

Dark Moon Daughter



Book II in the Tyrants of the Dead
Trilogy

Free Prologue and First Chapter

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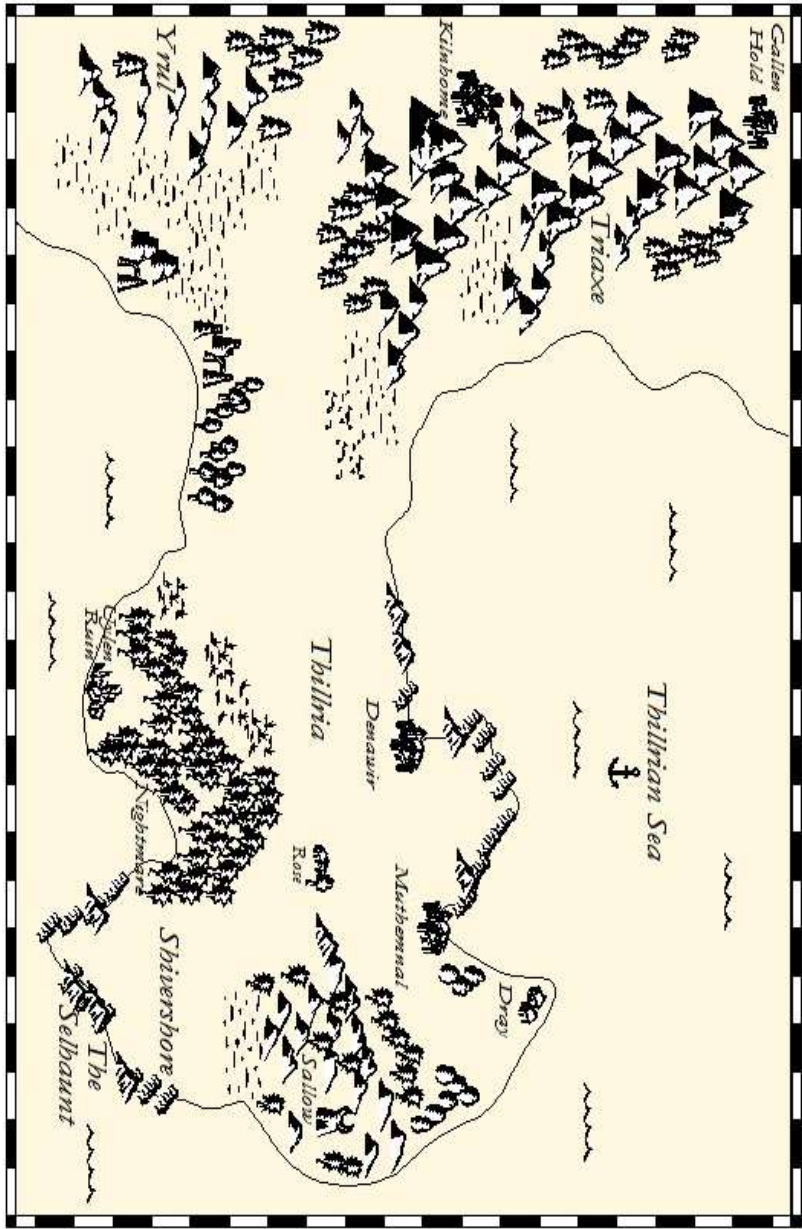
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For G

For Uncle John

For Granbo



In the long, slow era before the birth of the sun, they existed. They were named the Ur, the keepers of twilight, the shades between this world and the nether. Before men awoke and tamed the fallow earth, it was the Ur who roamed: invincible, restless, their every movement shaped by the gloom in which they lived. Nomads of the eternal night, beings of half-shadow, you may yet perceive them today, perhaps in your reflection upon the surface of dark water, in the lightless shade of the waning moon, or during a moment of profound grief.

I tell you truly; the Ur shaped the evil in men's hearts. The Ur created magic. They sleep now, banished by our ancestors, but mortal man must beware what they left behind. We must not rebuild the relics of the night. We must never recover the nightmare book, the Pages Black, whose resting place I dare not name. The world cannot abide such things to be remembered, for therein lies the way for the Ur to come again...

