

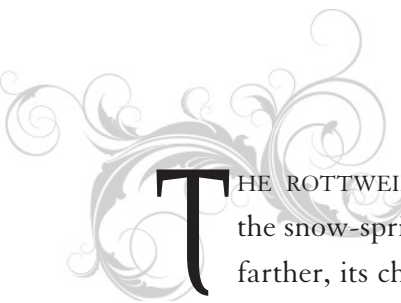
A decorative floral scrollwork design in a light gray color, featuring intricate, swirling patterns that frame the title text.

DARK GODDESS

SARWAT CHADDA

HYPERION
NEW YORK

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A decorative flourish consisting of intricate, swirling lines and floral motifs, rendered in a light gray color, positioned to the left of the first paragraph.

THE ROTTWEILER'S HEAD LAY IN A BUSH, JUST OFF the snow-sprinkled path. The body was several yards farther, its chest carved open so the ribs stuck out of the skin like a row of gruesome lollipops.

Billi covered her face with her sleeve. The cold night air was fresh with January frost, but the corpse stank of spilt intestines. The dog was, had been, brutishly big, but its size had not saved it from being torn apart.

“Well?” asked Pelleas as he searched farther along the path, scanning the ground with his flashlight. They were on the edge of the woods, spiny trees to one side and a low hedge bordering a white-coated field to the other. The dense snow clouds of the day had lifted, leaving the velvet-black sky hazy with starlight and the crescent moon. The sky over London never looked like this—vast and fathomless.

Billi snapped off a twig and used it to bind her long black

hair in a loose bun. She leaned over the corpse, directing her flashlight at the wounds. She'd seen the pictures of the other slaughtered victims, but the artificial eye of the lens had made them seem remote, fake even. This was sickeningly real. She poked at the body with a stick and grimaced as semi-congealed blood oozed from the gaping tears. They hadn't been made with knives—that much was obvious.

They'd been made with claws.

Without touching, Billi spread her hand carefully over the line of the wounds. Five ragged talons had been dragged through the dog's guts. Judging by the depth of the cuts, the beast was big. "Definitely a loony," she said.

Pelleas peered over his shoulder. "You mean *werewolf*, of course."

"Of course."

Pelleas was a stickler and didn't like the slang she and the other squires used. They had a whole directory for the Unholy. Loony. Fang-face. Goat-head. Casper. The list went on and on, each squire adding something new.

Billi straightened and adjusted the sword tucked into her belt, resting her hand on the leather-bound hilt. She'd brought a *wakizashi*, a single-edged Japanese short-sword. It had been her godfather's and she hoped that something of his strength still lingered in it. She clicked the blade out a few inches, just enough to see the flashlight glisten on the deadly, mirrorlike surface, then slammed it back in place.

"This the one?" Billi asked.

Pelleas inspected the corpse. He'd been hunting loonies most of his adult life, and to him a claw wound was as individual as a fingerprint. He lowered his fingers into the gaping holes, checking their depth. He smiled grimly.

"Yes, it's Old Gray," he said, wiping his bloody fingers in the snow. "At last." Pelleas scratched his arm and peered around. He'd come close to it in Dartmoor, only for it to escape and leave him with a scar that ran from his elbow to his wrist. Billi knew Pelleas had very personal reasons for hunting this creature down. He wasn't the first to disguise revenge as duty.

They'd been hunting the werewolf for over four months, following its bloody trail from Cornwall, Devon, through the southeast, all the way to here—Thetford Forest in East Anglia. Thirteen dead across five counties. Werewolves were territorial and only went off reservation if they were hunting something, or someone, very special.

"I wonder if it's looking for an Oracle?" Billi said as she peered into the thicket of branches, seeing nothing but darkness.

"Another one like Kay?" Pelleas tapped his rapier against his leg. "Doesn't seem likely, does it?"

No, it didn't. People like Kay only came along once in a lifetime, if you were lucky. Billi stared down at the dog, and her hand locked rigid around the sword hilt. Kay had been more than an Oracle. He'd been her best friend since they were ten, and the one person she'd cared about. Then

he'd turned into something more. But now he was lying in a grave on the Kent coast. For a moment Billi felt lost; she wiped her face, but there was nothing there to wipe away. Kay was gone and she had a job to do, here and now. Dwelling on the past solved nothing.

