

DEATH IN THE WALLED WARREN



SCARRED
LANDS

DEATH IN THE WALLED WARREN



SCARRED
LANDS

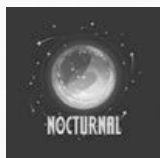
Story: Richard Lee Byers

Editing: Scott Holden and Stewart Wieck

Creative Director: Richard Thomas

Art Direction and Design: Mike Chaney

Cover: Steve Ellis



Death in the Walled Warren is © 2016 Onyx Path and Nocturnal Media, LLC. All rights reserved. Reference to other copyrighted material in no way constitutes a challenge to the respective copyright holders of that material. Scarred Lands, Onyx Path, Nocturnal Media, and their associated logos are trademarks of Onyx Path and Nocturnal Media.

www.theonyxpath.com

www.nocturnal-media.com

Death in the Walled Warren

Richard Lee Byers

Built in the midst of the Sorporatra Swamp, the Walled Warren was a city possessed of both streets and canals. As a rule, Cuinte preferred the latter. The streets were narrow and often crowded, and even when they weren't, slitherin — with their pointed ears, chisel-toothed snouts, and red, beady eyes; their long, thin tails, and rank-smelling, bristly fur that scratched what it brushed — were apt to jostle by too close for comfort's sake. They seemingly lacked the human instinct to keep a decent distance between oneself and a stranger.

This morning, though, riding in the gondola was as unpleasant as walking. Ratfolk to either side of the canal glowered as the gondolier rowed the boat along. Occasionally someone shouted, "Plague bearers!"

Eventually, a clod of mud struck the side of the boat. Some of the splatter landed on Cuinte's sleeve.

That was too much. Turning his head, he spotted the offending slitherin with its clawed hand still extended in completion of the throw. He snarled the first word of an incantation and made the initial pass of the arcane gestures likewise necessary to cast the spell.

Pale and long-fingered, delicate-looking but strong and callused, his companion's hand seized his wrist. "Don't," Vladawen said.

Cuinte turned back around. The famous Titanslayer was a gray-eyed elf, slenderer than nearly any adult human male. Superficially, his face was as youthful as that of his wizard companion, but his expression conveyed a wry composure acquired over the course of what had already been a long, eventful life.

"I wasn't going to hurt it badly," Cuinte said, "but it needs to learn respect. We're envoys from the throne of Durrover!"

"Oh, *now* you care about the mission. In that case, remember it depends on the good will of Epistrategos Frenlok *and* his people. And if that's not enough to deter you, consider this: More onlookers could start flinging things, and those things could be more injurious than mud."

In his private thoughts, Cuinte grudgingly conceded that his companion's argument made a certain amount of sense. In any case, he was Vladawen's subordinate and supposed to follow orders.

He had his parents to thank for that. Overreacting to a little innocent carousing and a few trifling gambling debts, they'd decided he was "wasting his education" and needed to "grow up." Sadly, his father had the ear of High King Jeddrad himself, and he prevailed on the monarch to appoint his supposedly dissolute son to a mission that would "teach him responsibility," an appointment Cuinte had to accept on pain of disinheritance.

The gondolier guided his craft up beside a quay where two other ratfolk armed with cudgels guarded the entrance to a low building made of timber. They wore leather cones over their snouts, further elongating their natural physiognomies, with smoke fuming up through vents from whatever was smoldering at the pointed ends. The effect might have been comical if Cuinte hadn't realized the masks were intended to protect the wearers from disease.

The guards apparently didn't have unlimited faith in the measure. They tensed as Cuinte and Vladawen approached.

The elf likely noticed, but if so, he pretended he didn't. "May we enter?" he asked. "I understand there's a quarantine, but we have the epistrategos's permission."

The guards hesitated, and then the one on the right squealed, "Go." After the human and elf had passed on by, he chittered to his companion, "What harm will it do? They can't kill them twice."

The hostelry had a dozen doorways opening off the common room in what seemed, to human eyes, a chaotic, asymmetrical arrangement. On Vladawen and Cuinte's previous visits, the place had been teeming with slitherin, but now it was empty. The innkeepers and guests had either fled or been ordered to evacuate.

"When did Frenlok give us permission?" Cuinte asked.

"When we first arrived," Vladawen answered. "He encouraged us to avail ourselves of the hospitality of the town. I trust that invitation covers the current situation."

Cuinte's lips quirked into a momentary smile. This was the first time he'd caught the supposedly virtuous elf bending the truth in the service of expedience. Perhaps they weren't *entirely* different after all.

