

SHADOWSFALL LEGENDS



PAWN, DECEPTION, AND SACRIFICE

VALDIA'S TALE

by Mur Lafferty

Shadowsfall Legends: Pawn, Deception, and Sacrifice

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This story takes place in Shadowsfall, a setting for the Pathfinder Role Playing Game. To find out more about Shadowsfall, goto JonBrazer.com.

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Pawn, Deception, and Sacrifice

By Mur Laffery

The baby in her arm shrieked, and all Valdia could think of was how she was going to get down the cliff face while holding the child. If it were just herself, she could nimbly drop down, slowing her fall with clever grabs onto rocky outcroppings, but there was no way she could do that with a baby in one arm. If the baby died while she was rescuing it, she would be reviled and possibly run out of the town of Sheol.

“Never mind that without me, they’d fall prey to the undead hordes that roam Shadowsfall in a week’s time,” she muttered to herself. She could barely hear her low voice over the infant’s cries.

Valdia held tightly to the ledge leading to the cave with her right hand and felt carefully for her next foot hold. It had seemed so much easier climbing up. But then she’d been solo, intending to rescue the kidnapped infant from the clutches of ghouls. She didn’t know why they needed it, but she was sure that ghouls couldn’t want it for any noble reason. She had accepted the gold from the tearful parents and gone on her way.

She broke the rule of free climbing and looked down, hoping to see the next foot hold for her to step down. She didn’t know what she expected, in this land of eternal night, there was little difference between day and night. As she started to feel around with her feet for another foot hold, a boot settled on her left hand. It was carefully placed, the intent was clearly to trap, not crush.

Valdia hissed and looked up. A very tall man stood above her, watching her.

“What do you want, Father?” she asked.

Lavin, the vampire, gave her a closed lipped smile. “Just a moment of your time.” The pressure on her hand increased. She was definitely trapped; she couldn’t enter combat with a child in her arms, even she knew that much about parenting.

“All right,” she said. “You have that.”

He removed his foot from her hand. She thought briefly about running, but gritted her teeth. She was a woman of her word, and besides, he was much, much faster than she was. She pulled herself up to the ledge and kicked aside an ichor-coated skeleton to face him.

The baby wailed. She made a face at it, but she held it tighter to her body. Valdia knew that this little bundle of annoyance was ill-bred for surviving on this dark plane. The little warmth the dim sun provided was fading fast as it would soon set. The sky was already beginning to change from its deep purple color of day to the all-consuming blackness of night.

"I can think of a quick way to silence it," her father suggested mildly.

"No, thank you," she said. She pulled her cloak up and over her armor, then settled the baby against her shoulder. It let out a very loud belch and then made a surprised whimper. Instead of screaming again, it reached out and grabbed the handle of Valdia's wartrident.

"I can see you get your nurturing instincts from me," Lavin said.

In the blessed quiet, she said, "What do you want with me, Lavin?"

"You're an admirable warrior, Valdia. I've been watching you; I don't know many in Shadowsfall who could defeat you. But I do worry."

She snorted. "You worry? That implies you care, and we both know that is a lie."

He frowned. "Yes, you have a point. You are a product of me, however, and carry my reputation with you."

"I hunt people like you."

His pale face broke into a wide grin, displaying his fangs. "Yes, but you do it so well. I don't care who you fight for, only that you do it well, not stupidly. As long as you are feared then I can call you my daughter."

"You have no idea how little that means to me." She tried to pull her trident from the infant's fist, but it would not let go,

and she figured it was keeping the little rat occupied.

"It matters to me. And therefore I must warn you to think about why you are here, and what you are doing." He extended his long-fingered hand, palm up, to the carnage around them. Dead ghouls and one gigantic spider littered the shallow cave; one body smoldered over a fire, giving off a ghastly scent.

"As you said, parenting wasn't your strong point. But humans usually want their children safe," she indicated the infant on her shoulder, which had brought the handle of her wartrident to its mouth to gnaw.

"That infant has no parents," her father said dismissively. "If you were a true vampire, you would have known this the minute you picked it up." He leaned forward and made a big deal of sniffing the top of the infant's head. "You could smell his mother's milk on him, if he had a mother. He hasn't touched his mother in weeks. See?"

He pulled the boy's shirt back and Valdial could see the small brand on the back of the child's neck. "They brand orphans?"

