

Seven Shades of Evil

The Seven are short science fiction stories from the Time Travellers Chronicles. They introduce you to some new science to make you think a little and smile. Shades of Evil is a full length fantasy story from the Book of Ages; a story of demons and wizards, magic and myth. It has it's own seven shades of evil.

Because these stories, associated albums and games are ongoing further details may be found at the back of this book and on my personal website.

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First printed as a single novel 2007

STARLIGHT
Welcomes you to the Darkworld

The Seven

Science Fiction Stories
A mixture of new and mature

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Shades of Evil

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Shades of Evil

Preface

Shades of Evil is a story of the darkworld, set upon an isolated island, on an isolated world. This island which was named Harandos was made up of many small domains. In times past each domain had shared the wealth of it's lands with it's neighbours, lofty mountains, fertile soil and rustling trees. So similar were these domains that they were known as the Mirrorlands, each land was a reflection of all the others, but alas those days came to an end; the Mirrorlands are no more. Harandos was not conquered from without, but from a dark place within.

With the departure of the elden kindreds and the powers of good, men tried to create their own magic. A power which related to the demons of myth. And with the unleashing of this power the kingdoms began to crumble and fall. There were many who fought the dark ways, for they said the creatures of the darkworld could never be controlled. Those who tried to master the dark powers would themselves become wraiths of it's malice. However, there were some who embraced it; the cruel Baron Nomarn Deleri was one. His wife Baroness Helian and their executioner Grogor were others. They are now a part of the circle of darkness, three of the seven shades of evil.

Stone and Spire

Prelude

They gathered upon the high moorlands beside the Spire of Darklore, where the wind howled beneath darkened skies. Their forms were tall; their features hidden behind shading cowls. Robes rustled as they passed over heathered ground.

The spire was aged. A shrine to the past, bound in evil and devilment. Cast in it's shadow lay the cold sacrifice stone, it's surface smooth; it's purpose foul.

The light began to fade into the west and Nomarn raised its hands. The seven circled the stone. They chanted.

Hunched figures moved up the hillside like the rolling mist. Some scurried, some crawled. Sharp nails embedded in bony fingers clutched at withered heather. Evil thoughts formed by evil minds twisted and contorted demon faces. They too formed a circle, a circle about the seven.

The chant grew louder; slow and rhythmic; cold and deathly. The circle began to move. They danced around the stone; the stone and spire; the spire and the seven.

Louder grew the chant, faster moved the demonic shapes, twisting, turning. From beneath taloned feet spurted the flames of hell. The circle began to close.

Upon the slab of sacrifice an image wavered, gaining strength as the frenzy heightened. Graceful, enchanting, flowing melodically to the rhythm of the wraiths; the wraiths in the ring; the ring of fire.

They wound their way across the moorlands at walking pace, the piper playing his flute melodically. Before him rode the mighty Lords of the Harandos. Behind, the snaking light of a thousand torches.

Raimar raised his hand and the column halted. The piper fell silent. Raimar listened. “Do you hear it?”

A distant chant drifted softly across the moors, a muffled whisper borne on an angry wind.

Raimar winced. “The wraiths have their ring. Soon they will have the fire. They are calling, beckoning. Soon she will come. They have a power not even Mirel may withstand, even now the Queen is awakening.”

Jorm looked past Giyorn, to Raimar, his father, his youthful features unchanging. “Then they will have her. They will join their power in unholy communion; the evil subjugating the good. It must not come to pass.”

Giyorn stroked his beard thoughtfully. “Perhaps not. Perhaps the mystical helvstone will protect her, it's strength lies in the forgotten yesterdays, the elden kindreds of old.”

Raimar shook his head misgivingly. “Well she could defend against the demons of these lands; truly a shade may not harm her but here are gathered the seven and the seven as one in the circle of fire stand above all. When the flame is kindled it will reach for the spire. At its touch we are lost.”

Giyorn sighed, then he looked upon the war-laden figure of Raimar, sat astride his battlemount. “I remember the days when all our lands flourished. It pains me to see the Northlands turned to sand and snow, my own lands to rolling moors - the deathly marshes. Soon all our realms will fall into decay and ruin, the forests will wither, even the Southlands will perish. We must bring an end to this madness. THE

SEVEN MUST DIE.”

