



Drawn Blades (A Fallen Blade Novel Book 5)

By Kelly McCullough

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In the days before the fall of his goddess, only one other rivaled Aral's skills, Siri the Mythkiller—a woman who ruthlessly earned the title First Blade. As a friend, Aral owes her his loyalty. As a former lover, he owes her part of his heart. As a Blade, he owes her anything she asks, including his life.

When Siri seeks Aral's aid, he knows he must go. But as they journey towards the ancient Sylvani Empire, only time will reveal whether Aral can save the former First Blade, or if he will simply fall with her...

From the Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Fallen Blade novels:

“A fascinating world.”—Fresh Fiction

“The Blade novels are absolutely fabulous.”—Night Owl Reviews

“Kelly McCullough’s writing style is indefinable, his imagination is creative and unique, and his plot execution is simply exquisite!”—Huntress Book Reviews

“Aral the jack, formerly the noble Aral Kingslayer, is the best kind of hero: damaged, cynical, and despondent, yet needing only the right cause to rise from his own ashes.”—Alex Bledsoe, author of *The Hum and the Shiver*

About the Author

Kelly McCullough is the author of the WebMage series and the Fallen Blade series.

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“Aral the jack, formerly the noble Aral Kingslayer, is the best kind of hero: damaged, cynical, and despondent, yet needing only the right cause to rise from his own ashes.”

—Alex Bledsoe, author of *He Drank, and Saw the Spider*

Acknowledgments

1

Smoke without fire.

That’s how it began. With swirling darkness on a cold stone hearth. Or, in a bar, with a beautiful woman, who had a problem. It all depends on how you look at it.

I had come back to Tien after months away. Not for me, but for Faran, my apprentice. She needed help I couldn’t give her—delicate and difficult magical healing—so I had brought her to a friend. Treatment was slow and painful for Faran, but it seemed to be working. Her sight had fully returned and the headaches were much better. So I’d decided I could leave her alone for an evening and visit old haunts.

Mistake? It all depends on how you feel about powerful magical sendings and other people’s problems.

The Gryphon’s Head was a dive bar of the worst sort, full of criminals and other shady types. It was also coming home. I had spent six years living in a tiny room over the stables there. I’d made my money as a

shadow jack in those days—the underworld’s all-purpose freelancer. It was a very long fall from the days when they’d first called me Aral Kingslayer and the mighty had feared the coming of my shadow. Well, and lately, they had begun to call me that again, but that’s another story entirely.

You see, I’m an assassin, or was once—one of the best in the world—and my shadow lives. His name is Triss. He is my familiar, a thing of elemental darkness and magic . . . which brings me back to the smoke.

Triss saw it first, and whispered into my mind, *Aral, ware the hearth!*

I turned in my chair, and saw the first twisting coils of smoke begin to rise from the bare stones. I wasn’t the only one. A pair of Cobble-Runners—one of the local gangs—who were sitting closer, noticed it about then, too. They leaped out of their chairs and backed away from the hearth, shooting the occasional glance my way as the smoke built slowly.

They were only the first. Within a few moments the whole bar was shifting attention between whatever was building on the hearth and me. The bar’s owner, Jerik, came over as the ball reached the size of a kneeling human.

“Aral?” he called. “What have you brought into my bar this time?”

I wanted to tell him I hadn’t brought anything, but honesty forbade me. I didn’t know what the thing on the hearth was, or where it had come from, but the chances were good that it was there for me. My life has taught me to doubt coincidence, and the odds that a piece of magic like nothing I’d ever seen before would appear in the Gryphon’s hearth by chance on the same day that I finally returned after so long away . . . Well, let’s just say that I wouldn’t take that bet, and leave it there.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I . . .” I trailed off as the thing stood up.

I say “thing” where I should call it a woman, because that’s what it had become. A woman of smoke. Tall and slender and very familiar. She wore the loose pants and shirt of the order I had once belonged to, and the swirling loops of smoke perfectly mirrored the dyed patterns of my own grays.

The hood of her cowl was drawn up to hide her face, and the smoke blurred what features I could see within, but the shape of her body and the way that she moved were instantly recognizable, even in smoky avatar—which form made her slow and deliberate as though she were underwater or might come apart at any moment.

Siri, the Mythkiller, First Blade of Namara. I recognized her at a level below thinking and beyond question. This was Siri, my sister in the service of Justice, my better in the arts of magic and the assassin, and perhaps the only person in the world who could ask for my life and expect me to give it into her care without thought or question. Both duty and honor demanded no less. I met her halfway to the hearth.

“Siri?”

The smoke swirled under her cowl, and a twist of white might have been a smile, but the figure spoke no words. After a long moment, she nodded. It was a slow movement—as they all had been—and it feathered the edges of her cowl.

“What do you need?” I asked.

Triss whispered into my mind. *Careful, Aral. You can’t be sure it’s really her.*

But I was. *No. This is her. I'm certain of it.*

The figure extended its left hand, palm up. With the other it gestured me to touch the extended hand with my own. When flesh met smoke I felt a faint electrical tingle, like distant magelightning, but no other sensation of contact.

Her right hand came forward and began a slow but intricate dance of gesture over our joined palms. I almost jerked away then, as I recognized the motions a priest would make at a handfasting, but forced myself to stillness. No matter how strange the manifestation, this was something of Siri. I could feel it in my soul, and I owed her whatever she asked of me.

When she was done, that white swirl of a smile flashed within her cowl once more. Then she fell apart, splitting into a hundred wisps on the breeze.

“What was that all about?” asked Jerik.

“I don't know,” I answered. “But I think I'd better find out.”

Aral, Triss spoke into my mind, she left you a ring.

Looking down, I saw that he was right. There, wrapped around my wedding finger, was a ring of smoke. It was only as I examined the ring that I realized none of what I had just seen bore any light of magic, and the only enchantments that I knew of that acted that way were god-magic. . . .

