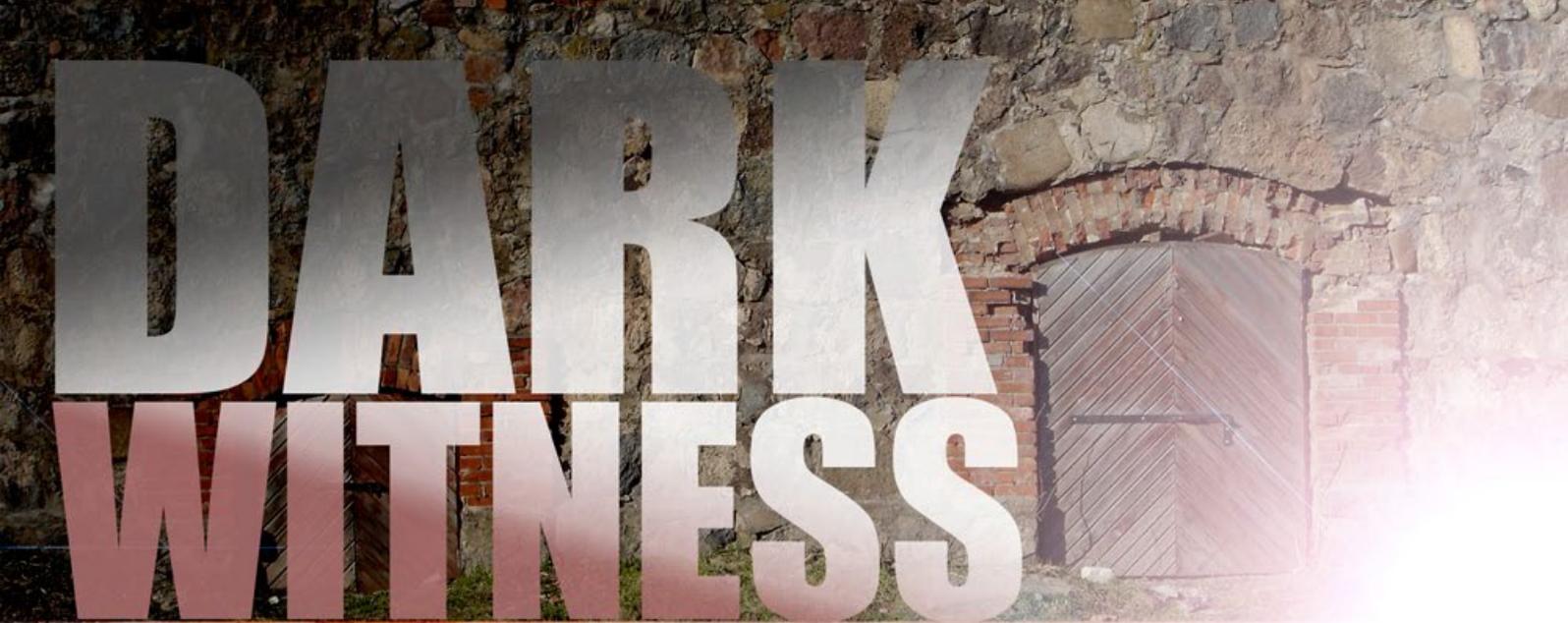


# DARK WITNESS



A SHORT STORY



# ROBERT HOOD

**UNDEAD  
BACKBRAIN**  
PUBLISHING

# **DARK WITNESS**

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# **A Tale of Tharenweyr**

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### **Author’s Note**

“Dark Witness” is made up of material edited from an earlier draft of my novel *Fragments of a Broken Land: Valarl Undead*. It provides important backstory for the character, Aridor—senior Acolyte of the Yanuran Lord Worjaren Rehemon. However, I found that its length slowed the pacing of the narrative too much in context and as a result only a truncated version now appears in the novel. It is reproduced in full here, elaborated somewhat to give it a stand-alone quality.

