

THE  
SHADOW  
REGENT

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CHAD CORRIE



DARK HORSE BOOKS

## CHAPTER 1

**T**wila watched the Chimera lead the Tularin down one of the main hallways in Anoma, Gurthghol's grand palace. She pushed herself into the shadows of the hall, further cloaking herself as the two incarnates passed. This wasn't that hard, since the palace, like much of Altearin, had plenty of shadows to spare. And her nature as a Lady of Darkness further augmented her efforts.

One of the many strange beings to inhabit the plane of Altearin, Chimera were as tall as Tularins but with goat legs, a humanoid torso, a snake-like tail, and a lion's head with ram's horns. Like the Tularin, this one had wings, but his were more bat-like; the Tularin's were covered in white feathers which matched his platinum hair. Gurthghol had often used Chimera in various guard duties, and this incarnate was allowed his heavy plate armor and spear. The Tularin, by contrast, wore only a white robe with a golden sash around his waist and a long sword strapped over that.

Tularins weren't commonly called upon to fight, as they were more often seen as administrators and messengers between the gods. Even still, they were a rare sight on Altearin. Unlike the other gods, Gurthghol didn't keep any in attendance, making Twila all the more alert as to just what sort of tidings accompanied this particular visit. Long aware of the workings of the palace since finding her way into and up the ranks of Gurthghol's harem,

Twila knew this was something of potentially great importance. Something she wanted to be sure she was able to use to the fullest possible advantage.

Neither of the incarnates spoke. Each was taken with their duty: the Chimera to seeing this new messenger to his purpose, and the Tularin to delivering his message. Such dedication was impressive but not uncommon among the incarnates. The titans and titan lords, however, were another story. She waited until the pair were well down the onyx-paneled hall before following after them, making sure to keep clear of the occasional sconce or torch along the way.

Keeping to the shadows was easy enough, as was making sure she remained quiet. Being twice their size didn't prove as detrimental as one might have thought. The palace was built for titans, and most who inhabited it were used to the size difference between titan, incarnate, and others. It was the stealth where she had to be mindful. This was still the residence of Gurthghol—the ruler of Altearin—and most of the guards probably wouldn't take too kindly to someone attempting to sneak through it. She followed them to a closed door at the end of another hallway, where the Chimera turned back to the Tularin.

“He's in here,” Twila heard the Chimera say in his native Entropis, which apparently the Tularin understood. “I'll let him know of your arrival.”

“Thank you,” said the Tularin in the same language as the Chimera entered the room.

Twila knew it was a library—one of a handful in the palace. But just who was awaiting the Tularin's message wasn't clear.

If this was a diplomatic message from the pantheon or another god, then it would have been delivered to another god. But Twila knew Gurthghol was on Thangaria with the rest of the pantheon. So why send this Tularin? The only other persons of rank in the plane under Gurthghol would be Erdis, Shador, and Mergis. And she knew both Shador and Mergis weren't in the palace, so that just left—

“Erdis will see you now.” The Chimera emerged from the library.

Wasting no time, Twila tapped deeper into the cosmic element of darkness and enveloped herself fully into the hall's flickering shadows,

hurrying to a special spot in the hall's wall that, when pushed just right, allowed a slender opening to appear. Sliding inside, she made her way through the winding tunnel until coming to rest at the end of another stone wall. Here again, if you knew how to push the right stones, you could silently create another opening that would take you into the library itself. It was one of several such secrets she'd collected through her efforts. Some from friendly palace workers or members of the court, others from Gurthghol himself. All had served her well.

And no sooner had Twila stepped into the back part of the library then she set her ears and eyes upon the two incarnates speaking at the front of the room near the door. Being an incarnate himself, Erdis and the Tularin were the same size, meaning Twila would have to listen extra carefully to catch all the details. She wasn't about to try to get any closer, staying within the cloaking darkness as much as possible.

"Welcome to Altearin. I'm told you have something important to relay." Erdis greeted the Tularin in Entropis. His robes were a rich mix of teal, white, and dark blue, which complemented his olive complexion.

