



“A wild ride. Highly recommended.”

—Ed Greenwood, *New York Times* bestselling author and creator of the Forgotten Realms

RETURN OF THE WIZARD KING

THE WIZARD KING TRILOGY

I

CHAD CORRIE

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DARK HORSE BOOKS

CHAPTER 1

THERE IS ONLY POWER AND THE PATH ONE TAKES TO ATTAIN IT.

—**Raston Tolle, Telborian wizard king**

Reigned 34 BV–6 BV

Valan emerged from the portal's brilliance into the musty chamber. Once through, he turned to face the mosaic fixed into the stone wall through which he'd passed. The white light had already faded, revealing the azure and violet tiles forming the twelve-foot circle. Small and uniform in shape, they'd been crafted into a swirling twist of color—a whirlpool of polished tiles spiraling into some unknown pit.

Turning from the wall, he took in the large chamber. As the portal's lingering glow faded all was lost in a shadowy murk, punctured only by the purple glow from a collection of runes carved into a solid blue marble column, encircled by a wrought iron fence, at the chamber's center. Valan's silver robes reflected part of the runes' light as the mage strode forward, brown eyes seeking out all he could with ardent interest.

As he walked, he retrieved a clear glass globe from the satchel dangling from his shoulder. Aside from what was in the satchel, all his belongings either were in the pack strapped to his back or stuffed into one of the handful of bulging belt pouches swaying with his steps. The mage whispered a word as he tossed the globe in the air. This birthed a flash

of sunlight from the now white and glowing ball that hovered above and to the right of his head.

Once his eyes adjusted to the light, he shed his pack and set it beside him with careful effort. This done, he took a few steps forward, the glowing ball following him closely as he did so. With its help, he could now clearly discern where he stood.

Built in a rectangular design, the chamber was about one hundred feet from the base of the stairs opposite him and about eighty feet wide. Its twenty-foot ceiling increased its cavernous feel. It was built from large granite blocks tightly packed one into the other; they formed a near-seamless weave of walls and floor. But as impressive as the sight the stones conveyed was, the real object of interest was that blue column dominating the chamber's center. Ringed with a fence crafted of spear-point-tipped wrought iron shafts, it was a surreal sight in the otherwise empty room.

He'd come a long way for it—searched and pressed himself through more than others might have thought possible. But now . . . His booted heels clapped loudly as he made his way toward the skeletal fence, its gate latched by a worn wrought iron bar that slid into an equally worn clasp. The latch was on the outside, keeping anyone or anything inside the fence from straying too far from the column.

"Finally." With a slight gesture, the gate swung open, squeaking softly. He cleared the twelve feet between the fence and the column with ease, reaching a slender hand for the cold blue marble.

"The Transducer." There was power there. Power to tap into, to use . . . and master. He craned his neck, taking in the majesty of the impressive fifteen-foot structure. Soon enough he'd translate the purple glowing runes stretching its length. It wouldn't be long now.

At the column's base, where he stood, was an eight-foot doorway. He dared a look inside. With the aid of his globe, he discovered a hollowed-out room. It was about six feet in diameter and constructed from floor to ceiling in polished blue marble.

"Everything's intact," he murmured. But any further investigation was cut short by the sound of stone scraping on stone coming from the top of the stairs that snaked up the wall opposite him. The stairs partially

flanked the wall and then ducked into an ascending corridor with a brighter opening he took for a doorway just beyond it.

Withdrawing from the fenced area, he watched a soft white line of light slide down the walls parallel with the stairs. Assuming it was some aid in maneuvering the old steps, he was more concerned with who might be descending them. He wasn't expecting visitors.

He whispered another word, dimming the glowing ball's brilliance to the brightness of candlelight, and tiptoed closer to the stairs. Someone was indeed making his way down. Only one person. Good. He soundlessly bounded up the steps two at a time, keeping a few spells on the tip of his tongue. The point where the stairs made their right turn into the corridor beyond was where he met up with his unwelcome visitor.

