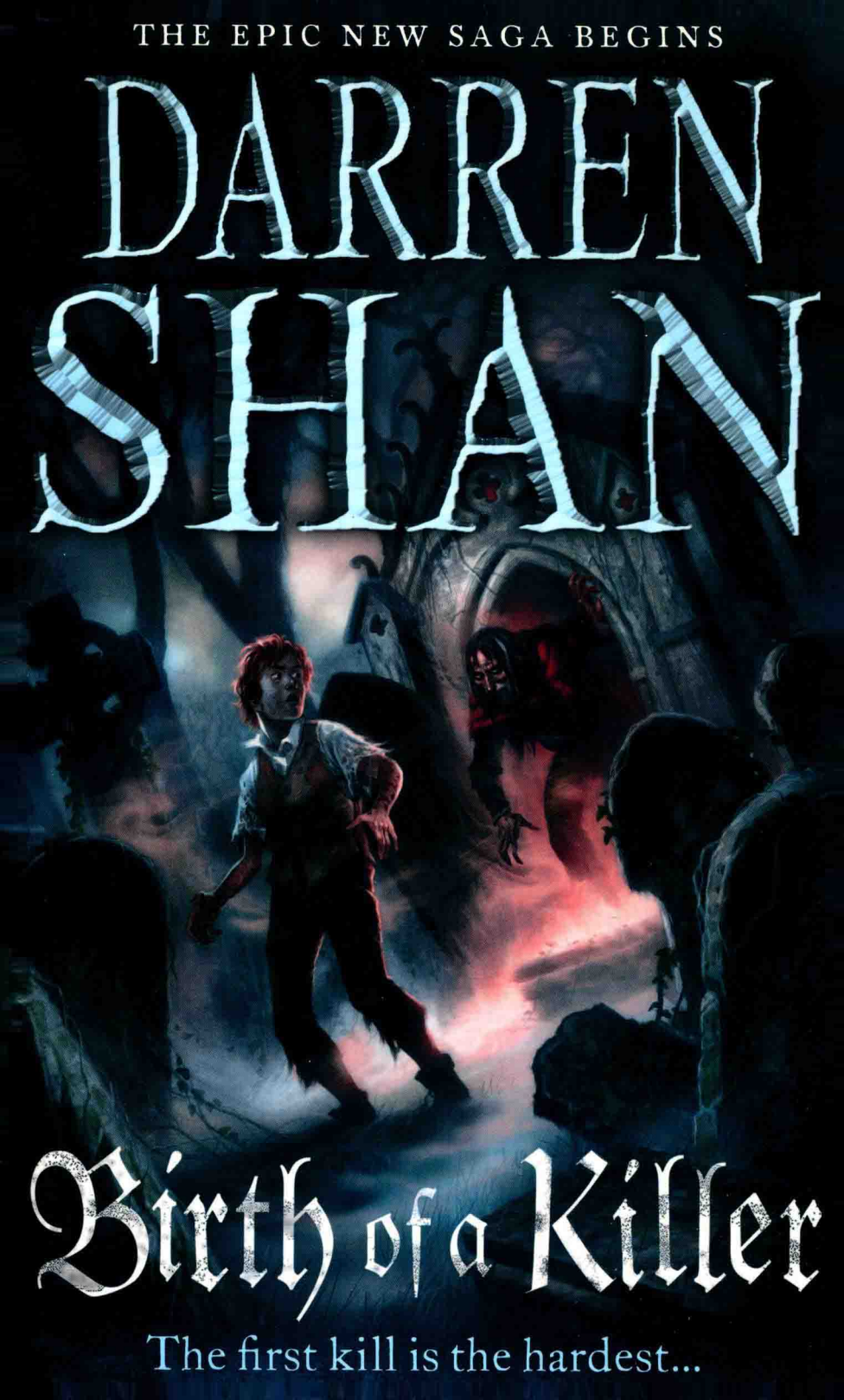


THE EPIC NEW SAGA BEGINS

# DARREN SHAN

A movie poster for the film 'Birth of a Killer'. The central image shows a young man with red hair, wearing a light blue shirt and dark pants, running through a dark, foggy graveyard. He has a look of intense fear or determination. In the background, a large, dark, and menacing figure with long, dark hair and a red, glowing face is emerging from a tomb. The scene is lit with a mix of dark blues and a bright, fiery red light emanating from the figure in the background. The overall atmosphere is dark and horror-themed.

## Birth of a Killer

The first kill is the hardest...

# DARREN SHAN

## Birth of a Killer



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

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# Birth of a Killer



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*For:*

Pearse and Conall — children of the night!

*OBEs (Order of the Bloody Entrails) to:*

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Isobel Abulhoul and all of the Shantastic gang  
in Dubai

*Editorial Mentor:*

Nick “the blood ninja” Lake

*General Masterminds:*

Christopher Little and his Princely clan





## PART ONE

*“Are cobwebs a treat where you come from?”*



# CHAPTER ONE

When Larten Crepsley awoke and yawned one grey Tuesday morning, he had no idea that by midday he would have become a killer.

He lay on his bed of sacks packed with straw, staring at specks of dust drifting through the air. The house where he lived was cramped and dark, and the room where he slept never caught the sun except at dawn. He often woke a few minutes earlier than necessary, before his mother roared for the family to get up. It was his only quiet time of the day, his one chance to lie back idly and grin lazily at the world.