“Tis difficult to kill the dead,” chortled a mischievous voice.

They all looked down at the small creature which stood beside Giyorn's mount.

“You have done well, Cretin,” Raimar complimented. “Those hind legs of yours carry you sturdily.”

“Legs of a demon,” snorted Giyorn.

Cretin chuckled.

Giyorn scowled. “You throw caution to the wind, Raimar, how may we be sure this creature has not led us into a trap?”

“You forget, Giyorn, we had little choice in this matter. Would you sooner face Greyfar, the citadel of Nomarn, or one of his many strongholds? The shades of evil grow in strength. Here they have no legions. They deem they are not needed.”

Jorm looked down at Cretin quizzically. “Why did you lead us here? Are you not a creature of the darkworld yourself? Do I detect treachery in your eyes?”

Cretin jerked his head from one rider to the next - like a preying mantis. “You fear little Cretin. Mighty lords on tall war horses fear little me!”

“Why do you aid us?” pressed Jorm.

Cretin frowned at Jorm, then turned to Raimar. “Pretty things I like, I do not wish to live in a land of snow or sand. Moors are freezing and wet. You rescue the lovely lady.” With a sudden drop in tone, and a chill which matched the dank moorland air, he hissed, “You rescue her now. You alone Raimar have the weapons to destroy these wraiths of life.” Cretin turned to the mist and pointed. On a nearby hill a flame flickered, caressing the earth with fire.

*

At first it was only a gallop but as the flame danced higher it became a full-blooded stampede. They rounded the top of the rise and charged headlong for the flame. Battle cries issued forth and swords sang at their unsheathing. They crashed into the fire.

Tongues of flame licked greedily outward; horses reared. Riders, like flaming torches screamed as the heat scorched their souls. There was turmoil, there was anarchy. The circle was sealed - it would not break.

Raimar calmed his steed and raised his eyes above the inferno, to look upon the spire. Colours rippled across its' ancient stonework, it looked now as it had not looked for a thousand years. It laughed at him. It mocked him. For an instant Raimar's courage wavered. Then he drew himself tall and determination pierced his eyes. He spurred his mount onward.

Hellish screams burst in his ears as he plunged through the fire then all fell silent. The chant had ceased and the air hung heavy; close; claustrophobic. Sweat ran down his face. He saw the circle of wraiths. They sensed his presence.

Within the circle, Raimar saw another figure. Beautiful; enigmatic; long white hair flowing down and about her.....But the eyes were glazed, unseeing. What had they done to her?

Raimar drew his sword and lunged at the wraiths, flaying the nearest figure. The cowl severed from the body, the clothing fell to the ground, empty.

The inner circle was broken; the flames began to subside. Raimar turned his mount for a second charge...

"I am Nomarn, first of the seven," a cold voice laughed.

Raimar covered his ears in dismay; the voice was

reverberating round and around his head, yet his action was only reflex, for the sound did not enter his ears. The deep mystic laughter rolled in his mind and his mind alone. "You think to destroy me with your weapons poor fool, but I shall cast them to the four winds. You think to save the lady, but the lady is mine."

Raimar looked bewildered as his sword vanished from his grip. His shield, dagger and axe also disappeared. He gazed at the wraith. Its figure seemed to loom up before him. A clawed hand stretched outward in greeting then the fingers began to coil.

Terror reflected in Raimar's eyes. He could see the hand ten paces from him, but he could feel the icy grip about his body. The hand clenched and squeezed; bones snapped like deadwood; Raimar fell from his horse.

As the flames subsided, Jorm coaxed his mount to jump the dying embers. What he had expected to find within the circle, he knew not. The circle was bare; the towering spire stood above a vacant sacrifice stone. Only the distant echo of an evil laughter remained.

Jorm saw his father's battlemount, then horror struck his face as he saw Raimar crumpled upon the earth. He leapt from his horse and ran to his father's side. He cradled his head on his lap.

"Nomarn has taken her," gasped Raimar, fighting to draw breath into his crushed body. "I struck one down, but they were too powerful. My weapons disappeared into thin air....They have taken her."

