

# **DEAD OR ALIVE**

**A NOVELLA OF SHADRAK THE UNSEEN**

**D.P. PRIOR**

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In connection with the assassination of First Senator Mal Vatès and for the trafficking of husks across the Farfall Mountains:

### SHADRAK THE UNSEEN

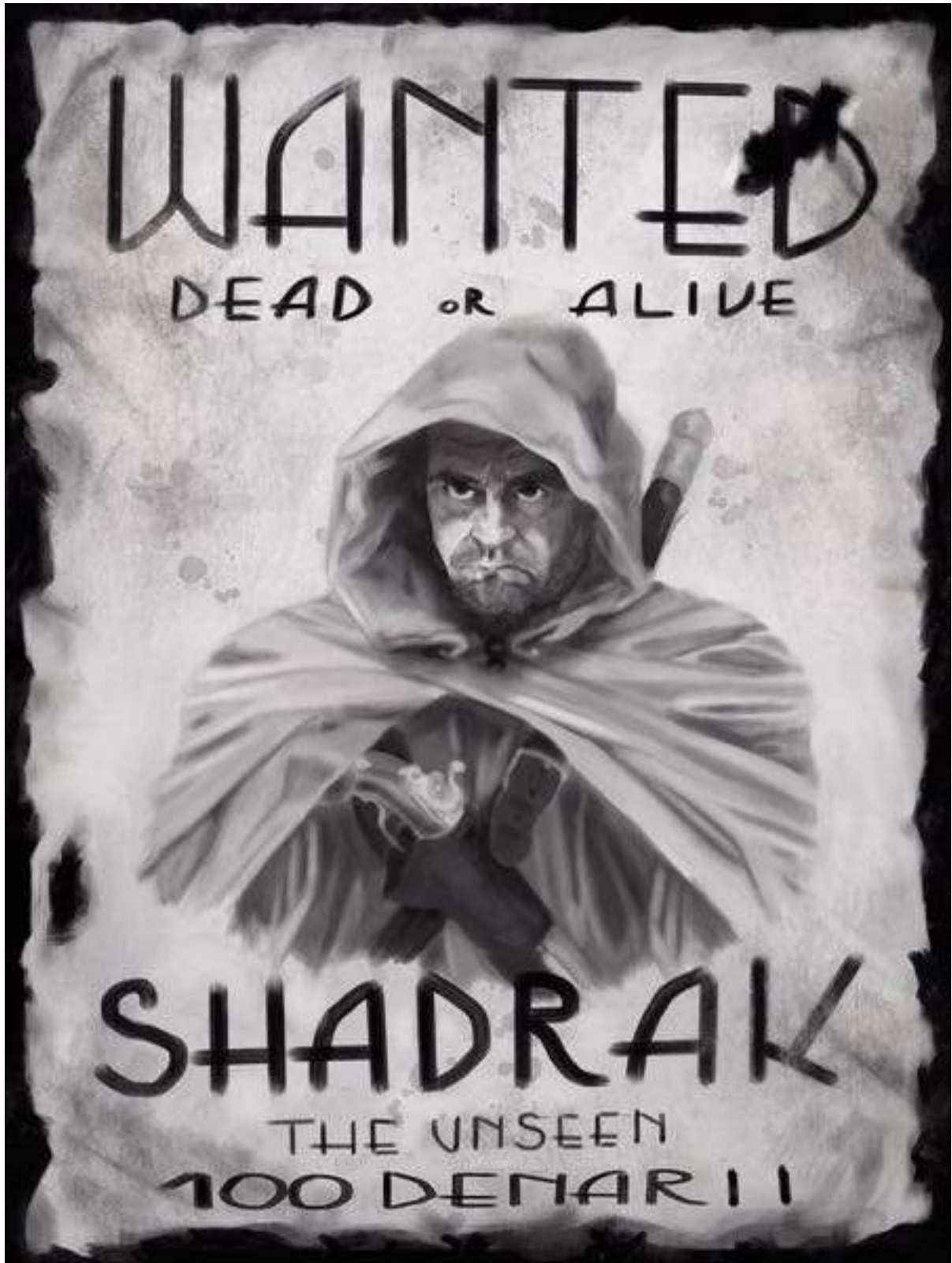
(former guildmaster of the Night Hawks)

Appearance: Approximately three feet tall. Pale skin. Pink eyes. Shaven white hair and clipped box beard. Last seen wearing a hooded cloak and sporting two baldrics, numerous blades, and “blasting sticks” that are believed to be relics from the time of the Ancients on Urddynoor.

