

## **An Excerpt from Scourge: A Novel of Darkhurst**

**By Gail Z. Martin**

### **Chapter One**

A HEAVY IRON candleholder slammed against the wall, just missing Corran Valmonde's head.

“Son of a bitch!”

“Try not to make her mad, Corran.”

Rigan Valmonde knelt on the worn floor, drawing a sigil in charcoal, moving as quickly as he dared. Not quickly enough; a piece of firewood spun from the hearth and flew across the room, slamming him in the shoulder hard enough to make him grunt in pain.

“Keep her off me!” he snapped, repairing the smudge in the soot line. Sloppy symbols meant sloppy magic, and that could get someone killed.

“I would if I could see her.” Corran stepped away from the wall, raising his iron sword, putting himself between the fireplace and his brother. His breath misted in the unnaturally cold room and moisture condensed on the wavy glass of the only window.

“Watch where you step.” Rigan worked on the second sigil, widdershins from the soot marking, this one daubed in ochre. “I don't want to have to do this again.”

A small ceramic bowl careened from the mantle, and, for an instant, Rigan glimpsed a young woman in a blood-soaked dress, one hand clutching her heavily pregnant belly. The other hand slipped right through the bowl, even as the dish hurtled at Rigan's head. Rigan dove to one side and the bowl smashed against the opposite wall. At the same time, Corran's sword slashed down through the specter. A howl of rage filled the air as the ghost dissipated.

*You have no right to be in my home.* The dead woman's voice echoed in Rigan's mind.

*Get out of my head.*

*You are a confessor. Hear me!*

*Not while you're trying to kill my brother.*

“You’d better hurry.” Corran slowly turned, watching for the ghost.

“I can’t rush the ritual.” Rigan tried to shut out the ghost’s voice, focusing on the complex chalk sigil. He reached into a pouch and drew a thin curved line of salt, aconite, and powdered amanita, connecting the first sigil to the second, and the second to the third and fourth, working his way to drawing a complete warded circle.

The ghost materialized without warning on the other side of the line, thrusting a thin arm toward Rigan, her long fingers crabbed into claws, old blood beneath her torn nails. She opened a gash on Rigan’s cheek as he stumbled backward, grabbed a handful of the salt mixture and threw it. The apparition vanished with a wail.

“Corran!” Rigan’s warning came a breath too late as the ghost appeared right behind his brother, and took a swipe with her sharp, filthy nails, clawing Corran’s left shoulder.

*He wronged me. He let me die, let my baby die—* The voice shrieked in Rigan’s mind.

“Draw the damn signs!” Corran yelled. “I’ll handle her.” He wheeled, and before the blood-smearing ghost could strike again, the tip of his iron blade caught her in the chest. Her image dissipated like smoke, with a shriek that echoed from the walls.

*Avenge me.*

*Sorry, lady,* Rigan thought as he reached for a pot of pigment. *I’m stuck listening to dead people’s dirty little secrets and last regrets, but I just bury people. Take your complaints up with the gods.*

“Last one.” Rigan marked the rune in blue woad. The condensation on the window turned to frost, and he shivered. The ghost flickered, insubstantial but still identifiable as the young woman who had died bringing her stillborn child into the world. Her blood still stained the floor in the center of the warded circle and held her to this world as surely as her grief.

Wind whipped through the room, and would have scattered the salt and aconite line if Rigan had not daubed the mixture onto the floor in paste. Fragments of the broken bowl scythed through the air. The iron candle holder sailed across the room; Corran dodged it again, and a shard caught the side of his brother’s head, opening a cut on Rigan’s scalp, sending a warm rush of blood down the side of his face.

The ghost raged on, her anger and grief whipping the air into a whirlwind. *I will not leave without justice for myself and my son.*

*You don’t really have a choice about it,* Rigan replied silently and stepped across the warding, careful not to smudge the lines, pulling an iron knife from his belt. He nodded to Corran and together their voices rose as they chanted the burial rite, harmonizing out of long practice, the words of the Old Language as familiar as their own names.