The pointed ears, claw-like hands, and skin the color of a ripe pear made clear he was facing a hobgoblin. He stood a foot above Valan's six-foot frame and was much more muscled than the mage. But Valan's magic was more than an equalizer, even considering the sword sheathed at the hobgoblin's side.

But the hobgoblin's steel-gray, short-sleeved robe, accompanied by the brown padded cloth vest, wasn't quite right for a race said to be more at home in armor or common dress than robes. The Steel Cross he wore as a belt buckle confirmed Valan's initial suspicions. The twin swords crossed over a round shield was a clear sign this was a priest of Khuthon.

A quick swipe of his hand sent the hobgoblin flying from the stairs and roughly hitting the floor below. While he spoke some Goblin, he didn't need to be fluent to understand the guttural growls that followed were clearly curses of pain. As the hobgoblin swiftly found his feet, Valan cast another spell.

"Agris lorim naslee rah!" A sudden burst of aquamarine energy shot out of his hands. An eyeblink later the hobgoblin was frozen solid, a thin layer of ice outlining his frame. The room was encompassed in a sinking mist birthed by the sudden change in temperature, the icy hobgoblin crackling in the seething fog.

Looking back at the corridor from where the hobgoblin came, Valan found it empty. He waited a moment more—ears tuned for anything

while eyeing the daylight streaming in from the new opening with some trepidation. Once confident he was truly alone, he spoke another word of magic, plucked the now dimming globe from the air, and returned it to his satchel. He made his way toward the base of the ascending corridor.

The hobgoblin wouldn't have been alone. Not a priest. So that meant there were others above. But how many? And were they *all* priests, warriors, or a mixture of both? Fishing out a silver medallion from beneath his robes, Valan studied the object carefully, noting the small ancient runes etched around its lip. More than once, the medallion had saved him from death. Many who'd tried introducing him to Asorlok failed—their weapons bouncing off his flesh as if it were hardened iron. The medallion would keep him safe from any physical attack, but if there were any more priests about he could be in for a very real fight.

Replacing the medallion under his robes, Valan ascended the stairs with more spells at the ready. He could feel the change in temperature as he climbed, growing quickly from a damp chill to a warmer and more humid environment. Of course, he knew from his studies the ruins sat in the midst of the jungle of Taka Lu Lama, but it was one thing to have head knowledge of a matter and quite another to experience the thick, semitropical air firsthand. All the better the Transducer was in the cooler chamber below.

At the top of the stairs, he discovered that the opening was a secret door hidden behind a statue, which he immediately crouched beside for added protection. The hidden door opened into a column-lined hallway with a row of statues extending forty feet down along the wall opposite the columns. All of the statues—including the one he hid behind—were of powerfully muscled humanoids and devoid of heads, each wearing unique armor and carved into a variety of military stances.

To his left the hallway turned around a quiet corner with no hint of activity beyond. It was the same on his right. This just left the open door across from him, out of which came the sound of more hobgoblins. Creeping forward, he dared a look inside.

Twenty hobgoblinian priests stood in the center of a rectangular area that must have been an ancient temple's altar room. The entire area was lit by

the late morning light, flooding in from both the holes in the ceiling and the broken stained glass windows on the wall opposite him. Naturalistic images of vines and roses, birds and serpents lived amid the supporting pillars lining the walls, alongside frescoes and mosaics depicting faceless forms, some in scenes from daily life and others devoutly petitioning headless giants. And while the massive space was impressive, Valan's main interest was with the altar the priests had pooled around.

The granite structure was square, about four feet tall. Its chipped and chiseled surface was host to a crudely formed set of crossed swords resting over a round shield, etched into the stone on all sides. The bloodstains were also recent additions and hard to miss, stirring his thoughts with darker musings even as he noted the stone lectern a few feet from and facing the altar.