* * *

“**It's** marvelous. I've never encountered anything like it.” Harad moved careful fingers this way and that as though he were trying to twist my new ring. “It doesn't *feel* like god-magic, but it certainly wasn't made by any normal mortal sort of spell. I have no idea what it is.”

I gave the ancient librarian a hard look. “You don't have to sound so happy about it.”

“I'm six hundred years old, Aral, and a master sorcerer for five hundred and fifty of those years. I have been the chancellor of one of the great Magelands universities and studied more varieties of magic than most spellwrights are even aware of. Finding something wholly new is a treasure beyond price.” He paused and rubbed his chin. “Though, I will be very sorry if it devours your soul before I have time to get it sorted out. . . .”

My shadow twisted itself into the silhouette of a small and rather worried-looking dragon. Triss rose up off the floor so that he could sniff at the smoke ring. “Don't worry,” the Shade told me. “If it tries anything like that I'll bite your finger off before it gets the chance.”

“Um . . . thanks, Triss.” I turned back Harad. “Is that really likely?”

“It was a small joke on my part, nothing more.” Harad frowned. “Though it seems to have gone wide of the mark. You didn't look nearly as alarmed by that prospect as I had hoped you might, but then, it's hard to read you. You do grim and blank as well as any man I know.”

I shrugged. “It's not something I'm going to dance about, but my soul's pretty badly mortgaged already. Between my failures since the death of my goddess and the need for efik chewing a hole in the back of my mind, there's not much left for anything else to carve off a piece.”

Triss winced—because he worried—but he didn't say anything.

“The cravings haven't eased in the months since the Kitsune first forced you to eat those few beans, then?” It was the question of a healer who considered me one of his patients. “I had hoped it would pass, but with the death of Namara you seem to have lost your immunity to the darker side of the drug.”

That immunity wasn't all I'd lost when the goddess of Justice was murdered. The list was long and brutal. Most of my magical protections. My home. My family. My friends. My reason for living. No, my efik problem didn't even make the top five, however much harder it might make my life.

Again, I shrugged. “I have good days and bad, just like with the booze, though efik hunger is sharper, and the hooks in my soul are deeper. But what can you expect? I tried it first shortly after I entered the temple, though I didn't really acquire the habit till my teens. But I never touched so much as a drop of alcohol until after my goddess was murdered.”

“Horrible stuff, whiskey.” A girl's voice—drifting down from the shadows atop a nearby set of bookshelves.

“Ah, Faran,” I said to my apprentice. “I was wondering when you were going to let us know you were there.”

She released the shadow that enshrouded her as she dropped silently to the floor. She landed a few yards beyond Harad, and I revised my earlier “girl” to “young woman” when I met her gaze. At eighteen or thereabouts, I had to admit that she'd grown up a lot in the last year. The cloud of living darkness that had concealed her from view on the shelves now flowed down to the floor, becoming the shadow of a phoenix.

My eyes immediately went to the scar that ran down from her forehead across her left eyelid and onto her cheek. It looked better than it had before her sessions with Harad, but I still winced whenever I saw it. She'd picked it up guarding my back, which made it my fault.

“You knew I was there?” She flicked her dark hair angrily back over her shoulder. “How? My form was perfect, and I know you didn't cross my shadow trail. What gave me away?”

“Your nature,” I replied. “I know you, and I know you wouldn't have missed me coming in to consult with Harad. You didn't greet us when we entered. That means you decided to make a game of stalking us.” I gestured around the large open reading area at the end of the narrow stacks. “There's only one place in this entire room where you could both listen *and* be sure Triss wouldn't sniff out Ssithra. That's atop the shelves. Therefore . . .”

“Fair point.” Faran smiled and bowed to acknowledge the hit. “Now, let me see what the fuss is about.” She reached out to touch the smoke ring on my wedding finger, then abruptly snatched her hand back. “Hey, it bit me!”

Ssithra flapped shadow wings and lifted off the floor, putting herself between Faran and my ring.

“It bit you?” Harad asked brightly. “Let me see.”

Now it was Faran's turn to give the librarian a hard look as he pulled her hand toward him. “The thing *bites* me, and you act like someone gave you a damned Winter-Round present?”

“Hush, child. I'm working. Hmm, no blood . . .” Harad reached through a hole in the air with his free hand and pulled an emerald quizzing glass from the pocket dimension where he kept most of his more delicate tools. He held the lens above Faran's injured finger. “*Very* interesting.”

I looked over his shoulder. The crystalline lens showed four tiny black marks on Faran's fingertip—marks invisible both to magesight and my mortal eyes. But only for a few heartbeats. Then the spots wisped up like smoke and blew away.

"What was that?" asked Triss.

"It really did bite her." Harad dropped the emerald back through the hole in the air and it vanished. "Though, what it drew wasn't blood."

"I told you so," said Faran.

"Why would it do that?" I asked. "And, how?"

A huge grin spread across Harad's face. "I have *no* idea." Then he paused and looked thoughtful. "I take that back. I have no idea about the how, but I think I can make an educated guess about the why."

"Which is?" Faran demanded.

"Smoke or no, it's a wedding ring. That's a very specific and ancient sort of magic. My assumption would be that it saw you as a potential rival for Aral's affections."

"I . . . Wait, it what?" Faran blinked several times, blushed, then shook her head. "That's idiotic!"

Harad grinned. "It quite likely is, but I don't think the ring thinks so."

"Stupid ring," grumbled Faran. Then her expression shifted suddenly from annoyance to something like shock. "Hold it. If it's a wedding ring, does that mean that Aral and Siri are married now, for real and legally?"

"I don't know about legally," said Harad. "But magically and symbolically, yes. That's a sort of marriage that's deeper and more profound than mere laws, and *far* less disseverable."

Faran rounded on *me* now. "Aral, did you know that was going to happen when the smoke figure offered you that ring?"

I shrugged. "Siri didn't offer me the ring precisely, but she did make it pretty clear she wanted my participation in something like a formal handfasting, and marriage is where these things typically lead, ring and all. Given that we had consummated our relationship in the traditional way long ago, I probably should have realized the implications."

