

COURT OF THE DEAD

SHADOWS

OF THE UNDERWORLD



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COURT^{OF THE} DEAD[®]
SHADOWS
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San Rafael, California



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The great promise of a benevolent celestial kingdom has long been dashed against the rocks of greed and corruption. Heaven and Hell are equally unscrupulous in their motives to acquire power, and their warmongering has torn asunder what was once a united realm. Both Heaven and Hell have been mired in the destructive fires of ceaseless conflict for eons.

The war engines of Heaven and Hell are fueled by etherea, the rare and precious energy of creation. Etherea is scarce in the Celestial Realms, but it congregates in abundance in the Mortal Realm, where it is carried within human souls.

The Mortal Realm is beyond the reach of the ravenous angels and demons, but there is one who can pass there freely: Death. The overlords of Heaven and Hell have enslaved Death to the singular task of harvesting the human souls that bear the etherea that fuels their war.

Heaven and Hell have burdened Death with this task of reaping souls, and for centuries he has obediently served. But Death is not a being of pure destruction. A spark of sympathy for the creative, finite mortal beings incited a flame within Death's heart. Armed with this noble purpose, Death began to plan a rebellion.

Death took a new name—Alltaker—and set about his ambition: to end the celestial war and restore balance to the universe.

He built the Underworld, one gravestone at a time. As fast as his scythe reaped the celestial harvest, his secret, subversive efforts kept pace. The Alltaker created the Court of the Dead, a council of unlikely champions, as his means to end the destructive task to which the Underworld was enslaved.

Unnoticed by the dismissive gaze of the celestials, the Land of the Dead flourished. Souls who slipped by the oppressors found refuge in the Underworld. These citizens of the Underworld call themselves mourners.

But the Alltaker was born of conflict. Although he sought to be a guardian, he could not deny his innate destructive nature. This dark nature that clutched at his heart, this dreadsgrasp, sought at every opportunity to turn the Underworld, like the Celestial Realms, into a place of wanton ruin.

To fall to the dreadsgrasp's choking grasp is to be forever removed from one's own identity and turned to monstrous purpose.

The dark shadow of the dreadsgrasp haunts every mourner in the Underworld.

Through great effort, the Underworld has fought off the dreadsgrasp and united around three factions—Bone, Flesh, and Spirit. While the factions' strengths complement one another, their differences threaten to divide them. And where there is division, the dreadsgrasp seeks the opportunity to strike. . . .





"THEY ARE CALLED THE SEVERED SHADOW."

"AND NO ONE SEES THEM COMING."

"ONLY THE BLOOD LEFT IN THEIR WAKE."

"RICH, CLOTTED MOURNERS ARE SUCKED DRY OF ETHEREA BY VICIOUS RAKERS."

AND ALL THAT REMAINS IS AN AIR OF MALICE.

EXRAILE, MY GLOOM, THEY CALL YOU THE THOUSAND LIES. I HOPE YOU EARN THE TITLE WITH THIS DREADFUL STORY.

I DO NOT LIKE THAT NAME, GETHSEMONI. EVEN LESS WHEN MY WHISPERS ARE TRUE.

I PREFER THAT YOUR JAW LOOSE COMFORTS, TRUTH OR LIE.

ALAS, TONIGHT IT BRINGS ONLY HORRORS.

"FOR IT IS NOT ONLY THE CLOTTED WHO HAVE BEEN TARGETED."

"THE POOR AND THE MOTTLED ARE DRAINED NEAR TO THE POINT OF THE LONGTRYP BUT ARE SPARED ITS FINAL RELIEF."

"THEY SUFFER THE FLESH TAIN?"

"YES, BUT I DO NOT UNDERSTAND IT. WHY WOULD RAKERS FEAST ON THOSE WHO ARE ALREADY STARVED?"

"THE UNDERWORLD IS NO STRANGER TO RAGE, NOR LUST FOR *ETHEREA*."

