

DEATH MASK
RIGHTYALG - BOOK II

RAZÖRFISZ

Death Mask

Nightvale 2

RazörFist

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Contents

1	A Wraith Amid the Ruins	7
2	Blood on the Wind	15
3	The Dead Citadel	23
4	Negotiation at Knifepoint	29
5	The Sálár Silverhawk	37
6	The Ghostwind	47
7	Monsoon of the Mind	57
8	Ambush at Xirfán	63
9	Rattle of Chains	73
10	Sanguine Reunion	83
11	Death Mask	91
12	Epilogue	99
	Appendix	103

Kara'Zin

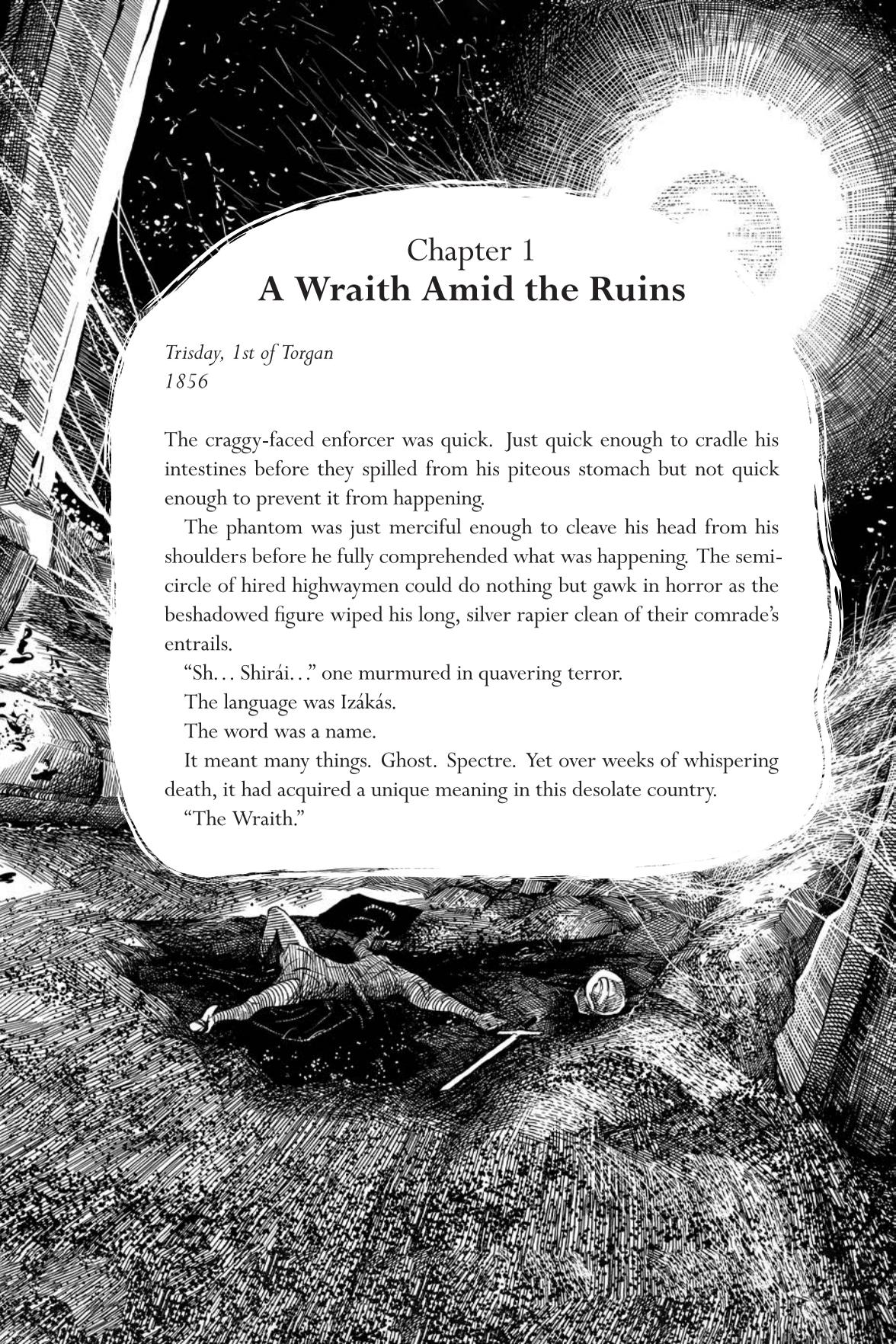
كرازين



Dedicated to Fritz Leiber
The forgotten father of it all







Chapter 1 A Wraith Amid the Ruins

Trisday, 1st of Torgan
1856

The craggy-faced enforcer was quick. Just quick enough to cradle his intestines before they spilled from his piteous stomach but not quick enough to prevent it from happening.