The two envoys made their way to the communal room where a band of ratfolk determined to emigrate to Durrover had been preparing for the grand departure. Corpses of would-be travelers lay in their bunks, and the bundles they'd intended to take with them cluttered the floor.

Vladawen prowled around peering at the bodies and their surroundings. After a time, he pointed to one of the lifeless forms, whose contorted limbs, curled fingers, and drawn mouth bespoke agony. "She has blood on her blanket. Others do, too."

"Sick people sometimes cough up blood," Cuinte said.

"True." The elf threw back the body's blanket and then uncovered two of the other corpses. "What's more, the dead don't have any wounds, which would seem to support your explanation. But let's take a closer look at this fellow." He pointed to a ratman who'd died on the plank floor instead of in bed. Blood speckled the boards around him.

To Cuinte's eyes, the corpse's location was the only thing distinguishing it from the others. "It— *he* got up out of his bunk to go for help. But his strength failed after a couple steps."

"Possibly." Vladawen dropped to his knees to examine the corpse, then reached under a bunk and retrieved a dagger. "Or he was fighting for his life and lost."

"Or," Cuinte said, "a mislaid knife has nothing to do with anything. You said it yourself: no wounds. No wounds, no murderers."

Vladawen stood up. "Two of the groups that agreed to go south with us drop dead in as many days. People Durrover needs as builders, miners, and tunnel fighters in the war against Calastia. It's no coincidence."

"If King Virduk has agents in the Walled Warren," Cuinte replied, "why don't they just kill us?"

"For one thing," the Titanslayer said, "we're harder to get to in the palace apartments Frenlok gave us. For another, murder us, and Jeddrad simply sends new emissaries who will then be watching out for trouble. Kill any slitherin who takes us up on our offer, and you discredit the whole notion of going to Durrover and exposing oneself to its deadly diseases."

"That's . . . a way of looking at it, I suppose. Still, you're only guessing."

"Fair enough. We need more information, and I may know how to get it. Once upon a time, I was a healer, and it wasn't all prayers and blessings. I had to know about physick for those occasions when there were more wounded or sick than there was magic to aid them." Vladawen moved to a corpse on a bunk, gripped its shoulder to hold it steady, and poised the newly found knife above its chest.

"If there is a disease," Cuinte said, "you're apt to catch it yourself."

"I'm as likely to contract a slitherin disease as they are to catch something from a human or elf carrier. Meaning, it isn't likely. Keep watch at the doorway. It's unfortunate enough the locals think we're giving them the plague. I'd rather they not walk in on me mutilating one of their dead."

Cuinte was happy to keep his gaze directed out into the hall. The soft, rhythmic sound as the dagger sawed through flesh, the grating when it scraped bone, and Vladawen's grunts of effort when he strained to snap away ribs were unpleasant enough. So was the fecal smell when he opened the corpse's guts.

Finally, the elf said, "Interesting. It's difficult to be certain working under these conditions, but the body has very little blood left inside it."

"They spat up their blood. We saw that already."

"No. There isn't nearly enough on the bedding and floor to account for all that's missing."

"All right. What does that tell you?"

"Not enough. It buttresses my opinion that these poor souls were murdered, but doesn't reveal the method or how the killers managed to enter and exit a crowded building undetected. Thus, it's my turn to guard the doorway and yours to investigate. Draw one of the departed spirits back into its body and question it."

Startled, Cuinte turned and caught a sickening glimpse of the corpse Vladawen had cut open before shifting his gaze away. "Me? You're the high priest." It was an integral part of the Titanslayer's legend.

Vladawen smiled a crooked smile. "Not anymore. I've seen too much of divinity and seen it up close. I still respect it, but I can no longer muster the adoration required to partake of its power. That leaves us with necromancy."

"But I'm not a necromancer."

"You weren't supposed to be, but you were curious, browsed grimoires students of your level weren't allowed to read, and experimented with a ritual or two. It's why the Phylacteric Vault expelled you and you had to complete your studies elsewhere."

"How do you know that?"

"Did you think that when the High King proposed you for my aide, I didn't check to see who I'd be getting?"

"Yet you took me anyway."

"I accepted you partly *because* of your peccadilloes. Occasionally a person has to walk a dark path to reach an important destination. I hoped that if it came to it, you'd be willing to walk one with me."

"How important is this particular 'destination'?"

"You don't want to return to your parents a failure, or, I assume, see your homeland conquered for want of the specialists who could help to keep it free. So I would think, from your perspective, reasonably important."

"What about yours?"

"I take exception to a vainglorious old man, monarch or no, bringing needless strife into a world still recovering from the Divine War. That's why my wife and I offered Durrover our services."