"LONE RAKERS WHO HAUNT THE DUSK PLAINS MAY WANDER INTO THE CITY, BUT THEY ARE NOT CAPABLE OF COORDINATED ATTACKS."

"NO. IT CAN MEAN ONLY ONE THING."

"THE SEVERED SHADOW HAS A LEADER."

"AND THAT LEADER HAS AN EVEN DARKER PURPOSE THAN WE THOUGHT."

"ENOUGH DANCING TO THE DIRGE, EXRAILE. YOU KNOW WHAT THIS IS, SO SAY IT."

"I DARE NOT GIVE VOICE TO SUCH AN AWFUL POWER."

"NEVERTHELESS, THE SEVERED SHADOW FORCES THE SOUND TO OUR LIPS."

"HMMM. THE MOTTLED PASS THROUGH THE CITY IN IRREGULAR WAYS..."

"ONE COULD DISPATCH OF A HUNDRED AND THEIR ABSENCE WOULD BE OF NO LASTING CONSEQUENCE."

"THERE CAN BE ONLY ONE REASON TO LEAVE THEM ALIVE--THE DEAD ARE SILENT."

"BUT MAIMED, SUFFERING DREGS ARE SURE TO TELL THEIR TALES."

"DESPITE ALL A *QUEEN'S* BURDEN, YOUR MIND STAKES THROUGH TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER."

"FEAR OF THE SEVERED SHADOW SPREADS AS MOLD ON FRUIT."

"FEAR AND RAGE."

"ETHEREA MADNESS FEETERS IN ILLVERNESS."

"WE CANNOT FIGHT THE INSATIABLE HUNGER IF WE WILL NOT SPEAK ITS NAME."

"THE DREADSGRIP."



BUT THE DREADSGRIP IS MORE PSYCHOSIS THAN PLAGUE.

ONLY **CELESTIALS** HAVE DOMINION OVER IT, AND I AM THE ONLY PURE CELESTIAL IN THE UNDERWORLD.

SO, THE QUESTION REMAINS, WHO COULD SPREAD IT WILLINGLY, AND HOW?

YOU **ARE** UNIQUE TO THE UNDERWORLD, MY MISTY HALLOW.

AND IT'S TRUE, COMMON RAKERS ARE ANIMALS WITH NO GRAND DESIGNS.

BUT LONG AGO, **DEATH'S** FIRST CREATIONS, THE REIVERS, TURNED TO ROT AND BAE.

THEY BECAME ONE WITH THE DREADSGRIP AND PERVERTED HIS SOUL HARVEST.



WHAT YOU SUGGEST COMES WITH CONSEQUENCES.

