



DIABLO
SEASON of
WITCHCRAFT

The Seven
Brides of the
Serpent

A SHORT STORY BY
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The Seven Brides of the Serpent

 *Freedom demands power.*

The whispered words echoed in Belith's head as all other thoughts and memories grayed at the edges. She was long past exhaustion, but she couldn't rest. Not yet. She had to see this through. Belith's hands were slick with blood, even though the lattice of scratches on her bare arms and legs were superficial at best. By the time the knife had reached her, it seemed dipped in crimson. As it twisted in her hands again, still hungry and unsatiated, she pressed her back against the flesh of the large tree.

Flesh? Is that what it is? The wood beneath the thin fabric of her shift was leathery, rough, but it still felt like bark. The *pulsing*, though. That slow, steady thrum that seemed to resonate from deep within the wood stamped its rhythm against her back. Or was that the heartbeats of the women laid before her, impossibly synchronized and becoming louder with each beat that pushed the lifeblood from their bodies?

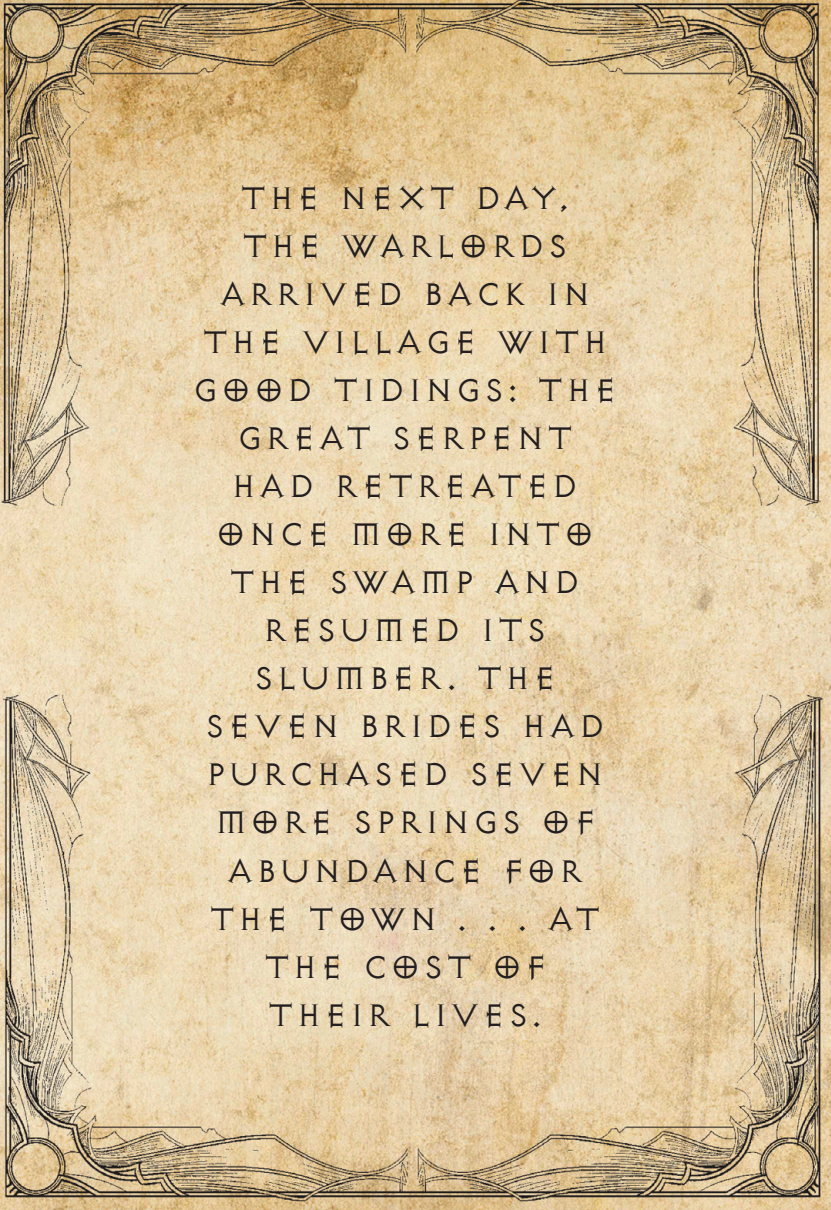
Her eyes went to her companions again. The nearly full spring moon hung in the sky, casting its dour light on the scattered and prone women beneath the naked boughs of the ancient tree, making their white-clad bodies glow with soft incandescence. It was an ethereal scene, their fading breaths casting vapors into the chill night. They would have been a beautiful sacrifice for tomorrow night's Culling, if not for Belith . . . and her plans.