On the wall to his left, however, was something more interesting: seven bookcases filled with scrolls and tomes. These stood beside a handful of simple wooden tables and chairs—another obviously recent addition to the room. If any of the items in the bookcases had been found in the ruins, they'd be a great boon for work with the Transducer. Pondering the matter, he observed the score or so goblins working in various capacities: sweeping the floor, tending to the bookcases, and assisting priests.

Goblins were related to hobgoblins—even ogres. All three races had roots in the jarthal, an ancient race said to have been created by Khuthon at the birth of Tralodren. Valan had long studied the various racial lines covering the world. It was essential if he wished to make proper use of the Transducer. In many ways, goblins were similar in appearance to hobgoblins, but with uniformly straight black hair—instead of the hobgoblin's brown or black—and skin the color of a ripe lime. The biggest difference, of course, was their size: goblins were only about half the height of hobgoblins. Even so, they could still be trouble should any of them notice his lurking. But a hobgoblin would beat the goblins to it.

No sooner had a nearby priest turned in Valan's direction than the hobgoblin thrust a thick finger like a spear point right at him. The room teemed with frenetic energy and Valan leapt fully into the open, eyeing

the onrush of goblins while the priests shouted back and forth to each other in their native tongue. He could ascertain just enough of their varied shouts to understand they took him for an intruder and that he should be killed. It was all he needed to know.

“Ackrin-loth gestra!” he shouted as he spread his fingers, expelling a web of lightning that took care of the closest goblins. He took no notice as they dropped, convulsing painfully on the floor before entering Asorlok’s gates. His attention was locked on the priests.

A spear crafted of searing red energy sailed straight for his heart. It’d been lobbed by the lead priest, who continually barked out commands. Valan instantly sidestepped the prayer made manifest. The weapon narrowly missed his right shoulder. Wasting no time, Valan conjured and flung a set of sharp icicles at the priests. They tried to avoid them but couldn’t entirely prevent their sharp points from piercing their flesh. Now even more enraged, the priests rushed him en masse, weapons tightly gripped and more curses on their lips.

Valan stood his ground. “Agris larom magalasta urik kane!” Before the hobgoblins knew what had happened, they’d run into and then through a translucent, eight-foot-tall, charcoal-gray barrier which suddenly formed a few feet from Valan’s position. To any casual observer it might have appeared as if the whole structure was made of standing water, which splashed on and off the hobgoblins as they barreled through. But that was where the similarity ended.

The priests wailed as the charcoal-gray gel clung to them, eating away at their flesh and clothing like acid. Even their weapons weren’t immune, sizzling and melting like butter in a hot skillet. One by one, each hobgoblin fell on his knees, cursing and crawling toward the mage. Though each was intent on doing him harm, none could make good on such claims. Their weapons were useless, and no matter how hard they struggled to wipe it off, the gel would only spread farther across their contorted bodies. A moment later all were fully on the floor, either dead or very nearly so. But that wasn’t the end.

Valan spun round and found a fresh force of hobgoblins shouting for his death. The hallway he’d first seen apparently led out of the temple.

Yet while they had the greater numbers, these hobgoblins were common warriors, their status clear by their chain mail shirts and drawn swords. No magic. No priests. Valan smiled and began casting a new spell. This was going to be fun.



Hadek didn't know if he should look into the commotion coming from the temple. Content as he was in his personal oasis from the challenging world that was the Basilisk Tribe, the bald goblin didn't feel like leaving it for anything. But as the noise grew and the shouts and sounds of fighting reached him, he knew something wasn't right, and for his own sake he needed to investigate. And so it was he found himself now taking in a most amazing and terrifying sight from where he hid beside a pillar close to the door through which he'd entered, not too far from the bookcases.

A skirmish was underway, and Hadek was glad to stay out of it. What made the matter all the more intriguing was that it all appeared to be related to a single intruder standing at the room's main entrance: a lone Telborian wearing silver robes. The brown-haired human was lean and carried no weapon, but none of the warriors could send him to Mortis. Attacks that should have run him through or sliced off his head instead stopped just outside his frame with a sudden jerk.