The ghostly woman’s image flickered again, solid enough now that Rigan could see the streaks of blood on her pale arms and make out the pattern of her dress. She appeared right next to him, close enough that his shoulder bumped against her chest, and her mouth brushed his ear.

*’Twas not nature that killed me. My faithless husband let us bleed because he thought the child was not his own.*

The ghost vanished, compelled to reappear in the center of the circle, standing on the blood-stained floor. Rigan extended his trembling right hand and called to the magic, drawing on the

old, familiar currents of power. The circle and runes flared with light. The sigils burned in red, white, blue, and black, with the salt-aconite lines a golden glow between them.

Corran and Rigan's voices rose as the glow grew steadily brighter, and the ghost raged all the harder against the power that held her, thinning the line between this world and the next, opening a door and forcing her through it.

One heartbeat she was present; in the next she was gone, though her screams continued to echo.

Rigan and Corran kept on chanting, finishing the rite as the circle's glow faded and the sigils dulled to mere pigment once more. Rigan lowered his palm and dispelled the magic, then blew out a deep breath.

"That was not supposed to happen." Corran's scowl deepened as he looked around the room, taking in the shattered bowl and the dented candle holder. He flinched, noticing Rigan's wounds now that the immediate danger had passed.

"You're hurt."

Rigan shrugged. "Not as bad as you are." He wiped blood from his face with his sleeve, then bent to gather the ritual materials.

"She confessed to you?" Corran bent to help his brother, wincing at the movement.

"Yeah. And she had her reasons," Rigan replied. He looked at Corran, frowning at the blood that soaked his shirt. "We'll need to wash and bind your wounds when we get back to the shop."

"Let's get out of here."

They packed up their gear, but Corran did not sheath his iron sword until they were ready to step outside. A small crowd had gathered, no doubt drawn by the shrieks and thuds and the flares of light through the cracked, dirty window.

“Nothing to see here, folks,” Corran said, exhaustion clear in his voice. “We’re just the undertakers.”

Once they were convinced the excitement was over, the onlookers dispersed, leaving one man standing to the side. He looked up anxiously as Rigan and Corran approached him.

“Is it done? Is she gone?” For an instant, eagerness shone too clearly in his eyes. Then his posture shifted, shoulders hunching, gaze dropping, and mask slipped back into place. “I mean, is she at rest? After all she’s been through?”

Before Corran could answer, Rigan grabbed the man by the collar, pulled him around the corner into an alley and threw him up against the wall. “You can stop the grieving widower act,” he growled. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Corran standing guard at the mouth of the alley, gripping his sword.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” The denial did not reach the man’s eyes.

“You let her bleed out, you let the baby die, because you didn’t think the child was yours.” Rigan’s voice was rough as gravel, pitched low so that only the trembling man could hear him.

“She betrayed me—”

“No.” The word brought the man up short. “No, if she had been lying, her spirit wouldn’t have been trapped here.” Rigan slammed the widower against the wall again to get his attention.

“Rigan—” Corran cautioned.

“Lying spirits don’t get trapped.” Rigan had a tight grip on the man’s shirt, enough that he could feel his body trembling. “Your wife. Your baby. Your fault.” He stepped back and let the man down, then threw him aside to land on the cobblestones.

“The dead are at peace. You’ve got the rest of your life to live with what you did.” With that, he turned on his heel and walked away, as the man choked back a sob.

Corran sheathed his sword. “I really wish you’d stop beating up paying customers,” he grumbled as they turned to walk back to the shop.

“Wish I could. Don’t know how to stop being confessor to the dead, not sure what else to do once I know the dirt,” Rigan replied, an edge of pain and bitterness in his voice.

“So the husband brought us in to clean up his mess?” Corran winced as he walked; the gashes on his arm and back had to be throbbing.

“Yeah.”

“I like it better when the ghosts confess something like where they buried their money,” Corran replied.

“So do I.”

The sign over the front of the shop read *Valmonde Undertakers*. Around back, in the alley, the sign over the door just said *Bodies*. Corran led the way, dropping the small rucksack containing their gear just inside the entrance, and cursed under his breath as the strap raked across raw shoulders.

