

TALES OF A BLOOD EARTH

Steven Montano

Copyright 2011 by Steven Montano

Smashwords Edition

Also by Steven Montano

BLOOD SKIES SERIES

Blood Skies

Black Scars

Soulrazor**

Crown of Ash**

The Witch's Eye***

Storm of Skulls***

** Coming 2012

*** Coming 2013

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

All rights reserved.

Released by Darker Sunset Press

TALES OF A BLOOD EARTH

one

Rooke saw red water and black skies.

She was dizzy. Her lips were dry and cracked.

The trees behind her formed a dark wall. Dirty golden light tried to break through the charcoal clouds, but couldn't. Bodies crawled and toiled in the shadows on the bleak plains.

“Dig!”

The mud was as black as coal. Shards of shattered rock and blanched bones shifted in the crumbling morass. Her hands bled. Blisters and cuts riddled her pale skin beneath the ebon muck.

The air smelled of sulfur. To the west, the dark land went on forever. They dug holes at the edge of nowhere.

Rooke closed her eyes, just for a moment. In her mind, she escaped back to the swamp, where she used to hide on hot summer days and wait for miniature crocodiles to float by in the water so that she and her brother could catch them. They were quite good at it, really.

That was before she'd become a prisoner. Chattel of Black Scar.

A rod struck her from behind. Pain flared down her back. Rooke cried out.

“I said dig!”

There were twelve prisoners in all. Rooke was one of the only humans; most of the rest were Lith, Doj, or Gol. They weren't allowed to speak, and as far as she had guessed they came from different cell blocks of Black Scar. She'd never seen any of her fellow diggers before they'd been put on the ship that morning, and when the day was done she doubted she'd ever see any of them again.

Revengeurs were close by. There were two men and a woman. Rooke didn't know their names. The Revengeurs never told the inmates their names. They wore tight-fitting leather armor with enameled black shoulder plates, tall boots, and leather gauntlets. One of the men paced the ground in front of the diggers, his boots slurping in the cold mud. The other two stood on the

ridge just in front of the line of trees, watching, joking about which prisoner would be the first to fall down from exhaustion and drown in the mud.

Rooke was sixteen. She'd been a prisoner in Black Scar for only a few weeks, but it felt like a lifetime. It was a dank and bottomless place, a dark and subterranean hell filled with violence and fear.

It was just as bad there, on the fields of dark mud. They might have been near Blackmarsh. There was no sign of civilization anywhere. The airship had brought them there, and those that survived the day-long dig would be flown back and dumped into their cells with a few scraps of whatever hadn't been eaten by the other prisoners.

She dug, her hands numb. She tried to think again of the swamp, and of her brother, but she was afraid if she did that the Revengers would somehow know, and she would be struck again. So she dug, and tears made black from the mud ran down her face.

two

The airship was at the edge of the dark forest. A machinegun (Rooke didn't know what type it was, but her brother would have, he was into that sort of thing) was mounted on the deck. Another Revenger stood there at the gun, watching them all. If they stopped digging, they'd be shot.

Rooke's fingers were raw. They'd been given no tools. She didn't believe there was any purpose to the dig aside from cruelty. The black fatigues she'd been given to wear were soaked through with dank water and pasted to her skin. The air tasted like sewage.

"Come on," one of the Revengers shouted, a tall and scarred brute with spiky blonde hair. "The faster you dig, the quicker you can get back to your cells! I know you LOVE your cells!"

One of the giant-sized Doj sneered at the Warden. He was rewarded with a blast of wracking pain that surrounded his body in a red cloud of razor dust. The solid jade eyes of the warlock Revenger, a wiry and rat-faced man with dark skin and red tattoos on his face, looked on the giant without pity or remorse. There was always one warlock who oversaw the work detail, there to keep unruly prisoners like the Doj in line. After the giant pulled himself together, he went back to digging.

The prisoners clawed their way through thick earth with torn hands. Black sludge caked their bodies, their faces and their arms. The air was freezing cold, and Rooke's body shook. Her fingernails were filled with grit and grime. Her arms were so weary and sore she could barely feel them.

She dug.

Her hands caught on something buried. It was clammy, and so cold to the touch it made her recoil.

"I found it!" she yelled.

All of the other prisoners stopped digging. The female Revenger walked up behind Rooke, and looked down.

“Clear it,” she shouted. She looked at the nearest prisoners, a red-headed Lith and a stocky Gol male with grey hair and a beard. “Help her. Now.”

They pushed away slime and dank, sticky soil, not quite mud but something more organic, like it came from the inside of a body. Whatever it was, it stuck to their hands and froze their skin.

They pulled and scraped to make whatever was buried visible. The other inmates gathered, their eyes wide.

It was a body. Ice cold, and tall. Its skin was ashen pale beneath the muck. Its massive claws were folded in front of its chest, and its wide lips barely concealed a clenched mouthful of pale, sharp fangs. It was humanoid, but larger, its features unnatural. It looked like Death.

“Oh, God,” Rooke gasped.

“Remind me,” the warlock asked the woman, the leader of those Revengers, “exactly why we were looking for this.”

“Because we had no choice,” she answered.

Rooke looked at the vampire, lying half-buried there in the mud.

It opened its eyes, and looked back at her.

three

The air was as dark as oil. The bitter smell of mold clung to the air, so thick it gagged the prisoners.

There were only eight of them now. Four of the others had been taken away after they'd finished excavating the dark field, and they hadn't been brought back. Those prisoners who remained had been bound hand and foot with steel wire, and forced into kneeling positions. They were like trembling mounds on the soil; some lay with their faces in the mud, while others, like Rooke, sat up stalwartly, and stared into the thick night.

Sweat ran down Rooke's face. Her blonde hair was pasted to her face with mud and sweat. Her knees ached where they pressed against loose stones beneath the soil, and her legs were almost numb.

It was the middle of the night, some hours after they'd finished their work. They'd spent most of the day digging.

The field of bodies was just over the rise. They'd unearthed body after body from the grim soil.

It was a field of vampires.

The unearthed creatures moved now as if in trance. They wandered like sleepwalkers, their eyes only partly open. Thick ebon claws like sinuous knives hung limply by their sides. The undead were naked. Their pale bodies were still covered in earth grime and bloody water.

The vampires were utterly silent. There were at least ten that Rooke had seen. They wandered up from the field where they'd been buried, shuffling along by as if drawn by something, but they only looked blankly at the prisoners. They seemed not to understand where they were, or what had happened.

The Revengers looked upon the scene with their guns ready. The vampires seemed not to notice the jailors. They were left free to wander among the bound prisoners, oblivious to the airship parked a hundred feet away, or the mounted machineguns and flamethrowers that trailed their every movement.

Rooke's stomach twisted in on itself every time one of the foul-smelling creatures drew close. She felt like she was collapsing.

"How much longer do you need?" the Revenger captain, Korva, asked the warlock. Korva pulled her dark hair back into a pony-tail, and her assault rifle dangled from her shoulder by a strap. She and the warlock, Gath Crezlock, were two of the only Revengers who'd stayed down there on the ground with the prisoners.