Belith was nine years old when she witnessed her first Culling. Seven maidens in bride clothes had marched, barefoot, into the courtyard outside the expansive manor of the three Warlords. The gathered people, Belith included, were transfixed as the Seven Brides waded into the glass-like waters on the edge of town. The spring was clear and cool, and it fed the surrounding swamps through winding tributaries. The waterways should have been too small for the Great Serpent to traverse, but it would arrive without fail to collect the offering. At least . . . that's what her mother told her. The Culling itself was too dangerous for any in the town to witness. The town's leaders—the three powerful, ageless, undying Warlords who had brought their people to the swamp long ago—were the only ones to preside over the ceremony. But the tattered remains of the Brides' white gowns, spattered with blood, were evidence enough. The next day, the Warlords arrived back in the village with good tidings: The Great Serpent had retreated once more into the swamp and resumed its slumber. The Seven Brides had purchased seven more springs of abundance for the town . . . at the cost of their lives.

The town had long ago resigned itself to the surrender of their daughters every seven years. For on all other days the people lived in great luxury and safety. The Great Serpent never threatened them, and their lands were protected by the surrounding swamps. Belith thought the way the town allowed this horror to happen was almost understandable, if not entirely forgivable. None of the women in town—Belith included—grew up feeling entirely free from the reach of the next Culling.

When the names of this year's Culling had been proclaimed, the seven young women were gathered from their homes by the Warlords' personal guard, led by the Old Sergeant himself. The women had been herded and locked into a small cottage overlooking the waters where they would offer themselves to the Great Serpent the next night. Only a single guard had been posted. After generations of Culling and indoctrination, the idea of resistance was laughable. The Warlords assumed all would be obedient.

It had been an assumption Belith counted on when she'd pushed her mother's paring knife into the back of the guard's neck. The choked gurgling sounds he'd



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made as she and the other brides dragged him inside didn't travel far. After convincing the others of her plan, Belith had assured them that the changing of the guard wouldn't happen till morning.

That was an assumption she'd been wrong about.

The brides had not been gone two hours before the sounds of a search party reached them. All were exhausted, trudging through bramblethorn that tore at their skin and muckwater that pulled at their feet, as if the swamp itself meant to hamper them. By the time the group had reached refuge beneath a towering leafless tree, they had resigned themselves to capture. The seven brides collapsed to the earth, sobbing their frustration into the mud. Their gambit had failed. *Belith* had failed.

It was then that the whispers came.

"Freedom demands power . . ."

The seven women startled from their fatigue and looked around, searching for the source of the whispers. There was no one in sight, a legion of voices that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere.

"Show yourself!" one of the brides called out.

Belith pressed herself close to the others, brandishing their only weapon—the knife.

"Make your choice . . . or it will be made for you."

Belith turned, looking up. She was sure of it now. The whispers were coming from the tree—where dozens of heads hung in its branches—one of which she recognized. It was Skaylaya. Or . . . it had been. The young woman had been Belith's nanny of sorts when she was young, watching over her whenever her mother had gone into town. But Skaylaya had been culled seven years ago.

