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—Richard Knaak, *New York Times* bestselling author on *Return of the Wizard King*



TRIUMPH OF THE
WIZARD KING

THE WIZARD KING TRILOGY

III

CHAD CORRIE

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DARK HORSE BOOKS

CHAPTER 1

DEATH IS NOT THE END, MERELY THE BEGINNING OF ANOTHER JOURNEY.

—**The Scrolls of Dust**

Broken and alone, Dugan hung before one of the portals composing Galba's stone circle. He couldn't see the peaceful heather-covered hill behind him. He couldn't see anything as he floated between lucidness and unconsciousness. Each of his hands was affixed to a stone post by a twitching band of violet energy that bit into his flesh. He could feel most of his ribs had been broken. A few had even sliced into his internal organs, adding to his agony. His head sunk into his chest, chin digging into his sternum. He couldn't feel his legs or his arms past his elbows, but he kept a tight grip on life.

That tenacity had kept him alert enough to witness the final confrontation with the lich, following his own failed attack. He wasn't clear on what happened after that. It had all happened so fast, and it was getting harder for him to think. He recalled the violent force, the cracking of his back, and the searing set of claws assaulting him from within. He'd also been raised a good four feet above the ground. It looked like he was getting his crucifixion after all. No matter how far he thought he'd come, it had found him in the end. At least he'd have these last few moments of freedom.

It hurt to think, hurt to lift his head or look around. Before him was a battlefield. With its surrounding circle of stones, it could just as easily have been an arena. In the end, he couldn't escape that either. His body felt lighter—much lighter than it should. He began to wonder if he was still breathing. As he drew closer to Mortis, it felt as though he was on a *real* cross. Its splinters dug into his back as he struggled for life. In his mind's eye he could see the arena's roaring spectators shouting at the gladiator who'd suffered his whole life for their amusement.

As he hung on the cross, he saw his life play out before him. He saw himself as a fair-haired, scrawny youth from a village long since lost to Elyelmic violence. He watched his younger self play with a stick, swinging it like a sword as he fought off imaginary monsters and villains. There was an innocence about the boy that brought a deep sadness to Dugan. Another thing that had been taken from him. The images grew faint and his mind grew fuzzy before fading into darkness.



Tebow wasn't sure if they'd won or lost. He'd barely survived the attack. The stench of burnt flesh and hair wafted through what he knew was his ruined nose, and there were constant agonizing echoes of the angry flames that had wrapped around his flesh.

Using his hammer as a cane, he rose on shaky legs before letting the object fall upon standing. He wouldn't need it anymore. He could see the bodies but couldn't see Cadrith anywhere. He knew they hadn't taken him down with their hammers, and Gilban didn't strike him with the scepter—the elf's dead body made that clear enough. So did the throne finish him off? That hardly seemed fair. Not after all they had gone through.

Too much to ponder and not enough time to do it. He could see Cracius was already at Sheol's gates, and knew he wasn't too far away himself. He might as well do some good while he could. He'd join him soon enough and then the next journey would begin. The Scrolls of Dust

taught he'd get to serve Asorlok even in the afterlife, ushering souls to their final destination. The same thing they were called to do in this life for the living. And as long as he drew breath he might as well continue that mission. He could see Vinder, Cadrissa, Alara, and Rowan were wounded, but not as badly as Dugan—though Vinder was gaining ground on the Telborian. The dwarf would be Tebow's second stop if he survived his first.

He hobbled over to Dugan and placed his charred hand upon the Telborian's limp leg. Even though his hand, like much of his body, had suffered severe burns, the priest could feel the growing coldness in Dugan's veins. "Asorlok, Lord of Death, Master of the Afterlife, I humble myself before you. I beseech you for a peaceful transition for Dugan, a man who died in service of a great cause—one that you issued to your servants. Give him the assurance he needs to pass over without regret, without anger, and without fear. Grant him peace."

Dugan moaned and opened one bloodshot eye, staring through the loose strands of his blond mane.

"Rest, Dugan," Tebow said, looking him full in the face. "Be at peace." He knew his own face was far from the image of calm he wanted to project, but at such moments it was more important to convey the full weight of the words.

