as if restraining itself from rearing.

“By all the gods of hearth and home,” Hemish mumbled, “what happened?”

He knew what had happened. The girl had the hands of a healer.

“Ash,” she crooned in his arms.

Mausa’s expression, too, changed. Scorn made way for fear. The woman pulled her horse quickly away.