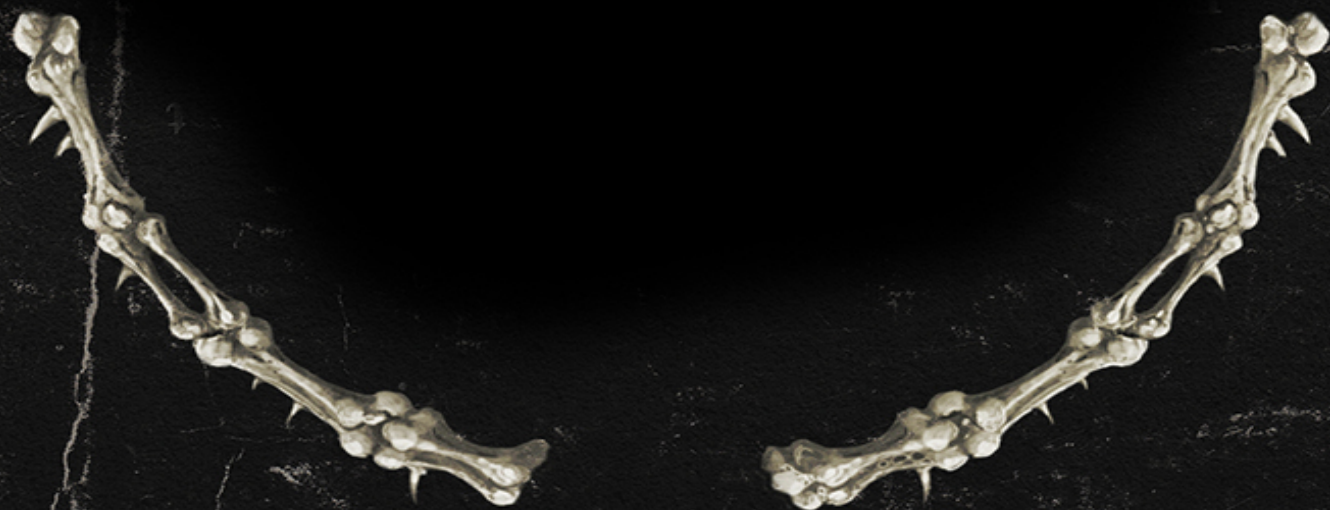




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# TITHE MARKED



STEVEN SHEIL

A WARHAMMER HORROR SHORT STORY

A circular frame made of bones and spikes, resembling a collar or a decorative border, surrounds the title. The bones are light-colored and have small, dark spikes protruding from them.

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**Tithemarked – Steven Sheil**

About the Author

An Extract from ‘Anathemas’

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# TITHEMARKED

By Steven Sheil

Petras tugged at the sleeves of his tunic, pulling them down to cover his hands so they wouldn't show, at the same time using his feet against the stone floor to push his body tight into the corner where the wheat sacks were piled. He was shivering with the cold of the night, and with fear, and had to clamp his jaw shut tight to stop his teeth from rattling. His heart jumped as he heard the sounds of his brothers entering the grain store – the loud *thwack* of the door as it was slammed back against the wall.

'You see him?' That was Grandon, the eldest, their father's favourite.

'No. But he could be hiding, the little wretch.' Bron, the second son, the strongest, the one Petras was most scared of. He still carried the bruises of when Bron had held him over the old trough, dipping his head first into the foetid water, only letting him go when they had heard the calls from the gates of the village, the urgent, terrified announcements that *They* had arrived.

Had that been only yesterday? It seemed longer ago, another lifetime almost. Everything had changed in the moment that his father had come to him and told him of the sacrifice he must make for the tithe. Since then there had just been running and hiding and the petrified fluttering of his heart.

His tunic matched the colour and texture of the grain sacks, giving him some camouflage against discovery, but he was finding it hard to hold his breath for so long in amongst the dust and draught of the store. He could hear Bron's heavy footsteps on the stone floor, could sense that he was circling the piles of grain sacks, could almost feel his gaze upon him.

Petras closed his eyes, held his breath, tried to shrink himself even smaller than his already tiny body. He was the youngest, the runt of the family, not blessed with the sturdiness of his brothers, or the age-wrought hardiness of his father. To Bron and Grandon he was little more than a dog to be kicked around for fun. But perhaps now, his smallness would be his saving, would protect him from the hands and from the knife.

It was not to be.

‘Ah!’ shouted Bron, as he pulled away the sack closest to Petras and reached in a thick hand to grasp the boy’s bony shoulder. ‘Thought you could hide from us, did you?’

Bron dragged Petras out of the corner and threw him down on the stone floor. Petras looked up, searching for an escape route, but Grandon barred the way to the door.

‘Please,’ said Petras, his eyes darting from one boy to the other, ‘please don’t make me.’

Grandon stepped forward and grabbed Petras’ wrist, yanked him to his feet. With his other hand, he bunched Petras’ tunic and pulled him close.

‘It’s for the good of us all,’ he said.

The mud path from the grain store was frosted into hard peaks which scraped against Petras’ legs as his brothers dragged him away. One of Bron’s thick hands covered his mouth to stop him from yelling, and over the top of his callused thumb Petras could see the torches that marked the entrance to the village and the dark shadow that stood waiting between them, the curve of its bare skull backlit by the torchlight, the long sword in its fleshless hand. In front of that dark shadow sat another – a heavy oaken chest filled near to the brim with fresh white bones. At the sight, Petras struggled even more, but his brothers’ grip was firm. There was to be no escaping what was coming.

Their father was waiting for them as they entered the house. The table had been cleared and the heavy cleaver which his father used for meat was lying next to the stone he used to sharpen it. When he saw his father, Petras shook his head wildly, pleaded with his eyes. His father shook his head.

‘Nothing else for it,’ he said. ‘The tithe must be completed, to the very last bone. What else would you have me do? The graveyard has been

emptied, the dying have been sacrificed and still we are short. Should the master of the village not be prepared to do what he must for the sake of his people?’

Grandon and Bron dragged Petras forward and threw him down face first across the table. Bron grabbed his left arm and pulled back the tunic sleeve almost to the shoulder. Grandon pulled his hand to lay flat, resting his weight against the wrist. Petras’ father picked up the cleaver. Petras twisted his neck to look up at him. Tears were in his eyes.