Crezlock was a short man with crimson tattoos on his face, arms and neck. He wore no armor but had on a thick brown cloak, the hood of which had been thrown back to reveal a head of short black hair. He looked young, maybe twenty.

"Have they pulled any more out of the soil?" he asked.

He stood near a vampire constrained in a cage of fire. Thick blades of orange flame bent over one another in molten beams. The cage was several yards away from her, but Rooke still felt the heat that issued from the incendiary prison. It was like having her face next to an oven. The cage illuminated the air like a bonfire.

"No," Korva answered. "This should be all of them."

"Then we can begin," Crezlock said. He had that edge to his voice that Rooke's father used to speak with, that tone that said his time was being wasted. "Again."

"Will you get it right this time?"

"Will you?" Crezlock snarled. "We should have brought more prisoners with us. These have been digging all day. They're exhausted. We need healthy bodies."

"We'll make do with what we have."

The vampire in the cage wasn't like the others. His eyes were wide open, and filled with black hate. His fangs were far too large for his square jaw, and they dripped a fluid like sugared milk. His pale and ugly flesh was addled with runes and scars, and his heavy claws gripped the ground. His skin bore no sweat, but Rooke saw burn blisters and scorch marks where he'd tested the cage.

His eyes were like holes, and they engulfed her. Every time she looked at him, something inside of her froze.

Rooke glanced at Korva. Korva was looking right at her.

"Gath," Korva said with a mischievous smile. "This young lady is healthy, and she seems to have taken a liking to your pet. Start with her..."

four

Rooke was carried, kicking and screaming, back to the vampire fields.

The earth was torn and bloody and stank of grave rot and mildew. The sky was dark and vast.

The vampires watched her in silence. There were more of them than she'd thought: two dozen easily, naked and pale and covered in claret soil. Their black eyes bore holes into her soul.

Korva and Crezlock, the Revenger captain and mage, followed behind the soldiers that carried Rooke. The vampire from the flaming cage was with them. He hovered through the air, unmoving. Chains of fire twisted around his body just inches away from his undead skin.

Rooke turned and looked at him. His eyes never seemed to leave her. She felt his eyes latch into her heart like sharp hooks.

He and the others that had been dug up were unlike anything she'd ever heard of. The vampires of the Ebon Cities were supposed to be smart and organized. They were legion, an efficient military force that ruled the western part of the known world. They weren't savages or mindless zombies.

But the vampires that the Black Scar inmates had dug out of the earth were different. They were primordial and animal-like. Their presence chilled her blood.

The Revengers seemed unafraid of the creatures they'd ordered excavated from their sodden graves. They marched through the field with their guns and their magic until they reached a section of torn-up earth. It was the exact spot where Rooke had uncovered the first of the buried vampires. Underneath where the undead had slept was an impossibly deep and dark hole that seemed to go on forever.

Without a word, they dropped her into it.

Rooke screamed. She tumbled end over end. She was weightless, lost in an ocean of black.

She collided with a slick shelf of ice so cold that it burned. Rooke slid down its face. Ice chipped and sliced her skin.

There were pale lights inside the walls, frozen there like submerged explosions. She slid down a runway lit by ghostly illumination.

There was no hard impact at the bottom — Rooke just slowed to a halt where the slope leveled out with the nadir of the shaft.

Rooke was in a tunnel that looked as if had been burned out of the ice. The floor was slick and uneven. Her mud-caked moccasins were little help as she stumbled forward.

She shivered uncontrollably. She steadied herself, and her fingers came back from the ice bloody.

The tunnel stretched on before her, unending. Only the lights inside of the ice walls allowed her to see, and her field of vision only extended a few feet before the darkness swallowed everything up. Her eyes went back to the lights.

There were faces in the ice. Leering pale visages, frozen in anger or terror, lay petrified beneath the blue-black glass. Their eyes were blue orbs that cast a dank cyan shine. Their fingers ended in claws that pushed against the inside of the glassy barrier.

She was in a tunnel of the frozen dead. They were vampires entombed in a glacial grave. She felt them looking at her. Rooke could almost sense them trying to push through the frozen walls.

An echo reverberated through the cavern. Something else was sliding down the tunnel after her. Rooke turned and ran.

five

Go deeper, the voice told her.

She didn't know whose voice it was, or where it came from. It didn't really matter.

Rooke pressed on through the icy labyrinth. There was no way to know how deep she had gone. She sensed miles of rock over her head.

She navigated tunnels that were smooth and dark. Bitter steam curled off of the ground. Only the hazy blue shine of vampire eyes, frozen in their grim visages there in the walls, lit the way. Their fangs were frozen in perpetual hunger. She moved quickly, waiting for them to somehow break free.

The air burned down her throat. Scattered whispers drifted through her mind, lunatic mutterings that licked cold against her ears. The ice of the tunnel grew darker the deeper she went. The constant azure shine dimmed, and ebon stains appeared on the ice, like cankerous black wounds.

The shadows grew thick. It was soon difficult for Rooke to see more than a few feet ahead. She moved cautiously. Her footing grew less certain. Things cracked into dust beneath her step, some so loudly they made her jump.

The tunnel split, forked, and split again. Rooke kept as straight a path as she could. She took a wide and sloping tunnel that led even deeper into the frozen earth.

After a time, her shivering subsided, and her exposed skin no longer felt raw. It was as if the glacial air had accepted her.

Behind her, growls and throaty calls echoed through the darkness. Alien presences stalked the ice tunnels.

All around her, Rooke felt the air pulse, as if it were breathing. She walked slowly, her feet carefully sliding along on the ice as she descended. The ice walls turned from black to smoky white. There were no more petrified undead in the walls — now ghostly vapors swirled beyond the ice barrier, ash ghosts trapped on the other side of the frozen pane. They swam through the air like spectral predatory fish.

Rooke's feet kicked up primordial drift as she entered a large round chamber, an inverted bowl of smoking onyx crystal. The air was warmer there, and thick. The dark whispers seemed to fade behind her, trapped in the upper tunnels. The air was suddenly silent, and still.

She had come to a throne room. A primitive seat made of bones and basalt and fused crimson glass sat at the center of the chamber.

What is this place? she wondered. What was it that we dug up?

She felt the age of that crumbling room. There was a presence in the air, a sense of something foreign. She tasted rot.

Sit.

"Who are you?" she asked. Her words echoed and faded. They turned to black dust that scattered and blew away on a chill wind. "What is this place?"

Sit. They have sent the vampire for you. You do not have much time.

"Why are they doing this?" she called out, no longer caring that by doing so she was likely telling her pursuer exactly where she was. "What do they want?"

Sit. Look.

Rooke hesitated. The seat was oddly-shaped. It was meant, she thought, for something not human. Carefully, she settled herself into the mishappen throne.

It was surprisingly warm. Familiar.

Welcome home, the voice said. Look.

Rooke did. And when she saw what was shown to her, she screamed.

six

Gath Crezlock took a drink from his canteen. The water tasted cool and fresh, which was a sharp contrast to the stinking graveyard of bloody soil and torn vampire earth. His skin was frozen, even with his spirit wrapped around his body in a shroud of heat. The air was brightening to the east, where the sky pulsed diamond red.