"No they have not," came a sad but prankish voice. "Only the seven have the power. Not the six nor the five nor the four. She is free to walk the lands once more."

Raimar tried to sit erect, but he could not. "My weapons boy, find them. Find the Queen; seek out the helvstone, for it has the goodness to see this evil destroyed.

Then....” Raimar grimaced, his voice was failing. “Seek Nomarn, this devil must be destroyed.”

Jorm felt his father go limp. He lay his head on the scorched earth, then stood to face the west. The whole moorland had fallen into silence; the air was calm and sorrowful, even the wounded had sealed their lips.

Jorm's face was a mixture of anguish and hatred. He pointed his sword with trembling hand to where the sun had fled the misted skies. “I WILL FIND YOU NOMARN. BE IT THE LAST THING I EVER DO. I WILL FIND YOU.”

The Gathering

Chapter 1

The guests filtered through the bronze archway as they made their way down the long corridor towards the Galerian dining hall. They chatted to one another as they walked, occasionally glancing upward towards the high pillars and the flickering torch lit decorations on the ceiling.

At the entrance to the hall Jorm greeted his guests, smiling at some, passing words of welcome to others, but his guests were nervous. Behind Jorm, on a pedestal of white marble, perched Cretin. For all the world he may have been no more than one of the many gargoyle statues which adorned the grand buildings of the Harandos, alas the talons on his feet which curved over the edge of the pedestal were tapping impatiently and occasionally his dark leathery wings which folded neatly on his back would twitch, it unnerved almost everyone.

All the guests but one had passed Jorm by. Jorm stood with one arm resting across his chest, his other arm folded upward with his chin resting on the palm of his hand. He was watching Giyorn striding down the corridor dressed in his crimson tunic and dark breeches - sheathed dagger strapped to his side. Jorm extended a hand in greeting. Giyorn was about to do the same when Cretin hissed violently, then leaning forward, his forked tongue whiplashed towards Giyorn's throat.

Giyorn took one step backward, his dagger flashing as he drew it from its' sheath. It swished through the air

narrowly missing Cretin's retreating tongue.

"I see he still likes me," snapped Giyorn.

Jorm pointed at Giyorn's dagger. "He takes offence to weapons in my household, but do not feel unwelcome, he was merely dropping a hint."

"One day he will go too far and I sense that day is not very distant," snorted Giyorn, sheathing his dagger angrily.

Cretin's emerald eyes blinked, then he put his head to one side and in a deep croaky voice said, "Nasty Giyorn."

*

Jorm and Giyorn strode across the dining hall to take their places at the far side of the long dining table. On arrival Jorm glanced down the row of seats to his left, then smiled to Miowni who stood to his right. He seated himself; his guests followed suit.

Giyorn seated himself to the left of Jorm; he too glanced down the table to his left. There were perhaps a score of guests in that direction. He then turned to his right where there were approximately the same amount. He noted some of the faces which crossed his line of vision, including the boyish faces of the brothers Dromar who carried only a score of years. He then turned his attention to the food lying on the table.

There was a great spread of fruits, meats and vegetables from which to choose and Giyorn's appetite was not lacking. He reached forward towards a juicy red apple, picked it up, opened his mouth, then paused. His ears had detected the faintest flap of wings. He did not bother looking behind, he simply turned to Jorm and said, "Why do you have a pedestal behind your dining table?"

"There has always been a pedestal behind the table."

“With that wretched creature stood on it?” queried Giyorn.

“No. It used to hold a bust of my great grandfather.”

“Then why did you not leave the bust of your great grandfather on the pedestal?”

“Cretin is my guardian.”

“Guardian?”

“He watches over me.”

“He watches over your guests as well?”

“You could say that.”

“They do not look very comfortable.”

“They will after a few tankards of ale and a few goblets of wine.”

“Do they usually drink so much?”

“They do when Cretin is around,” said Jorm with laughter on his face.

*

Musicians entered the large hall silently and positioned themselves in the eastern corner then without a single practised note they began to play. From down the hallway dancing girls began to appear, moving sensually to the hypnotic sounds. The faces of the male nobility lightened and their chewing became less vigorous. The ladies however looked on with a little less enthusiasm.