"Some brand unwanted, yes. Humans can be so barbaric. So if this child doesn't belong to this woman, why did she send you here?"

"She could still be an adoptive mother," Valdial protested.

Her father nodded. "Yes. She could. By all means, I could be wrong. But when you got here, the child was unharmed. Did you wonder what a ghoul would want with a human baby in the first place? Could he have been bait?"

They both looked around at the carnage, and Valdial shrugged. "If so, they needed a stronger force at this end."

Lavin pointed down the mountain toward the village, and said, "Then perhaps the child was a distraction, to get you away from the village?"

Valdial felt her mouth go dry. She tongued her fangs briefly, a sharp reminder of who she was, of what she was, to get her head back in the game. Screams from the valley below filtered up to their mountain cave, and she cursed.

In one swift move, she wrapped the babe in her cloak and

leaped from the cave, hearing her father's laughter above her. She landed on the rocky slope, skidding down on her boots, catching hand holds as she went to slow her descent. The infant chortled in his new soft prison as she held him tightly to her shoulder. A larger drop-off came in front of her and she leaped off it, above the forest of dead trees.

Did I know that woman? Had I ever seen her before? Or was she just another human who asked me for favors while hating me for who I am? The thoughts were unwelcome, bitter, and she welcomed the jolt of pain down her arm as she caught hold of a dead tree branch. It broke off with a snap, but it slowed her fall enough that she could grab another. She made her noisy way down the tree, the infant laughing all the way, and finally she hit the soft dead floor of the forest.

As she started to run, the vision of the woman came back to her head. Valdia had been focusing on her tears and her screams and her panic, but the woman had been garbed in leather and had a roughly sewn traveling cloak, black on the outside and a creamy white on the inside. Valdia didn't know if she imagined it, but she did see a lump on the woman's back that could have been a staff. Valdia knew many warriors who were mothers, but she knew of none who didn't hang up their weapons when they had a babe at the breast. It was a sacred time, they said. ("And mother's milk can make chainmail rust and leather stink more than sweat can," confided a drunken friend one evening.)

I am a fool. Lavin was right.

So much she had tried to do to fit in with humans. So much she had tried to prove to them. And they had so easily manipulated her. In her desire to be the hero, to maybe be welcomed at last, she abandoned the small town she'd tried to protect.

The intruders remained. They rampaged through the town, cutting down fleeing villagers, howling and laughing. They cleared barns of food and valuable livestock and secured lockboxes to saddles for later breaking.

Before Valdia went down the valley to her town, she took

the infant and wrapped him in her cloak. "Can't leave your favorite toy with you, lad," she whispered, prying his grip free from the war trident. She placed him under an outcropping of stone and prayed that the fire would keep wolves away. She unslung her trident and dashed into town.

Up closer, she saw that the raiders were not all that they seemed. They were putrid, rotting things, people who looked to be driven mad by their parasites. Filthy, fat naked creatures that looked to be made of plant matter waddled in and out of the houses, leaving horrid stench in their wakes. Valdia cursed again, hating her father, then admitted that he had nothing to do with this particular travesty.

The mob had to have a leader, and Valdia had a hunch who to look for. She cast about the streets - the raiders avoided her; either they sensed what she was, or saw she was too much of a threat to wrangle with. The town was lost, that was for sure, but Valdia had to make sure this didn't happen again.

Then Valdia spotted her. The woman she had spoken to earlier about the child sat on a white mare in the center of the town, watching her minions wreck havoc. Her dark cloak had been turned inside out, showing a white side with a tentacle spiraling. Her hair, previously tangled and wild, now was pulled back to proudly show a face that writhed with parasites. "Demon worshipper," Valdia muttered to herself, her rage growing. How had she fooled Valdia? Had she been under an illusion spell? Or was Valdia just that eager to prove herself?

She could prove herself now. She cried out and ran for the woman, who turned her warhorse to meet her.

The white horse was out of nightmares. She stood sixteen hands high and wore heavy spiked armor, slicked with ichor and slime. Part of the beast's nose under the face plate was eaten away, and Valdia could see the worms that writhed there. The horse reared and struck out with her hooves, and the demon priestess pulled free her staff. It was tipped with copper ends coated in a slick film of something Valdia was pretty sure she didn't want touching her.