The airship sat on the ground nearby, its swivel-mounted weapons aimed at the hole that led to the tunnels. The ship's engines were kept warm in case the Revengers needed to make a quick exit.

Gath didn't want to have to make a quick exit, because that would mean that everything had gone irrevocably wrong.

We've had enough of that, he thought. It would be nice for at least part of this shitty assignment to happen like it's supposed to.

Gath thought about the graves in the snow fields near Glaive. He thought about Lancer.

Sorry we couldn't find your arms, pal. Or your face.

Korva had Lancer added to the MIA list so Tower wouldn't ask any questions. She'd covered their tracks efficiently thus far. But Gath knew they couldn't afford any more mistakes.

"How long has it been?" Frost asked. Korva's aide was thin and handsome, with fair hair and an angular jaw. He looked more like an actor or a prostitute than a jailor with a reputation for excessive cruelty.

And that takes a special something, Gath thought, considering we're part of a group defined by its penchant for cruelty.

"Long enough," he answered. "You should get your team ready."

The field of bloody soil stretched into the pulsing darkness. The air was heavy with freezing vapor. Vague silhouettes of elephantine beasts roamed the murky horizon. The air tasted of burnt charcoal and dying embers. Gath's eyes stung with fatigue.

The remaining prisoners huddled nearby, surrounded by the dazed vampires, who still roamed aimless and free, their pale naked bodies covered in muck, their jaws slack and their eyes blank. Gath watched them nervously.

Far below, in an icy labyrinth that in spite of its dark and ancient history had no name, came the sound of a woman screaming.

“It’s time!” Korva said. “Bring her out.”

Six Revengers assembled at the staging area at the lip of hole. Their MP5s and machetes were readied. Their dark armor made them near invisible in the dead night. Frost bore a smug, satisfied expression on his face.

You live for this, don’t you? Gath thought. Leading armed men in pursuit of a frightened, unarmed young woman. You’re worse than half of the inmates of Black Scar, you bastard.

“What about them?” Gath asked with a nod toward the rest of the prisoners. There were seven left, all dragged from the Black Scar work details, each of them looking half-dead and pathetic. Their clothes and skin had been stained sediment black and rust red.

“Kill them,” Korva said with a shrug. Something in Gath’s chest tightened at that.

“Shouldn’t we make sure it worked first?” he asked. “Make sure she survived?”

As if in response, a voice issued from the cave mouth that led to the tunnels below. Its volume rattled the ground and loosened the soil around the hole. The bestial roar was deep and hollow, a thunderous animal cry that seemed to envelop the night sky. Gath’s insides turned, and he was nearly ill. For a moment he felt the touch of death in the air, like a cold blade kissing his skin.

No one moved.

“Gath,” Frost asked with nothing of his usual confidence. “What the hell was that?”

Gath couldn’t answer. He didn’t know.

seven

There was black blood in the blue light of petrified vampires eyes, held in grim faces behind frozen walls. The air was thick with ice-hard mist and red steam. Combat boots shuffled across thick ice on the ground. Their guns were trained on sounds that issued out of the cold smoke.

They waded through a sea of mist, refugees in a crystalline darkness. Moisture ran down the frozen walls like sweat. Gath smelled something foul, like meat left out too long that had started to fester.

The air was still held in the grip of a brutal chill, but in spite of that it felt stifling, filled with dust and difficult to breathe in.

Frost's team consisted of himself, Gath, a pair of infantrymen named Task and Powell, and a swordswoman named Wynd, a dark-haired and dark-skinned woman with a pair of katanas she wore strapped to the back of her tight black armor. The others were all armed with MP4A submachineguns, pistols and knives.

Only Gath was relatively unarmed, or would have been if not for the fact that he was a warlock. His spirit skirted the air around him, filling it with an electric wind that set his senses alight. Her whispers filled his head, and every few seconds she flew into his chest and penetrated to his soul, warming him. Even with that comfort that she offered, he could feel her fear, and that terrified him. She was never afraid.

Frost looked at him, needing direction. They'd come to an intersection in the curving tunnels. The ice was smooth, like it had been sculpted. Gath had never actually been inside of one of these Malojian monuments, but he had read about them. The tunnels likely stretched for miles in every direction, deep and winding paths of transparent ice as hard as stone and as clear as glass.

Gath focused, and sent his spirit along both tunnels simultaneously. Her form stretched until she became a pair of razor-thin emanations that explored the tunnels with trace fingers meant to detect arcane vibrations and living soul matter. She had to differentiate between actual living beings and the energies that might be clinging to the long ruined souls that still swam there in the

tunnels, harmless but enervated, a lethargic army of shattered ghosts that had been stripped of all will and left to wander like lost animals.

Eventually, Gath felt a living presence. There would be only one living creature in that accursed place that wasn't one of Frost's team. He indicated the correct tunnel with a nod, and Frost signalled Task to take point and lead on.

This wasn't supposed to take this long, Gath thought as they slowly crept down the corridor, their eyes and their guns on a small army of immobilized vampires on the other side of the glass-like walls that surrounded them. Gath practically felt those walls closing in around him. The rounded and sloped tunnel floor was barely wide enough to fit two abreast, but they moved single file with a meter spread between bodies to avoid getting caught too close together.

Gath's every breath felt shallow, and the hairs on his neck and his arms tingled with fear. Any moment he expected one of those long petrified vampires to come to life and leap out at him. His hands were moist with sweat, and his shoulders ached with tension. The water that dripped from the walls made an incessant and constant sound, a dismal choir of echoes like nails scratching stone.

Everything will be fine, he told himself. *By now she's seen the way, and the vampire will have consumed her*. All they had to do was kill the vampire and extract his black seed of a heart, and they'd be rich beyond mortal comprehension.

The corridor sloped sharply down, almost a slide.

"The throne," Gage whispered to Frost, indicating they had come the right way.

How the Maloj had done it, they'd never know. They were along vanished race that could never be fully comprehended. They'd been lupine in form, savage and bestial, yet possessed of incredible intellect and arcane aptitude. Conquerors who seemed not to have lost their Empire, they'd simply vanished at its height. They were living anachronisms who'd existed out of synch with time itself.

Had they ruled in the past, or are they yet to rule? Are these tunnels and these mindless vampire slaves relics of a long lost age, or refugees from a future that has yet to take place?

They started down the slope. Gath focused ahead, trying to ignore the leering eyes of the undead frozen in the walls. Suddenly, the sound of dripping water stopped.

Frost motioned for everyone to hold their positions.

Ahead, at the bottom of the tunnel, a figure moved. Frost signaled the rest of the team to follow his lead, and he moved forward to put down the vampire.

But it wasn't the vampire. It was the girl, the prisoner, the one they'd sent down there to die.

And she had changed.

Gath swallowed.

"Oh my God..."

eight

Carefully, she settled herself into the mishappen throne.

It was surprisingly warm. Familiar.

Welcome home, the voice said. *Look.*

Rooke did. And when she saw what was shown to her, she screamed.