There were six children in the room, five of them snoring and shifting in their sleep. Larten came from a crop of eight, but two had died young and his eldest sister left a year ago to marry. Although she was only fourteen, Larten suspected their parents were glad to be rid of her — she had never been an especially hard worker and brought home little money.

“Up!” Larten’s mother roared from the room next to theirs, and pounded the thin wall a couple of times.

The children groaned and crawled out of bed. They bumped into one another as they tried to find their way to the bedpan, the older siblings cuffing their younger brothers and sisters. Larten lay where he was, smiling smugly. He had already done his business while everyone else was asleep.

Vur Horston shared the room with the five Crepsley children. Vur was a cousin of theirs. His parents had died when he was three years old, his father in an accident at work, his mother of some disease. Larten’s mother had been keeping a close watch on the sickly widow and moved in quickly to take the baby. An extra pair of hands was always useful. The boy would be a burden for a few years, but children that age didn’t eat much, and assuming Vur survived, he could be put to work young and earn his foster parents a nice little income.

Larten felt closer to Vur than to any of his real siblings. Larten had been in the kitchen when his mother brought the silent, solemn boy home. After giving Vur some bread soaked in milk – a rare treat – she’d stuck him by Larten’s side and told her son to look after the waif and keep him out of her way.

Larten had eyed the newcomer suspiciously,

jealous of the gift his mother had given the stranger. In return, Vur had stared at Larten innocently, then tore the bread down the middle and offered his cousin the bigger half. They had been best friends ever since.

“Up!” Larten’s mother roared again, slamming the wall just once this time. The children blinked the last traces of sleep from their eyes and quickly threw on their clothes. She would come crashing in on them soon, and if they weren’t dressed and ready to go, her fists would fly.

“Vur,” Larten murmured, nudging his cousin in the ribs.

“I’m awake,” Vur replied, turning to show Larten his smile.

“Don’t you need to go?” Larten asked.

“I’m bursting,” Vur giggled.

“Hurry up!” Larten shouted at one of his younger sisters, who was squatting over the bedpan as if she owned it.

“Go in the bed if you’re that desperate,” she jeered.

“You might as well,” Larten said to Vur. It wasn’t uncommon for them to wet the bed — the great thing about straw was that it dried swiftly.

“No,” Vur said, gritting his teeth. “I can wait.”

Larten’s clothes were on the floor next to the bed. He pulled them on, not removing the thin vest

which he slept in. Larten's mother was an orderly woman. She did the family laundry every second Sunday. All the children had to wait in their beds, naked beneath the covers, until their clothes were returned. Then they would wear them without changing for the next fortnight.

Larten's sister finished on the bedpan. Before his youngest brother could claim it, Larten darted across the room, snatched it and passed it to Vur, careful not to spill the contents.

"My hero," Vur laughed, loosely aiming with one hand while he rubbed yellow crust from his eyes with the other.

Although Vur was Larten's age, he was much smaller — a thin, weak, mild-mannered boy. He seldom fought for anything, happy to go without if he was challenged. Larten often stood up for his cousin, even though Vur never asked for help.

"What's keeping you?" Larten's mother screeched, sticking her head in and glaring at the children.

"Coming!" they roared, and those nearest her ducked through the doorway even if they weren't finished dressing.

"Vur!" she yelled.

"Just a second!" he panted, straining to finish.

Larten's mother squinted at the boy, deciding

whether or not to punish him. In the end she just sniffed and withdrew. Larten sighed happily. He didn't mind when she hit him — he could take a fierce whipping — but he hated it when she hurt Vur. Larten's father almost never struck the frail orphan, but his wife whacked him as much as the others. They were all equal in her eyes.

When Vur was finished with the bedpan, Larten tossed his clothes at him and hurried down the stairs to the crowded kitchen where his brothers and sisters were already making short work of breakfast.

There was never much to eat, and those who grabbed first got the most. Their father, who'd shuffled off to work three hours earlier, had generously left some strips of pig's ears for them — he always shared what he could with his family. The older children seized upon the gristly treats with excitement. By the time Larten and Vur arrived, the strips were gone and they had to make do with stale bread and watery porridge.

Larten tore bread from the fingers of his eldest brother — they were slippery from the grease of a pig's ear — and passed it to Vur, laughing as he bobbed out of the way of his brother's swinging fist. Taking a couple of small, chipped bowls, he dipped them into the pot of porridge, filled them to the top and hurried



to where Vur was waiting by the back door. He licked drips from the sides as he crossed the room, eager not to waste any.

They ate in silence, chewing the crust of the dry bread as if it was meat, using the rest to soak up the watery porridge. Larten was quicker than Vur and managed to refill his bowl before the pot was scraped bare. He ate half and saved the rest for his cousin.

It was cold and raining outside, but the kitchen was cosy. His mother hadn't lit the fire – she'd do that in the evening, when she returned from work – but the tiny room was always warm, especially with so many bodies crammed into it.

“Move on!” Larten's mother yelled, coming down the stairs. She belted those closest to her and waved a hand threateningly at the others. “Do you think I've nothing better to do than stand here watching you eat all day? Out!”

Still chewing and gulping, the children filed out into the yard, leaving their mother to mop up after them, before setting off for the first of the four inns where she cleaned.

There were two barrels of water in the yard, one for drinking, the other for washing. The Crepsley children rarely bothered with the latter barrel, but Vur went to it every morning to scrub the dirt from his