*Fragments of a Broken Land: Valarl Undead*  
by Robert Hood (Borgo Press, 2013)  
<http://fragmentsnovel.undeadbackbrain.com/>

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# Dark Witness

A Short Story by Robert Hood

*“WHAT about this one?” says the one-eyed pirate.*

*The leader of the raiding party, face red and scarred, scowls at six-year-old Aridor, who glances up defiantly from the mud. A mixture of seawater and his father’s blood makes it stink like their barn after a hog slaughter. “The Dark Lord’ll deal with him.”*

*“Let him go, ya mean?” says a short, red-faced thug.*

*“I mean, throw him in the hold, maggot. All such swine belong to the Dark Lord and’ll be fed to him, raw and scabby, when the time’s right.”*

*He turns to Aridor and sneers in mocking contempt.*

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His life may have begun in brutal servitude, but time and his own cunning had freed him. These days, thirty years later, Tanuul-Aridor’s memories were dominated by the coming of Eblamthezaik to the court of High-Lord Zarth in Vornarca. That was the thing that kept him going. The noise of those memories could cancel out the echoes of childhood degradation.

The overriding fact of the Ormsinir had smitten him with remorse and fear, quelling all doubt in him and infusing his spirit with joy and hope. It seemed to him on the Day of Dark Witness, as he entered the High-Lord’s Hall with the rest of his trembling comrades, that the ancient carving and human-craft that dressed the Hall in splendour was a tinsel-trivia whose falsehood was now revealed for all to see. The glory of Kings was nothing, an empty windiness without meaning to the advancement of the Great Desire that was the soul of Men’s Destiny. His own life seemed a tedious struggle from futility to despair. Only the Ormsinir’s massive bulk was true. It gave off an aura in which all else basked, and without Power—of which the Godling was a surrogate—there could be no purpose or worth, no contentment, but only frustration and ultimate surrender.

Perhaps now he could be worthy of such Power. It was his deepest hope and his life’s devotion.

Born on Ephratah, Aridor had begun life as the son of a farmer who

scratched a meagre living from the rocky soils along the island's southern coast. His father's life had subsisted between pain and toil, and though Aridor remembered little from that time he clearly recalled the worn skin, weather-beaten and scarred by wrinkles like wounds, that hung around the contours of his father's gaunt face. This aging cripple, who wore misery like a cloak against life, had once said to him, when he was only five: "Joy in nothing, son. Sorrow'll wash off your back then and the pain'll be less." Of his mother Aridor remembered nothing. She had died sometime before his memories began.

When he was six, white-skinned, savage invaders came to the coast of Ephratah, burned his father's farm and murdered the old man. His death, like his life, was long and cruel. His screams for mercy, which went unheeded, remained still in corners of Aridor's mind, though he tried to deafen himself to their call. They sounded their summons often, arising unbidden, especially when, as now, he thought back through his life in an attempt to read its themes. They saddened him, but could never be allowed to drive his actions. The Godling had spoken to him. To Eblamthezaik and his Master all things must be subordinate. The Ormsinir's cries: "*Kerunin-heth-saliz'yarthor! Ruthlim! Ruthlim!*" (The horns sound for all the faithful! Arise! Arise!) must drown out alarms from his own vain past.

His father slain, the pirate-marauders had slung the young boy in with other booties gained during the raid. Their squat, ill-kempt ship carried him away from his home and he never returned there. They fed him on scraps and raw fish, keeping him locked in the hold for nearly two months, while they slew more innocents and added to their cargo. Often Aridor heard cries on the shore and several times terrible screams and the sounds of turmoil and murder on the deck itself. He huddled in his corner, damp and cold, almost demented in his frantic struggle to accept what was happening to him. Once a woman was thrown into the hold after an orgy of struggle above deck, and she wept and, like his father, begged for mercy. Perhaps she was his mother. He could not know; he did not even understand what had happened to her. But her tears fell across his feet and later the men came for her and she never returned. When he asked about her, the one who fed him only laughed, and later, after another raid, dragged a woman before him and raped her there -- to further his education, he said. The pirates became for him a symbol of implacable fatefulness, an image of life's savagery. It was impossible to be happy in such a world, yet what could be done against its terror? The torments he accepted with a pragmatic sorrow, but he railed, in a childish and unrationalized way, against the knowledge that such horrors were bound by chains of adamant strength to the heart of human life. He could not see what had to be done if his own existence, darkened by the shadow of this truth, were to play more than a passive role in the outworkings of the

world's grim destiny.

