

DEATHMASK

A Novel

By

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## Prelude

The wagon creaked and lurched, rousing Tikos from his fitful slumber. He gripped the rough iron bars and struggled to sit up, coughing dryly, but there wasn't enough moisture in his parched mouth even to spit. He risked a mouthful of the rancid water from the barrel and gagged, but managed to swallow. His hunger had long ago dwindled to a dull ache that he couldn't banish, but he still struggled to survive, while others had simply drifted into a comatose slumber never to awaken. He checked his sister Loree, and wetted her parched lips with a dribble of water. Jondi his younger brother was awake, but just stared at nothing, as he had since the day they'd been taken. Mother had died two days before. He looked at her body, stuffed into the far corner of the cage wagon with the four others, covered in flies and stinking horribly, and he wondered if she were not the luckiest among them.

The dull predawn light did nothing to raise his spirits, for the view was the same as it had been for the last four days - bleak, grey ash and choking dust and smoke, no longer even the stripped skeletons of trees. The shambling horrors that had taken him and his family still walked beside them, ignoring the prisoners and occasionally applying their long whips to the backs of the hissing creatures that drew the wagon onward. The effort it took to stand made Tikos wonder how long it would be until he also fell asleep and did not wake, but as he gripped the bars and squinted over the driver's seat into the mists, he wished that he had not woken up at all.

Mountains of jagged stone stabbed up from the blasted landscape. Upon the nearest cliff face, a keep of twisted black stone clung like a malignant black tumor that sought to leech the life from the earth's very core. Dark spires and angular minarets thrust into the smoke-stained sky like skeletal fingers questing for something to strangle. From all directions, trains of great caged wagons streamed to and from the massive gaping portal at the cliff's base. They arrived ever full of pale, pitiful figures, and departed empty. The convoys were escorted by motley squads of humanoids, pale and dark, skeletal and bloated, moving yet not alive.

Tikos stared sullenly at the twisted iron rods that thrust up from the battlements - sharp, foreboding and bearing the grisly remnants of a few long-forgotten corpses. Screams and wails of despair reached his ears as if riding on the fumes from the smoking braziers that further sullied the air. When the wagon passed through the immense portal, under the immense spiked portcullis, it was like being swallowed by a foul beast in a dream. The horrible stench of death doubled him over as they rattled into the broad courtyard, but Tikos managed to regain his faculties as the wagon lurched to a stop.

The clank of the cage door being thrown open jolted the boy out of his misery, and the groping hands of their wretched captors shocked him into motion. He lurched for the opening as if to escape, but a pale hand gripped his arm painfully. His kicks and screams affected the tall, bone-white creature as much as an offending fly affects an ox, and the grip tightened until he thought his arm would be broken. Tikos ceased his struggling as

he watched his fellow prisoners being herded with whip and lash down the gaping mouths of tunnels in the mountain's side. The dead were taken, too, down another tunnel from which wafted a thick, nauseating stench. All of a sudden, Tikos realized that he was the only one left, that the creature that held him was not going toward the tunnels, but into another, even darker, doorway. A fear unlike anything he had ever felt gripped him more tightly than his captor.

Up many long and winding stairs he was dragged, for his strength finally failed as his captor climbed tirelessly. When it stopped, his legs so bruised that he could barely stand the creature rapped on a thick oaken door. Hope rose in Tikos for a flashing instant - perhaps whoever was behind that door could be reasoned with, or pleaded with. But when the portal finally opened, that tiny flicker of hope died like a drop of water on a hot skillet.

"Ah, yes," the bent and ancient caricature of a man croaked, backing from the door as his knobby fingers flexed and shook with anticipation. His rheumy eyes were glazed and jaundiced but wide with delight. His decrepit frame moved as if not a single joint in it worked as he hobbled to a high, flat table of stone in the center of the room. Turning back, his craggy features stiffening into a fetid mask of delight. "Yes, bring it in, bring it in."

Tikos' eyes widened in horror as he was dragged to a table crisscrossed with straps and manacles. "Please, Master! No! Don't!" he pleaded, but he may as well have been talking to the undead thing that held him, for his words only seemed to excite the ancient, evil man. He nearly swooned as the straps and iron bindings tightened around him. "Please don't kill me!"