“Sit down,” Rigan said, nodding at an unoccupied mortuary table. He tied his brown hair into a queue before washing his hands in a bucket of fresh water drawn from the pump. “Let me have a look at those wounds.”

Footsteps descended the stairs from the small apartment above.

“You’re back? How bad was it?” Kell, the youngest of the Valmonde brothers, stopped halfway down the stairs. He had Corran’s coloring, taking after their father, with dark blond hair that curled when it grew long. Rigan’s brown hair favored their mother. All three brothers’ blue eyes were the same shade, making the resemblance impossible to overlook.

“Shit.” Kell jumped the last several steps as he saw his brothers’ injuries. He grabbed a bucket of water and scanned a row of powders and elixirs, grabbing bottles and measuring out with a practiced eye and long experience. “I thought you said it was just a banishing.”

“It was *supposed* to be ‘just’ a banishing,” Rigan said as Corran stripped off his bloody shirt. “But it didn’t go entirely to plan.” He soaked a clean cloth in the bucket Kell held and wrung it out.

“A murder, not a natural death,” Corran said, and his breath hitched as Rigan daubed his wounds. “Another ghost with more power than it should have had.”

Rigan saw Kell appraising Corran’s wounds, glancing at the gashes on Rigan’s face and hairline.

“Mine aren’t as bad,” Rigan said.

“When you’re done with Corran, I’ll take care of them,” Kell said. “So I’m guessing Mama’s magic kicked in again, if you knew about the murder?”

“Yeah,” Rigan replied in a flat voice.

Undertaking, like all the trades in Ravenwood, was a hereditary profession. That it came with its own magic held no surprise; all the trades did. The power and the profession were passed down from one generation to the next. Undertakers could ease a spirit’s transition to the realm beyond, nudge a lost soul onward, or release one held back by unfinished business. Sigils, grave markings, corpse paints, and ritual chants were all part of the job. But none of the other undertakers that Rigan knew had a mama who was part Wanderer. Of the three Valmonde brothers, only Rigan had inherited her ability to hear the confessions of the dead, something not even the temple priests could do. His mother had called it a gift. Most of the time, Rigan

regarded it as a burden, sometimes a curse. Usually, it just made things more complicated than they needed to be.

“Hold still,” Rigan chided as Corran winced. “Ghost wounds draw taint.” He wiped away the blood, cleaned the cuts, and then applied ointment from the jar Kell handed him. All three of them knew the routine; they had done this kind of thing far too many times.

“There,” he said, binding up Corran’s arm and shoulder with strips of gauze torn from a clean linen shroud. “That should do it.”

Corran slid off the table to make room for Rigan. While Kell dealt with his brother’s wounds, Corran went to pour them each a whiskey.

“That’s the second time this month we’ve had a spirit go from angry to dangerous,” Corran said, returning with their drinks. He pushed a glass into Rigan’s hand, and set one aside for Kell, who was busy wiping the blood from his brother’s face.

“I’d love to know why.” Rigan tried not to wince as Kell probed his wounds. The deep gash where the pottery shard had sliced his hairline bled more freely than the cut on his cheek. Kell swore under his breath as he tried to staunch the bleeding.

“It’s happening all over Ravenwood, and no one in the Guild seems to know a damn thing about why or what to do about it,” Corran said, knocking his drink back in one shot. “Old Daniels said he’d heard his father talk about the same sort of thing, but that was fifty years ago. So why did the ghosts *stop* being dangerous then, and what made them *start* being dangerous now?”

Rigan started to shake his head, but stopped at a glare from Kell, who said, “Hold still.”

He let out a long breath and complied, but his mind raced. Until the last few months, banishings were routine. Violence and tragedy sometimes produced ghosts, but in all the years

since Rigan and Corran had been undertakers—first helping their father and uncles and then running the business since the older men had passed away—banishings were usually uneventful.

*Make the marks, sing the chant, the ghost goes on and we go home. So what's changed?*

“I’m sick of being handed my ass by things that aren’t even solid,” Rigan grumbled. “If this keeps up, we’ll need to charge more.”

Corran snorted. “Good luck convincing Guild Master Orlo to raise the rates.”

