

An excerpt from

*Witness*  
*Book One of All Prophets Are Liars*

Copyright © Bill Blais 2008  
All Rights Reserved.

The right of Bill Blais to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted  
by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in the United States in 2008 by  
iUniverse  
2021 Pine Lake Road, Suite 100  
Lincoln, NE 68512

By permission of the author, this file may be freely copied and distributed  
for the express reading pleasure of anyone wishing to sample the novel.  
Any other use is strictly prohibited.

Like it? Hate it? Glad you saved a tree?  
bill@billblais.com  
<http://www.billblais.com>

WITNESS  
BOOK ONE OF ALL PROPHETS ARE LIARS

BY

BILL BLAIS

## Table of Contents

|   |                     |
|---|---------------------|
| <a href="#">Morrin’s Fall.....</a>                      | <a href="#">1</a>   |
| <a href="#">Uninvited.....</a>                          | <a href="#">7</a>   |
| <a href="#">Ex Marks The Spot.....</a>                  | <a href="#">9</a>   |
| <a href="#">The Long Way Home.....</a>                  | <a href="#">15</a>  |
| <a href="#">Distracted.....</a>                         | <a href="#">17</a>  |
| <a href="#">Fear And Loathing.....</a>                  | <a href="#">19</a>  |
| <a href="#">Strangers In A Strange Land.....</a>        | <a href="#">21</a>  |
| <a href="#">Old Habits.....</a>                         | <a href="#">25</a>  |
| <a href="#">The Mis-Taken Hero.....</a>                 | <a href="#">30</a>  |
| <a href="#">Doorways.....</a>                           | <a href="#">41</a>  |
| <a href="#">Big Fish, Little Fish.....</a>              | <a href="#">44</a>  |
| <a href="#">Debris.....</a>                             | <a href="#">56</a>  |
| <a href="#">The Wrong Man.....</a>                      | <a href="#">63</a>  |
| <a href="#">Brothers At Arms.....</a>                   | <a href="#">66</a>  |
| <a href="#">Rested.....</a>                             | <a href="#">71</a>  |
| <a href="#">The Hounds of War.....</a>                  | <a href="#">73</a>  |
| <a href="#">In The Company of Strangers.....</a>        | <a href="#">78</a>  |
| <a href="#">Born Evil.....</a>                          | <a href="#">90</a>  |
| <a href="#">The Simple Life.....</a>                    | <a href="#">97</a>  |
| <a href="#">Family Knots.....</a>                       | <a href="#">115</a> |
| <a href="#">You Can’t Go Back.....</a>                  | <a href="#">123</a> |
| <a href="#">Animal Magnetism.....</a>                   | <a href="#">131</a> |
| <a href="#">The Right Wrong.....</a>                    | <a href="#">149</a> |
| <a href="#">Lost In The Herd.....</a>                   | <a href="#">152</a> |
| <a href="#">Things Can Always Get Worse.....</a>        | <a href="#">163</a> |
| <a href="#">Left Behind.....</a>                        | <a href="#">179</a> |
| <a href="#">My Enemy’s Enemy.....</a>                   | <a href="#">195</a> |
| <a href="#">All Fall Down.....</a>                      | <a href="#">207</a> |
| <a href="#">Lies That Bind.....</a>                     | <a href="#">227</a> |
| <a href="#">Fractured.....</a>                          | <a href="#">235</a> |
| <a href="#">Catching Up.....</a>                        | <a href="#">236</a> |
| <a href="#">Hobbled.....</a>                            | <a href="#">238</a> |
| <a href="#">Youth, Wisdom, and Memory.....</a>          | <a href="#">248</a> |
| <a href="#">Friends Among Enemies.....</a>              | <a href="#">255</a> |
| <a href="#">In Pain We Trust.....</a>                   | <a href="#">265</a> |
| <a href="#">Stones and Bones.....</a>                   | <a href="#">279</a> |
| <a href="#">Windows to the Soul.....</a>                | <a href="#">290</a> |
| <a href="#">Of Lies And Leverage.....</a>               | <a href="#">292</a> |
| <a href="#">By The Hair of My Chinny Chin Chin.....</a> | <a href="#">298</a> |
| <a href="#">Stone from Stone.....</a>                   | <a href="#">309</a> |
| <a href="#">Enough.....</a>                             | <a href="#">313</a> |
| <a href="#">Pulling Strings.....</a>                    | <a href="#">320</a> |
| <a href="#">Dead Man Walking.....</a>                   | <a href="#">337</a> |
| <a href="#">Moving On.....</a>                          | <a href="#">340</a> |
| <a href="#">What Peace There May Be In Silence.....</a> | <a href="#">348</a> |

|                                      |            |
|--------------------------------------|------------|
| <u>Managing Madness.....</u>         | <u>353</u> |
| <u>Bump in the Night.....</u>        | <u>357</u> |
| <u>Control.....</u>                  | <u>367</u> |
| <u>Inch By Inch.....</u>             | <u>370</u> |
| <u>Rewind.....</u>                   | <u>372</u> |
| <u>Broken Things.....</u>            | <u>385</u> |
| <u>Getting Away With Murder.....</u> | <u>391</u> |
| <u>Coincidences.....</u>             | <u>398</u> |
| <u>Run.....</u>                      | <u>402</u> |
| <u>Address Unknown.....</u>          | <u>413</u> |
| <u>Second Thoughts.....</u>          | <u>419</u> |

## Morrin's Fall

The fragile pop and crinkle of glass burst from one of the last intact windows somewhere. Fires spit in dead-end corners, waved from broken windows and roared through houses knocked on their sides in the middle of streets. Manic, dancing shadows bumped and shoved one another like drunken revelers. Thick smoke and fumes drifted over the stumps of once proud buildings, coating the lungs and burning the eyes.

“Still alive, then?” Bran called, his back to the bricks.

“Come find out,” replied the flat voice on the other side.

Bran almost smiled. Then his eyes found his last three men, splayed against the crumbling and blackened inner wall of the gutted Morrin Guild Hall like so much flotsam left by a filthy tide. Ragged and grim, they sat among the broken stones and smoking timbers, catching their breath and counting their minutes.

The bodies of the Skyrran patrol at their feet mixed with the dancing shadows. Each body bore the distinctive, triangular pauldron of the Council army, but it was the occasional moon-white eye staring blindly from their pitch black skin which proved their allegiance.

Bran shifted his tired grip on the sweaty leather handle of his short sword. “Your companions are dead, soldier.”

There was a muddy thump from the other side of the wall. “So are yours.” The voice was rough and strong, like the speaker. It was also tired.

So, however, was Bran. Closing his smoke-dry eyes, he leaned his head back against the stunted brick wall and breathed slowly. “Not all of them.”

“Whenever you’re ready, then. These other two are cold.”

Bran blinked once. The voice was different, just then. A little too strong, a little too much bravado; as much forced proof as simple statement. A crack in the armor.

“You’re an excellent fighter,” Bran tested, “but there are six of us and one of you.”

The other man grunted. “Four, D’Nom.” He used the racial epithet with the same proud condescension as the rest of his race, but his next words were less assured. “And my reinforcements are coming.”

Bran opened his eyes. The single white-blue spark of darkfire still hung far above, cutting through the thick haze and pointing straight down upon them for all to see. The soldier was right. The Skyrra were nothing if not reliable.