‘Please, father, please!’

A curl of contempt came to his father’s lips. ‘Have some strength, like your brothers. We each must play our part. You want the whole village to be slaughtered for the want of a handful of bones?’

He put his hand against Petras’ forearm, then lowered the blade of the cleaver to the point just above Petras’ elbow, marking the spot. Petras felt the sharpness of the metal against his skin and a panic went through him. He tried to move, but the weight of his brothers held him tight to the table. His father lifted up the cleaver, raised it high...

And brought it down to sever his son’s flesh with all the force he could muster.

Petras jerked awake, instinctively reached to protect his left arm, and instead felt the scar-marked stump, the same stump which he’d felt there every day of these last twelve years since his father had used his limb to complete the Ossiarch Bonereaper’s tithe. The sky above him was turning a dirty pink with the dawn, the same pink that had lingered on the bones after his father had scraped them clean of flesh and sinew. He remembered huddling there on his bed, feeling the dull ache of the cauterised wound, still somehow feeling the hand he no longer had, phantom fingers twitching as he watched his father at the table with the flensing blade. He shivered at the memory and pulled his blanket tight around him.

The campsite fire was burning low, but he was too far from it in any case to properly feel its warmth. Even amongst the other vagabonds who comprised this makeshift camp in the woods he was an outsider. It wasn’t just the fact of his missing limb that made him a pariah – there were many others, survivors of war and battle who had experienced similar losses – but the nature of how it came about. ‘Tithemarked’ they called him, as

though the violence that had been perpetrated upon him had forever linked him to those that had demanded it. Fear of the Ossiarch legions was palpable all through Shyish, but especially so in these parts, which were long overdue the return of the tithe masters. Petras and his missing arm were not only a reminder of what could befall them, but also, in their eyes, a potential harbinger of their arrival, as though his bone – now moulded with the others from the tithe, into the body of an Ossiarch warrior – would be led eventually back to its source.

And so they kept a wary eye on him, forbade him to share of their food and demanded that he stay ever a stone's throw away from the rest of them, while still allowing him to share their camp. This was done only out of superstition that any attempt they made to harm or repel him might bring the Ossiarch hordes down upon them.

Petras slept a while longer, until the dim morning sunlight, split into raking beams by the trees around him, lit the camp. Then he gathered up his blanket and the knapsack he used as a pillow, chewed on the last stale crust of bread that he'd saved and set out for the path. The other vagabonds murmured amongst themselves as he left. The last of them – a big, bearded man who reminded Petras of his brothers – hawked a globule of spit into his throat as he passed, and Petras felt it land against his shoulder. He didn't stop, didn't turn back, just walked on. It was no worse treatment than he was used to.

He walked for an hour before he saw another human. The path here was potholed and rock-strewn, treacherous for any wagon or carriage. But at the point where it widened and joined another, wider track, he found a merchant sat eating his lunch on a rock, his horse and cart beside him. Petras approached, keeping his missing arm out of sight, letting the loose folds of the cloak hide its absence.

'Sir?' he said as he approached. The man – older, heavier, with a dark beard flecked with grey – looked up at him with suspicion, the knife he held to cut the apple in his hand tightening in his grip. Petras held out a hand in greeting, kept his shoulders hunched as though to show he was no threat.

'What is it?' said the man. 'If it's food you want, there is none. I've got enough for meself and no more.'

'No, sir, I'm not here to beg. I just wanted to ask you if I was on the right

path for Mortenwood.’

The hand holding the knife relaxed a little. The grey-bearded man nodded. ‘Mortenwood? Aye. Take this path.’ He gestured along the opposite way to where his carriage was pointed. ‘You’ll be there by nightfall. You got business there, boy?’

Petras shifted a little uncomfortably. He was afraid to tell the man the truth, but he was an uncommonly bad liar. ‘I’m looking for a man named Hestane, he’s a smith, he—’

‘I know what he does,’ said the man, cutting in. ‘You got need of him?’

Petras again hesitated, afraid to reveal his purpose. The bearded man laughed.

‘Don’t be afraid, boy. Here.’ He reached down and lifted the leg of his trousers. ‘See?’

The man’s foot was clad in a heavy leather boot, but the leg stretching out from its neck was not one of flesh and blood. Instead, it was crafted in a series of curved strands of iron, interwoven like the tendrils of a living vine. Petras could see the earth through the gaps in between them. At the knee, the metal parts met a curved ring which was clamped to the kneecap.

‘Taken in a bone tithe ten winters ago,’ said the man. He looked up at Petras. ‘You’re tithemarked too, ain’t you? Can’t hide it, not from a Shyish man like me. Hangs around you like a stench.’ He rapped his knuckles against his metal leg. ‘Hestane made this for me. Now all I got to worry about is rust.’ He laughed heartily, then pointed at where Petras’ cloak covered his missing arm. ‘That what you lost?’

Petras nodded. He pulled back the cloak to show the stump just above where the elbow should have been. The old man peered at it, nodded.

‘Aye, I’ve seen worse. Could be he could do something for you.’

Petras’ heart jumped at the words. He hadn’t dared let himself dream that it might be possible. But here in front of him was proof that something could be done, that he could be made, if not whole again, then something like it; that he could be granted something that approximated what had been taken from him.

‘That’s good to hear. Thank you, sir,’ said Petras.

The man had pulled down his trouser leg and was getting to his feet. He walked with a slight limp, the heaviness of his metal leg obviously impeding his gait, but without knowing the truth Petras would just have

taken him for a little lame. The man headed for the front of his carriage, then turned back to Petras.

‘Tell me something, boy. You got money?’

‘Yes,’ said Petras, ‘a little.’

The old man laughed. He planted his metal foot on the step and hefted himself up onto the seat at the front of the carriage. He picked up the reins and prepared to set off. Before he went, he turned back to Petras.

‘A little won’t get you much from Hestane,’ he said. He flicked the reins, urged his horse on. As the wheels began to turn, Petras could hear his voice over his shoulder. ‘Won’t get you much at all.’

It was nearing dusk when Petras entered the gates of Mortenwood, and it was in the rapidly growing dark that he made his way through the streets to find the smith’s workshop. At last he heard the thump and thwack of hammer against hot metal and saw the orange glow spilling out from a doorway which told him that he’d found his destination.