The phantom was just merciful enough to cleave his head from his shoulders before he fully comprehended what was happening. The semi-circle of hired highwaymen could do nothing but gawk in horror as the beshadowed figure wiped his long, silver rapier clean of their comrade's entrails.

"Sh... Shirái..." one murmured in quavering terror.

The language was Izákás.

The word was a name.

It meant many things. Ghost. Spectre. Yet over weeks of whispering death, it had acquired a unique meaning in this desolate country.

"The Wraith."

DEATH MASK

None knew its origin. None dared divine its purpose. Only vague descriptions of a shrouded form, with obscured features, walking with an uneven gait, an argentine blade perpetually dangling at its side, ever thirsty for sinful blood. The hooded figure had appeared in the outer reaches of Vale over one month ago, leaving a trail of bisected criminal bodies, headless henchmen, and vanishing crimelords in its wake. After a moonlit tavern massacre in the twin capital of Tirionus, reports soon reached the west that it had been spotted crossing the Valen/Nazgani border near the peasant village of Romatho.

The corresponding blood-soaked siege of the city's underworld confirmed the hushed rumor. Inexorable and deliberate as death itself, the formless thing had cut through the criminal element of two countries before any reprisal could be mobilized. The cabals of Kara'Zin, the capital of Nazgan and veritable den of debauchery, had dispatched hired assassins to the easternmost reaches of the A'lidar Desert to quash the invisible assailant.

That they had already sent three parties ahead—none of whom had yet returned—failed to appear on the employment contract.

Beneath the billowing cloak, the Wraith suddenly and violently doubled, as with a light convulsion.

The sellswords hesitated, but only momentarily. Even their meager faculties did not fail to recognize an opportunity.

It was not until they neared for the kill that they at last calculated the enormity of their misstep. Bounding inhumanly from the feint, the Wraith lashed out with its one dangling arm at the nearest of the five. Slapping his sword point away and stabbing viciously through his dismantled guard, the swordpoint protruding from the back of the thug's neck punctuated the error more profoundly than any acrobatics on the swordsman's part.

Their blood afire, the remaining cutthroats did not falter.

Batting the first two aside, a dark-skinned, dagger-wielding murderer managed to break through and lash out with two blades at once. His knife-points met nothing but the already-frayed edges of the revenant's cloak. For the Wraith had darted. Spun. Whirled.

Into a perfect pirouette that ended with a savage sideswipe.

His would-be killer fell in two pieces. He did not rise again.

A WRAITH AMID THE RUINS

A stocky Nazgani at his side swept upward at the vengeful spirit with a bulky broadsword. The Wraith's riposte and downward sword stroke ensured he would never wield a two-handed weapon again. The assassins' attacks came from all directions. The silver sword met them all.

With just two remaining men, the attackers at last ducked behind the rubble to regroup. There was no shortage of it. The westernmost outpost of Rináz had been immolated in more than one war in centuries past. After the fifth, they finally stopped rebuilding it.

The desert wind was picking up, but even over the low, desolate howl, they could hear a shuddering sigh at their back. The smaller swordsman's curiosity momentarily supplanted his fear, and he shot a glance over top.

Nothing.

The lethal shade, the cinereal cloak, the burnished, bloodstained blade, in a flash, all had diminished into ghastly remembrance. As the two crooks cowered among the rubble, a solitary whisper reverberated about the ruins. One scarcely even recognizable as a name.

"Xeeerdessssssss..."