Miowni smiled sweetly at Jorm, brushing a few black locks of hair from her face, revealing smooth youthful skin and eyes of stone. “I see our poor dancers can still afford no more than waistbands with hanging tassels.”

Jorm lifted one eyebrow. “It is in keeping with the music my dear, besides do they not cover the lower half of their faces as modesty requires?”

Miowni bit her bottom lip and said no more.

The music steadily increased in tempo. The guests downed their wine and tapped their feet. Like the music the dancing had its' own mysterious attractions. Faster played the music; faster flowed the wine. As each moment of time elapsed the guests became more absorbed. The musicians were lost to their vision; in fact the whole hall was lost to their vision, only the dancers remained.

Cretin swayed on his perch, lifting his legs alternately to the beat, his head moving from side to side like those of the dancers.

The music rose to new heights and the dancers writhed erotically around the floor. The populace of the hall was lost in bliss, even Giyorn had parted with the world of reality.

*

Above the dining hall two figures cast long candle flame shadows across Jorm's bedchamber. Shiny metal implements glistened in their hands. Their voices were no more than whispers, their intent was clear.

From below came the sounds of song and dance. It seemed the assassins would be in for a long night. Time passed slowly, but as surely as night follows day the sounds subsided, until there was only silence. Two silhouettes flitted across the chamber; they disappeared into their surroundings.

*

Cretin watched the guests leave with a look of dismay, then with an instant change of mood he grinned fiendishly, opened his wings and silently glided the short distance to the floor. "Check the corridors, stairwell and bed chambers," he chortled, then as if playing a game he partially

retracted the talons on his feet and set off towards the rear exit, chuntering to himself. “Cretin creepies quietly through the doorway on tippy talons so no one hears him; he spies a guard near the stairwell. Cretin moves like a shadow. The guard is dozing; he is unaware of Cretin's presence. Guard should not be asleep on his feet; Cretin will teach him. Cretin crouches low and approaches the guard, then he straightens his sturdy legs till his eyes glare at the closed eyelids of the guard, then he reaches out with his tongue and tickles the guard under his chin; the guard smiles; what is he thinking? Cretin tickles again. The guard's eyelids flutter; just one more tickle.”

The guard's eyes opened. Sheer terror crossed his face which reflected more than simply the sight of Cretin; he was lost for breath; his skin grew pale; then without a word he collapsed in a heap.

“Guard still sleeps, but now he is more comfortable... Cretin turns and creepies up the stairs; he spies the bedchamber entrance; he stops; he smells vermin.”

Cretin moved steadily towards the bedchamber entrance. He stopped no more than a hand span from the open doorway. Very slowly he leaned forward, stretching his neck through the doorway. He paused for a moment and listened, then he turned his head to the left and then to the right. There was no one there. Cretin scratched his head.

Stealthily he crept into the room, his eyes wide in the semi-darkness. When he stood in the centre of the chamber he stopped and peered all around. He crouched and looked under the bed. “Come out, come out, wherever you are,” he called in a silly voice but no one came. He looked towards the window drapes, then towards the curtain which divided the bedchamber from the bathing room. After studying a moment he moved towards the window. His clawed fingers reached out and he tore the drapes open. “BOO,” he cried... to no one.

“Not having much luck tonight,” he chuckled, knowingly.

The bathing room curtains rustled; two figures darted into the bedchamber. Cretin feigned surprise.

“It is his master's pet,” chastised one, as he began to work his way around Cretin.

“Ugly brute,” commented the other.

Cretin's left eye followed one assassin and his right eye followed the other, he crouched and hissed venomously. His adversaries halted.

“Come on Chard, let's take him.”

Chard moved a little closer. Cretin reached out with one claw like hand; his fingers coiled with horny, needle sharp nails beckoning Chard forward.

“I do not like the look of those claws Jame, look at the way those nails curve.”

Cretin took one step towards Chard. Chard took one step backward.

Jame moved two steps closer - talons extended between Cretin's toes.

“NOW,” cried Jame.

Nothing happened.

“Are we a little nervous?” queried Cretin in a curious, if over exaggerated voice. “Does Cretin frightens you?”

