



BOUND IN SHADOW

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“So fragile,” Agathia said, tightening her grip on the druid’s throat.

There was a satisfying crack, and the black-robed body fell limp to the floor of the underground passage, sending up motes of dust to drift among the bones of the dead. His soul loosed a scream of terror as it was drawn into one of the ornate cages dangling from her wrist. Thus far the presence of the Circle Orboros had been minimal, and the few guardians she had encountered had been ill-prepared for someone of her capabilities. As a rule druids worked in packs, though, and there were bound to be more nearby. The Circle valued these ruins as a place of power, and Agathia knew their territoriality regarding such sites could be fierce.

The bane witch looked down at the corpse, her eyes burning. Her features were beautiful and sharp, like shards of ornate glass: a reflection of her broken and dangerous mind. One hand rested on the haft of the scythe lying across her thin shoulders, its blade nearly touching the low ceiling, and a length of chain bearing the pair of soul cages wrapped her arm.

The mechanical form of a Deathripper idled at her side, its necrotite furnace casting a green glow over the tunnel and washing bones with flickering shadows. The bonejack clattered its jaws and cocked its head to regard Agathia. Though the machine’s chassis was newly forged in the necrofactoriums of Skell, its cortex was ancient, and she had come to appreciate its instincts. Her warcaster talents allowed her to maintain

a mental connection to the 'jack, and she felt its eagerness to move on. She reached out and grazed its skeletal head with the sharp talons of her gauntlet, prompting something like a metallic purr.

Deeper in the complex a monument to the forces of death sang. Until recently, Agathia had been consigned to the void, the dark place between worlds that held neither life nor true death, and her sensitivity to death's call was strong. The power imbued in the surrounding ruins brought back the sensation of the void now, sending a shiver of pleasure down her spine. In a chamber the druids did not even know existed, she would find that which Lich Lord Tenebrous desired, she was sure of it. She had sent one of her incorporeal servants to clear the way.

Muffled gunshots sounded from beyond the tunnel ahead, and a moment later a ghostly figure emerged to hover before her. A long-barreled pistol rested in each of his skeletal hands. In life, the wraith had been one of the greatest pistoleers on the Scharde Islands. In death, he was bound to her will.

"It is finished?" Agathia asked.

The wraith nodded. "Got the lot of them between the eyes," he said, tapping the barrel of one pistol against his skinless forehead. Even the lowest of the dead had their pleasures, and the wraith never tired of gunning down the living.

"Wait for me above," Agathia ordered. The wraith nodded again and floated up through the stone ceiling as if it were not there. She sensed his life force moving to join the two helljacks she had left aboveground, their massive frames being far too large for the confined underground passages.

The tunnel opened into a large room with a tiered altar at its center, and Agathia recognized Orgoth influences in the twisted black marble faces that adorned the altar and steps. This place predated those invaders, though, having been built for blood sacrifices long before recorded history.

A humanoid construct crafted from stone and wood, what the druids called a *wold*, stood half-completed amid the corpses of its creators, druids slain by the pistol wraith. Whatever power had drawn the Orgoth to this place also called to the Circle Orboros, and all about the chamber were signs of the blood magic used to bring such lumbering constructs to life.

The Dragonfather's lich lords had obtained much knowledge from sites such as this after the Orgoth had been driven from the continent. It was no wonder Lich Lord Tenebrous had sent her here on nothing but rumors of an ancient and nearly forgotten tome, a book whispered to detail esoteric Orgoth lore that could be found nowhere else.

She ran her hands along the outer walls and let the lingering horrors of this place fill her mind until she came to where the energy was strongest. Runes flared before her outstretched hand, and the iron frame of her Deathripper faded and became incorporeal, much like the wraith. A mental command sent the bonejack through the wall. With a last look at the altar, she cast the spell on herself and followed.

Shelves of moldering tomes and pots containing various fluids lined the walls of the hidden chamber. The green light of the bonejack's necrotite engine cast jumbled shadows over a podium against the far wall, and there Agathia saw what she had been sent to retrieve.

Thick with centuries of dust, the book was as Lord Tenebrous had described: large, bound in leather etched with unfamiliar sigils, and wrapped with chains secured by a black iron lock. Agathia crossed to the podium and caressed the tome. She sensed the power that sealed the pages within and knew significant time and effort would be required to open it without harming its contents. From ancient relics such as this was born the dark magic the lich lords employed to bolster their armies as part of their eternal quest to restore the Dragonfather to wholeness, destroying any mortals in their way.

No sooner had she lifted the book from its resting place than a pang of alarm from her helljacks breached her consciousness. Above, forces of the Circle Orboros had arrived. She affixed the tome's chains so it hung from her waist and ascended into the fray.



The moon hung pale over the ringed obelisks of Nine Stone, where a battle raged. Amid older stones lay the shattered fragments of the site's original guardians, destroyed by Agathia's 'jacks. Gunshots from the wraith punctuated the night over the roar of necrotite engines. Cloaked figures—perhaps a dozen in all—darted between the massive stones and hurled the occasional bolt of elemental power before taking cover again.