Rigan’s eyes narrowed. “Guild Master Orlo can dodge flying candlesticks and broken pottery. See how he likes it.”

“Once you’ve finished grumbling we’ve got four new bodies to attend to,” Kell said. “One’s a Guild burial and the others are worth a few silvers a piece.” Rigan did not doubt that Kell had negotiated the best fees possible, he always did.

“Nice,” Rigan replied, and for the first time noticed that there were corpses on the other tables in the workshop, covered with sheets. “We can probably have these ready to take to the cemetery in the morning.”

“One of them was killed by a guard,” Kell said, turning his back and keeping his voice carefully neutral.

“Do you know why?” Corran tensed.

“His wife said he protested when the guard doubled the ‘protection’ fee. Guess the guard felt he needed to be taught a lesson.” Bribes were part of everyday life in Ravenwood, and residents generally went along with the hated extortion. Guilds promised to shield their members from the guards’ worst abuses, but in reality, the Guild Masters only intervened in the most extreme cases, fearful of drawing the Lord Mayor’s ire. At least, that had been the excuse when Corran sought justice from the Undertakers’ Guild for their father’s murder, a fatal beating on flimsy charges.

Rigan suspected the guards had killed their father because the neighborhood looked up to him, and if he'd decided to speak out in opposition, others might have followed. Even with the passing years, the grief remained sharp, the injustice bitter.

Kell went to wash his hands in a bucket by the door. "Trent came by while you and Corran were out. There's been another attack, three dead. He wants you to go have a look and take care of the bodies."

Rigan and Corran exchanged a glance. "What kind of attack?"

Kell sighed. "What kind do you think? Creatures." He hesitated. "I got the feeling from Trent this was worse than usual."

"Did Trent say what kind of creatures?" Corran asked, and Rigan picked up on an edge to his brother's voice.

Kell nodded. "Ghouls."

Corran swore under his breath and looked away, pushing back old memories. "All right," he said, not quite managing to hide a shudder. "Let's go get the bodies before it gets any later. We're going to have our hands full tonight."

"Kell and I can go, if you want to start on the ones here," Rigan offered.

Corran shook his head. "No. I'm not much use as an undertaker if I can't go get the corpses no matter how they came to an end," Corran said.

Rigan heard the undercurrent in his tone. Kell glanced at Rigan, who gave a barely perceptible nod, warning Kell to say nothing. *Corran's dealing with the memories the best way he knows how*, Rigan thought. *I just wish there weren't so many reminders.*

"I'll prepare the wash and the pigments, and get the shrouds ready," Kell said. "I'll have these folks ready for your part of the ritual by the time you get back." He gestured to the bodies

already laid out. “Might have to park the new ones in the cart for a bit and switch out—tables are scarce.”

Corran grimaced. “That’ll help.” He turned to Rigan. “Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

Kell gave them the directions Trent had provided. Corran took up the long poles of the undertaker’s cart, which clattered behind him as they walked. Rigan knew better than to talk to his brother when he was in this kind of mood. At best he could be present, keep Corran from having to deal with the ghouls’ victims alone, and sit up with him afterward.

*It’s only been three months since he buried Jora, since we almost had to bury him. The memory’s raw, although he won’t mention it. But Kell and I both hear what he shouts in his sleep. He’s still fighting them in his dreams, and still losing.*

Rigan’s memories of that night were bad enough—Trent stumbling to the back door of the shop, carrying Corran, bloody and unconscious; Corran’s too-still body on one of the mortuary tables; Kell praying to Doharmu and any god who would listen to stave off death; Trent, covered in Corran’s blood, telling them how he had found their brother and Jora out in the tavern barn, the ghoul that attacked them already feasting on Jora’s fresh corpse.

Rigan never did understand why Trent had gone to the barn that night, or how he managed to fight off the ghoul. Corran and Jora, no doubt, had slipped away for a tryst, expecting the barn to be safe and private. Corran said little of the attack, and Rigan hoped his brother truly did not remember all the details.

“We’re here.” Corran’s rough voice and expressionless face revealed more than any words.

Ross, the farrier, met them at the door. “I’m sorry to have to call you out,” he said.