- From "Letters to the Lords of Grae" by the warlock Dank

The Journal

Year 12, date unknown

It is cold outside, as ever it is in Shivershore. The sea's salted foam crashes outside my window. The sun sets beneath a dreary, unhappy sky. Save for my lonely candle, my little friend who likes to dance with each draft of air seeping between the shutters, I have little light to write by. I sit here, inking words no one will ever read, squinting to see the page before me. I am too anxious. This will be my final entry. I wonder if I am ready.

Today will be my last day in the tower. This crowded pillar of tired, sea-bleached stones has been a good, if humble home. The corner hearth keeps it warm enough, while the tower's perch amid the tangled rocks and battered shoreline cliffs affords me the sort of privacy and solitude I have found nowhere else. Though my comforts are few, my years here have been useful. I have unraveled the secrets I sought and brought many intangible truths to light. I have sacrificed much in living here, but soon all of it will be worthwhile. Today marks winter's last gasp. Tomorrow a new season begins. And so I bid you a fond farewell, good tower. I hope to never see you again.

I packed my things yestereve. I slid a few important sheaves of paper, a loaf of bread, some wine, and an extra set of boots into my weathered satchel. I suppose I might even find room for this journal, though it seems rather meaningless, considering I will not tend to it again. Looking at my bag, small and crumpled as a peasant's hat, one would never know the places I am bound for.

I dreamed again last night. I have dreamed often of late, too often, suffering many doubts while I sleep. My nightly imaginings have been particularly dark, twisting my life's hopes and ambitions into nightmares, poisoning my mind with images of death and failure. Even so, every time I wake I feel no weakness or perturbation. This strikes me as comforting. Perhaps my dreams are trying to send me a message, whispering horrors into my ear and reminding me of my simple beginnings, while at the same time

fortifying me. Though I tremble as I slumber, the very moment I wake I feel strong again.

Last night while cleaning out my cupboards, a number of unexpected questions tumbled into my mind. I suppose I had been concerned with the execution of my plan for so long that certain possibilities escaped me. I sat at my lonely table, chewing on a brick of hard, stale bread, and the questions struck me just as the sun began to set. I wondered; how will my coming be perceived? How will my subjects view me? When I stand on my pulpit at the world's twilight, what will they think? Will I be adored and praised or feared and reviled? Will they see me as a savior from their daily futilities or will they look upon who I am and what I have become and turn their cheeks with wordless scorn? Kneeling upon the earth, stretching fearfully from meadow to sea, what will they whisper? Tyrant, I wager they will name me, destructor of the earth. But it is not certain, not knowable for now.

These questions and more pummeled my mind for too much of the night. As I swallowed my bread and dwelled upon them, I came to no meaningful conclusion. I decided I did not know the answers. I cared not. I cannot fathom the emotions of others, nor do I wish to. What the people will think at the end does not concern me, nor will it when I become king.

King. It has a pleasant taste to it. I say it often to myself, and it snaps so easily off my tongue. No wonder the term is so often misused. The local lord risen to power, the snot-sniffing heir, the winner of some inconsequential military affair, they all think they are kings, and that they above all others know what it means to possess power over mankind. If only they knew what I know, they would not think themselves so wise. They would wet their gilded chairs by day and shiver in their beds by night. They would beg for a taste, a single lash of their tongues just to lavish their minds with a fragment of what I know. What horror would befall their minds were the truth to strike them? But now I am rambling again. I do it too often. I am nothing if not someone who talks too much.

Each time I reflect upon my long, slow years of study, I realize my greatest sacrifice has been living here in this tower. Because of my choice, I have had no one to talk to, no one to share a cup of tea with or sit beneath the night with and discuss the meaning of the stars. During the endless days, this journal was all that kept me

from madness. I have been drawn to it every night, dithering for a moment before penning to paper the least significant parts of my day. How quaint it seems, a child's diary. How ordinary. How weak.

My things are packed. My cleaning is complete. I am ready for a last night's sleep. As I stretch upon my sagging bed, I feel a moment of longing. It is a strange sensation. I almost wish someone else were here, a woman perhaps, a pretty thing with a sympathetic ear. I wonder how pleasant it must be to lie with a beautiful girl or to be a man with many friends. But what do I know? These things are forgotten to me. Rather than sit and pine for the world to comfort me, I must remember my chosen path. My own thoughts are the only ones I shall ever know. I will be alone from now until the end.

