


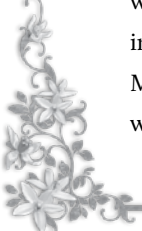


THE PARSON

As far back as he could remember, Parson Rainier Worthington had been more comfortable around the dead than the living. They spoke rarely, argued less, and drank nothing at all. Which meant his whiskey was safer from wraiths than from his elderly neighbor.

This evening, deep in the northern reaches of Niveaux, Worth raised a scarecrow onto its cross and tightened the tethers against the wind. Lavender from the straw man's stuffing infused the evening with calm but did little to fight the parson's malaise. Worth leaned the scarecrow against his cottage and glanced toward the mountains as the setting sun painted them pink.

He'd made twenty straw men today. The herbs in their stuffing would ward off wraiths for locals until Worth could be called to settle the poor spirits into their bones and bury them somewhere restful. It was a skill few chose to hone, but it kept the Old God relevant. Many in Niveaux were turning from the old ways to the Silent Gods. The Mother and Father of the younger religion promised security and wealth. Whether they could deliver had yet to be seen, but faith was



fragile with the armies of Brouillard gathered just over the mountains, ready to invade.

Worth scratched at the dark stubble along his jaw and rounded the porch to the worktable he kept outside. At the moment, it was littered with bones. He ran a finger along an aged ulna, and darkness seeped from its edges to hover over the table like a cloud of pipe smoke. A deep longing reverberated from the wraith and made Worth's breathing hitch. He closed his eyes, the emotion no less real because it wasn't his.

As long as people died in fear and pain, there would be wraiths in the world—their inability to let go tying them to their bones. Despite the discomfort of their lingering grief or anger, wraiths caused no physical pain to those who encountered them. No lasting injury. Under the control of bone-wielders, however, the spirits became weapons of madness and fear, against which Worth's scarecrows did nothing.

And Brouillard's battalions were built on bones.

The math was simple: when an army had wraiths, it needed fewer men. Niveaux had no way to combat the psychic attacks of bone-wielders. Even the most highly trained infantry would freeze, minds overrun with anguish, as Brouillard's human soldiers stepped in to cut them down. Worth's research for the crown had uncovered rumors—legends of wraiths of light with bodies of straw able to combat the dark. But no matter how Worth experimented, the technical aspects of turning a wraith from dark to light eluded him.

The wraith on the table shuddered and sank gratefully into the bone as Worth whispered peace over it. The soul was tired, much like his own, and the parson sighed. He refused to submit these spirits to more testing. The king wouldn't like it, but Worth was not a wielder. And he wouldn't torment wraiths as if he were.

Frantic yelling and the baying of warhorses cut through the air, and Worth squinted toward the road. Half a troop of the king's guard burst from the forest and made straight for him. If visitors were rare, given Worth's distance from the capital, then royal visitors were unheard of.

Dread pooled in Worth's stomach as the company clattered to a stop in the yard, blue uniforms practically black with mud and blood.

"The capital was attacked," said the captain from the back of her frothing horse. The woman's long blonde braid was frayed, her sword nicked along its edge with furious use.

Bella Charis, captain of the king's guard, swung out of her saddle. "Three days ago, at least seven bone-wielders entered Tuteurs unchallenged."

"How could that happen?" said Worth, reaching to steady the woman's horse.

"They walked in with morning traffic dressed as merchants," said the captain. "No one noticed until they called their dead."

"We got out with the princess," said a towering soldier with a braided beard, "but three wielders aren't far behind."

A girl, perhaps ten, pushed her way forward. Mud covered her dress, but Worth could never mistake the vivid green eyes of House Tristain. A soldier led the girl into the cottage and Worth turned on Captain Charis, heat rising from the collar of his loose tunic.

"Wielders have our capital, and you brought our only hope straight toward the mountains where they are known to hide?"

"We brought her to *you*." The captain's tone shifted a shade toward pleading. "We can't fight what's behind us."

"My duty is to the dead," hissed Worth. "What do you expect me to do?"

"Serve the crown!"

Worth bit back the curse rising like bile in his throat. His reputation had always been bigger than he deserved—as if the knowledge he'd spent twenty years accruing could save their small corner of the world. Maybe it could, if he'd had answers instead of theories—weapons instead useless straw men full of herbs. His monarch had trusted him, and he had failed.