“Let's put an end to this charade!” exclaimed Jame. “This thing makes fools of us.”

Cretin shifted both eyes to Jame, their emerald shade turning to blood red.

Jame looked uncomfortable.

“It is just trying to scare us,” said Jame with little conviction.

“It is doing a good job,” replied Chard.

“There is nothing to fear; it is a demon; it puts fear into our minds to protect itself; it cannot defeat the two of

us.” Jame's face contorted as if he was fighting with an invisible enemy in his head, his hands began to tremble, then with what seemed an extreme effort of willpower he lunged at Cretin with his dagger.

Cretin had foreseen his action. He deflected the blade with his left arm. His right hand clutched at Jame's face, two clawed fingers thrusting into his eyes.

Jame shrieked.

Chard put a hand to his stomach, his face drained of colour.

Cretin turned and slammed Jame's head into the wall; once, twice. Bones smashed and blood splattered the wall. He retracted his hand, blood dripping from his fingers. He turned to face Chard.

“Keep away from me,” stammered Chard. “We did not come here to harm you.”

Cretin moved towards him.

Chard began to walk backwards. “We can talk. Are you not an enemy of these people?” Chard backed into a chair. He stumbled; he regained his balance and picked up the chair.

Cretin moved menacingly close.

“All your fellow creatures serve Nomarn, should you not join them?”

Cretin remained silent.

“Listen to me, damn you.” Chard hurled the chair at Cretin.

Cretin ducked, then leapt at Chard feet first. His taloned feet impaled Chard's stomach. His clawed hands clasped Chard's head. They fell to the floor. Chard tried to wriggle free, but Cretin held him firm; he opened his protruding jaws to reveal razor sharp teeth then he bent forward towards the throbbing jugular in Chard's neck...

Giyorn was the only man sat at the table. Jorm was somewhere down the corridor bidding farewell to the last of his guests.

Giyorn leant back in his chair feeling rather satisfied and very tired. He was musing to himself in the quiet of the hall when a distant scream reached his ears. He sat bolt upright, then glanced at the ceiling. “What was that?” he mumbled. He looked towards the corridor in search of Jorm, but naught could he see. He turned to look behind and saw the empty pedestal. Leaping from his seat he made for the rear exit, his drowsiness had fled him and his eyes were alert.

A guard lay before Giyorn, his face horror stricken. He glanced up the spiralling stairway, then back towards the hall. For a moment he appeared hesitant, then he turned back to the stairwell and began a stealthy ascent.

Giyorn leapt silently but swiftly from the top step to find cover at the side of the bedchamber doorway. He leaned forward to see through the opening; he heard slurping and licking sounds coming from the chamber. A puzzled look crossed his face then he drew his dagger and stepped briskly into the room. Giyorn’s eyes scanned the room quickly. The first thing that caught his attention was the lifeless body of Jame. It was in a sitting position against the far wall, eyeless sockets seeing nowhere. The slurping sound stopped. Giyorn moved his eyes to the right. He saw two sparkling rubies. It took only a moment to recognise the outline of Cretin, but what was he doing?

Giyorn moved towards Cretin. Cretin watched him for a moment then began to back away. Giyorn could see blood dripping from Cretin's mouth. He looked down, then grimaced; he lifted his head to glare at Cretin.

“Nice Giyorn... er.. Cretin was only doing his job.”

Giyorn began to walk towards Cretin. His face as black as thunder.

Cretin continued to retreat. "Poor Cretin. Cretin did not get supper. Cretin has not been drinking wine. Poor hungry Cretin. Why is Giyorn not speaking?"

Cretin backed up against the wall where Jame sat. He looked down at Jame and patted him on the head. "Nasty misters, came to hurt nice master. Cretin showed them."

Giyorn's face looked gnarled and angry, he crouched to attack.

"HOLD," came a cry from the doorway. "What is the meaning of this?"

Giyorn half turned towards Jorm. One eye still watching Cretin. "Your creature, Jorm," he growled. "Your disgusting monster."

"Cretin's not disgusting," said Cretin. "Cretin's guarding his master. Look on the floor. Daggers; daggers to cut out master's heart."

Both Jorm and Giyorn looked around until they saw the daggers.