The winter fails. The sea rages outside. I am weary of writing. I have come to it at last, the end of my preparation. My candle, my only companion, is dying, the victim of too many nights spent watching over these sad little pages. When I lift my pen, my hermit's life shall end. Not long from now, perhaps on an evening not so different than tonight, the skies will fall, and I will be the last living soul in all the world.

- D

The Thillrian King

Like a bear waking from a winter's worth of sleep, King Orumna sat up in bed with an earthshaking yawn. No matter that the cold season was three weeks dead, the sun shining warm and bright, and the cool morning air gliding like a spirit into his tower window, he came to consciousness with a scowl. His head hurt, his nightclothes were damp with sweat, and his back ached as though the whole of Thillria had stomped over him in his sleep. *Another morn...* He rubbed his eyes with swollen knuckles. *And me without a queen. How much will Thillria complain today?*

Through his windows and onto the floor the early sunlight splashed. *Like a chamber pot spilling*, he mused. *Yellow and only a wee bit warm.* Grunting from the effort, the old king swung his legs over the side of his bed and wiggled his toes at the edge of the light. Waking was always a sour affair for Orumna. As ever, his dreams had been filled with shadows, of all the opportunities that had long since passed him by, and of all the whisperings behind his back. He had only just awoken, but already he was tired, not just of body, but of mind, as if life itself was a wearying thing to endure. *But endure it I must*, he thought as he struggled to stand. *Until I trip and fall and roll to my death at the bottom of the sea. And won't that be a sight?*

Thillria's eighty-fifth sovereign, Orumna had inherited the throne from his father at the tender age of fifteen, and had ruled without fanfare or turmoil in the thirty-five years since. He knew what his people thought of him. *A recluse, an enigma, an ambitionless old blob who had long ago locked himself in Aeth and threw away the key.* Above all things, Orumna was old-fashioned, concerned more with keeping the peace than prodding Thillria into anything glorious. He maintained only a small army, emptied his coffers freely for festivals and charitable causes, and kept neither treaty nor dialogue with Thillria's western neighbor, the enviable folk of Triaxe. In all his reign, he had done nothing to either harm or advance his people, which some respected him for, but most detested.

Blustering to himself, Orumna made his way, wrapped his broad shoulders and burgeoning belly in his royal azure robes, slicked back a few greying strands of hair, and sauntered out of his bedchambers. Alone, he made his way down the curling tower stairs and into his royal hall, the great circular room lying at the junction of Aeth's six tower hallways. He leisured about the room for a time, poking at the statues and toying with the swords on his tables, and then he plopped like pudding into his throne. The tall-backed, pillow-laden chair groaned beneath his globular mass. Once adjusted in its depths, he gazed down the long table stretched out before him and managed a smile for what he saw.

"Ah!" He boomed at the three woman servants standing at the table's far end. "My ladies, my friends! Some bread and tea, please. For all of us, of course."

It was no unusual thing he did. For the last fifteen years, he had shared his morning morsels with all his servants. Many had come and many had gone, but his current three ladies were his most favorite of all. *Tinali, Harra, and the best of them, Reya*. He liked to think of his women servants as his only friends, the ones who knew him best. They seemed to know and accept his many moods, and he felt comfortable sharing his mind with them, no matter that they were peasants and he the King.

Reya, eldest of the three ladies, had known what he would ask for. Even as he folded his fingers over his belly, she presented a tray of bread, sweetmeats, and four steaming cups of tea.

"Thank you, my sweet." He smiled at her, she who was nearly the same age as he. "You are gift from the stars, you are." After plucking off his desired treats, he pushed the tray down the table. "Take what you like," he bellowed, and they obliged.

While the ladies sipped from their tea and nibbled at their bread, he devoured seven sweetmeats and drained his cup dry. "I think I shall remain inside today," he announced at the end of it. "This weather does not agree with me. It is too chilly, and the wind nips at my ears like a wet-tongued pup."