"Well . . . all right. If you know about me, you know this didn't go well the last time. That's why the teachers caught me. But I'll try."

Cuinte selected another one of the ratfolk than the one Vladawen had dissected. If this one came back, at least it wouldn't do so with its insides falling out. Standing over it, he sought to recall the ritual from the book he'd "borrowed" without permission. When he had it as clear as it was likely to get, he took a long, steadying breath, held his hand above the corpse on the bunk, and recited.

The room grew darker, and the shadows under the bunks and in the far corners shifted and flowed when a person wasn't looking at them squarely. A chill suffused the air, and voices whispered. Or perhaps they did. Whenever Cuinte stopped speaking to take a breath, there was only silence.

Anyone unversed in the arcane arts would surely have found all this eeriness disquieting. Cuinte told himself it simply meant the spell was working. He would have felt more confident if his magic hadn't stirred similar manifestations on the previous occasion, though, before everything went awry.

The words became harder to enunciate with the proper cadence as he neared the end. This effect could have been reality struggling to maintain the natural order of things, or it might merely have been his own anxiety hindering him. Regardless, he pressed on to the final syllable, reached down, and wrote a glyph on the slitherin's low, sloping brow with his forefinger.

The glazed red eyes shifted in his direction. Fumbling, moving stiffly, the reanimated body tried to sit up and swing its feet onto the floor. Cuinte stepped back to give it room.

"Spirit," he said, "we have questions. Once you answer, I'll return you to your—"

The dead thing rose from the bunk and lunged, jaws opening and clawed hands extended.

Thank Madriel, the ratman was slower and clumsier than its kind were in life! Cuinte got his hands up between them and shoved it backward. It bumped into the bunk bed, tottered, and recovered its balance. Meanwhile, Vladawen drew his silver rapier.

Even with his life in danger, Cuinte realized he didn't want the elf intervening, didn't like it that Vladawen assumed he'd failed and needed to be saved from the consequences of his bungling. "No!" he said. "I can handle this!"

He snatched up a bulky pack, and when the dead slitherin lurched at him again, he shoved it into the creature's face. Its hands reached around the obstruction and groped for his flesh. He crooned an incantation intended to calm a disoriented spirit unexpectedly thrust back into a cold, discarded body.

The dead ratman seized the pack and sought to wrest it away from him. Though awkward, the creature was strong, and he felt the makeshift shield pulling out of his grasp.

Then, however, the slitherin froze. After a moment, it let go of the pack, and Cuinte cautiously lowered the bag to look it in the face. The creature's lifeless visage remained a disquieting sight, but the rage was gone.

"We have questions," Cuinte panted. "Once you answer, you can return to your rest."

"Ask," the ratman croaked.

"What killed you?"

"Shapeless things. They came in the night. I hit one, and it splashed like water, but its hands were strong and held me down. While they did, they stung me and drew the life out of me until it was gone."

"Ask him if he smelled anything," Vladawen said.

"Did you?" Cuinte said.

"Raw meat," the corpse said. "Or blood."

"That's all we need," said the elf. "You can release him."

Cuinte recited the dismissal. Upon its completion, he expected the dead thing to collapse. Instead, it lay back down on the straw mattress on which he'd found it, and only then did it become profoundly still.

Vladawen slid his rapier back into its scabbard. "Good work," he said.

To his surprise, Cuinte rather liked the praise. He tried not to show it. He didn't want it to seem as if he actually craved the elf's approval.

"I take it," he said, "that the ratman's answers enabled you to figure out these killings."

"To a point. The killers are almost certainly creatures called bloodmen. They leech the gore from their victims without breaking the skin, and their ability to flatten themselves into a sheet of liquid allows them to sneak around with relative ease. They can flow through a crack or on the surface of a waterway like a canal."

Cuinte grinned. "That's it, then. We solved it. All we have to do is tell everybody, and our mission can move ahead."

"Would it were that easy. Consider, though, that the slitherin would have only our word for it that our explanation is the truth."

"I can question another corpse for them if I have to."

"Via the sinister art of necromancy? The Walled Warren isn't Hollowfaust. People here don't trust a magus who reanimates the dead. They'd suspect the spirit you summoned of being a puppet, mouthing lies you commanded it to tell."

"You're the Titanslayer. Couldn't *you* convince everyone we were bringing them the truth?"

"Chern died a while ago. People aren't always as impressed as they used to be with that story. Still, let's say you're right, and Frenlok puts measures in place to protect our emigrants from further bloodman attacks. That still leaves us with the fact that, when simply acting according to their natures, bloodmen are all but mindless. It's inconceivable that they moved about the city preying only on our recruits because they themselves want to spoil our plans."

