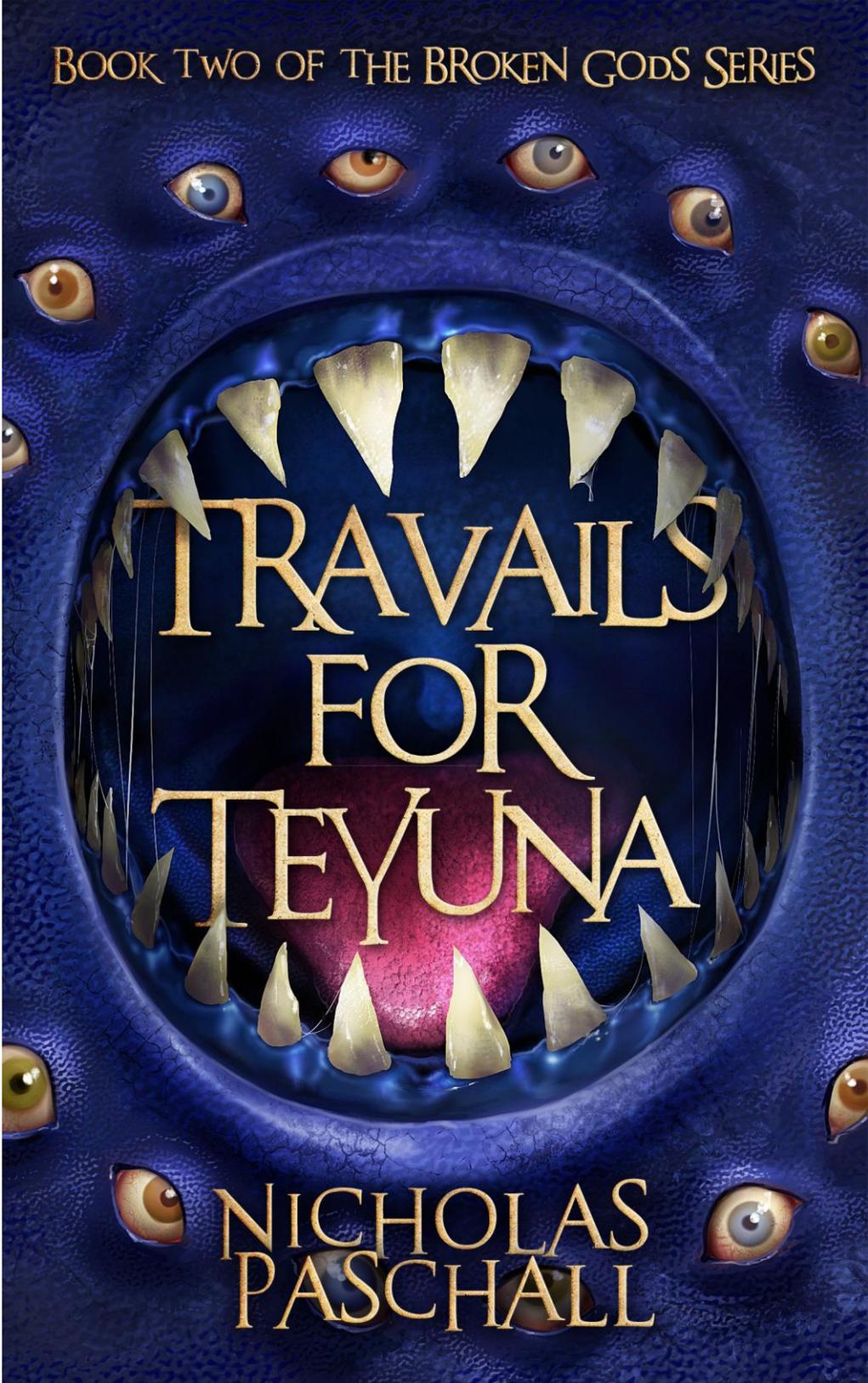


BOOK TWO OF THE BROKEN GODS SERIES



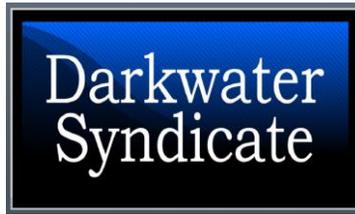
TRAVAILS
FOR
TEYUNA

NICHOLAS
PASCHALL

**TRAVAILS
FOR
TEYUNA**

**BOOK TWO
OF THE
BROKEN GODS SERIES**

NICHOLAS PASCHALL



Travails For Teyuna
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Postcards from the Void