"Again?" Reya arched her eyebrow. "Orum dear, it is not so cold. Why not take a walk down to the bazaar? A new galley full of tealeaf and spice arrived last night. Some of your favorites await you, if only you will go."

“Oh no, no, no. Not today,” he huffed. “What do I have servants for, if not to bring these things to me?”

“What about a skim about the harbor, Sire?” the lass named Harra chimed in. “We could bundle you up like a bear. I heard from the quartermaster that the ice has melted and your sail is ready.”

“Yes, m’lord. Tis true,” added Tinali, Reya’s daughter, the most comely of the three. “And we’ve seen merchants from Triaxe. They’ve brought such pretty horses and sharp, sharp swords.”

Their coddling made him smile. For years, he had laid the same trap, and they had always taken it, doting on him no matter his stubbornness. “No, no, no.” His belly jiggled when he laughed. “No ships. No merchants. No rough, gruff Triaxe knights. What about lunch? Are we expecting any early guests? Are we having a roast, or is it fish and seaweed again?”

“Orum dear...” Reya pushed a stray strand of grey hair away from her eyes. “You’ve only just eaten breakfast, and already you plead for lunch. Your belly is too wide as is, which you might cure if you took a walk once in a while.”

Other sovereigns might have ordered the woman clapped in chains and thrown in a cell, but Orumna merely grinned. “My belly, eh?” He clapped both hands around his cauldron of a gut. “It’s not so huge, is it?”

“It is, my dear, and you well know it,” said Reya. “The people are worried for you. How can you quell them if you do nothing but lock yourself away in these dusty old halls? We can clean and cook and scrub for you till our fingers are naught but bones, but none of that will produce an heir. The country wants a queen, and soon.”

Ah, that again. The mention of his greatest failure touched a nerve inside him. All these years, and he had yet to take a queen, *or even a worthy mistress*, and thus Thillria had no heir. Orumna had no brothers, no sisters, and no cousins of royal value, for which all of Thillria was mournful. He might have been angry at Reya for raising the subject, *but no, she is right*, he thought. *I am old and fat and sour. What woman would even want me?*

“No matter.” He sank into his chair. “I will not go outside today. Perhaps next week, if the weather is warmer. If you would, now that we are finished with breakfast, bring me my books. I will read today. Tell everyone to leave me be. Even the guards.”

The ladies' cheer fell from their faces like rain from three rooftops. Reya snapped her fingers, summoning Harra and Tinali to her side, and led her unhappy procession toward the kitchen door.

"Wait!" he rumbled before they could escape.

"Yes Orum?" Reya halted.

"What of dinner? What is planned?"

"Your favorite, Sire. Fish and seaweed."

Her jest made him smile. "Excellent! And any guests?"

"None that I know of. Shall I invite Lady Gennai or Mistress Rashay? They both took a liking to you. When was it they were here? Last summer, I think?"

"Ha!" Orumna shooed her away. "No, neither of those. They were too young, too skinny, and much too haughty. No, I think I shall dine with you three tonight."

"Orum dear," Reya wore a look of motherly concern, "should you dine so often with your servants? You are the King, and we..."

"...shall do as I say." He raised his cup to them with a smile. "What better guests than you, my lovelies? Let the rest of Thillria squawk. Orumna sups with who he wishes."

Reya and her lasses spun toward the kitchen, but again she stopped short. "Orum dear, you reminded me of something. We do expect one guest. Not for lunch though. Not till supper. A gentleman from the south, near Shivershore. I regret to say I do not recall his name."

"Oh?" he huffed. "A guest without a name? What does he want? Not trying to sell me his daughter, is he? You know how pale and skinny those Shiver girls are."

"He's a merchant, I think," chirped young Tinali. "That's what I heard."

"Yes," Reya agreed with her daughter. "The fellow has contributed much to your Grace, as in gold for Aeth's coffers. I believe that is why he was granted audience."

Orumna shrugged. In his halls, one guest was the same as another. *They all have advice for how I should run my country.* "Well enough," he grunted. "See him to dinner. Until then, bring me my books and leave me be."

As ever, Orumna's books did not keep him awake for long. A few hours after Harra delivered the old, musty tomes, Tinali

entered the hall and found the King fast asleep, face planted cheek-first atop the royal table. He snored so loudly his chair creaked with each long, heaving breath. His drool dripped upon the tablecloth, while his hands, cradling a huge weather-worn tome, rattled like leaves upon an old oak.