This man is extremely dangerous. Do not approach him.

Any sightings should immediately be reported to the Senate of New Londdyr.

Should a tip-off lead to the capture of the suspect, a reward of one hundred golden denarii has been authorized (subject to clause 4, paragraph 25b of the Rule of Malfen, pertaining to, but not exclusive to, the Order of Maresmen). Tax will be applied at a rate determined by a select committee of the Senate at the time of apprehension.



## INTRODUCTION

A brief and potted history of Shadrak the Unseen

(Or, what has gone before in the *Shader Trilogy* and *Legends of the Nameless Dwarf*)

**\*\*\*Spoiler Alert!!!\*\*\***

On his home world of Urddynoor, Shadrak the Unseen was among the elite of the Sicarii, the most feared guild of assassins. Injured during what was supposed to be a routine murder, he is shot with his own pistol, an Ancient tech weapon he found in the metal corridors of the Maze beneath the city of Sarum.

Patched up by the disguised lich Dr. Cadman, Shadrak's payment is to learn all he can about a mysterious artifact known as the Statue of Eingana, and in so doing, he becomes embroiled in the battle against the Technocrat Sektis Gandaw, who plots the end of all things.

Shadrak travels by plane ship to the dream world of Aethir with the knight Deacon Shader and is instrumental in preventing the cataclysm known as the Unweaving.

During the last stages of the battle against Sektis Gandaw, Shadrak is badly injured beneath the Technocrat's mountain. He returns to the city of New Londdyr with his fellow Sicarii, Albert the Poisoner. After Shadrak's convalescence, they systematically take over all the guilds of the city, and Shadrak rules as lord of the underworld.