The silence of his own men tugged at Bran’s attention. Looking back over them in the treacherous light, Bran recognized how near the end they all were.

Yesterday, Meinrad had only barely fought off that scrappy grik while out on point, and it had cost the lean Narician an eye, the use of an ear, and one side of his nose now flapped as he breathed.

Abrastus had been bitterly wasted by some tainted food they’d discovered after their own supplies had been exhausted, but the sheer power of the Heccan shepherd’s will and his unyielding faith had brought him through each fight. Against this wasting poison, though, they carried no antidote and his spiritual stamina was almost all he had left.

Even Dimas’ towering strength had been pushed too far. The grawnt’s seven foot frame, brick-brown skin, and bull’s head and horns had made him the singular target in every encounter, and singularly impossible to hide. Guilt over the danger he therefore represented to the rest of them had long since eaten away the last of the teenager’s youthful optimism.

Ferrin and Murra had just joined the rest of his troop on the Island Between. It was their bodies now cooling at the Skyrran's feet. The result of another of his poor judgments.

The Valley was not a land of warriors or battles, it hadn't been for generations. These men, Naric, Heccan, and Grawnt alike, were born of farmers, traders, and laborers, yet they had believed in Bran's father, a rootless D'Nom wanderer who'd brought a dream of unity to the Valley and managed to use words as often as steel to make his point. In turn, they'd trusted Bran at his ailing father's urging.

Less battered and broken than the rest, Bran felt this most keenly. Trained by his father and their travels to fight and to lead, it had been Bran's choice to involve the Valley, even with so small a force as this one had begun as, in the conflicts of outsiders. It had been his choice to join with the rigid Skyrra against the wild AkuVara of the Keros Sea. It had been he who led these men from home and peace and safety to these foreign lands tangled in foreign wars.

Each of those choices had been wrong.

Yet, though he saw pain, exhaustion, loss, and the desire for home in the face of each man before him now, he saw neither reproach nor doubt. Despite all, they still followed him, though he knew it was the shadow of his dead father they truly followed, and it was for his dream they now accepted their ends, here, so far from home and family.

Because the man on the other side of the wall was correct. Reinforcements were on their way, and Bran and his men did not have the strength to evade them any longer. Abrastus likely would not last the night, even without a fight, and Bran had no salve even to make his passing peaceful. Dimas was bandaged in a dozen places, but the rags dripped purple, soaked through with his blood, and left a trail as clear as his massive cloven hooves. Only Meinrad might have survived, slipping away on his own, but Bran already knew it was impossible to convince the

ornery Naric to save himself.

Bran took a deep breath to clear his head. His father had taught him to find options, not bemoan the unchangeable. There was a way out of every situation, but only for those who sought it. The battlefield was not only for swords and arrows.

“You sounded disappointed,” he called over the wall, remembering the soldier’s change of tone and hoping he’d heard correctly.

The other man coughed slightly. “What?”

“About the reinforcements. You sounded disappointed.”

A short silence. “You would not understand.”

“You don’t know me.”

“You are D’Nom,” replied the soldier simply. “Duty and obligation are not your strengths.”

“Duty?” Abrastus, weak and shivering, but with fury in his eyes, struggled to stand upright. Meinrad caught him and placed him under Dimas’ large, restraining hand, but the weakened Heccan continued to cry out hoarsely. “How many Kerosians...have you killed...to save them?” Dry coughs shook him into silence.

Dimas motioned to Bran for them to rush the Skyrran, taking him by force of numbers, at least.

Bran, however, saw a better way in the Skyrran’s loud silence, and he raised a hand to quiet his men. He had met many wicked and vicious people in his life, but he had yet to meet an enemy who held nothing sacred.

“It’s true,” he began. “We have broken the alliance we swore to the Council.” His men stared at him, but he kept his hand raised, willing them to wait him out. “But we had no choice.

Your general ordered us to kill a family of Kerosians and make it appear the AkuVara had done it. My refusal to perform this atrocity has cost the lives of nearly all my men. It may yet claim the rest of us.” He paused. “Tell me, soldier, would you have done that deed?”

The Skyrran was slow to answer, but Bran waited.

“Sacrifices are sometimes...” The Skyrran’s voice trailed off.

Bran waited, listening. After several moments, Meinrad pointed urgently up at the darkfire beacon, as clear as ever. Bran nodded slightly.

“We’re tired and nearly beaten,” he said, motioning his men to stand. Abrastus pushed Dimas away and stood on his own. “But you’re worse. I saw the stab Ferrin gave you. Had we time, we could simply wait for you to die.”

He led his men in a wide arc around the crumbling wall. Their unsteady footfalls over the debris were clear, but so were the Skyrran’s, who shifted when he heard them move.

“Since we don’t have that time, however,” Bran continued evenly, rounding the wall, “we could have overcome you with numbers alone, accept our losses, and make our way onward.”

Fewer fires burned on this side, but the black-skinned warrior hadn’t tried to hide himself in the shadows. Instead, he faced them with those empty-seeming, moon-white eyes. His long blue-steel blade was in one hand and Ferrin’s short sword in the other, but his elbow was tight to his side, just below where the short sword had gone in, almost to the hilt.

“But,” Bran finished, stopping and watching his opponent, “we haven’t done so. I think that bears noting.”

Abrastus stopped next to him, gripping his staff firmly, Dimas towered on Bran’s other side, brandishing his pike-axe, and Meinrad continued to circle slowly, keeping his good eye on the Skyrran.

The Skyrran said nothing, but Ferrin's short sword kept a point on Meinrad as he moved.

"My name is Bran. This is Abrastus, Dimas, and that's Meinrad. What's your name?"

The dark man's bright eyes narrowed for a moment. "Marius."

Bran nodded. "Marius. Your comrades will be here very soon. Then we will be forced to kill you and as many of them as we can before we die. I would offer you an option you may not have considered, however." He sheathed his sword. "Come with us."

Bran felt the eyes of the others on him, as he'd expected, but it was Marius' white eyes that most concerned him, as they narrowed tighter still.

"I think you know how wrong the Council is, in this," Bran continued calmly, stepped forward with his hands out. Abrastus moved to follow him, but Bran waved him back. Ahead, Marius didn't move as Bran approached. "I think you know this even better than we do."

He stopped a few feet away. One step and Marius's sword would easily span the short gap, but Bran kept his hands clear. "You're a better swordsman than the rest of your patrol combined, yet you wear only a soldier's rank. We accused your general of gross brutality, yet you didn't call us liars."

He lowered his hands. There was little more he could do. "Duty and loyalty are just goals, but can it be honorable to obey wicked orders?"

Marius continued to stare at him for a moment, then his eyes scanned the others standing round. Finally, he lowered Ferrin's short sword.

"I have a sister."

## Uninvited

The elevator rattled to a stop at the eighth floor. Pushing back the stubborn gate with his bag of groceries, Razmus stepped out onto the landing. The bitter tang of stale urine from the elevator thinned out on the landing, only to be replaced by old sweat and spilled liquor, most of which seemed to come from the filthy, barefoot bundle of clothes passed out in a doorway nearby.

Down the corridor, a woman shrieked incoherently, and furniture was clearly being smashed. Razmus sighed, envisioning another sleepless night of shouting, screaming, and police raids. He reached into his pocket for his keys and sighed again, this time at himself.

