



A NOVEL OF DRUSS THE LEGEND AND
SKILGANNON THE DAMNED

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THE SWORDS OF
HIGHT AND DAY

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*The Swords of Night and Day is dedicated with love to
Don and Edith Graham, to the magical Cloe Reeves,
and to all the residents of Old Mill Park, Bexhill, U.K.,
who have made the last seven years a joy.*

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Prologue

The sun was warm in a blue sky as the Priestess Ustarte stood at the graveside, watching her aides disguising the tomb. Carefully they placed rocks upon the small, island site and transferred plants to cover the recently turned soil. Ustarte pushed back the hood of her scarlet-and-gold gown, revealing a hairless head and a face of startling, ageless beauty.

A great sadness settled upon her. Ustarte had witnessed many deaths in the hundreds of years of her life, but few had touched her as strongly as the passing of this hero. She gazed down at the dry riverbed. In spring the water would rush down from the mountains and flow around the island on both sides before becoming a single waterway to the south. Now, in the height of summer, the island was merely a small hill, dusty and unmemorable. Not a good resting place for a great man.

An elderly priest in yellow robes approached her, his back bent, his gaunt, malformed features and huge brown eyes showing clearly to the initiated his status as a Joining, a meld of man and beast. Happily there were few in this benighted world of swords and spears who would recognize his origins. To most he would merely be an ugly little man, with friendly eyes.

"He deserved better than this, Holy One," said the priest.

"Aye, he did, Weldi, my friend."

Ustarte turned away from the graveside and, leaning on her staff, moved down the hillside into the shadows. Weldi hobbled after her.

"Why have we done this? The people would have built a great tomb for him, and erected statues. He saved them, after all. Now none will know where he lies."

She sighed. "He will be found, Weldi. I have seen it. It may be fifty years from now, or a hundred. But he will be found."

"And what then, Holy One?"

"I wish I could say. You remember the Resurrection priest who visited us several years ago?"

"A tall man. He wanted your help with an artifact."

"Yes," she said, reaching into a deep pocket in her gown. From it she drew a section of shining metal, indented and set with polished gems. Weldi gazed at it.

"It is very pretty. What is it?"

"It is part of a larger artifact used to produce creatures like us, my dear. To meld and to change matter. To extract the essence of life and cause it to be reproduced, or reshaped. Beasts to walk like men, or men to act like beasts."

"Magical then?"

"In a way, Weldi. This is an old world we find ourselves in. It has been through many births and rebirths. Once there were cities, where buildings were so tall that clouds gathered around their summits. In that time magic was commonplace—though it was not called magic. I have seen it in the Mirror. It was a time of evil so colossal, so all-consuming, that men no longer recognized their own evil. They built weapons so horrifying that they could devour whole cities and turn entire continents to ash. They poisoned the air, and poisoned the seas, and tore down the trees that kept the earth alive."

Weldi shivered. "What happened to them?"

"Mercifully they destroyed themselves before they could kill the whole planet."

"And what has this to do with our friend, and his death?"

Ustarte glanced back at the work party. The hilltop was bare once more. Within a few weeks there would be no sign of the tomb. The wind would blow dust over the site, grass

would grow, and *he* would lie beneath the earth, silently waiting. She shivered.

"These ancients left many artifacts, Weldi. In the Resurrection Temple there are objects like these, used for manipulating life itself. In other places there are more sites, dedicated not to life but to death and destruction. The more the priests delve into the secrets of these artifacts, the closer they will come to re-creating the horror of those ancient days."

"Can we stop them, Holy One?"

She shook her head, an angry glint in her blue eyes. "I cannot. I do not have the power, and my time is running out. I have looked in the Mirror and seen many desolate futures. It tore my heart to watch them. Armies of Joinings rampaging across the nations, corrupted priests wielding arcane powers, the skies dark with deadly rain. Fear, desolation, and evil rampant. I saw the end of the world, Weldi." She shuddered. "But in one future I did see our friend, born again to fulfill a prophecy that might end the terror."

"A prophecy? Whose prophecy?"

"Mine."

"Yours? What is this prophecy?"

Ustarte smiled. "I do not know yet, Weldi."

"How can that be, Holy One? It is your prophecy."

"Indeed it will be. But such are the frustrations of seeing time fragments out of place. All that I truly know *now* is that our friend will live again. I know the Swords of Night and Day will aid him. I know that the dead will walk beside him. More than that I cannot say."

"And he will save the world?"

Ustarte stared back at the hilltop. "I do not know, Weldi. But if I were looking for a man to achieve the impossible, that man would be Skilgannon the Damned."

