

Chapter One

“My men and I reached the city of Nelefer, on an island in Lake Chaarlz on May 23, 2749. South of the lake are the ruins of the ancient city called St. Louis on the old maps. The official measurement of time here differs from ours. They count the year after the Great Illness, 2073, as Year One. Thus, they number the current year 677. I call this the ‘official’ time because many local Christians use the same method we do. Jews and Muslims have their own calendars of course. There are other cities around the lake but this is the largest and most amenable to trade. To encourage foreign traders it honors all religions whereas the other cities discourage all but Christianity. Nelefer has some peculiar religions. People from a country to the north and west of here called Moerrelm worship a religion I’ve never heard of called Gaianism. Moerrelm also rules Nelefer.”

~ *Travels into the Central Lands* by Vinsent Byrd Como as transcribed by Mister Samyel Moer

Omallee’s was jumping for a Tuesday night. A slack period usually lasted from early afternoon until a short time after the town crier’s call of, “Six bells past noon!” Most day workers left their jobs then and many thirsty ones came to Omallee’s. Today, drinkers had started trickling in before the town crier’s call. By mid-afternoon it had gotten as busy as it usually did only after the workers arrived. Seralin had left at six bells as always to tend their kids at home so her husband could go to his night job. Cristeen usually left then too but Mik hadn’t showed up to replace her. Hambone and Emilleen Omallee had arrived, as always, well before six bells to make a smooth transition from the day to night shift. Emilleen had begun preparations for the dinner hour in the kitchen.

Cristeen knew Hambone, Emilleen and Mik cleaned the place thoroughly after closing every evening. She had changed shifts with Mik a few times and helped close. Yet, a hint of the previous night’s scent – stale beer, rancid tallow candles, unwashed human flesh and less definable odors – remained when she arrived every morning. It intensified as the day crept along. The July heat made it worse. At night the smell of burnt, greasy food joined the malodorous mélange. The gradual blossoming of the sweet, herbal scent of reefer during the evening kept the tavern’s atmosphere bearable.

In between Hambone’s good-natured bantering with customers he occasionally told her, “Thankee, gal, for a-stayin.” The big man’s sense of humor, modest demeanor and generosity made friends of customers and employees alike; so did his gratitude. Though he could be tough when necessary. The bar’s location in the northernmost part of the slum called Fishgut often demanded it. He had gotten his nickname by knocking a recalcitrant customer senseless with a hog’s thighbone.

The time dragged on. The heat, stench and raucous voices grew. The smelly candles did little to relieve the incipient darkness. She pasted on a smile and ignored the occasional grope of her ass or lewd remark. Mind turned off, she swabbed tables; carried full pitchers, tankards, mugs and packets of reefers to tables; and took empty ones away. During the dinner hour, her orders included steaming bowls and plates of food from the kitchen. More than once she heard Hambone rumble, “Where is that lidl whelp?” Meaning Mik of course.

The closed end of Omallee’s U-shaped bar faced the door. Cristeen happened to be carrying a drink order past it when Mik opened it. He stood there looking about, his expression changing from pleased to frown to confusion. She passed close enough to see his widely dilated pupils.

The kid had shown up stoned on scatter before and late too, though not this far gone or this late. Surely Hambone wouldn't put up with him this time.

"You dumb shit," she hissed as she hurried by.

Indeed, she had barely passed him when Hambone had Mik by the shoulder. She wondered where the big bartender had come from so fast. On the way back to the bar with an armload of dirty tankards she saw Hambone quietly giving Mik hell by the back door. That left only her to pour, mix and deliver drinks and collect money, so busy she lost track of Hambone and Mik.

Once well past her regular quitting time, when the door opened she saw that full dark had fallen outside. The cobs who entered made her wish Hambone had come back up front: The shaved head of the biggest, called Aarvil Something-or-other, seemed to sprout neckless from broad sloping shoulders. Three of his goons followed. An earring in each left ear bore the symbol of Boss Blunt's gang, a raised clenched fist. Gold chains encircled their necks. A large wolf-head pendant hung from one of Aarvil's chains. They wore the City's usual male summer garb: sleeveless or short-sleeved shirts, knee pants and broad waistbands. Their garish colors jarred against the working-class drinkers' clothes. Their drab blacks, blues or browns blended into Omallee's ancient faded wooden walls and fixtures.