The Angel of Razors floats over a stygian landscape.

Her wings carry her through clouds of charnel matter and past predatory birds made of blades. She floats through a blood sky filled with black stars. The earth below her is dark and dead. Mounds of white bones and white trees interrupt the ebon soil. Rivers of blood and pools of yellow slime bubble and spew sick fluids into the air. There are no structures, no buildings, and nothing alive.

This is not a place for the living. It is the Shadowmere, where the dead rule over a domain that is also their prison. It is a place she knows well, for she has listened to the voices of the damned, of those trapped against their will, through all of her many lives.

Black lightning courses through the sky. Stale wind that smells of dead fish blows at her back, but the Angel floats onward, unchallenged, unafraid. She yields a blade of black glass at her side and holds a white apple in her fist. Its power is capable of repulsing most anything that would dare face her in this place.

Occasionally she catches sight of distant onyx fliers, gigantic bats with barbed tails that leave clouds of black steam in their wake. There are great shambling beasts on the surface below, hollow creatures made of bones and eyes that move like elephantine zombies, but not even they will come anywhere near the source of the power that she carries.

The landscape changes. She comes to the killing fields, where the souls of the accursed are forever made to suffer. Tears of blood fall from her eyes as she flies over this dark place. Many of the souls impaled on stakes or tethered to the barbed trees or stretched between blood-stained stone blocks were once those of people she'd loved and cared for in her many lives. Souls are

like bodies in the Shadowmere, and the Grim Father's legions are known for their ruthlessness. They do not treat their prisoners kindly.

Some victims have been thrust upon tall wooden spikes, and their bodies have been left to slowly slide down the wood over the course of many days. Others are tethered to trees made of razorwire and hooks, where they dangle upside down in such a way that to struggle invites tremendous pain. Others are thrown into pits of fire where they burn and scream and blister for the rest of time. There are pools of acid, racks of stone, bludgeoning hammers taken to limbs. Bodies are left to rot beneath the blood red sun that during the day hangs in the sky like a withered heart.

The screams that resonate from the killing field are loud enough, they say, to be heard in the world of the living.

The Angel hears the cries of the tortured, the throes of the dying, the wails of innocents. She has never known such rage as she feels for the lord of that domain. She has never known hate as she knows it now, for the Grim Father.

Finally, in the distance, she sees the Black Keep.

Perhaps it had once been something else, some structure of meaning, but regardless of what it might have once been it is now a morbid sanctuary, a decrepit landmark on an already blighted landscape. It is a block of stone that stands atop a preposterous precipice, a mountaintop stronghold so deep jet in color it seems to penetrate the impossible night. Bits of rock crumble and fall away from the behemoth structure. A waterfall of silver and black flows down the face of the mountain; the waters are polluted with bodies, souls being vomited from the mouth of the dread structure to plummet to their doom. There are no towers, no parapets, no walls or crenellations: just that void of stone, a featureless cube, so dark it would be invisible against any normal night.

She knows what is there. She knows what must be done.

I will avenge you, my love. I will do what is right. I have escaped many prisons to reach you. Now I must help you escape yours.

nine

Even from her distant vantage, the Angel hears the screams of the damned that issue from within the dark halls of the Black Keep. Unimaginable pain and unspeakable tortures are visited upon those who earn the ire of the Grim Father, the self-proclaimed lord of the Shadowmere, and the first vampire. He is the thing that she has come here to kill.

Dark riders take flight as she approaches. They are merely shadows at first, strange firmaments of darkness that seem to scatter away from the greater Keep like clouds of dust, but as she draws closer she sees them for what they are: leathery wings and glistening claws, creatures that wear necklaces of human heads and bear crab-like pincers. The riders are gaunt and faceless, and they stare on at her with dead white eyes as they flex their jagged spears to challenge her. The draconic mounts roar with heavy maws filled with saber-like teeth. The thunderous beating of their wings tears open the air like an old wound.

She holds the white apple aloft. White light erupts forth, a soundless explosion of glittering energy. The riders recoil, blinded by the sudden eruption, dazed by the intensity of searing illumination. They scream and writhe, the dragon's wings lose their motion, the riders shield themselves and fling their spears wide...and then they are gone, and they plummet down, their will to exist gone, their bodies dissipating, lost in a haze of blood and dust until they crash into the void beneath with distant and sickening thuds.

She flies to the Keep. It is truly enormous, a monstrosity, its size beyond normal definition. No matter how close she draws, it still seems further away, but its size only continues to increase, and its vertical distance from the blighted plains over which it rules grows unequivocally vast. The Angel feels the size of the world around her, feels the rush of dead wind and the whispers of ancient blasphemies, gazes into the impossibly deep sky and ascends up, ever up, towards the gargantuan maw of the Keep.

The dismal water falls from mammoth openings shaped like upwardly curved blades. Inside the openings, above the gritty tide, hang great braziers made of bone and filled with charnel flames. Razor-sharp pillars form barriers that prevent easy access to the deeper halls. Bodies

float in the freezing waters that exit the Keep, and they plummet, endlessly, towards the unforgiving depths below.

I will stop this. I will destroy you, once and for all.

Slowly, so slowly, she flies through an opening, unchallenged, even though she feels eyes on her, even though she feels the sick presence of what rules there as it encompasses her. She feels it breath, which is thick with the dank stench of centuries.

Inside the Keep, everything swims in darkness. Pillars of calcified bone and twisted flesh stretch for miles. The Keep's halls are deep and lost in shadow. The ceiling almost seems to be a second sky. Tall sets of illogically twisted and winding stairs run off into hundreds of alcoves and passageways made of cobweb and stone. Dried blood and excrement and brain and effluvia have been spattered everywhere, like paint. The dark songs of suffering echo through the halls and out into the black sky and the surrounding void.

Faceless, fleshless creatures with alabaster skin and remorseless eyes watch her from the dark. She feels the presence of stronger beings, the more powerful servants of the Grim Father, the elder vampires, the generals of his Earthbound armies. They serve the Father without question: he gives them purpose, and the promise of conquest. For as much power as he has, he wants more. He wants her.

Her wings flap and make metallic song in the dark air as she flies through the confines of the fortress. She senses him overhead, feels the dull beat of his pitiless heart reverberate like a power source through the Keep. She throws back her arms, braces herself, and ascends into the darkness. It swallows her whole.

ten

It was the girl, the prisoner, the one they'd sent down there to die.

And she had changed.

Gath swallowed.

“Oh my God...”

“What the hell...” Frost said.

Every inch of the girl's skin was covered in a thin layer of ice. It was pasted so close to her body they could hear the crystals shift and crack as she walked. Her eyes were pale and blank, like frozen winter pools. Her fingers were black with frostbite, and her nails were as dark as raw diamonds. Every breath she exhaled turned the air around her to a hard, sinking vapor that cracked like soft glass when it hit the ground.

The Revengers — Gath, the warlock; Frost, the leader; Wynd, a swordswoman; Rask and Powell, well-armed grunts — held their ground, but did not advance. They kept their weapons trained on the girl there at the bottom of the stone steps, that wraith-like teenager who seemed possessed by the ice.