"And you are Erdis, Gurthghol's chamberlain?" The Tularin kept to the same language, no doubt honoring the preferences of his given audience. Erdis often didn't speak Entropis, from what Twila knew. The official language of court and for much of Altearin was Titan.

"I am." Erdis' oval head was shaved save for a brown ponytail at the back, allowing his pointed ears to clearly be seen. The high forehead made his faint features stand out. His thin lips were almost nonexistent, and his nose was so flat it nearly blended into his face. She used to wonder how his people managed to breathe, but somehow they'd found a way to thrive, like all the other chaotic incarnates, of which the Kardu, his people, were a part.

"Then the pantheon has sent me with a message for you and the two viceroys."

"And you have my word I will inform them as soon as we finish speaking here," said Erdis. Twila had no doubt of that. The Kardu had a long record of integrity and loyalty to Gurthghol and his duties.

“The pantheon thought it right to inform you of recent events at Thangaria . . . and of some new challenges Altearin shall be facing in the future.”

“Go on.”

“As you may be aware, Nuhl, one of the two Cosmic Entities, recently sought to use a human wizard named Cadrith Elanis as a pawn to bring about the end of the pantheon and the world of Tralodren, which they created. Gurthghol and all the other gods decided to make their final stand against the assault on Thangaria, where, millennia prior, Vkar saw his end by Nuhl and another agent.”

“Yes, I am keenly aware of that,” said Erdis. “As are all of those who have a hand in keeping this realm governed.”

Twila was too, of course. She made it her business to stay informed on all important matters of state and the lives of those from whom she received such information. It could be tiring work but was well worth it—especially in times such as this.

“And were you aware of Gurthghol’s plan to reclaim his father’s throne?” The Tularin’s question gave Erdis pause.

“Vkar’s throne,” Twila whispered in surprise.

She, like just about all titans, knew of it. How could you not know about the most powerful item in all the cosmos? But it was always out of reach—to both god and divinity alike. Gurthghol himself had seen to that. But now to have him laying claim to it again was truly something of note. Even more so since he never shared the matter with Twila—or rather she hadn’t been able to discover it through her normal channels and methods.

“Is this the pantheon asking or you?” asked Erdis.

“I make no accusations. I simply want to make sure you receive all the information I was sent to convey.” The Tularin’s reply lightened Erdis’ features.

“Then yes, I had an idea that was what he was about. One doesn’t take a small force of warriors to Galba for a simple chat. I had my concerns about him breaking the pact between them, but it was not my place to try to stop him from his decision, even if I had my doubts.” He sighed. “Did he succeed? Is that what this is about?”

“Gurthghol reclaimed Vkar’s throne and used it in the battle with Cadrith and Nuhl on Thangaria.”

“And won?” Erdis was as surprised as Twila.

“Yes. With the throne and some help from a goblin, he was able to put an end to Cadrith and the threat Nuhl posed through him.”

“A goblin?” Erdis was clearly intrigued. “The throne of the first god of the cosmos wasn’t enough to take out the threat?”

“The goblin had a scepter that helped weaken Cadrith, allowing Gurthghol to make quick work of the former wizard.”

“That sounds like a rather powerful scepter. One, no doubt, the other gods will be interested in now as well, assuming Gurthghol hadn’t claimed it for himself.”

“No, he didn’t. And he didn’t end his fight with Nuhl once Cadrith had been defeated. Instead, he pressed on and sought to destroy both Awntodgenee and Nuhl in their true forms.”

“He did what?” Erdis barely managed to soften the shout.

“He sought to use Vkar’s throne like his father before him, seeking to destroy the Cosmic Entities. He claimed it was the only way to finally be free of their threat over the pantheon and the entire cosmos.”

“I knew he was seeking something bold”—Erdis lowered his head in what Twila could only assume was a form of mourning—“but to take on the Cosmic Entities? It’s madness.” His eyes locked on to the Tularin’s. “Did—did he survive?”