The thugs sauntered toward their favorite table in back. Aarvil glared at everyone he passed. No one returned his gaze. When he had been drinking, and that night the four had had a few, he took every glance from another person as a challenge. Fortunately, their fellow gang member, Gomes, hadn't come in. He and Aarvil, once friends, were feuding over a girl. Aarvil clearly sought trouble. He might have used Gomes to satisfy it.

When the two cobs sitting at "their" table saw the four approach they stood with their drinks and moved to another one.

Cristeen strengthened her resolve and went to the table as they sat down.

"You havin the usual?" she asked in a voice without warmth.

"For now," drawled Aarvil, grinning lewdly. "And a lidl desert later. What time you git off?"

"Ai, me too," said another. "Yor a big gal. Oughta be nough lovin there for all a us."

"An a redhead," said a third. "I ent never had one a them."

Aarvil grabbed for her hand. She pulled it away and started to turn.

Aarvil slapped the table. "Hurry up, cunt. Git us some fuckin beer."

She wheeled with fists clenched, wondering how bad Aarvil could hurt her if she hit him. She was indeed a "big gal." And farm work had made her strong.

"Here's yor beer, Aarv," said Hambone beside her. "Leave my gal alone if you wanta drink in here."

She started, hadn't heard his approach. She turned to see him clutching a pitcher of beer in one hand and four mugs by the handles in the other.

He nodded for her to go to the bar while he collected the hoods' money. She did and he joined her there.

"Y' kin take off, Crissee. The crowd is thinnin out so Em'leen an I can handle'm. Git sunthin to eat though first. An thankee for stayin. As for Mik, we won't be seein him in here no more. Gotta find me nother cob for nights."

"Thanks, Ham."

This meal was in addition to the one allowed per day which she ate during the afternoon, to show his appreciation for her staying late.

Cristeen didn't like the way Aarvil's eyes followed her as she went to the kitchen, then returned to the bar with a bowl of stew and a slice of bread.

"Hey, Freckles," said someone from near the front of the bar. "Why not join me?"

Cristeen saw the tall thin cob Hambone called Flin nursing his beer at a table alone. She didn't know him well but Hambone liked him. Sometimes Hambone bought whiskey from him that Flin delivered in unlabeled jugs secretly at the back door. That meant they were untaxed and so illegal. Of the customers, only Flin dared return Aarvil's glare. He must have noticed the thug hassling her.

She drew herself a beer from the tap and joined him.

"Thanks, Flin."

"Glad to have the company just before goin to work."

"What kinda work do you do?"

He shrugged and smiled. "Ah, this an that."

The vague answer and his shaved head, which someone had told her showed disrespect for legal authority, along with the illegal whiskey, meant he "worked" mostly outside the law.

"By the way," he said, nodding toward Aarvil's table, "stay away from them fuckers."

"I know. They work for Boss Blunt, North Slope gang boss."

"Not just the North Slope. He works the Saddle an parts of the South an Gaian Slopes. Biggest gang in Nelefer."

Flin sipped his beer. "How long you been in this City?"

"My accent still that bad?" she said around a mouthful of stew. "Oh, I came to Nelefer last fall, first of November."

"Not yor accent. It's mostly gone. Some of us canna lose ours. I don even try no more. But I remember how ye talked when ye started here. It was kinda pretty. Never heard nobody talk like that."

"I'm from west of Moerrelm, even beyond what you call the Kansiddee ruins."

"So, yor one a them Cattle Folk. Out on the prairie."

She frowned. "No, no. I lived in a regular town, Humber on the Hill it's called."

"Hey, I didna mean to piss ye off."

"I didn't mean to sound grouchy but I've worked umpteen hours today. And I don't know why folks think everybody living on the plains wander around with their cattle. My family were farmers. Lived in a little town in the middle of our fields."

"I came from a farm too, up north. It was off to itself though, wasn't in no town."

"Most prairie farmers live in towns with walls around'm. We don't always get along with the Cattle Folk."

"That's why yor town's on a hill, hunh? For pertection agin the Cattle Folk?"

"Yeah, but the name is to let people know which Humber we're talkin about. There's also a Humber on the Kaw."

"What's a Kaw?"

"It's the name of a river."

"I come to Nelefer to git away from the farm too. Got tired a shovelin cow shit."

"I didn't come just to get away from the farm. My papa was a teacher as well as a farmer. He had come to Nelefer's City College, wanted me to study here too, then come back to Humber to teach. I couldn't make up my mind though, had a boyfriend, thought about getting married. Then last fall we had an outbreak of typhoid. Killed my papa. Mama passed a long time ago. I

missed papa so much I couldn't stay around there no more. And here I was twenty-one. I had to do something. So I left my boyfriend and the farm to my brother and here I am."