All the warriors could do was slice a bit of his robe here and there. His flesh wasn't marred in the least. It wasn't until the Telborian returned the attack that Hadek fully understood the nature of the threat. The human used magic to cut down the hobgoblins with apparent ease. And if seeing him in action wasn't enough to give one pause, then a quick inventory of the carnage surrounding the wizard was all one needed to heed.

The slain priests lay in puddles of their own dissolving flesh and weapons, while the goblins had also taken a beating. Most had been killed, but a remnant of their ranks hung back from the fighting—some even hiding, like Hadek. It seemed a wise course of action given the situation, but it wasn't an enduring one. Eventually the hobgoblins would either

die or retreat, and then where would that leave him? Alone with the wizard. And that wasn't good.

Hadek pressed himself deeper into the limited shadows afforded him. If he ran, he could be spotted and killed just as easily as he could in battle. His indecision lasted until he spied Boaz rush into the scene. The chieftain of the Basilisk Tribe was leading a fresh force of warriors into the temple even as the last of those who'd challenged the mage were shaking hands with death. Upon catching sight of each other, Boaz and the mage stood still. Hadek supposed each was taking stock of the other. When they'd finished doing so—a time frame measured in heartbeats—the human addressed Boaz in rough Goblin.

"You can keep throwing your men's lives away or be wise and surrender."

Boaz seemed surprised he'd been addressed in his native tongue. He squared his shoulders and peered around the room. His expression grew dark and he released a snarl of seething wrath when he caught sight of the priests' remains. Hadek tried keeping as still as a statue.

"You can't harm me," the mage continued, "no matter how much you try."

"What do you want?" Boaz eyed the wizard from sole to crown.

"That blue column in the chamber below. You leave me to it and my experiments, and I'll leave you to your lives."

Boaz was still. Hadek was surprised Boaz didn't run him through right there. Or at least attempt it. He didn't take kindly with others trying to prove themselves his better. The handful who had since Boaz became chieftain ten years earlier were quickly shown their place in Mortis.

"And who are you to demand anything?"

"I think your dead priests speak to that," the wizard answered. "The only question that remains is if you'll join them."

Behind Boaz, the remaining warriors, some fifty strong, observed the exchange. The growing unease among them was palpable. They dominated the main hallway extending out of the open room the priests had turned into their makeshift library and altar room. But even the spacious hallway couldn't comfortably afford so great a company of

men. And with them blocking the exit, Hadek wasn't able to escape. That just left his secret refuge . . .

"We're many," Boaz replied confidently. "You can't hold back a whole tribe."

Before anyone could act, the wizard brought forth a fat shaft of lightning from the hand he'd directed at the hobgoblin warriors. The men howled in agony as the lightning forked and danced between them. Their deaths were gruesome but quick.

Boaz raised his sword and bellowed, making for the mage like some goring bull. Instantly, the chieftain was lifted from the ground. Hadek could see he was choking. It was like some giant invisible hand had uprooted him and was now crushing his throat. Boaz dropped his sword as he frantically tried to free himself from the phantom vise, but to no avail. No matter how hard he clawed he remained in its grip.

"Now," said the wizard, "are you going to join your men or help me?"

"What do you plan to do?" Boaz croaked.

"I'll need help in my experiments."

"Wh-what sort of help?" Boaz gave up trying to free himself and instead focused his gaze on the mage. Even at a distance Hadek could hear him struggling for breath.

The mage's grin was far from calming. "Test subjects."

"How many?"

Hadek could see where this was going and didn't like it one bit. Thinking it was now or never, he made a dash for the nearby door, drawing both men's attention. Even in his present predicament and distance from the hobgoblin, he could feel the hot ire of Boaz's glare burn into him.

"He'll do for a start, I suppose." Hadek was pulled toward the wizard as if he'd been lassoed around the waist. It was no good resisting. He might as well have been standing in oil as he slid over the stone floor with the greatest of ease. As soon as he reached the mage he dropped to his knees. There was only one option left.