Today it was going to get them all killed.

Without warning, three bone-wielders charged out of the woods with a roiling ocean of wraiths. Dressed in variations of black and gray, the three humans were quickly lost to sight as the spirits they had enslaved dodged and circled, cries shrill and unforgiving. Claws and teeth took shape at times only to drift back into the tide like mists made of nightmares. These wraiths were strong, the images of death and pain they planted in the mind reached Worth from across the clearing.

Fire and blood.

Fathers unable to protect their homes.

Children hidden, overrun by an endless wall of darkness.

The parson shook his head to clear it, and as he watched the tide of souls race over the field, his chest tightened with grief. These had been people once. *His* people. And if Worth let the anger in, he would be next. The soldiers around him cowered in fear, no more ready to fight than if they'd been dreaming.

If they froze, this fight was already over.

Worth tore the wooden cross from the nearest scarecrow and broke away the arms so that all he had was a staff. He spun the make-shift weapon in his hands, wishing for the first time in his life that he'd learned to use a sword.

"What they're showing you isn't real," he bellowed, hauling the nearest soldiers to their feet and shaking them. "You can't fight the dark. Go after those wielding it! Remove their source. Amulets. Weapons. Anything on them that looks made of bone."

He'd read of the infamous tools of Brouillard's wielders. Small bones turned into knives or rings gave a wielder control over a single soul. Others were made from innumerable ground bones, allowing one wielder to control multitudes without dragging carts of skeletons into battle.

Beside Worth a young soldier whimpered, eyes wide. The parson gripped the man's uniform and pulled him close.

“If they can’t touch the bones, they can’t wield the wraiths,” said Worth. He turned, staff spinning, as the wall of darkness overran them.

Soldiers brandished blades, but wraiths split around steel like oil to water and re-formed, menacing shadows unscathed and unhindered. The king’s guard staggered beneath the wraiths’ mental attack, but momentarily held. A flash of silver cut through the darkness to Worth’s left—twin swords in the hands of one wielder. Worth cried a warning, but the wielder felled several of the company before facing Worth with a wolfish grin. Wraiths flung tortured images toward his mind, their anger threatening to become his own. The parson inhaled deeply, focused instead on protecting the soldiers beside him, and cast the wraith’s images away before they could penetrate.

This wielder was young, lacking control. The inexperience of the king’s guard made them easy targets, but this wielder was no match for Worth’s years of study. The parson held his staff before him like a battering ram and charged, bursting through the last of the wraiths and into the wielder’s personal space. The man staggered as Worth jabbed his staff into the wielder’s throat. Worth tore a white amulet from the man’s neck as he lay crumpled and choking, and the closest wraiths calmed with an anguished sigh, present but no longer attacking.

Captain Charis stepped to Worth’s side breathing heavily.

“One wielder to the north,” she said, “but the other—”

Movement in the trees caught her eye. Worth heard the twang of a bow and Captain Charis sidestepped, putting herself between him and the tree line the second before an arrow protruded from her chest. The captain of the king’s guard sank to the ground with a rueful smile. Worth screamed and dropped to his knees beside her, looking for cover. He dragged Charis behind a rain barrel, frantically scanning the forest. Blood pulsed through Worth’s fingers as he pressed them against the wound in vain.

“No,” he breathed, as more wraiths assaulted his mind.

Blood and fire.

Desperation.

Loneliness and despair.

But the captain smiled weakly up at him.

“Do your job, parson.” Captain Charis coughed, blood staining her lips as her eyes went dim.

“No!” Worth cried, adjusting the grip on his staff, now slippery with the woman’s blood. The darkness of wraiths tinged the edges of his vision, but he focused on the tree line. He may take four arrows before he reached the wielder, but Worth was going to get in one blow before he succumbed to them.

One blow was all he needed.

Before Worth could go after the wielder, however, Captain Charis’s body erupted in light. Worth fell back as her flesh dissolved into white ash. Misty tendrils rose from the dust, the hair on Worth’s arms and neck with them. Pearly and translucent, the mist pulsed with a warm energy. Memories flickered through Worth’s mind. Not pictures, necessarily, but *feelings*. Emotions.

His father’s kindness after he’d fallen.

His mother’s pride as she’d taught him to settle the dead.