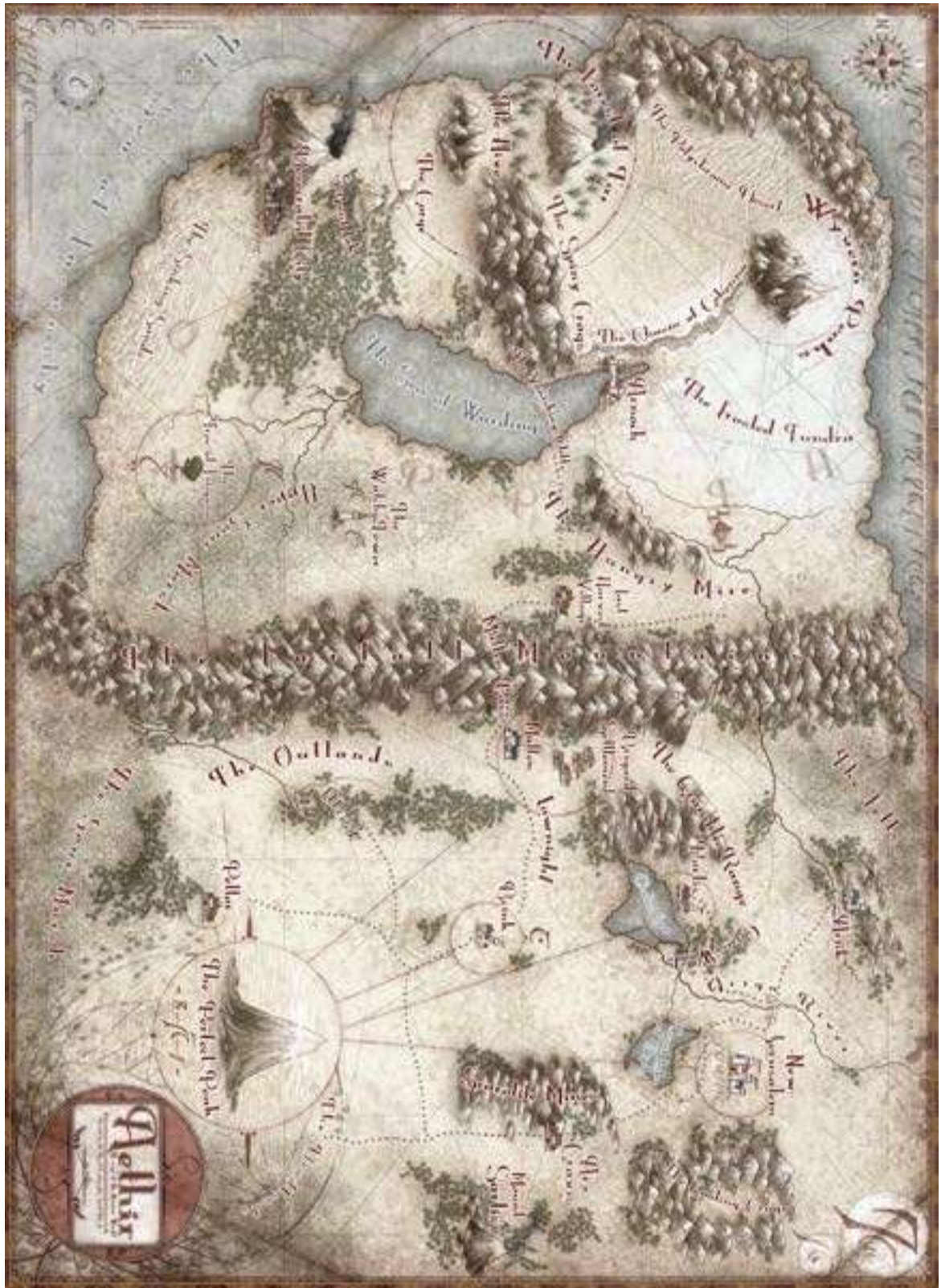
On the orders of a powerful being known as the Archon, Shadrak assassinates the First Senator, Mal Vatès. With the help of the Nameless Dwarf, he flees the city and subsequently aids the dwarf in his quest to free himself from the curse of the black axe that caused him to massacre his own people.

A sorcerer named Bird reveals to Shadrak the truth of who he is: a homunculus from Aethir, spawn of the Demiurgos. As a baby, Shadrak had been threatened with death by the homunculi due to his imperfections: the pink eyes and pale skin of an albino. Bird rescued the infant Shadrak and arranged for him to be taken by planeship to the world of Urddynoor, where he was given into the care of an old Dreamer woman, Kadee.

The Nameless Dwarf is tricked by the Demiurgos, and returns to the ravine city of Arx Gravis to commit even greater atrocities than before, until Shadrak finds a way to stop him.

Shadrak later travels with the Nameless Dwarf to the death world of Thanatos in a desperate attempt to save the dwarf city of Arnoch from the attack of a five-headed dragon. Shadrak is reunited with his dead foster mother, Kadee, mysteriously kept alive on Thanatos. When Kadee sacrifices herself to save the companions, Shadrak is devastated, and bit by bit his world begins to unravel.







## THE WITCH QUEEN'S RING

A job well done had turned into a scut of a day, and Shadrak hadn't seen the last of it. Six of Jankson Brau's thugs lay sprawled in the dirt twenty feet below his ledge on the mesa. If only it had taken just six shots to kill them. One of Shadrak's Ancient-tech flintlocks was clean out of bullets, and the other can't have been far off. He reached behind to reassure himself his old "thundershot" pistol was still tucked in the back of his belt. It didn't hold as many rounds as the *faux* flintlocks, and it wasn't half as powerful, but it had gotten him out of many a tight spot over the years, and he was in one right now. He'd lost sight of the wizard and the last of the thugs. At this point, they could be anywhere.