"Assassins," murmured Jorm, looking at a white gold ring with black seven on the index finger of Jame's left hand. "Nomarn's assassins. You have done well Cretin."

"Well," snapped Giyorn. "To kill or to capture is one thing but to tear to pieces and then... and then..."

"Have supper," added Cretin.

"You are repulsive," added Giyorn.

"But effective," added Jorm. "Would I have been shown any mercy?"

"Certainly not," said Cretin.

Giyorn looked thoughtful, his temper slightly cooled.

"Nomarn is playing for keeps. Spies everywhere, assassins...Every day that passes, poor master's life is in grave danger."

“You are right Cretin, we must act and act now,” affirmed Jorm, “though I suspect these would be murderers were only unwitting pawns, sent to harass me into rash decisions.”

“Act on what?” queried Giyorn, taking a more relaxed stance. “We need your father's weapons if we are to confront these cloaked devils; these wraiths of evil. Where do we start to look?”

“I do not think Nomarn has the power to place these weapons where he wills. I think they are back where my father found them.”

“It took him ten years and six to discover their whereabouts. The elden kindreds of yesteryear did not intend these weapons of power to fall into any fools' hands.”

“No, they did not, but my father had to search for clues of their whereabouts, whereas I know where he found them.”

Giyorn's face lightened a little. “Then we muster our armies?”

“No. Armies will not aid us in our quest. A handful of trusted friends may travel more discretely.”

“Cretin is a trusted friend,” said Cretin.

“QUIET!” rasped Giyorn.

“On the morrow we head for the village of Boudier to see what we may find. Let us go now and prepare ourselves.”

Giyorn walked toward the doorway with Jorm. At the doorway he stopped and looked back at Cretin. “What may I ask do you feed him on when there are no assassins, friends of the court?”

“No,” grinned Jorm, “of course not, only strangers.”

The Slaughtered Lamb

Chapter 2

Giyorn gazed down the grassy embankment towards Boudier, perhaps in better times he may have appreciated its quaint setting, the little stream which wound its way around the outskirts of the small village, the wooded areas, with trees of green and red, but now was not the time. "Where the devil is she," he grunted.

"Patience my friend," said Jorm. "The call of nature comes to us all."

"Especially women," snapped Giyorn. "Do you realise how many times we have had to stop already, every time we pass a clump of blessed trees."

"The men have to stop as often as Miowni."

"If we were all men we would not have to worry about the trees. Look behind us Jorm."

Both Giyorn and Jorm turned their mounts.

"See those trees five hundred paces, a little to the east."

"Yes."

"See those trees a thousand paces, a little to the west."

"Yes."

"See those trees in the distance."

"What are you getting at Giyorn?"

"We have wound our way around them all, a snake could set a straighter course."

"Ah."

“When nature calls we all have to find a clump of trees because a lady is present.”

Jorm shrugged his shoulders.

“What on earth is she doing,” said Giyorn in a rather loud irritable voice.

The rest of the party heard Giyorn's remarks. They meant little to Cretin, but Gwidian and Morgain the sons of Baron Dromar could not resist adding their own comments.

“Perhaps it's that funny time of the month,” smiled Morgain.

“Oh you mean it's the night of the full moon,” sneered Gwidian.

“More likely a crescent,” laughed Morgain.

The laughter slowly died.

“You do not think she is having trouble with that belt of hers again, do you Gwidian?” Morgain was still smiling.

“Could be. She has probably misplaced the key.”

They both erupted into laughter.

“Silence,” cried Giyorn. Then he turned to Jorm. “Are we surrounded by fools... Two jokers, a lady with a weak bladder and a... a...,” he pointed at Cretin.

“A strong brave loyal servant,” helped Cretin.

“Give me strength,” growled Giyorn.

“Calm yourself my friend,” said Jorm in a soft voice. “We should not enter Boudier before nightfall.”

“Why nightfall?”

“We will be less conspicuous,” replied Jorm.

Giyorn looked at Cretin. “You jest, of course.”

“Not at all. I have an old hooded cloak he can wear. If he keeps the hood closed we can pass him off as Miowni's grandmother.”

Giggles came from Morgain and Gwidian who had been eavesdropping.