Worth was filled with a hope he knew was not his own, and as he marveled, the mist drifted toward the ground, solidifying into a single bone shaped like a human heart. The captain’s body was gone.

Around him the fight raged. Wraiths attacked soldiers, fewer and fewer of whom stood against the tide. Worth could charge the tree line, as intended, but the heart pulsed before him and his plan shifted. In her death, Charis had given him an answer twenty years of study had not.

Wraiths could not be turned from dark to light. They were born one way or the other.

Worth squeezed his eyes closed, legends pouring through his mind. Around him, soldiers screamed in terror. To his right, another fell to an arrow fired from the trees. Without a miracle, they were all about to die.

He needed a straw man.

With a prayer of desperation, the parson scooped Charis's heart from the ground and ran. An arrow skimmed his shoulder and Worth dropped to the ground, rolled, then found his feet again. He slid around the corner of his house, grabbed the first scarecrow he found, and shoved Charis's heart into its burlap torso, closing the opening with a hastily bound knot.

Nothing happened.

Screams rent the night behind him, but the pounding of Worth's heart nearly drowned it out. The hope he'd felt from Charis's spirit flared again, and the air pulsed, a concussion of rowan stuffing forcing Worth back. Rowan—the ultimate plant of protection—was fitting. Paired with hope, it was exactly what they needed.

Then the burlap began to shift, smoothing to skin, muscle forming where only moments before fabric had hung limp. The scarecrow fell from its cross and stood as Captain Bella Charis—flesh and blood—with the fury of battle in her eyes. She flashed Worth a bewildered smile.

The parson's knees turned to water, but Charis took his elbow in a firm grip and shook him once.

“No time for that, parson,” she said. An arrow hit the side of the house just over her head and she laughed, light and loud.

Worth struggled for words, but Charis bent to pick up a discarded sword.

“Don't stop moving,” she said. Then she spun the blade and charged back into battle.

Worth glanced around the corner of the house. Wraiths no longer hovered near the woods but had congregated in the yard. Few soldiers remained, only two wielders visible among them. Charis was already engaged with one, a bow slung over his shoulder while he fought her with a short sword. Worth tore another staff from a scarecrow and edged toward the fight, horrific images assailing him yet again.

An endless tide of darkness.

A woman stood in his yard wielding what must have been a thousand souls, her bladed staff tearing at the remnant of the king's guard where they blocked the way to the princess.

Worth stepped between the wielder and a dazed soldier. Their weapons clashed, and the contact was the sickening crack of wood against bone. Around them wraiths shuddered and screamed, but he focused on the woman and her weapon. Lines wound through the wielder's staff where it had been reinforced with metal to add strength, and the woman parried against Worth's attack, whipping her staff around and catching him in the ear.

Pain exploded in Worth's head and he staggered into a defensive stance, bringing his staff between them. Wraiths dodged at him, their cold biting through his thin tunic, images assaulting his mind.

Shoulder burning where the arrow had grazed him earlier, chest catching with half breaths, the parson burst toward the wielder. She met him with a grin and parried two blows easily before Worth used his bulk to shove her off-balance then swept his staff behind her feet, sending her to the ground. The woman scrambled to rise, slipping in the mud, but Worth was on her, tearing the bone staff from her loosened grip.

For a split second, he felt them—wraiths hovering, just beyond reach. Startled to a halt by their incapacitated wielder, they waited, their darkness less an assault than a question. In answer, Worth breathed a prayer of peace and the wraiths stilled completely, settling back into the staff that had become a simple weapon in the hands of someone unable—or unwilling—to wield the dead.

Finally on her feet, the wielder screamed in fury, then ran toward the cottage, and Worth followed, cursing. She was already scrambling at his worktable, grasping at any bone she could wake to give her an advantage. He'd be tangled in hell's roots before he'd let her wield those bones.

Worth threw the bone staff in the opposite direction, then reached the woman in four strides. He gripped the wielder's robe and slammed

her into the side of the cottage, pressing his staff into the softness of her throat. She gasped for air, lips tingeing blue, but a wicked grin split the wielder's face as a searing pain tore through Worth. The parson glanced down—barely registering the knife buried to the hilt in his chest.

He tried to tell the bones he was sorry. That he had done his best to help them. To stand between them and this wicked fate. Instead, the parson coughed. Blinked twice. And died.

Before his untethered soul, two paths diverged in the darkness.