“None of the pantheon know for certain,” said the Tularin. “But he was taken captive and, it’s assumed, will meet his end in time.”

Erdis hung his head once more with a heavy sigh.

Twila could feel the weight on her own shoulders. And then there was the pang in her heart. She’d grown rather fond of Gurthghol. Her repeated efforts to raise herself in his favor and in rank in his harem had brought them closer in some ways than she’d expected. And yet, even as this all set in, her mind was racing. This opened up so many avenues to explore . . . *if* you had the right means to explore them, that is.

“I’ve been sent to let you and the twin viceroys of Altearin know as soon as possible so you can make the proper arrangements and prepare for spreading the news to the rest of the realm.”

“But he’s not dead. You’re sure of that?”

Twila inched closer, intent on not missing a single syllable.

“I can only share what I’ve been told,” said the Tularin. “And when I left, none of the pantheon were sure if he lived or died. But my understanding is he will not be returning anytime soon, if at all. You and your viceroys will have to work through what comes next until additional arrangements can be made.”

“*Additional* arrangements?” Erdis raised an eyebrow. “Like having the pantheon try to take command of Altearin? This is still Gurthghol’s realm—whether he’s here or not. As long as he draws breath—”

“I will leave those matters to you and your viceroys. They are not of my concern. And I have spoken what needs saying.”

“What about Vkar’s throne?” asked Erdis. “What happened to it?”

“It was taken along with Gurthghol.”

“So now they have the throne as well—I’m sure that hasn’t pleased the pantheon.”

“I believe it was said that what has happened has happened and cannot be changed.”

Erdis snorted. “Sounds like Saredhel. So then the rest of the gods are going to be busy, I take it.”

“There is much that needs to be done. And they are even now in another council seeking to be about it.”

“Which gives us time,” said Erdis with a dismissive nod. “If you’re finished, you may go.”

“And you will tell Lords Mergis and Shador this news?”

“You have my word. As soon as you leave, I’ll send out messengers and summon them to the palace. *Discreetly* summon them to the palace. We don’t need to raise too much concern until we’ve decided on the best course of action.”

“Then I will leave you to it.” The Tularin took his leave, closing the door behind him.

Once alone, Erdis hurried to a nearby desk and began searching for some ink and parchment. He was so engrossed in the activity he never saw the shadowed figure of Twila stealthily tread to the hidden portion of the wall and slip back inside, closing the secret door behind her. If she could beat Erdis' letters, she'd have a leg up on any competition. But she had to be wise as well as rapid; what came next needed to be delicately and decisively implemented.

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Thick clouds cloaked Altearin in a purple covering similar to perpetual twilight. No stars nor any other light filled the dark canopy for miles. Yet even within this darkness, Shador didn't feel secure. He'd taken to his keep outside the realm's capital and surrounded it with his Swarthinian honor guard.

The Lord of Darkness paced before the large fountain in his courtyard, thinking. The heels of his boots clicked on the flagstone like anxious hooves. Dressed in a purple-trimmed black robe with a pure-black cloak, he blended in with his surroundings. He'd left the hood down, leaving his clean-shaven face and deep violet eyes visible to anyone lurking about. Like the rest of the Lords of Darkness, Shador had an unusual skin tone. The dusty grayish-purple grew more gray in the light and a deep purple in the darkness.

He'd fortified himself as soon as he'd encountered Rheminas' emissary in Haven. It had taken him years to recruit and carefully cultivate his cult until it was sizable enough to undertake his desires. And all that had been extinguished in mere moments. But what was worse than losing his worshipers was knowing it wouldn't have happened if the gods hadn't been privy to his actions. Which also meant the destruction of the cult was just a prelude to the real assault.

He'd taken careful study of others who tried rising above their station through the use of Tralodroen cults and thought he'd done everything right. He'd even built into his cult the desire to keep things secret and hidden, promoting himself as a divinity able to share power and wonderful



secrets with those he found worthy. It was mostly lies and ritualistic jargon he made up as things progressed, but it had worked well enough, and the cult's ranks swelled.