"And you're all right with that?" she demanded.

"Of course. If Siri asked me for my life, I would give it to her. Why would I refuse to marry her if that's what she needs of me?"

"You haven't seen or heard from Siri in eight years!" Faran's voice started angry and got angrier. "Then a smoke figure that may or may not even be her shows up, asks you to get hitched, and you just say 'yes' like it's nothing? You don't even know what sort of person she is now, Aral. That's insane!" She glanced at Harad as though seeking his support, but the old librarian had an even better blank expression than I do.

"Perhaps it is," I replied. "Perhaps Siri *has* become a monster in the years since I last saw her. I can't imagine it, but I couldn't imagine Master Kelos betraying the order and our goddess either. None of that

changes what Siri once was and the duty I owe her.”

“How can it not?” demanded Faran.

“Because what I owe Siri isn’t about her. It’s about me, and my duty here is perfectly clear.” I paused for a long moment, trying to think of how best to explain the thing properly. Faran was my apprentice and if that was going to mean anything I had to let her see my thinking. “I don’t have much of my old soul left, but what there is, is bound to the service of Namara, whether that takes the shape of the goddess herself, her ideal of justice, or simply the word of her First Blade. I *can’t* turn Siri down if I want to remain true to what little remains of Aral the Blade.”

Faran glared at my shadow now. “Triss, don’t you have anything to say about this?”

The little dragon flipped his wings back and forth noncommittally. “I am concerned about the manner of the thing. But what we have heard from those who *did* betray the goddess suggests that even Kelos believed Siri was incorruptible. It’s one of the chief reasons why he sent both Aral and Siri away when the temple was about to fall.”

Ah Kelos, my mentor and master—two-hundred-year-old lord of assassins, and the father I never had. The Deathwalker. He was perhaps the greatest Blade who ever lived, and, without any doubt, the greatest traitor to our order. His actions had materially contributed to the death of our goddess. I knew that he deeply regretted her murder, but I also knew that he would do the same again in the same circumstances if he believed it would achieve his goals. He was brutal and ruthless, and yet he had spared both Siri and me as much because he loved us as because he wanted to preserve our talents. I could not hate him as I did, did I not love him, too.

Ssithra spoke for the first time, breaking my reverie. “Siri is the Mythkiller, and one of the greats of our order. I would marry her if she asked me. Or Kyrissa, her Shade, for that matter. I think that if you had completed your training you would do the same.”

Faran scowled. “I . . . You . . . I can’t even . . . Aral, this is one of the stupider things I’ve seen you do. And I’ve seen you pull some really dumb moves. You *married* someone you haven’t seen in years simply because she asked you to. No. Because a . . . a fucking smoke *effigy* of her asked you to. Do you have any idea of the magical implications of this?”

I shook my head. “No.”

Faran threw her hands into the air and snarled.

“Faran,” I said, trying one last time, “Siri is my sister in the order, my master in the arts of the Blade, my friend, and my lover. My honor is her honor, and what she asks it is my duty to give.”

“Augh!” Ssithra suddenly puffed into a black cloud, rolling forward to envelop Faran in impenetrable darkness.

It was always a startling transformation, even for one who had performed it as often as eating. One moment, Faran was there with Ssithra at her side, the next she became a sort of hole in the center of my vision. A simple blot of shadow would have been easy to pick out against the lights and sights of the library, but some magic of the Shades made the task infinitely harder, more a place you couldn’t see than a patch of darkness.

Even trained eyes had trouble focusing on an enshrouded Blade. You had to learn to look for what you

couldn't see, and it was surprisingly difficult. That shroud of shadow was the most powerful tool possessed by those of us who had once been Justice's hidden weapons—Namara's Blades. I lost track of Faran and Ssithra within moments as they moved rapidly away, slipping into one of the aisles between shelves.

"She seems angrier than she ought," I said. "Any idea why?"

Triss looked over his shoulder at me and contracted briefly in the loose Shade equivalent of an embarrassed shrug. "No idea. Harad?"

"I wouldn't care to venture a guess," he replied.

That wasn't a "no," but years of association had taught me better than to call him on it. Harad would share what he wanted when he wanted, and nothing anyone could do would change that. Instead, I raised my beringed hand between us. "Any further thoughts on what to do about this thing?"

He nodded. "Shang informs me that he would like to have a look at it through his own eyes since it's new to him as well."

I blinked at that. Triss assumes the form of a dragon. Shanglun *is* a dragon, and not a petty dragon either. Shang is a river dragon, one of the greatest of the noble breeds, a power of the world, and Harad's familiar—though I didn't learn that last until after I'd known the librarian for more than a decade.

While such bondings aren't completely unheard of, they're so rare that you had a better chance of winning ten straight rounds of lin-hua against Ping Slickfingers than of actually meeting such a pair. He was also the reason for Harad's great age, as the lifespan of any familiar-bonded pair will always conform to the longer of the two partners, and dragons live as long as they wish.

Normally, Shang prefers to slumber in his tank below the library and, dreaming, look out through Harad's eyes. That he was interested in seeing Siri's smoke ring through his own was both an honor and more than a little alarming. It drove home the unique nature of my new trinket in a way that Harad's childlike delight simply couldn't. This was a *dragon* and he wanted to see my ring because he'd never seen anything like it before.

Oh. My.

I gestured toward Harad's apartments and the secret stair that led down to the library's equally secret underwater entrance. "By all means, let's go show it to him."

The reservoirlike tank that Shang used as a bed lay in a deep, barrel-vaulted chamber under the river side of the building. The Ismere Library held the city of Tien's largest private collection of books, including many volumes that had been officially banned by the government at one time or another. Protecting that collection from forces both official and un- was one of the chief reasons the library had such a powerful sorcerer as its chief. It had been founded four hundred years earlier by a Kadeshi merchant-adventurer—see also smuggler and pirate—and the underwater tunnel that connected the tank to the river was probably a legacy of the founder's original line of work.

