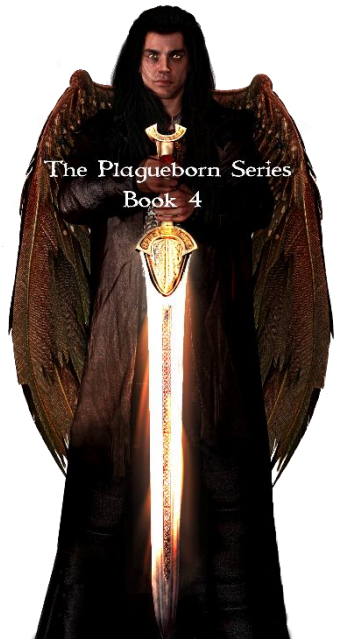
A Wretched Darkness



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Dramatis Personae

Virals

Threadfin Todder, an imperial viral mage, and brother to the imperatrix, he is now the de facto leader of the viral horde, whether he likes it or not, which he doesn't

Tezcat Licolo, a lost viral soul who was linked to Aiyana Todralan but is now returned, she is the annoying friend of Threadfin Todder

Beezer, an ancient viral soul who was also linked to Aiyana Todralan, he gets on Threadfin's nerves

Lyrin, another ancient viral, who sometimes makes Threadfin feel like he's in school

Greencloaks (Actaeon Guard)

Artorius Agrippa, formerly a captain of the Actaeon Guard, recently promoted to Imperial Marshal

Grudge, formerly a simple-minded corporal and scout, who loves his Ma, now a simple-minded captain, who still loves his dead Ma

Vilt, an archer with the rank of sergeant from Ancyra, who loves Grudge

Trotters, an unfortunate sergeant known for his huge size and appetite

Icarthians

Creed, Paladin, a member of the Forum within the Pantheon and a church paladin, she is an older woman who has a dark and dangerous side

Myral Azarm, formerly a zorast priestess, and imperial spy, she has left her old life behind to find a new one on another continent

Podral Pole, an imperial bodyguard known as a Darken, who is also a friend of Threadfin Todder's, reluctantly keeping the undead mage's bony ass out of trouble

Polius Augustus, conclavist

Lucius Aidarius, conclavist

Rajax, a paladin and a member of the Forum

Sarscha Todralan, former imperial marshal, and estranged sister of Threadfin, she is now the imperatrix of Icarthya

Nephilim

Anak, Anakim, second eldest son of Og, who would be heir if he could manage to murder his older brother Gog

Desool, youngest son of Og, who has no desire to rule, and is regarded as a disappointment by both father and brothers, but who the angelic council have decided must become king

Gog, of Magog, eldest son of Og, and apparently the heir to the Nephilim throne

Nanel, half sister to Gog and his brothers, she was raised, taught, and protected by the Keeper of the Stone

Skinbone, an ancient undead giant, which is considered a rarity, he exists only within the confines of a viralic haven known as Hades. Good natured, and with a deep sense of right and wrong, he has been known to offer aid to the living

Volar, of the Anakim clan, and right hand to Anak

Volo, also known as the Keeper of the Stone, he is an elderly Nephilim, which is considered shameful within their warrior society

Others

Adal, a mysterious character out of legend, otherwise known as the Eleventh Torment, despite being angelic in nature, who tends to get involved in everything

Angrboda, a dark witch, also known as a, Daughter of Lucifer, she once served the Grim, but now serves a new master

Astra, also known as Astra Dar, is a young sorceress who was reborn over and over for a millennium. Now, all her former selves have been stitched together into a new person, resembling the old Astra, but forming a doorway to Tartaros

Cadaver, male leader of the Torments, serving the Grim

Cerberus, fabled guardian of Hell's Teeth, this beast is also a manifestation of the shraed twins, Manic and Mania

Corso, lord, a dhampir lord who serves Wormwood

Hazine, a young woman, whose family were taken by the vampires

Librarian, the, fabled two-headed man with access to all knowledge in existence, its two heads named Enep and Sigos (*see also,* Orthrus)

Lucifer, a manifestation of the Darkness otherwise known as Tartaros, Lucifer is sometimes referred to as a prince of darkness. He has gained access to the mortal world through the fragmented soul of Astra Dar