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A direct sequel to *The Father of Flesh*, this one was spawned from an old friend of mine who was once set to judge a most heinous case. He was the main prosecutor in a murder case, you see, and had six young men who were complicit in the crime. His one true struggle? To find out who killed Billy Morsely.

This was a dire situation that I got to sit by and watch, as calm as I've ever been. I came up with an idea for what the Brother of Bone would be like, an entity that has been separated from his siblings for so long that he burns with an unholy rage. I have to say my lucky number in this one is thirteen, and Professor Davis and the gang are going to be in store for a major mystery, just like my old friend. But unlike the drunkard, Davis may indeed find the true mastermind behind the crimes he sees set before him.

Then again, maybe not!

This is to past friendships that were broken in a single moment of betrayed trust, and for the strongest friends I've had in many a lifetime. My best friend, Jennifer, is by far the best person in my life. And I hope to be able to say that for a good, long while.

My other friends who've made this book possible are Donovan, Jason, Kevin, and Sean. All of them have been friends for years, some more than others, but they have all listened to my stories with patience and laughter.

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CHAPTER ONE

The yawning cavern was hazy from choking smoke, burning veins within the stone giving off a toxic stench. Strange creatures moved about the cave; some stood motionless near the entrance, arms folded over their chests like sentinels. Metal plates on their chests glowed red hot, sewn in place with barbed wire and chain links.

Their sinews were rifted with piercings, some going through bone even, with dangling spiked chains from their forearms. Lipless snouts made of chitinous bone stretched out to reveal a perpetual grin of sharpened teeth, with a ridgeline of scarred tissue stretching up from the lower jaw to the bridge of the nose, acting as a means of holding the head together in place of a mandible.

Metal clinked around the room, almost drowned out by the continual sound of smoldering coal, the roaring flames coming from the center of the cave. Three creatures sat cross-legged over worn pillows, a great iron hookah sitting between them that they all took puffs from every few moments. Green, ethereal light filtered out from a collection of metal skulls at the top of the smoking device, and beneath the constant sound of burning rock and the clinking of metal, there could be heard tortured screams. These cries were warped and hollow, rising up from the hookah each time one of the smokers drew from the pipe.

Unlike the other abominations roaming through the haze, the three seated creatures were haggard in appearance, their flesh flaking off bones yellowed and chipped, visible through thinning sections of dry skin. Large hands ending in spindly, spidery fingers delicately held the pipes to their mouths, puffing from the nightmarish device, their teeth jagged from much use. Pendulous breasts hung from their nude frames, splayed to their sides from the opened maws in their chest cavities. Sternums separated from ribs, the bones were pulled back by links of rusty chain to reveal their innards. Within their bellies were throbbing masses of eyeless serpents that coiled within their emaciated figures.

Each of the three was adorned with a flawless gemstone, nestled into their sternums. One had a brilliant sapphire, the other a shining ruby, the final one a deep green emerald. No heart was visible, nor were there any other organs besides the slithering serpents. As the creatures moved to inhale from their pipes, sand fell from their bodies, coal dust and detritus gathered from dwelling within the burning hellfire they seemed to be relaxing in.

Ruby puffed on her pipe between chipped teeth, green smoke lolling out from between the brown enamel as she swallowed the strange smoke. She looked over her shoulder, her thin neck bending at a horrid angle.

"More fire!" she hissed, her grating voice brooking no argument.

One of their servant creatures leapt into action. It dropped to the ground in a kneeling position before heading to the wall of their abode. Using a clawed hand as a

shovel, the servant punched it into a vein of flames, pulling smoldering coal from the wall. Scuttling closer, it bowed before the females, its hand blistering and popping from the flames devouring its exposed skin. It gripped a hidden latch and pulled open a chamber at the base of the hookah, filled with chunks of ashy, black pearls. Scooping them out with the other hand, it dropped the fiery fuel into the box before sliding the hatch back into place, twisting it closed with an audible pop.