When we entered the vault, Harad waved his hands. In response, the blue and green magelights that picked out Zhani glyphs on various surfaces slowly brightened. In combination with the flickering reflections from the pool and the deep green moss that covered many of the stones, the magelight produced an illusion that the whole room lay deep under tropical waters.

As we crossed to the reservoir, a column of water lifted up out of the tank. It rose and twisted, extruding bumps and whiskers that slowly formed themselves into the features of a large dragon. As the face took on shape and character it darkened in whorls and swirls, like a fine tea when you first stir it. Its scales shaded in from the lightest hint of jade at the center to an oversteeped seaweed green along the edges.

The change rolled back from a head longer than my own five feet and eleven, coloring in his thick, ropy neck and the many looping coils of his snakelike body. Shang was big, perhaps a hundred feet from nose to tail, though he was dwarfed by Tien Lun, the guardian of the city's bay. He smiled at Harad when he bent down to touch his nose to the old man's forehead—a disconcerting expression that exposed teeth longer than my forearm.

Once he had greeted his partner, he turned my way. Dark green eyes the size of an extended hand fixed on me and he spoke in a deep, watery mindvoice. *Hello, Aral, what trouble have you found for yourself this time?*

I responded in kind, sending my thoughts along the same channel I used to communicate with Triss. *I don't find trouble. It finds me.* I held up my beringed hand. *This came to me. I didn't seek it out. Besides, who's to say that it's trouble.*

Shang laughed into my mind. *It's a wedding ring. They exist for trouble. I have watched your people for two thousand years, and yet this magic is a new thing for me. When such takes up residence on your hand, you can bet that trouble will follow. Beyond that, I would have thought your experiences with the Kothmerk and the Signet of Heaven would have taught you to avoid such pretty baubles.*

He's got a point, Triss noted, his mindvoice wry. *Rings have not been good luck for us.*

I couldn't argue that, but there was something about Shang's tone that made me think he was teasing me as much as advising me. It's hard to tell the difference with dragons.

I bow to your wisdom, venerable one. Which I did, giving him the full formal court version. *But I'm afraid that the lady made me an offer I simply couldn't refuse.*

Such is the way of women, said the dragon. *Now, let me examine this fancy of yours.* He bent lower still and twisted his head to the side so that he could bring one great eye within inches of the smoke ring.

Hmm. He pivoted and looked at it with his other eye. Then he touched it with one of his long whiskers.

Very interesting. Hold it out and let me smell it. My entire hand slid into a nostril big enough to engulf my head, though I could still see it through his translucent flesh. *One last test.*

He opened his mouth and a tongue that was bigger around than my waist and long enough for two of me to lie end to end on shot forward. Before I could think to protest, Shang licked me from toes to top—the two forks of his tongue wrapping around me like a lover's arms. It was a profoundly weird sensation, as the dragon's substance split the difference between animate-water and mortal flesh.

I would like to see this Siri of yours now, said the dragon.

That's a lovely idea, I agreed, somewhat sarcastically. *Any thoughts on how to manage it?*

He nodded. *First, you will need to make a fire. . . .*

"Faran," I said aloud. "Would you be so kind as to fetch some wood from Harad's apartments? I believe

there's a basket of it beside the fireplace."

A snort issued from an unusually dark shadow at the base of the vault by the door. "Why me?"

"Because fetching and carrying is the reason they invented apprentices." I smiled. "Aren't you going to ask how I knew you were there this time?"

"No. You know the same way you did earlier, by knowing me. I may not always like the lessons you give me, but I do learn. And, yes, I'm off to fetch that wood now."

Twenty minutes later we had a nice little fire going beside the pool. "Now what?" I asked.

We wait for it to burn away to nothing. Fire devours its prey entire. Smoke is the ghost of the consumed—shadow and flame. The sacrifice must wholly burn away before the true element can arise.

"That's going to take hours," grumbled Faran, who had dropped her shroud once again—though her mood seemed only marginally improved.

"It needn't." Harad stepped forward, put his hands out over the fire as though he were warming them, and spoke a single word in the language of ancient Kadesh.

A thread of spell-light—invisible to the normal eye—jumped from Harad's hands to a point between Shang's eyes. The dragon opened his mouth, and a great flood of spell-light burst forth, engulfing Harad in an aura of green and blue. As the light flowed down Harad's body to his hands it changed color, becoming a scarlet torrent that shot from his fingers to the flames below.

It all happened in the pause between two heartbeats, and the very next instant the fire roared and flared like a burning building collapsing. There was a brief burst of heat almost too intense to bear. Then the fire was gone, leaving behind ashes and a thick curl of smoke.

Shang leaned forward, touching the smoke with the tip of his long tongue. "Come!" he said, speaking aloud in a voice like the Grand Rapids below Kao-li.

The smoke curl twisted back on itself, forming the rough outline of a human figure. It looped back and back again, until the whirls and swirls of smoke took on the character of the woman I had so recently married.

"Siri?" I said.

The figure nodded, but made no further answer.

Shang touched the figure with his tongue again. "I lend you my voice, that you might speak."

The smoke woman bowed to the dragon and spoke in the rippling tones of a lively brook, "Thank you, great heart, you have saved me hours of pantomime." Then she turned to me. "Hello, Aral. I need you to come to the Sylvani Empire. It's a matter of souls and buried gods and unfinished business."

That's the story of the Sylvani Empire. Not to mention the Temple of Namara, but that's another tale entirely. For the moment, let me stick with the Sylvain. We of the eleven kingdoms aren't the first children of the gods. That "honor" belongs to the four kindreds of the Others: the Durkoth, the Vesh'An, the Asavi, and the Sylvani—who were all once one people but are no more.