Mania, a powerful shraed in female form, curvy and seemingly kind, with a meddlesome streak

Manic, Mania's twin brother, who is often bored, and somewhat unpleasant when he isn't insulting

Nipper, a mongrel scribe/housekeeper/gold thief, serving Threadfin Todder, and who is thinking of forming a union for better pay and treatment, when he isn't plotting secret revenge

Orthrus, the Librarian in another form, this creature was created by the Grim in parody of Cerberus

Quel, a strange vampiric-type creature known as a dhampir, this one being consider the weakest of its kind

Ralan, the son of Grim, and the Tenth Torment, he now resides in Icarthya and is an advisor to the imperatrix

Rasnal Nalrost, a high mage, sometimes referred to as a sorcerer, long since dead, after which he became the Grim

Raziel, commander of the Dominions, a legionary rank of angels, he now aids the imperatrix in Icarthya

Severo, a rebel leader who seeks to bring down the Vegoian aristocracy, now a refugee in Icarthya

Striga, a female Torment, serving the Grim, and her own interests, she has little patience and a short fuse

Virtue, a mysterious paladin who appears within the Forum of the Pantheon, replacing paladin Rajax

Volcanus, also known as the Despoiler, he is the both the first angel to have come into existence, and the first to fall. His current appearance and location are unknown, but he may be hiding among humans

Wither, once known by another name, he is now called the Red Prince. After taking control of the vampire horde, he has since been usurped

Wormwood, a mysterious and powerful new leader of the vampires who usurped the Red Prince

Zane, once a leader among the Aidari, with some limited magical ability, she is now a companion and possible romantic partner to Desool


ARTACA MTS
WUNN MTS
EWSANN
TARL FOREST
TYSTRIA
ARTACA PLAINS
R. NOT
R. SUL
LAME
BYRSA
ICARTHYA
R. NOT
FRAYLE
TIRAL
LAMEDON
ADALALCAS
PALDAN
ANCYRA
NORTH ADALCIS OCEAN
THARONIS
TOLDRON SEA
TARSUS
VALTAR
MIDWARE
TWINPORT
VALTARAN DESERT
HATAVA
PETHRAM
CANTRIP
SOUTH ADALCIS OCEAN
GULLEY
SHAMAR
MORAL DESERT
MOURN
1000 MILES
N
ATLANTIS


PETHRAM
CANTRIP
GULLEY
SHAMAR
ELADALDOR
MOURN
ATLANTIS
MORAL DESERT
BOLAM
MAGOG
BASHAN
RADDHON
GOMORRAH DESERT
SODOM
GILGAL
WARZAN
RINDURR
CALAMIR
RIPE
PITH
TALPA
MALDAR
N
RISE
1000 MILES

'Never have I been so troubled than when I have gazed upon mortal kind, those who embody both the futility and the hope of existence.'

—Volcanus

Prologue

THE SMELL OF DEATH lured Angrboda from her cave, filling her entire being as she inhaled. The agent of Darkness, in the guise of a young woman with white hair had returned to the ocean several hours ago, and the witch deemed it safe at last to scuttle across the stony beach. Within minutes her legs were spread either side of a corpse.

A handsome lad, fresh-faced, barely a man. Never would be now. Not that she cared. The witch licked her grey lips, prodding the cadaver with the hilt of a bone knife. She liked them young and as fresh as possible.

Often, her choices were limited; a local who'd tumbled from the cliffs, or a fisherman's bloated leftovers rolling in the surf. Never in this witch's life had she been rewarded with such a bounty.

In this part of northern Adalalcas, where the Artaca and Wunn Mountains met, was a small garrison town with a wall. A hangover from days when an attack from Tryn to the north weren't just a fancy. Still, this witch had been surprised to learn of viral mages in the town. She'd heard of that female undeader on the throne before she'd gotten what was coming. Then, undead mages started popping up every which way. The ones in the town hadn't sensed her yet, her magic not of their variety. Funny, since death was her trade.

As it were, the mages must've sensed something in the dark waters of the North Adalcis Ocean, and mobilised the garrison to this beach. An hour earlier, she'd felt the agent arrive, its feet touching the sands to be greeted by greencloaks with spears and shields, flanked by the undead mages. Fat lot of good it did the lot o' them. The oracle had known they were coming after all.