He pressed his back to the rock wall beneath an overhang. One of the suns chose that moment to pitch into its haphazard descent. It didn't matter how long Shadrak remained on Aethir, he'd never get used to the frenetic sequences of its twin suns, the phases of its three moons. He shielded his eyes against the sun's glare, and when it was safe to open them again he could see nothing but white spots.

A boot scuffed the ledge above him. Shadrak blinked rapidly to clear his vision then raised his flintlock and waited. One heartbeat. Two. Voices from up top, muffled, arguing. A man swore, then a pair of boots dangled over the edge. Shadrak shot one, and blood spurted. The owner screamed. He shot the other, and a man fell, flailing and wailing, till a thud from below shut him the shog up.

"Move and I'll fry you."—The wizard's voice, from behind.

The scut had been a pain in the arse all the way from the Grinning Skull Tavern just outside of Malfen. It was his wards and cantrips that had cost Shadrak so many bullets, and

he had a wand that spewed fireballs that threw up clods of earth and rocky shrapnel when they detonated.

The boots had been bait. Obvious bait. Hindsight was a hundred percent.

Shadrak started to turn, but the wizard said, “Uh uh. As you are. Just reach into your pocket very slowly and remove the ring.”

Brau’s ring. The relic. Supposedly crafted by the Witch Queen of Thogani. The thing gave him the creeps so much, Shadrak would have gladly handed it over, only there was a Stygian in Pellor expecting him to deliver it. Not only was Xultak Setis a formidable sorcerer, he had a reputation for eating those who failed him. And besides which, he paid extremely well.

Shadrak slipped his free hand into the pocket of his jerkin, willing himself to relax, bide his time. He’d no desire to touch the ring again; when he’d stolen it from under Jankson Brau’s nose he’d worn gloves, but the contact had still made his skin crawl.

“Did I fail to mention the tech-weapon?” the wizard said. “What do you call it?”

“Gun,” Shadrak said, slowly withdrawing his hand from his pocket. As he did, he noticed the wizard’s shadow on the ledge. And then he realized: The shadow started in front of Shadrak’s position, and lacked the length of his own. It was an odd thing when you considered his height. Shadrak was a smidgen under three feet tall, the wizard almost six. It could only mean the scut was not just behind, he was above. Given the angle of the shadow, the position of the second sun that cast it, that was impossible... unless

—*Of course!*

The scut could levitate.

“Drop it,” the wizard said. “Now.”

The flintlock clattered as it hit the ledge, and like Shadrak knew it would, it discharged. Thunder boomed, rocks cascaded down from the overhang, the wizard squealed, and Shadrak spun, snatching a razor star from his baldric and flinging it higher than a man was tall.

The wizard's wand went spinning below. The man himself clutched his throat while he gurgled and frothed at the mouth. He was suspended in midair beside the sheer wall at the end of Shadrak's ledge. No mean feat by any stretch of the imagination, but even meaner when you considered the shogger was in his death throes, blood seeping between his fingers.

A bit too mean.

With a frantic wave of his arms, the wizard plummeted to the ground.

And that was that, as far as Shadrak was concerned: an aggravation he could have done without, but when all was said and—

Something tugged at his pocket. On instinct he felt for the ring, but it wasn't there. He swung round, pulling the thundershot from the back of his belt.

Nothing. No one. Just the empty ledge.

But the ring was definitely gone.

He crouched down to peer over the side. Still nothing. Held his breath, listened. A squawk from up high. Vultures circling the bodies on the ground, clustered together in a tidy pile, the wizard on top, robe hitched up exposing his arse. Filthy bastard. What was the world coming to when a man wore nothing to cover his knackers?

Shadrak backed away from the edge, stood, and drew his cloak tight.

He didn't know how he knew, but he knew. The prickling of the hairs on the back of his neck was warning enough. Something was on the ledge with him, and yet when he looked, there was nothing there.