Eventually, after he'd spent several seasons aboard their ship as lackey and sex-slave, the pirates sold Aridor into servitude of another kind and he left the sea to train as squire in the Court of Zarth the Elder, monarch of Dagest-Yanu, a state east of the mercantile capital Vesuula. Aridor's first lord died in a minor skirmish with Rheat forces along their border with the Empire. Having taken kindly to the boy, the old lord had left Aridor a legacy.

Often they had talked of Life and the hatefulness of its birth in Man. Lord Garis'den had shown himself to be a follower of the cult of Dread Huedaik, one of the most glorious of the E'ashalsinir and the most ancient of the Rebels to have fled the ranks of the Raashyr-Gods long ago in the pre-Apocalypse stages of the world's history. Lord Garis'den introduced Aridor to the philosophies and aims of this deity and he found a measure of peace in them. *In Life there is suffering and evil, Huedaik taught. Life is bondage, Death freedom: all must seek the panacea of Death's gift.* These doctrines gave him assurance that the course of his span in the world might contribute to the freeing of human's souls, and though he only understood them in his later years, from the first the Lord's words were prophecies of hope, etched in his memory by the power of Lord Garis'den's kindness. They helped expunge his guilt and turn his despair to defiance. In desperation, he embraced the faith with zeal.

He could hear the tall, grey Lord's voice even now: *Young Aridor, I know the extent of your feelings and how hard they are to bear. But just sacrifice them to Great Huedaik, Quaker of Men's Spirits, and he will receive the oblation with gratitude. Know, boy, that the kindred of the E'ashalsinir have sought through countless ages to destroy that Power which corrupts the true development of Eternal Being. They would free the Life in Men from the bondage of existence, save them from strife and pain, provide a Destiny whose fruit is the uncorrupted, unliving state that all Life secretly desires. Do not despise the vicious and the cruel. Though all unknowing, they work in the name of mercy and salvation.*

When Lord Garis'den was killed, his kindness went on in Aridor's life. His legacy freed the boy from the taint of slavery and provided for his education in the magic-school of the Yanuran Court. Deep-Power adepts were much prized among Dark-God worshippers, as they so rarely showed a willingness to serve the Dark Gods and embrace the darkest of the magic arts. So he grew toward manhood and eventually came under the tutelage of Lord Worjaren Rehemon. Loyal and skilled, his thirtieth year saw him bonded to this Lord as Chief Acolyte, as honorable a position as any he could then have wished to attain. Lord Worjaren Rehemon was hard and ruthless, a man whose cold detachment terrorized all who knew him. He lacked even those threads of Family connection which gave to many in the

Court their status, yet in the Court of Zarth the Younger, who succeeded this father as High-Lord following a period of civil strife, Worjaren Rehemon was placed at the right hand of ultimate political power. The influence of E'ashalsinir worship grew under his deft manipulations. Now Dagest-Yanu was recognized as a Dark-God kingdom, if any were bold enough to speak the truth or wise enough to discern its nature under the façade of conformity that was yet preserved in its relations with neighboring states.

During these many years, however, Aridor's disillusionment and restlessness became more and more apparent, at least to himself. The beginning of his fortieth year saw him descending further into confusion, his faith at a low ebb. He could not understand the failure of the Court to rise above petty internal squabbles and march out upon the heartless, Raashyr-dominated lands all about them, bringing death and freedom. He himself had contributed little to the furtherance of the Dark-God Dominance. He felt that there was no value to his life beyond the endless recitation of doctrine and the performance of sterile rites. He was no longer giving anything, even toward his own peace-of-mind. Moreover he was still just a slave in the social hierarchy of the land. All were, even Lord Worjaren Rehemon. Where was freedom? He was bound to wheels he could not control and had replaced his early childhood bondage with a subtler restriction hidden by illusions of power.

Sometimes he felt that even the Dark Gods were merely a falsehood of men's hearts, a fantasy to assuage grief. He could not bear such thoughts. They tormented him. Often, at night in his chamber, he would weep for the darkness to bring him a sign of hope.

It was during such a night as this that voices called him from his sleep.

"Sire Aridor! Sire! Your *Sinir* has come."

The words confused him. *Sinir*, or Master, was a title Worjaren Rehemon was given only in jest, by those careless enough to speak such folly. Aridor's master was not the Lord Worjaren Rehemon but Huedaik Himself, the God who dwelt in Nalim-Tar far beyond the lands where Men were. Aridor leapt from his bed, determined to beat this fool for his insolence. He flung open the door, but the caller had passed on to other doors. At each room the message was the same: "Your Master has come!"