The dark emanation had stepped onto land, and Angrboda had huddled in the gloom of her damp cave. She wasn't used to being afraid. A servant of the Grim Master since birth, she'd made him many offerings in the hope one day he might notice her, and bring her through Hell's Teeth to her reward. Unlike those fool zorasts, she was a true and loyal servant. But everything was different now.

With arms outstretched, the witch glanced down at the cadaver's face, eyes pecked out by gulls along with the tongue and much of the cheek fat. Handsome, but looks never mattered in the end, did they?

The agent of Darkness had known of her presence, but had ignored her. She knew her master was now in service to the sorceress. This witch needed to be careful; she could not anger her master, but nor could she ignore Astra Dar. The Darkness was playing a game, moving pieces on a board, but any piece might be sacrificed in one poor witch's heartbeat.

She knelt, ripped the clothing, and drove the knife into the body to remove the fleshy liver. She didn't understand why the agent had returned to the water, instead of moving inland and continuing its slaughter. Why had it come at all? Mulling on the conundrum, she ate noisily, and felt the body shift against her legs in the surf.

Now, Angrboda was well acquainted with undeath though she had no use for it. After all, virals were born that way. She preferred the magic of death for it was the opposite of life, and she was of the living. She tossed the rest of the liver into the sand, and stared curiously at the dead soldier.

The man's head turned left and right, as though seeking something. The fingers twitched and his hands rose. The witch rose too and backed off a few steps, but there was another body behind her, also moving.

All twenty-two dead soldiers became a writhing mass of limbs. Only the two virals, or what remained of them, lay still. This wasn't undeath, for she knew its flavour. No, this was something new. Something darker.

The witch offered a prayer to the Grim. Not for salvation since her master was not one for such foolishness. No, she prayed that he would not forget how useful she'd been in recruiting zorasts, in eliminating spies throughout her short sixty-eight years of life. She could be of use still.

The Grim did not reply, but then he never did.

When all the dead had stood and turned to face her, she felt bile tickle the back of her throat. Liver always gave her indigestion, but the magic she worked required it. Not that it mattered now. She had no magic to counter this. Each corpse began to totter towards her, and too late Angrboda realised she'd been chosen.

By the *sorceress.*

It was she who'd sent the agent, and who now commanded Angrboda to serve her. The witch knew all this in an instant, a feeling. A witch's instincts were keener than any blade after all.

Once the dead were within a few feet, gathered in a clump, their mouths began to open wide, jaws dislocating, and as one they formed a spinning vortex. The dark maelstrom became a gateway from the *other side.*

And through the gateway, *they* came.

Scores of shraeds, ghostly and dark, drawn by Angrboda's power. The witch realised they must've been waiting for her to feast on the liver, to open herself to them. A trap, and she'd sprung it like the half-wit she was. *So much for a witch's instinct,* she thought.

The shraeds forced her mouth open, devouring her scream as they entered her. She shook with convulsions, as bones snapped, blood spurting from her nose, eyes rolling up in her head.

When Angrboda opened them again, she felt different.

No longer one but a legion, the once-witch and now something else, turned away from the beach. The stench of death did not interest her anymore.

No, she had a taste for the living now, and her hunger was insatiable.

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Nazra Hal took her usual route out of the city of Alrana with a bribe for the guards. She knew most of the men from childhood, and though bribes weren't necessary, she wanted to make certain no one reported her. Besides, she'd been escaping her father's watch for years. He had yet to suspect a thing.

Everyone said she was like her grandfather, the Emperor Murtaza Hal, who knew of her disobedience and approved. As she rode beneath the stars blanketing northern Vegoia, careful to keep her sydarag to a trot, she thought about the rift in her family. Her mother's suicide had been at the heart of it, but she didn't understand it all. Something had occurred between her grandfather and father, and it had weakened Vegoia to its core. Her father, who had no sons, seemed to view Nazra as a delicate thing, incapable of taking care of herself. The princess was determined to prove him wrong. She was capable of ruling when the time came, the first Vegoian empress in centuries.