“It’s our job,” Corran replied. “I’m just sorry the godsdamned ghouls are back.”

“Not for long,” Ross said under his breath. A glance passed between Corran and Ross. Rigan filed it away to ask Corran about later.

The stench hit Rigan as soon as they entered the barn. Two horses lay gutted in their stalls and partially dismembered. Blood splattered the wooden walls and soaked the sawdust. Flies swarmed on what the ghouls had left behind.

“They’re over here,” Ross said. The bodies of two men and a woman had been tossed aside like discarded bones at a feast. Rigan swallowed down bile. Corran paled, his jaw working as he ground his teeth.

Rigan and Corran knew better than most what remained of a corpse once a ghoul had finished with it. Belly torn open to get to the soft organs; ribs split wide to access the heart. How much of the flesh remained depended on the ghoul’s hunger and whether or not it feasted undisturbed. Given the state these bodies were in—their faces were the only parts left untouched—the ghouls had taken their time. Rigan closed his eyes and took a deep breath, willing himself not to retch.

“What about the creatures?” Corran asked.

“Must have fled when they heard us coming,” Ross said. “We were making plenty of noise.” Ross handed them each a shovel, and took one up himself. “There’s not much left, and what’s there is... loose.”

“Who were they?” Rigan asked, not sure Corran felt up to asking questions.

Ross swallowed hard. “One of the men was my cousin, Tad. The other two were customers. They brought in the two horses late in the day, and my cousin said he’d handle it.”

Rigan heard the guilt in Ross’s tone.

“Guild honors?” Corran asked, finding his voice, and Ross nodded.

Rigan brought the cart into the barn, stopping as close as possible to the mangled corpses. The bodies were likely to fall to pieces as soon as they began shoveling.

“Yeah,” Ross replied, getting past the lump in his throat. “Send them off right.” He shook his head. “They say the monsters are all part of the Balance, like life and death cancel each other out somehow. That’s bullshit, if you ask me.”

The three men bent to their work, trying not to think of the slippery bones and bloody bits as bodies. *Carcasses. Like what’s left when the butcher’s done with a hog, or the vultures are finished with a cow*, Rigan thought. The barn smelled of blood and entrails, copper and shit. Rigan looked at what they loaded into the cart. Only the skulls made it possible to tell that the remains had once been human.

“I’m sorry about this, but I need to do it—to keep them from rising as ghouls or restless spirits,” Rigan said. He pulled a glass bottle from the bag at the front of the wagon, and carefully removed the stopper, sprinkling the bodies with green vitriol to burn the flesh and prevent the corpses from rising. The acid sizzled, sending up noxious tendrils of smoke. Rigan stoppered the bottle and pulled out a bag of the salt-aconite-amanita mixture, dusting it over the bodies, assuring that the spirits would remain at rest.

Ross nodded. “Better than having them return as one of those... things,” he said, shuddering.

“We’ll have them buried tomorrow,” Corran said as Rigan secured their grisly load.

“That’s more than fair,” Ross agreed. “Corran—you know if I’d had a choice about calling you—”

“It’s our job.” Corran cut off the apology. Ross knew about Jora’s death. That didn’t change the fact that they were the only Guild undertakers in this area of Ravenwood, and Ross was a friend.

“I’ll be by tomorrow afternoon with the money,” Ross said, accompanying them to the door.

“We’ll be done by then,” Corran replied. Rigan went to pick up the cart’s poles, but Corran shook his head and lifted them himself.

Rigan did not argue. *Easier for him to haul the wagon; that way he doesn’t have to look at the bodies and remember when Jora’s brother brought her for burial.*

Rigan felt for the reassuring bulk of his knife beneath his cloak—a steel blade rather than the iron weapon they used in the banishing rite. No one knew the true nature of the monsters, or why so many more had started appearing in Ravenwood of late. Ghouls weren’t like angry ghosts or restless spirits that could be banished with salt, aconite, and iron. Whatever darkness spawned them and the rest of their monstrous brethren, they were creatures of skin and bone; only beheading would stop them.

Rigan kept his blade sharpened.