Skaylaya's dismembered head dangled from a withered vine on the tree. Her single braid, once thick and golden red, was a brittle tangle of copper wire. Her eyes were vacant, set into shadowed sockets lined with age and terrible knowledge. A sagging mouth had been slashed into the parchment skin of her pale face, a mouth that repeated the words.

"Freedom demands power."

And then clarity blanketed Belith like a gentle wave, as the once-distant sounds of the search party inched ever closer. Many of the heads on this tree were young women.

Women of their village.

Brides of the Great Serpent.

Belith's breath caught as she stared into the unseeing eyes of the dead woman who had been Skaylaya.

"Do not fear," the head of the young woman whispered.

"We will share our knowledge," said another.

"And with it, you will know power and freedom."

"Give us your lifeblood and bind yourselves to the tree's service."

"Or return to the village . . ."

"And join your sisters in these branches on the morrow."

She saw the truth . . . the brides all saw the truth. The Warlords were not controlling the Serpent. They were feeding the women of their village to this tree, their lifeblood in exchange for . . . what? Power? Immortality? Had the Serpent ever been a threat to them at all?

Belith's throat tightened around tears as she looked at the other women. She knew what they must do. The Warlords had lied to the village for generations, but . . . could they trust this tree? And the price . . .

It was too much. The women were looking to her now, seeking answers, guidance. She had convinced them to escape, to defy the Warlords. If she didn't do something soon, they would bolt into the swamp, back into the terrible cycle of death. The Warlords trafficked in such things, but Belith's life had not prepared her to make such choices.

Her mind spun. She felt the eyes on her, the heads, the brides, all demanding an answer. All demanding *more* from her. But every path led to blood and sacrifice. Blood and—

She looked at the knife in her hand, still stained crimson from the guard. She hadn't known what she was going to do when she'd stolen it, only that she

refused to walk quietly to her own death. She had needed one moment of defiance, a moment to make her own choice when all others had been stolen from her. A moment to be *free*.

“Listen to me,” she rasped, forcing words from the rictus of her throat. “If they catch us, we will die tomorrow. First, they will make us pay for what we’ve done, but be assured, they will parade us through the village like decorated ponies, march us into the water, and rejoice as we are butchered.” She gestured to the heads on the tree. “You see where that path leads, what truly happens to the Brides of the Serpent.”

Belith raised her eyes, looking at each of them in turn. “Yes, this tree makes promises to us, of power . . . of freedom, but I can’t make such promises. I don’t know what will happen if we make this bargain. We may die here in this swamp.

“But I would rather die here, in this muck, by my hand and by my choice, beside you, my sisters, than in service to those deceitful bastards.” Her voice was soft but woven with surety and steel.