The hookah came alive, the figures on the vase-shaped body twisting and moaning as the three figures began to cackle. The servant dumped the jagged black pearls into a sack next to the hookah before backing away, returning to its post near the entrance.

"Sisters," Ruby croaked, "have you sensed tremors that rocked the spirit world so long ago?"

"Yes," the other two whispered in response.

Sapphire cleared her throat. "Indeed, how could we not?"

"The Mistress's dreams have slowly begun to warp," Ruby continued, "they've begun to take on nightmares, memories of Her birth coming back. She will likely awaken soon, and the pain will return."

"We cannot allow this to happen!" Emerald coughed, holding a hand to her chest as her gem flared with energy.

"I agree," Ruby said, "that is why I consulted the ancient texts, and found a way to ease Her back into a peaceful slumber."

"Do tell sister," Sapphire sneered. Ruby glared at her before puffing on her pipe, contemplating her next words carefully.

"I believe that if we were to acquire a chosen one, we could sacrifice said individual in the Ritual of Thirteen. The bound essences of both the human and the spirit would be fed directly to our Mistress, lulling Her out of the frightful state She has slowly been slipping into."

"And where would we find a chosen?" Sapphire snapped. "They are rare, and we don't have any that would be suitable."

"Luck is on our side, I say." Ruby grinned. "I found one just hours after the tremor through the spirit realm."

"And?" Emerald asked.

"The Father was waking due to one of his own chosen taking the initiative. They were attempting to start the Marriage."

Sapphire smoked her pipe while Emerald hummed.

"So, you found a chosen? Are they strong?" Sapphire asked.

Ruby bobbed her head, innards slithering about with the sound of dry parchment being torn. "Yes, he is quite powerful. I was amazed one existed without us noticing him."

"So have our handmaidens gather him and be done with it!" Sapphire spat, raking one clawed hand along the stone near her seat. "We can't sit on our hands and wait for him to stumble into our lair by chance, now can we?"

"Again, I'm ahead of you, sister. The problem at hand is that he is surrounded by allies. I've set up methods of securing him, and have several handmaidens watching

him even as we speak. He is amongst the Father's worshippers, but once he leaves we will set upon him with strength untold."

"I should hope so," Emerald murmured. "You say he is with the Father's worshippers?"

"Yes," Ruby replied, "and I think your expertise in manipulating the threads of fate would be helpful in this exchange." She grinned with her mouthful of jagged teeth. "Have him... *waylaid* by some of our followers in the region."

"We have a few tribes of base creatures that still revere the Mistress," Emerald mused. "I will send an order to patrol the mountains looking for them, with a reward for a successful capture."

"Will he survive those followers?" Sapphire asked, sounding doubtful. "They can be a bit overzealous..."

"Trust me," Ruby said with confidence, "this chosen is durable. Knocking him out will be the most difficult part, next to separating him from his friends."

"So, we have a plan, then?" Emerald asked.

Ruby and Sapphire exchanged looks, each daring the other to speak.

"Yes," Sapphire said. "A plan. For now, we have a plan."

"Excellent," Emerald said, taking a long pull from the pipe. She reached into the sack and withdrew several misshapen pearls, rolling them in her spidery hand like a gambler with his dice. "How many should we use?"

"I leave it up to you, as it is your turn," Ruby said with a sigh. "Just keep in mind how important this task is."

"We should devote a considerable amount of energy to this," Sapphire admonished, looking sharply towards Emerald. "Use what you need! We will barter for more as needed; we have the gold and humanity has the sin to spare!"

"Dear sister, I would rather not tip our hand by unleashing a horde of our kind upon the world." Ruby puffed, exhaling a putrid storm of smoke. "I mean, nobody knows we exist. I'd like to keep it that way."

Sapphire let her shoulders droop sullenly. "Back when we were true servants to the Mistress we didn't restrain ourselves so much. Perhaps your time spent cowering in our fortress has left you as spineless as the husks that mankind has become choked with?"