It had been years since he had first heard of the smith who could create bones from molten iron and shape them into replacement limbs. And now here he was, on the threshold. A part of him knew that a metal arm would change nothing about him, would not make up for his loss, would never be the same as having his own bones back again. But to walk with two arms by his side, to know that he was no longer a pariah, to have at least the base appearance of a human – something that others took for granted – that would be enough to change his fortunes in this world. That much he knew.

Ever since his arm had been taken from him to make up weight in the Bonereaper’s tithe, Petras’ life had been nothing but pain. First the physical ache of the wound itself, the uneven, grizzled stump where his father’s cleaver had been inexpertly wielded and the bloody flesh sealed by the press of a fire-iron: tender to the touch for many months afterwards, as though the nerves themselves were being constantly plucked by unseen fingers. Then the way he had been treated by his father and brothers. He had always been the least of them, the weakest, sickly and frail, only fit for the lowest of duties. But after the sacrifice, he had become even less than that somehow. His father – whether out of shame or disgust – could barely look at him, and with their mother lost in the birth that had

produced him he was left to the tender mercies of Grandon and Bron, who now saw him as something less than human. When he ran away from home a few years later, leaving the village by hiding under the sacks of a visiting merchant, it was as much to escape the daily beatings as it was in hope of seeking the prospect of another, better life.

But there was no better life, at least none that he could find. His early years away from home were spent as a beggar, relying on the pity of others to save himself from starving. As he got older he taught himself to pick pockets, but it was no easy task with only one hand and his lack of finesse led to many beatings, and being chased out of countless towns and villages. Since then he had been a vagabond, moving across the land, taking work where he could find it, with no purpose but to survive another day. That was until he heard of the smith and his skills. Since then, Petras had gained a purpose and had dedicated himself to the task of finding the man who could fashion him a new arm, while saving every coin he had earned or found or stolen.

Now though, with the old man's words in his ears – *a little isn't enough* – he feared that his efforts might have been in vain, that all his hard work had been for nothing. The fear that always lived in his heart, planted there by his brothers and father, nurtured there by the world – that he would never, could never amount to anything – was growing once more.

*No*, he told himself, *not this time*.

And so he took a step across the smith's threshold.

The room was lit by a deep orange glow which came from a large forge that sat at its centre. To one side stood a table, along the edge of which were gripped various intricate and elaborate clamps and tools, the likes of which Petras had never seen before. And at the table's end, his hands clasping a poker whose burning red tip now pressed together two strands of metal in an ornate web-like piece of metalwork, stood a man.

He was short, even shorter than Petras himself, but his shoulders were the broadest that Petras had ever seen, his arms thick from shoulder to wrist, tapering to two hands which were surprisingly small and delicate. He had a short beard cropped close to his chin: it was a ruddy, almost rust colour, the same as the hair which ringed his head, leaving a large circle of bald scalp at its centre. When he looked up, as he did now, Petras could see two eyes of deepest amethyst.

‘Eh,’ he said, looking Petras up and down, ‘what wind blows you in?’

Petras felt his courage wilt under the man’s intense gaze.

‘I...’ he stammered, ‘I wanted...’

‘I know what you want,’ said the man. He put down his tools, stepped round the edge of the bench, wiped his hand on a leather cloth and nodded at Petras’ left arm. ‘Let’s see it, then.’

Petras didn’t know how Hestane had divined his problem, whether through the hang of his cloak or the balance of his posture, but whatever had revealed his affliction it was of no matter now – all that mattered was that he was here, with the master smith, and that the solution to his woes was at hand.

Petras pulled back the cloak and lifted his sleeve to show Hestane the scarred stump of his left arm. Hestane peered closely at the stump, and with a light, delicate touch used his small hands to tilt Petras’ arm this way and that, examining it closely. At one point, he used a sharp nail on his forefinger to touch a tender, reddened spot on the edge of the scarring. Petras flinched.

‘You’ll need to keep an eye on that. I’m no doctor,’ said Hestane, ‘but I’ve seen a bad case of Dead Man’s Meat grow from spots like that. I’ll wager you don’t want to lose any more of this?’ He waggled the stump up and down. Petras shook his head. ‘Keep it clean, let the air get to it once in a while. Best thing for it.’

He let go of the stump and walked away, back to the bench where his work lay. Petras could see now what the metalsmith had been forging and a jolt of excitement went through him. Hestane lifted up the piece and turned it in his hands.

The piece was a metal arm, full from fingers to shoulder, jointed at the elbow. As with the iron leg of the merchant that Petras had met earlier, the pieces were entwined like vines, giving the sense of motion and life to the static shape. As Petras watched, Hestane used his own hand to curve the jointed metal fingers into a perfect fist. He looked up, saw Petras watching and gave a snort of derision.

‘Put your eyes back in their holes,’ he said, laying the arm carefully back onto the bench, ‘this isn’t for the likes of you. This’ – he tapped the metal wrist with his knuckle, sending out a perfectly toned ringing note around the room – ‘is for a great nobleman and warrior of the Freeguilds who lost

his arm fighting against the Ossiarch hordes.’

Petras gave an involuntary shiver at the mention of the name, and looked away to disguise his reaction.

‘And he’s paying a pretty penny, too. This is craftsman’s work, don’t come cheap. So...’ He leaned forward on the bench. ‘Let’s see the colour of your money.’

Petras reached into his cloak and pulled out the small bag which he had sequestered there. He handed it over to Hestane. The older man opened the bag and spilled out the coins into his palm. He nodded, put the coins back into the bag, then reached down to the bench and picked something up.

‘Here,’ he said, holding it out. ‘That’s what that lot’ll get you.’

Between his fingers sat the metal tip of a finger, roughly made, little more than a sharpened inch of iron.

‘Please,’ said Petras, ‘I’ve come so far. I’ve waited so long...’

But Hestane was already turning away, going back to his work as though Petras had completely faded from his vision, like smoke from his forge drifting into the night.

‘I’ll work for you,’ said Petras. ‘I can fetch and carry...’

‘Already have apprentices for that,’ said Hestane without looking up.

‘Then I can cook and clean. Empty your latrines. I’ll do anything,’ said Petras.