That's not far from the truth, Gath thought.

“Frost,” he said quietly. “Listen carefully. We need...”

“Where in the hell is the vampire?” Frost interrupted.

“We just passed tunnels full of frozen ones...” Gath said, but Frost wheeled round on him.

“The one that WE sent, you idiot!”

Frost's voice blasted and echoed down the tunnel. Gath was certain he felt the earth move just then, that he felt something shift. It was as if something had been askance, and had finally righted itself.

“Look!” Rask yelled, and he pointed at the girl's feet. Just beyond her frost-blistered toes was the body of the vampire they'd sent after her. It's chest had been carved open by what appeared to be a massive stalactite pushed through its heart. The front of the girl's grimy prison

uniform was caked in frozen blood, and her hands bled profusely onto the icy ground. Small clouds of steam rose with every drop of her blood.

She stumbled forward, eyes blank and feet shuffling through her own blood.

“Rask, Powell,” Frost said. “Grab her.”

She still has it inside of her, Gath thought in amazement. She killed the damn vampire, and yet she still has it inside of her, all of the memories, all of that pain.

The two Revengers stepped forward with their MP5s ready. The girl made no motion or indication that she would move. They made it within five feet of her when the girl tore them to pieces.

It happened in a flash. One moment she stood there, placid, unaware, and the next second there was death. Her hands become razor sharp axe-blades made of ice. Blood streamed onto the frost-lined walls, so hot it melted through with jets of steam. Rask and Powell fell without a sound.

“Son of a bitch!” Frost yelled, and he opened fire. The air went white. The roar of the automatic weapon pounded Gath’s eardrums like hot hammers. His spirit swirled around him and took him in her ethereal hold, blocked his ears with muffled air before the drums were permanently damaged, and she moved her spectral form between he and Frost. It was her nature to protect him. Gath pushed her aside, grabbed Frost, and threw him against the wall.

The air returned to normal. The swordswoman, Wynd, had drawn her MP5 and held it ready, but the damage had already been done. The girl, Rooke, lay on the ground. Blood poured out of gaping rents in her flesh. Dark blood sluiced out of her torso and her torn neck and painted the frosted ground red.

“You blithering idiot!” Gath yelled at the commander. ”Now we’ll never get it from her! Another dead end, thanks to you!” Gath turned away. His spirit rode his anger, intensified it. She was ready to fly from his fingertips at any moment. All it would take was a thought from him, the slightest gesture, and she would ignite the air around Frost and turn him into a briquette. It took every reserve of Gath’s will to stop her.

When Frost rose and gave Gath a cold stare, Gath met it in kind.

We were so close this time, the warlock thought. We almost had it. Almost had the way to the Black Keep. If only we could have extracted it from her mind, all of this would be over. The debt the Revengers owe could be paid. We could go back to our regular lives.

Frost understood all of that, of course. There was no need to say any of it aloud. He straightened his dark armored coat, shot a glance at Wynd, and then turned to head back up the tunnel. With both Rooke and the vampire they'd sent to kill her destroyed, there was nothing to gain by staying down in that grim catacomb. They would have to find another location, a virgin location, one with an untouched throne. Gath would have to return here again before they could leave, so that he could determine what had happened to the vampire. It would be up to him to find out what had gone wrong.

“God damn it,” he muttered, and he turned to follow Frost out of the tunnels.

“Look!” Wynd shouted.

Gath stopped, and did. And his heart nearly stopped.

Rooke had stood up.

eleven

“Kill it!” Frost shouted.

“No!” Gath screamed. He positioned himself between Frost and the girl, the dead girl, who was covered in frost crystals as well as her own blood. Her eyes had become vacant ice pools. The blood that ran from her open wounds congealed and thickened even before it left her body, so that it stuck to her bluish skin like black syrup.

“God damn it, Gath, move!”

“Wynd!” Gath shouted. “Don’t shoot!”

Everyone stopped. It was as if they were all frozen in a photograph.

Gath’s skin was ice cold even though he was covered in sweat. His arms trembled with fear and rage. His spirit hung barely tethered to the edge of his consciousness, ready to push away and attack anyone, everyone, at a moment’s notice.

Rooke, the dead girl, just stood there and watched them.

Once Gath was sure that neither Frost nor Wynd was going to open fire, he turned around. He slowly and steadily walked towards the girl.

She has what we need. If I can get it out of her, it will all be over. The Revengers, Black Scar...all of it.

“Please,” he said in a near whisper to the girl, the avatar, whatever she was now. “Please, I need your help...”

She didn’t move. Her expression remained blank.

Gath walked up to her, his hands unsteady, his feet turned to the side so he could launch into a run if he had to. She was so cold..he felt the heat escaping her body even from a few feet away, an intense chill so heavy that approaching her was like passing through a physical barrier. His spirit tensed, coiled, readied herself to strike at the first sign of danger.

He reached out his hand. The girl, Rooke, quietly walked up to him. She stood close by, as if ready to follow. Gath looked at Frost expectantly. Frost, for his part, looked completely baffled.

“Wynd,” he said. “Take the point.”

Wynd backed away cautiously from Gath and Rooke. She kept her MP5 trained on the dead girl even as she moved backwards up the tunnel. Her dark eyes were filled with terror, and the moment she moved next to Frost Wynd turned and headed up the ice tunnel, back the way they’d came.

“Rooke,” Gath said cautiously.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Crezlock.”

“Shut up, Frost!” Gath barked.

Funny how people change in a crisis, he thought. Frost’s very presence had scared the hell out of Gath just an hour earlier. Now Frost would be lucky if Gath’s spirit didn’t eviscerate him before the night was done.

“Rooke,” he repeated, speaking as if to a young child. “Listen, dear, if you can understand me, I need you to do something for me. There’s something I need to get from you so that you can rest, okay? But in order for us to do that...you have to come with us. I just need you to follow me.”

Her expression didn’t change. Her behavior was like that of a zombie, but Gath had never heard of nor seen a zombie that wasn’t hostile.

What she was now — what those memories of the White Mother’s old life had done to Rooke — was a mystery to Gath.

She followed him. Gath wasn’t sure what actually compelled her, and he was still suspicious that she intended to do them harm, but as the warlock slowly made his way back up the ice corridor she followed him. Each step was agonizingly slow as they walked up the sloped passage.

“Holy shit,” was all Frost could add. Gath didn’t comment, but ushered Frost to move on ahead.

They re-entered the vampire hall, that stretch of tunnel lined with undead frozen in brutal poses on the other side of the ice. Wynd waited for them where the corridor sloped up again and led back to the surface, where Korva and the other Revengers waited.

Gath walked, and Rooke followed. Frost and Wynd started towards the surface.

Something was wrong. Gath couldn't put his finger on exactly what it was. He wiped sweat from his brow. More sweat dripped down his wrist, and he realized his shirt was pasted to his chest. He also could no longer see his breath in the air.

The air had grown hot. Water rolled down the thinning ice walls in rapid streams. Gath heard dripping, and he tasted glacial salt on the subterranean breeze.

