

Excerpt from Ruby Red Switchblade
By Andrew G. Schneider

Prologue

“Damn! He’s going under!”

The minotaur bucked and spat blood, eyes rolling wildly in his head.

“He’s not responding to the mandragora.”

“Get out of the way,” Isalyn growled, pushing her way past the first response team.

“What do we...there’s no breath, no pulse.” She slammed her palms flat against the minotaur’s chest, and a sheet of light passed through his body, to no effect. Isalyn fell away, her hands wet with blood. She shook her head and grabbed him by the horns, staring into his eyes. “Damnation, why won’t he answer-”

The chubby Inquisitor caught the hellspawn as it leapt from the minotaur’s mouth, his hand snatching the eight-legged monstrosity out of the air and slamming it against the wall. The creature, obsidian black with coal-red eyes, writhed and squealed in his grip until the Inquisitor put his pistol to its head and fired.

Isalyn waited to hear the stunned silence beyond the ringing in her ears.

“Everyone, out of here,” the Inquisitor gestured to the nurses and doctors who’d come running with the gunshot. “The doctor and I need to have some words, in private.”

“Thank you, Inithrion,” Isalyn said, walking around the bodies while the blood crept towards the drain in the floor.

“You need to be more careful. Should’ve looked deeper.”

“That’s not my habit.” She glanced at the minotaur, noting the seal on his pouch. “Can you send someone for the Justiciars? They’re going to want to see this. He was one of theirs.”

Inithrion checked the seal in turn. “He was out of New Harrow.”

“We’re losing ground. If the Balance has tipped far enough down there to open a Hellgate-”

“More than that, Isa. New Harrow’s the last place the Innocent was heard gone.”

“Hells,” Isalyn swore. “Do you think it’s a trap? For Garen?”

“Likely. Can you keep him here?”

Isalyn felt for the pair of rings in her pocket and sighed. “His choice if he goes, but I can certainly try. Come on,” she lifted the Hellspawn by one of its razor-skinned arms. “Let’s get these down to the morgue.”

Isalyn asked me to start this account that morning, prior to her engagement to Garen Stormwall. It was to have been a wedding present from her to him, if there had been a wedding. If he hadn’t died.

I’m a Chronicler, by the way. An invisible, incorporeal, and in all ways inconsequential teller of tales. I normally write obituaries, the summaries of lives in three lines or less, and I confess, this is my first true assignment. Still, I thought I’d written enough to handle a simple pre-nuptial tale. I’ve never been more wrong.

Chapter 1

“Home, sweet home,” Garen said, approaching the tall iron gate of 53 Dyer’s Street with a little skip.

“Well,” Mykael grumbled in the broad twang of the Southern Reaches dialect. “Best I be-

“Hold on...sorry.” Garen was digging through the many pockets of his long leather coat. He looked up at his companion, one dusty-pale eyebrow quirked in concern. “Uh, do you have a key? I think I lost mine a ways back.”

“Yeah,” Mykael sighed, reaching into the pouch at his belt. “Just a minute.”

Dyer’s Street fronted the Serpensworn River in the Merchant District of the city of Nightcap. The wealthy and well-heeled were profiting from the mild autumn weather with an evening stroll along the river’s gold-cast banks.

Garen surreptitiously scraped mud from his coat, keenly aware of how they must look after several weeks of hard travel. Mykael’s antiquated suit of soot-blackened plate mail and the broad-headed war axe slung over his back had already occasioned a few curious, cursory glances.

“Here,” the warrior slapped something into Garen’s waiting hand.

“Right.” He took a deep breath and a swig from his pocket flask. “Home sweet-”

“Garen?”

“Mykael?” He turned the lock.

“Promised Isa I’d see you home safe from New Harrow, and that’s done. Best I be going now.”

“Come on, you can’t be serious-”

“You did what you had to— got the Balance back on an even keel. Now I do what I gotta do.”

Garen looked up from beneath his hat, grey-blond hair falling around his shoulders. “You know you’ll miss the wedding. And the cake. Hells, you’re my best man-”

“Said my mind already. Don’t push it.” The warrior turned, the plates of his armor scraping together.