Giyorn gave them a look of disgust then turned back

to Jorm. "It may make a good fairy tale, but would not an old hag look a little out of place walking with five riders?"

"She... He can ride with Miowni."

"NOT ON YOUR LIFE."

Jorm turned to see Miowni approaching. His cheeks flushed a little. "Is there a problem?" he said meekly.

"I would sooner ride with... with Morgain." Miowni walked towards Jorm to retrieve the reins of her horse.

Gwidian chuckled and said, "I thought that was the last thing that you would ever do."

Miowni glared at him. "What difference does it make anyway. There is not a horse in the land that would tolerate a creature of the darkworld on its back."

They all looked at one another.

Cretin walked over to Miowni's horse. The horse bowed it's head and Cretin stroked it behind it's left ear, using the back of his hand. The horse neighed softly.

"Most strange," said Giyorn.

Miowni did not know what to say.

"See, there is nothing to fear," said Jorm.

"No, I will not," stated Miowni.

"We must all play our parts, my dear. We are trying to save our lands...our people from a fate worse than death. Soon we will face true evil. Do we falter so easily." Jorm's eyes locked onto Miowni.

"And if I do not agree, you will send me back to..."

"No," interrupted Jorm, "it is your choice."

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Jorm and Giyorn rode at the head of the small procession. Though they were not dressed in their finery or battle armour, they still looked impressive; Jorm wearing a tunic of deepest green and Giyorn clad in black, his cloak

rustling gently in the breeze. They were two very different characters; Jorm with his long golden hair held in place by a head band and his youthful blue eyes; Giyorn with his short dark hair and beard, reflecting a more mature and hardened character. Behind Jorm and Giyorn rode the brothers Dromar; both were dark and young, with a certain amount of flair. They were around ten paces in front of Miowni, who sat like a statue. She dared not look down to her waist where clawed fingers held her gently.

“You are keeping your little secrets well, Jorm,” said Giyorn, “but pray tell me, what do you expect to find in Boudier?”

“Information, my friend. The weapons of my father are spread far and wide, some paths may be more inviting than others. Many travellers pass through Boudier, it is a good place to find out what lies before us.”

“What options do we have when we leave Boudier?”

“North, East or West - all directions except from whence we came.”

“You seem very matter of fact. Where is the fire that accompanied you on that fateful day, when Raimar fell?”

For just an instant a shadow crossed Jorm's face, then it was gone. “I do not intend to fail in my task. I need cunning; I need stealth and most of all, I need my wits. Hatred blinds all.”

Giyorn turned to look at Gwidian and Morgain, then he looked at Jorm. “You certainly have the wit.” Giyorn could not help a smug smile.

“They have their purpose. They are young and well skilled with a blade, and who would believe they had a serious aim in life!”

“Who indeed!”

Gwidian and Morgain were too far adrift from Jorm and Giyorn to overhear their conversation. They chatted idly

to one another. "How is Miowni faring with Cretin?" queried Morgain.

Gwidian looked over his shoulder. "Well... Er... So-so, I suppose. She looks a little frigid."

"Did she ever look any different. Perhaps I should have asked how Cretin was faring, poor little man."

"Man, did you say?"

"Well, he is male, is he not?"

Gwidian scratched his head. "To be quite honest I do not really know. How do you tell the difference?"

"Easy. All you have to do is shake them."

"Shake them?" said Gwidian inquisitively.

"Yes, shake them. If it is male it will rattle."

Gwidian laughed. "You fool, Morgain."

Miowni sat taut in the saddle, she could feel Cretin's spikey fingers holding her waist gently. They gave a sort of tickling sensation and her skin tried to crawl away from its source.

"You are sitting very stiff, my dear," chortled Cretin.

"I... I normally ride this way," whispered Miowni.

"There is plenty of time to be stiff when you are dead," continued Cretin.

Goose pimples began to break out on Miowni's arms. "I am... er practising," said Miowni in a very uncertain voice.

"Practising to be dead!" said Cretin.

"No," said Miowni, "not that."

Cretin looked puzzled. "I know plenty of people who are dead."

"You knew plenty of people," corrected Miowni.