Oh, God, no.

"Frost!"

Behind the melting ice, wide-fanged mouths slowly started to move. Massive talons shifted and flexed. Undead muscles pushed against the weakened slush in which they'd been encased. Cracks appeared in the ice walls in the form of jagged lines.

The ice was melting, and the vampires were waking up.

And Rooke was laughing.

twelve

Gath's spirit fell around him like a glaze of steel. His eyes exploded with liquid light, and he cast her into the nearest vampire as it clawed its way out of the icy wall.

All around him, Gath saw undead pull and rip their way out of frozen prisons. The ice melted all along the corridor, and rapidly. Bloody runoff pooled along the smooth floor and flowed down the slope of the tunnel. Chunks of steaming ice that had turned red and black clattered down as vampires pulled their way free. The smell of bad meat was thick. Gath thought he was going to choke.

Claws like nails shoved their way clear and tore at the Revengers. Ice and caustic drool filled the frozen air. Frost and Wynd both fired into the walls. Bullets rammed into undead flesh, and the caves were again filled with deafening echoes.

But Frost and Wynd fired in vain. Even as bullets drilled into pale bodies, the vampires tore their way free. They were legion, and whatever force had kept them frozen was gone.

The ice had melted.

“Let's go!!!” Frost shouted. “Gath, get your...”

Claws cleaved though Frost and threw his bloody body to the ground. Wynd screamed as a mass of naked vampires threw themselves upon her and Frost with wild abandon. Snarls and howls filled the air. Gath heard angry claws and teeth tear his teammates apart.

The warlock turned and fired beams of black fire that incinerated a pair of vampires as they reached for him. They were everywhere. Fangs and claws and black eyes. He was in a sea of razors and dead breath. Wet steaming muck splashed across his face. Nails as sharp as knives raked his body through his armored coat. Hot pain flared up his arms and back.

His spirit roared, and he roared with her. She melted into a fan of edged flames that covered his body and shielded him. Fire flashed from his hands and burned the cave floor. Vampires ignited as they touched him. Their moldered flesh dripped away beneath the dark blaze.

Gath ran through the tunnels. Had he been in his right mind, he would have been afraid that he was lost in the labyrinth. But the bloodlust was on he and his spirit both. They ran together,

sheathed and sealed in a cloak of ebon fumes. Every vampire that touched them burst into a walking blaze of black fire.

The tunnels filled with ice and flame and blood. Bodies burned and collapsed. Water from the melting tunnels fell thick as rain, extinguishing the burning bodies and filling the air with charnel smoke.

Gath and his spirit waded through it all, somehow. The space around them was filled with a gagging haze. Gath crawled over mounds of smoking flesh.

When his mind calmed somewhat, Gath realized they were almost topside. He recognized the particular stretch of tunnel they'd entered, and the angle and steepness of the slope he climbed told him he was headed in the right direction. All he wanted to do now was escape — he no longer even cared about stealing the White Mother's secrets for the Ebon Cities, or about ending the Revenger's penance for betraying the Grim Father. All he wanted now was to make it out of there alive.

Carefully, Gath ascended the tunnel. He sent his spirit out ahead: even though he felt naked without her there, he didn't want to walk headlong into another nest of frozen vampires. She would only be gone a moment.

His body shook all over. Vile fumes from smoking corpses filled the air behind him in a wall of dead fog.

Gath didn't see her until she was already on top of him. Claws lanced through his arms and threw him face-first to the ground. His jaw smashed against the ice and rock, and the sound of his nose as it cracked made his stomach clench. His spirit raced back towards him — he felt her tear through the air in a line of dark fire.

But it was too late. She couldn't reach him in time.

He went numb. Something was torn away, some part of his body. Blood rained onto the floor around him. Gath tried to rise, he tried to scream, he tried to do anything, but it was no use. He was gone.

All he could do was watch the girl, Rooke, who was now a vessel for the White Mother, stand up. His own grisly remains covered her, so thick and red she looked as if she'd swam through meat. He tried to call out, but he couldn't speak without a face. He tried to think of something, anything, some precious memory from the life he was about to lose, but all he could think was how Rooke would go the surface and kill the other Revengers.

After all they'd done, he decided they deserved it.

thirteen

Korva bit her lip impatiently. She fingered the silvered blade at her side and adjusted the MP5 on her back. Trask, Halo, Drage, Fort: some of her most trusted men waited nearby. They paced around in the bloody mud, their nerves on edge and their weapons ready.

The extraction team had been gone for far too long. Her men were exhausted and on edge. The remaining prisoners had been pushed to the edge of a muddy ravine, where they waited, huddled together and afraid, so covered with muck they looked like walking lumps of black clay. The morning sun cast beams of crimson light through the thick armor of blue-black clouds. The air smelled like old steak, and tasted like sickness.

The airship gunners kept the guns locked on the hole that Frost and his team had used to descend into the tunnels. Trask had asked permission to go and find them, but Korva refused.

She already knew what had happened. It had all happened before. They were all dead, including the girl. Soon, she'd emerge for a measure of revenge, and Korva would have little choice but to stop her.

If only there were some way to break the cycle, she thought. If only there was some way to avoid this happening again.

When Gath screamed from within the hole, the Revengers gathered their weapons and made for the open wound in the soil. Blood-colored vapor drifted up from the utterly dark pit. The earth trembled, as if afraid of what was hidden below.

I've lost track of how many of us there are, Korva thought. I keep hoping one of them will have what we need. The means of returning, and paying the debt.

The way to get home.

A cyclone of blood-soaked earth erupted out of the hole like a geyser.

Rooke, who was at least the eighth known avatar manifestation of the alien being called The White Mother, emerged from the ground in a film of blood and with wings made of razor steel. Her skin and eyes were dead and cold. Black blood like oil and ice slid out of her wounds and down her body.

She was already dead, and no longer of any use to them.

So close, Korva thought. So close.

She gave the signal, and the Revengers opened fire. The air erupted into an avalanche of muzzle flashes and bullets, acrid smoke and ear-shattering blasts. The dark sky was lit with their violence.

Korva watched impassively. None of the bullets would matter, and she knew it. Nothing that any of the other Revengers did would hurt the girl Rooke.

She called the cease fire. Smoke as thick as iron hung low in the air. The smell of gunfire was heavy and sour. Weapons were reloaded, men changed positions. Boots moved in and out of the heavy mud.

Korva saw an angel emerge from the fog of gunsmoke and blood. Everything that had been remotely human and living had been wiped away from the girl.

Screams issued from deeper in the fog, near the airships. Korva heard vampire howls and the cries of her men.

Of course, she nodded sadly, now that you're here, they won't wander mindlessly anymore. They'll rise up in your defense.

More gunfire, this time the staccato booms of the mounted B.A.R.s. There were shouts of pain and voices that cried out for mercy, both prisoner and Revenger alike. She heard small explosions and the sound of blades sliding into skin, the slurp of feedings and the violent crunch of undead being decapitated.