“What about goodbye?” Garen called out, spreading his hands. “Look. I know you’re anxious to go...somewhere. But Isalyn will want to see you, and Raelle. Give them that much.”

For the longest time, Mykael didn’t move. “A minute,” he rumbled, finally. “But don’t think things’ll change. I’ll be on my way afore true night.”

“That’s all I ask.” Garen followed him in, slipping the key into his pocket.

The tantalizing smell of pumpkin pie wafted past the lace-shrouded windows while the front door of the tall row house hung open in the warm breeze.

Garen slipped into the kitchen where he found a woman of obvious beauty sitting at the small table, perusing the *Nightcap Tribune* by the spill of the westing sun.

“Raelle,” Garen announced with a small tap at the door, a tired smile on his face. “We’re home.”

Raelle looked up, eyes wide, her golden hair haloed in the light. “You’re late,” she said at last.

“High Summer. I know.” Garen had already turned away, kneeling to set down his pack. “Karli’s dead.” He swallowed. “Demon did her in before he got away.”

Mykael stepped into the room and said nothing.

“I know,” she said, slipping over to the back door. “We watched through the water...” She stared out into the small herb garden in the back, then turned to Mykael, pie in hand. “You must be hungry, though. Can I offer you something?”

“Only came to say my peace with you and Isalyn,” the warrior brushed his lanky black hair back from his face. “Then I’ll be on my way.”

“My darling sister is still hard at work, saving lives.” Raelle smiled with a hint of sadness. “Anyway, you shouldn’t hit the road hungry.”

Mykael nodded after a minute. “Fair enough. Pie’d be fine.”

Garen brought wrapped packages out of the pockets of his long coat. “Anything doing while we were gone?” he asked finally, his knees popping as he rose to his feet.

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” Raelle said, dishing out two servings of pie. She waited, leaning against the window-sill, as both Garen and Mykael began eating.

“Mm. This is great. When did you say Isa would be back?”

“She won’t.” Raelle stayed at the door, her eyes hard in the unforgiving lines of her face. Someone called out in the street, selling roasted chestnuts and coal. “You’re too late, Garen. She’s gone. Someplace you’ll never find her.”

Garen tried to stand, a queasy expression on his face, then fell back into his seat. His eyebrows drew together in confusion. “What...what are you babbling?”

“Damn woman,” Mykael muttered, staring in horror at the crumbs on his plate before he slowly toppled to the floor.

“Poor Garen,” Raelle turned, bringing her hand around to caress the rough stubble of his face. “You’re already dead to the world.” He couldn’t move as a numb cold seized his chest and darkness clouded his sight. “But I’ll kill you again if I have to.”

Raelle’s out the door. Garen and Mykael are out like a light. It’s time for this Chronicler to get back to Isalyn. *Where’ve you been?* she always asks. Sometimes accusing, sometimes curious. What I wouldn’t give to be able to answer.

Chapter 2

Where've you been?

You know I can't tell you, Isa.

You almost missed all the excitement.

There are rules. You know that.

Things change, old friend. No one watches, anymore. No one cares.

I care...What did I miss?

Nothing. Isalyn let the drape fall over the statue, covering the woman's cold blue features. Covering too, her failure. One of the priests let loose a mournful howl, his ghostly, ephemeral shape floating back through the bare stone wall to haunt another section of this dead temple, long since converted to a Justiciar safe house. They too had held impossible hopes. She closed her eyes, squeezing tears that refused to come.

She swallowed, licking her too-full lips in the dry, cool air of the underground. *It was to have been so simple. Steal the statue and use it. Reach into the Heavens and find what was lost.* She twisted the rubied band of promise around her finger. *Find a way to bring Garen back, without tipping us all into the Void in the process.*

Her dull black hair swirled across her back as she turned abruptly and strode from the room, a snap of her fingers and a wisp of light causing the secret door to pivot into place. Ahead, long hallways stretched in all directions. She followed her footsteps in the dust, heading towards the surface. *The gateway to the Heavens opened as planned, but...it was so empty.* Isalyn gave a silent, rueful chuckle. *I couldn't go back. Not alone. And Garen could never come with me. At least, not in any way that mattered. A pyrrhic victory, they call it.*

You realize there are those who would kill, who have killed, and who continue to kill for what you turn your back upon? Word of the statue's existence has spread. The Fallen are here. It has already started.