One

First there was darkness, complete and absolute. No sounds to disconcert him, no conscious thoughts to concern him. Then came *awareness* of darkness and everything changed. He felt a pressure against his back and legs, and a gentle thudding in his chest. Fear touched him.

Why am I in the dark? In that instant a bright, powerful image filled his mind.

A man snarling with hatred, leaping at him, spear raised. The face disappeared in a spray of crimson as a sword blade half severed the skull. More warriors attacked him. There was no escape.

His body jerked spasmodically, his eyes flaring open. There were no painted warriors, no screaming enemies yearning for his death. Instead he found himself lying in a soft bed and staring up at an ornate ceiling, high and domed. He blinked and took a deep breath, his lungs filling with air. The sensation was exquisite—and somehow unnatural.

Confused, the man sat up and rubbed at his eyes. Sunshine was streaming through a high, arched opening to his right. It was so bright and painful that he raised his arm to shield his eyes from the brilliance. Then he saw the dark blue tattoo upon his left forearm. It was of a spider, and both ugly and threatening. His eyes adjusting to the brightness, he stood and padded naked across the room. A cool breeze rippled against his skin, causing him to shiver. This, too, in its own way, was confusing. The feeling of cold was almost alien.

The opening led to a semicircular balcony high above a walled garden. Beyond the garden lay a town, nestling in a mountain valley, the buildings white with red tiled roofs. His eyes now accustomed to the light, he gazed at the snow-capped peaks beyond the town and the brilliant blue sky above them. Slowly he scanned the rugged landscape. There was nothing here that tugged at his memory. It was all new.

He shivered again and walked back into the domed room. There were rugs upon the floor, some embroidered with flowers, others with angular emblems he did not recognize. The room itself was also unfamiliar. On a table nearby he saw a water jug and a long-stemmed crystal goblet. He reached for the jug. As he did so he caught sight of his reflection in a curved mirror on the wall behind the table. Cold, sapphire-blue eyes stared back at him, from a face both stern and forbidding. There was something about the reflected man that was unrelentingly savage. His gaze traveled down to the tattoo of a snarling panther upon the chest.

He knew then that a third tattoo was upon his back, an eagle with flaring wings. Though why these violent images were etched upon his body he had no idea at all.

Becoming aware of a gnawing emptiness in his stomach, he recognized—as if from ancient memory—the symptoms of hunger. Filling the crystal goblet with water, he drank deeply, then looked around the room. On another narrow table, alongside the door, he saw a shallow bowl filled with dried fruit, slices of honey-dipped apricot, and figs. Carrying the bowl back to the bed, he sat down and slowly ate the fruit, expecting at any moment that memories would come flooding back.

But they did not.

Fear flared in him, but he quelled it savagely. "You are not a man given to panic," he said, aloud.

How would you know? The thought was unsettling.

"Stay calm and think," he said.

The snarling faces came again. Hostile warriors all around him, hacking and slashing. He fought them with two deadly, razor-sharp blades. The enemy fell back. He did not

seek to escape then, but hurled himself at them, seeking to reach . . . to reach . . .

The memory faded. Anger swelled, but he let it flow over him and away. Holding to the memory of the scene, he analyzed what he did remember. He had been bone weary, his swords unnaturally heavy. No, he realized, not just weary.

I was old!

The shock of the memory made him rise again and return to the mirror. The face he saw was young, the skin unlined, the close-cropped hair dark and shining with health.

The image returned with sickening intensity.

A broad-bladed spear plunged into his side. He winced at the memory of it, the hot, agonizing rush of blood over ripped flesh. The spear all but disemboweled him. A mortal wound. He killed the wielder with a reverse cut and staggered on. The Zharn king screamed at his guards to protect him. Four of them charged—huge men bearing bronze axes. They died bravely. The last managed to bury an ax blade into his right shoulder, almost severing the arm. The Zharn king shouted a war cry and leapt to attack him. Mortally wounded, he swayed from the king's plunging spear, the sword in his left hand cleaving through the king's side, slicing through his backbone. With an awful cry of pain and despair the Zharn king fell.

The man looked down at the skin of his shoulder. It was unmarked. As was his side. There was not a scar upon his flesh. Was he seeing visions of the future, then? Was this how he was to die?

A cold breeze blew in from the balcony. He rose and searched the room. By the far wall was a tall chest of drawers. The top drawer contained carefully folded clothing.