*Been here so long, even this chaos is normal. What would mother say?*

As he shook the thought away, the arthritic elevator behind him tried once, then twice, to close its doors. He leaned back against it and the pitted steel cage finally clanged shut before coughing its way downward.

The soft jangle of his keys as he pulled them from his pocket made him stop. The rest of the seventh floor hallway was suddenly silent. His mind sharpened immediately. The only woman he knew of on this end of the hall was the elderly lady with that mechanical device she put to her throat to speak. She couldn't shriek.

His skin prickled, but he didn't move.

*Somebody's girlfriend. Or a hooker. Or both.*

He wasn't convinced.

A glimpse of motion made him turn. The foul-smelling bundle of clothes had moved into the hallway and was now straightening up with one arm pointing directly at him.

Between the low wool hat and the raised collar of the stained and faded winter jacket, a long, pointed, filthy nose stuck forward. Beady black eyes squeezed together above it, and a thick, unkempt moustache bristled beneath. The cracked-lipped mouth slowly parted in a crooked grin, but even before Razmus saw the yellowed teeth, hand-sharpened to evil points, he knew.

“Finder.”

The crouching, rat-faced man inclined his head slightly at the recognition, but remained as silent as Razmus remembered only too well.

The next moment, the door to his apartment slammed open amidst high shrieks and howls, but Razmus was already in the stairwell heading down, one flight of stairs at a time.

## Ex Marks The Spot

“Sarah! Sarah! Lemme inna goddamn door! Sarah!”

A fist-crushed can, mostly empty, clanged off the metal frame of the apartment’s bay window, spitting droplets of beer onto the glass pane. Sitting in her pajamas, Sarah watched the thin brown drops slide downward, smearing the almost beautiful glow of the Fenway Park lights in the distance. The October night was clear, and the landmark Citgo sign burned brightly.

Down on the street, over-based gangsta rap thumped and pounded from the over-priced sound system in Stephen’s Bronco, vibrating the entire house and shivering the window like a giant erratic heart about to burst.

*Too late for that.*

She snapped over another page of the Entertainment Weekly magazine she’d spent the last few minutes pretending to read.

“Sarah! Talk to me! Sarah!”

She slapped the magazine shut and glared at the streaky window.

“Lemme in! You’re my girl! Mine! Sarah!”

She stood up angrily, took a step towards the window, then stopped and gripped herself tightly around her chest.

“No,” she said aloud. “No. Sit down. Don’t give him the satisfaction.” Yet she continued to stand there, squeezing herself so hard her knuckles turned white.

“Sarah! Lemme- hey!” The shouting softened, almost lost in the heavy music. “You live here? Let me in. Come on.”

Sarah leapt to the window and threw it open. Three floors down, she saw Stephen’s spiky

blond hair shining as he practically pushed Ashley, the new girl in 2B, through the locked front door.

“Stephen!”

His head snapped up. Even at this distance, his normally chiseled, well-tanned face was puffy and pink as he blinked up at her.

“Sarah?” He was still in his office clothes, but nothing was tucked in or even straightened.

“Go home, Stephen. You’re drunk.”

“Huh?” he said, grinning slightly. When he stepped back onto the curb to look up more easily, Sarah heard the front door bolt slam home.

“Hey!” Stephen shouted as Ashley’s footsteps fairly ran up the stairs to her apartment. “You tricked me!”

“That’s not that hard, Stephen,” Sarah snapped, before she could stop herself. She took a slow breath.

“Hey!” he barked. “I was-”

“Look, just go away, okay?” She started to pull her head back in. “We’ve been through this. We’re done. Just leave.”

“No! You don’t leave me!” He stabbed his chest with his thumb like some Cro-Magnon caricature. “You’re mine!”

She almost couldn’t believe what she was hearing. It was so blatant, so undeniably obvious to her now, and yet, and this made her stomach turn every time she thought about it, she’d almost considered his proposal.

She shook her head slowly. “What did I ever see in you?”

“Enough to make me marry you,” he said sarcastically. “That’s all.”

“Make you?” Sarah was caught entirely off guard. “What are you talking about? That was your stupid idea!”

“Only cause I had to!”

“Had to?”

“You were gonna leave, remember?”

“Remember?” Flabbergasted, she repeated herself. “Remember? What I ‘remember’ is I was leaving you because you cheated on me!”

Stephen opened his mouth, but she cut him off.

“Again! And then I ‘remember’ that you got all apologetic and scared and then I ‘remember’ you asked me to marry you.” She shook her head in disbelief. “Marry you! Not fifteen minutes after you refused to admit to cheating! What the hell were you thinking? What makes you think I would even consider that!”

*Except you did.*

Remembering the scene in the middle of the street outside La Dolce Vita in the North End, she was still amazed by his ability to charm when he had to. She squeezed herself angrily.

*Wonder if that redhead felt the same.*

“You done?” Stephen’s voice was unsettlingly calm over the music.

“For now,” she snapped defensively.

“Good. Then since we’re talking about being unfaithful, who the fuck is Rick?”

Every last hair on Sarah’s body stood up straight and she gripped the window frame in fearful, embarrassed, angry silence.

*How did he know?*

“Surprised?” Stephen barked. “Yeah, me fuckin’ too!” He kicked savagely at the small, barren brick planter in front of the apartment, and the throbbing music punctuated each hit. “Followed you - unh! - to his apartment - unh! - last night!” Chunks of crumbling brick ricocheted hollowly off the vinyl siding and skittered along the sidewalk.

“Four years, Sarah!” His voice rose higher as he turned his face up again, screaming. “Four years and you go behind my fuckin’ back?”

“No!” She shouted over him. “I’m not doing this again! We-” She suddenly noticed the dozen or so people collected on the other side of the street. Several others sat in windows and doorways nearby, enjoying the show.

“Listen,” she said quickly, “Rick has nothing to do with you and me. We’re through. That’s all. Go home.” The windowpane rattled when she slammed it shut, but she didn’t step away. She felt slightly weak, and the shiver under her skin had nothing to do with the brisk evening air.

*So maybe Rick does have something to do with it, but not until after! And who’s Stephen to judge, anyway?*

Stephen’s shouts slapped against the windowpane. “You whore! You two timing-”

“Hey, buddy!” A salt-and-pepper-haired, middle-aged man in a blue mechanic’s jumpsuit leaned out of a window directly across the street from Sarah. “If you two’re done sharin’ yer love lives with the rest of us, why don’tcha shut yer goddamn trap and drive that stupid-assed, gang-banger wannabe truck ‘a yours outta here, ‘fore I call the cops!”

“Fuck you!” Stephen snapped automatically. “Sarah! You cheated on me, too! I forgive you! See? Sarah!”

“That’s it, buddy,” the mechanic snapped. “I’m callin’ the cops!”

“Wait a sec,” Stephen shouted. “Is he in there with you?” A booming thud sent a light tremor through the apartment building, deeper than the music vibration. “Is that little prick in there right now! Let me in!”

“Hey, asshole! See this phone?” The mechanic held his cell-phone out as he began to dial.

“Yeah?” A pause in the tremors. “See this brick?”

The mechanic’s eyes widened in disbelief, then he jerked backward just before a chunk of brick shot through the upper window pane, shattering the glass with a brittle splinter.