"I'm in the arena." His voice was weak and distant. "I-I see them . . ." Dugan drifted between this world and the next. "I have splinters in my back . . ."

"Be at peace. Don't fight it. Let go . . . Sleep." Dugan's eye closed again. His chest fell like tired bellows once more, and then Dugan was dead.

"Safe journey, brave warrior." Tebow allowed himself a rueful smile, ignoring the tearing of skin and fresh pain it created. He turned toward Vinder, who was also ready to cross into Mortis. On his way to the dying dwarf, he got a closer view of Gilban's body. His neck was broken, suggesting a quick death. Merciful, he supposed, and easier too, as he wouldn't have known how to offer comfort to the elf anyway. Gilban followed a different god. While Asorlok ushered all on to their final

destination, Tebow didn't know what rituals were right and proper for a priest of Saredhel. It was better to let the body lie. His spirit was with his goddess anyway.

He didn't see Hadek anywhere, which raised questions the priest didn't have time to consider. Surveying the others, he wondered where Galba was. It would have been nice to learn what had happened with Cadrith. He supposed he'd find out soon enough, once he'd crossed over. He could wait.

Tebow shuffled to Vinder. The dwarf remained stoic as he fought to stay conscious, though savage pain was clearly gnashing its teeth over every inch of him. His gray skin and clothing were pitted with black circles of burnt flesh and cloth. His hair was singed and his salt-and-pepper beard was partially burned around his face, but his ice-blue eye still blazed with stubborn life.

Tebow studied the dwarf closely. Vinder stared back. Much of his brigandine armor still remained, but parts of it still emitted thin blue-gray, greasy plumes of smoke. His right hand held his rune-etched axe with a white-knuckled grip.

"You promised . . ." His lips bled with his words, black gel globbing in the corners of his mouth.

Tebow squatted beside the dwarf, biting back his own pain. "Vinder—"

"Don't . . . you . . . dare . . ." Vinder's eye blazed. "You promised . . . honor . . ." More blood flowed over his chin and down his singed beard and chest, where it spilled around and behind his head and neck.

"Once this was . . . done . . . you told me . . . I'd have . . . my honor. I did . . . my part . . ."

"Yes, you did." Tebow placed his hand on Vinder's battered chest and closed his eyes. No matter what had happened, they still had made a promise, and it needed to be kept.

"No tricks . . ." Vinder huffed.

"No tricks," Tebow repeated, then prayed. "Asorlok, grant this warrior the honor which he sought as he comes before your majestic throne for judgment. Honor the promise made to him by your priests so you are known as a fair and impartial god that looks favorably upon your

priests and honors his word.” With these words spoken, Vinder faded from sight. All that remained was a pool of blood on flattened grass, outlining where the dwarf’s body had once lain. Tebow forced himself to stand. He needed to see to the others.



Vinder felt his spirit seeping away from his ruined body. He knew his time was short, and that made his plea all the more urgent. He wouldn’t die without honor. He’d been promised this by the priests and would hold them to their agreement, even if they were dying with him. They owed him as much. He’d done his part. Now it was their turn.

He didn’t know what followed Tebow’s prayer. His mind was fuzzy. His vision grew more and more narrow. It was like he was looking through a tunnel. He didn’t think he could hold on much longer, and that was fine with him.

He knew Tebow wasn’t able to heal his wounds. The priest’s beliefs and his god forbade such things. It would have been nice to go back to his family and clan . . . to live an honorable life for the rest of his days . . . but he understood his final return to the clan in death was just as important, if not *more* important, to him. If given a choice, he’d choose death with restored honor over more years with the ones he loved without it. He’d already made that choice when he’d stood at the mouth of Cael’s lair. He knew he’d probably die, but he also knew it would bring him the redemption he desired.

Now as he lay dying, Vinder had an epiphany. The most important things in life *were* faith, honor, and family. Duty was only the byproduct of these ideals. Only in death did it all make sense. What would he leave behind? What mark would his existence make on the world? And how would he be remembered? Life was not so much about being alive, but how one lived, and what one left behind. That was the basis of the dwarven philosophy. Without death, life would have no meaning. Here was the purpose and meaning of it all. Here, on the precipice of death, he learned what he should have been living for all along.