I will relate a part of that tale now, because it is important to all that comes after, and I will tell it in the manner it was told to me by Master Kelos:

"It is said the gods created the Others because they wanted a people to share the wonders of the world they had newly formed. That the first Others looked and acted much as the Sylvani do now. That they were arrogant, and sometimes cruel, and that this drove a wedge between them and the gods, and that the gods were forced to bind their magics and confine them to the lands of the Sylvain. That the Vesh'An and the Durkoth refused the bargain of the gods and lost their magic because of it. Many things are said by the priests who serve the Son of Heaven first, themselves second, and their gods next before all others.

"But here in the Temple of Namara, Goddess of Justice and champion of those who cannot champion themselves, a different tale is told. The gods created the Others without limits on their magics because they wanted powerful servants and they were arrogant enough to believe that none could ever challenge them. But all too soon some among the Others began to rival their masters, and this the gods could not abide. So there was a war between the gods and their first children, and much that was wonderful in the world was unmade.

"The old gods were the more powerful and they defeated the Others, but only at great cost. Many gods died in the war, including the first Sovereign Emperor of Heaven. All of the great ones among the Others were thrown down, too, but some had grown too powerful for even the gods to destroy without dying themselves. These mightiest of the Others were bound into the earth of the Sylvain in a state halfway between life and death. The rest of the Others were bound as well, tying their magics to their buried might.

"The Sylvani and the Asavi accepted this confinement and limited themselves to lesser magics and the lands of the old empire. The Durkoth and the Vesh'An refused, forsaking magic for the deep places of earth and ocean that they loved more than power. The bound ones . . . they do not sleep easy or accept their fate. They fight against the injustice of the gods and ever they strive to rise from their graves to challenge Heaven once again.

"Namara never forgave the other gods for what they did to the Others, but neither did she make an effort to free the fallen. For they had become horrors in their own right, terrible and mighty, desiring only to renew their war with Heaven. And they would tear the world apart to wreak vengeance. In these days they are known as the buried gods, and now and again one will rip free of the earth and seek to regain the power they once held."

It was in confronting one such risen god that Siri came to be called the Mythkiller. That was the mission that made her a legend and me second among the Blades of the day. The fight more than half killed her and it left her with many scars and a lifetime of nightmares.

That's why I had been so surprised when I first learned she had forsworn the lands of man and gone south to the Sylvani Empire after Namara was slain. It seemed a . . . strange choice. One that seemed stranger still if she had become involved with the buried gods once again. There was nothing in the world I wanted to do more than stay out of the affairs of the gods, dead or otherwise. But if Siri told me that she needed me to do so, I would make war on Heaven itself.

"How soon do you need me?" I asked the figure of smoke.

“As soon as you can get here by land.” This time she spoke with the deeper tones of a river running slow and wide.

“A ship would be faster,” I said.

Harad leaned forward. “And there are spells that could send you as far as the Wall of the Sylvain faster still.”

“No, it must be by land or the connection will fail.” The figure shook her head—a quicker movement than any she had made yet. It blurred her features as the air currents pulled at the smoke. “The logic of smoke requires it.”

“The logic of smoke?” Faran lifted an eyebrow. “How so?”

“I don’t have time to explain,” said Siri. “Already I can feel the ghost of the fire failing. The magic involved is . . . complex. Suffice to say that the ring requires certain conditions to be met if it’s to work properly.”

Harad cleared his throat. “What, exactly, will it do if it works properly?”

“More importantly,” said Faran, “what happens if it doesn’t?” She gave me a hard look. “I *really* don’t like this.”

Ssithra flipped her wings and rose into the air, agitation showing in the ruffling of shadow feathers and the tension in her neck. “Child, for once in your life, respect your elders. This is the Mythkiller you’re talking to and she has a need for haste.”

“Phoenix,” said Siri. “That means Ssithra, and you must be Faran.” She turned eyes of smoke on the younger woman. “You were a clever girl, and very promising. I’m glad you escaped the fall. Please, trust me that this is necessary.”

Faran nodded reluctantly and bowed her head, stepping back.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“South of Tavan, near . . .” Her voice fell away to nothing. And then, with a faint puff, the smoke form collapsed in on itself and Siri was gone.

“Next time,” I said to Faran as gently as frustration would allow, “please save the arguments until *after* the important questions are all asked and answered.”

She looked down at her feet, but nodded anyway.

“When do we leave?” asked Triss.

I thought about it for a moment. “We’ll have to stop at the house and the fallback at the abandoned warehouse both to collect all the supplies we’ll need for traveling before we hit the western road. That’ll take some time. We really ought to leave here within a quarter of an hour if we want to get clear of the city yet tonight.”

“I’m coming with you,” said Faran.

I was not feeling in charity with her, and I immediately shook my head. “No, you’re not. You have to complete your healing here, with Harad.”

“Look,” said Faran, “we can have this argument, and you might even win. But if you do, I’ll only sneak out and follow you like I did the last time, and the result will be the same as if you’d just agreed in the first place. Besides, Harad says that I’m at a stopping point in his treatment anyway, so the timing is perfect.”

I looked at Harad.

He spread his hands noncommittally. “What I said was that we needed to take a break from your sessions so that you could rest and see how the healing was working. A two-thousand-mile speed run across the eastern edge of the eleven kingdoms isn’t exactly what I had in mind. . . .”

Faran looked stubborn. “It’ll be *much* more restful for me than staying here would be. I’d fret myself into a mess worrying about all the trouble Aral will get himself into if he doesn’t have anyone to watch his back.”

“Hey!” Triss flicked his wings grumpily.

“You know what I mean, Triss,” said Faran. “Given the sort of trouble a buried god is likely to pose, can you honestly say that you won’t need all the help you can get?”

“There is that,” Triss agreed reluctantly. “But I’m not taking you anywhere unless Ssithra and Shang both agree.”

Ssithra contracted briefly in a shrug. “I gave up arguing with her when she gets this tone in her voice years ago. But you’re right. If Shang doesn’t think it’s a good idea, we’re not going.”

At that point, all eyes turned to the river dragon. While Harad might be the one formally in charge of Faran’s treatment, it was Shang who was ultimately responsible for her progress. The curative powers of the great water dragons were without peer—most of the healing springs of legend had drawn their magic from a resident dragon.