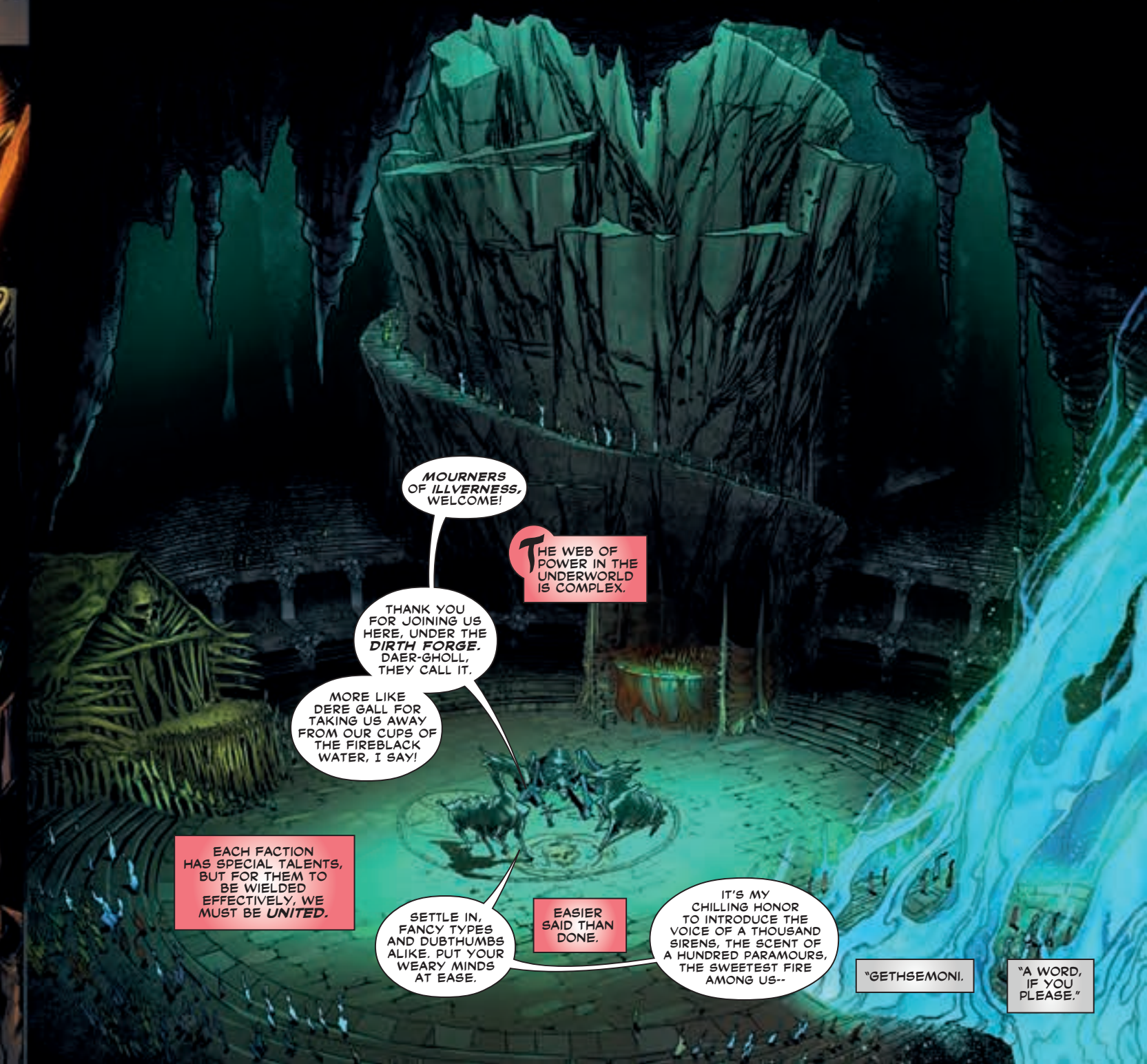
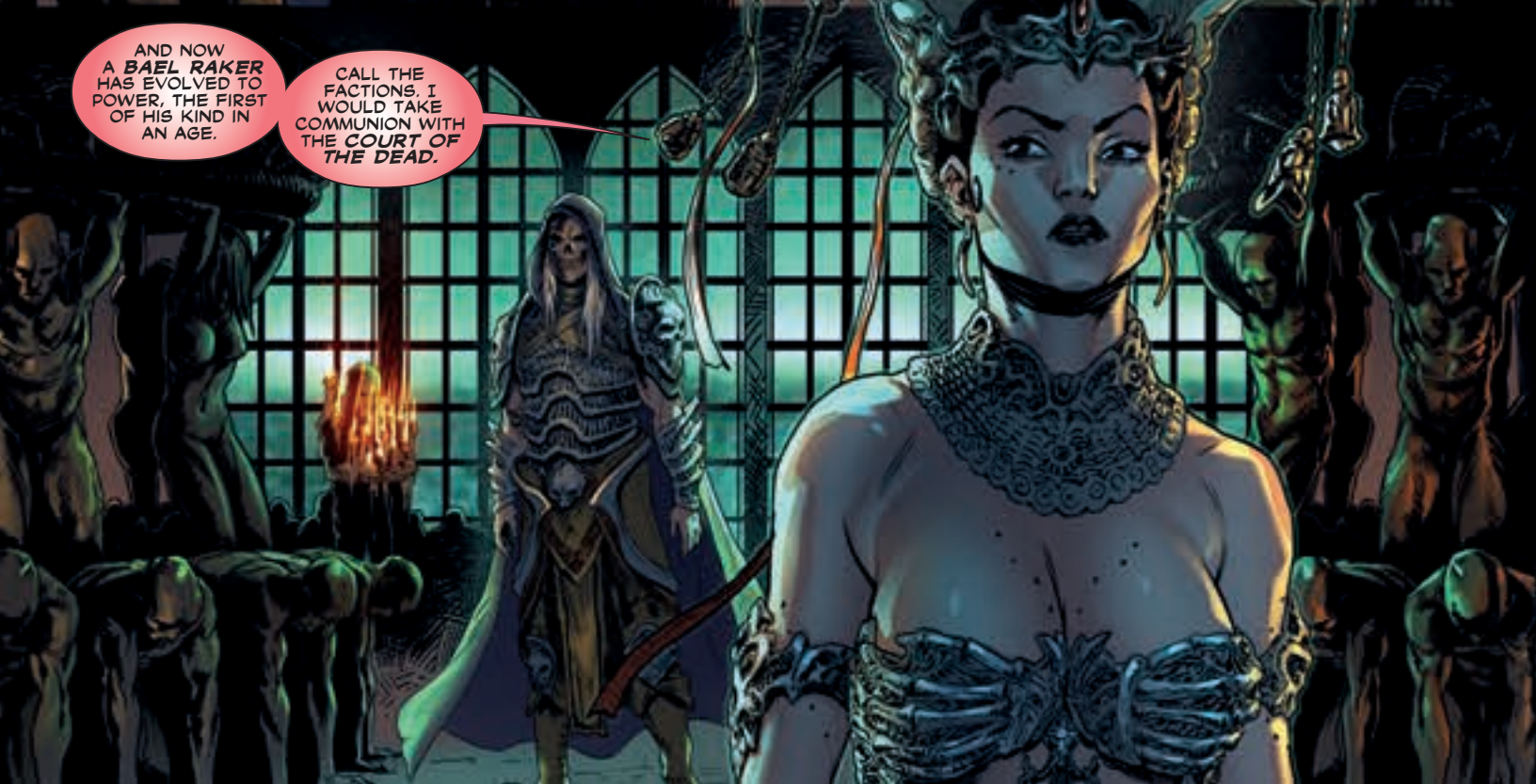
ARE YOU SURE?