Vinder didn't even realize the scenery had changed. The green grass had given way to cool, rocky earth. The blue sky had darkened to a foggy twilight, and the stone circle had transformed into a womb of rock. There was something familiar about the place. He struggled to sit, his fading vision weakly scanning the area around him. A smile found its way across his pale and worn features, even as he coughed up blood. He was back in Cael's lair. He noticed the Troll's bones beside him, skin and muscle melted away by the death priests' earlier attack. He fixed his narrowing gaze upon the skeleton. It was nothing but a hollow, meaningless thing now. It would be the last thing he saw when Drued called him to his ancestors.

As he contorted his body to better view the Troll's remains, he understood this wasn't enough. This wasn't going to win him his lost honor. He may have been willing to die in battle with Cael, but now his foe was dead. Failing to fall in battle wouldn't win him anything if he died alone here on the cold stone floor. Though those who would find his corpse later would assume he'd died in battle with the Troll, he and Drued would know the truth. His family might have comfort in his perceived restored honor, but he'd be unable to rest in his afterlife knowing the truth.

Worse, if it wasn't believed that Vinder died in battle, his death would serve no purpose. His family would have lost not only a son, but honor within the clan as well. No, something had to be done. Reaching under his clothing, he retrieved the small figurine of Drued he'd worn around his neck since heading out with Alara and the others into the marshes.

He gave the quartz pendant a kiss. Suddenly his head lolled backward and his body grew cold and slack as it slammed into the rocky ground. A bloody groan escaped his mouth, jarring his mind toward action. He had one last thing he could try.

Slowly, fighting against the cold numbing of his flesh, he turned his head toward Cael's skull. He forced back the growing blackness long enough to fix his gaze upon the skull's empty sockets. For what seemed like a great span of time he eyed the jaws that would have split his bones and torn muscle and skin. Now they were dull and silent.

With one last burst of will, he called upon the deepest reserves of life that yet remained. He'd have to face Drued on the merits of his own life—as all dwarves did—and live with the verdict his god decreed, but he could at least leave behind some comfort for his family.

Vinder forced his numb right hand to tightly grab his axe. Laboriously, he focused his mind, his will, and his faith on the task. He watched Cael's skull fade into darkness before it disappeared altogether, and then his heartbeat ceased.

The dwarf took a deep, rattling breath. It was slow, painful, and labored but gave him his last bit of strength. He let out a powerful yell that fueled the weapon's arc, severing the skeleton's neck with a single hit. The head rattled away and struck the nearby wall like a child's spinning top. And with his final strike, the last of Vinder's life fled from him.



Alara managed to sit up, ignoring the throbbing in her gut and temples. She tried to make sense of the scene coming into focus. Her stomach was bruised, she knew, and there was going to be a welt on the side of her head, but she'd live. She spied Gilban not too far from her. His body lay on its side, neck broken and face staring blankly into space. Near him was the silver scepter, half-hidden from view. He didn't deserve this—none of them did.

She didn't see Cadrith anywhere. She wanted to believe that was a good thing—perhaps the throne took him—but in her heart she knew that wasn't true. And then Tebow came into view. The priest was a horrid sight. His body was as black as his singed sable cloak, most of his dark brown hair was gone, and the remaining skin on his face barely covered the bones beneath it. A thick black ichor oozed from his ruined flesh.

“Are you able to stand?” His voice was rough, crackly.

She didn't answer.

Tebow drew closer with careful steps. She was surprised he was able to stand at all. He was probably in a great deal of pain—*much* more than she—and yet he seemed unconcerned.

“Take care of the others,” he said, placing his cinder of a hand upon her shoulder. “You’re all they have left to hold on to. You have to be strong for them in the time to come. You still—”

His speech was cut short as he fell to the ground. He landed on his side, his eyes locked on hers in a gaze holding the last of their fading light. A heartbeat later, the priest’s body and even his charred clothes crumbled into dust, leaving only a pale gray blanket of ash. She thought of Cracius and dared a look, only to find another swath of gray dust a few yards away. Even their silver hammers were gone.