Emerald rolled the ashy orbs in her hand, dropping several into the sack before reaching back down to scoop out more for her consideration. "Will you let me have access to your armory, then?"

Ruby's eyes widened in surprise at Emerald's willingness to barter. The sisters sometimes played this game when it came to making decisions for their kind – it was a game they knew well.

"I have several new toys to play with," said Emerald conspiratorially. "Some would even make this task simpler if you employed them, allowing you to save a few soldiers for yourself, for your own errands."

Sapphire squawked, scratching the stone floor in irritation. "You fiend, you! Offering her your servants' mewling constructs! Why, if you do as I say, I'll offer you a portion of the souls my daughters have gathered this past decade to add to your fire!"

“How much of a portion?” Emerald asked, holding four pearls between her knobby fingers, dropping the rest into the sack. “Because I believe our eldest sister has a fair point in offering her bounty of weaponry and alchemical concoctions to my soon-to-be soldiers. But if you were to offer me, say, the lion’s share of your gathered energy so that I can devote my own daughters to blacksmithing and enchanting, then I could see myself exerting more effort into this endeavor.”

“The lion’s share? Cruel sister, how could you leave me to starve after all I offer you?” Sapphire asked, holding up her hand to her sternum, a chorus of hisses coming from the cavity there.

“It is my price: one thousand souls!” Emerald answered, her voice carrying a tone of impending victory with it. “You could always let me use a smaller task force, but would that show the Mistress your true devotion?”

“A thousand souls, though!” Sapphire wailed. “Are ye mad woman? I’d have nothing left, be a mere bag of bones and skin with naught for power but my own internal energies. I’d have to consume all but a few of my daughters just to live through the transaction!”

“Such a pity,” Ruby said, folding her hands in her lap. She turned to face Emerald. “To sweeten my offer, I’ll put up a hundred souls and whatever supplies you need.”

“Then a deal is had!” Emerald declared, ignoring Sapphire’s groan of despair. She carefully selected pearls, examining their ashen surfaces as she palmed them. She shook them in her large hand before throwing them out onto the hard stone ground of the cavern, where they burst into shards spewing green smoke. When the smoke cleared, a bevy of nude women stood before them, all beautiful by any man’s standards—high, perky breasts with wide hips and trim waists. They looked all around them, bewildered, before turning to face their creator.

“Now,” Emerald addressed them, “go and fetch the chosen for us! Kill his allies and draw him out of hiding, so that we may snatch him up! He is needed so your Mistress can sleep peacefully Go!”

The women bowed their heads in reverence and set off on their task.

“Wait,” Emerald spoke up. “You three, remain here. I want to use you for something special...”

Ruby laughed while Sapphire merely puffed from her long pipe, her muzzle of scar tissue wrinkling in disgust.

CHAPTER TWO

“... and so, you’ll find that shaping your inner well of ether will be easier after you’ve attained a mastery over your mind as well as your body through meditation,” Professor Davis Nickels said. The old man paced around the snow-coated courtyard, circling a group of twenty teenagers, all dressed in loose vests and baggy linen pants.

Despite their lack of warm clothing, none of them seemed to feel the bite of the frigid weather, each one breathing slowly in and out as they sat in the lotus position, eyes closed. Both boys and girls were in attendance, the girls dressed in similar garb save for chest bindings to hide their breasts. Most had shaved heads, though some girls had their long hair done in a plait.

Davis, hobbling past a young man with his cane, stopped and studied him. He could see the steam of his breath in the chilly air.

Crack!

The boy pitched forward from the blow as Davis shook the pain out of his smarting hand.

“You need to maintain your body’s inner temperature!” said Davis, stroking his long, white beard. “We’re in a dangerous clime. To slip is to risk freezing.”

The boy looked at him with a gimlet eye and nodded.

“Now find your center and regain your inner balance!” Davis went on. “We still have much to cover today.”

Leaning against his cane, David hobbled in circles around his students. They were young, but they were adept. The Khul had done right by these monks, although Davis still held his doubts on a handful of the monastery’s practices.