Xerdes propped a leg against the wall, leaned back in his chair, and eyed his companion warily over a terracotta tankard of pallid ale. The squat, bulbous barkeep wrung his hands nervously against his filthy apron and attempted to tidy the dining arrangements before them. It was like dropping a daisy on a dung pile. The table looked like a fallen log he'd decided to make the best with, and taking a moment to consider the surroundings, Xerdes could see considerable expense had been spared.

The roof of the inn loomed low, wreathed in plumes of pipe smoke that reeled hypnotically in the air above its boisterous patrons, its midportion pregnant with the sodden earth above. Taverns of this sort were sheared into the soil like the sunken dwellings typical of this country, with the added benefit of providing more effective cooling in the harsh deserts of Nazgan.

Even in a city of secrets like Kara'Zin, the tavern held many.

Rogues leered from the shadows and plotted in sparsely lit corners, drunks reeled, and wenches fended off inebriate advances. A

DEATH MASK



“He was nothing anyone would look twice at. The second look told the story.”

A WRAITH AMID THE RUINS

blind peasant child in an oversized fez begged for zalas¹ at the inner door. If dirty looks were currency, he'd leave with a wealthy inheritance.

The air hung thick with the scent of spice and filth. Though this was a city of the Bords, this particular tavern, situated as it was at the heart of the L'Intaza Alienage, was known for serving Men and other waylanders almost exclusively. Its middle-aged proprietor was perched on a squat little wooden stool, his bulging midsection spilling forth beneath a humble uniform. His hair was a carefully greased crop, pulled tight to the side, its black untamed curls still visible through the oil slick atop it. He was nothing anyone would look twice at.

The second look told the story.

"Xerdes, is it?" the barkeep inquired, all but hiding behind his wafer-thin mustache.

"Correct," the thief replied. The tavernkeep started to speak. His companion cut him off with a wearied eyeroll. "...You will now ask why my name is Nazgani in origin."

The barkeep was dumbstruck but steadied himself enough to dislodge a response. "I... I had... that is, I perhaps had begun to wonder—"

"...and I will reply that 'it's a long story,' and you, being the type to pry using liquor as lubricant, will press the issue..."

Xerdes drank deeply of the mug of ale and with a wince, continued.

"...at which point, we will be at an impasse. Let's just say 'my story starts here' and let the matter rest while you find further reasons *not* to explain why you requested my services. In Kara'Zin, you're not exactly lacking for options..." he finished, indicating with a wave of the hand his patronage of cutpurses and cutthroats arrayed about the establishment.

Thieves predominated in Nazgan's capital.

It was a city marooned by the empires of men, bones of their legions long consigned to the whirling winds of the A'lidar Desert in a failed attempt to reclaim it. In the absence of order, one was created where predator preyed on predator, where legalized cartels clashed with co-teries of thieves in the all-too-brief evenings, and where the knotwork hierarchy of disparate guilds yielded an empire of perfidy. Even the

¹ **Zalas:** Nazgan coin comes in three denominations. The zala, or tin, is the least of these.

DEATH MASK

Sálár—though officially recognized as the sovereign ruler of Nazgan—was little more than the long-ascendant Queen of Thieves. Her ancestor was still quietly called the Royal Usurper.

Very quietly.

The barkeep's composure crumbled.

"I w-will give you all the reward I can spare, sir!" he suddenly sobbed. "My b-beloved is gone. My *Sháiná!* I fear terribly for her safety."

With a furtive glance over his shoulder, Xerdes leaned closer.

"Best to turn the cards over now, I think," he said, softening his tone.

The barkeep wiped his eyes and reassembled himself. There was plenty to reassemble.

"I was not always the shambles you see before you, sir."

Xerdes leaned his shoulder against the low back of his chair and replied, "The thought had occurred to me." With that, his index finger fell against a thick gold ring adorning one of the innkeep's sausage-like digits. It had a unique quality. Richly inlaid with winding black tendrils carved into its aurous surface, at its center gleamed a single emerald, smoothed round as a hen's egg into a solitary, eye-catching protuberance. It caught Xerdes's eye more than most.

Contrasting the squalor of their surroundings against the gaudy trinket, Xerdes took it to be the lone lingering glimmer of pride a long-humbled man had afforded himself.

"I... once belonged to the L'Intaza, sir."

Xerdes shook his head incredulously.