Cuinte frowned. "Some spellcaster is controlling them."

"Exactly. The hostile slitherin out in the Mourning Marshes have their witches and shamans, and it wouldn't be all that hard for one of them to insinuate himself into the Walled Warren."

"Catch the caster himself and we stop him from simply switching tactics when the bloodmen outlive their usefulness."

“Yes. We also prove that Calastia has a secret understanding with the slitherin of the Marshes, for why else would the latter concern itself with us? When other realms learn King Virduk doesn’t scruple to ally with titan-worshippers, that may motivate them to send Durrover whatever aid they can.”

“All right. I see that. *How* do we catch the hidden mage?”

“You can perform necromancy when you put your mind to it. How are you at locating things? Specifically, what if you were in possession of something newly come from the enemy’s lair? Could you follow a fresh trail back to the point of origin?”

“Possibly. If it wasn’t too far away.”

“In that case, I have a plan. Help me wrap the corpses in blankets. We’ll tell the guards outside it’s a precaution against contagion.”

“I thought we wanted everyone to understand there *is* no sickness.”

“Ultimately, yes, but if we only shrouded the subject of my impromptu autopsy, the sentries would think it suspicious, would they not?”

The noisome task made Cuinte miss the luxuries of home, the menials not least, and brought some of his resentment of Vladawen creeping back. Still, he endured the scrape of coarse fur, the clamminess of the flesh beneath, and the awkwardness of lifting and rolling bodies. He offered only a scowl, a few winces, and the occasional soft “Ugh!” by way of complaint.

Afterward, Vladawen instructed their gondolier to take them to a different hostelry, and they once again endured glares and insults as he rowed to their destination.

Packs and bags slung over their backs, a number of ratfolk were exiting the inn as the gondola approached the quay. Cuinte was nowhere near as skillful at distinguishing among individual slitherin as Vladawen was, but he still recognized the one surviving band of recruits manifestly in the process of decamping. Some shrank back as they saw who was aboard the long, narrow boat. A few looked on the verge of bolting.

Vladawen didn’t give them the chance to do so without embarrassment. Not waiting for the gondola to draw up beside the quay, he rose and sprang across the strip of water separating the two. The boat rocked, and Cuinte clutched the brass rail beside his half of the bench.

“Hello, friends,” Vladawen said. “What’s this?”

For a moment, no one answered. Then Zreejun took it upon himself to reply. Bigger than most slitherin, wearing a scimitar on a silver-chased baldric, he’d been something of a spokesman for his fellows ever since discussions began.

“We talked,” he said. “We’d be mad to travel south with you when the other groups never even made it out of the Walled Warren.”

“Not because of sickness,” Vladawen said. “How many times have we met? If Cuinte and I were carrying plague, some of you would have fallen ill already.”

The slitherin exchanged uncertain glances. “Then why did the others die?” Zreejun asked.

“I believe that a witch or warlock from the Mourning Marshes has infiltrated the city and is dispatching creatures called bloodmen to kill anyone who agrees to serve High King Jeddard. Apparently the Walled Warren’s enemies in the Marshes and ours in Calastia have come to an arrangement.”

“How do you know this?” Zreejun asked.

Stepping from the gondola onto the cobbled walkway, Cuinte remembered that a mention of necromancy might prove counterproductive. “I divined it,” he said. It wasn’t entirely a lie, just a vaguery.

Zreejun made a quick growl of a noise that might be the slitherin equivalent of a dubious grunt. “Can you show us?”

“Not yet,” Vladawen said, “but I believe we can prove it together.”

“How?” the ratman asked.

“After Cuinte and I leave, tell people we’re all departing for Durrover tomorrow before whatever happened to the other groups can happen to you too. Let the rest of the hostel see you making preparations. At the same time, sneak the children out, and anyone else unable or unwilling to fight. Get them all somewhere safe. Cuinte and I will sneak back here, and together we will all spring a trap on the bloodmen when they come tonight, as they must to prevent you slipping through the spellcaster’s fingers.”

Zreejun twitched his whiskers. “I don’t know.”

“You gave me your pledge. You have mine: Jeddard will reward you well for your service against a foe that menaces both your countries. Don’t let someone steal that opportunity away from you. Give me one night. If nothing happens, Cuinte and I will release you from your promise and give you every coin we brought north.”

Zreejun glanced at those among his fellows who were armed. He seemed to be gauging the mood of the warriors in the company, those Vladawen had exhorted to bide with the envoys and so, from their perspective, risk infection and mayhem alike.