First Gilban and now Tebow had appealed to her leadership, urging her to guide the others. With Gilban she had accepted it, in part knowing she’d be able to let it go once the mission was over. Now everything had changed. Part of her didn’t want to do anything but run to Rexatoius as fast as she could. But she knew that wouldn’t change anything. Then there was Rowan, and her promise to him.

Sliding on her right side, she dragged herself close to Gilban and the scepter. With her left hand, she pulled it free. She used it to prop herself up and rose with agonizing effort.

She didn’t want to lead anymore. She didn’t want to fight. She felt beaten and tired, alone and afraid. This wasn’t what she’d pictured on the fields where she’d been a child, watching her father’s herds and practicing with her imaginary sword. She didn’t see the suffering behind such actions and quests, only their completion. She never would have imagined what it might be like to truly suffer defeat.

Alara forced her feet forward. She made it to Rowan, lying unconscious across the dais’ white marble steps. Thankfully, he didn’t seem too much the worse for wear. He’d have a headache, but the measured rising and falling of his chest showed he still lived. She couldn’t find Vinder and assumed the lightning had totally consumed him. A grisly fate, for sure, but at least it was quick. She also saw no sign of Hadek. She hoped the goblin met his end as painlessly as possible. If anything, he was an innocent in all this. He’d had the potential to live a decent life in Rexatoius, she supposed, but now she could only hope he’d found some peace somewhere.

To her amazement, Cadrissa was awake and sitting upright. From how Rowan had reacted, Alara had thought she'd been killed, yet here she was looking better than any of them. When last they'd been together Cadrissa had been wearing travel-soiled golden robes. Now she was dressed in a clean white gown and hooded gold cloak with matching sash. As with many things she'd been encountering, Alara wasn't sure what to make of this new attire.

"What happened?" Cadrissa's movements were weak and labored. Her face was lined with fear and exhaustion.

"That's what I'd like to know," said Alara. "I thought you were dead."

"So did I." Cadrissa's mind started to clear. "How did you get here? The warding was almost too strong for—" She broke off suddenly. "Where is he?"

"The lich?"

"Yes." A note of fear crept into her voice.

"I don't know." Alara figured that was the best answer for the time being. She didn't want to explain everything, not until Rowan was awake. And at the moment she was more interested in what Cadrissa could share about her time with Cadrith than anything else.

"Then did he become—"

"I don't know."

Cadrissa nodded, lost once more in her thoughts, until she caught sight of the crucified Telborian. "Dugan!" She bolted for the dead man, her feet betraying her a few times in her rapid flight. Alara followed, wincing.

Tears filled Cadrissa's green eyes. "You're going to be okay." The image in the portal behind Dugan had changed to a snowy wasteland—a flat arctic tundra of white winds. "We just have to get you down. We—"

"He's dead, Cadrissa." She tried to be as gentle as possible, but there was no way around the truth. "Leave him be."

"He's just wounded," Cadrissa said, tenderly stroking Dugan's knee. "He'll be okay."

"He's gone, Cadrissa. There's nothing we can do." Alara's eyes misted at the finality of the words, feeling the weight of all she'd seen since she herself woke to this nightmare.

Cadrissa sobbed violently, burying her face in Dugan's lifeless legs. Alara tried to administer some comfort, but she knew the wounds of the heart were painful to endure. While helping Cadrissa, she pondered how she'd deal with the same grief. Even if she and Rowan lived to a ripe old age, she'd still outlive him. Worse still, anything could happen to them in the meantime. Events even worse than what they'd just survived. Silently, she thanked the gods Rowan hadn't left her yet—there was *one* positive note in this dark ballad.

She'd become so absorbed in her own thoughts that she failed to notice the portal's image behind Dugan change once more. The frozen wasteland was warping into a desert realm with tall volcanic mountains, meandering streams of lava, and roving flames resembling fiery serpents.

Cadrissa jumped from Dugan's body as if bitten by a snake. "It's like he's on fire." No sooner had she spoken than a geyser of flame erupted from Dugan's chest, spreading over his whole body with such speed that his entire frame was devoured by the famished fire before either of them knew what was happening. It consumed him entirely, melting his flesh and blackening his bones into a fine dust. Neither could do anything but stare open mouthed at the empty stone posts. Nothing of the former gladiator remained.