Sarah yanked open the window as another tremor shook the walls. Stephen was heaving himself against the bolted wooden door as a genuine crowd looked on. The mechanic reappeared with blood on his cheek and forehead, screaming obscenities as he mashed buttons on his phone.

“Stephen!” Sarah shouted, louder and higher than she’d expected.

He backed up, chest heaving, rubbing his shoulder where the shiny gray jacket sleeve was tearing away at the seams. “I’ll kill him! I’ll kick his ass! Send the pussy down here!”

“He’s not here, Stephen!”

Sirens flared a few blocks away, slicing clearly through the cursing, the shouting, and the pounding music.

Across the street, the mechanic was shouting into his phone and gesturing furiously.

Below, Stephen was looking wildly up and down the street.

“Stephen,” she said tiredly. “Stephen, it’s over.”

He continued to stare at the empty street around him. The crowd had evaporated and the heavily-amped car radio boomed in awkward solitude.

Sarah sighed. “Just go home.”

The sirens turned a corner somewhere nearby, closer, and Stephen jerked towards the

Bronco, pulled himself in, ground into gear, and screeched away.

Sarah gazed after it, suddenly exhausted.

*Oh, Stephen. What have you done?*

Pulling herself inside, she met the mechanic's angry gaze.

He leaned carefully out of his jagged window and pointed at her. "Don't you go anywhere, girl! Yer boyfriend there owes me a window and he could'a killed me with that goddamn brick!"

Sarah nodded weakly. "I'll be here."

"Damn right!"

She sank back into her apartment, closed the window, and just managed to reach the sofa before collapsing. She dragged a jittery hand slowly over her eyes as the sirens approached.

*Oh, Sarah. What have you done?*

## The Long Way Home

His boots pounded the broken pavement as he dodged yet another gaping pothole and nearly collided with an oncoming van. Tires screeched, a horn blared and cursing chased after him as he spun away. He righted himself against a parked car and jumped up onto the empty sidewalk under broken streetlights, but his balance was wrong, his timing was off, and even though it had only been a few blocks, his breath was already ragged.

*Soft.*

Working construction during the day and beating up thugs and drug dealers by night had barely kept him in shape all this time. He hadn't had more than a handful of genuine fights, and even those had hardly taxed him. He'd lost his edge.

Marius would be cruelly disappointed.

*So fix it.*

He'd pushed too hard, too fast. He needed to calm down, find his rhythm.

Glancing back, he slowed his pace. They hadn't made it out of the building yet. He had to stay ahead, but he couldn't lose them, either. Not until he'd figured things out. He had to figure things out.

*Focus.*

Why was Keeper hunting him? He was certain his mother would never have sent the old crone-man to retrieve him. She'd never trusted the jailer.

He grasped the pendant around his neck, but it was as cold and lifeless as it had been for the past five years.

*Five years.*

It wasn't his mother's face that flashed into his mind, then, but Elkie's angelic, child-like one. The sublime happiness of her irrepressible optimism gazed down at him with the first and only tears he'd ever seen her shed, as she knelt beside him where he lay panting shallowly in the short grass.

Remembering the moment brought back all the associated pain, but his chest swelled at the memory, and the deeper things it bore. There had been beauty in that pain, even as they'd said goodbye.

He often imagined the look upon Elkie's face when he returned. When he felt lost or abandoned in this place, that vision always helped him find his balance.

The crash of the pallets he'd tossed across the alleyway half a block behind snapped him back to the present. He let the pendant go as he ran, his heart swelling happily once more. If Keeper and Finder were here, then the time had come and he would see her very soon.

"Monadi tam wei cantaru," he husked into the night air, forcing his pace to match the rhythm of the chant Marius had taught him. "Monadi tam wei cantaru, monadi tam wei cantaru..."

Each step felt lighter than the one before.

Let them come. He was finally going home.

## Distracted

“Thanks, Tony.”

“Sure thing, Ricky. Sure that’s all you want? Y’need some meat on those bones, boy.”

“I’m set,” Rick smiled, raising his open container of pork fried rice in salute to the fat Italian man behind the counter of the Golden Wall Chinese Take Out restaurant. “This is good, really.” He smiled again as he took the pair of plastic chopsticks from Tony’s thick fingers.

“Thanks. See ya later.”

“Alright, kiddo. Have a good one.” The phone on the black and white tiled wall above the counter rang again and Tony reached for it as he waved goodbye. “Golden Wall. Yep. Number fourteen. Yep. Side a’...”

Rick stepped out onto the sidewalk, shouldering his gym bag up higher and swinging it directly into a woman pushing her sleeping child in a stroller.

“Hey!” she snapped, swatting the bag away and glaring at him. “Watch it!”

“Oh!” Rick pulled back in surprise and embarrassment. “Sorry. I didn’t see-”

“Sorry? Give you sorry,” muttered the woman as she continued purposefully up the street. “Knocking into people and spooking them at all hours...”

Rick sighed. He looked both ways along Hudson Street, empty at this hour but for the departing woman and her stroller.

*Figures.*

He sighed again, hiked the bag up once more, and made his own way down the street, limping slightly from the hyper-extended kick he’d made during the soccer match an hour earlier, which they’d lost anyway.

*Because the ref played favorites again.*

He sighed and thought about calling Sarah, but she had the early shift tomorrow, so she was already asleep. Still, it was nice just to think of her, and that big, silly grin broke out on his face again.

They hadn't actually said 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend', and they'd only had a few dates, including that lame romantic comedy which had disappointed them both, but she had come over for dinner last night. They'd watched some TV and laughed a bit before she headed home. He kept telling himself he was probably her rebound, but it really didn't feel that way, and the ease with which they could just hang out and talk thrilled him every time he thought about it.

His silly grin got bigger as he shoveled in several mouthfuls of his first meal since breakfast without taking a breath, until he choked, spraying half of what was in his mouth out into the street and onto the trunk of a parked car.

"Aw, man," he mumbled, slumping and hunching against the inevitable onslaught of the ever-present Bostonian car owner.

Somebody's phone rang in an upstairs apartment across the street. A car swooshed past. No one shouted.

*Little blessings.*

He stepped up his pace and slipped his headphones on, turning up the Mortal Kombat II soundtrack in case someone started yelling after him for being unable to eat like a normal human being.

## **Fear And Loathing**

Racing along a stretch of small restaurants and bars, Razmus dodged through the late dinner and early drinking crowds.

“Sorry,” he grunted automatically as he squeezed between an elderly couple and glanced back behind him for his pursuers.

The woman squeaked and clutched her purse and the man began to bluster, but both fell silent and fairly leapt away from the six-foot-four, heavily built black man in the black trench coat who had just pushed through them.

A spike of violent frustration rose in him, but he pushed on, forcing down the desire to lash out, to give these soft, weak little creatures something real to fear.

*Focus.*

Yet it gnawed at him. It hunched in the back of his mind, chewing determinedly away at his self-control, while he tried to deal with the more immediate questions: How did Finder and the rest cross over? How did they know he was here in the first place? Most of all, though, why hadn't his mother warned him?

That last question grew darker and more sinister as he became certain there could be no answer that wouldn't be very, very, very bad.