The slitherin turned back around. “One night,” he said.

Back at the epistrategos’s palace, Vladawen sought a private audience with Frenlok, explained his intentions, and persuaded the commander-in-chief to let him proceed as planned. Then, after sunset, the envoys departed the citadel once more, this time via a servant’s gate, both of them hidden under a tarp in the back of an unassuming cargo barge.

As per Vladawen’s instructions, the barge workers conveyed them to a quay adjacent to a dark little cul-de-sac free of the foot traffic prevalent elsewhere. The elf led his human aide down the alleyway and tapped on a shutter. Zreejun swung it open to let them climb through.

Cuinte shook his head in respect for the Titanslayer’s acumen. He certainly hadn’t gleaned enough about the mazelike layout of the Walled Warrens to permit such an inconspicuous approach. Yet somehow, over the course of their peregrinations, Vladawen had.

Beyond the window waited five more ratfolk fighters. Now that their allies had arrived, they extinguished all the oil lamps but one and lay down on various cots, their naked weapons ready beneath the blankets. They'd left two cots empty for Cuinte and Vladawen. The rest had pieces of baggage arranged under the covers to make it look like people were lying there as well.

Once Cuinte lay down, he had nothing to do but stare into the gloom and wait. Unless one counted fending off the reanimated corpse earlier that day, he'd never been in mortal combat before; his mouth was dry and his pulse beat in the side of his neck at the thought of it. He sought to draw comfort from the knowledge that his comrades had more experience, Vladawen especially.

The night wore on and on. Vladawen expected the bloodmen to come late, when all the hostel would be abed, but still, the waiting scraped at Cuinte's nerves until, while he still feared the creatures' arrival, he yearned for it as well. Anything to get the vigil over with.

At last, there came the faintest of gurgling and splashing sounds, and a coppery smell tinged the air. Yet there was nothing on the floor beneath the door. Peering through half-closed lids, Cuinte turned his head toward the window. Its red hue darkened nearly to black in the dim light, liquid streamed through the crack at the bottom of the shutters and down the wall.

As more of the red fluid poured in, shapes rose from the spreading pool it formed. They were manlike only in the crudest possible sense, each with two legs and two arms, but they sagged and oozed from one moment to the next, and the bumps and hollows on the hairless, neckless heads created only vague, constantly melting approximations of faces. Bits of bone hung suspended in the half-congealed muck that made up their substance.

Vladawen shouted, "Now!" and scrambled up off his cot, rapier in hand. The ratmen sprang to their feet with their own blades at the ready. Nudged from a daze of dread by their example, Cuinte cast off his blanket and floundered up as well.

Vladawen lunged, and his long, straight, thrusting blade stabbed into a bloodman's visage and out the back of its head. Cuinte grinned to see it until, seemingly unhurt to any significant degree, the creature grabbed hold of the elf's extended arm with both malformed hands. Vladawen cried out.

Shrill, grating slitherin voices screamed along with him. The ratfolk had attacked by surprise with the superior reach their weapons afforded. But it didn't matter because, as near as Cuinte could make out, one thing Vladawen *hadn't* known about bloodmen was that they took no harm from such attacks. Flailing, the creatures pushed the slitherin back or grabbed them, just as their fellow had seized the elf.

Cuinte had intended to cast a spell or two, enough to make himself useful, but had also expected his companions to bear the brunt of the fighting. Now, though, it appeared that everything might depend on him. For an instant, his mind went blank, as if he'd forgotten every bit of magic he'd ever mastered. Then his thoughts snapped into focus, and he realized what he needed to do.

It was widely believed that pure force could kill anything. He rattled off an incantation and thrust out his arm. Luminous golden beads leaped from his fingertips and diverged in flight to strike three different bloodmen grasping one or another of his comrades.

None of the bloodmen fell, but they all faltered. In that moment, Vladawen, Zreejun, and another ratman jerked themselves free.

That improved the situation, but only somewhat. A fighter who wasn't being held might dodge attacks or shield himself with a buckler, for a while, but if he had no way of hurting his opponent, it was only a matter of time before the adversary penetrated his defense.

"Everyone, duck!" Cuinte shouted. He rattled off another spell, and a fan-shaped burst of bright flame roared from his fingers. Crouching, his comrades were safely below the flare, but it caught four of the bloodmen in what passed for their faces. Their substance bubbled and blackened, and smoke that stank like burning garbage puffed up from it.