He was prone to jumping at shadows these days. No surprise there, after the life he'd led. But this was no phantom. What if the Witch Queen had sent one of her minions to reclaim—

Shadrak's shadow wavered.

No, not his: another shadow crossing it.

He leveled the thundershot and fired. Someone gasped. The scuff of a boot on stone, the flap and flutter of a cloak...

Shadrak glanced up then down, waited for another sound, but whoever it was, they were good. He rifled through a belt pouch for his Ancient-tech goggles, fitted the strap around his head, adjusted the lenses, and looked again.

At first the landscape was limned in stark green, but with a further adjustment, he began to see smudges of red and orange overlaying his vision, dashing, scampering, one coiled beneath a rock. All living, all hidden from normal sight; but there was nothing that could conceivably have stolen the ring.

He scanned the surrounding area for a minute, then another. Finally, he shook his head, suppressing the urge to swear. Whatever magic concealed the pickpocket was apparently shielding him in other ways, blocking the heat the goggles detected.

He snatched the goggles off and stowed them back in their pouch, all the while letting his eyes rove the ground below, hopping from body to body. Then he saw something and squinted to get a better look. There, weaving between the corpses: footprints in the sand.

He tucked the thundershot back in his belt, re-holstered the flintlock he'd dropped, and lowered himself over the edge.

At the bottom of the mesa, he stooped to inspect the prints. Human, judging by the size. Booted. Light on their feet. He began to follow the trail, sticking to the shade of the rock face, trusting his stealth would be a match for the invisible thief's.

The thief who'd come out of nowhere.

Jankson Brau hadn't shown his entire hand, it seemed. He'd kept an ace up his sleeve.

Or had he?

Shadrak stopped a moment to consider.

The footprints weren't heading back toward the brigand settlements outlying Malfen. If anything, they were going in the opposite direction, skirting the base of the mesa toward Lownight, maybe even Brink. Then again, that was also the way to the Chalice Sea and Portis. But who in their right mind would go to Portis? All they had there was fish. Well, fish and connections...

The twist of Shadrak's guts told him intuition had just happened upon a truth, and an unpalatable one at that. Connections with the guilds of New Llonddyr, and with Shadrak's old guild more than most, the Night Hawks.

He shut his eyes and uttered a swift prayer to his foster mother, Kadee. He'd been doing that a lot lately, since he'd lost her. He never heard her answer, but she was at work somewhere, because he kept growing softer, less vicious; and it wasn't through choice.

When he opened his eyes, nothing had changed. Nothing ever did. It was still the same pile of shit he was stuck in: a year's worth of pay taken from right under his nose, and a Stygian sorcerer likely to turn him into a turnip for shogging up.

But maybe something had changed, albeit something subtle. His sense of certainty, for one thing. His gut was right, no doubt about it, and not on account of anything superstitious. It was merely his mind drawing inferences before he'd had chance to sift through all the evidence.

He knew with unshakeable certainty where the thief was from, and where he was heading. Assuming, of course, it was a he.

New Llonddyr.

The last place on Aethir Shadrak wanted to return to.

His scut of a day was set to grow a whole lot scuttier. Not only was Aethir's major city the site of old wounds, old losses, but it was the place he'd assassinated the First Senator, Mal Vatès.

And ever since, the Senate had wanted him hanged.

## AN INVISIBLE THIEF

The thief wasn't just invisible, he was crafty with it. After the initial flight from the mesa, he'd made a good show of covering his tracks, or at least keeping to firmer ground when he could, so as not to leave any impressions.

Shadrak lost the trail more than he'd care to admit, but as he came upon the sparkling waters of the Chalice Sea, the ground grew soft and sandy, and the footprints were the kind a blind man could follow.

The only surprise was, the tracks went nowhere near the jetties and the boats that ferried people over to Portis. The scut had looped around the inland sea, bypassing the fishing town, rather than making a stopover. Either he had the stamina of a dwarf, or he was too scared to stop and rest. And if the latter, that made him wise as well as canny. He ought to be scared, with what Shadrak was planning on doing to him.