"You sure it's not one of the Bodmin pack?" Billi asked, wanting to think about something else. But Pelleas shook his head.

"The Bodmin werewolves aren't the problem. They haven't hunted humans for the last six years. Arthur saw to that, remember?"

"I remember." How could she not? Her father had fought the alpha male and chopped its right arm off. God, she could picture that severed limb, dripping blood all over the kitchen table, like it was yesterday. That night she'd learned her father and his friends weren't just porters at the Inns of Court. Maybe her life would have been better if they really were servants. Instead of being the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Jesus Christ and of the Temple of Solomon.

The Knights Templar.

Like her.

Ever since that duel, the Bodmin werewolves had stuck to the accord between Templar and wolf; the Templars left them alone, and they left humans alone.

No, this was a rogue, a wolf driven mad by bloodlust. It needed to be put down.

Billi scanned the bloodied snow around the body. A

row of pawprints ran alongside the ripped-up torso. The imprints were deep, just the balls of the feet with wide-splayed toes. The snow hadn't settled into them, meaning they'd been made recently. Billi shivered as she peered into the black net of bristly trees.

"I'm calling the others," she said. "The werewolf could still be—"

A branch creaked.

Instantly the Templars clicked off their flashlights.

Bad bad bad.

Ever so slowly, Billi and Pelleas sank down to their knees. Something snorted loudly, and a growl rattled out of the darkness. Billi went down onto her belly, burying herself in the muddy snow, using it to cover her scent. Some of it trickled down her collar, but she didn't dare shiver. Her fingers tightened around her scabbard and she forced every muscle still.

A brittle twig snapped as the loony came out on to the path, five or six yards from where they hid. All Billi could see was a huge black silhouette, almost seven feet tall, wrapped in sinewy muscle and its ragged pelt. It raised its face skyward and howled at the sickle-edged moon.

Old scars were carved into its mangy gray fur. Pelleas's monster, just as he'd described it. It stepped forward on reverse-kneed legs, coiled and ever ready to leap, its disproportionately long arms ending in uneven yellow-ivory talons. Its tail must have been bitten or torn off in some long-ago

fight, leaving just a stub. Billi took in the demonic green eyes that gazed at the moon. The werewolf turned its snout this way and that, its black lips peeled back into a grotesque grin, fangs slimy with spittle.

Billi pushed farther into the snow as the beast's eyes grazed her. The werewolf's body tensed, and its long hairs quivered as it gave a guttural hiss. Had it seen her? Billi dragged her hand over the sword hilt. Despite her training, despite the steel, she felt a cold dread slide over her, colder than the snow.

A bush shook as a second werewolf emerged. Billi let slip a sigh as Old Gray's attention shifted to the new arrival. This beast was in its prime, heavily muscled, its fur thick and red, claws bright and razor-sharp. Its eyes were the same green as the older monster's, and instantly Billi knew they were kin, not just by the eyes but in the way Big Red mimicked the elder's stance and movements. Old Gray grunted at the younger werewolf.

They launched forward, bursting through the hedge and loping over the field in a blur. Moonlight lay silver on their backs, but within seconds they were fading.

Pelleas sprang up. "Quick, Billi! What's over there?" He pointed his rapier toward the far edge of the field where the wolves had run.

Out there? Billi racked her brain. She'd checked the map only an hour ago. . . .

"A farmhouse." *Oh no.*

Pelleas swore and pushed himself through the hedge.

“Pelleas,” Billi hissed. “The others.” Their eyes met. Two knights might take one werewolf, but the odds shifted badly one-on-one. They should wait for reinforcements. But she could see the fire in his gaze. Pelleas was rake-thin, but as tough and fast as a whiplash. He wasn’t going to let the werewolves go, not after having lost them the last time.

“It’s our duty, Billi.” He jumped over the hedge and ran.

Duty. Always duty. It was their duty to fight, no matter what the odds, no matter who the foe. To fight and, if necessary, to die.

Wasn’t that what Templars did best? They called it martyrdom, but it amounted to the same thing. Wasn’t it one of the Templar Rules?

You shall keep the company of martyrs.

They needed backup, and now. Billi’s thumb hammered out FARMHOUSE on her mobile as she flicked her sword free from its scabbard. *Wakizashi* aloft, she turned her body sideways and tried to use her long legs to clamber over the hedge. It scratched and pulled at her, but eventually she broke through. She ran after Pelleas.