Amid the sounds of battle rose the howls of a great beast delivered from the wilds to strike down those who dared trespass Circle ground. The sinewy form of a feral warpwolf leapt from one stone to the next, avoiding fire from the pistol wraith and looking for an angle of attack. The creature moved with uncanny speed, muscles rippling and spittle flying from its jaws as it snapped at the night air. She heard the howls of other approaching creatures in the distance.

At her mental command the Slayer and Reaper fell back to shield her from the barrage of incoming spells with their black iron frames. The air crackled with energy as arcane bolts tore through the air, rocking the helljacks with each impact. With the element of surprise lost, the force now surrounding Agathia represented the limits of what she could handle. If she fled, the warpwolf would outpace her, even with her significant arcane talents. No, she must fight her way out. She would not deny Lord Tenebrous his prize.

She surveyed the surroundings through the eyes of her Slayer and located a group of druids clustered behind a low wall. With a mental command, she ordered her Deathripper to close on their position. Its necrotite furnace blazed with green fire as it put on a burst of speed and darted from its place beside her, dodging the incoming hailstorm of arcane energy as it made for the wall.

Spell runes flared, and the soul Agathia had claimed from the druid belowground twisted into smoke and disappeared, consumed to enhance the power of her magic. She hurled her spell forward through her bonejack's arc node, which glowed with intense light as it launched the spell farther ahead. In the next instant the enemies behind the wall were engulfed in flames, filling the night with cries of agony before crumbling to ash.

A howl echoed across the standing stones, and the warpwolf lunged at her Slayer. A tremendous clash sounded as the beast knocked the six-ton helljack off its feet. Beast and machine rolled in a tumult of growls, venting steam, and slashing claws. Another set of runes flared before Agathia, and she vanished in time to avoid being crushed only to reappear an instant later several yards away.

Seeing she was exposed, the druids broke from cover and rushed forward to push the advantage. Agathia's Reaper fired its harpoon gun and speared one of them through the stomach. As it reeled in the corpse, the remaining druids came on, prepared to kill the bane witch in close combat.

Agathia hefted her scythe from her shoulders and brought it around in a wide arc. The weapon caught the frontrunner across the face, removing the woman's chin and sending her sprawling to pour blood into the dirt. The druid's soul rose into the air, and Agathia channeled its essence into a spell that loosed a parasitic energy to sap the strength of the remaining druids and simultaneously create a shifting layer of protective darkness around herself.

She met the druids head-on, spinning as she cleaved into them with her scythe like a thresher. The corners of her mouth twitched upward at the palpable despair of the survivors, horrified at her use of their comrade's soul. A voulge swung inside her guard and tagged her hip near where the Orgoth tome hung, but the darkness surrounding her lessened the blow, and she retaliated in force. Her scythe tore open one of their number from groin to sternum; then she reversed the direction of the strike and caught a second druid on the downswing.

Through her mental connection with her Slayer, she could feel the machine struggling as it grappled with the warpwolf. The helljack's right arm now hung useless from a single rod, and pistons and servos strained as the machine tried to ward off its assailant. Blow after blow connected, smashing the Slayer's faceplate flat before knocking it aside. Agathia's mental hold on the 'jack was wrenched away as its cortex was obliterated beneath the assault. A great howl went up, the beast reveling over the Slayer's inert chassis. In the next moment the warpwolf fixed its gaze on Agathia and barreled toward her.

Reflexively she teleported behind the beast, letting it crash through where she had stood. Her instinct was to order her Reaper between herself and the warpwolf, but losing the second helljack would likely spell disaster.

The beast leapt back to its full height and bared its teeth at her, eyes bright with rage. It charged, and Agathia ran, shouting to her pistol wraith, "Deal with these mystics!"

The crackle of gunfire resumed as the wraith sighted in on the exposed druids and sent two of them to the ground clutching wounds, but the others continued their assault. Without the element of surprise he'd had in the tunnels, the pistol wraith was vulnerable; his incorporeal form afforded him no advantage against the elemental magic of the druids' weaponry. He spun back as an arcane bolt caught him in the shoulder, and in the next moment a voulge came crashing in to end him. The wraith had been a reliable servant, but the sacrifice was necessary.

The warpwolf closed to within yards of Agathia, and the world unfolded in slow motion as the beast transferred its momentum into the beginnings of a leap. Forcing herself to ignore the claws reaching toward her back, Agathia took direct control of the Reaper and fired its reloaded harpoon at the warpwolf. She watched the harpoon sail through the air and punch through the warpwolf's airborne form in a spray of hot, red mist. Guttural sounds of pain and rage carried from the beast as it was dragged flailing and slashing to the Reaper's feet. The 'jack's helldriller pierced downward in decisive strikes. The battle was over.

The remaining druids fled, and Agathia launched a spell at the nearest, consuming him in flame. She considered hunting them down but decided against it. They had other allies nearby, and she would not risk the book Tenebrous had sent her to claim. She looked down to where it hung at her waist and smiled. She was not expected back in Skell for some time, and there was much to learn.

