

Seven They Were

By James P. Davis



Seven They Were

*"Between the dark and the daylight,
When the night is beginning to lower,
Comes a pause in the day's occupations,
That is known as the Children's Hour.*

*I hear in the chamber above me
The patter of little feet,
The sound of a door that is opened,
And voices soft and sweet."*

*--from "The Children's Hour"
by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
(1807-1882)*

13th of Tarsakh, -947 DR

Dun Tharos

A flickering crimson light, the color of fiery blood filled the lower halls of Dun Tharos. Shadows, both mundane and many much less than ordinary, crawled across the stone of a grand meeting hall just outside the war-room of Thargaun Crell, ruler of Narfell and architect of the war that would soon unite all the Nar kingdoms under a single banner. As the door to the war-room opened, Serevan Crell, youngest of Thargaun's heirs, scowled and looked up from the large tome upon his lap to witness the triumphant entrance of his eldest brother, Derevan.

Kulthane, second in succession to the throne, followed dutifully in Derevan's footsteps. As the moon traces a path to reflect the light of the sun, so did Kulthane hope to shine in the light of his elder brother's glory. Mere sight of the pair sickened Serevan and he feigned interest in his reading, though he suspected he could not escape the brutish outburst to come as his brothers closed the war-room door and smiled cruelly as if conspirators sharing the secret of a delightful murder. It had been rumored that Thargaun would bestow upon Prince Derevan the honor of conquering Shandaular, a task Serevan suspected could be beyond his older brother's skills. They reclined in the softly cushioned chairs of the grand hall, close to the snapping crackle of the hall's fireplace.

"Shandaular will fall," Prince Derevan mused, staring off and likely envisioning himself upon the smoking battlements of the last remaining city to resist Thargaun's nearly complete empire, "And I shall have their wizard-king roasted on a spit for my victory feast."

"Roasted? Please reconsider, dear brother," Kulthane replied, a mocking smirk on his lips, "A wizard shall make a poor beast for the feast, better a stew or soup."

"Provided his body can be picked out from the ashes, of course," the older brother added with a grin and they both laughed, their booming voices causing Serevan's stomach to turn. He looked up from his reading and fixed them both with a withering stare.

"And what of Jastaath?" their youngest sibling asked, breaking into the monotonous rhythm of their laughter.

Prince Derevan appeared both confused and amused by the question.

"Jastaath has been defeated little brother," he replied with a raised eyebrow and a half-grin, "I do not think I shall concern myself with what is past—"

"Ah, yes," Serevan interrupted with a strained and knowing smile as he stood, collecting the large, red leather-bound tome of his studies and made to leave his brothers to their talk of war, "Defeated . . . and bearing no ill-will toward the nearness of your invading army at all, I'm sure they're beating swords and spears into farm-tools as we speak."

"No doubt you have the secret to victory hidden away little brother," Derevan said, leaning forward and clasping his large hands before him, "Perhaps in your nursery? The one you think none of us knows about?"

Kulthane barely stifled a laugh, seeming eager to hear Serevan's response to the jibe. A shadow, larger than the others and bearing ghostly white eyes crossed through the back of the room, beckoning to the Thargaun's youngest before disappearing deeper into the bowels of Dun Tharos.

Serevan Crell smiled mysteriously, nodding to his brothers as he followed the shadow demon into the crimson dark, his voice echoing long after he'd been lost to view.

"Perhaps...perhaps."

Kainillian the Fair of Jastaath

Born to a commoner, a woman who died during child birth, Kainillian was the only child of Gaen Sarchus, High Priest-King of Jastaath. Raised on the temple grounds within the fortress of Jastaath, Kainillian showed little aptitude for the priesthood, much to the disappointment of his father, but seemed nonetheless within the favor of the demon prince Graz'zt. With bright blond hair that darkened as he aged and eyes of startling blue that changed over time to a brilliant green, he was a child adored, able to win the favor of his elders as dangerously as he wielded the daggers he trained with in lieu of priestly studies. At the age of ten he could get away with most anything he wanted, a maddening ability to his father, but one that proved a blessing in the dotting eye of their demon prince . . . until the rise of Narfell. Jastaath resisted Nentyarch Thargaun's armies for months, their mountain proving a formidable location to withstand the constant siege, but in the year of -948 DR, sensing annihilation in the face of Thargaun's ambition, Gaen surrendered.

Embittered by defeat, the Priest-King secretly authorized insurgents and assassins to undermine the rule of the Nentyarch and began to converse by messenger with the Mage-King Arkaius of Shandaular, still withstanding the first wave of emissaries from Dun Tharos. Caught up as he was in his secret war, Gaen did not guard well enough the safety of his blessed son.