Dissolving back into pure liquid, one of the bloodmen fell, but the other three survived the assault. Trying to decide what to do next, Cuinte glimpsed motion at the periphery of his vision. He whirled, and a bloodman was right beside him. Amid all the confusion and piles of baggage in the room, he'd missed its advance.

He recoiled, but not quickly enough. It grabbed his arm. The contact burned, and he lost his balance. Banging his head on the corner of a cot, he fell, and maintaining its hold, the bloodman dropped on top of him like red snow sliding off a roof.

Cuinte raised his free hand to cast a spell, and the bloodman grabbed the wrist of that arm as well. The mage tried to think of combat magic that could be evoked by voice alone, but with two limbs held, the pain was twice as bad, and nothing came to him.

Then Vladawen was standing over him. Swinging a stool, the elf struck the bloodman's head and knocked much of the bulb away in flying spatters. What remained rippled and heaved, attempting to reform itself. Blobs of lost gore crawled in an effort to reunite themselves with the creature's body.

Vladawen didn't give them time. He struck again and smashed away more of the bloodman's substance. The part of it that was still on top of Cuinte — hands, legs, and lower torso — dissolved into slime.

Pivoting, Vladawen shouted to the slitherin. "Blunt instruments! Cutting doesn't work, but we can club them!"

Zreejun dropped his scimitar and yanked a miner's shovel from the thongs that secured it to his nearby pack. Other ratmen reached for improvised bludgeons of their own.

Vladawen looked down at Cuinte. "How badly are you hurt?"

Cuinte took stock. "I'm not dizzy. I guess it didn't steal too much blood."

"Then let's get back to work." The elf hauled Cuinte to his feet, hefted the bloodied stool, and returned to the fray.

The tide of battle gradually turned, now that Vladawen and the other warriors were wielding useful weapons. Cuinte spoke words of power, thrust out his hand, and sent a

beam of heat into the back of a bloodman battling Zreejun. The creature faltered, and the slitherin bashed it apart with the shovel.

Cuinte looked around for another target. Vladawen was still fighting a bloodman, but as his aide was drawing breath for further magic, the elf battered it into oblivion, and that was the end of the struggle.

Panting, Cuinte realized he and his comrades were wet and foul with blood, but the mess didn't disgust him as much as it might have in other circumstances. He was too relieved that little of the gore was their own.

Returning to his side, Vladawen said, "You did well."

As before, Cuinte was loath to acknowledge that the commendation pleased him. "I did *very* well. I saved you all." He smirked. "I thought the Titanslayer could win a little skirmish like this all by himself."

To his surprise, Vladawen smiled back. "If you've listened to all those lying ballads, I don't blame you." His expression turned grave. "Lad, your parents sent you with me in the hope you'd profit from the experience. If you carry away nothing else, learn this. It doesn't matter what victories a person has won in the past. Anybody can die, fighting any foe, at any moment. That's why a warrior must always keep his head, and he and his companions must look out for one another.

"Now, are you ready for the next phase of our plan?"

"I suppose. Now that you've made the prospect so inviting."

Vladawen turned to the slitherin. "What about you?"

"You swore it was creatures, not sickness, killing us," Zreejun replied, "and now you proved it. So yes, we're ready. Let's finish this."

Vladawen inspected Cuinte and then pulled loose a bone chip from the blood glued to his jerkin. "Will this do to focus your seeking spell?"

"It should," Cuinte said. "Everyone, give me a moment."

He opened one of the pouches on his belt and brought out a tuft of bloodhound fur. Whispering a charm, he pressed it and the bone chip together in his left hand. He then visualized a slitherin spellcaster with bloodmen servants gathered around.

They appeared before his mind's eye in a large, windowless room, where red coals glowed beneath a cauldron and luminous blue steam rose from the brew inside. The spellcaster, who he sensed was female, had fetishes knotted in her fur and spots where the bristles were shaved away to form glyphs associated with the titan Mormo. Several other ratfolk were in the chamber as well.

Like every wizard, Cuinte had well-trained powers of visualization, but with the magic working, it wasn't his imagination creating the scene in all its detail. He truly was glimpsing the witch's lair as it was — or rather, as it had been immediately before the bloodmen departed on their mission.

He extended his right arm and turned in a circle. A subtle magical pull on his hand told him when he was pointing in the right direction. "That way."

"Good," Vladawen said. "Everyone, make sure you bring along something blunt in case the enemy kept some bloodmen in reserve." He smashed the stool he'd been using on the floor and tucked one of its legs through his belt, presumably to serve as a cudgel.

As the others prepared to depart, Cuinte said, "I think we may already have killed all the bloodmen. But the witch has some slitherin warriors to protect her."