The King dozed, and the rest of the day passed without event. Come late afternoon, the warmth fled from castle Aeth, replaced by a chilly seaborne breeze sliding through the shutters like ghosts. A soft rain settled over the city beyond the castle, compelling Orumna's servants to close every window, walling off his hall just as he liked it.

Orumna awoke with a start. He jerked upright in his chair, groggy-headed and uncomfortable, rubbing his eyes as though expecting every seat at his table to be occupied with plaintive guests. He soon calmed, for nothing dreadful awaited him. His books were stacked neatly upon the floor, a favor from Tinali. His cup was full of cool water, and a plate of cakes, bread, and spiced apples set before him. The hall was quiet, and though the windows behind his throne were frosted from the cold, the great room was warm. Three braziers were lit, six hearths blazed, and some two-hundred candles glowed, shining like stars within the room's iron chandeliers.

Not long after he woke, young Tinali burst out of the kitchen door. The lass was striking in her semblance to Reya. Her cheeks were round and dimpled, her hair long and black, and her smiles enough catch the stares of all his guards. She and three servant girls approached, giggling as they set the table, placing dull silver spoons and chipped porcelain wares before him. His belly rumbled in anticipation of dinner. He was not concerned about how it was served or what utensils he used to eat it, so long as it sated him.

"Tinali." He yawned and smacked his lips. "Should you set a second place? Aren't we expecting a guest?"

Tinali conjured a slender smile. "Yes milord. It is just that, well...we thought with all the rain he might not come."

"Rain? Again?" he grouched. "All the same, arrange a second setting. If he does not come, one of you may join me. You or your mother, mayhap. If your family were highborn, Tin-Tin, I swear I'd marry you both."

Blushing, Tinali retreated to the kitchen. She reappeared in short order, silverware and plates in hand, and she arranged the guest's setting on the opposite end of the long table. "There, all ready." She backed away. "Is there anything else?"

He yawned like a lion. His limbs felt heavy, his eyes dry and tired. "Bring the setting closer." He patted the table just one chair to his right. "Your mother always tells me I keep our guests too far away. I should prove her wrong tonight. And when you're done, see that the guards take their places. One can never be too careful with these Shiverfolk, not that I expect this one to actually come."

"Yes m'lord. Of course." Tinali nodded.

With a bat of her lashes and a swish of her green skirt, Tinali did as he asked. The rest of the servant girls slipped back toward the kitchen, and he slumped in his chair. In the girls' absence, he grew restless. He ached from his awkward, daylong nap. His back felt as stiff as a board, and the bones in his legs nettling him. He had no real interest in the night's guest, especially not with the pain throttling his skull. He hoped no one would come, that dinner would fill him to bursting, and that, *like all other nights*, he could retire to his bedchamber and doze the darkness away.

Not a moment too soon, supper arrived. He sat up in his chair, licking his teeth and clutching his fork as though it might flee. Reya was on hand to dish out the evening's splendor, and his smile widened as she approached. In her grasp was a great platter heaped with hot, buttered potatoes, a slab of roasted pig, a pile of steaming chicken legs, and a cradle of thick gravy huge enough to lose a fistful of ladles within. She set the platter before him, took one step back, and raised her eyebrow, concerned at the haste with which he heaped his first serving on his plate.

"Now Orum, you know better than to eat everything," she said. "Save some, in case your guest should arrive."

"Guest? What guest?" he pretended to forget. "Some nameless beggar? Besides, Shiverfolk need little to fill them. They're all bones and skin...and more bones. I am hungry, and so I eat."

"As you wish." Reya set down the last part of the feast, a chalice brimming with red wine, a rare treat from Aeth's depleted cellars. "Anything else?"

“No, no.” He stabbed his fork into the roast, testing its tenderness. “This will do just fine.”

No man’s appetite rivals Orumna’s, he thought at he sank into his meal. He tore huge chunks of meat with his teeth, gulping them down with swigs of wine. He poured gravy over mountains of potatoes and used the ladle in place of his spoon to scoop great mouthfuls down his gullet. The rest of the room was silent as he feasted. The guards said nothing as he stuffed himself to bursting, while the servants passing through averted their eyes.