Shang slid his huge head down and forward till he was inches from Faran. Then, much more gently than he had done with me, he extended the tips of his tongue to touch either side of Faran’s forehead. He stayed like that, perfectly still for several minutes before finally drawing back and canting his head to one side so that he could look deep into her eyes with one of his own.

“I know your vision is much improved, though it will never be perfect again. But tell me true, child, how are your headaches?”

“Bad,” Faran said in a small voice. “But not nearly so frequent as they were, and never so awful that I think about killing myself anymore.”

The dragon sighed, then nodded. “If you do this thing, I do not believe that you will backslide. But neither will you get better. It is true that you need a time away from my active care to set what we have done so far. But if you spend the time moving about rather than resting, what might have taken a few weeks will take some months at the least, and I won’t be there to soothe the pain for you.”

Faran winced. “I know, but I won’t be resting if I don’t go with Aral either. I’ll be stuck here alone with Ssithra and going mad with worry, just like I did when he went to face the Son of Heaven alone. He’s too gentle, and that’s going to get him killed one of these days.”

Shang turned his other eye on me now. “The gentle assassin—now, there’s an interesting turn of thought. What do you think of that, Aral?”

There was something about the dragon's tone that didn't brook dissembling. "Faran's right that I prefer not to kill anyone I don't have to," I replied. "But I am not so gentle as I was when last Faran and I went a-hunting together. My definition of who needs killing has . . . widened a bit since our visit to the Magelands last year."

"Really?" Faran looked doubtful—she'd been all of nine when the fall of the temple had cast her out into the world alone. It had hardened her in ways I didn't think were entirely healthy. She killed with a cheerful remorselessness that didn't suit one who should have grown up to become a champion of Justice.

But Triss nodded. "He's coming around nicely, actually." Like most Shades, Triss had never shied from killing anyone that he thought needed killing, and he had often chided me for letting loose ends keep breathing.

"What changed?" asked Faran.

"I remembered what I am," I said. "When I was younger, I gave my conscience into the hands of Namara, and I killed who she told me to kill, knowing that I served justice as well as Justice. I was content with that. Then Namara died. And, for a very long time, I was lost. But I finally realized that the death of Justice the goddess didn't free me from my obligation to do justice. There are many monsters in this world, and for some the only justice is death. It's what I was born for and trained for, and ultimately death is what I am."

"Death," said Faran, and I nodded. "That's a little dark for you, but I think I like it." She smiled. "If I take the house and you hit the fallback we can save an hour. Meet at the bridge where the Great West Road crosses the Zien?"

"Done."

* * *

Pick up my gear and head out. A simple task, but important. Many of the tools of my trade are things that you have to make for yourself. Cornerbrights, drum-ringers, opium-and-efik-packed eggs for knocking out watchdogs, the blanks for making wardblacks . . . The list is endless. Others are hard to come by or expensive, like eyespys, good silk rope, spare Blade grays, etc. And, while things like bedrolls and silk tents can be picked up at most of the larger markets, it's infinitely quicker and easier if you already own such things to collect them from storage.

Which is why I had come back to the long-forgotten warehouse that was my main fallback at the moment. At one point, the stone and timber building had probably fronted one of the many narrow lanes that spurred off the nearby canal road. But somewhere along the line someone had simply walled off the ends of the alley to make a new building, orphaning the small warehouse and cutting it off from the commercial lifeblood provided by the canal. That was likely when the main entrance got bricked over, though it could have been ten years before, or half a hundred.

When and who had cut the door-sized hole into a sidewall that accessed a dead-end alley not much broader than my shoulders was an open question. Though it had to be noted that whoever had done it had almost certainly been planning on using the rotting old building as a tuckaside for smuggled or stolen goods. At least, that was the conclusion I'd reached given how carefully they'd concealed the door's construction.

Later still, the dead-end alley had been closed off, too—possibly by repairs made after one of the many fires that had burned through the area over the years. At that point, the only way in or out of the old warehouse involved either climbing down into the alley through a gap in the rooftops above, or heavy work with a saw

and maul. Great for concealment, less so for quick entry and exit, and a major problem now that something had followed me to my hidey-hole.

I first heard it come into the alley behind me when I slipped through the warehouse's hidden entrance. I'd dropped the heavy bar in response, but it forced the door within a matter of moments. By then, I'd gotten up onto the balcony above, though I hadn't had the time to make it all the way up to the concealed loft where my gear was stored.

The creature was patterned and colored like a tiger, but it moved more like a hound. Big, bear-sized, maybe six hundred pounds. It came through the broken door slowly, head low—sniffing along my back trail. I could see it tracing the route I had followed after I entered. I didn't know how good its eyes were, or anything else about it, really. I'd never seen its like before and it practically reeked of magic. For that matter, nothing that big and obviously dangerous should have gotten anywhere near this deep into a city the size of Tien. Which made it a sending of some sort—quite possibly conjured directly into the alley.

Shrouding myself in Triss's substance, I drew my right-hand sword and leaped lightly onto the railing that separated the balcony from the lower level, slipping back toward where I had come in. When the thing passed below me, I dropped. Landing to one side of the creature's head, I swung my sword in a beheading arc. The short, curved blade hardly slowed as it passed through the thick neck—such were its goddess-forged enchantments.

A moment later, I skewered the head on the tip of my sword and lifted it for a better look. It was heavy, even for a head, and ugly—a nightmare of extra teeth and tusks—and it nearly cost me a broken leg. I was so busy examining it that I almost missed seeing the swing of the body's right forepaw—almost.

The long claws shattered a crate as I crow-hopped back out of the way—the best I could manage with that head weighing down my sword. I cleared my blade and turned to face the still-standing body, drawing my second sword. It was looking right at me—if anything without a head can be said to look. The gaping wound of its neck pointed straight at my heart as it continued to slowly drool blood. The headless body took a ponderous step toward me. I backed up again and it followed.