*Stop. You don't know anything yet.*

Up ahead, a clutch of ignorant people bottled up around an outdoor restaurant, pushing Razmus out into the street against the nearly stopped traffic. Slipping between cars, he took another glance back.

As if on cue, a horn blared in the distance, followed immediately by others, and people

began crying out in anger, then fear.

Finder's hunched form leapt atop a stopped yellow cab, swaying slightly and crouching on all fours. His rat-like head jerked from side to side as he scanned the street. The others, a half dozen bent figures in hooded overcoats, burst from a group of screaming pedestrians a little behind, trampling any underfoot and beating down any in their way.

Razmus ignored them, though, focusing instead on their leader. Keeper's long, filthy, yellow-white hair tangled around his face in snarls and stringy lengths as he ran at the rear of the pack. The haggard and effeminate old blind man would look out of place anywhere, and the sight of the filthy jailer here, in this place, only emphasized for Razmus how bad things must be back home.

Finder suddenly stood up on the cab, ramrod straight and arrow-thin, and pointed one long, thin arm. More horns screamed and honked and people cried out as a wave of confusion and panic raced outward from the creature's perch.

Keeper's thin grin cracked the old man's angular face. "There!" he shrieked through the din. "Fetch him, children!"

The half-bent figures yelped and yowled like a pack of starved coyotes and swarmed around Finder's cab, denting doors and smashing windows as they passed.

Pedestrians ran, cried out, fell back against one another, or dropped from sight without further sound.

"Move!" Razmus shouted as he pushed through the dumbstruck, staring people.

## Strangers In A Strange Land

“Sorry about this,” said the cab driver, waving his cap toward the windshield. “Shows’re getting out.”

A sea of chattering and bustling people clogged the street traffic as they overflowed from the open doors beneath a banner depicting a young, tattered boy with an angelic face holding out a small bowl beside the over-sized word ‘Oliver’.

The driver grunted in mild pain and squeezed the bridge of his nose for a moment, then shook his head and looked in the rear-view mirror again.

The clothes of the man in his late twenties were filthy, as if he’d been living in the gutters, and his tired, tanned, brawler’s face bore a heavy stubble as he faced outside. He pulled constantly at the neckline of his too-small sweatshirt, while his massive muscles stretched the faded cloth near to breaking. Beyond all this, however, it was his entirely milk-white eyes which most singularly identified him.

Beside him sat the frail-looking girl, looking perhaps ten years old, with long-black hair framing her open, yellow-white face and thin, slanted eyes. Cross-legged on the seat, she was nearly covered by an old army jacket, clearly his. Her eyes were fixed intently on the small white disc in her lap, but she seemed to sense the driver’s gaze, and looked up quickly.

The cabbie coughed lamely and shifted his eyes outside. “Looks like a lot,” he said quickly, “but it’ll clear up in no time, don’t worry. Uh...you really oughta take the girl to a show, mister. They’re...they’re really good around here.” He lifted his hat and scratched his bald spot. “Or that’s what they say, anyway.”

“Oh, huh,” he said suddenly, patting a black pamphlet with a pair of glowing feline eyes

that was taped to the back of his sun visor, “I did see, uh...Cats! Yeah, I saw ‘em once. I mean, I saw ‘it’ once,” he stammered quickly, glancing at the girl in the rear-view mirror. “I saw it once.”

The girl smiled back charmingly, before returning her attention to her lap. Beside her, the man cracked the knuckles of his thumbs in his fists as he continued to stare out the window.

“Back when the wife and I were on vacation in...NYC,” the cabbie continued distractedly. “Huh. Cats. That was something. Gotta be the best-”

“Look,” snapped the man, his eerie, aimless eyes facing the driver. “We-”

He looked down at the girl’s small hand on his thick forearm, then back up to the driver. “My...daughter and I are late.” His words were spoken slowly, as if unsure the driver understood his words. “It is very important.”

“You folks said you’re just driving around to see the city, so I been following your daughter’s ‘turn here’s and ‘turn there’s for the last twenty minutes. You wanna go someplace specific? Great. You just tell me where.”

The big man leaned toward the glass barrier between the front and back seats. “You said you would drive us, correct?” It wasn’t a question. “So drive.”

“Hey,” the driver scowled, “don’t get all bent out of shape with me, fella. I told you when we started that I’d do this trip for free because you looked like you needed it, but you can get out and walk any time, tough guy!”

“Dom!” The girl cut in.

“No!” the man snapped bitterly. “This may be just another adventure to you, just another game to play with the rest of us, but I’m-”

“Don’t you dare.” Her voice was suddenly beaten steel. “I know as well as you what’s at stake, here, and I will not be treated as a child by a man no more than a child himself!” Her small

dark eyes narrowed, and Dom looked away.

A cold silence followed, surrounded by the muted calls, laughter and general murmur of people moving among the cars. A horn honked and the driver glanced around quickly. Ahead, the line of cars began to move. Behind them, the horn sounded again, three times in rapid succession.

“Hold yer horses!” The driver gripped the wheel with both hands and the wagon lurched forward, jerked to a stop, lurched again, then evened out to a slow crawl. “Stupid machine,” he muttered, glancing up into the rearview mirror.

“I’m sorry, Elkie,” Dom said, turning to face the window. “It’s this place. It’s wrong, somehow. I don’t trust it.” He squinted his ivory eyes at the people moving past. “And we’re not alone. I can feel it.”

Elkie touched the stone in her lap softly. “We’re getting closer.”

“Maybe,” he said. “Maybe not.”

“Stop it!” she cried petulantly, squeezing her eyes shut. “Stop it! Don’t you think it’s killing me? After all this time, to be so close? I’m practically crawling out of my skin to see him again!”

The muscles in Dom’s jaw tensed, but he didn’t turn from the window.

Her fierce gaze stiffened, then broke apart. Slumping weakly, she seemed to shrink even smaller than she already was.

Dom’s face was as blank as his eyes when he finally faced her. After a few moments, though, he lifted his hand, hesitated, then touched her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he said stiffly. “I honestly am.”

Elkie’s bowed head leant slightly towards his hand.

When her hair brushed his hand, however, he pulled away. When his eyes settled forward, the cab driver quickly turned his own attention back to the road ahead.

“You’re not the only one with feelings here, though,” Dom continued firmly. “I may not be enough of my cousin for you to truly love me, or enough of a son for my father to truly care, ” he stared down at his hands, “but I was the next best thing.”

Elkie looked up at him, her eyes flashing, but Dom shook his head firmly. “Don’t. I’m not blaming you. I willingly accepted this brief illusion between us.” He looked at her. “I would do so again.”

“Dom.” She raised her hand to his knee.

“But Maia chose me,” he continued gruffly, “because I believe as she does, and because I will do what I pledged. I always have.” He removed her hand. “I’m here for my aunt and for the prophecy. Not for you, and certainly not for him.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” said the driver, pointing to the intersection ahead, “but which way?”

“Oh,” fumbled the girl, turning to the stone in her lap. “Mmm, straight.”

The corner of the driver’s lip lifted in a tiny smile. “Straight it is.”

## Old Habits

“Come now, Razmus,” Keeper’s hoarse cackle chased after him. “Finder expected a harder trail!”

Razmus ignored him as he ricocheted himself off the overflowing garbage dumpster and into a powerful back-swing. The back of his fist cracked the nearest pursuer’s snarling, hooded head around, but the beast’s momentum slammed them both back against the dumpster, clanging Razmus’ head hard against the cold and hollow metal.