When Reya returned, his platter was thrice cleaned, slick with grease, and piled high with chicken bones. “Reya!” he blustered. “I need more potatoes! And put more wood in the hearths. They’ve died down. It’s bloody freezing in here.”

“Orum,” she said, “Your guest is here.”

Striding to the far end of his gloomy hall, Reya opened a door. A stiff, shivering wind cut into the room, gusting past her skirts and slaying several dozen candles. A bone in hand and a mouthful of meat, Orumna ceased chewing and watched as a tall, hooded man in a rain-slicked cloak entered the hall, his face hidden down to his chin.

“Dramatic, even for a Shiver man,” Orumna grumbled at his guards. “Well...does he have papers?”

Reya stepped aside. An armored guard strode out of the shadows and stalked toward the cloaked stranger. Orumna took the opportunity to seize another chunk of meat, slather it in gravy, and stuff it in his cheek. He chewed as he watched, only vaguely interested.

After accosting the tall stranger, the guard unraveled a scroll stripped from the rain-soaked man and scanned its contents. “Seems in order, Sire.” The guard’s voice boomed in the hall. “Your seal is affixed. Says here this man is *the Sponsor of Shivershore*, whoever that may be. Says you invited him to discuss the possibility of employment in your service. By writ, he’s promised one night’s room under your roof, and one supper by your side.”

Orumna sucked the grease from his fingers. He did not remember inviting anyone, *least of all a Shivershore man*, to Aeth. On another night, he might have sent the stranger right back out into the rain, but his meal had softened his mood, and the wine

doubly so. “Just him?” he bellowed. “No retainers or squires? No daughters?”

“There was one retainer,” answered Reya. “But he preferred to remain outside.”

“In the rain?” He leaned back in his chair, whose legs groaned beneath his weight. “What’s he to do? Sleep in the stables?”

“No, Sire.” Reya’s usual humor seemed absent. “In the city. In Denawir.”

Orumna tossed the last of the bones onto the platter, sparing a brief glance at his sopping wet visitor. It was a rare thing for him to allow guests at supper, rarer still that they arrived alone. *Peculiar*, he wanted to say, but held his tongue. *Since the lass set his place, I may as well humor him.*

Two guards escorted the guest to the King’s table. Orumna looked the man over as he approached. *Sponsor of Shivershore, eh? Looks more like a dishrag, wet and moldering.* The Sponsor tossed back his hood and slid into his seat two chairs away, a guard at each side. Between pulls of wine, Orumna glowered in the Sponsor’s direction. He decided he liked the idea of a guest even less than before.

At a glance, the Sponsor cut a striking figure, a Shivershore man to the bone. His hair was ebon, as dark a black as the sea at night and just as shiny. His skin was white with a wintry pallor, and his short black beard neatly groomed. More than anything else, Orumna noted his man’s eyes. Their brightness was most un-Thillrian, their greenness most profound. The King reckoned they looked like the crystalline waters of Denawir’s harbor at midsummer. *And maybe that’s Reya was so shy*, he mused. *She’s smitten with this handsome sod.*

After perusing the Sponsor long enough to make most men uncomfortable, Orumna hunched over his platter in a most unkingly manner. He dismissed Reya with a wave before swallowing a chunk of roast and chasing it with a noisy swig of wine. He hoped his uncouth behavior would unsettle his guest, *and keep this visit short.*

“Has he been checked?” he asked at length.

The guards flanking the Sponsor bade the man rise again. The search was a piece of protocol Orumna rather liked, *for all that it makes them uncomfortable.* As one guard patted the Sponsor

down, the other rifled through the satchel he had carried to the table. The Sponsor neither blinked nor raised a word of protest. He held his arms high and suffered the search without apparent concern, not seeming to mind even when one of the guards dumped his satchel's contents on the table. Smirking, the guard sifted through the spilled things, finding only a weather-worn book, a glass cylinder with a sheaf of cloth packed inside, and a sealed bottle of wine labeled *Shivershore's Finest*.

"Sire." The guard hoisted the wine for Orumna to see. "A book, a bottle, and a rag. 'Tis all he has."