Hestane stopped, looked at him. ‘You want an arm that bad, do you?’

‘Yes,’ said Petras. He’d never wanted anything more.

Hestane held his gaze for a moment, then nodded at the fine-wrought arm on his bench. ‘Can’t promise you one of these, but you work for me, do whatever I say, no complaint, and I’ll see what I can do.’

A surge of relief went through Petras. ‘Thank you, sir, thank you!’

Hestane smiled, and there was a curl of contempt to his lip, as though Petras’ gratitude had somehow lessened him.

‘Enough of that,’ he said. ‘Thanks gets paid in deeds, not words. So...’ He nodded to the broom in the corner. ‘You’d better get to work.’

For a week, for a month and for a year, Petras’ gratitude held. He did whatever Hestane asked, whether it be cooking and bringing him his supper every day, or washing and scrubbing his clothes, thick with smoke and tar and ashes, or sweeping out the hot embers from the forge when it

was needed, feeling the heat scald his cheeks and smelling the hairs on his hand burning with their touch. The apprentices who worked with Hestane, who maintained his tools and prepared the metal for his touch, treated Petras little better than his brothers had. To them, his tithe-taint rendered him barely even human, made him little more than a dog, to be shouted at and kicked and kept in his place. And like a dog, he was given just a bed of straw in the corner of the workshop, where he slept every night after cleaning the room from top to bottom.

Petras put up with every indignity, every push and shove from the apprentices' hands, every time they tripped him on the way back from the latrine, sending him sprawling into the effluent which he would then have to clean up alone. He put up with it all because he knew that he was working towards the time when Hestane would give him what he most desired – the arm that would make him whole again.

In the odd moments between toiling at his menial tasks, Petras would watch Hestane as he worked at his craft. The blacksmith's favourite tool was a heavy, dark hammer, blunt and flat on one side, and sharpened to a point like an axe on the other. When he pulled a piece of glowing metal from the forge and placed it on his anvil, he would use the hammer to flatten and curl the piece into whatever shape he needed, and then, by deftly twisting the handle mid-air as he lifted it, would cut the piece with the razor-sharp axe blade. For Petras it was like watching magic happen, the glowing hot metal formed by Hestane's blows and cuts into one of the vine-like strands which would then become part of an arm or a leg – an iron sinew or an iron muscle. At night Petras dreamed of Hestane forging a limb for him, hammering, cutting, shaping and moulding, and finally presenting him with his prize.

And one year after he arrived at Hestane's door, one year after he made the bargain, Petras again spoke to the smith and asked him when his arm – his simple metal arm – might be ready.

Hestane laughed. 'You think you've earned it, do you?'

Petras nodded. 'Yes.'

Hestane laughed again, and as he laughed, he moved over to the bench where he was working and picked something up and held it out to Petras. 'This is what you've earned so far, lad.'

Petras saw what he held. A single metal finger.

Resentment boiled in his gut. 'I've worked hard,' he said. 'Haven't I?'

'You've done a fair job, I'll give you that,' said Hestane. 'But you've had food and lodging from me and that don't come free. We each have to pay our way.'

'But—'

Hestane slammed his hand down on the bench. Petras flinched. 'I'll hear no buts, boy. You want your arm, you keep working. That's the deal.'

And with that he turned his back on Petras and busied himself with stirring the embers in the forge.

Over the next weeks and months the seed of resentment that had been planted in Petras began to grow and fester and mature. He saw the years stretching out ahead of him, years of him working like a slave, years of being kicked and trodden on and treated like an animal. He'd grown used to such treatment, had come to expect it. But now, with the prize of the metal arm dangled in front of him, he felt for the first time the injustice of it all. He kept his head down, carried out his chores, didn't complain when the apprentices pushed him down, didn't shout back or get angry. Instead, he nurtured and fed the red-raw feeling inside of him.

One night, when he lay on the straw at the rear of the workshop, Petras was woken by voices. One he knew belonged to Hestane, but the other was new. A man's voice, thin and reedy, with a kind of sing-song whine to it. Quietly, Petras moved through the dark shadows of the workshop towards the sound.

Peering through the shelves where Hestane kept his tools, Petras could see the smith beside his forge, talking to another man. The other was tall and thin, and hunched his back as he spoke to Hestane, as though seeking to shrink himself to his level. He held in his hands a sack, which he held open at the top, and moved from side to side in front of Hestane's eyes, like a merchant showing off his wares. Hestane's hand pulled something from the sack, held it up. It was an armoured chestpiece, bent and pummelled but still intact.

'It's a good piece, solid, hard-wearing,' said the man.

*A scavenger*, thought Petras. He'd met many of them before on the road, had bartered once or twice with them to sell pieces that he'd picked up on the trail. Hestane looked the chestpiece over with a cautious eye. He wrapped his knuckle against the metal and held it up to his ear to hear the

low tone it made. He shook his head, dropped the piece of armour back into the sack.

‘Unsound,’ he said. ‘No good to me. What else do you have?’

The scavenger gave a sigh and closed the sack. ‘You’ve seen all I have,’ he said. Then he looked down at another, smaller sack behind him. ‘Unless... this might be of interest.’ He picked up the smaller sack and opened it, reached a hand in to pull something out. ‘Found at the battle near Skullshale River. A rare find. A rare find indeed.’

At the sight of what he held, Petras felt his stomach lurch and a pulse run through his blood, as though pricked by a sword.

Hestane’s brow creased. ‘Is that...’

‘The arm of an Ossiarch Bonereaper,’ said the scavenger, ‘forged by Mortisan craftsmen from the bones of the dead, clad in nadirite armour, now—’

‘Get it out of here!’ Hestane roared, pushing the scavenger in the chest. The scavenger tripped, half-fell over his sack. Hestane grabbed the sack and threw it at him, aiming a kick at his backside as he scrambled for the door.

‘It’s but a dead piece,’ said the scavenger. ‘Can’t bring no harm.’

‘Then take it with you,’ said Hestane, ‘and hope it doesn’t bring the Ossiarch hordes to your door.’

As the scavenger gathered together his sacks, Petras caught another glimpse of the white of the Bonereaper’s arm and a thought sprung to his mind as though conjured there. The thought that perhaps in that bag, merged within the structure of the Bonereaper’s arm, lay his own bones. That perhaps fate had brought back to him what he had thought forever lost.