They'd finally grown in strength and influence to such a point that he was starting to gain the ability to infiltrate and affect the administration of governments and even the faint edges of the major religions in the region. And that was what he wanted: the ability to act on Tralodren without being seen by the gods or their allies.

Because Tralodren was far from just the jewel of the pantheon, as the gods would have all believe. No, it was also a treasure cache waiting to be exploited—both of items and of people.

The titans had once ruled the planet, as had the dranors after them. And each left forgotten wonders behind one could exploit if cunning enough to find and engage them.

And this was to say nothing of the potential one could gain in taking some spirits of their own—just like the gods did—whenever their followers died. While Shador hadn't yet figured out how such a thing could be done, he was sure it was achievable and kept building his cult with as many young and healthy people as possible to allow more time for solving the mystery.

But none of that was going to happen now. The gods knew of his actions and had little love for those who were pulling others away from their worship or even playing on their private planet. The pattern for retribution was simple enough: send in a Galgalli after the cult and then follow up with the main offender. Except it got even more challenging when the culprit was part of the administration of one of those gods. Here it could possibly fall to the offended god—in this case, Gurthghol—to deal with the matter over the Galgalli. And given that the agent who'd so recently slaughtered his followers wasn't really a Galgalli but a mere human instead, things weren't as cut and dried as they normally would be.

But even while Gurthghol might have been a more hands-off ruler in many things, once word reached him one of his trusted officials—a viceroy too, no less—was working his own will on Tralodren, Shador was

sure Gurthghol wouldn't let it stand. And Shador was certain that was just what was going to happen when he'd earlier received word from Erdis about needing to meet with Gurthghol for some task on Tralodren.

He was sure Gurthghol was calling him to his final judgment but quickly discovered it was to fight with another entity called Galba instead. But once Galba sent those he'd assembled back to Altearin, he only heard the rest through snips and pieces while deciding to flee the city. There was talk of a battle being waged on Thangaria. By who or what wasn't clear, but if it took Gurthghol's attention, it bought him some time. But that wouldn't stop the inevitable. And so he remained holed up in his keep, racking his brain for some way out of this mess.

He stopped his pacing, shifting his gaze to the nearby fountain. It was a lavish affair: a lifelike rendering of four barghests howling atop a large rock. The rock was of rough basalt, the barghests formed out of polished onyx. The creatures were once native to Umbrium but had arrived on Altearin with the creation of the realm. They were large tailless dogs that grew about waist high to a titan with powerful jaws and claws that made quick work of anything that got in their way.

Streams of water flowed from their open mouths, filling the fountain's basalt-ringed pond built around the rough rock. In the past the sight was a restful thing that helped soothe him during trying times. But that peace today was elusive.

Reaching into the pocket of his robes, he pulled out the silver necklace given him by the high priest of his now-defunct cult. The large circle of lapis lazuli at the center of the silver pendant shimmered in whatever light it captured. It was easily dwarfed by his larger palm, making it appear as some child's trinket. The necklace was said to enhance one's access to magic—or in Shador's case, the cosmic element of darkness. And having such an increase in ability would be an immense boon in the days ahead.

All that trouble and planning and plotting . . . Yet it had been worth it. And all he had to do was show up to collect his prize. That was the beauty of using guises. They got you through the Grand Barrier around Tralodren, allowing you to take a form that further cloaked your actions

from any curious eyes. But the best part was that things could be brought into and out of Tralodren. The barrier only blocked divinities and gods from coming and going in their true forms. Anyone or anything else wasn't hampered. This meant Shador could go and pick up whatever his cultists offered him, and none would be the wiser. Yes, it was a wonderful situation, until recent events . . .

The sound of a descending Swarthin pulled him from his thoughts. Though half the size of Shador's fifteen feet, any gap in height was easily overcome by aid of the other's wings. Like the rest with him, the bat-like darkened incarnate wore dark brown brigandine armor with short swords on his belt. Each also kept a crossbow slung over their back. A bandoleer across the chest kept more bolts at the ready.