He spilled more wine into his gullet. "Leave it be." He half-stifled a burp. "And let the poor man sit. One of you, go fetch Reya again. We'll need more supper if this skinny fellow is to eat. Seems I ate all the rest."

The guards did as asked, afterward drawing back into the deep shadows at the back of the hall. They held their spears as tightly as men holding a battle's front line, all the while menacing the Sponsor with their glares. Orumna, tipsy as he was, found the whole thing amusing.

Reya brought more food, some for the Sponsor and still more for the King. *My guest is silent*, Orumna thought. *He must be hungry. Good. Let him nibble on his while I drown in mine.* A glutton, he tried to be, finishing his fourth platter of food. He stuffed his cheeks with soggy bread and slathered roast, though the Sponsor ate nothing.

"So then, what did you say your name was?" Orumna asked.

"I did not say." His guest was polite, *too polite for a Shiver man*. "To most, I am known as the Sponsor of Shivershore. I invest coin and concern into the making of the south's finest wine, Shiver Red."

"I know this wine." Orumna tapped his empty bottle with his finger. "I drank a bottle just tonight."

"Was it all you hoped it would be?"

"It was good enough. Another bottle, and perhaps I'd be drunk enough to care about whatever it is you've come to say."

Unasked for, the Sponsor dragged his chair closer to Orumna's, close enough that the guards at the back of the room twitched. *Only an arm's length away*. The King drew back in his seat, frowning. *Does he presume to hold my hand?*

“I do not recall you, Ser Sponsor.” His jowls shook. “And I do not remember inviting you into my hall, especially during this season. I am uncomfortable with you. How did you secure a summons? What is it you want?”

“Majesty, recall last summer if you will,” said the Sponsor. “You awoke one morn to find a chest of gold and a selection of rare seeds for your garden. Do you remember? These were delivered to you from my tower in Shivershore.”

“That was you? I remember. What of it?”

“As my correspondence tried to explain, I gave the gold to expand Aeth’s gardens, and perhaps if you were feeling generous, appeal to you to stock your shelves with Shiver Red. I aim to become Aeth’s largest contributor, its Sponsor, if you will. I have large stakes in Shiver’s vineyards and orchards, and I would open my cellars to Denawir, not for profit but for the joy of spreading the passions of the south to the unsuspecting north, who knows not what they are missing.”

The Sponsor looked comfortable now, smiling and talking with his hands. *Too comfortable*, thought the King. *As if his charm matters to me.*

“Indeed,” said Orumna, still doubtful.

“As for the summons,” the Sponsor continued, “Your gentle steward had it delivered to me. His name is Jix, I believe. I requested a tour of your gardens and cellars, and he was kind enough to add dinner with you to my visit.”

“Ah, Jix.” The name left a sour taste on his tongue. “I must have been wading nose-deep in Red. Forgive my forgetfulness.”

He lifted his chalice to his lips again, but tasted only emptiness. All the servants had gone, he realized, and all his guards were rapt. The Sponsor leaned back into his chair, settling into his seat as though he had done it a thousand times. Orumna shivered. Reya had stoked the hearths before she had left, but to little avail. The cold penetrated him, and he swore he saw his breath frost the air above his table.

“You still seem suspicious of me.” The Sponsor’s tone was calm, even soothing. “I cannot say I blame you. I would be the same. After all, who am I to invade Aeth in the rain, dressed as a Shivershore cur? You are Aeth’s lord, Thillria’s sovereign, and I

am but a chaplain of vice. I know my place in this world, Majesty. If you ask it, I shall leave. I shall not trouble you again.”

Between shivers, Orumna came to realize what a miserable host he had been. *Too miserable*, he thought. *Even for me*. His rudeness left an ill taste in his mouth, while the memory of his supper manners weighed in his stomach like a stone accidentally swallowed. “No, enough of that.” His neck flushed, his hands sweating despite the cold. “Stay at least a little while. I would hear your offer before I boot you into the rain.”

“You are certain, my King?”

“I am.” The words felt odd escaping his tongue. “Now will someone fetch a few logs and drive back this damnable cold?”