Hestane pulled shut the big wooden doors of the workshop and skulked away, back towards the stairway which led up to his living quarters above. Petras could hear the scavenger just outside the door as he gathered up his pieces and began to leave.

Some instinct, some compulsion took hold of Petras and he made his way to the doors and quietly opened them. He could see the shadow of the scavenger, making his way towards the gates of the town. Petras, stepping quietly so as not to be heard, followed him.

The scavenger walked deep into the woods which lay on the outskirts of the town, and Petras had to be careful not to be heard as he followed the man through webs of branches and clusters of thorn bushes. Eventually the man entered a small clearing, at the centre of which stood a large overhanging tree, its twisted branches nearly touching the forest floor. The scavenger had to creep almost on his belly to reach the thick trunk, where he had made his camp, safe from the prying eyes of any passing brigands.

Petras moved slowly and silently so as not to alert the scavenger to his presence, and peered through the crisscrossing branches. He watched as the scavenger took a deep glug from a bottle of mead, then pulled a horsehair blanket over himself and settled down to sleep. In the minutes that it took until he heard the scavenger's deep snores, Petras could feel the cold of the night penetrating his bones, but though he longed to move, he kept still, kept his presence unnoticed. Then he left the cover of the bushes where he had been crouching and fell to his belly to crawl beneath the overhanging branches. Across the grass towards where the scavenger slept.

In the dim light of the moon which threaded through the branches, Petras could see the sack containing the chestpiece rejected by Hestane, but not the second, smaller one which the scavenger had carried. For a moment he worried that the man was using it as a pillow, but then he saw it, sat in the darkness close to the trunk. Stepping past the sleeping scavenger, careful not to wake him, Petras picked up the smaller sack and looked inside.

The Bonereaper's arm lay curled at the bottom of the bag, a strange, unnatural thing. The long, clean fingers of its hand sat curled at the end of a thick forearm which ended in a jagged break, like a saw's blade. From afar, one could mistake it for a mortal arm stripped of all flesh, but up close the workmanship of the Ossiarch craftsmen was clear. The white bones had been sculpted to forge something new, something instantly unnerving, the sight of which sent a sickening lurch through Petras' stomach. At the same time, a vivid memory also swept through him.

*His father dropping the newly cleaned bone into the chest that stood at the entrance to the village and retreating in fear... The Ossiarch revenant who stood guard over the chest turning the black eye sockets of its fleshless skull onto the contents, assessing its weight, then reaching its hand down to slam the chest closed, stealing Petras' arm forever from*

*him—*

He drew in a loud breath. The scavenger stirred beneath his bedding and Petras quickly closed the sack and stood, statue-still in the darkness beneath the tree. He waited until the scavenger's thick snores came again, then he moved away, carrying the bag with him, clasping the heavy load tight against his heart.

Hestane's workshop was dark and silent when Petras returned. He lit a small lamp and carried it over to the straw bed, where he laid the Bonereaper's arm. It was a left arm, the same as he had lost, and Petras wondered again if his own bone lay somewhere merged within, such was his instinctive desire to possess it. Ossiarch magic remade souls as well as body parts, so it was told, and perhaps some part of Petras, buried deep in his marrow, had been stolen and used by their necromantic craftsmen. Perhaps it was calling out to him now, somehow.

*Or perhaps, thought Petras, my mind has become addled and is playing tricks on me.*

Petras wrapped the arm in the blanket which he used as a pillow, and buried it beneath the straw. He didn't know why he had stolen it, what good it would ever do him, but something about possessing it made him feel more complete than he had done in years.

Over the next few days Petras worked hard and worked quietly. He spoke no more to Hestane, save to acknowledge each order he was given, and even the bullying of the apprentices provoked no more in him than a resigned shrug. And each night, when he was alone, he would unwrap the arm and look at it. The perfect shape of the bones, the glinting metal of the armour that was seemingly bound to them, the curve of the hand which seemed too long for the grip of a weapon. Fear and disgust mixed with desire and envy in him as he turned the arm in his hand and felt its weight. In form it far eclipsed even those that Hestane had made for his wealthy clients, being both more and less human than anything crafted from metal.

Petras found that the Bonereaper's arm came ever more frequently to his waking thoughts, almost as though it were calling out to him from its hiding place beneath the straw. And in the darkness, as he dozed, Petras could even vouch that he heard the arm moving inside its blanket, bony fingers scraping and tapping against the stone floor, like the steady ticking

of a clock as it moves towards midnight.

One night, a week after he stole it, Petras took the bone arm from its hiding place, knelt down on the straw and moved it so that it lay in a straight line, palm up. As he ran his finger along the sculpted bone, a sudden urge went through him – a hunger to feel it against his flesh. He untied the twine that kept his loose left sleeve tied, and pushed up the fabric so that it exposed his scarred stump. The fingers of the bone arm were curved towards the palm, all except the long forefinger, which curved up and pointed its tip towards him as though beckoning. Petras felt almost in a trance as he picked up the bone arm and placed its jagged edge against his stump of flesh. It felt to him as though invisible forces were guiding his movements, drawing together bone and stump, as though completing some unnatural ritual.

At the moment the bone met his scar tissue, a surge of images swept through Petras' mind, scouring away all that had been there before – memories more vivid than any he had known, none of them his.

*The splitting open of terrified faces with the swipe of his sword, showing the pink flesh within; the crush of a skull beneath his foot, brain matter clinging to his boot tread; his bone arm wrist-deep in the guts of a man, pushing forward, ever deeper, towards the heart.*

At the same time came a cacophony of voices – the souls of those merged to create a single animus, now screaming in torment, inconsolably insane, railing against their impermeable bonds.

In the next moment all conscious thought was obliterated as a needle of pain spiked through him, penetrating from his stump through to every single nerve ending in his body, annihilating any other sensation. Petras threw his head back and let out a shriek of agony, stripping his throat red raw. As the cry died in his mouth, Petras slumped forward onto the straw bed and clenched his fist to beat against the floorboards beneath. It took seconds for him to hear the echo of that sound from his other side, and realise that now there were two hands beating.