The Khul, like the rest of the monks for whom he served as headmaster, was a cannibal. Consumption of human flesh powered one’s mystical energies in ways Davis had only read about, until happenstance made him a guest at the Khul’s dining table. The meat—long pig, they called it—made the demon trapped within Davis’s chest sing with delight. And while Davis rarely balked at the notion of absorbing more mystical power for himself, even he drew the line somewhere.

And then, of course, it wasn’t like he held much faith in that trapped demon entirely, either. Useful as Davis found it, the curator was still a demon, and demons could never be trusted fully.

Cannibalism was not high on the list of things Davis relished, but when in Rome, as much in the Nanling Mountains of China where he currently found himself, he did as the locals did.

It had been a little over a year since Davis and his students had traveled to the Orient to help battle the awakening Children of Flesh, monstrous entities of an old god that had infected men and women in the surrounding villages.

James Walker and Huan Xi, undergraduates back at the University of Austin where Davis taught, had traveled with him. They were invaluable in putting down the threat

the Children and their Father had posed, but the journey had changed them profoundly. James and Huan had become seasoned occultists in their own right despite their youth.

And as for Davis, the Khul promised him and his group safety and provisions if he agreed to stay and train the new generation of monks. Surrounded by cannibals and miles of treacherous, snow-covered mountains, he was hard pressed to refuse.

He stopped pacing, taking up position at the head of his class. For his next lecture, on teleportation through focused meditation, he had prepared two wells of ethereal energy. He and his class could draw power from these wells to aid in their practice.

Suddenly, a pang ran through him—something was not right. He blinked, switching to ethereal sight, and looked upon the invisible wells of energy as they simmered and flared, roiling waves of energy bubbling off them and washing the area in arcane power. The snow melted into steam with the onrush of rampant energy.

Down below the monastery, something hammered at the mystical wards that kept the Father of Flesh and his agents at bay. The pounding was insistent, like a man beating on a door to be let in.

Davis's jaw dropped open in alarm. It was the Father, whom the Khul called the Slumberer, shuffle beneath the latticework of spells designed to keep him asleep.

All of the students were breathing heavily, their eyes unfocused as they struggled to deal with the psychic backlash they'd just experienced. Davis raised his hand cane in the air, channeling energy through the old wood to cause a flare of light, gathering their attention.

"That will be all for today," he said, his voice shrill, trying to mask his anxiety. "Meditate before you go to sleep tonight and focus on removing yourself from your body for at least fifteen minutes."

The students rose to their shaky feet, some stumbling about drunkenly. All of them looked as if they had horrible headaches, a common side effect of pulling too much ethereal energy into a body at once. They shuffled out of the courtyard as Davis stayed behind. He had sensed a subtle ripple in the ether his students hadn't, and waited for it to manifest itself.

Once the last of the monks had exited the yard, the Khul collapsed the ethereal barrier that hid him from view.

"I thought I felt someone standing there," said Davis.

The Khul acknowledged him with a shallow bow of his head. He approached Davis with an imperious stride, one weighed down by neither old age nor frailty. The Khul was ancient, though his ramrod straight back and the way he electrified the air by his presence alone told otherwise.

Today he wore his ceremonial skull mask. Only his lips and chin were exposed. His long, white hair flowed down a trim torso covered in tattoos. Everywhere he went, tiny green flames sizzled into the snow that had settled on the ground.

"Very good," said the Khul, clapping his hands. His long nails clicking as they struck the many metal rings he wore on his bony fingers. "I think this batch of students

will be able to move on much faster than the previous. If they continue under your tutelage, I'd say they might flourish like flowers in the sun!"

"If?" Davis asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, if... I'm afraid your time here has come to an end," the Khul said, his brilliant red eyes glowing from the sockets of the mask. "I'm sure you noticed the pulse?"

"It made the wells flare..." Davis said, trailing off.

The Khul nodded. "I imagine you'd have figured this out by tonight, but that wasn't just any wave in the ocean that is the spirit world. No, that was a call from someone ancient, someone who wanted to draw allies to help him."