A chill crept over Aridor as he realised the caller's choice of words was neither accidental nor impudent. But if this were so, what did 'your Master' portend? Had Huedaik Himself arrived in their midst?

"You!" he called to the servant who was making his way down the corridor. The man turned. Another face, that of a higher-ranked court acolyte, appeared at an open door. "*Sinir*, you say? What do you mean Master? What's going on?"

"Yes," said the other. "Are you mad?"

“No, praise be to the Great Ones!” cried the steward, a tremulous fervour in his voice. “A Godling, sires. You are awaited in the High-Lord’s Hall.”

A Godling! The Ormsinir of Huedaik! Servant of the Dark Gods, born of Their flesh! Aridor’s exclamation of surprise stuck in his throat. He looked at the senior acolyte and the acolyte looked at him, and then they both ran down the corridor like school-boys. Joy vied with disbelief in him, but it was fear that sped his mind before him to the Great Hall—fear that there was some deception at work. To be given such a hope and to have it dashed would be too great a burden for his already tenuous faith to bear.

The huge marble stairs were crowded with the elite of Zarth’s extensive Court. A hum of questioning and excitement thrilled the air and turned the forecourt to a marketplace. Aridor accosted a duty-guard. “Tell me, man, why are the doors barred against us when we have been summoned?”

The guard sighed impatiently, tired of answering the same enquiry. “The Godling wants no stragglers,” he said.

“The Godling! Then it is true?”

The guard became stone-faced and did not answer. Aridor stepped back and waited with the rest for the doors to open. Doubt and hope jostled for possession of his heart.

The memory of that day was vivid in Aridor’s mind. Not the stonework under his feet nor the wind that caressed his ears could provide a reality more powerful than the mere remembrance of the Godling’s awesome presence. With all the rest Aridor had entered the Hall, trembling with anticipation, but the crowd’s noise had died instantly as the Ormsinir was seen facing them from the Judgement Seat. Everyone stared, dumb with private emotion. One thought joyed in Aridor’s mind. *A Godling, Ormsinir of Huedaik, sent to me in my hour of despair. Praise be Huedaik, Master of Men’s Hearts and Saviour in dread!*

He spoke this acclamation in unison with the gathered men-servants of the Dark God. Their combined voices thundered in the Hall, until the timbers shook and Aridor feared the walls would succumb. But High-Lord Zarth, who sat on the throne beside the Godling, shrunken now in the Ormsinir’s vicinity, raised his hand for silence.

“Fellow servants,” he intoned, his gaunt features radiant with the glow of his own importance, “A boon has been granted us this day, the reign of Zarth the Younger acknowledged as a time of greatness.” Aridor could have sworn that one of the Ormsinir’s bird-like heads sneered scornfully at these pompous words. “I call you to my worship and to give praise and a servile ear to the Master’s Herald, the Ormsinir Eblamthezaik himself. Honour and fear be due unto Huedaik! Praise Him!”

The Hall rang with the gathering’s response.

More words from Zarth followed, and the High Priest sacrificed a

slave before the Godling's feet. There was dancing, too. Through it all Eblamthezaik stood impassive, radiating an inhuman majesty that made the Court's endeavours seem trite and insignificant. The air carried an unworldly chill into every waiting soul.

At last the Ormsinir gestured stiffly and the dancers fled. His dark, penetrating eyes scanned the crowd, each person there imagining that the Being sought for him alone.

“Kerunin-heth-saliz'yarthor! Ruthlim! Ruthlim!”

The stark, jaggedly intoned voice cracked in the Hall. The floor quivered. These were ancient words of the sacred language of Gaharlgeth, the Dark God Father—a terrible sound that could bend and subdue the stoutest human spirit. Most here had learnt them, but heard them now as they were meant to be spoken. It thrilled Aridor and left him breathless.

“Truly we are Eblamthezaik and to none but the Ultimate Master and His peers do we kneel.” The Godling was speaking in Lesser Goduulan now, the common tongue of all the world's sentient creatures. The words were transformed in his use of them, becoming dark and unfamiliar. “We have come to test the truth of your devotion and the extent of that truth's fidelity. Now is the time when treachery must be expunged. Come forward and give us your obsequence!”