"Tell us everything you saw," Vladawen replied. When Cuinte had finished, the elf said, "That's a Red Witch."

Inwardly, Cuinte winced. From what he'd heard, Red Witches were among the most dangerous of those slitherin who still served their old masters, the fallen titans. "You're sure?"

"Reasonably. You will attend to her with your wizardry while we warriors handle the guards."

"What?"

Vladawen grinned. "Of course, it isn't going to happen like that. We'll all try to neutralize her as quickly as may be. But I'm gladder than ever that we too have magic on our side."

With that, they all headed out into the night. Cuinte's vision of the Red Witch and her servants had faded, but his uncanny sense of the route that led to her remained in place. At certain moments, it was like phantom hands turning his shoulders in the proper direction or an invisible rope tugging him along. As he and his companions crossed a small arching bridge, he asked, "Do you think the Red Witch knows we're coming?"

"I think it would be foolish to assume otherwise," Vladawen answered. "At the very least, she knows her bloodmen have yet to return."

In time, the magic led Cuinte to a part of the Walled Warren where the streets were even narrower than those he'd seen hitherto. The swampy smell that often prevailed in town was stronger here, as if it weren't just seeping from the vegetation beyond the city walls, but also from the dark buildings to either side, all of them in the throes of dank decay. Apparently slitherin cities had slums the same as human ones.

The spell of finding turned him a final time, to face a blank log wall with the bark still on the timber. He stared in confusion, and one of the ratfolk warriors made an abbreviated chittering sound that might indicate dismay.

Vladawen drew his rapier and slid the point into the wall. For an instant, Cuinte thought the wood must be soft as butter for the sword to go in so easily. Then he discerned there was no resistance at all.

"Illusion," whispered the elf. "It's one of the schools of magic at which Red Witches excel."

"Do you think the enchantment's always here?" Zreejun asked. Following the Titanslayer's example, he too kept his voice down.

"Possibly," Vladawen said, "but spells that last forever require a high level of proficiency. I'd rather believe it was cast just recently . . . even though that suggests the enemy is indeed expecting us."

"It also means," the slitherin warrior answered, "that there could be an ambush waiting right on the other side."

"If we go in fast, anticipating trouble, perhaps we can turn that around on them."

Or maybe not. Cuinte imagined the Red Witch poised to hurl fire or some other equally devastating attack the moment he and his companions appeared.

"I have another idea," he said. "If I cast every defensive spell I know, I can make myself resistant to . . . well, a lot of things. Let me go first and trigger the trap while my wards are active. The rest of you will charge in the moment after."

Vladawen eyed him. "Are you sure?"

Upon reflection, Cuinte realized he wasn't, but having made the suggestion, he couldn't see a graceful way to back out. "Just make sure you come running the moment I shout."

Murmuring, the youthful wizard wrapped himself in layers of protection. Invisible armor sheathed his limbs. Abjurations flowed into being to stop arrows, crossbow bolts, and other missiles and also to attenuate the effect of hostile magic.

He wished his preparations made him feel safer, but if anything, the reverse was true. They didn't make him truly impervious to any sort of harm, although they improved his chances of survival. However, the time he spent casting them was also time for fear to whisper that he was mad to think they improved his odds enough to keep him alive.

Perhaps discerning his anxiety, Zreejun gripped his shoulder. "You took care of the rest of us back in the hostelry. We'll look after you now."

Cuinte almost snapped at the ratman before realizing the creature's assurance hadn't actually annoyed him. In truth, it was good to hear. "I know you will," he answered.

He groped to find the edges of the hole, ducked through, and ran. He supposed he risked falling headlong into a hidden pit or something similar, but Vladawen had suggested the best approach was to go fast.

For several strides, he seemed to be dashing down a tunnel with a faint glow at the far end. Then the walls vanished as he plunged outside the area veiled in illusion.

He was inside the chamber he'd seen in his vision. The Red Witch crouched some distance ahead of him, near her steaming cauldron. She screeched words of power, raised her hand over her head, closed it, and jerked it down as though yanking something out of the empty air.

Hailstones the size of plums hammered Cuinte. Thanks to his arcane defenses, the clumps of ice didn't break his bones or batter him insensible, but they still hurt and knocked him staggering.

Now he saw that several ratfolk stood to either side, just clear of the area where the ice had fallen. They hurled javelins. The spears thudded into the invisible barrier that warded Cuinte against projectiles and thrown weapons, and they fell clattering to the floor.