"Another honored vessel?" Davis asked, hating how he had to refer to demonologists in that manner. Most demonologists were a savage bunch—demon-infused, bloodthirsty cultists. There was nothing honorable about them, and this much Davis knew for certain, as he himself was one.

"Yes," the Khul hissed. "An old one at that, so old that they've become of one soul, what we call an Ur. There was a message in the pulse, for those qualified to interpret it."

"And?" Davis asked.

"It was a plea for help in awakening the Lord of Bones, somewhere very far away."

"The Brother of Bone?"

"I would assume so, as I know of few entities with similar titles," the Khul answered. "The Brother is restrained in a fashion similar to that which keeps the Father at rest, though I don't know the specifics. He was one of the first to be subdued, back when the old god siblings squabbled with each other. I know he settled across the oceans in faraway lands."

"That... isn't a great deal to go from," Davis said. "If you're releasing me from my service, I'll need to study up on where the Brother could be, and take my two students with me back to the outside world to better deal with the threat."

"I will allow this, assuming you plan on returning one day. I've become accustomed to having a magus on staff, and would love to keep you."

"Make no mistake, I have relished my time here. Back home, the practice of our art is something done discretely, not out in the open as here. But duty calls, and I am needed elsewhere."

"Understandable. I had originally planned on keeping you here permanently. But this strikes me as something of importance. The ripple across the spirit world will undoubtedly attract many beings to the point of its origin. For the continued safety of my people, I will release you from your work here and allow you and your pupils to leave. I do hope to see you again."

"As do I," Davis lied. Imprisonment, no matter how comfortable, was still imprisonment. "If you don't mind, I'd like to take with me a few trinkets I've acquired while in your service."

"I see no harm in that," the Khul replied, turning towards the doorway back into the warmth of the monastery. "We'll see you off in the morning with a contingent of monks to guide you through the mountains."

"And I'll call ahead for my people to pick us up," Davis said with a smile.

The Khul smiled and held out a hand. "Come inside from the cold, make your plans and gather your supplies. I have a feeling you'll need all you can carry for the task that lies ahead."

CHAPTER THREE

Davis hobbled out of the cold, headed for the comfort of his quarters. They were lavish, given the relatively Spartan accommodations a monastery in the Chinese mountains could offer: a cushioned bed of softened furs and feathers with a thick woolen blanket, two shelves holding his notes and the few relics he'd gathered during his stay. A large backpack sat next to his bed, holding his belongings in case he ever needed to make a swift exit.

Reaching out to pick up a ceramic orb resting on a three-pronged stand, Davis felt the souls stirring within. This was one of the many Spheres of Concordance, tools designed to house demonic entities that had merged with human souls.

Palming the orb, Davis sat down on his bed and curled his legs beneath him to form a lotus position. No sooner had he closed his eyes than he was plunging headfirst into the ethereal.

Down below the mountains into which the monastery was built, the energy nexus twisted and roiled. It was royal purple now, after a year under the influence of the wards Davis had established. A leyline ran through the site of the monastery, which served as both a fount of ethereal energy and a magnet to entities drawn to that power. Ensnared at the epicenter of this leyline was the Father of Flesh, whose physical manifestation had gorged upon the leyline's power for so many centuries that the Father had grown massive in size, large enough even to house its towering Children, asymmetrical monsters composed of sweaty, waxy, molten skin and fat.

Reaching out with his mind, Davis pulled some of the residual energy around him into his body. The curator, Davis's very own captive demon, tightened around his heart, awakened by the alien power that was flooding its host. Davis redirected the energy like water through a channel, funneling it into the orb his physical body held in its lap.

The best way to describe what Davis was doing at the moment was to call it a twisted form of fishing. Using some of this extra energy as bait, Davis enticed a demon from the orb and dragged it, screaming and howling, from its crystal prison, pulling it into himself.

Demons, Davis knew very well, could grant particular boons when used symbiotically. The curator, for instance, was a being that thrived on knowledge. Once it had merged with Davis, it granted him an extended lifespan, nearly unlimited knowledge of languages and most common subjects, and the ability to solve complex equations in mere seconds, not to mention the uncanny ability to tap into the ether with ease.