Now what? Normally when I beheaded something, it stopped coming after me. Especially when I used my goddess-forged swords. I wasn't at all sure how you killed a thing that could shrug that off.

Triss? I mindspoke.

No idea.

I had a problem. A big, ugly, magical problem. The blood stopped dripping off the end of its neck about then, and . . . I realized that I had a big, ugly, *regenerating* magical problem. Even as I watched, the thing had begun to grow a fresh head. I glanced down at my sword then, checking to see if someone had somehow managed to substitute an ordinary steel blade for my own.

But no, the light-absorbing black steel of the goddess was as familiar as the hand that held it. More so, since flesh could be bent to new shapes by the right spell, while Namara's steel was immutable and all but unbreakable. But that same divinely forged blade should have acted to magically cauterize the wound and prevent any regeneration. For that matter, it should have broken whatever spell bound the thing to life and killed it even if beheading didn't.

The whatsis swiped at me with a paw again. I was tempted to slice it off, but a nasty thought occurred to me then and I simply slipped aside. I looked around for the fallen head and discovered that I'd made the right

decision. It had begun to grow itself a new neck—and presumably, given time, a whole new body. I mentally pointed that out to Triss as I put one of the pillars that held up the balcony between me and the thing.

We need a plan, I sent. Ideally yesterday. I don't suppose you could send it into the everdark?

Not in any reasonable amount of time. It's too big and too magical. Maybe if you could get it to hold still for an hour or two . . .

Somehow I don't think it's going to cooperate.

It struck again, shattering the thick wooden pillar and sending splinters flying every which way. One thick sliver embedded itself painfully in the back of my hand, and I snarled an angry curse. When I yanked it out with my teeth, the taste of tarred oak gave me the first ghost of an idea, but I needed a bit more time to let it grow into something solid.

I slipped sideways, keeping one sword between me and it to fend off any more sudden attacks. When I got to the next pillar, I used a long vertical cut to shear off a corner, effectively making myself a short wooden spear.

I quickly returned my left sword to the sheath on my back and slid a foot under the jagged piece of wood, flipping it up into my hand. I was only just in time, as the beast charged me then and I had to cartwheel out of its way to avoid a vicious swipe from freshly regrown tusks. Moving in behind the whatsis, I jabbed the rough spear through one of its hind feet and down into a crack between two flagstones. It wouldn't stop it for long, but it ought to—

“Oh, fuck.” I swore aloud as the damned thing kept moving forward without slowing. Sure, its hind leg stretched out briefly like some boneless bit of tentacle, but then the flesh simply parted around the wooden spike and grew back together afterward, like water cut by a knife.

That's not good, sent Triss.

No. I think we're going to have to do something pretty drastic.

Any idea what?

Maybe, yeah, but it's ugly dangerous. I need you to go to sleep for a bit while I see about making a fire. I hate using fire as a weapon, but I didn't see a lot of choice given the thing's regeneration.

A low growl from behind warned me that the original head would soon be providing me with a second whatsis to deal with. I needed to end this fast, and I could only see one way to do that. I silently kissed off the supplies that I'd not yet had the time to retrieve and set about implementing my plan.

For starters, I took over from Triss, who had slipped into the dream state that allowed me to use his powers and senses as my own. The whatsis seemed to favor scent over sight, which meant there was little point in shrouding myself, but any sort of complex magic required that there be only one of us pulling on the reins. Honestly, I suspect he would be better at the spellwork than I was if we could arrange things that way. But, with the notably bizarre exception of the Dyads, that's simply not how the mage-familiar relationship goes.

Magic works much like swordplay, with the mage in the role of the hand on the hilt and the familiar playing the part of the blade. I drew my shadow up from the floor and across my skin, forming it into a coating thinner than the finest hair as I bent Triss's substance to my will.

When it covered my face and head, my senses expanded into the realm of shadow in ways that are hard to describe in any human language. Darkness took on tastes and textures that no mortal tongue or eyes ever experienced—light howled, color vanished, and textures whispered. The first time I'd clothed myself in Triss's substance, the utterly disorienting mishmash of sensation had driven me to my knees. It had taken years of training to allow me to interpret the flood of new information in any useful way.

I got out ahead of the whasis again now. Easy enough, since it didn't seem to be in all that big a hurry to kill me. That was convenient, but also worrying. When someone is trying to murder you in a leisurely sort of way, it's usually because they're not at all concerned that you're going to get away. Hopefully, that was out of ignorance of who I was and what I could accomplish, but somehow, I doubted it.

I took down the pillars holding up the part of the balcony overhanging the secret door—shutting it forever. That narrowed my exit options considerably, since the main entrance had been bricked over years before. It was one of the things that had attracted me to the potential fallback in the first place. That and its location deep in the Downunders where structures didn't so much get built as they accreted, which was all the more reason to feel a pang of regret for what I was about to do to the place.

I began to work my way around the periphery of the building. I moved as quickly as I could. But the necessity of dragging one sword tip to score a continuous line along the stone flags behind me made for slower going than I'd have liked. That gave the whasis and its slightly smaller twin time to catch up to me before I'd quite finished inscribing my circle of protection. I was just speaking the word of closing and binding as I brought my scored line back to bite its own tail when they came at me from both sides.

Even the fanciest of footwork only barely sufficed to get me clear as I took two running steps up the wall and then backflipped into a swords-tip cartwheel. The maneuver would likely have resulted in my breaking my idiot neck only a year or two before, and it certainly would have shattered the lesser swords I'd been wielding at the time. As it was, I barely held on through the shock of first one blade and then the other striking the hard flags tip first as I vaulted through the narrow gap between monsters. My hands and wrists felt like someone had struck them with hammers.

As I raced out into the center of the warehouse, I sheathed my swords and extended my arms toward the ceiling. Triss whimpered in his sleep as I shot magefire from my palms—Shades and the element of fire make for a painful mix, but it was the only plan I had, and I was all out of time. In a matter of instants, the main trusses sprouted blossoms of red and gold and I closed my fists—quenching the fires of magic. The building was aflame, and soon it would be falling in on itself.