I AM, AND I'LL PROVE IT.

THE SEVERED SHADOW IS SOWING DISCORD, AS THE BAE REIVERS ONCE DID.

AND NOW A **BAEL RAKER** HAS EVOLVED TO POWER, THE FIRST OF HIS KIND IN AN AGE.

CALL THE FACTIONS. I WOULD TAKE COMMUNION WITH THE COURT OF THE DEAD.



MOURNERS OF ILLVERNESS, WELCOME!

THE WEB OF POWER IN THE UNDERWORLD IS COMPLEX.

THANK YOU FOR JOINING US HERE, UNDER THE **DIRTH FORGE**. DAER-GHOLL, THEY CALL IT.

MORE LIKE DERE GALL FOR TAKING US AWAY FROM OUR CUPS OF THE FIREBLACK WATER, I SAY!

EACH FACTION HAS SPECIAL TALENTS, BUT FOR THEM TO BE WIELDED EFFECTIVELY, WE MUST BE **UNITED**.

SETTLE IN, FANCY TYPES AND DUBTHUMBS ALIKE. PUT YOUR WEARY MINDS AT EASE.

EASIER SAID THAN DONE.

IT'S MY CHILLING HONOR TO INTRODUCE THE VOICE OF A THOUSAND SIRENS, THE SCENT OF A HUNDRED PARAMOURS, THE SWEETEST FIRE AMONG US--

"GETHSEMONI.

"A WORD, IF YOU PLEASE."