He turned his eyes to the left and saw the bone arm, now somehow grafted to his own body, its jagged edge pushed into his flesh, the entwined bones snaking up and embedding themselves into his skin, merging into his stump. As he watched, the bone fist unclenched and spread its fingers wide, as though trying on a glove. He could feel the movement, but it was

not him who commanded it. The animus within the bone – fractured, tortured, half-unmade – was guiding its actions, its voices screaming inside his skull.

In amongst the cacophony of thoughts there came a desperate one of his own. *Cut it off. Get rid of it.* The arm would never be part of him, but he could sense that if he didn't act now, he would become part of it.

'Who's there? Is that you, boy?' Hestane's voice, coming from the stairway, boomed out across the room, his footsteps coming at the same time as he entered the workshop. 'Well? What's all this noise?'

Petras' head turned towards the sound. He was holding his jaw clamped tight, trying to swallow down all the pain and fear that was inside of him, trying to suppress all the alien images and impulses which threatened to consume him from within. As he saw Hestane approach, he felt himself get to his feet and turn to face the older man – almost as though he were a puppet being pulled up by unseen hands.

He looked down at his left arm, and saw where the Ossiarch bones now wedded themselves to him, like a leech to a wound.

'Boy?' said Hestane, growing closer 'What ails you?'

As the smith stepped forward, Petras' eyes seemed to run over every part of Hestane's body at once and see not only the clothes and muscles, but somehow everything beneath. His gaze fell on Hestane's upper body – the thick shoulders and arms. *Good bones,* said a voice inside of him.

The bone arm reached out towards the tool rack beside Petras.

Hestane saw the movement, saw the arm and felt the fear of what it meant. 'What have you done, boy?' he said, his voice little more than a whisper.

Petras wanted to hand him the axe, to beg him to wield it quickly and true, to cut the bone arm from him, even if it meant losing all that remained of his own limb. But the words wouldn't come and even as he fought to speak them, he could feel the bone arm's grip tightening on the axe's handle.

*Now is the time,* said the voice inside Petras. *Act now or be forever joined.* But the voice was small and quiet now, lost in the screeching of the others. Petras took hold of the tool and raised it high above his head.

'Don't!' cried Hestane. He raised a hand in protection, only to see the arm severed at the wrist by the sharp edge of the hammer-axe, swinging

down with all its weight. Before he had time to react, to even feel the pain of the amputation, before even the blood had begun to pulse from the cleanly cut wound, the handle of the tool was spun by Petras' bone hand and swung upwards from below, its blunt end connecting with Hestane's chin, shattering his jaw. Hestane fell to the ground, tried to cry out, but his mouth was now a mess of mush and bone fragments, his lower teeth embedded in the roof of his mouth, his tongue just a set of flailing ribbons attached to a pulsing muscle.

Petras stood over the squirming, bloody body of the smith and felt the bone arm turn the tool's handle in its grip, offering again the sharpened blade. The severed stump of Hestane's arm pulsed blood onto the flagstones beneath. There was a clean cut at the wrist, which Petras now stepped on with his boot, holding it in place, ready to make another cut. Petras felt as though he were watching the whole thing from the bottom of a deep well, or as though he were a passenger in a carriage which was being driven hard to its destination, but with no control over the reins.

He lifted the axe high and swung it down, meeting the stone floor with a *clang* as it severed Hestane's arm at the shoulder.

When the apprentices arrived shortly after dawn, the doors to the workshop stood open and a trail of bloody footprints led out from the stone floor to be swallowed by the mud outside. The room within was spread with blood and flesh and hair and muscle – the remnants of Hestane's body. A small pile of half-flensed bones sat atop a pile of meat and sinew as though discarded, but of the larger bones – the arms, the shoulders – there was no sign.

It was close to dusk and a dank, heavy fog was creeping out from the forest that surrounded the village, enveloping the standing torches which marked its boundaries, sending them flickering and jumping, creating shapes and shadows in the mist.

Bron cupped his hands to his mouth and blew on his fingers to warm them, then pulled on his gloves once more and stamped the ground to waken his feet. Patrol duties on a night like this were an unpleasant part of his role as village watchman, but he knew that though the cold would soon enter and settle into his bones, it would be nothing that couldn't be

banished by a good spell in front of a warm fire. He closed his eyes and tried to picture the fireplace at home, the high mantel built years ago by his father, the crackling logs stacked high and burning red. He could almost feel the warmth against his skin. Then a noise woke him from his reverie, a sound like a heavy footfall on the forest floor, and Bron opened his eyes.

At first there was nothing, just the trunks of the trees and their low spreading branches, cloaked in the thick fog. Then, coming between the trees, moving steadily, slowly, something swinging in its hand, came the figure of a man.

Or was it a man? As it came close, Bron felt the dread he'd felt a number of times before, the cold fear that accompanied the arrival of the reapers. *It can't be time for another tithe*, thought Bron. It had been only a handful of years since the last, and the village had not enough dead to fulfil their demands, nor even enough old and dying prepared to be sacrificed. The figure moved closer, and Bron could see the whiteness of bone that marked its limbs and his mind began to race. Should he run now, warn Grandon?

Then the figure lurched out of the fog and Bron realised that what stood before him was no Bonereaper, but a sick mockery of one. Apart from the left arm, clad in armour and grasping a bloodstained blacksmith's hammer, the bones which covered the upper part of the torso were hanging with strands of flayed skin and chunks of wet flesh, and were pinned to the body beneath by what looked like metal rivets, inserted directly into the skin, leaving suppurating wounds at each point where they penetrated.

But it was the face that sat above the flesh-dripping shoulders which horrified Bron most, for it was one that he recognised.

'Brother,' said Bron, his throat turned dry and cracked, 'is that you?'

Petras looked Bron up and down. His eyes – clouded and rheumy but still somehow penetrating – fell on his brother's legs. Thick and heavy, solid and strong. *Good bones*, said the voice inside him.

Petras swung the hammer.

Grandon's wife and children ran when the door burst open and Petras lurched in, wet with Bron's blood and dragging a sack of his bones, but Grandon held his ground. He grabbed the wood-axe from beside the fire

and held it clasped in both hands, feet shifting in the earth, ready to face the attack.