Kainillian, brave, misguided, and still innocent as only a child could be, was drawn away from the fortress, guided by the sweet promises of the shadow-demon Zuraphael. The boy was convinced he could help in the fight, make his father proud, but the shadow demon took Kainillian away, to the dungeons of Dun Tharos. Hearing the news, Gaen was enraged, reading over a missive sent anonymously that demanded his compliance in return for his son's life. He would leave unharmed any warrior serving under Thargaun's youngest son and cease all contact with Shandaular.

Reluctantly the Priest-King agreed, leaving his son unknowingly to the whims of the Nar wizard Goorgian and the ambition of Serevan Crell.

28th of Kythorn, -947 DR

Dun Tharos

Serevan was soothed by the tense quiet within the fortress, only the lasting memory of Thargaun's rage still echoing among the halls, shimmering in every subservient shadow. Derevan had returned from Shandaular in defeat, his initial failure to breach the walls emboldening the disgruntled priest-kings of Jastaath who had, allegedly, sent assassins to remove several of Derevan's trusted officers.

Dealing with insurgents to the east, Thargaun then chose Kulthane to represent his standard at the walls of Shandaular. Serevan had smiled at the worried expression on Kulthane's face and the awkward manner in which he wore armor that would defend him against not tutors who feared the Nentyarch's son, but soldiers trained to kill and wizards slinging spells of fire. Making his way deeper into the fortress, Serevan entered the dwelling of one of his own tutors, also his most powerful accomplice, Goorgian Skallis. Bent double over a wide table of maps and ancient texts, a smell of death and jasmine on the air, Goorgian ignored the young prince's entrance and stabbed a sharp finger at the central map.

"Here, at the barrow-fields," he growled, a mad power in his eyes, "Bring me two souls that dance upon the ancient graves unharmed."

Serevan studied the map, narrowing his eyes at the rural location.

"I don't understand," he muttered, "There is nothing there, what do we gain...?"

"Blood," Goorgian fixed him with a dark stare, "We'll need their blood."

Suress and Ylldar Nabelh

In the western wilds of Narfell, several small villages of farmers and tradesmen lived in the shadow of Thargaun's war. They raised crops that were taken to serve the hunger of the Nentyarch's troops and gave up their homes to cruel officers. One such village was Barlgrath where, despite all the ravages of a long war, the people lived with a sense of hope.

Raised on a small farm, Suress and Ylldar Nabelh were seemingly ordinary children. Suress was the older of the two and she was known to be a force to be reckoned with. She watched over her younger brother with a careful eye and knew how to get her way, clever enough to argue a point to the point of exhaustion. Most knew that when Suress put her foot down, there was no budging it—and there were few who would have tried at all, seeing she and Ylldar as signs of things to come.

One night, when the siblings were younger, they went missing. Fearful, their parents organized a search party and scoured the lands, finding their children in the last place they might have expected, a place they even loathed to approach called the barrow-fields. Ancient graves surrounded by rumor and myth, all who disturbed the barrows were set upon by powerful spirits, said to be servants of a god-born champion from days long before the Nar settled in the region. However, Suress and Ylldar played among the barrows as if greeted by the spirits, speaking to unheard voices and entertained by ephemeral lights, unharmed. Inspired by what they saw as a sign to resist the predations of Narfell, the citizens of Barlgrath gave refuge to insurgents, hid food from the Nentyarch's armies, and waited patiently for the day when an ancient bloodline would forge the destinies of two children who could topple the cruel rulership of Dun Tharos . . .

Though Serevan loathed wasting his time abducting commoner children, he trusted to Goorgian's magic and eventually found their disappearance to be a strategic boon. With the chosen children missing the citizens of Barlgrath turned on the insurgents and spies in their midst, calling them 'cursed' and 'bad omens', and readily giving them over to Serevan's guards.

Agents from Jastaath, Serevan took their leaders aside and offered them their lives and freedom in exchange for the completion of a simple task that required a certain distance from himself, after which they might be free to bother his tiresome father all they wanted. Hesitantly, they agreed, and with a compelling spell of brutal enchantment, Serevan made sure they would not fail him.

The siblings—and the ancient blood in their veins—in tow, Serevan returned to Dun Tharos and the deep hall of Goorgian.

17th of Eleasis, -947 DR

Dun Tharos

"My brother is dying," Serevan mused, imagining the pale, frightened face of Kulthane and the jagged, infected wound through his older brother's gut, then added, "Then again, he was always dying in Derevan's shadow, I suppose the grave shall suit him better than armor." "Indeed," Goorgian croaked absently, a chemical smell rising in the dark steam from his work table, then he shouted "Zuraphael!"