The demon he had presently snared was a minor entity, but a particularly foul one. It was a devourer of children who lived in the black water at the bottom of lakes. Davis could feel its panic as he tugged on the creature's essence.

As the demon entered Davis's body, the curator stirred like a swarm of hungry piranhas that has scented blood. It fell upon the demon and tore it to shreds, biting, snapping, ripping at its ethereal form, swallowing chunks whole all the while. The demon was now part of the curator, and by extension, it was part of Davis too.

Davis's eyes fluttered open as he stirred from his trance. He stood, popping the kinks in his back. *Maybe I can take it easy on the painkillers for a while?* he mused, not so much to himself as to the curator.

Demon that it was, the curator demanded regular sacrifices of blood or souls. If it didn't get any, it would express its anger by coiling around Davis's heart and squeezing—something akin to the pain one feels when experiencing a massive heart attack, with all the risks included. Davis had learned early into his relationship with the curator that it could be sated with heavy doses of morphine. Most who laid eyes on Davis thought him to be addicted to the painkillers, as the doses he'd take were sufficient to drop a horse. In truth, none of those does ever made it into his system—the curator greedily lapped the painkiller from his veins before it could take effect, relishing the drug's numbing effects.

Setting the orb back on its stand, he reached for his pocket watch, but not to check the time. The long hand told how close he was to death, denoted as a skull on the watch face where the twelve would have been. The short hand measured the danger he was in. Presently, it hovered between one and two. The thin hand ticked around the watch face, stopping at twelve and reversing direction. This one told him how concentrated the area was in ethereal energy, like a form of mystical Geiger counter. Satisfied with the readings, he closed the watch, then pulled off his vest and linen breeches, swapping them for the clothes he had worn when first he'd arrived at the monastery.

Normal people's clothes, he mused, settling into his cargo pants and long-sleeve button shirt.

There was a knock at the door. He extended his senses beyond the doorframe to see who was calling. Out in the hall he saw James and Huan, along with the current warden and healer of the monastery, Bohai.

"Come on in, I'm decent," Davis said.

In stepped James. His pale pink eyes stared down at Davis, and a frosty smile graced his lips.

"Getting ready as well?" James asked.

Huan walked in, gripping Bohai's arm. She was dressed in thick leathers and furs, her body covered in the clothing of a Sherpa. Davis imagined that a Sherpa had died in those clothes, but chose not to mention it, instead smiling at James.

"Yes, I'm glad that you have been notified as well," Davis said. "Are both of you ready to go? And may I ask, why are you hanging off Bohai, Huan?"

"He has a question that he needs to ask!" Huan chirped, her long hair tied into a simple braid that fell over her shoulder. She had the body of a professional swimmer—all svelte curves and taught muscle. The piercings in her ear spoke to her full status as a monk; the tattoos that ran the length of her torso along the left side were proof of her encounters with the otherworldly.

Huan was a rarity, even among such mystical beings as the residents of the monastery. She was an honored vessel, having been impregnated by an agent of the Father of Flesh. The creature that had settled in her womb was small—imperceptible to the naked eye—but would no doubt grow to consume her if left unchecked, hence the need for the mystical tattoos that bound it in stasis. Its presence within her allowed her to perform wondrous feats, which she'd honed in practice with the Khul himself. Apart from being preternaturally alert, strong, and quick, she could reshape her body as though it were clay.

"So, what can I do for you, Bohai?" Davis asked, giving a slight bow to the young monk.

Bohai returned the nod. "Shifu, I wanted to know how long you will be gone. We have a young group that will need tutelage in the next year."

Davis frowned. "To be honest, I have a life outside of the monastery, Bohai. I can't return as I am needed elsewhere. I've been able to send messages back home that I'm alive and well, which has helped things, but these matters require my personal attention."

"I see." Bohai frowned. "Then I must warn you of a vision that one of the youngest of our order had."

"Great..." Davis grumbled. "A vision is quite rare, but are you certain that this one is important to me?"

"No, but the Khul and I agree that it could pertain to you. The recent surge of ethereal energy seemed to provoke this vision, and the boy has been rendered blind because of it." Bohai shook his head. "I doubt he'll live a month, the condition he's in."