No one answered. Green eyes gleaming, the Sponsor scooted still closer in his chair. He uncorked his bottle of Shiver Red and drained a cupful as if to prove it was no poison. “Never ceases to amaze.” He pushed the bottle to Orumna. “If wine were power, Thillria might rule the world.”

As many bottles of Red as Orumna had imbibed, the marvels of its taste were all but lost to him. “After the third goblet, they all start to taste the same,” he said while wringing the cold from his hands. “But enough of the wine. Tell me, Sponsor, why are you here? You promise wine and flowers, and you leave chests of gold on the steps. Do you have a daughter needing marrying? Do you want an army raised? A few ships built? Every man who comes to Aeth wants something from me. Your only hope is honesty.”

The Sponsor cupped his chin in his left palm. “None of these, Majesty. I have two daughters, but neither is suitable for you. I already have an army, it seems, and I rather hate sailing. The sea upsets my stomach.”

An army? A Shiver man who hates the sea? Orumna found it all very odd. “What is in this bottle of yours? Not the Red. The other bottle.” He glared down the table at the scrap of cloth inside the Sponsor’s glass cylinder.

The Sponsor smiled. “A page from a book, your Majesty. A very old book, as it happens. Perhaps the oldest.”

Orumna rubbed his head. He could hardly hear the Sponsor’s words anymore. His headache was too powerful, and the cold washing over him felt like waves from a wintered sea. His breath made great clouds when he breathed, and his eyelids felt as though

icicles were hanging from his lashes. “A book?” He fumbled with the words. “What book? Am I the only one freezing in here? Where is Reya?”

He glanced behind him, hoping to see his guards, *or Reya, or anyone*. But Reya and her girls were gone, and the guards frozen stiff as statues. The two men’s skins were blue, their eyes glazed with frost, and their brittle fingers cracked around the hafts of their spears. The fog in his head was too thick to make sense of it, and so he faced the Sponsor once again. “Do you see that?” he blustered. “The guards are...”

But the Sponsor was gone, and in the Shiver man’s place Orumna saw himself sitting in the chair. The second Orumna’s cheeks were just as bulbous, his gut just as huge, and his sausage-like fingers twiddling against his kingly robes. The only difference was in his eyes. *Green*, though the real Orumna. *Green as Thillrian water, green as moss. But impossible! There is no magic in this world!*

“Majesty...” The second Orumna grinned. “It’s rather cold in here, did you notice?”

The real Orumna cracked his mouth to cry for Reya, but no sound came out. The cords in his throat were frozen stiff, and his teeth stuck together with frosted saliva. The false king smiled at him, feigning sympathy, and then reached out to tap the real Orumna’s knuckles with a spoon. The King of Thillria felt no pain. He watched his arms shatter like glass, then his chest, and then finally the rest of his body, raining in crystalline shards upon a floor he would never walk again.

About the author



A reader of mass quantities of fantasy and sci-fi, J Edward Neill became obsessed with writing fiction in early 2001. On one bitterly cold morning in the lowest corridor of his candlelit man-cave, he set fingers to keyboard and began hammering away on what would soon become a much larger project than he ever imagined. Since that day, J Edward has spent nearly all his free time lost in his daydreams, conjuring ways to write the kind of stories he always loved as a child.

When he's not glooming in front of his laptop or iPad, J Edward also has a powerful affinity for esoteric art, quirky foreign films, and his seven-string Ibanez guitar, Beelzebub. He currently lives in the 'burbs of North Georgia, where he moonlights as a foodie and a sipper of too much pinot noir.

Also available by J Edward Neill

Fiction

Down the Dark Path – Book I in the Tyrants of the
Dead trilogy

Nether Kingdom – Book III in the Tyrants of the Dead
trilogy

Hollow Empire – A Serial Dark Fantasy Opera co-
authored with *John R McGuire*

The Sleepers – A Sci-Fi Horror short story

Old Man of Tessera – A Horror short story

Non-Fiction

101 Questions for Humanity – Coffee Table

Philosophy

101 Questions for Men

101 Questions for Women

And coming soon...

Darkness Between the Stars – Prequel to the Tyrants’

trilogy

Let the Bodies – A Short Story Sequel to Old Man of

Tessera

101 Questions for Midnight

 Tessera