"Kill you! Ha!" The decrepit thing that had once been a man fought off a fit of coughing, then gazed down at Tikos as if amused. "Why ever would I do that?"

"You're not going to...?"

"Of course not, you ignorant little creature," the old man cackled, his cold, bony fingers patting Tikos' cheek with a touch like a cold, dead thing. "If you died, how could I consume your soul?"

Before Tikos could even fathom the suggestion, those yellowed, half-blind eyes widened and darkened, and bored into his own until he could feel their icy touch in his mind. He tried to fight, to close his eyes, to scream, but he could not. He could do nothing but feel the ancient, putrid thing crawl down into him, into that which makes humans separate from all the other races save dwarvenkind. The coldness enveloped him from the inside, wrenching his essence from his body, rending his soul from his living flesh. When it was free, he was drawn out and breathed in like the intoxicating vapors of a narcotic. And there in the dark, shivering and alone, the soul of the boy named Tikos was devoured.

Azrael straightened from his morning repast and gazed into the mirror that hung on his chamber wall. Youth surged into him like a painful, purging tide, strengthening his joints, freeing his knobby fingers of age's crippling grip, and thickening and darkening his lustrous hair. His eyes became sharp and dark, his jaw smooth and strong. And when the last of the boy's soul was gone, his full, black lips smiled over even, white teeth, and he sighed as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. As the sun broke over

the distant hills and flooded his chambers with light the color of freshly spilled blood, Azrael turned to it and his smile became more grim.

“Another day, another soul,” he said slyly, waving his shambling servant to take the lifeless corpse away. He stretched briefly, reveling in the young, strong body that would be his for only a few hours, until age once again began its relentless progression. He had seen so many such sunrises from this, the highest reach of Necrol Keep, that he no longer had a clear recollection of the last time his feet had touched earth, or the last time he had taken food or drink as a mortal would. Empires had broken themselves against the fell walls that surrounded him, and others had risen and fallen like mighty oaks in a forest, untouched by him yet dying of inner decay. All the while he continued on, consuming only the essence of others, as was the way of the most powerful of Necromancers, the Deathmages. But even among his deathless brethren Azrael was ancient, and proportionally more dreadful with those years. Yet time is a harsh and unforgiving foe, and even to the deathless the Reaper of Souls eventually comes calling. And the Reaper had been calling Azrael for more than two millennia. Now, the call was growing irresistible.

As the centuries passed, Azrael had been forced to consume more and more soul essence to sustain himself. Now, with death calling him so loudly that his mind rang with it, he consumed a soul each morning, and often one later in the day, depending on how vigorous his labors. This thought reminded Azrael of how very taxing today promised to be, and he called his attendant back.

“Bring me two -- no, three more of the newest arrivals. Today will be very strenuous and I will need additional sustenance.” The shambling servant - a pale wraith he had made long, long ago - nodded and passed out of the chamber, its black teeth chattering and slavering already over the burden it bore. Such sweet flesh rarely reached the rendering pots untouched by Azrael’s wraiths, the few among his servants that still coveted corporeal sustenance. He would have scolded it, but the trials of the day already weighed heavily on his mind, and he passed quickly to his laboratory where the preparations of days gone by lay awaiting completion.

Azrael’s only hope of foiling the call of the Reaper of Souls lay as if sleeping upon a dusty, chalky bench. He stepped up to the table and gazed down at the unfinished likeness of himself. There his own face was rendered in finest porcelain - his face as it was now, young and full, though the work was still unglazed and rough. Today would begin the enchantment of this device, and when that enchantment was finished, he would die. The mask would be his receptacle, his hiding place, his refuge from the Reaper, though what would follow after his soul left his body, even he could not foresee.

“At this point in the game, my friend,” he said, caressing his likeness with supple fingers, “we have nothing to lose.”

He moved away from the table to gaze out a lofty window, out over his domain. It stretched farther than even his eye could see - farther than the fastest hawk could fly in a quarter passing of the moon - and from one end of it to the other, death reigned supreme. Neither grass nor tree grew within the sphere of his power, and only flies, vermin and those that fed upon them were welcome within it. The very earth was poisoned by his touch, and after he was gone, long centuries would pass before life successfully invaded his domain. Eventually, however, someone would come, and when they reached Necrol Keep, Azrael would be waiting.