Korva ignored it all. She kept her eyes locked on the razor angel. The angel stared back. Her wings unfolded like steel flowers. Her stance and the manner of her approach issued an unspoken challenge. Korva drew her curved silver blade, a thin broadsword with a landscape played out in incredible detail on its hilt — a miniature topography of torn hills and rivers.

The Revenger discarded her guns and let down her hair. She stepped onto the rust-colored field of mud while her men died in the fog.

The angel moved swift and deadly. Her wings were so keen they sliced the air open. Korva fell back and let the wings fill the space where she'd stood. She felt the sharpness of metal come within inches of her face.

Her blade moved in a blur. Pale flesh opened, and cold blood flew out in a purple arc and splashed on Korva's cheek.

The angel fell to the ground. Korva felt a dread chill ripple up her arms from the blade, which turned black as Rooke's blood crept up it. Korva dropped the sword and let it melt on the ground in the avatar's blood. It had served its purpose. It wasn't the sword that had killed Rooke, but the power of the sword bearer.

Korva looked down at Rooke's body. The fighting continued in the distance, off in the bloody smoke. Shouts and screams echoed and faded into the budding day. Korva paid them no mind. None of the vampires would hurt her.

Rooke clung to undeath. Even as necrotic fluids seeped out of her dead veins and melted the soft earth around her body, the girl gasped for air, not remembering that she no longer needed it.

Korva saw her own reflection in Rooke's wide eyes. Since Rooke had been awakened by the throne down in the tunnels below — the tunnel network was only one of the White Mother's many hideaways — she would now be able to see Korva for what she truly was. She'd be able to see that they were the same: avatars of the White Mother.

Only we can find the way home, Korva thought. The Black came here looking for us, for the creature that we used to be. She didn't make it. Not all of her. That missing piece is out there somewhere. That core. All of the avatars in the world won't matter. Until we find the frozen heart, the world can never heal. In the end, one of us, one of the White Mother's avatars, will have to sacrifice herself to take the rest of us home.

Korva walked away from the body, back towards the airship. The sounds of fighting slowly faded. She guessed that her men were all dead.

I have to try again, she thought. She had to find the frozen heart before the The Black could be forced back to where it came from; before the Grim Father would give up his campaign.

An avatar of the White Mother will have to sacrifice herself, Korva thought. But that sacrifice won't be me. I intend to go home.

end

Now, enjoy an exclusive sneak preview of SOULRAZOR, Book 3 of the BLOOD SKIES series, coming March 2012!

one
spire

Year 25 A.B. (After the Black)

The ship passed through a fog of ghosts.

Spectral faces leered at them from out of the dark of night, pale wisps of unstable and desolate energies, the ectoplasmic remains of the long since dead, stitched together by the dreaded Soulweavers to form a dismal net in the sky around the Bonespire.

Grisly energies coagulated in the gritty air. Bolts of cold black lightning danced in a spider web pattern around the mile-high obelisk of dark bone. Necrotic effluvia congealed into a thick liquid substance that fell on the ship like sick black rain.

The Darkhawk had been stripped of its sails, outfitted with an arcane engine set with silencing mufflers, and broken down to only the most necessary components and weapons. Its armor was lightweight and hexed to ward off sensor leeches, echo mines and necrotic plasms, all standard defense measures that the vampires were known to deploy in the air around the Bonespire. The bow of the ship had been re-cut to form a sort of wedge-shaped blade, which lent the vessel – which was just big enough to house the team without the benefit of a tremendous amount of elbow room, all pale grey sheets of riveted steel and utilitarian metal benches – a much more sleek and aerodynamic design. Compared to a standard Bloodhawk, this mercenary vessel wouldn't be able to withstand as much direct damage, but it would be able to outrun and outmaneuver almost anything, and resonant temporal field dynamics applied to the eldritch hull would help it escape notice in situations where it should have stuck out like a beacon.

Getting the ship retrofitted had cost the team of mercenaries almost everything they'd earned from the reconnaissance and rescue and seek-and-destroy missions they'd engaged in for their first year of operation, but they all agreed that having the Darkhawk through their second year of operation had been well worth the investment.

If only it could cure me of my aversion to flying, Cross thought. It wasn't a full-blown *fear* of flying, by any means. Cross has flown plenty of missions in the past, and he would continue to do so as long as he needed to, since flight was really the only efficient means of transporting the team to their various destinations, especially since they based themselves out of the relatively remote city-state of Thornn. But Cross *did* have a strong dislike for being in the air. He pined for the ability to teleport. A few years back, Southern Claw mages and scientists had explored the notion and possibility of transubstantive locationism – or, as the layman liked to say, “gateway teleportation” – but the research was abandoned when it became clear that there was no way for humans to shift vast distances the way some other races could, at least not if they wanted to remain human. Cross would've given anything for that to have worked. *I'd be able to travel without getting banged up, nauseous and dizzy every time. What a novelty that would be.*

Turbulence kicked at the vessel as they slipped into the inner perimeter around the Bonespire. Cross grabbed onto the overhead beam and gazed out of the starboard viewport. Greasy rain and clunks of ghostly matter congealed and slid down the glass like melting ebon fat, making it even more difficult to see in the unnatural darkness over and around the structure. Even then, Cross could still make out some of the larger details in the dark field below them: bone cannons and catapults, war machines made of steel and blades, tattered skin flags, cold iron howitzers, clouds of molten shadow congealed in solid masses of eyes and teeth, pale and faceless shades with translucent razor swords and organic hand-cannons. Dark spikes protruded from the ground in vaguely organized patterns around obsidian battlements, and dark trenches stood next to short pillars of white flame. Vampires wreathed in spirit unguent marched in armor made of enchanted crimson steel.

“That,” Kane said as he traced the path of a chunk of dark matter as it slid down the glass, “is nasty. It's like a ghost puked on our window.”

“Nice,” Black said from behind them. “Thank you for that, Mike.”

Cross turned and looked at his team. Everyone was huddled together – the confines of the ship didn't allow for much else – and they stood practically shoulder-to-shoulder.

Danica Black and Mike Kane had been with Cross from the moment the unnamed mercenary group had formed, in the wake of a difficult Southern Claw victory over the Ebon Cities at the icy ruins of Karamanganji. Both of them had been associated with the corrupt and terrifying prison called Black Scar, but in vastly different capacities: Black had been a warden who'd gotten herself into personal trouble with her criminal brother, while Kane had been a prisoner of that self-same prison, and an intended trade commodity for Black to use so that she could purchase her kidnapped lover's freedom in an under-the-table deal. In the end, both of them had wound up helping Cross resurrect an avatar's power to destroy a walking shadow the size of a mountain.

That type of situation had become distressingly familiar to them.

The rest of the team were all newer faces, but only the swordsman, Ronan, had been with the group for less than a year, and even he'd been with them for almost nine months, long enough for the highly paranoid Kane to decide that the blade-yielding mercenary wasn't a vampire spy or another aspect of the Sleeper made flesh. Ronan was a tall and imposing man, thin and bony, with wild dark hair that stuck straight up, an angular and skeletal face, dark armor and pale skin. He had a habit of concealing his face behind the face-wrap of his cloth and leather armor, and for bearing at least two razor-sharp katanas at all times.