It never ended. Let them dig their own graves fighting over scraps. I know my work. Odds are they'll never find it. She turned into a small bedroom, finished the cold remains of her tea, and left the mug in the sink. *As for the city...it's survived worse.* Returning to her room she fished her travel bag from the closet and began throwing clothes from the dresser onto the bed.

Isa, if it didn't work...do you want me to stop? I can end the chronicle. Have it ready by morning.

No. Someone needs to watch what happens next, and since there's only you...

Headed home? Inquisition's already been through there, so you should be safe.

Later. I'm meeting Raelle around midnight and we'll head south in the morning. She's been saying for years she wants to go someplace warm. Until then...I need a stiff drink. Isalyn looked up, catching sight of herself in the mirror above her dresser. She lit a candle with a thought and traced the deep circles under her eyes with one shaking finger. The candlelight deepened the hollows in her cheeks, the creases in her high forehead. *Garen wouldn't recognize me.*

You haven't been taking care of yourself.

A strong jaw, he called it, and a crooked prow of a nose. And beautiful all the same.

Your fiancé was somewhat lacking in tact.

Isalyn's eyes shifted from blue to hazel-green. *Only the truth.* She angled her reflection in the light, *I really should eat more,* then turned away and thrust her belongings into her bag. Pausing in the grand entryway, she lingered over the motley island of couches and tables where

she and Garen had spent so much time. Lingered too over the bookshelves, and their stories of happily ever after.

Moving carefully over the buckets on the floor, that permanent stop-gap against the leaking roof, she stepped outside. A bit of spit polished up the Justiciar's brass plaque next to the door as she locked it and had the gargoyle swallow the key. Then, shivering a little in the chill of twilight, she slipped into the streets of Nightcap's Temple District. Ending up between a minotaur and a medusa, doubtless on their way to an evening's work in the Labyrinth, Isalyn pulled the chatter of the crowd around her like a cloak.

I will miss this place.

Isa's in a bar, pretending to get drunk, so I hasten back to Dyer's Street. Garen and Mykael remain as I'd left them, with one notable exception.

Chapter 3

The island of lamplight on the kitchen table was painfully small, barely serving to illuminate the slight, grey-clad figure perched nearby, his gangly legs drawn up to his chest like some vaguely animate gargoyle.

“Not the homecoming you had hoped for,” the figure said with quiet culture. The light glanced off his sharpened features, pooling in the hollows of his cheeks before shimmering down his flow of ashen hair. The wind stormed past the windows, while the cuckoo clock tick-tick-ticked.

Garen’s eyelashes fluttered, and he sat up, holding his head in his hands. “Excuse me?” he croaked, checking for his twin flintlock pistols and the slender sword hidden beneath his coat. “Who are you, and what are you doing here?”

The figure tilted his head, cat-like, revealing the dagger-shaped ears of a sylvan. “How rude of me not to introduce myself.” In the careful, clipped accents of the highly educated, it was almost a question. He glanced down, watching the shadow of a hapless moth dance over the print of the *Tribune*’s front page. His hand came down, leaving a brown smear across the paper. “Loric.”

Mykael groaned from the darkness. “Hells and damnation. ‘S a low thing, to poison a man.”

“It could have been worse.” Garen coughed. “Never thought being late was grounds for a poisoning.”

There was the scrape of metal on metal in the darkness by the window. “Raelle never did like us.”

Garen shook his head. “She said something before I passed out...Hells. I can’t remember.”

Silence and the *tick-tick-tick* of passing time were Mykael’s response. The sylvan had not moved a muscle.