"So yor goin to the College."

"Not yet. I passed the entrance exam last fall just fine. But I didn't have enough money to enroll. I'm saving up, living in a Fishgut roach-hole, hoping to have enough money this fall."

She soaked up remnants of the broth with the last scrap of bread, swallowed it and looked over her shoulder at Aarvil and his cronies. She had to pass them to take the bowl back to the kitchen.

"Don't worry bout them," said Hambone, looming suddenly beside her, as always so silent for a big man. He picked up her bowl, spoon and beer glass. "Go home. Git a good night's sleep. I'll have Alik work tomorrow night." To Flin he explained. "That's my son. He's a musician but ent got no gig this week."

Flin nodded, finished his beer and stood up. "I'll walk ye a ways, Freckles."

She also stood. "It's Cristeen. And you don't know where I live. Maybe it's not on the way to your 'work.'"

He grinned. "Hey, I ent no danger to ye. I got me all the woman I need. Name a Suraiya."

She smiled. "Sorry, Flin. Hambone likes you. That's good enough for me." It surprised her how much she regretted him having a woman. Flin was sleekly handsome and moved with the quiet grace of a cat. And she hadn't had a man since she left Bryan in Humber.

They waved good-night to Hambone and left. Only a few customers remained though the tavern would have another spurt of business when the night workers got off.

It was marginally cooler outdoors. Pedestrian traffic and noise increased as they walked the three blocks to Ocaanr Street, North Slope's main thoroughfare. On Ocaanr, pole-mounted oil lamps lit every corner and mid-block. Businesses catering to partiers lined this lower section of the street: taverns, drug bars, brothels, strip clubs, gambling houses, restaurants. Crowds spilled over from the sidewalks to the streets, workers among the pleasure seekers: porters, kids running messages, street venders, street musicians, buskers, a few tired whores. Vehicles forced their way through: carts and a beer wagon, passenger vehicles ranging from richly appointed cabriolets to the ubiquitous shaes. Most of the latter were taxis. The broad street's din fascinated Cristeen after quiet little Humber, even now: the talking, laughing, hawking of wares, cursing draymen, clapping hoofs. Music issued from the interiors of pleasure houses. Competing scents assailed her: roasting meats and chilies, the sweat of men and ordure of horses, the stench of oil lamps and tallow candles, and the occasional fishy whiff from Fishgut wafted by a vagrant breeze.

"Whadda ye think of these city folk, after leavin the farm?" he asked as they walked downhill.

"At first I didn't like'm very well," she said. "I thought their names were weird, especially the women. And they thought mine was old-fashioned."

"Ai. Nelefer women like long names. Men like short ones."

"Yeah, that Aarvil goon likes to go by Aarv."

"They didna like my first name, Clerents, so they call me by my last name, Flin." He shrugged. "It's okay by me. Good as any other name."

"Yeah. What's in a name?"

Three blocks down Ocaanr Cristeen stopped and pointed down an alley into Fishgut. "I live just down there. I can go the rest of the way alone."

"Ye don want me to know where ye live."

"Sort of, but not because I don't trust you, Flin, honest."

"It's okay, Cris. I'll jus ..."

He turned away, started uphill, angrily Crisleen thought.

She ran to him and grasped his arm.

"Wait, Flin." And after he turned, "I just didn't want you to see the hole I live in. But you know a lot of crap about me already. You might as well see that too."

Flin's face relaxed. He smiled a little. "If ye'd seen the places I lived, Freckles, ye wouldna be the least bit ashamed."

She turned and walked down the increasingly dark alley, Flin beside her. She stopped before a shambling two story building with a fish market on the ground floor and an apt above.

"Here it is."

Flin looked up at the apt. "This ent so bad for Fishgut."

"I don't live up there." She pointed to a narrow, sloping walkway between the market and the hovel beside it. "I got a room behind the shop. It's cheap because of the smell. Remember, I'm trying to save money for college."

"Ah. Sorry, Cris."

"I thought I'd have an easier time of it. Papa gave me the name of a student he met who later taught there, a Mister Samyel Moer. Said he might help me get in. But at the College they said he hadn't taught there for a long time. When I mentioned him to Hambone he said," – she tried imitating his voice – "'Ent no Mister gonna have time for people like –'"

Flin grabbed her arm. "Did ye say Mister Samyel Moer?"