His ears rung and his eyes wobbled, but he kicked and pushed the grasping, groaning, clawing thing away. The stench of piled, rotting trash and the rest of the alley’s normal filth and urine filled his nose, but the creature’s matted hair and ragged, sweaty breath smelled rankly of a deeper, darker rot.

As the two lurched upright, Razmus got a better look at his attacker by the distant streetlights. Hunched and twisted, the thing was an aberration several times over. Its left arm bulged irregularly, with strongly muscled joints and jagged seam-lines, and it stretched half again beyond the puffy overcoat sleeve. On the other side, the sleeve was shredded open, revealing a thin, stunted arm that appeared even shorter by contrast.

Both hands were too large, but the shorter arm sported long, horned fingernails. Where the coat fell open, an exaggerated rib-cage, covered in patches of savaged skin and clumped hair, expanded to a ridiculous size as the thing yowled horribly from its wolfish snout, spittle flying and dripping. Then it lunged again.

Razmus let the long arm reach past him and dig into his back, then he grit his teeth and went with the pull, stepping across the creature and clasping his own arms behind its head. As

the stunted right arm shredded easily through the side of his heavy leather jacket, Razmus anchored himself, pivoted away, and twisted hard. With the staccato crack of bone, the creature flopped over his back and onto the ground without a twitch, though its exaggerated arm still clung to his back.

“No!” Keeper’s cry was of a woman losing her baby, and the rest of the creatures joined him, baying madly.

Yanking the monstrous left arm from free, Razmus measured the field. They were maybe fifty feet away, with Keeper a bit behind, hobbling madly along and cursing in his screechy voice. Finder perched upon a distant dumpster, watching and sniffing.

Razmus did the math and grunted. Six more, plus Finder and Keeper. Even if the creatures were all as stupid as that first one, there were simply too many. He turned and ran.

His hand came away red from the open gashes on his side.

*Later.*

Squinting against the ringing in his ears, he raced for the end of the cluttered alley, chased by giddy howls.

Ignoring the noise, Razmus assessed the larger situation. These beasts obviously belonged to the deranged jailer, but Keeper himself belonged to Ptereseus, and if Keeper was here hunting him, that meant the Skyrran ambassador knew Razmus was no longer dead.

A pair of loose metal trash cans crashed behind him amidst the grunting barks.

Razmus didn’t look back as a deeper realization chilled him.

*They know how to cross over.*

As he neared the corner, a metal door screeched open into the alley and a stocky Asian man leaned out, wearing black and white checked pants and a smudge-stained apron. Holding the

door with a foot, he emptied a bin into the nearest of a line of trash cans.

Howling barks snapped at the intrusion, and the man jumped, dropping the bin to the ground with a clatter.

“Lock it!” Razmus shoved him backwards through the reek of fried noodles and duck sauce. The door slammed shut with a muted boom, but not before he noticed the bright red handprint he’d left on the man’s dingy apron.

*Mag it.*

He pushed on, knocking the line of trashcans down around him as he passed. Noodles, egg rolls, rice, and vegetables slopped across the alley in a thick dark sauce.

Then he was out, around the corner, and heading down the dimly lit street. It was surprisingly quiet here. Even his pursuers had given up howling for the effort of the chase.

A few more blocks and he’d have the train yard to move around in. At this hour, the only people in there wouldn’t be missed if something happened.

Behind him, a surprised yelp, then a minor explosion of crashing bodies, bouncing trashcans, and yelps of pain.

“Get up!” Keeper shrieked. “Get up!”

That mess wouldn’t buy Razmus much time, but it was only two more blocks to the train yard. The train yard with its disposable people.

The looks on the faces of the elderly couple flashed into his mind, all dumb terror and ignorant racism. He remembered the people dropping from sight as the creatures made their way across the street behind him.

*Cattle.*

That’s all they were. They had no idea what was going on; no idea how much was at

stake. So wrapped up in their tiny, selfish, chaotic little lives, they weren't worth worrying over, much less saving.

He felt Elkie's disappointment, immediately, and he didn't bother to fight it as he pumped his arms and legs along the sidewalk. All this time away and he still hadn't changed.

*That doesn't make me wrong.*

These people were so uniformly weak, so completely pathetic, they couldn't even save themselves. It had been obvious to him soon after arriving that Ptereseus and the Council would trample them like so many insects if they ever found this place.

A glance back showed Keeper exiting the alley, but the nearest creature had almost made up the space between, and the rest galloped fast behind.

*And now they're here.*

Ahead, a big SUV with its headlights off swung onto the street from a side road and yanked itself to a sudden stop. Heavy bass music thumped rhythmically and the car began to jerk in squealing fits and starts, brake lights glaring on and off in the darkness in time to the beat of the music.

Razmus had just passed it when the wheels screamed free and the machine leapt forward, headlights and fog lights flaring to life. The sudden flood of light cut the back of a man's figure from the darkness ahead like a ghost brought suddenly to life. Barely thirty feet away, the man spun halfway around and stopped, frozen, in the middle of the street, eyes wide. By the time the small box from his hand hit the ground, the truck had closed half the distance.

*Disposable. Get to the yard.*

The man stayed rooted to the spot as the squealing tires were swallowed by the wild howls of the creatures closing in behind and Keeper's rasping, incoherent shrieks.

*Keeper matters. They won't even save themselves. Get to the yard and get Keeper.*

The man in the road hadn't even blinked.

Furious and guilt-twisted, with the weight of Elkie's eyes upon his heart, Razmus shot into the road.

“Move, you-!”

## The Mis-Taken Hero

“Left! Turn left!” Elkie snapped, glancing from the white disc to the window. “Faster!”

The driver pressed them hard into the turn, but a sudden burst of powerful light flared directly in front of them and the driver yanked the wagon to a hard, screeching stop.

A matching screech of tires came from ahead of them and the blinding light swept off to the side, sharply framing a dark, lunging figure for an instant.

“There!” Dom shouted, bracing against the separating glass and blinking into the glare. He recognized his cousin’s powerful, black form immediately, and the old tangled anger flushed his skin before he shoved it back down.

“Razmus!” Elkie cried shrilly, righting herself and scrabbling for the door handle.

Then the light collided with Razmus, snapping him sideways and sending him to the ground.

Dom was out of the taxi and running hard before Razmus hit the pavement. There were a thousand places for ambush here, and years of training took over automatically, his Guardsman’s mind tagging the objects on the narrow field as he closed the distance as fast as he could.

The road was lined with tall, packed buildings and more empty metal wagons, like all the other roads they’d been down in this overwhelming, overcrowded city. Only one of the tall street lamps was lit, but the hard white lights of the two wagons, in front and behind, threw enough to see.

A man dressed in shiny black clothes and bright white shoes stood frozen in the middle of the street, facing the lights. A few feet to his side, Razmus rolled to a stop as Elkie swept up next to him.

Dom forced his eyes forward, to the other metal wagon stopped diagonally across the road and rumbling like a hungry rankha.

Weaving easily around the statue-like man, Dom came up on the near side of the wagon, loosening his right hand automatically. Without stopping, he tightened his fist and sent it through the window. The glass was much harder than he'd expected and the bones of his hand crunched from the impact, but the glass shattered inward in a spray of tiny pieces. Immediately, the throbbing noise pounded outward, along with a cry of angry surprise.