"Have mercy." He addressed the wizard in Telboros—the Telborian's native tongue. The wizard stepped Hadek's way, letting Boaz drop to the floor behind him.

“You speak Telboros?” he returned in the same language.

“Yes,” Hadek quickly replied. “The priests taught me so I could help them.”

“With what?”

“Those.” He pointed at the bookcases.

“You can read too?” The wizard’s respect was rising. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Boaz’s previous ire drift into disgust.

“What are you saying?” Boaz demanded in Goblin, forcing himself on his feet. He, like most of the tribe, couldn’t speak Telboros. It was the priests who preferred the language when they wanted to keep something private. And, by extension, some of those serving them also had to be instructed to better facilitate their will.

Any other time Hadek would have quickly responded to Boaz’s question, but now he felt more emboldened to resist—as if he had some protection he could fall back on. It actually felt good in a way. Though it was really more like hiding behind the flat of a dagger’s blade that at any time could show him its edge, for the moment, he welcomed it.

“Yes, I read and write—”

“What’s your name?”

“Hadek.”

“Hadek?” Boaz’s voice was rough from his ordeal but still strong enough to remind the goblin he could be run through if he wasn’t careful.

“Rise.” Hadek did as the wizard bid. “Your life will be spared as long as you serve me.”

“What’s he saying?” Boaz nearly cursed as he retrieved his sword, making sure his attention never fully left them.

Before Hadek could answer, the mage spun around and faced the chieftain, speaking once more in Goblin. “That if you value your life as well as your tribe, you’ll do as I say. I want all of those scrolls and books moved down into the chamber—bookcases and all. Those tables and chairs could be of use too. And then I’ll need those test subjects.”

“Do you have a name I can curse?” Boaz sheathed his sword with a frustrated thrust.

“Valan.” The mage returned to Hadek, switching back to Telboros. “Come. There’s much to be done.”

As Hadek followed Valan he tried not to dwell on Boaz’s searing stare as he passed. Even as they neared the secret entrance to the chamber it stuck with him. He’d been far from cherished before, but now . . . Now he was certain that outside of Valan’s protection he was a dead man. And who was to say how long the mage would be among them, or how long he’d tolerate Hadek’s presence? Or if he’d end up being made a test subject after all? What had he gotten himself into?



“Interesting.” Cadrith’s words were as dry as his skeletal frame and the threadbare plum robes and gray hooded cloak draped over them. To his left, always at the ready and in reach, rested his staff: a time-seasoned wooden shaft capped with an infant’s skull. His attention was locked on the back of a violet glowing skull clutched in a monstrous obsidian hand a few paces from his throne. Its gaze seemed focused on a far corner of the room, hiding its empty sockets from Cadrith’s eye while small silver runes burned hot across its sides and front. It was through this skull he’d just finished watching Valan’s encounter with the hobgoblins.

“Now how best to use you . . .” He slid back into his polished red stone seat and looked out onto the small room. Besides the throne and the skull there was only a lonely chest opposite him, allowing both it and the scrying skull to always be within Cadrith’s sight.

A lone window peered onto the fading twilight outside and the swaying shadows beyond. The occasional breeze rustled a few tapestries, but the centuries-gnawed surroundings were far from his thoughts. When he’d first arrived at the deserted keep after awakening from his longer-than-expected slumber, he’d been mildly curious about the new setting. But it eventually became meaningless in light of his desire to return to Tralodren.

The original strategy had been to wait out the Divine Vindication’s removal of magic on Tralodren, taking his time to develop his plans and skills as best he was able. Had he known how long it would be until

magic finally returned, he might have reconsidered the strategy. If not for his spell somehow extending his slumber for centuries beyond his original intentions, he'd have had to endure all that time in what had proven to be a dismal situation. It'd been vexing enough dealing with the past five years since he'd awakened; he couldn't even begin to fathom the agony of over seven hundred years staring him in the face.