Undeterred, the hostile slitherin hefted swords and rushed forward. Almost instinctively, Cuinte spoke a phrase and waved his hand, erecting a short-lived barrier of force in front of him. Nonetheless, one of the ratfolks' blades tore his jerkin and inflicted a shallow cut on the shoulder beneath. If not for his magical protection, their attacks would likely have maimed him.

"Now!" he bellowed. "Now! Now!"

Footsteps pounded, and then his companions charged in around the titan-worshipping slitherin. Silver flashed, and an enemy warrior who'd been about to thrust a broad, heavy short sword at Cuinte fell down instead.

Vladawen killed another ratman intent on slaying his aide, then hauled Cuinte clear of the melee. He pointed his bloody rapier at the Red Witch. "Get her!"

It was the right idea. The slitherin spellcaster seemed momentarily flummoxed, perhaps because she couldn't conjure another attack like the hailstorm with her servants and adversaries tangled up together, lest she smite friend and foe alike. But if no one gave her something else to worry about, she was bound to hit on a workable alternative.

Cuinte drew breath, raised his hands, and focused his mind. If he started his incantation now, before the Red Witch, he should finish ahead of her, too.

Vladawen ran toward the Red Witch, but via a looping path. He evidently hoped to distance himself from Cuinte in such a way that the slitherin couldn't strike them both with a single attack. In so doing, he likewise gave his lieutenant a clear line for casting.

The Red Witch yanked a curved length of carved black stone or polished wood from her fur and brandished it fiercely. The fetish instantly released the magic stored within. Black tentacles erupted from the floor, coiled around Cuinte, and jerked him off his feet, spoiling his casting.

Tentacles shot up around Vladawen, too, but he twisted and somehow sprang clear of them. He charged onward, rapier extended to spear the slitherin witch, who recoiled before the threat.

But when Vladawen sprang into striking distance, the luminous blue vapor rising from the cauldron swirled into the shape of a pair of hands with a fanged, apish face leering above them. The hands grabbed the Titanslayer's sword arm. He tried to pull free, but to no avail.

The Red Witch's expression switched from feigned alarm to renewed ferocity. Chattering another spell, she lunged at Vladawen with claws upraised.

The elf planted his foot against the side of the cauldron and, with a cry of effort, overturned it. The hot liquid splashed out over the Red Witch's feet and legs, and she screamed and reeled. Deprived of its source, the entity in the blue steam vanished.

Vladawen thrust the rapier into the witch's torso, stabbed her again as she fell, and then, just to be sure, pierced her a third time as she lay sprawled on the ground. That accomplished, he turned back in Cuinte's direction.

His concern was appropriate given that the Red Witch's death hadn't gotten rid of the tentacles. They were still trying to wrap Cuinte ever more tightly. If left unchecked, they were likely to crush or strangle him to death.

Happily, the young wizard was reasonably certain he *could* check them. He gritted out an incantation, gestured with the hand he'd managed to keep free, and his magic-canceling spell melted the dark, writhing arms away.

He and Vladawen killed two more enemy ratmen while their allies accounted for the rest. Afterward, Cuinte was glad to see that, once again, though there were wounds to tend, his side hadn't suffered any losses.

"Well," Vladawen said, wiping the blood from his rapier with a cloth, "I imagine a slain Red Witch will convince even the most dubious resident of the Walled Warren that humans and elves out of Durrover don't really carry the plague after all." Turning to Cuinte, he added, "Did you enjoy that, partner?"

"Are you crazy? Of course not!" Cuinte hesitated. "But now that it's over, I suppose I am glad I was a part of it. Which means, I guess, I'm also not *completely* sorry you dragged me north."

"I knew you had the soul of a hero," Zreejun quipped, as he thoughtfully twisted one of his whiskers. "You know, people say there's a woodwreck dragon living out in the marsh. I'll bet if you went off and slew that, *hundreds* of our people would sign on to go with you to Durrover."

Cuinte stared in consternation until his companions burst out laughing. After a moment, he joined in.

DEATH IN THE WALLED WARREN

Famed elven adventurer, priest, and war hero Vladawen the Titanslayer faces a new challenge. Something is killing Redeemed slitheren in the Walled Warrens, and the elf has been sent as an agent of High King Jeddard of Durrover to find out what. The ratfolk fear contagion is to blame, but the elf and his companion, the disgraced mage Cuinte, suspect otherwise. Someone, or something, may be deliberately sabotaging Durrover's diplomatic mission to the Warrens.

Return to the Scarred Lands in this short story by Richard Lee Byers, crafted to celebrate the re-envisioned second edition of the beloved RPG game setting.