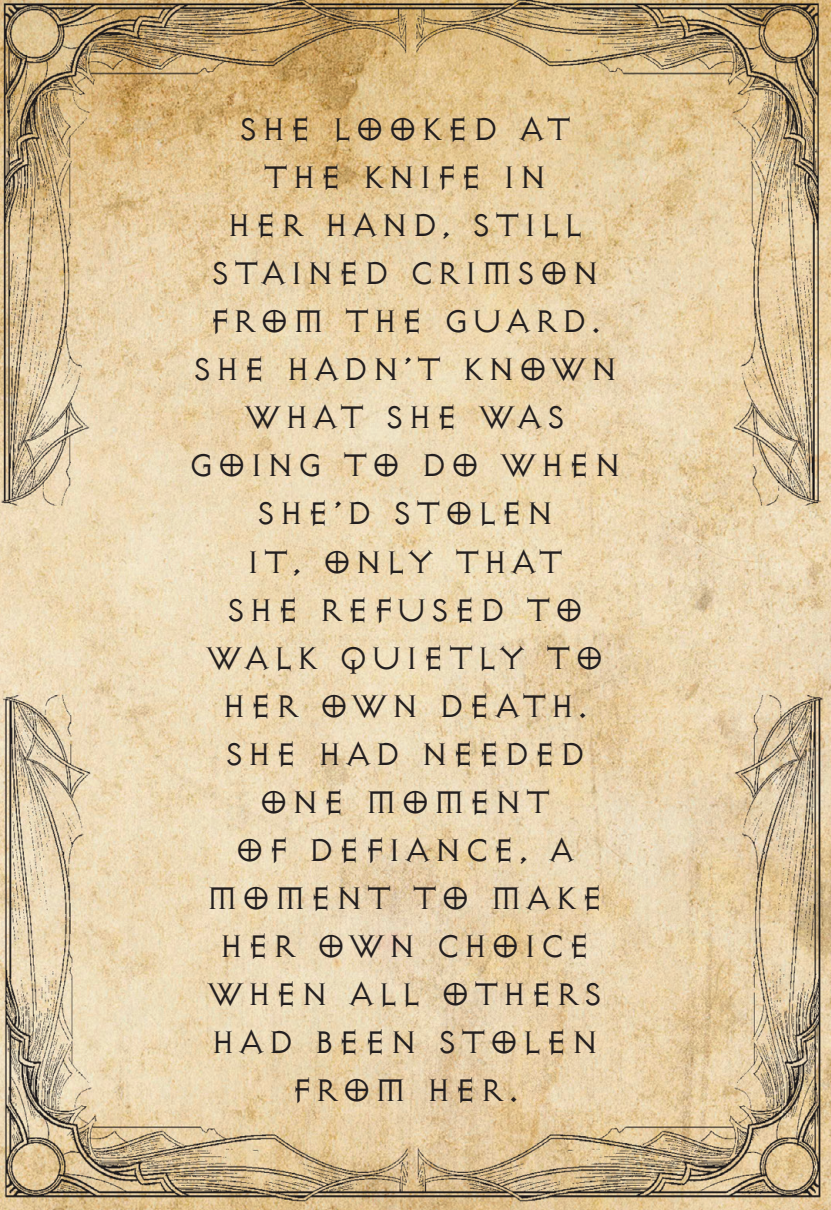
“I’ve made my choice,” Belith said. “You must now make yours.”

There was a moment of silence as the women all looked at one another, and then, without a word, they formed a ragged circle, with Belith marking the beginning and end of it at the base of the tree. The woman to her right, Belith thought her name might be Deno, plucked the knife from her hand and took a deep breath before making quick slashes. Belith watched, transfixed, as the women each took their turn with the dagger, spilling their lifeblood into the hungry roots of the tree. Belith knew she had to be the one to bear witness. She needed to be last so she could know that this had not all been in vain.

She needed to see the tree keep its promise.



The Old Sergeant paused as a shrill cry stabbed the night like a lance. The four men behind him were well trained and halted immediately, eyes alert, necks turning in search of danger as their hands went to the hilts of their weapons. The Old Sergeant



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listened and reached for his face, scratching at the jagged scars that ran from beneath his leather breastplate, past his neck, to his right cheek. Something in the air here made his scars itch. And he did not like it.

“It’s just a damned bird,” he growled. His voice was gravel and indignation as he gestured for his men to continue following the trail those ridiculous girls had left behind. “Keep moving; the Warlords want them back in town before dawn.” The party grunted assent and followed, none of them willing to risk further agitating the Old Sergeant, who could be cruel on his best days. The trail seemed to be leading toward the only visible landmark in this forsaken swamp: the towering boughs of a dead tree.

In a few minutes they had reached the small clearing, where they came upon the bird that had made them pause earlier. A raven, perched high in the branches of the tree, bobbed and fluttered, seeming to laugh at the red-faced Sergeant.