Following his momentum, Dom lifted himself half inside, reaching and grasping. A ragged edge of glass stabbed into his stomach as he grabbed a handful of forearm, but he put the pain away and prized himself backwards off the door with his knees, hauling the unknown, screaming driver with him.

"Fuck!" The man screamed. He was big, and he thrashed as Dom pulled him through the opening. Glass tore and sliced his clothes and skin, a horn blared twice, something slapped the front window, and then the deep noise suddenly ceased and Dom hoisted the last of the man out and dumped him, bleeding and blubbering, on the ground.

"The fuck? Ahh! Wha-?" Pain, fear, and anger muddled the man's curses as he scrambled backward.

Dom dropped and shoved the man's chest hard with his good hand, squeezing out a fume of cheap alcohol and silencing him. Dom didn't recognize him, and he spoke with the same strange accent as the others here, but his features caught Dom entirely off-guard; from the short straw hair to the icy blue eyes and square nose, he was pure Naric.

*Om妈's here? How?*

"Stephen?"

The Naric's red-veined, dilated eyes swam unsteadily at the new voice and Dom spun round. Just behind them, the statue-man was staring at the Naric in blank confusion. "What's-?"

In the close light, Dom guessed the man was hardly more than a boy. His clothes were no more strange than the rest he'd seen over the past several hours, and like the rest, his face was as soft and pale as a child, with eyes bearing the plain transparency of the innocent.

"What's going - unh!"

Dom swept his legs out from under him and held him to the ground as well. "Be silent," he growled, shoving the air from the boy's chest with an audible whoosh and a distant blur of pain from his own broken fingers.

A few feet away, the wagon's powerful lights glared at Elkie, nearly pushing through her pearlescent skin. A memory rose in Dom's mind, but he kicked it away when he realized she wasn't touching Razmus' body.

*His dead body.*

"Stephen!" Dom shoved his attention back to the gasping Naric and pressed the drunken man's windpipe with his thumb. Stephen grabbed at his fingers and struggled for shallow breaths, but Dom's grip was firm. "Answer honestly and I will be quick. Where's Omma?"

Stephen's eyes shrunk slightly and his forehead knit in confusion, but he didn't speak. Blood inked his shredded clothes and collected in a thin pool beneath him.

"Who sent you," Dom growled slowly, pointing toward Razmus' body, "to kill Razmus?"

Again, though, there was only terrified confusion on Stephen's puffy red face. Silent tears smeared his blood-spattered face with pinkish streaks.

Dom narrowed his eyes. This was not a reaction he expected from one of Omma's mountain warriors.

Releasing Stephen's windpipe, Dom dragged the other one round with a frustrated bone-grinding jerk, but the sputtering boy was just another unremarkable D'Nom, by the look of him. Pale and soft, he was even more openly terrified than the odd Naric. Neither one of them fit.

*Trap.*

"Elkie!"

Silence.

A glance showed her back to him as she still crouched beside Raz's form, still not touching him.

Dom stared, unable to look away, and something deep within him splintered and cracked, even as he refused to believe.

*All this time. For nothing.*

"Ha ha ha ha!" A high, hoarse cackle rattled into the harsh light.

Dom jerked his head up. On the edge of his vision, Elkie's raised eyes blazed, sparking in the cold lights.

"Keeper," she hissed.

Keeper laughed again, practically screeching. "Yes, pretty one! It's me!"

Dom could just see him over the hood of the wagon, some dozen yards back from the lights. The small, angular man, with his white-yellow hair and his shining, crooked smile, leered to the side as he made that hideous noise. Scattered around him, several stouter, coat-covered figures made snickering, wheezing noises and scraped the pavement.

Each time he saw Keeper's wasted, androgynous figure, Dom's skin instinctively crawled in revulsion from his earliest memories of the old jailer. Old beyond years, the sallow skin hung in loose folds on the spare body and the blind, milky eyes wandered of their own will, but it was

that undeniably female voice, stretched high and taugth, which was most unsettling.

*Focus.*

Keeper's presence, in addition to this strange Naric, meant Maia wasn't the only one who could send people across, and only one name came to mind.

*Ptereseus.*

He quickly scanned for Finder. The twisted grawnt was never far from Keeper, and taking him out might even the odds slightly, but Finder was keeping out of sight, as usual.

"Don't move," he said to the two men as he stood. Keeper's other figures were fanning out across the street. Reflected light revealed wolf or canine heads, with hunched backs and lop-sided gaits as they circled, focusing on Elkie.

Standing alone, she let the oversized bandit coat drop to the ground. Her pale blue silks shone brightly in the clear light, casting the road and everyone on it in a chill hue that seemed to draw all heat out and away. A leather necklace string hung from her clenched fist. Dom didn't have to see the obsidian disc to know what it was.

*Raz's amulet.*

The amulet Dom's own father had made for the son he'd wished he'd had. The amulet Raz was supposed to come back with. The amulet Raz was supposed to save them all with.

Raz, whose body lay still as stone upon the ground in this mad, cold, foreign place.

Dom felt his strength ebb in despair of the lie he'd accepted and the life he'd wasted and the love he'd never truly had.

"Poor Elkie," Keeper sing-songed, softening his voice to a bristling rasp as he hobbled a step forward. "Is he truly dead? May I see?"

Elkie didn't move, but her glittering eyes stopped the old man abruptly.

Keeper offered a nervous, yellowed smile and then a giggle. “All this trouble and time, and not even Domenicus’ brick-headed stubbornness can deny it!” He laughed again, screeching. “Ha ha! Razmus is dead!”

Dom grit his teeth against the questions scratching angrily within him. He’d sworn himself to the prophecy, not to Razmus and not to Elkie. They had the amulet. Perhaps the prophecy could still be fulfilled. It had to be.

*Duty above all.*

Maia had done the unthinkable once, already; she could raise her son again if need be. Dom had given his word and he would see it done, even if it killed him.

*A man’s word is his law; isn’t that right, Father?*

Elkie hadn’t moved a muscle, beyond the pinking of her tiny knuckles around Raz’s amulet.

“Elkie!” he hissed, watching the covered figures moving closer, “The portal! Elkie!”

“It doesn’t matter.” Her voice was a hollow wind across an empty tundra.

Dom looked for an exit. Across the road, a low metal fence surrounded a dirt and grass area with strange, metal structures scattered about. On this side, the front door to the nearest building was cut off by two of the circling figures.

“After all this time,” Keeper giggled, “after all that waiting, after Maia lied to you, then told you just enough of the truth to use you...” He let the words hang, supported by the rough panting of the creatures looming around them in the dark.

Dom scanned behind them. The lights of the wagon they’d ridden in made it impossible to see anything clearly, but it was still the best option. He quickly measured the space between himself, Razmus’ body, and Elkie, but just as he looked at her, he watched her arms snap up into

a cross, one little fist clenching the amulet, the rest of her as taut as a bowline, and he threw himself to the ground, grabbing the other two men who flinched in terrified confusion.

The next moment, the world was filled with wind and noise and chaos.

Dom managed to flip the other two over and hold them all together just as the wind began to yank and tug him from the ground. Gripping them tightly under the arms, he pressed his head down and braced against the driving gale.