Removing the first item, he saw that it was a thigh-length tunic of fine blue wool. He pulled it on, then opened the second drawer. Here he found several pairs of leggings, some in wool, others in soft leather. Choosing a pair in dark, polished leather, he donned them. They fitted perfectly.

Hearing footsteps outside his door, he stepped away from the chest and waited, his mind tense, his body relaxed.

An elderly man entered, bearing a tray on which was set a plate of cured meats and smoked cheeses. The man glanced at him nervously but said nothing. He moved to the table, set down the tray, and backed away toward the door.

"Wait!"

The elderly man stopped, eyes downcast.

"Who are you?"

Mumbling something under his breath, the old man rushed from the room. Only after he had departed did the man manage to piece together the answer he had given. The words were familiar, but somehow mangled. He had said: "Just a servant, sir." The man had heard: "Jezzesarvanser."

Moments later a second figure appeared in the doorway, a tall man with iron-gray hair receding at the temples. He was lean and slightly round shouldered, his eyes deep and piercingly green. His clothes were somber, a tunic shirt of gray satin and leggings of black wool. He smiled nervously. "Mataianter?" he asked.

Might I enter. The man in the bedroom gestured for him to step inside.

The newcomer began to speak swiftly. The man held up his hand and spoke. "I am having difficulty understanding your dialect. Speak slowly."

"Of course. Language shifts, changes, and grows. Can you understand me now?" he asked, speaking clearly and enunciating his words. The man nodded. "I know you will have many questions," said the newcomer, pulling shut the door behind him, "and they will all be answered in time." He glanced down at the man's bare feet. "There are several pairs of shoes and two pairs of boots in the closet yonder," he said, pointing to a panel against the far wall. "You will find all the clothes fit you well."

"What am I doing here?"

"An interesting first question. I hope you will not think me

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rude if I respond with one of my own. Do you know yet who you are?"

"No."

The gray-haired man nodded. "That is understandable. It will come back to you. I assure you of that. As to what you are doing here"—he smiled again—"you will understand better once you have remembered your name. So let us begin with *my* name. I am Landis Khan, and this is my home. The town you see beyond is Petar. It is, you might say, a part of my domain. I want you to think of me as a friend, someone who seeks to help you."

"Why have I no memory?"

"You have been—shall we say—asleep for a long time. A very long time. That you are here at all is a miracle. We must take things slowly. Trust me on this."

"Was I injured in some way?"

"Why would you think that?"

"I recall . . . a battle. Painted Zharn tribesmen. I was stabbed. Yet I have no scars."

"Excellent," said Landis Khan. "The Zharn! That is excellent." He seemed massively relieved.

"What is excellent?"

"That you recall the Zharn. It tells me we have succeeded. That you are . . . the man we sought."

"How so?"

"The Zharn faded from history long ago. Only shreds of legend remain. One such legend tells of a great warrior who stood against them. He and his men led a desperate charge against the center of a huge Zharn army. It was said to have been magnificent. They charged to their deaths in order to slay the Zharn king."

"How would I recall an event that happened long ago?"

Landis Khan rose. "Find yourself some footwear and let me show you the palace and its grounds."

"I would appreciate some answers," said the man, an edge appearing in his voice.

"And I would like nothing more than to sit down now and supply them all. It would not be wise, however. You need to arrive at your own answers. Believe me, they will come. It is important for you that we do this in a careful manner. Will you trust me?"

"I am not a trusting man. When I asked you why I had no memory you said I had been asleep for a long time. More accurately, you said *shall we say you have been asleep*. Answer this one question and I will consider trusting you: How long have I been asleep?"

"A thousand years," said Landis Khan.

At first the man laughed, but then he realized there was no trace of amusement to be found on Landis Khan's face. "I may have lost my memory, but not my intelligence. No one *sleeps* for a thousand years."

"I used the word *sleep* because that is the closest to the actuality. Your . . . soul . . . if you like, has been wandering the Void for the past ten centuries. Your first body was slain in that battle with the Zharn. This is your *new* body—fashioned from the bones we discovered in your hidden tomb." Landis Khan reached into a small pouch hanging from his belt. From it he took a small, golden locket and a long slender chain. "What does this mean to you?" he asked. The man took the locket, his fingers closing gently around it.

"It is mine," he said, softly. "I cannot say how I know this to be true."

"Say a name—if you can."

The man hesitated and closed his eyes. "Dayan," he said, at last.

"Can you describe him?"

"Him?"

"The man, Dayan."

"It is no man. Dayan was a woman . . ." A brief flash of memory flowed through his mind, causing him to wince, as if in pain. "She was my wife. She died."