Her mount halted close to a cliff edge, and she dismounted. Behind her were the tumbled ruins of an old tower, once a lookout for enemies from the sea. She stood watching the sun lift its bloated

bulk above the watery horizon. This was her favourite spot to visit whenever she needed to escape, to think. The tension between her father and the emperor had grown hotter, and a conflagration wasn't far off. If she wasn't careful, she might get burned, and between them they might destroy Vegoia.

'I didn't think you'd come,' said a voice behind her, 'not after what I heard happened in the city.'

She turned to see a man with the dark skin of a Keen native from the south, approach. He'd been hiding within the ruins waiting for her. 'You have no idea.'

'I can take you away from this.'

'To do what? Join your band of renegades? Loot and pillage for the rest of my life, a wanted woman? I don't think so. Can't we just *be,* for now?'

Severo took her in his arms and held her tight, face in her hair as he inhaled. 'As long as you're safe, I am content.'

She pulled away from him and turned back towards the cliff edge. 'You heard about it then? The news has travelled fast.'

'Yes,' he said behind her. 'An odd business. Is it all true? Did they … you know …?'

She nodded. 'The *blackening* of those corpses was unnatural Sev. I've never seen such a thing. It shouldn't have been possible.'

'I think I know what you're going to say.'

She turned to face him, searching his face, which remained devoid of expression except for the eyes; those were always full of passion. They grew darker whenever he talked of revolution, though. 'Do you, though?'

'Not every strange event is a result of magic, Naz. There are no virals in Vegoia for one thing.'

'That we know of.'

'We know of the undead in the south too, but I've never heard of them doing anything like this. No, it doesn't make sense. Why would they bother?'

'To topple my grandfather, to take the throne. I don't know. Does there have to be a reason?'

He scratched his jaw. 'This has the feel of something else, Naz. It makes me uneasy.'

'You didn't see the bodies. You don't know.'

'They think it was an assassin, don't they? I've heard they're kicking down doors all over the city looking for them.'

'For someone hiding in the mountains, you seem to know a lot.'

He grinned.

She paused for a moment, and then said, 'My family will see someone executed for this. Hung and disembowelled in public as per the law. In the end it won't matter who. If they don't find the real culprit, they will provide one. You should leave. You would be a perfect fit.' Her father wouldn't hear of anything regarding magic, instead insisting it had been poison, with the hunt for the poisoner underway. It wouldn't be long before the search spread beyond the capital.

She'd always had a fascination with magical power. Whatever had happened to those people in her city had been unnatural, and to Nazra that meant magic, which excited her. What magic existed if not the viralic sort? Her excitement was offset by her fear for Severo's safety, of course. She couldn't abide the idea of anything happening to him.

'I will go into deeper hiding,' he said, as though reading her mind, 'until it all calms down, but I'm not leaving you, princess. Not ever.' He placed his strong muscular arms around her, holding her from

behind, as they stared out across the glistening whitecaps. It was then she spotted something moving out in the ocean far below.

'What's that?' She pointed off to their left, which was in the direction of north.

'A pod of whales.'

'No, wait, I think those are ships.'

'A fleet? Impossible. There are no fleets this far north.'

'Well, those are not whales, Sev. Look at them!' The objects were moving towards the Vegoian shore. After a while, they grew closer and larger, and she saw the vessels were in the shape of odd sea creatures, each with a large crew aboard. A crew that even at this distance looked strange, unnatural. For one thing, some had wings.

Her heart beat faster, mind racing. All the dead in Alrana had been officers and soldiers save for a few civilians of high rank. She broke his hold, and raced to her sydarag who was grazing nearby. Mounting him, she wheeled him about. 'You must go, now. If my father doesn't discover you first, you will be killed by whoever is attacking us. If you have any sense you'll return to Keen. You should flee this continent.'

'What are you talking about? I don't understand?'

'You soon will. We all will. There is no time, Sev. Not for us or anyone.'

'Come with me, then.'

'I am a princess of Vegoia, you idiot. My place is with my people. Yours is not. Just go, Severo!'

They shared one last look before she glanced back out to sea. The otherworldly armada was cutting through the waves like a hot blade through fat. Strange ships, moving too quickly to not be magic. Whomever they were they weren't dropping by to say hello.