‘What kind of creature...’ he began, but even as his eyes moved from the bloody leg bones, freshly skinned and shorn of meat, skewered to the flesh beneath, up the red-drenched torso to the face, he realised that he would never know what had made the thing that stood before him, the thing that was once his brother. He would either die by its hand in the next few minutes, or drive it back into the night from which it came.

Grandon swung the axe with all his strength, cutting down towards the bone arm which held the hammer. But his blow was met by Petras’ hammer moving upwards with an inhuman strength of purpose. Grandon was spun backwards with the force of the contact, tripping and spilling across a chair to land on his back on the floor. As he turned to look up, he saw the hammer spin in Petras’ hand, the blunt edge become sharp, and then the whole thing come down to split him in two from crown to hip.

Grandon’s chest fell with the last breath from his lungs and Petras could see the movement in the newly exposed breastbone and ribs. *They’ll make a fine body*, said the voices inside him, the ones that weren’t screaming. Petras lowered himself to his knees astride his brother’s body and began to work.

‘I’m back, father,’ said Petras. But his voice was little more than a whisper now, drowned out by the other sounds that crowded him. He felt like he was growing smaller, ever smaller, and even the eyes he looked through were a great distance away. He could see earth and his hands digging, the bone hand scooping out great globules of soil and throwing it behind him in the moonlight. Then came the scrape of his bone fingers against wood, and the tearing of the rotten timbers away to reveal the face of his father. The old man’s lips seemed to be moving, trying to speak, but as Petras peered closer he could see that it was just the maggots writhing as they ate the soft, rotting flesh. A few fell onto his father’s teeth and then into the blackness of the decomposing throat beyond.

The skin had been eaten away around the eyes and Petras could see the sickly white bone of the skull beneath. Petras’ bone hand reached for the axe that lay beside him on the graveyard grass. As he raised the blade, a

voice from long ago came back to him. His father's voice.

*We all must play our part.*

'You too, father,' said Petras. 'You too.'

The cracked and fractured pathway of bones which led to the Ossiarch fortress gave a little under Petras' bloodstained foot. Each step he took was filled with pain, but that pain had become a kind of ecstasy for him now, so long had he lived with it. His gait was slow and heavy, each movement accompanied by the scraping of bone against bone. Grandon's breastbone was embedded in his own now, Bron's legs wedded to his legs. Around them, riveted to each other were the bones of others – people from his village who had found him as he left his father's grave, vagabonds he'd met along the road, the arms of Hestane. His head was heavy too and his eyes, dry and bloodshot from lack of sleep – for how was sleep possible with the cacophony ever in his head? – looked out through dark sockets at the path he walked. He could see the gates of the fortress in front of him, could see movement in front of them.

A pair of Bonereapers marching out to meet him, their bone feet cricking and cracking against the bone path beneath.

He watched them through the cracked and broken mask that once had been his father's skull, now pinned by rivets to his cheekbones and jaw. He could no longer speak, could not tell them that his tithe was, at last, complete. All he could do was stand and wait for their approach.

As they fell upon him with hands and weapons, making little distinction between the bones that were pinned to his flesh and those that lay beneath his skin, harvesting all with the same cold precision, Petras saw once again visions of battlefields and hoped that some part of him would move on to some other, greater destiny.

But they had no use for anything beyond his bones. As the Bonereapers carried away their haul, they left his wet flesh to rot into the earth. His weak soul, of no worth to them, they left to the winds.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Steven Sheil** is a writer and film director based in Nottingham, UK.

His films include the features *Mum & Dad* (2008), winner of the *Silver Méliès* at the Leeds International Film Festival, and *Dead Mine* (2012). His short fiction has previously appeared in *Black Static* magazine.

An extract from 'The Shadow Crown' by C L Werner  
from the Warhammer Horror Anthology *Anathemas*.



Night cast its long fingers through the alabaster halls of the royal palace, muting its brilliance to dirty grey shadows. In the long hours before morning, few were abroad within the colonnaded passages. One of those few was a young, copper-haired woman with dusky skin who kept a dark cloak drawn close around her as she stood at the back of an alcove just outside the Ocelot Plaza. A shiver rushed through her as she saw a shadow flash across a doorway opposite her. Even a noble of Lady Cualli's status was aware of the stories that were bandied about in hushed whispers in the bazaars and taverns of the old city beyond the palace walls. It was said that deadly monsters prowled the streets, striking down all they encountered and leaving only a few gnawed bones for the gutter-rakers to find when dawn came to Aqshy.

Nor were stories of slinking monsters the only tales of dread and destruction rife among the commoners. There was also talk of plague, and wretched, disfigured people prowling the night, their countenances too horrible to be gazed upon in the light of day. Toxic miasma from the river was said to inflict such foulness. Some claimed it was the curse of Dark Nagash as his spectral tallymen sought to meet the underworld's quota of damned souls.

Cualli wished she could truly feel the noble disdain she feigned when she heard such stories. The truth was that she knew there was some veracity to them. Something strange and terrible was stalking Maktlan. If there were any other choice possible to her, she would have remained safely locked in her own rooms. Unfortunately, the purpose that made her brave the night was not one she would entrust to anyone else. There were some matters that demanded personal attention, no matter rank and privilege.

From the shadows, she waited and watched. And listened.

Not long into her vigil, a man came slinking into the plaza. He paused beside the marble fountain and stared down at the bubbling water, oblivious to the grey mist that wafted up from the pool in the dim moonlight. He was well into middle age, and the topknot that grew from his otherwise denuded scalp was the colour of iron, with a ruby pin thrust across its centre. He had a stocky build beneath his rainbow-hued robe of cloud-viper scales, and the gem-encrusted sash around his middle struggled to confine his round belly. This was Chancellor Icnoyotl, formerly chief advisor to King Tlanextli.

Formerly. Cualli expected it was that fall from the king's favour that had motivated Icnoyotl to hold this clandestine rendezvous. He was desperate to retain power, and so he'd turned to plots and schemes. Conspiracy.

Cualli observed Icnoyotl for many minutes before the sound of footsteps drew her attention to the far side of the plaza. The confederate Icnoyotl expected had arrived. She covered her mouth to stifle the gasp of recognition when she saw who the chancellor was meeting – a young, muscular man, his arms tattooed in the colourful patterns of the Blood Jaguars, Maktlan's elite warrior caste. Slung across his back in a sheath of manticore hide was a macuahuitl, the obsidian-edged sword-club with which each Blood Jaguar was lethally skilled. Cualli knew first-hand this man's skill with the weapon, as many times he'd put his deadly blade at her service. He was Tochtli – her brother.