His clothes snapped and tore in the whirlwind and his ears echoed with the keening pitch of screaming air, but he held on. Sand scraped his skin as it whipped against them, getting between his clamped eyelids, under his clothes, and up his flaring nose. There were crashes and rending snaps, one on top of another like an avalanche of broken trees and stones. Something slammed into his feet and then his legs and back, bruising and winding him before bouncing away. Explosions sounded. Underneath it all wailed a mad mix of terrified screams and howls.

And then, as quickly as it had arrived, the whirlwind was gone.

Something large and heavy fell to earth nearby with a tremor. Water rained down on them. Strange horns blared loud and silent, loud and silent. The crinkle of shattered glass peppered the intermittent silence. A bitter crackling noise snapped and hissed.

Dom blew out hard and threw himself upward, away from the faint, gasping coughs of the two men. Stumbling quickly to his feet and rubbing his ears, he got his bearings in the darker road. He was certain it hadn't lasted more than a few moments, but everything within thirty feet in any direction was torn apart.

The street lamp lay broken and dark across the road, but the wagon lights still shone over the upturned scene. The Naric's wagon was on its side, windows laced with spidery cracks, one front light dark. A spray of water gushed from a hole beside the street, glittering through the

single ray of light. A large box tied to an enormous pole lying on the ground flashed white and blue sparks that danced on the surface of the growing pool of water. The wooden porch of the nearest building was a splayed pile of tinder stretching in front of the next building over. Every window within sight was gone, and strips of siding were missing throughout. In the street, wagons piled against and on top of other wagons, and everywhere was filled with the flotsam and jetsam of Elkie's fury, including the twisted and mangled form of one of Keeper's hairy, misfigured companions.

Elkie stood alone, transcendent and calm amid the devastation and noise, circled by a small patch of untouched ground. As Dom righted himself, she turned toward him, but didn't meet his gaze.

"Go if you want," she said between horn blasts, pointing at a hole in the ground between them. A wide iron cover lay off to the side.

Before Dom could respond, the concussive bang of a small cannon tore through the night. Her slight, beautiful body shot sideways through the air, a doll kicked by an angry child. Long black hair flowed behind her like dark water, until she landed hard against Razmus' body, crumpled and still. The amulet clattered to the ground where she'd stood.

"God-damn!" called an excited, vaguely familiar voice. "Now that's a weapon!"

Without hesitation or thought, Dom closed himself down and focused on this new threat. Blurrily silhouetted by the lights from the wagon he and Elkie had arrived in, a figure slowly approached, one hand spinning something loosely around a finger, like a knuckled dagger.

*The driver.*

"Luska!" Keeper's incensed fury pitched over the blaring horns.

"Of course it's me, old man. Someone had to—" The driver's voice suddenly lost its levity

as he shouted over the horn noise. “How did you know?”

“Finder is not fooled by your disguises, shape shifter,” Keeper replied haughtily, as Finder crawled atop the creaking side of the Naric’s wagon and pointed directly at the driver.

“Now leave-”

Dom was expecting the bang this time.

“Magging filth,” Luska cursed, as Finder dropped from sight like a candle snuffed out.

“Aaiii!” Keeper’s shrill anguish reached into Dom’s bones, surprising him with its familiarity, but his eyes locked on the amulet in front of him, useless and meaningless as it was now.

“Kill him! Kill him! Kill hiiiiim!”

Ravens howled drowned out the horns and other noise, only to be joined by more canon fire and Luska’s own roars as he ducked and ran.

Dom grabbed the amulet just as one of the wolf-creatures lunged out of the dark. He scooped up the heavy disc with his good hand and cocked it back for a broad swing, but another bang sounded and the creature’s face disappeared in a blur of blood and hair before the body dropped limply to the ground.

“Stop!” screamed Luska, racing towards him and firing.

A hammer-blow struck the disc Dom held, ringing loudly and nearly knocking it from his grip, as a metal slug the size of a sling pellet ricochet, wasted, to the ground.

With a sudden, eviscerating clarity, Dom found himself entirely summed up in that wasted slug. All this fighting, all this work, all his life, and he’d failed as completely as that spent piece of iron.

As he stared, a blurred, hairy form shot out of the dark, knocking Luska to the ground in

a sprawl of curses and growling yelps.

Numbly, Dom looked at the amulet. Through the interlaced triangles engraved in the glassy obsidian surface, he saw the deep glow of pride on his father's face the day the old man had given the amulet to Razmus. More than he'd ever shown for his own son.

“Help!”

Dom turned as a creature lunged for the two strangers as they tried to scramble their way upright. He leapt forward and brought the disc up hard against the creature's snout from below. The beast's face crunched upward, and it flopped over backwards.

The men tripped pathetically back onto the ground, as Dom stepped in quickly and caved in the wolfish skull with the thick edge of the heavy iron hole cover.

Spinning around, he felt the wild stares of confusion from the two stunned men. In the detached observation of his mind, he was again struck by how out of place they were. That thought disappeared, however, when he saw Elkie's ashen corpse crumpled up against Raz's own.

Fury almost engulfed him, but he twisted it into cold precision when another explosion and a whimpered cry snapped his head around.

“No more!” shrieked Keeper, still hidden in the dark. “Get him!”

Luska, a dark wash of blood across his neck and chest, wrestled himself out from under the limp body of another of the creatures and pointed his incredible weapon at Dom.

Crouching behind the hole cover, Dom was face to face with the terrified men as slugs slammed into the iron disc, shaking the bones in his fingers and echoing hollowly in his ears. The men cringed at the noise and their eyes were nearly as white as his own with fear.

“Domenicus!” Luska cried.

“Luska!” screamed Keeper.

“Mag it,” Dom grunted. He shifted forward, grabbed the stunned Naric under the arm, and hauled him headfirst through the open hole. Grabbing the boy’s shirt next, Dom paused as he caught sight of Elkie’s corpse again. The blue and white sparks from the strange box lit her already grey skin and reflected in the spreading water.

*All for nothing.*

A pair of guttural howls and another bang cut into his thoughts.

“Domenicus!” Luska shouted through the horns and Keeper’s unintelligible shrieks.

Dom looked past the terrified boy, and into the dark portal. He thought of his promise to Maia, and of Elkie and Razmus. Without them, for entirely separate reasons, he had no reason to return home.

*Maia forgive me.*

Cramming the amulet into the boy’s shaking hand, Dom shoved him through the opening.

“Find Maia!” he shouted. “Tell her I’m s-”

A slug tore into his chest as if he’d been kicked by a rankha and the world spun madly away.

End of excerpt from

*Witness*  
*Book One of All Prophets Are Liars*

Copyright © Bill Blais 2008  
All Rights Reserved.

The right of Bill Blais to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted  
by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in the United States in 2008 by  
iUniverse  
2021 Pine Lake Road, Suite 100  
Lincoln, NE 68512

By permission of the author, this file may be freely copied and distributed  
for the express reading pleasure of anyone wishing to sample the novel.  
Any other use is strictly prohibited.

Like it? Hate it? Glad you saved a tree?  
bill@billblais.com  
<http://www.billblais.com>

WITNESS  
BOOK ONE OF ALL PROPHETS ARE LIARS

BY

BILL BLAIS