“Alright *Loric*,” Garen pulled himself onto a chair and leaned his elbows on the table. He glanced at the clock and checked it against his watch, a gift from Isalyn. *Wear this next to your heart*, she’d said. *It’s selurium. It won’t break.* Opposite the watch-face she’d been caught at a moment of inattention, her expression of wry amusement tempered by some deeper sadness and cast forever into this cool, silver-blue metal.

He came back to himself. Almost 10 o’clock. Assuming it was the same day, they’d been out for over four hours. “What are you doing here?”

Again the predatory tilt of the head. “I am here for the wedding.”

“Too late, sylvan.” Mykael grunted. The flare of a match caught the warrior leaning against the stove before he faded into the dime-sized ember of a lit cigar.

“Though your deaths did complicate matters, I came in your footsteps. When did the ceremony take place?”

“We’re,” Garen pinched himself, suddenly unsure, “...not dead. Are we?”

The Sylvan blinked lazily, momentarily eclipsing his ash grey eyes. “News of your passing spread through this region over a month ago.” He opened the *Tribune*, revealing a small pile of clippings from papers past. His long fingernails delicately separated the pages, choosing one and passing it to Garen.

The tip of the cigar brightened. “Solve a lot of problems, being dead.” There was a loud clank. “But seeing as how I can’t pass through walls and all...”

Garen paled visibly as he angled the article in the light, and began reading. "*Garen Stormwall, 47, and Mykael Deleeds, 32. Members of the venerable order of the Justiciar. Ever striving to hold the Balance, to keep the world from both Hells and the Void. They were killed returning from New Harrow by the dragon of Ashwood-*"

"Hold on there," Mykael spat, and stepped into the light to peer over Garen's shoulder. "Weren't no dragon."

"-five days ago. They will be missed." Garen looked up, his eyes haunted. "It says it was submitted by Doctor Isalyn Illistari."

A chair scraped across the floor as Mykael sat. "Hey," he cuffed Garen in the shoulder. "So she made a mistake...I mean, that ain't even three whole sentences."

"The grief is to be found between the lines," Loric commented softly, picking an invisible piece of lint from his lapel.

"Shut up, sylvan. Who asked you to be here, anyhow?"

"Loric's right," Garen rubbed his forehead with the heel of one hand. "No one else would care enough to write even that much."

The Sylvan paused as the cuckoo sprang from his hutch, sounding the hour. *Cuckoo. Cuckoo.* "I am an old friend of Isalyn's." He blinked again, slowly, and pulled a small white envelope from his breast pocket. "She sent this at the end of summer, anticipating your return today."

Garen barely glanced at the wedding invitation, looking instead to the enigmatic figure perched on the chair across the table. "Now I like mysteries as much as the next man, as long as I know the answer. I'll give you a break, since you were clearly unaware of that little aspect of my personality, and give you until the count of three to start making sense."

"Ah." It was almost a sigh. "I was not clear. Your sword renders scrying...unreliable."

"It was a set-up," Garen said flatly. "Someone faked our deaths?"

"If the world believes your death, then who is to say it is not truth?"

"Hells." Mykael stood and walked around the room.

Garen mirrored the Sylvan's stillness. "Were you responsible?"

"No. Why-"

"Then who?" Mykael growled. "Who pulled this stunt?"

Loric's ash-grey eyes sifted in the light. "The Innocent."

"There now, was it that hard to speak straight?" Garen's mouth twitched, and he looked down, twisting the rubied ring of promise on and off his finger before taking another swig from his flask. Mykael slammed his fist into the stove, swearing a blue streak. "What else do you know?" He fixed the Sylvan with eyes the color of new ice.

Loric's mouth worked silently, and with an uncertain finger he brushed a strand of hair from his eyes. "There is no Hellgate. I am no demon."

"He's here, isn't he. In Nightcap?" Mykael turned a chair around and straddled it as he sat down. "Blast, sylvan, spill the beans."

"I...I just wanted to see the wedding."

Garen slammed his hands onto the table and stood, pacing. "Don't you understand? There is *no* wedding! Isalyn's gone. We were dead and she left. What more do you want?"