She parried the horse's strike with her trident, cutting a

shallow slice up the horse's foreleg. It grunted and struck out again. Valdia grimaced as the wound didn't bleed, but instead more sludge and worms fell out of the cut.

The priestess wasn't doing much but holding onto her steed with her legs and grasping her staff like a scepter. Her eyes were closed and she began chanting.

Valdia was distracted by the chanting, trying to identify what she was hearing. She took a swing at the rider's leg, but the horse came down on her, the hoof hitting her in the shoulder. Pain flared and she leaped backward in order to avoid the follow up bite. She changed her grip on her trident; she didn't think her shoulder was broken, but the pain was such that she couldn't move the arm for the moment. She made use of the range the weapon allowed, and swiped it at the horse's eyes.

She never knew whether she hit or not. The priestess' staff began to glow, and as the trident headed toward the horse's eyes, the beast exploded.

Out of instinct, Valdia closed her mouth and eyes as she was blown backward by the force, and landed heavily on her back about thirty feet down the road. She jumped up and opened her eyes. The priestess was standing in the midst of the carnage that used to be her mount, a cloud of spores surrounding her. Valdia saw some of the red spores coating her skin and armor. They could easily take root within her and make her the host to a darkly parasitic child, she knew, unless she found sunlight more powerful than the dim sun provided. The irony of the situation was not lost on her.

If she ran away from town, the spores would go with her. If she attacked the priestess, the spores would still go with her. There was not much else to do, she supposed, and ran forward.

A wave of nausea slowed her. She snarled and kept moving. She could fight monsters and undead with no problem, but this - rot, and pestilence, and foulness - was truly demon-wrought. One thing the nausea did was distract her from the pain in her shoulder. She actually appreciated the sensation,

and gripped her trident harder.

The priestess' eyes grew wide, and Valdia relished in her fear. Yes, that is the proper response, she thought. At about ten feet away, she brought the trident down and swung up, vaulting toward the priestess. As she came down, she drew her dagger and plunged it through the woman's ineffectual attempt to shield herself with her hands. The blade found a home where her collarbone met her neck, and she crumpled.

Valdia pulled the knife out with a practiced yank and cut the woman's throat for good measure. Worms and other writhing things wriggled out of the woman's body, and the pestilence began to feed.

Valdia took a step backward, hesitant, hoping it was over. She then realized the other raiders had gathered around them. She raised the dagger in a defensive posture, but the crowd didn't look at her. They were focused on the writhing corpse of their leader. Valdia chanced a look behind her, quickly, as the crowd, human and plant-beast alike, fell to their knees.

More worms and bugs had crawled from the priestess, more than seemed possible could be housed in her body, and they fed on her. As they fed, the mass got larger and larger until it looked like the size of a small horse instead of a woman.

The crowd began bowing and chanting. Valdia cursed and dashed out of the circle, grabbing her trident as she left. As she did, one of the little plant creatures ran forward and threw itself on the mass, and was immediately devoured. As if a dam had broken, the others ran forward, each eager to give themselves to whatever was being birthed.

The general store was near the town center, and Valdia ran inside. The door had been broken off its hinges and the inside was ransacked. Valdia betted that the creatures wouldn't have touched what she sought.

She took a moment to look sadly on the body of Tam, the store owner who had always glared at her even as he took her money. He lay over the counter, greenish fuzz already covering his body and forming on the pool of blood on the floor.

"I'm sorry, Tam," Valdia whispered, then vaulted the counter and found what she was looking for; Tam always had on hand several jugs of oil.

She hefted them and grabbed some torches from a barrel by the door.

Outside, hell had come to the small town. The raiders were gone, as were the horse and the priestess. The spores still hung in the air, probably taking root within Valdia's lungs by now, and in the center of town the mass still writhed, spitting worms and bugs, reaching the size of a war horse. It still seemed to chew and grow, and as long as it was concerned with that, Valdia was happy. She uncorked a jug and got as close to the mass as she dared and ran a quick circle around it, soaking the ground with oil. She lit the torch against one that still burned against an inn, and lit the ground. The dirt caught fire and surrounded the mass, which grew still, ignoring the change in its circumstance.

Valdia took her last jug and pierced the clay with her dagger, cracking the neck carefully. She held it in her good hand and heaved it toward the pestilence. Her aim was true; the jug landed just in front of the mass, shattering and spraying oil in all directions. She then took the torch and heaved it like she would do her trident, and it hit the center of the mass. It was devoured immediately, mindlessly, but then it caught fire and the tiny screams pierced the air. The ground rumbled, and Valdia decided she was done with this place.