"Yeah. But Hambone said he was a Notable and they didn't have time for the likes of me."

"They's different kinds a Notables. The First Families are them that's always lived here. An they's a few that come from other cities. Then they's the Moerin Clans. They run the City."

"I know a little about them. Harrow on the Hill's southwest of Moerrelm but they come out to trade with us sometimes."

"As for them not havin time for us...well, Hambone's right bout that, most times."

"What do you mean, most times?"

Flin looked rather smug. "I happen to know a cob who sees this here Mister Moer whenever he wants to."

"Then he must be a Notable too so he wouldn't have time for me either."

"Naa, he ent. He's like us. Fact is, he started off worse'n us. Ye an me at least had parents. He's a orphan."

"How can an orphan know this Mister Moer so well when I can't even meet him? And where can I find this orphan?"

"Ye can't find him. Even I don know where he lives. Use to live somewhere round Gallows Square up in the Warren. He knows Mister Moer cause he used to run errands for Notables."

"Why the hell did you even mention him if you don't know how to find him?"

"Don git pissy. I said ye couldna find him. I see him sometimes. We even work together. If ye want me to I'll mention ye to him next time I see him. If he wants to he'll meet ye."

"Of course I want you to. What's his name? Why's he so hard to find?"

"He ent on the best a terms with the law. I'll let him tell ye his name if he'll see ye."

So this cob was also a crook, but surely he would be safe to meet if he and Flin were friends.

"Okay. I'll tell Jack ye wanta see him." Flin started as he realized he had betrayed the name.

She smiled. "Thanks, Flin. And I don't care what 'work' you and Jack do together. By the way, I know where the Warren is but where is this Gallows Square?"

"Ye don got no business goin up there, specially at night. Ye won't find Jack nohow. He stays mighty scarce. I'll tell ye what he says after I see him."

“Okay, Flin. Thanks. And thanks for walking me home.”

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Cristeen knew a little about the Warren from the other day waitress, Seralin, who lived there. A slum atop Old Town Hill, it sounded grimmer than Fishgut. It had no street lights. The police only went to find specific miscreants and then in squads. Yet, Seralin had said Boss Blunt ruled there and she felt safe living under his rough but fair order. By following his simple rules: no snitching or fucking with his gang, Warreners remained safe from him and the bulls. Cristeen wondered about Seralin’s husband. He worked nights, maybe for Boss Blunt but Flin, judging by his dislike of Aarvil and his cronies, surely had nothing to do with the gang.

Cristeen thought about the mysterious Jack at work the next day. As a criminal like Flin, and an orphan at that, he surely couldn’t really know this Mister Moer. Even a business owner like Hambone didn’t have access to the Notables. Flin was just teasing her. Still, she wanted to meet this Jack. In the unlikely event that she met this Mister Moer maybe, because of his friendship with her father, he would lend her the money to start the College’s summer semester.

She asked Seralin where Gallows Square was.

“It’s on the south side of the Warren,” said Seralin. “I go through it on the way home.”

“Can I walk along with you tonight?”

“Sure. You thinkin bout movin there?”

Cristeen shrugged. “Maybe. I’m sick of smelling like fish all the time.”

Outside, after their shift ended, a slight breeze made the street feel slightly cooler than the tavern’s interior. They followed straight, broad Ocaanr uphill, leaving the worst of Fishgut and lower Ocaanr’s stench behind.

“Seralin, why are these Notables so hard for people like us to see?”

“They ent. Who do you think cooks for’m, washes their clothes, wipes their babies’ asses. We do. I got cousins that work for’m. When Ham told you they don have time for us he meant they don do business with us. Cause they got money an we don’t.”

“If you have a good reason can you meet them even if you don’t work for them?”

“If it’s a damn good reason. You gotta know how to talk to ’m though. Like what to call ’m. The First Families is Mesr an Miz So-an-so. The Clans is Mister an Mistra.”

“I’m curious about the Moerin Clans,” said Cristeen. “I know they rule Nelefer but not how long they’ve done it.”

“Bout forty years or so. Back in my grandparents’ day Nelefer was a free City. Ever’one figgered it always would be. It was the biggest one round the lake on a island with a wall round it. People shoulda known better. It’d burnt down twice before, once by pirates. The wall turned out not to be tall enough. Kaarst conquered the City fifty-some years ago. Then, bout a dozen years later the Mayor made a deal with Moerrelm to git rid of ’m. Ever hear bout bein careful what you ask for?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Moerrelm kicked the Kaarstins out a the City. But they never left.”