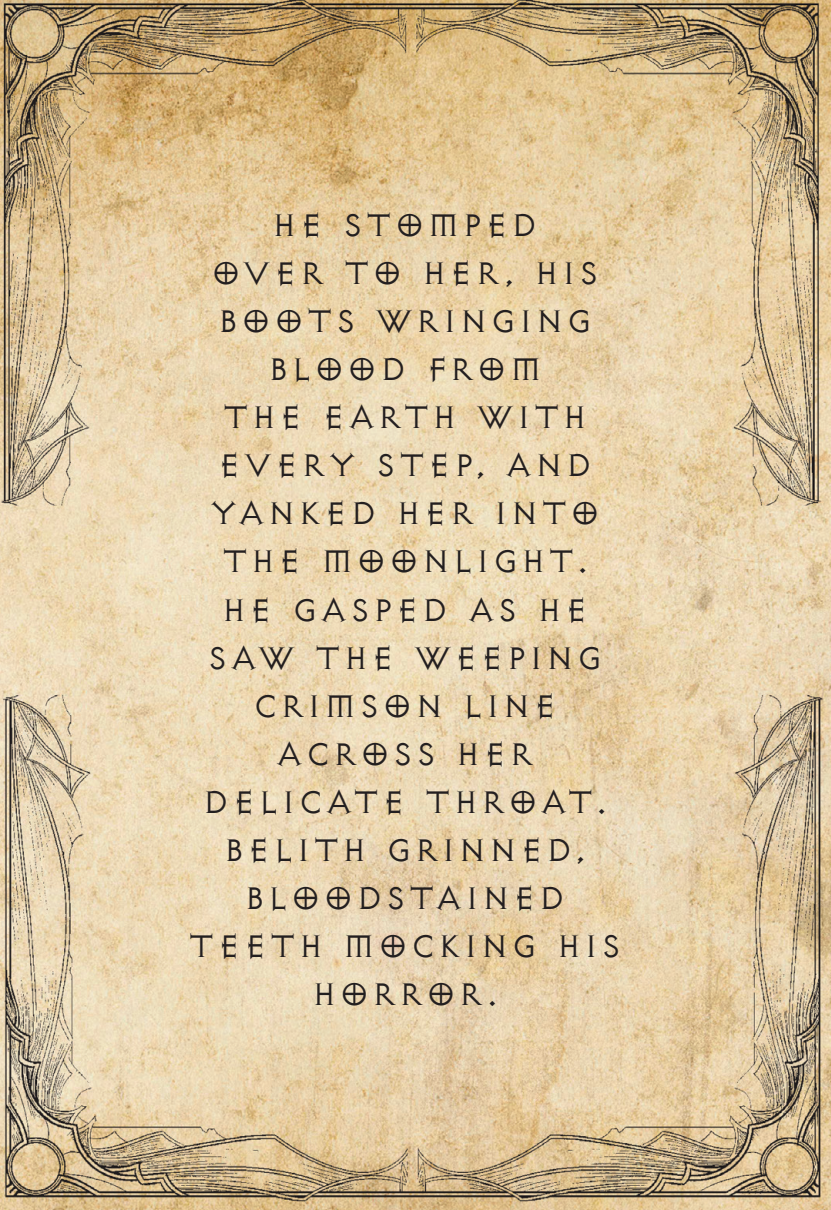
The old man followed its gaze down, where a gruesome scene was set. He tramped through the roots to examine the bodies of the brides, cursing anew as he found each one on the verge of death. Their wounds were too grievous and the healer too far away. He hadn’t considered this. He gnashed his teeth in frustration. The Warlords would not be pleased.

“You’re too late,” a small voice croaked from the shadows.

The Old Sergeant whirled, spotting Belith leaning against the massive trunk of the tree. “You!” he spat at her. “What did you do?” He stomped over to her, his boots wringing blood from the earth with every step, and yanked her into the moonlight. He gasped as he saw the weeping crimson line across her delicate throat. Belith grinned, bloodstained teeth mocking his horror.