"Someone is approaching from the east," the Swarthin said in Stygian, the language birthed in the ancient plane of Umbrium—the former plane of darkness.

"Just one?" Shador asked in the same tongue.

"There isn't any sign of anything else for miles."

Shador slid the necklace back into the hidden pocket of his robes. "Are they on foot?"

"No, they're mounted on a black stallion and keeping to the road, pressing hard for the keep."

"A messenger?" Perhaps the pantheon wanted a parley. That could buy him more time.

"They carry no banner, my lord."

"Keep watch, and when they get closer—"

A sudden flurry of motion near the large barred gates stopped Shador in midspeech. "What do you think you're *doing*?" he shouted at the handful of Swarthin lifting the thick wooden rail holding the doors shut. "I said to keep the doors barred!"

"Urgent messenger, my lord," one of the Swarthin lifting the wooden bar grunted. "They had to speak with you at once."

"And so you just disobey my orders?" Shador yelled, throwing back his cloak over his left shoulder, revealing his sheathed sword.

"No," said a new voice in Stygian, "he obeyed *mine*."

Shador spun on his heel, taking note of the black stallion making its way through the small opening barely allowing it inside. Already the rider was looking to dismount. As she did, Shador only grew more uncertain.

“Twila?”

Now free of the horse, it was clear the figure was indeed a woman. And she was definitely a titan, sharing his height and build, but her black cloak and hood hid the rest of her person from further scrutiny.

“Were you expecting someone else?” She removed her hood, revealing her short black hair, along with a face and manner that were hard to forget.

“Close the gates,” Shador ordered. “And this time *keep* them shut.

“You rode all the way here?” He eyed her carefully, trying not to miss a single detail. Her complexion was slightly lighter than his own but still helped to blend her into the darkness.

“I didn’t want to draw any attention using the portals,” she replied, “and I thought if I used other methods you might mistake me for someone else before I could properly make myself known.” It was clever thinking that reminded Shador again of part of what had drawn him to her in the first place.

“And it looks like I was right.” Twila scanned the courtyard. “Are you preparing for a war?”

“And why wouldn’t I be?” He didn’t share her levity. “The pantheon wants my blood, and I’m not yet ready to surrender it.”

Twila raised an eyebrow and turned up a corner of her lips. “You seem pretty convinced of that.”

“It’s pretty much what’s in store, given the last I’ve heard.” He watched Twila draw near.

“And just what *have* you heard?”

“Something about a battle back on Thangaria—a threat to the pantheon,” he said, half watching the flying Swarthin returning the wooden bar across the gate with a thick thud.

“That’s it?” Twila was clearly amazed.

“*What?* I had some other pressing matters on my mind. And as the other Lords of Darkness were expelled from Tralodren in the first fight with Gurthghol, I haven’t spoken with him since.”

“But you still had time to raise the troops,” she added. “You must have known something.”

“Just what I told you. I let Mergis see to most everything else. The preparations allowed the perfect opening and cover so I could secure this place.”

“And you’re supposed to be a viceroy of Altearin?” It was the first time in a long while Shador actually heard some disappointment in Twila’s voice.

“There’s something greater than Altearin at stake here,” he attempted to explain. Instead his words only birthed a blank look from his longtime lover.

“You’re right,” she finally said. “Nuhl returned to try to destroy the pantheon. Tralodren would have been next, I guess.”

“Nuhl . . .” The name wasn’t something you spoke lightly. All knew of its history and desire for destroying anything and everything it could. And while it had tried and failed once before in taking out the pantheon back in the days of Vkar and Xora—the first god and goddess of the cosmos—none really imagined a second attempt was possible.

“Did it win?”

“No, but it did create some interesting developments.”

“I don’t have time for your games, Twila. Just spit it out.”

“The threat to the pantheon has been eliminated . . . but so too has Gurthghol.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s gone, and Vkar’s throne with him.”

“*What?*” Shador lurched forward, grabbing hold of Twila’s arms with a death-like grip. It was almost too impossible to believe. “Tell me everything.”