No-one moved. Then Zarth rose from his throne and stood before the huge Being. He raised his hands. “Hear, O Ormsinir, honoured guest from the Master Huedaik. Read my faith in devotion to thy cause. So begs Handrel-Zarth Elban, High-Lord of Dagest-Yanu and the Court of Vornarca.”

He bowed and returned to his throne. He gestured to his Lords. The first to come forward was Lord Worjaren Rehemon. The stern aristocrat mimicked Zarth's actions and spoke similar words, adding only “So begs Worjaren Rehemon, Lord of Dejselgua under Zarth, High-Lord of Dagest-Yanu.” He bowed again. One of the Ormsinir's heads stretched out in a leisurely fashion. Its eyes contracted.

“There is more to you than is common,” the Being said quietly. “You have an ancient experience and unbounded ambition we can use. But take care. You are our servant now, as always.”

The Ormsinir dismissed him and he returned to his place. Others followed, one by one begging the Godling's favour. The Godling acknowledged none as he had Lord Worjaren Rehemon. Aridor awaited his turn with pounding heart, wondering what fate would come to those who were rejected, if any there should be whose soul merited such condemnation.

When Lord Terissaron of Hirron-Tilan came forward and spoke, his demeanour was no different from that of the Lords he followed. But his voice had barely finished echoing from the high walls when Eblamthezaik's voice swept its last tones away. “This man stands condemned before us,

a coward whose lies stain the sanctity of our presence. Even now he deals with the enemy. To Eblamthezaik who reads treachery in his soul his life is forfeit.”

“Master,” Terissaron said, turning pale and trembling. “How can you believe this of so devoted a servant? Someone has defamed me.”

“You defame yourself, life-worshipper.” The eyes of the Godling’s central head began to glow and the wretched Lord screamed. His shaking hands clutched at the air for an instant, then he fell forward limply. So silent was the Hall that the thud of his collapse echoed like thunder over the heads of the gathering. “He shall be no more,” the Godling said. Lord Terissaron’s body seemed to melt and distort for a moment, becoming ugly and monstrous. His chest bulged as though the air had become a viscous fluid and was refracting the light, and there was another face there, a parody of Terissaron’s intelligent features. It stretched out like a serpent and glared at the people in the Hall.

“Praise be to Huedaik!” it hissed, in a voice that seemed forced from something that should never have spoken. The head retreated into Terissaron’s body, and both it and its unnatural appendage crumbled to dust.

“We are merciful,” the Godling’s voice cracked through the silence. “Lord Terissaron feels no pain.”

The ceremony continued, but the tone was different now. Aridor sensed the fear and uncertainty all about him. There were many unsure of their own innocence. Several times he noticed men and women moving back through the crowd toward the door, but the portals were barred and guarded, and those who would flee found their way blocked. Many died that day. As the count rose some sought to take the door by force, and were slain by the Court’s swords. When Aridor’s turn came he felt no fear, despite the doubts of yesterday. He knelt before Huedaik’s servant and lifted up his hands:

“Hear, O Ormsinir, Honoured One, Most Welcomed by all of pure heart. Read my joy in your Coming! Acknowledge my devotion! So begs Aridor, Chief Acolyte of Lord Worjaren Rehemon under High-Lord Zarth of Dagest-Yanu.”

There was silence. Slowly he rose and went back to the gathering, his obeisance accepted.

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*“What about this one?” says the one-eyed pirate.*

*The leader of the raiding party, face red and scarred, scowls at Aridor,*

*who glances up defiantly from the mud. “The Dark Lord’ll deal with him.”*

*“Let him go, ya mean?”*

*“I mean, throw him in the hold, maggot. All such swine belong to the Dark Lord and’ll be fed to him, raw and scabby, in the end.”*

*Before the man’s words can fade, Aridor pushes himself up, slamming his fist into the leader’s crotch. The man screams and drops the dagger grasped in his hand. Aridor grabs it.*

*“This is the end,” he yells. “At least for you. I am the Dark Lord’s now and forever—and you die for your blasphemy in evoking His name.”*

*He rips the blade across the raider’s gut—letting blood and offal spill like a sacrifice across his father’s land.*