Peeling itself from the darkness of a deep corner the shadow demon appeared, in its hands a long length of dull, black chain, stained by centuries of use. Ripped from the walls of a prison in the Abyss, the chains were originally crafted to bind celestials or others that had fallen into the disfavor of Orcus, those to whom a swift death would have been a blessing the demon prince would never allow. As they clinked heavily upon the table, Goorgian prepared a mixture of fresh blood, arcane acids, and inks of strange and exotic origins with which he would inscribe his genius upon the links.

Serevan turned away from the log process, sighing as he considered the long wait for his remaining brothers to fail at Shandaular's walls, none of them with any respect for magic beyond the demons bound into their swords and bulky armor.

"Idiots," he whispered under his breath and turned to the shadowed cages at the back of Goorgian's dwelling, his cruel eyes resting upon the young twins at the far end of the room, a boy and a girl, and in their pitiful eyes he saw armies charging to the thunderous rhythm of a thousand hooves. . . .

Culvan and Isla Murthag

Even during the hard time of war, Culvan and Isla were privileged children, born to a powerful doting father and worrying mother. The brother and sister, twins, were the youngest of Lord Tadryn's many children, his courtship with their mother brief, but lasting as she proved to be an ambitious woman who had no intention of disappearing into Vas Murthag's stonework as his other wives had done before her. She kept his ear during and after the battles with Thargaun's armies, urging him to victory in the beginning and begging him to cease his attempts to undermine Narfell in the months after his defeat. She feared for

her children and her station and had seen what happened to those who resisted the rising empire with too much vigor.

The twins had few friends in the castle walls, kept from their half-siblings by their protective mother, but allowed much freedom within her watchful eye. Their favorite activity was to go on afternoon rides just outside the fortress, their mounts chosen for them especially from the horses that were famous in the region. Lord Tadryn's steeds were of the finest stock, bred for incredible speed, endurance, and loyalty to well-trained riders. Though a valuable resource, Thargaun's sons had either ignored or forgotten Tadryn's herds as they swiftly marched on Shandaular and Tadryn had used that ignorance to send messages to Shandaular from behind the armies, assisting Arkaius in defeating one proud son after another until Thargaun himself would rouse enough courage to attack the city himself. Serevan did not wait for that day to come.

Despite the famed qualities of Vas Murthag's horses, they were mere animals and highly susceptible to even minor magic. The twins, enjoying their afternoon ride, were whisked away by their enchanted mounts. Before their worried mother could pull herself from the saddle of a horse that had died on the spot, before she could even begin to raise an alarm, the twins were gone.

Within the hour the grief-stricken and enraged parents were approached by the shadow demon Zuraphael. Unwilling to gamble their children's lives on prized horses or the hope of a tide-turning victory at Shandaular, the parents agreed to the terms delivered by the shadow demon.

Lord Tadryn's last missive to Arkaius was burned only hours after the ink had dried, never to be delivered.

12th of Uktar, -947 DR

Dun Tharos

Autumn passed swiftly over Narfell, leaving the first snows of winter to lay the only siege in the fields outside Shandaular's walls. Scavengers and abandoned blades the only army to look upon the shivering faces of soldiers in service to Arkaius. Serevan's thoughts drifted to imagining the empty field as he stood, unflinching in the gaze of his father, waiting for the judgment that would see him standing on the field of battle within a matter of a few tendays. Having trained and studied for years for this moment, to outshine his savage brothers, fools fathered before him, he studied the eyes of his father, a gaze that had rarely rested upon the youngest son of Dun Tharos.

All he could see was the glimmer of borrowed power, a man caught up in the ambition of the demon prince Orcus and little of the warrior Serevan had heard of when younger.

That Thargaun, the younger one, would never have pulled the empire together.

His father sighed and nodded, seeming surprised by Serevan's resourcefulness, but he would only promise a fraction of the forces granted to his brothers. Taking him by the shoulders, the Nentyarch leaned close.

"Ash, little one," he said, his voice tired, but full of hate, "Bring Shandaular to ashes, deliver its portal to me, and perhaps when this empire is complete...you will have no brothers. Agreed?"

Serevan did, graciously, and turned away from the war-room, from the gaze of a man lost in the dreams of a demon. The lack of his father's full army was annoying, but meant little, Serevan began making preparations to summon his own army.