"I have not forgotten them," said Cretin in a strange tone, which hinted of a dreamy sadness.

Miowni turned her head until she could see Cretin out of the corner of her right eye. His hood had fallen back

onto his shoulders in the riding breeze. There was a strange look on his face and a dampness beneath the eyes. Although this may have been no more than a reaction to the cool evening air, it gave his face a look of humanity.

*

They entered Boudier as the last embers of light drifted beyond the horizon. They had donned their cloaks to ward off the chill of the night.

At the first crossroads they halted. "Where to now, my lord?" enquired Giyorn.

Jorm looked about himself. "There is a tavern here somewhere, though its exact location and name elude me. The roadways look much the same."

"Is it not the Dwarf and Dragon," prompted Gwidian.

"No, that does not seem familiar - it seems such a long time since I passed this way."

"We passed this way on our journey to join you," commented Morgain, "I can remember the hanging sign." Morgain looked at Gwidian and Gwidian returned the look.

"I have it," stated Gwidian. "The Butchered Lamb."

"The Slaughtered Lamb," corrected Morgain.

"The Slaughtered Lamb," reaffirmed Jorm. He pointed to the north. "That is the way we should go."

They cantered down the narrow twisting roadway which lead north, passing buildings, both quaint and old, until they came to a clearing.

The 'Slaughtered Lamb' was set back from the road, being surrounded by a reasonably sized area of grass, where tables and chairs stood; though at this time of day they were unoccupied. To the rear of the tavern stood what used to be a barn, but was now used to stable the horses of overnight

guests.

They dismounted their horses silently and began to walk towards the nearest rail where they could tether them.

A small boy appeared, seemingly from nowhere. “Water and feed for your faithful servant, Sir?” said the boy to Jorm.

“I doubt whether Cretin would appreciate oats and water,” muttered Morgain.

Gwidian kicked Morgain's left shin.

“Can you also bed the animals down for the night?” asked Jorm thoughtfully.

“I trust you have rooms to spare at the tavern?”

“I am sure my father can find a place where you may rest your heads.”

“Thank you, young man.” Jorm began to walk towards the tavern entrance. Miowni walked by his side with Cretin tucked in close behind; his hood cloaking his face in total darkness. Giyorn brought up the rear of the group close behind Morgain and Gwidian.

The tavern was quite large, wood beams supported the ceiling and a log fire burned in a large fireplace on the eastern wall. A few guests turned their heads as the group entered, one or two raised their eyebrows at the sight of Miowni; it was unusual to see a lady in a tavern, although there was no consensus against it. They sat themselves around a table at the opposite side of the room to the fire; it was the only one totally unoccupied. They sat and talked for a while before a short plumpish man approached.

“Food, wine, what may I get you good sirs and madam and... ?”

“Wine certainly and food...” Jorm looked around the table at his companions, expecting them to give their order. One by one they suggested what they would like, although sometimes their tastes could not be precisely satisfied. Finally

there was only Cretin left to speak, still hidden behind his hooded cloak. All eyes fell in his direction.

“Come on now, grandma. What would you like to eat?” said Miowni, in a sort of over emphatic manner.

“Him,” croaked Cretin, turning towards the tubby little man.

Morgain sniggered.

The little man's face dropped, then he smiled and chuckled nervously. “Grandmother certainly has a sense of humour, has she not?”

“I very much doubt it,” said Gwidian looking rather amused.

The little man looked from one face to another.

Giyorn looked puzzled by the conversation, he had not heard what Cretin had said.

“She is a funny old sort, a nice piece of meat should be fine,” said Miowni with a warm smile.

The little man returned the smile, “How would grandmother like the meat?”

“Raw,” grunted Cretin.

“Rare,” said Miowni.

The little man looked at Miowni, then said, “Rare it is.” He shook his head and walked away.

It was not long before the table was laid with dishes and the food served. The meal was marred only by Cretin, bending his head over the table and placing it squarely in his dish to the accompaniment of the most revolting slurping sounds which emanated from his hood, but this did not last long.

Miowni smiled, “I bet grandma has not had a meal this good since..”

“Chard,” added Cretin.

Miowni gave him a quizzical look. “A bit burnt was it?”