“We no longer serve the same master,” she said, her voice a whisper that fell on him like a thunderclap. “We are free.” With every word, the tree shuddered in response. The men behind him cried out as the tree stretched and grew, branches clawing the sky with terrible life, while the wood shrieked in agony and joy. The branches thickened and expanded, roots rending the earth, casting shadows over the soldiers.

Belith laughed as the men scrambled back, huddling together, but the Old



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Sergeant still held her shoulders. He was transfixed, not by the tree but by the Raven. The large bird had added its piercing call to the thunderous cracks of splintering wood, as the tree scratched at the moon in defiance of all natural order. The Raven screeched in pain and rapture as its delicate, hollow bones were broken, knit together, and broken again, until it was born anew. It threw its wings against the sky, a vast curtain of ebony to match that of any eagle's. No bird such as this had ever existed. Could ever exist.

And then the Raven cocked its great head, its golden eye fixed on the Old Sergeant.

The eye was ancient. And wise. And hungry.

As the soldiers fled the clearing, the mixed cackles of the Raven and Belith followed fast on their heels.



As night fell again on the village, hundreds gathered to witness the Culling. Whispers spread through the crowd, idle talk of the selfish women who'd abandoned their duty and of the seven poor souls who'd been rounded up at the last moment to fulfill the evening's sacrifice. The carts and stalls that had hosted a festival of food and music throughout the day were now shuttered, adding silent audience to the events about to unfold.

The three ageless, undying Warlords stood on an engraved dais in the center of the manor courtyard, lit red by a large brazier. Their formal armor was gilded with gems and precious metals, their timeless faces hidden from the masses behind full, plumed helmets. The Old Sergeant stood to the side of the platform at attention, ramrod straight, despite the fresh lashes on his back, hidden by his cuirass.

The Warlords gestured and a hush fell over the crowd as the women began their march to the dais. Two gilded soldiers carrying the standard of the Warlords led a procession of the seven veiled maidens.

The Old Sergeant's scars began to itch with growing intensity as the procession continued. The seven deep lashes in his back, one for each bride he had lost to the

swamp, were burning from his sweat, but he didn't dare move during the ceremony. He gritted his teeth and watched as the women arrayed themselves on the dais before the Warlords, ready for inspection. Words tumbled from the Warlords' mouths about the vast bounty of the town and how this sacrifice would sate the Great Serpent's hunger, granting the people seven more years of splendor.

The Old Sergeant had heard it all before and could hardly focus, entirely consumed by the discomfort of his wounds and the terrible itching of his scars. A deep and insidious itch. Just as they'd felt when he was . . .

No.

One of the Warlords had stepped forward and was reaching for the maiden in the center, his gauntleted hands lifting the edges of her veil. The Old Sergeant lunged forward, a warning shout in his throat that was drowned out by a renewed cavalcade of trumpets. What was it that wench had said to him in the marsh?

He was too late.



Belith grinned at the Warlord from beneath the raised veil, a clean white scar across her throat, pulsing and taunting. "I bid my lord greetings from the Tree of Whispers," she hissed. "Am I a suitable sacrifice?"

The Warlord paused, frozen by the young woman's eyes.

"Such a clever pact you made with the tree," Belith said. "Seven heads for seven more summers. Tell me, was it hard to trick all these people to give up their own flesh for your longevity? Or did it become easier with time?"

The Warlord scrambled back, bellowing, but he could not escape the dais; the brides were closing the circle. Belith paid his antics no mind, reaching out and tracing the Warlord's helmet with a single finger. "The simpletons you rule believe gold and gems are the wealth of this land. But the true wealth—the vast, unmeasurable fortune—is all in here." She tapped the forehead of his helmet for emphasis.

"The Great Serpent was the perfect threat. Enemies, allies, the people of this village . . . everyone feared it. No one would dare venture into the swamps to

threaten you. No one would dare *leave*. No one would ever find the tree and discover *what . . . you'd . . . done*.”