"And you carried a lock of her hair?"

The man looked closely at Landis Khan. "You seem surprised. What were you expecting?"

"It is not important. An error occurred somewhere. You are quite right. Our earliest tales of . . . of you . . . have you wed to a princess named Dunaya. It is said she was slain by a demon and carried away into the underworld. You went after her. For years you were lost to the world of men, as you journeyed through the deepest places of the earth seeking to bring her back." Landis Khan chuckled. "A fine tale, and there is probably a grain of truth in there somewhere. Now come with me, my friend. I have much to show you."

Landis struggled to contain his excitement. Through what seemed endless years of fruitless toil he had held to the vision that one day he would find a way to redeem himself. For the last twenty-three years he had waited so patiently, hoping against all reason that this latest experiment would prove to be decisive.

The first three failures had been galling, and had dented his confidence. Now, however, in one glorious moment, it was restored.

Two names had rekindled the fires of his hope. *The Zharn* and *Dayan*.

He glanced at the tall man with the brilliant sapphire eyes and forced a smile.

"Where are we going?" asked the man.

"To my library and workplace. There is something I am anxious for you to see."

Landis led the man along a narrow corridor and down a set of stairs. The lower levels were cold, despite the lanterns hanging on cast-iron brackets. Landis shivered, but the man beside him seemed untroubled.

At last they came to a set of double doors. Beyond them was a long room, with five soft chairs and three couches, festooned with embroidered cushions. A tall arched window showed a view of the distant mountains. The curtains billowed with the afternoon breeze. To the left was a second

arch, leading through to a library, the scores of shelves bent under the weight of the books upon them.

Landis walked on to another door at the rear of the room. This he opened with a key taken from his pouch.

Inside, it was windowless and dark. Landis lit a lantern, hanging it from a bracket. Golden light flickered in the room, shadows dancing upon the plain walls. "What has been removed?" asked the man.

Landis smiled, noticing the rectangular dust patterns that showed where objects had been taken down from the walls. "Just some paintings," he answered, swiftly. "You are very observant." Moving to a desk, Landis reached down and lifted what at first appeared to be a short, curved ornamental staff. At each end were sections of beautifully carved white ivory, though the center was smooth, polished ebony. Turning, he offered the object to his guest.

The man's face darkened, and he stepped back. "I do not want to touch them," he said.

"Them?"

"There is evil in them."

"But they are yours. They were buried with you in the tomb. They were laid upon your chest, your hands clasped over them."

"Even so, I do not want them."

Landis took a deep breath. "But you know what they are?"

"Yes, I know," answered the man, a wealth of sadness in his voice. "They are the Swords of Night and Day. And I am Skilgannon the Damned."

Landis curled his hand around one of the hilts. "Do not draw that blade," said Skilgannon. "I have no wish to see it." With that he swung on his heel and walked back through the library. Landis placed the Swords of Night and Day on the desktop and ran after the warrior.

"Wait!" he called. "Please wait."

Skilgannon paused, sighed, then turned. "Why did you bring me back, Landis?"

"You will understand why when you see the world outside

my domain. There is great evil here, Skilgannon. We need you."

Skilgannon shook his head. "I do not remember much as yet, Landis, but I know I never was a god. In every generation there are war leaders, heroes, men of valor. I may—just may—have been special in my day. But you must have men of equal skill in this time."

"Would that we had enough of them," said Landis Khan, with feeling. "There is a great war being fought, but not—in the main—by men. We have a few doughty fighters, but we have survived this long here for two reasons. Firstly, my domain is largely inaccessible and offers no mineral wealth. Secondly, the passes are guarded by our own Jiamads." Landis hesitated, seeing the look of noncomprehension on Skilgannon's face. "Ah, but I see that I am getting ahead of the tale. You have no knowledge of the Jiamads. In some ancient lands they were known as werebeasts, I believe, though in your time the word was *Joinings*. Men and beasts melded together."

Skilgannon's face hardened, his eyes glittering in the lantern light.

"You remember them?" asked Landis.

"A glimpse only. But yes, I fought them."

"And you won!"

"There is nothing that bleeds that I cannot kill, Landis."

"Exactly my point! You will not find more than a handful of men in this land who would dream of saying that about Jiamads. We are on the verge of becoming a defeated species, Skilgannon."

"And you think I can change this unhappy situation? Where is my army?"

"There is no army, but I still believe you are the one man who can save us."

"Why?"

Landis shrugged and spread his hands. "There was a prophecy concerning you, Skilgannon. It was originally in-