"Always knew I was destined to break bread with nobility."

"I assume you know the story then. The Bords²... have long resented our presence."

"...like a descending foot resents a bug."

"Too true. The Calamity gave them their excuse," the innkeep continued, "Seermen of the Zi'Zin Temple had long prophesied we would cause doom. Finally, we were blamed even for the shaking of the Earth. We were divested. Our lands seized or simply razed. I was luckier than some."

² **Bords:** The residents of the deserts of Nazgan. Reptilian, lanky, and apelike in stature, they are known for their craftiness, religious piety, political upheavals, and inherent distrust of waylanders.

A WRAITH AMID THE RUINS

The thief took another lingering look at their drab surroundings. He said nothing.

“...My lands were seized on *paper*, but... in practice, my estate was so distant from the nearest settlement, not even the tax collectors would trouble themselves to send a garrison. And so I remained. A blade above my head.”

Xerdes watched the man’s eyes widen three sizes and well with nascent tears.

“...and then I met *her*,” the barkeep added. “My Sháiná. My desert ro—”

“I’ve had too much ale to stomach the wedding story. I gather she’s been... taken?”

“I know not,” the barman replied in a voice the size of a pebble. “Since my reversals, she has... come and go at times.”

“Some women are just looking for a reason to go missing,” Xerdes mused aloud.

“Wherever she might be, if you consent, I suggest you start your search at my estate. She has... many reasons to revisit it.”

“Some more sentimental than others, I wager,” Xerdes chuckled, “Maybe even a few locked up behind a thick vault door? Requiring the service of an intrepid young safecracker rather than one of your regulars? That about the size of it?”

The barkeep’s eyes hit the floor with shame. He started to speak, but the thief adjoined his previous statement instead, “Can I assume I’m being paid in more than sad looks and liquor?”

Morosely, the man made for his coinpurse. His very *light* coinpurse.

“Whatever I once was... *today*, I am a tavernkeep. I can offer but a humble stipend.”

“How humble?”

“50 zalas at most.”

“...and I had such high hopes for this conversation.” Xerdes said with a shrug. Downing the remainder of his drink, he turned to leave. The frantic innkeeper intervened. With a speed he shouldn’t have possessed, all at once his ruddy corpulence barred the path like a boulder in a rain gutter.

“I beg you reconsider, sir.”

“Look, pal. There’s humble, and then there’s self-hatred.”

DEATH MASK

"I... I may not be moneyed, sir," he stammered, "But the mansion is a loss, Sir Thief. One I've written off, regardless. You're welcome to keep the entire contents of the strong room as payment."

The edge of the thief's mouth pulled into a smirk.

"You had your openers and closers reversed."

"May... mayhap it has been raided by other thieves, but... in that remote location? I think not. You will find it quite unspoiled, I think. Though, in the long years, I... I fear I no longer possess the key.."

The innkeeper paused, and the grin that unspooled itself across his craggy features did his face no favors.

"...not that this will be a problem for you."

"What good is it to her then?" Xerdes asked, turning his eyes away from the man's corn-colored teeth.

"She... may not be alone," the barkeep admitted, shoulders sagging with invisible strain. "More men than you can penetrate a vault in this godless country."

"So long as we're pretending that's all he's penetrating", Xerdes jibed, almost unbidden, aided in no small part by the ale.

The barkeep weathered the quip in silence.

"I... I am Azin," began the barman, extending a meaty paw. Xerdes shook it once and coldly. "I should... warn you. My estate. The location is not the only reason garrisons have avoided it. It has acquired a reputation."

"...and with my luck, I'm betting it's not as a brothel."

Azin choked back a nervous laugh and continued, "To be expected, I suppose. It is a strange and eerie country. It lies between here and Tralini. In the heart of the Whispering Waste."

Xerdes' eyes narrowed. His face noticeably whitened, but his features stood unfazed beneath the low-slung hood. He knew the place exactly. And the odious reputation that came along with it.

"I have every faith in your abilities. You are, as I hear it, a *master*."

The thief gathered up the meager collection of coins, spun on his back heel, pulled his cloak from the back of his chair, and made for the door.

As he passed the blind beggar child, he dropped a coin into his fez and muttered to himself.

"...at everything but making a living."