Why the spell had gone awry he didn't know, but he was grateful it did. If he'd been a more religious man, he would have thanked the gods, but Cadrith knew they'd nothing to do with it. If anything they would have kept him in continued slumber, or just killed him. Either that or one of the local denizens could have just as easily destroyed him had the spell also failed to keep him hidden from sight while he slept. Another reason for the religious man to give his thanks. But awakening, he discovered, was the easy part.

Taking up his staff, he moved toward the window, ancient robes fluttering in the soft breeze. Since entering the Abyss, he'd taken to keeping his hood drawn at all times. There was no reason for it other than it let him pretend there was still something there to cover. It was more a habit now than anything else. A small tongue of azure flame flickered inside each of his eye sockets, which seemed to scan the empty, hilly terrain around the tower he'd taken for his current domain. All was still, but that meant nothing. He'd learned well enough that in the Abyss much of what's seen can be deceptive.

He spied movement in the distance, a dark shape fluttering through the clouded sky. Looking back at the scrying skull, he gave a wave of his bony hand, causing it to return to normal bone—albeit with some carved runes here and there. A moment later, a familiar visitor took a perch on the window's ledge, moving his strong form through it by means of his clawed feet and hands.

"Sargis is eager for some news." Akarin finished making his way inside, forcing Cadrith a few steps back so the nine-foot winged demon had his needed space.

"I'm sure he is." Cadrith watched the demon case the room, his yellow eyes in stark contrast to his blood-red skin, bald head, and black bull-like

horns curving out from his forehead. “But I’d be better able to make progress without so many interruptions. I told him I’d keep him informed of any developments.” The demon’s brawny tail swayed from side to side before stilling itself behind him.

To say the lich loathed the pointy-eared minion would be an understatement of the highest order. The demon was nothing more than a lackey of his weakened master, who, like Akarin himself, mistakenly thought himself superior to others. And that arrogance and boldness grew more annoying with each visit.

“He’s aware of what you told him.” Akarin folded his powerful wings behind him as he found Cadrith once again.

“Then why are you here?”

“To find out what you might have forgotten to pass on since the last time you shared your progress.” Akarin crossed his arms and puffed his chest. Cadrith had never seen the demon clothed in anything other than a short-sleeved scale mail shirt. The armor flowed down to his thighs and covered his black silken breechcloth. A thick segmented plate metal belt kept his sword always within reach.

“It’s nice to see I still have your master’s trust,” he said, making his way for the throne.

“Is there any reason you *shouldn’t* have it?” The demon raised a bushy black eyebrow.

“You’ve grown a bit bold, Akarin.” He took a seat.

“And Sargis has grown even more impatient.” The demon tapped a clawed finger on his muscular forearm. “Do you have anything to tell him?”

“You can tell him I believe I’ve found our key.” Cadrith was once more peering at the silent scrying skull.

“He might want to know more than that.” Akarin’s tail swished as he again looked over the room, focusing on the darker corners now.

“*He* wants to know . . . or *you* do?” Cadrith peered back at the demon.

“Does it matter?” Akarin’s smirk pulled back just enough of his lips to show the sharp teeth behind them. When added to his overall physicality, the effect would have been quite terrifying to most. But Cadrith knew a

thing or two about theatrics—especially when it came to keeping one’s place in the dangerous social order of which he was now a part.

“If you value your life, it does.” He glared back, latching on to the demon’s eyes. Though it would have been easier to do so if he still had eyes, he was sure Akarin got the intended effect.

“I’ll make sure he gets the message,” said Akarin, turning to leave.

“Please do. And when you see him, remind Sargis that *I* will contact *him* about anything he should know.” Akarin didn’t reply, merely leapt out the window and into the spreading night. Cadrith waited a while longer before returning his staff to the side of his throne and casting the spell to reactivate the scrying skull. There was still much that needed doing.