“Nothing to lose but all that I have wrought here,” he said with a tremor of trepidation, “and nothing to gain but the chance to bring it about once again.”

His smile thinned to one of defiance, for to be a master of death, one must be willing to resist it to the end, and then cheat its last grasping fingers. And with that final defiance of the inevitable fortifying him, Azrael turned to his likeness and began inscribing the runes of power that would receive his soul.

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The Deathmage’s fingers burned as if the fires of the sun were upon them, his eyes felt like sand had been poured into them and his throat was raw to the point of agony with countless hours of mumbled incantations and phrases of power. He had not rested since beginning his toil, sustaining himself only with the souls of his captives when fatigue or age assailed him to the point where he could not continue. How many days it had been he knew not, nor cared, but he knew he must continue until he was finished or until the Reaper finally claimed him, for time was growing short. Now, at long last, the thousands of arcane runes were inscribed upon the mask’s pristine surface. The power was there, but he was not yet finished.

The engraving stylus fell from his cramped fingers to the floor and was forgotten. Azrael grasped a broad brush and began to lay a fine black glaze over the surface of the Deathmask, painstakingly stroking on a mirrored surface of midnight until he could see his reflection in its luster. The arcane runes of power were now hidden from all eyes but his, but their power remained - they would receive him and sustain his essence when the time came. He ignored the fire in his joints and the haze of his vision, and reached for yet another brush and another hue. He set finest lines of gold upon his dark likeness, at the arch of eyebrow and lip, and around the façade’s edge, but to the eyes he added no color, leaving them closed and plain, for behind them he would sleep until the one who would become his vessel placed the mask over their own face.

With the glazing complete, his gnarled hand cast the fine brush aside as if it offended him, then twisted into a painful gesture. His withered lips uttered a phrase that, accompanied by the gesture, drew the moisture from the dark glaze, readying it for the fire.

“Attendant!” he barked, whirling from the table with several audible and painful pops from his aging joints. The pain went unheeded, for the time was fast approaching. “Bring in the kiln, at once!”

The wraith lumbered away to comply, and scarcely a moment passed before the stench of searing flesh reached Azrael’s nostrils. Six dark shades lumbered in, towering and silent and bearing a great burden. The six had once been ogre chieftains, and their strength had been great, but it had doubled and redoubled with their evolution under Azrael’s attentions. Every bit of that strength was in use now, for the kiln weighed tons, and glowed dull red with the coal fire in its belly. The door to his laboratory had been removed and the casement and much of the wall chiseled away to admit the bulky kiln, but even so, the ogre shades had to squeeze tightly through the aperture. Their great shoulders pressed against the scalding iron oven with a hiss, and smoke rose from their long-dead flesh. Once inside, the floor shuddered alarmingly as they set down their burden.

Smoke wafted from Azrael's robes, heat blasted so harshly from the device, but words arcane already flowed from his cruel lips, protecting his fragile flesh. Hands trembling with age, fatigue and anticipation lifted his ebony likeness and placed it gently into the kiln. When the heavy door thudded closed, he rasped a single word of command, and the fires of the great device were drawn into the dark mask until the coal was consumed and the kiln lay as cold and lifeless as a corpse.

Silence fell heavily on the room; the dead attendants waited patiently. The fires had been quenched, and Azrael stood and stared at the closed door to the kiln. His fate lay inside that cold stone oven. Though the only alternative to his planned fate was oblivion, trepidation still gripped him like a vice. His trembling fingers left imprints in the thin layer of frost forming on the icy iron, and when the door opened, a haze of chill fog rolled out like mist over mountain peaks. The dark mask lay there, glossy and perfect. The spells that would empower him beyond death had been set and were inviolate within. All that was required of him now to ensure his immortality, was to die.

"Go from here!" he barked to his waiting wraith as he lifted his destiny in tremulous hands. "Go and command my servants to dismantle all that I have wrought! Go and douse the great forges. Smash the engines of death that burn beneath the keep. Throw open the gates! Free all those wretched souls that still live in wait of my need, for my need shall cease 'ere the light of dawn touches Necrol Keep again, and all I have built will fall and break into ruin!"