Josaht Sydiraas

Strong, hardy, and free, the Sydiraas tribe of Narfell's northern plain watched the slow rise of the empire with trepidation. Roads to Jastaath bore only military representatives and the occasional prisoner, though few who crossed the empire lived to see prison walls at all. Merchant caravans out of the mountain, sometimes raided by the nomadic warriors, were now heavily guarded by the Nentyarch's soldiers and demon-priests. The life of the tribe seemed at a crossroads, a tense situation that forged young Josaht into a fierce young man. Nephew to the chieftain, Josaht hunted with all the skill and deadliness of a young warrior twice his age, leading other children on hunts that as time wore on earned more than amused laughter from their elders. Many considered the boy to be the future of the Sydiraas, expecting him to lead the tribe away from the Nentyarch's ambition and honor the blood of their ancestors.

Upon the lonely hunt that would pave Josaht's path into manhood, a blood-ritual that would see him return to the tribe in the skin of a slain winter-wolf, he was attacked near the western border of Jastaath. Insurgents from Barlgrath, bound by Serevan's magic to finish the deed they'd begun, the enchanted men fought to take the boy alive. Unprepared for such a skilled warrior in one so young, one among them was slain before the cut of a poisoned blade rendered Josaht unconscious.

Ready for the fatal outcome, the insurgents were relieved they'd not been forced to execute one of their own and dressed the body in the uniform of a Shandaularen soldier and left the bloody scene to be easily found by the Sydiraas.

In due time Serevan met with the hostile tribe, feigning an interest in tracking down a company of spies from Shandaular. He quickly earned the enraged tribe's trust and alliance against a common enemy, promising to lead them in vengeance upon the city.

His army complete and mounted on fine steeds, free of attacks by the insurgents that had hindered his brother's efforts, Serevan returned to Dun Tharos, smiling as he read again a quickly scrawled message received several days prior, a letter stamped with the arch and shield of Shandaular.

20th of Hammer, -947 DR

Dun Tharos

Silence marked the slow ride of Serevan through the gates of Dun Tharos, for none expected victory to be delivered by the young, pale son of Thargaun, not half the warrior his savage brothers were. Most had expected the Nentyarch himself to ride out against the impertinent mage-king Arkaius, but Serevan knew the power-hungry gaze of his father, saw the fear that true power could bring to those who'd won all they'd ever fought for—the thought of losing it all could be maddening. However, as he passed through those curious to view his procession, Serevan noted that few looked upon him for long, making warding signs in the air and avoiding his gaze.

Fear, he thought with a smile, The kind of superstitious fear that no sword-arm in all the world could inspire.

In his wake a large contingent of soldiers marched, but of more importance were the priests and wizards, many more than his brothers had summoned, all drawn by the word and power of Goorgian to fight at Serevan's side. He regretted that the reclusive wizard would not join the battle. Goorgian had of late become consumed by his own search for power and half-maddened by the recent occurrence of portentous dreams, his abandoned, empty study stained by an arcane sigil for the word 'twilight' scrawled messily upon the wall in blood. Despite Goorgian's absence, the mad-wizard's handiwork rode quietly upon a well-guarded cart in the middle of the formation.

An ornate chest, decorated with profane images on glossy, black stone, sat covered by the standard of Narfell, the bare black tree on a red field. The chest was far larger inside than it was without, hiding innocent hands bound in cursed chains, shadowing tear-filled eyes glazed over with a haze of magic. None but he would ever view the contents of the chest when opened, none would ever know their fate until long after it was too late and perhaps not even then.

The box bore the doom of Shandaular and the key to Arkaius's fortress: the Shield.

The Seventh Child

Nameless, the identity and purpose of the youngest of Serevan's child prisoners was held only in quiet rumor and speculation by those few who knew she even existed. Some suggested the girl might have been an illegitimate sister of Serevan, others wondered if the girl might have been the daughter of King Arkaius himself, though the possibility painted Arkaius as far crueler than they'd been told of Shandaular's king. It was clear she was separate from the others, some strange component demanded by the workings of the mad wizard Goorgian.

Serevan allowed the whispered rumors to persist. Those select few privy to his secrets never spoke of the girl at all nor her purpose, much less her true name. They kept their eyes upon a very different prize than mere victory over King Arkaius.

Nonetheless, of all the seven children, she was Serevan's most favored, his victory in quiet sobs, endless tears, and perfect innocence. She would be returned to Shandaular—as promised—for services rendered.

*"I have you fast in my fortress,
And will not let you depart,
But put you down into the dungeon
In the round-tower of my heart.*

*And there will I keep you forever,
Yes, forever and a day,
Till the walls shall crumble to ruin,
And moulder in dust away!"*

*--from "The Children's Hour"
by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
(1807-1882)*