She ran as the fire spread, the dying, screaming mass burned and flailed and spread its vermin everywhere to catch nearby buildings on fire. Valdia chanced some of the houses on the edge of town, to tell them to get out, but she found few survivors. Those she did find huddled in cellars and refused to admit her or even listen to her warnings.

Shaking her head, she left Sheol, wondering numbly if the spores would take root in her and if she would carry them to the child.

Unbelievably, her father stood by the child as she approached the outcropping where she'd hid him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Never happy to see me. Pity. I wanted to see how it turned out."

"I got covered in spores and all the raiders got voluntarily eaten up by some pestilent fungus demonic presence."

The vampire narrowed his eyes. "Are you injured?"

She shrugged, then winced. "Shoulder injury. And I don't know what the spores are." She laughed shallowly, then added bitterly, "I bet some sunlight would dry these spores right up."

She sat heavily next to the child, who slumbered.

"They will find poor purchase within you," Lavin said. "My heritage has given you yet another benefit."

She ignored the blatant fishing for compliments. "What about him?" She pointed to the baby. "Will they get on him?"

Lavin stroked his hairless face. "Let me put it this way. If you leave him here and do not touch him, will he survive?"

"No."

"If you take him with you, and you get spores on him, will he survive?"

"Maybe."

"Then your way is clear. Unless you'd like to offer him to me—"

"Don't even suggest such a thing," she muttered. "He's the only thing left from this travesty. If I lose him, I have nothing left."

"You do not even know his name."

"That's minor. I can give him a name."

Lavin laughed. "That will tie you to him. Is that what you want?"

Valdia indicated the burning town of Sheol below them. "That ties us together more than any name could. We are to blame for that travesty. I just hope he never finds out." She flexed her arm, and decided her shoulder was only bruised. "I am not going to raise him. I'm going to find a town, hopefully one that doesn't brand its orphans, and find someone else to raise him."

"Where will you go?"

“North. Blackbat is there, and an alchemist owes me a favor. He can help me get settled.”

Her father was silent, and she finally looked up, only to find him gone. “I guess we were done, then,” she said, sighing. She regarded the child for some time. “You look like a Bran.”

She looked at her hand, which had still managed not to wither from the application of the spores. She put the pad of her thumb in her mouth and nicked it with her fang.

Valdia flipped the sleeping infant over onto his stomach and looked at his brand. “And they call my kind barbaric,” she muttered as she passed her still-bleeding thumb over the brand. “Whatever protection my blood gives me, maybe it can help you too.” She paused, thinking, and then put her thumb to the child’s mouth. His sucking instinct took over even in his sleep and he swallowed some of her blood. It was all she knew to do.

Now she could smell him. She would be able to locate him, wherever he was. She could at least help the one surviving human in town, find him a real family, and warn them of the consequences of abandoning or harming the child.

“Let’s go, Bran,” she said, and hefted him to her good shoulder, leaving him well in reach of his favorite toy for when he woke up.

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The Plane of Shadows. The Death Land. The Forgotten. The Shadow Realm. It goes by many names but it all refers to one place, Shadowsfall. This place is the dark flip side to most fantasy realms. While most traditional fantasy settings roughly resemble medieval Earth, Shadowsfall can be described as its dark opposite. While many places seem familiar here, they are far deadlier. Undead roam the vast wastelands searching for living flesh to consume. The dim sun provides little in the way of true sunlight and no help in discerning objects at great distances. Many small towns where humans, elves, fetchlings, and others try to make a living for themselves both free from

the rule of the large fortified cities while avoiding the dangers this blighted land has to offer. These towns live and die by the heroes that guard them. Valdia, a half human-half vampire, is one such hero. Her kind are frequently resented by the living and viewed by the dead as something they can control. Most make a life looking for long forgotten treasure in the ruins that dart the landscape. A few find their place as protectors of towns and the large fortified cities, despite the prejudices from the town.

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About the Author: Mur Lafferty is a podcast producer and author. She is the host of I Should Be Writing, the Angry Robot Books podcast, and the editor and host of Escape Pod. She is the author of The Afterlife Series, Marco and the Red Granny, and Nanovor: Hacked!. She lives in Durham, NC with her husband and daughter.