As his fell minion went forth unquestioningly to oversee the destruction of the keep, Azrael's smoldering and foul robes fluttered to the stones around his feet. He donned a gown of finest silk - the shade of midnight and highlighted with gold - and lay himself down in a tomb of black stone. His final command was to his ogres, who obediently placed atop the tomb a massive lid of iron.

Within that lightless niche, even as his undead army began to wreak havoc on all that he had wrought, Azrael placed the work of his life upon his own face. The chill of it invaded him. As icy fingers gripped his fluttering heart, he began the incantation that would transfer his soul into the piece of lifeless porcelain forever. The coldness spread through him with each successive word, ethereal fingers gripping him from inside, probing for his soul. His voice remained firm, however, and when the final word was pronounced the wrenching chill pulled him forward, and Azrael's soul was emptied from his ancient body.

The untold centuries that only his essence had kept at bay fell suddenly on that frail flesh, and it crumbled to ashes and dust. With it, all of the Deathmage's power suddenly ceased, and all that he had created was undone.

The clash of steel against iron reached Jondi's ears, and the hysterical shouts of men and women stabbed into his mind, but he sat motionless, staring into the dark. A slim hand groped for his arm, and he tried to pull away, but his sister's voice stirred him, though another deafening crash of smashed bars threatened to drown her out.

"They're throwing open the gates, Jondi!" She shouted at him, dragging at his skeletal form. "We can escape! Come on!"

People were pushing and shoving around him now, and he moved with the jostling flow rather than fall, but his eyes did not see the towering dark forms smashing the iron gates into molten shards with their fell weapons and his ears did not hear the crash of

metal and the shouts of disbelief and fear. His legs burned as he stumbled up the sloping tunnel into the ruddy light of an overcast day. His eyes squinted reflexively in the brightness, and his sister's fingers dug painfully into his arm.

"Look! They're dying!" a gravelly voice shouted at his elbow, and a flicker of cognizance wavered in Jondi's eyes.

He looked about himself, taking in the streaming crowds of pale prisoners. Through the billowing smoke and steam issuing from the many holes and tunnels, he could see the dark shades crumbling and falling into dust, and white-skinned wraiths wandering and groping blindly, mindlessly.

*How can they die?* he thought numbly. *They're already dead.* Then he saw something else, and his voice leapt into his throat.

"RUN!!" he screamed, his frail legs churning even as his free hand thrust up to point at the crumbling spires of black stone. The squeal of tortured rock howled around them, and he found himself grabbing at frail arms and legs to hurry the crowd toward the towering arched gate. Already hundreds had escaped, and more streamed from the tunnels. Several of the infirm fell and were trampled in the crush, but many more survived, and pushed and shoved their way through the gate.

"HURRY!" he screeched, dragging at Loree's hand as she stumbled and almost fell. The short figure next to him, a stout dwarf hauling a heavy barrel on his shoulder scooped Loree up and tossed her over his other shoulder like a sack of grain.

"Run on, Lad!" the dwarf shouted, but his words were lost in the rumble and roar of falling rock and gushing steam.

Men and women and dwarves from the mountains fled the dark citadel like ants from a burning mound. Pale and weak, but free and alive, Jondi and the other prisoners stumbled past the crumbling gates, their numb feet stirring the ash into billowing clouds of dust. None knew why they had been released, or what was happening to the dark citadel, but they knew they were free, and that was all that truly mattered.

Then behind them came a final cataclysm of cracking stone and shattering, twisting metal. Jondi, Loree and their dwarf benefactor turned at the noise and beheld the fall of Necrol Keep, and their mouths gaped in awe. The black spires peeled away from the mountainside like dead bark from a burned tree, falling into a pile of black rubble that spouted fire and steam. The air was filled with dust so choking that several more of the fleeing prisoners were overcome, but the threesome was far enough to escape the worst, and when the air cleared, they beheld all that remained of the most dreadful and feared mortal that time had ever known. The Deathmage Azrael had fallen, and the two frail humans and one dwarf were among the scant few who survived to tell the tale.

Yet among the strewn blocks of black stone, atop the twisted remnants of his engines of death, the tomb of Azrael lay unbroken. The great iron lid sat askew, enough to let air and light fall upon the dust that had once been Azrael's body. And within the great tomb lay a single artifact of black porcelain, patiently awaiting the touch of a living soul.