Ocaanr Street came to an abrupt end at the broken remains of a wall that extended right and left as far as Cristeen could see. In some places it existed only as piles of rubble. Seralin led her through a gap in the wall into a narrow alley hemmed in by tall, gaunt buildings.

“Welcome to the Warren,” said Seralin.

“Odd place for a wall,” said Cristeen. She followed Seralin uphill along the alley.

“The First Families built it,” said Seralin. “The pirates burnt Nelefer when it was a small town and only on North Slope. When they rebuilt it the First Families moved up here an built

this wall for extra protection in case the pirates came back. They called everything built inside the wall the Haishee.” Which Cristeen knew meant High City to Neleferins.

“Why would rich people want such small alleys instead of a broad street like Ocaanr?”

“To make it harder for invaders to find their way in.”

The tall buildings darkened the twisting, branching alleys even in the late afternoon, giving them a vaguely sinister feel. Cristeen walked carefully to avoid random heaps of refuse which familiarity allowed Seralin to easily avoid. The Warren had a stench of its own which increasingly replaced the relatively clean air of the upper Ocaanr. They came to an open court paved with ancient, broken flagstones, some of which had been replaced by cobbles. Decrepit one- and two-story buildings, pierced by alleys and narrow streets, surrounded it. A few people loafed around its edges. Pigeons strutted about or pecked at unseen morsels on the paving.

Seralin gestured with an open hand. “Gallows Square. They call it that cause they used to have hangins here every week when this was the Haishee. Come on home an meet Fred an the kids. He’s gotta go to work but you might as well have dinner with me an the kids. Just so you git outta here before dark. After that the Warren streets ent safe.”

So much for the safety of Boss Blunt’s “order,” thought Cristeen but she said, “Thanks, Seralin.” And followed her across the Square and up an alley on the other side.

After dinner, about sunset but before dark, Seralin told Cristeen, “Folks who ent used to these alleys can git lost,” and led her back down the twisted alleys to Ocaanr Street.

* * *

A week passed without Flin coming back to Omallee’s. Either Flin had not seen Jack or Jack had refused to see her. Thursday was Cristeen’s day off. In the afternoon curiosity about the elusive orphan drove her to Gallows Square. If Jack had once lived near it maybe she could find someone who knew where he lived now. Despite warnings about the dangers of the Warren after dark it seemed harmless enough by daylight. The twisting alleyways made Gallows Square a bit difficult to find. Since it lay above North Slope though, she soon found it by taking only alleys leading uphill.

The few people crossing the Square or loafing around its edges gave her no more than a passing glance, probably because she dressed as poorly as them. A large two-and-a-half story house filled most of the Square’s western side. Three middle-aged men sitting on its porch watched her for a time and then resumed their conversation. They appeared friendly enough and might know Jack so she approached them. She stopped just below the porch which rose a half story above the Square.

She said, “Good afternoon, good sirs. May I ask you a question?”

They looked down at her, nodded and mumbled greetings. One said, “Y’ shor can.”

“Do you know a young man named Jack? I don’t know his last name. He’s an orphan.”

They frowned and glanced at each other uncomfortably.

“Ai. You must mean Jack Mors,” said the one who had spoken before. “Nobody even knows if he’s alive but findin him wouldn’t be safe if he is.”

“Is he so bad then?” she asked as if she knew nothing about his trouble with the police.

“Oh, no,” said another. “He’s a good boy, though a little odd.”

“See, Miss,” said the third, “he’s wanted by the Anti-Teks. An they’re likely to arrest anybody seen with him.”

She said. “They’re the religious police, worse than the regular police. Right?”

“Ai, Miss,” said the first. “Make the bulls seem like pussycats. People they arrest, nobody never sees ’m again.”

She left them soon after. The little she had learned about Jack, his last name and that the most dangerous law enforcement agency in the City wanted him, made him seem even more mysterious. She wanted to meet him whether he could introduce her to Mister Moer or not. Of course maybe Anti-Tek had found and arrested Jack. And Flin too if they had been together. Thinking of him so deeply made her take a wrong turn into a dead end alley. She retraced her steps and finally found her way to Ocaanr Street.

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The next day at work Cristeen asked Seralin if she knew Jack Mors.

“Not well but I knew friends a his, like Flin. He’s wanted by Anti-Tek so it’s best not to ask round bout him. You don’t want Anti-Tek thinkin you an him was friends.”