Belith whipped her head to the side, lashing the Old Sergeant with her gaze as he charged the dais with his weapon raised. He paused midstride as Belith lifted her chin, jerking her head in his direction.

His heart exploded in his chest.

“But *we* know.”

The other brides tore off their veils with a howl. The scars on their forearms were clean and healed as they descended on the Warlords.

“And we made our own pact. Forbidden knowledge, power, freedom . . .”

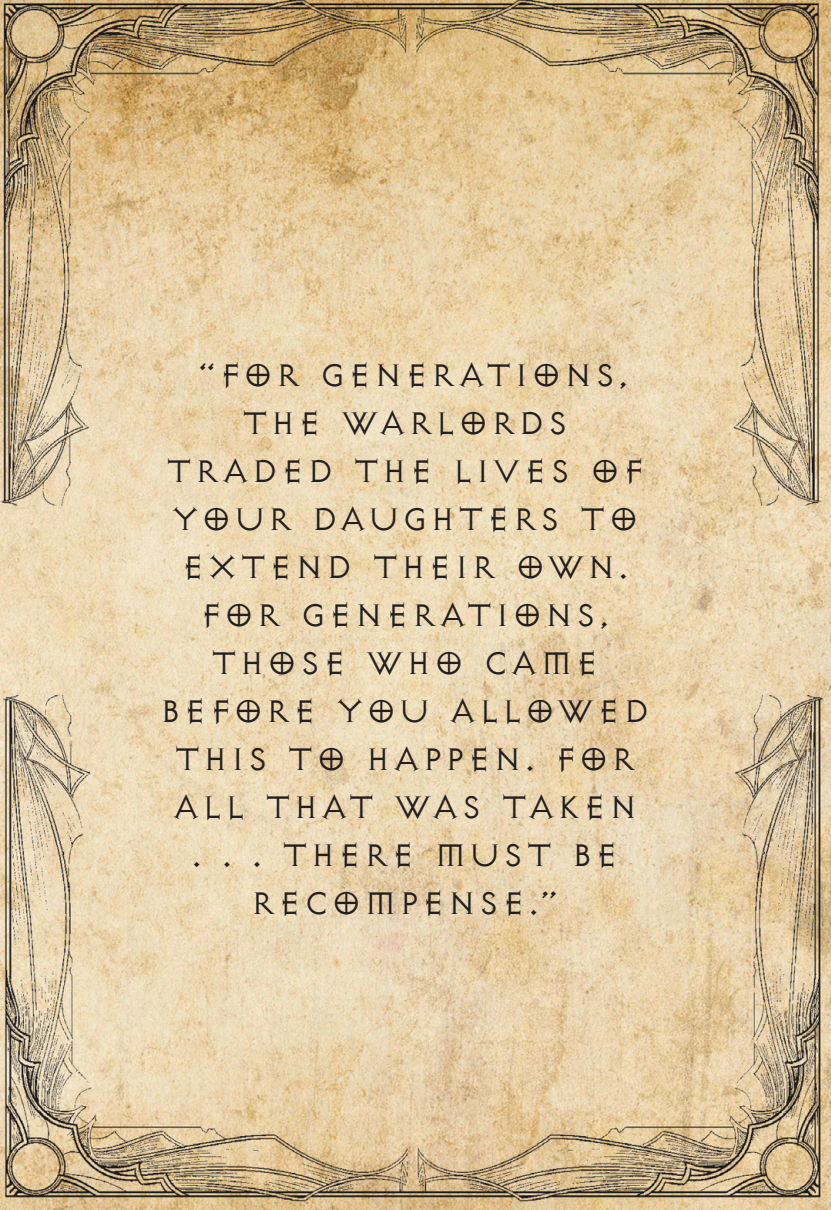
The gathered townsfolk stood in silence as the white-clad women cracked open the armor of the Warlords, dragging them out of their protective shells to face justice.

“All for a vow to serve the Tree. Starting with the return of three heads it *very much* wants.”