"How many?" Ronan asked. They couldn't see his face, but the tone of his voice made clear that he was smiling.

"How many *what*?" Kane asked.

"How many vampires are down there?"

"Dude, how in the hell should we know?" Kane asked, a bit exasperated. Just because he'd grown used to Ronan didn't mean he *liked* him – quite the contrary, in fact, and while Ronan seemed fairly indifferent towards Kane, Kane had talked Cross' and Black's ears off about how much Ronan drove him crazy.

"Because you and Cross are the only ones standing there and looking out the window," Ronan said with grim sarcasm.

"I have an idea...*you* can go down and ask," Kane smiled.

"Girls," Black groaned. "Please."

Grissom laughed from behind them, a sound that shook the vessel and rattled the steel walls. The half-Doj had coffee-colored skin and no hair save for a very thin mustache and beard. His

considerable bulk of muscles were covered by his dark armored coat, but there was no mistaking his mass, since the big man stood over eight feet tall and was as wide as a truck. An AA-12 automatic shotgun dangled from a strap around his shoulders, and enormous blades and hammers dotted the bandolier that he wore over his massive chest.

His sister, Ash, twenty years his senior, was his opposite in a number of ways. She was fully human and darker skinned, but like her brother she was also bald. Her lithe and athletic frame was covered in light leather armor that was meant as more of formality, since she was rarely exposed to direct combat. Rather, Ash was the group's tracker and healer.

Finally, there was Maur, a Gol engineer and pilot who insisted on referring to himself in the third person. Like all the members of his strange race, Maur resided in a stolen body: he was a diseased and pestilent dwarf with no memory of who or what his people had once been. Maur had an uncanny knack for repairing things and making very creative use of seemingly ruined equipment. He also had a skill for driving everyone crazy with his sometimes nonsensical ramblings.

Everyone looked ahead through the main viewport. Maur moved the vessel as close to the Bonespire as anyone in the Southern Claw had ever dared to get. For almost two years the dark tower that stood to the west of Thornn had remained quiet, even though the threat of a direct conflict had ever loomed. Just a few months ago the Bonespire's campaign against Thornn began in earnest, and it had turned into a long and bloody affair. Luckily, the Southern Claw had long anticipated the strike, and it had met the vampires in the fields west of Thornn.

A number of land engagements and aerial exchanges had thus far resulted in something of an uneasy standoff. There was more to come – Southern Claw intelligence had made it unequivocally clear that the Bonespire housed some new Ebon Cities weapon that had not yet been unveiled and that no one knew anything about. Cross' team had been sent to find out what that weapon was and, if possible, destroy it.

Lucky for us, we're too used to these kinds of jobs to complain about how impossible it's going to be.

Cross didn't make a habit of complaining, in any case. After a mission with his old team, Viper Squad, had resulted in everyone's death but his own (he'd been an enlisted warlock at the time, almost the last in the chain-of-command), Cross had been given the option of what his own future in the Southern Claw military would be. After a year spent acting as a "special operative",

he was eventually given the mission that ultimately introduced him to Black and Kane; that same mission had resulted in many deaths before the threat of the Sleeper had been quelled, among them almost two full Platoons out of Talon Company, Kane's lover Ekko, and a good-hearted ranger named Jamal Dillon. Cross had decided then and there – irrationally, he knew, but he didn't care – that he would no longer be a part of the Southern Claw and put its soldiers in direct jeopardy. Rather, his new team, made up of mercenaries and soldiers-of-fortune, took on dangerous missions for the Southern Claw so that soldier's lives didn't have to be wasted.

They were at times a rescue team, assassins, a clean-up crew, and rangers. What they were above all else was a group of mercenaries that was incredibly adept at getting themselves into insane amounts of trouble and somehow living to tell the tale. In the two years since they'd been formed they'd never chosen a name for the group, even though Cross' Cutthroats and Mage Gunners had both been tossed around in both the military (who loved them) and among other mercenary outfits (of which there were surprisingly many, none of which liked them). Neither Cross nor the others cared for any of the nick-names they'd heard. Likely they'd continue to go without any official title for their band, at least for the time being.

Cross surveyed the faces of his team. He'd never expected to be doing this, to be here, in this place...leading. Being responsible for others. He was the one they looked to for decisions and direction. He'd lost four team members in two years, which, all things considered, wasn't that bad. The most recent had been Zane, a young war mage who'd died in a skirmish with Vuul bandits about ten months before; his death had resulted in the need for another hitter, which was when they'd recruited Ronan.

In spite of himself, Cross came to know every member of his team pretty well. The team always worked alone. They rarely turned down a job. They were paid well enough to stay in operation, but none of them had much of a life outside of the team: it was the one thing that any of them had, and that was the point. They fought and died for each other.

“Maur says we're about two minutes away from our target drop,” Maur said from the front of the ship. The diminutive pilot looked entirely too small to be flying the ship, even though they'd reconfigured the pilot's seat to accommodate him. The vessel was powered by a combination of a fairly standard steering stick plus a set of levers and pulleys that ran into the starboard wall and ceiling, while a pair of foot pedals helped to control vertical tilt (whatever that meant), and there were so many gauges and screens and batholithic charts that Cross couldn't

even determine how much fuel they had. Luckily, both Maur and Black knew how to pilot the ship, which meant they wouldn't be entirely up a creek if something happened to either one of them.

Now if something happens to both of them...well, then we're screwed.

The vessel tilted forward. Cross heard a hard gust of soul-tainted wind slam against the side of the vessel. They smelled burning hair and dark steam.

"Everyone ready?" Cross shouted out. He still felt awkward doing that, calling out commands or signals to action. That felt like it should have been someone else doing it, not him.

"I'm first, right?" Ronan asked. He sounded eager.

"You're a freakin' wacko," Kane replied.

"Thank you," Ronan smiled.

"Kane's first, along with Black. I'll follow right behind, and Ronan and Grissom cover our rear."

"Maur will wait here," Maur said.

"Thanks," Cross answered. "We figured as much."

"Don't forget these," Ash said. She produced a small number of inhalers made from dark clay. Wisps of pale steam escaped from them, like they housed bottled fog.

"Do we *have* to?" Kane whined.

"Only if you don't want to be vomiting up your insides the moment you inhale that caustic air," Ash smiled. She handed one to Grissom, and her younger brother dutifully inhaled, even though he clearly wished he could do otherwise. He held the steam in like it was good pot, coughed and sputtered, but after a moment the giant breathed in deep.

"It feels like swallowing a mint that's been covered in piss," the half-giant coughed.

"Well, good," Ash said. "Since you're so big, you get to take two hits."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Montano started writing at the age of 18 and never really stopped. A graduate with distinction from the University of Colorado at Boulder, Steven took his Creative Writing degree and became an accountant, instead. He still hasn't figured out why.

Now, Steven writes the Blood Skies series. His wife runs a popular online yarn shop, and his kids just drive him crazy. They all live in a rain shelter in Washington State.

Visit Steven's official website, bloodskies.com