Still, it was a blessing, in one way. The stink of fish was rank, even from this side of the water, and the chances of running into the past were just as strong in Portis as they were in New Londdyr. Only, in Portis Shadrak ran the risk of being knifed in the back by some goon who thought he'd been ripped off, or by an ex-Night Hawk who blamed him for abandoning the guild and leaving a shogwit like Buck Fargin in charge. He couldn't blame them for that. That dumb twat Fargin was the beginning of the end for the unified guilds. But there'd been no choice. Sometimes events moved too quickly, took on a life of their own. Some things just refused to be controlled. Apparently, Buck Fargin hadn't made it through the last guild war. It would have been a miracle if he had. Most likely scenario: one of his own had garroted him while he was taking a piss.



Shadrak took the opportunity to wolf down some jerky, and then he was back on the trail, assuming, when there were no signs, that the thief would take the shortest route to New Londdyr.

At the first sight of Raphoe, largest of the moons, Shadrak made camp a stone's throw from the road to Brink. He busied himself with setting a fire, adding deadfall to the kindling from his tinderbox. He'd ceased caring if it gave his position away; he doubted the thief would be looking back.

Truth be told, he'd ceased caring about the Witch Queen's ring, too, but he knew that was on account of the tiredness that had set in from hours on the road. Come morning, he'd be fired up and ready to take back what was his—until he brought it to Pellor and sold it for a tidy profit. Who was he to question what a Stygian wanted with a dubious artifact crafted by the Witch Queen? A mummified hag, so they said. The last ruler of Thogani, the Desecrated City, somewhere within the nightmare realm of Qlippoth.

Shadrak shuddered and reached into one of his belt pouches for a weedstick he'd laced with *somnificus*. He'd not smoked before losing Kadee, and he'd scorned anyone who chewed or puffed on the drug. But Kadee had used it till she was black-eyed and vacant, like the rest of her kind, the Barraiya people back home on Urddynoor. Just another part of her he'd inherited, he guessed.

With the fire keeping off the bite of the night air, he sat back against the trunk of a spindly tree and took a long draw on the weedstick, letting the *somnificus* muddy his thoughts then slowly turn them to mist.

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Next morning Shadrak was up before dawn, with only Ennoi, smallest of the moons, still in attendance. Stars were scattered in unobscured constellations, some of them winking, all of them sharp and cut clear as diamonds. It was going to be a cloudless day, which meant it would be stifling when the suns came up.

His cloak was damp with dew and something else that stank like the Abyss. The rustle of leaves in the treetop above where he'd slept told him it was squirrel piss. Sure enough, after he waited a while, one of the critters showed its twitchy little face, and Shadrak took a pop at it with a flintlock. It hit the ground, a bloody splatter where its head had been.

He skinned the squirrel and baked it on the embers of the fire. When he'd washed it down with a slug of water from his costrel, he kicked dirt over the charred wood and ashes, then set back out on the trail.

An hour later he was standing over the remains of another campfire. A flaccid wineskin lay discarded on the ground, and the air was redolent with dung. A quick survey showed him someone had done their business in too much of a hurry to bury it. The briefest of stopovers, then, but the thief was growing careless. He must have assumed Shadrak had given up the chase, but he was still keeping up a good pace.

Presumably there was a buyer waiting impatiently in New Londdyr, maybe the promise of a bonus if the ring was delivered in a timely fashion. Either that, or the thief was as uncomfortable around the Witch Queen's handiwork as Shadrak was, and couldn't wait to be shot of it.

Of course, a third possibility was that the thief wanted it for himself, that he was some crazed sorcerer who'd caught a whiff of the precious relic when it dropped into the hands of Jankson Brau. Fool if he was. Wizard or no wizard, he didn't want to be messing with anything out of Thogani. If the Witch Queen left things lying around, it was as bait. Shadrak

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