Now I just had to get out. . . .

3

The flame that burns the bones. Call it bonfire if you like, or the older and more honest bonfire. Whatever name you give it, a burning skeleton holds a terrible beauty.

Whether it belongs to a man or a building older than any mortal span, the result is much the same. All-devouring chaos claims another victim. From the outside it can be gorgeous, even cleansing. From the inside, all that matters is getting out.

I had deliberately left the central pillar of the warehouse untouched when I called the magefires to my service. But, before I could even begin to mount that rough-cut length of timber, the whasis and its likewise-

evil twin were upon me again. There was no subtlety to their approach—a small mercy that brought them straight in from the front. I hadn't the time to draw my swords again, nor, frankly, the inclination—they'd done me little enough good so far.

Magic might have done me better service, but I am no Siri, nor even Faran. The finer points of spellwork have always eluded me. Beyond that, the same flames that I hoped would save me now circumscribed my shadow-centered magic as thoroughly as any chains or bars of irons would have prevented more ordinary means.

So, I put my trust in luck and a good grip where another of my order might have chosen fancy bladework or a well-tempered spell, and simply leaped as high as I could up the pillar, wrapping arms and legs tight around its rough girth and hoping that it would be enough.

The shock of impact as the paired monstrosities struck and shattered the bottom six feet of the pillar very nearly finished me. Aged oak a foot thick and iron hard though it was, the wood burst to splinters when the great beasts struck it. Splinters drove deep into ankles suddenly clutching air. The ceiling dropped a good yard, and me with it, leaving the remains of the pillar hanging from the cross braces above instead of supporting them.

I had just enough time and presence of mind to shimmy up out of reach of my ungentle friends before they could strike again. This time, with no support left, the pillar merely lost a bit more of its end. Then I was up and away, climbing into the fiery rafters above and hoping to find some hole where I might squirm out before fire devoured us all.

I could feel Triss tossing and turning deep down in the sleep of magic. As too-real nightmares of fire and sun chewed at the Shade's substance, I pushed him farther and farther into my own weak and mortal shadow, shielding him from the flames as best I could with the stuff of my own flesh. It wasn't enough, and the fires I had started tore angrily at my familiar, racking me with guilt.

I lost track of the creatures below as the fire and smoke that ruled the upper reaches of the warehouse became the whole of my world. By the time I reached the rafters, there was no path left to me that didn't pass through flame. Leaping from my pillar to one of the rafters, I sprinted along its fiery length, grateful for the low boots that kept my burns to something time might treat even without the aid of magic.

Soon, I reached a point where the cracked and aging terra-cotta tiles of the roof hung inches above my head, with only the threadbare bamboo matting between them and me. By then, smoke owned my sight and had taken a good bite from my lungs as well. It was break through or die.

Five feet more, and I paused to flip the rough silk of my hood and muffler into place, costing me precious but necessary seconds. Then I unsheathed my swords and crossed my arms. Bracing the blunt back sides across my shoulders and the back of my neck, I formed them into a rough triangle pointed toward the sky.

Picking a spot more or less at random, I put the paired tips of my swords against the bamboo and drove upward, punching through matting and shoving tiles aside to create an opening into the world above. For one brief, beautiful moment, cool air and bright light surrounded me—heaven. But I hadn't the time to enjoy it because I knew what must come next.

I took a quick, shallow breath, then closed my mouth tight and forced the desperately needed clean air back out through my nostrils, as I leaped upward. Fire followed me, erupting up and out in a huge column as the air-starved flames below suddenly found a fresh route to the sky and the fuel it brought with it. My forelock burned away, but my silks protected me from the worst of the blast, and exhaling through it all kept me from

scorching my lungs.

I hit the roof on fire and rolling. Again, the thick raw silk of my assassin's grays meant that my burns, while painful, weren't crippling. I stopped rolling when a low and broken chimney caught me in the ribs. The roof tile was hot enough to cook fish, and my elbows burned through my sleeves as I levered myself back to my feet. Smoke was everywhere, blinding and confusing, and I might have died then if a thick twist of it hadn't suddenly shaped itself into something like Siri's slender form and led me through the chaos.

At least, that's what I think happened, though the pain of my burns and a head made too light by shallow breathing and caustic fumes might have sent my mind astray. Whatever the cause—madness, or method, or merest luck, I had almost reached the edge of my strength when I passed from a smoky maze into clear air and bright sun. It happened all in an instant as I stumbled over the low coping between one roof and the next, and, with that, passed the line of protection I'd drawn to circumscribe my fire.

I fell to hands and knees, and then onto my side, gasping and coughing as I tried to breathe enough to catch up for what felt like a life's worth of inhaled smoke. A towering cloud of gray and black rose behind me, threaded here and there with the brighter colors of active fire where it angrily clawed the sky. A few feet away, just on the other side of the magical line I'd drawn with steel and magic, stood the shape that might or might not have been Siri. It seemed to blow me a kiss in the instant before it blew away itself. And that made me doubt its existence more than anything—Siri never mixed her pleasure with her work, though she did both with rare verve and focus.

I was still trying to sort out what I ought to believe about those mad air-starved moments in the fire, when a new shape appeared where Siri's might once have been. This one was big and broad, moving like a crippled bear, and all too familiar—my whasis come calling again. Fire rode its back and shoulders, a burning cloak that haloed the beast and consumed it, though not quick enough by half.

It staggered as it reached the line that divided fire from freedom and went to its knees. I struck then—though I hadn't known I had it in me till I moved—rolling up onto my own knees and driving both swords deep into the monster's chest. It reared back, teetering on the edge of balance. I followed, using its motion to lever myself to my feet. Letting go my hilts, I took a long step back. Then I pivoted and kicked with all the strength I had left, striking the paired pommels of my blades and driving them hilt deep into charring flesh.

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