Doubt worked its way into Cualli's mind for the first time since offering to play the part of spy. She didn't care overmuch about Icnoyotl or what might befall the chancellor as a result of his plotting, but she didn't have the same detachment when it came to Tochtli. There was no one in Maktlan she felt loyalty towards except Tochtli... and the man who'd sent her to spy upon this meeting.

Misgivings about her task were cast aside when the two men started to speak. Cualli listened carefully to each word, committing them to memory. She knew she would be called upon to recite them exactly when she returned from her mission.

'It is a dangerous game you play,' Tochtli said as he joined the chancellor beside the fountain. 'Why would you not meet me somewhere outside the palace?'

Iconoyotl shook his head and sighed. 'I am too important, even now, to leave the palace without someone noticing. No, this was the only thing to do. The only way we could meet and decide what must be done.' An edge crept into his voice and his eyes became as cold as iron. 'What must be done about this vile Ekurzakir.'

Cualli felt her pulse quicken when she heard the name. So, it was true! Iconoyotl was plotting against Ekurzakir! When she brought this information back to him, she would prove her devotion and he would finally reward her loyalty.

Then Tochtli spoke and Cualli's excitement turned to dread as she was reminded that things were always more complicated than they seem.

'I despise the priest even more than you do,' Tochtli told Iconoyotl, 'but what can be done about the man? The king dotes upon his every word. He'd never listen to us if we tried to denounce Ekurzakir.'

'Priest?' Iconoyotl scoffed. 'He's naught but a charlatan. I doubt he had anything to do with the young prince's recovery. He just showed up at the right time and exploited the king's credulity.'

Cualli clenched her fists when she heard Iconoyotl insult Ekurzakir. He was a holy man, endowed with powers from the gods themselves. If King Tlanextli preferred the priest's counsel over that of his chancellor, that was a mark of their sovereign's wisdom, not his credulity. She sickened to hear Tochtli agree with Iconoyotl.

'He is like a cockatrice dripping poison into the king's ear with the advice he gives him,' Tochtli said. 'The king will listen to no one but Ekurzakir.'

Iconoyotl nodded. 'Tlanextli ignores the troubles of his subjects. Supplies are being stolen every night now, but the king hears only Ekurzakir telling him to punish the merchants for scheming to create shortages and increase the value of their goods. Disease has spread through whole quarters of the city, but Ekurzakir says there's no sickness, only lazy serfs who refuse to work and think to exploit the king's generosity.' He paused and a haunted expression came upon his face. 'When people speak of seeing monsters prowling the streets at night, Ekurzakir warns of conspirators trying to scare others into staying in their homes while the traitors are free to plot and scheme.' Iconoyotl's voice became bitter. 'Tlanextli has become paranoid. He distrusts everyone. Everyone except Ekurzakir.'

Cualli seethed to hear these pernicious lies spouted by Iconoyotl. She

could well imagine what would happen when the king learned of this. And he would learn of it after she reported back to Ekurzakir. As soon as the conspirators left, she would steal back to the priest's chambers and tell him everything. She felt some regret that Tochtli would share the chancellor's fate, but it was his own fault for scheming against the holy man.

Then Tochtli started to speak again, and once more Cualli's resolve faltered.

'I care about none of that,' Tochtli told Icnoyotl. 'What matters to me is the hold this charlatan has over my sister. She has surrendered herself completely to him. Never have I seen Cualli seized by such a fascination.'

'She has always been ambitious,' Icnoyotl warned. 'Cualli has always sought to aggrandise her own rank and status in the court.'

Tochtli gave the chancellor a warning glower. 'You slight my kin. Tread carefully, friend.'

'No matter what words I choose, you know their meaning is the truth,' Icnoyotl replied. 'Her path to power is littered with those she has used to gain that power. Your own position as captain of the Blood Jaguars – do you think you could have claimed such rank without her politicking?'

Cualli thought Tochtli would strike the chancellor down for daring to speak such words. Instead, her brother lowered his eyes and bowed his head.

'This time it is different,' Tochtli explained. 'This time *she* is being used. Used by Ekurzakir to crawl his way to Tlanextli's ear. She truly believes he's a holy man gifted with divine powers.' Tochtli turned and kicked the side of the fountain in frustration. 'Ekurzakir has used her to get where he is now, but I think Cualli's usefulness to him is nearing an end. I fear he will try to get rid of her. *That* is why I agreed to speak with you. I don't care about what happens to Maktlan. I only care what happens to my sister.'

'Whatever your motivation, I need your help,' Icnoyotl declared. 'Your Blood Jaguars can put a permanent end to Ekurzakir...'

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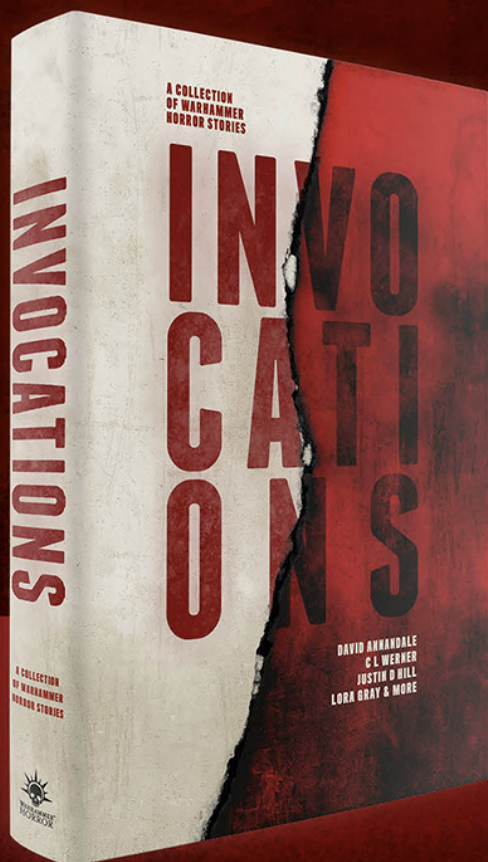


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