“Anti-Tek. The religious police. Do you think they arrested him?”

“Maybe. Or killed him. Nobody’s seen him for half a year or so. I hear he’s pretty slick though. He might just be hidin out. They’s a old lady named Amelya that lives in the Caen House that was good friends with him. If anybody’d know for sure bout him it’d be her.”

“What’s the Caen House?”

“It’s on Gallows Square.” Seralin described the big house where she had talked to the three men.

Cristeen had to talk to this Miz Amelya. How could a youth who befriended old ladies come to be sought by the law?

After work she walked to Gallows Square with Seralin and bade her good-by at the Caen house. None of the three men sat on the front porch so she climbed its steps and knocked on the front door. One of them answered it.

“Hello, young miss,” he said. “Pleasure to see you again. Come in.”

“I’m actually here to see Miz Amelya if she’s available.”

“Sorry, miss, but she’s away. Visitin her daughter down in Waimaarkt. But yor welcome to come in an sit a bit with the women. Or join us old guys. We’re bout to come out to the porch.”

“Thanks but I might come back when Miz Amelya returns. When do you expect her back?”

“She oughta be here Sunday night.”

“Okay, I’ll come back after that if you think it’s all right.”

“Ai. I’ll tell Amelya to expect you.”

Disappointed, Cristeen turned away to cross the Square. The shadows had grown longer than she expected. She saw three ragged, furtive youths blocking the alley she had come up with Seralin. She didn’t like the way they watched her. As she started toward another alley, one called something out to her that she didn’t catch. She thought she saw them start toward her but didn’t hesitate to make sure.

The alley she chose went downhill only a short distance before turning at a right angle. At the next intersection she heard clattering and curses coming from the downhill branch. And did she hear someone following her? The three youths? She couldn’t be sure with all the noise coming from downhill. Trying to still her rising panic she took the only alternative route, an even narrower alley uphill, stumbling through the trash.

She almost shrieked when the alley ended against a rough stone building wall.

She turned and leaned her back against the building face with her hands clenched before her face. She willed her harsh breathing to quiet. The walls surrounding her were blank at ground level. Their doors and windows had been bricked in generations ago. A rustling just around the corner made her heart leap into her throat. And sink again when a rat raced across the alley’s

mouth. All grew quiet but the shadows had lengthened ominously. Everything is all right, she told herself. All you have to do is find an alley leading downhill.

She crept to the alley's mouth, careful not to make a noise by stumbling through the refuse. At its mouth she edged her face around the corner, looked both ways. She saw no movement, heard not a sound. She breathed easier. She left and soon found a relatively wide alley leading downhill, one almost free of trash. Ahead, it turned slightly but still led down. She didn't even care if it pierced the ruined wall far from Ocaanr Street as long as it led to the lighted, gridded streets of North Slope. She rounded the angle and...

...stopped.

A body-shaped pile lay in shadow ahead. She looked all around her. Nothing stirred. Still no sound. She approached the shape, quietly, quietly. She stopped. It was indeed a body, lying on its side. And protruding from its back, a knife, buried almost to the hilt. Several other dark splotches in the back betrayed multiple wounds. The person might still be alive. She dropped to her knees and gingerly grasped the knife hilt to withdraw it. Something held it; maybe it had stuck in the victim's shoulder blade. She desperately yanked it out and rolled the body onto its back.

Aarvil!

His startled, wide open eyes and mouth told her he was no longer alive. She felt for pulse in his throat anyway but found none.

Shadows moved up the alley toward her.

"Hey, somebody's layin up there!" came a voice. "Is that Aarvil?"

Cristeen rose quickly to her feet.

"There's somebody with a knife. It's that bitch from Omallee's."

Two of the cobs that had been with Aarvil in the tavern.

Cristeen turned to flee. She crashed into someone's arms. And nearly fainted.

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Note to the Reader:

Thank you for reading the first chapter of ***Shadowspawn***, book 4 of the Shadow World series. You need not have read the first two books of the series before reading ***Shadowspawn***. Though some characters appear in more than one novel each book tells its own story.

If you *do* want to read the whole series though, I highly encourage it.

You can order a copy of ***Shadowspawn*** [here](#).

Other books in the Shadow World series include:

[The Shadow of Armageddon](#) (The Shadow World Book 1)

A Shadow Over the Afterworld (The Shadow World Book 2)
Shadow Jack (The Shadow World Book 3)