The Warlords did not ask for mercy, and the Brides did not give it. Moments later, the limp bodies of the Warlords lay in a mess of shorn metal, bone, and meat. The brides, white gowns splattered with gore, stood in silent judgment and regarded the cowering onlookers. There was a collective gasp from the crowd as a shadow fell over the dais. A raven with colossal wings that threatened to blot out the light of the moon soared above them.

“You are all complicit.” Belith’s voice was soft but rolled through the courtyard like a testament. “For generations, the Warlords traded the lives of your daughters to extend their own. For generations, those who came before you allowed this to happen. For all that was taken . . . there must be recompense.”

The Raven, as if in response to her words, dropped from the sky like an arrow, landing on the carcass of one of the Warlords. Its massive beak plunged into the Warlord’s neck and began to tear. Cries of fear, utterances of denial and innocence rose from the crowd, but again they were silenced. In moments, the Raven had completed its task, and then it took to the sky, bearing the head of the first Warlord.



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“You closed your ears to the pleas of these women, sacrificed so that you could live in the shadow of the Warlords’ bounty,” Belith thundered. Her words were punctuated by the piercing shrill of the Raven’s return. It dove upon another body to sever the neck tendons of the second Warlord.

As the bird worked, Belith reached into her shift and revealed two fistfuls of incense. She threw the powder into the brazier and a great cloud erupted before her. The Raven, carried on tendrils of smoke, departed, carrying the second head.

“When the Raven delivers the third head to the tree, *our* pact with the tree will be sealed. The knowledge the Warlords have gathered over their lives—*their* debt—will feed the Tree of Whispers for many years to come. But *your* debt . . .” Belith swirled her hands in the smoke of the incense, seeming to cast it higher into the sky. “Your debt, the blood debt of your forebears, is well overdue.”

The Raven returned, claiming its third head and alighting into the sky. It screeched its victory into the air once again, but this time, a great rumble cried out in response.

The gathered people began to scream, scattering in all directions, a formless mob trampling and tearing itself apart in fear. The other brides had joined Belith, once again forming a semicircle of joined hands, just as they had in the swamp when they swore their pact with the tree.

As one, the Seven Brides of the Serpent spoke. “*You made your choice.*”

There was a tearing of earth and an explosion of stone as the Great Serpent erupted from beneath the manor of the Warlords, rising on coils as thick as antiquity. It held its place, undulating, while the brides basked in the screams, luxuriated in the terror of the townsfolk. But the Great Serpent simply waited, existing in a space beyond human comprehension. It had been called by a great magic, but its will was ever its own.

The Seven Brides raised their joined hands to the sky and intoned as one, for the final time, their joined voices a chorus of liberation. They would part after this. The Seven Brides would carve their own places in the swamp and each begin their service to the Tree of Whispers.

They would be called many names: wretches, healers, *Anzehir* . . . witches. From this day forward, the Brides and those who walked in their footsteps would never surrender themselves to another's determination.

"Now I am free to make mine," Belith cried out.

With terrible certainty, the Great Serpent fell upon the town as the Raven soared high, crying its approval.

The village and its Warlords were erased from history . . . and the Witches of Hawezar came forth, a birth from ash and blood.



About the Author

David A. Rodriguez is an associate narrative director and writer at Blizzard Entertainment. He has published novels and graphic novels and is currently working on the critically acclaimed *Diablo IV* franchise. A native of South Chicago, he graduated with a BFA in musical theater from Rockford University and continues his quest to add musical numbers to all his projects. Over his career, he has worked on the *Transformers: War for Cybertron* franchise and *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance 2*. He has written comics including *M.A.S.K.*, *Rising Sun*, and Hasbro's *First Strike*. He has also been lucky enough to combine his love of comics and games while writing for epic franchises such as *Skylanders* and *Destiny 2*. Most recently, David served as narrative lead on the *Vessel of Hatred* expansion for *Diablo IV*.