Davis got the subtext. *They're going to use the boy as a meal since he isn't useful anymore.*

Bohai pulled a rolled-up parchment from his sash. "The description has been taken down here, and all relevant symptoms are included. Will you want to see the boy before we continue his treatment?"

Davis shook his head. He didn't want to see a boy being fattened for the slaughter. He took the scroll and unrolled it, reading silently to himself.

Dark. The area is dark, and smells of dust. Small red creatures the size of your hand crawl over mountains of shadow. An altar with four faces sits in front of a pit. A dark figure, swathed in shadows, stares at me. It has golden eyes and thin eyebrows. It is speaking, but I don't understand it.

Light shines down, a celestial being banishing the shadows from everything but the figure. I see bones, thousands of them. They're sorted and stacked, an altar made from them, and a slab of white stone. The walls are covered in pictures, carved figures that seem to stare and mock. Someone is screaming, the light shows it to be a woman on the altar. Smoke is rising off her body. Her eyes send out sparks as she spasms on the stone. An ax, made from bone and black rock, is used to hack into her body. Blood spatters everywhere; it seeps onto the stone.

The stone drinks the blood up as if it were a hungry child, and the figure lowers the weapon. The room fades with a wave of the figure's hand, and the cries of the woman go silent. A dull, wordless roar comes after several moments of steady beating of stone on stone, almost like a heartbeat.

Davis looked up from the scroll to Bohai. "This seems like a ritual, like the ones used for the Father."

"The Khul said something similar," Bohai agreed. "Before we began offering different sustenance to the Sleeper, the Khul would lead honored vessels into the catacombs with captives and perform this very ritual."

"I read up on the rituals," Davis said. "The presence of bones mean that this is most likely dedicated to the Brother of Bone. If I recall correctly, his tomb is close to us, somewhere in China?"

Bohai winced. "Actually, we... *lost* the resting place of the Brother."

Davis stared at Bohai for a moment before heaving a sigh. "How do you *lose* the body of an ancient god?"

Bohai just shrugged

"Unbelievable," he groused, pinching the bridge of his nose. He shook his head in bewilderment.

END OF SAMPLE

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Slasher Sam

By: Simon Petersen

Slasher Sam writes a killer blog. When Sam isn't gutting victims, the serial killer/blogger is posting it to the Internet for the world to see, putting readers so close to the action that they're practically in the splash zone when the blood and guts go flying.

Holy

By: Abbie Krupnick

Gus Stevens has the worst of both worlds. By night, he resides in the Dream World, a place steeped in magic and chock full of exotic dangers, with hardly a way to defend himself. By day, a giant snow-lizard, the ravenous personification of Winter, stalks him in the Real World, looking to make Gus its next meal. Author Abbie Krupnick blends the magical and the mundane in this avant-garde dark fantasy where nothing is as it seems.

Chasing Blood

By: R. Perez de Pereda

A briefcase full of money lies on the floor. Would you take it? What if the money belonged to a crime lord, and taking it set you running for your life? Still sound good? It did to Ryan, who had nothing to lose.

Born a child of the streets, Ryan Cantril learned early on to fight for his keep, and sometimes just to keep what he earned. Now in his thirties, the self-proclaimed king of the sucker punch fights to keep the cash he rightfully stole from a powerful crime syndicate – and if he's lucky, his life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Texas, Nicholas Paschall started his career in writing at an early age, jotting down stories on scraps of paper when he could and saving them to read aloud at lunch to all his friends. The teachers, upon learning this, asked him to stop as the stories weren't exactly school-friendly, but this only spurred him on to continue his career as a writer.

After a stint as a journalist and editor, he started his career as a horror author. It was brought on by reading a book he found dull and listless, which, after lending it to a coworker, he was informed it was terrifying. He thought he could do better, and has been publishing ever since. He's been published in nineteen different printed anthologies and magazines, served two years as a recurring columnist for *Dark Eclipse Magazine*, and is a current columnist for *The London Horror Society*. His work can be found across the web, where he spins new yarns for all to enjoy on a daily basis.

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