The Sylvan considered the question, then plucked another newspaper clipping from the pile and passed it across the table. "We can find her." It was, again, almost a question.

"What's it this time?"

Garen scanned the page. "Consequences. An Inquisition bulletin. Something, likely an

artifact, was stolen from the Museum four days ago.” His voice took on an edge of disbelief. “Isalyn, of all people, is the prime suspect. She and Raelle are wanted for questioning.” He passed the article to Mykael and took the next clipping from Loric’s fingers.

“Damnation. How’d they get it in their heads that Isa was...What’s next?”

“More demons,” Garen went from disbelief to near hysteria. “Several, so far. Zombies, the results of their feeding, have been sighted near the Docks.”

“Town’s gone to the Hells awful quick while we were gone.”

“Everything’s falling apart, all over again.” He looked to the Sylvan. “Anything else?”

“No.” Loric closed the paper, and the lamp flickered in the sudden breeze, sending shadows dancing across the wall. “Only that the demons appeared after the theft at the Museum.”

“Got to be a connection there.” Mykael posited. “Those artifacts are powerful stuff.”

“Probably. Loric, you-. How did you get in here? Didn’t I lock the gate?”

“I followed in your footsteps.” He smiled a secret little smile and put his hands out over the table. Showing them empty, he closed his fists. “Choose.”

Garen hesitated, drawn to the glimmer of lamplight over the worsted wool of Loric’s cuff, then tapped the left hand. The Sylvan opened his palm. Nothing.

“Choose again.”

“This is ridiculous,” Mykael scowled. “We don’t got time-”

“Hush.” Garen’s admonition hung like an accusation in the still, silent air of the room. “I’m good at these games. Besides, I think...I want to say we have all the time in the world.”

“A choice without consequences. My wedding gift. Choose,” Loric insisted, the ashes of his eyes stirring in an unseen wind, hinting at the long-banked fires beneath. His smile widened as Garen chose the left hand once more. Uncurling his fingers, he revealed a bright blue spark hovering over his palm. The ticking of the clock was suddenly present once more. In the distance something howled. Maybe a werewolf. Maybe the wind.

“So you can track?”

The Sylvan blinked rapidly several times. “Of course.”

“Fine. Get us on Raelle’s trail. We need some questions answered.”

“Raelle,” Loric savored the name on his lips, “is headed into the Carnival.” He unfolded his legs and stood, walking to the kitchen door. “There is something you should see, first. Beneath the house. It may tip the scales...”

Garen knelt and gathered the gifts he’d brought for Isalyn. They’d been opened and scattered about the floor. A vial of perfume, jasmine and star-anise. She didn’t wear the stuff, but the bottle was pretty. A miniature of the New Harrow Opera. A sachet of smoked black tea. The box of chocolates he passed to Mykael; Raelle had left only the caramels. He opened his pack and dumped its contents on the floor, slipping things into his pockets. Extra gunpowder and balls. A canteen. Another flask.

“You don’t want the rest?” Mykael’s shadow crossed over the light as he popped the remaining candies into his mouth.

“I thought you were leaving,” Garen grunted, rummaging through the pile.

“Can’t go home without saying goodbye,” Mykael scooped up a sack of granola and somehow stuffed it into his too small pouch.

“I appreciate it.” Garen accepted Mykael’s hand and pulled himself to his feet.

“Not a favor to you.”

Garen dusted himself off and tried to ignore the comment. “I figure it like this. We only have to solve the crime, stop the demons, and save the girl all without sending the world over the edge in the process. Nevermind being led by a sylvan tracker who’s a few marbles short of a full set.” He forced a chuckle. “Any thoughts?”

“Hit the demons hard, and Raelle if we catch’er. Like as if they’ve not found her yet, Isa’s got herself holed up somewhere nice and tight. More’n likely she’ll come out once we’re on the case.”

Garen looked around the small kitchen, checking the lock on the back door, the embers in the stove, and taking the lamp in hand. Always important to make sure the place would hold up until their return. “I agree. But first, let’s see what the sylvan’s got to show us.”