“After you and Mergis summoned those other lords to Arid Land Gurthghol won against Galba. And after besting her, he reclaimed the throne.”

“Why would he break the pact and take up the throne again? He hated it from the beginning.”

“He wanted to use it to destroy Awntodgenee and Nuhl.”

Shador paced for a few steps, attempting to wrap his mind around everything. “He couldn’t succeed. He must have known that.”

“From what I hear he thought he’d finally found a way to be done with them both for good.”

He spun back around, facing Twila’s still-unreadable features. “But he wasn’t.”

“No. He was taken prisoner instead—at least that’s what the story was when I left the city.”

“But he defeated the first threat then—the reason for the battle on Thangaria?”

“Oh yes. He even had some help from a goblin,” said Twila.

“A goblin,” Shador snorted. “Is that right?” He’d had plenty of opportunity getting acquainted with them during his exploits on Tralodren.

“Not just any goblin,” she continued. “He had a scepter that weakened the human wizard whom Nuhl had been using for its attack, allowing Gurthghol a greater advantage.”

“Weakened him even with Nuhl’s backing?”

“That’s what I hear.”

Now this was something *very* interesting. Nuhl’s original agent had bested Xora and Vkar in the past. The whole pantheon had apparently summoned their best forces to face off with another such agent, leaving one to assume victory wasn’t going to be so easily won. And yet one goblin with a certain scepter could change the whole dynamic . . . What would it do to any other god—even one that now sat upon Vkar’s throne?

Twila’s smile was dripping with mischief. “You can see why I spared no expense in letting you know.”

“And where did you hear all this? I know you weren’t at the battle on Thangaria.”

“I have my ways. But it’s genuine and vetted, rest assured.”

“And where is this scepter now?”

“So far it’s being kept on Thangaria.”

“And they’re in another council, no doubt, to deal with all this,” he mused.

“The last I heard.” Twila was clearly enjoying watching Shador gather all the loose threads.

“So then I might have some time. But we’ll have to act quickly.”

“What do you have in mind?” She flirted with her violet eyes.

“Something bold and daring,” he replied, brushing a hand down Twila’s soft cheek. Already he was feeling like his old confident self again. No longer fearfully lurking but now confidently plotting.

“I like it already,” she purred.

Shador wasn’t saying the half of it. If he could get all the pieces to line up, he could soon find himself in the best place he’d ever dreamed possible. Forget about what his ambitions had been before. With Gurthghol gone and the gods locked in debate, he could see himself rising to some *incredible* heights. And the best part was if done right, the pantheon couldn’t do a thing about it.

“Let me guess,” said Twila. “Does it involve a plot to take Gurthghol’s throne and finally rule like you’ve always wanted?”

“Not an open plot, no. We need to be tasteful in our coup—discreet and honoring of our beloved lord and master. And it has to be something that smacks of legality so the rest of the pantheon can’t come after me once I’ve risen to the challenge.”

Twila ran a hand through his short dark hair. “And here you were worried they might be coming to do you in.”

“And they still will be once this current crisis has passed. Even if things go well, there will still be some calling for retribution.”

“Then it sounds like you’re still going to need an inside person,” she said, placing a hand on his chest. “Someone with connections and ways to help sway the others more fully to your cause.”

“Someone who, no doubt, will want to share in any success.”

“It’s only fitting, I would think,” Twila purred. “If we *are* truly to be partners in everything.”

Shador nodded in thought. “Too bad. You were so close.” His comment caught Twila off guard.

“To what?”

“Being his favorite,” he replied, referring to the past dealings between Twila and Gurthghol as she worked her way through the ranks of his harem. While others might have been troubled by the action, Shador knew the truth. It was never anything serious and just part of the game they both played: attempting to gain greater place and power. Though now with Gurthghol’s absence, he was looking forward to having Twila more to himself.

“I think I’ll have something to compensate the loss soon enough.” Her dark eyes again flirted with his.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He brought her close, face to face—holding her taut with his arm.

“Then let’s get started.”