

**HASELEY  
HINTON**



**Shadow  
of the  
Seacrow**

*An exclusive extract from the novel (2 of 2)*

## A STORM BREWS IN MORTH

The seacrow had flown southwest, struggling to keep ahead of the wall of smoke-grey storm clouds that was closing from the north. It had taken him more than two days, despite flying cross-country and ignoring the roads and settlements where he might otherwise have picked up some easy crumbs.

As he soared over the peaks of the Dinash Mountains, with the rain lashing against his feathers, balancing on the updraught of air sweeping up the mountain sides, he looked across to where the Khoulan monastery sat serenely on the fertile lowlands between the mountains and the sea. There was smoke coming from the monastery buildings. This did not alarm the seacrow. The weather was chilly and smoke to a seacrow meant cooking and food scraps to eat. But as he drew closer, it became obvious that the smoke was coming not from a chimney but from the still smouldering timbers of one of the four buildings that formed the quadrangle. The haystack, which had been in the corner, was completely gone, while the feed store lay empty, its splintered door leaning crookedly on twisted hinges.

Approaching the monastery slowly from the north was a group of about a dozen riders on very large cam-horses, led by a rider bearing the king's standard. In the centre of the monastery courtyard was a coffin draped with a deep blue cloth bearing the royal insignia on one corner. Two more undraped coffins waited under the shelter of the cloister eaves. Monks on the top of the north wall of the monastery shouted the instruction for the gates below them to be opened. This was unusual, as the gates were normally left open throughout the daylight hours. With visitors approaching, the seacrow hoped there would be food on offer before too long and he

alighted on the ridge of an unburnt part of the roof.

The king handed his spear and sword to one of his soldiers as he approached the monastery gate. Each soldier then deposited his weapons against the outside of the wall before riding behind the king into the courtyard. Once inside, the entourage parted, the riders guiding their horses to take up positions in two lines on either side of the quadrangle, at a respectful distance from the coffin. The king dismounted, removed his helmet and stepped forwards.

“Dear, gentle Uncle Calim,” he said quietly. Then he raised his head and shouted, “Those Xouthan dogs will pay for this!”

The Khoulan monks said nothing. They had begun to gather in the courtyard and now stood in small groups facing the coffin of their dead mattouk with bowed heads.

“Who is leader here now?” the king asked of the silent clerics.

The scripture master looked at the music master with raised eyebrows. The music master quickly shook his head and looked down at the ground. The scripture master was left to speak for the community.

“Kesh of Khoulan was appointed our mattouk designate,” he told the king.

“Excellent,” said the king. “And where is my nephew? I do not see him here.”

“Kesh of Khoulan is on sabbatical with the Community of the Sacred Mountain,” the scripture master told him. “We sent word, of course, but the answer back was that Kesh of Khoulan is presently away completing a task for the Prophet of the Burning Ship. A messenger has been dispatched to find him ...” The scripture master coughed and quickly corrected himself. “That is, I mean, to give him the news. We hope every day to see his prompt return.”

“Perhaps we had best not wait on a man whose whereabouts

do not seem to be known.” said the king signalling to his men.

Six of his followers dismounted and stepped up to the coffin. Some of the monks recognised that it was the king’s eldest son acting as lead bearer and were pleased to see their last mattouk so honoured.

“Let’s get on with it,” the king said to the monks. “Where do you want him?”

After a little hesitation amongst the monks, the scripture master again took the lead.

“This way,” he said, and turned to go out of the north gate.

He led the procession round the walls to the burial ground on the eastern side of the monastery, where a grave had been dug in readiness against the eastern wall. The coffin was rested at the grave side while the scripture master recited the traditional funeral texts. The music master gathered the choir to deliver the haunting Morthern ‘Chant for the Dead’. Then the coffin was lowered into the ground.

A final prayer was said, petitioning Harg to accept the soul of his departed servant, as the rich red Khoulan soil was thrown back into the grave pit. Garlands of greenery were then heaped onto the resulting mound. The heavy mountain of cloud that had chased the seacrow from the north could wait no longer and burst its first wintry splashes onto the heads of the funeral party just as the wreaths were being laid.

“Will you come in for refreshment?” the scripture master asked the king nervously.

“Thank you,” said the king and he followed the scripture master back into the courtyard. The empty trestle table that had borne the coffin was quickly taken apart and carried into the refectory, where the mattouk’s table was already laid with bread, cheeses and cold meats underneath a bright white

cloth. The monks had prepared cold food in advance, as the exact time of the king's arrival could only be guessed at. The music master and the scripture master both sat with the king and his son to eat.

"I want you to come back with me to Ahbresk," the king said, including both monks in his gaze. "You will be safer there. You are too near the coast here. Too short a ride for marauders landing on the beaches. I can find you temporary accommodation at the palace until we can build you a new monastery."

"Oh, your majesty, that will not be possible," said the scripture master bravely.

"But I will make it possible," said the king. "What do you mean?"

"We are a Community of the Sacred Mountain. The shadow of the Sacred Mountain touches the bell tower of the meditation hall on solstice day. We are already as far from the Sacred Mountain as we can be."

"Very well," the king sighed, a little annoyed. "Then I'd better send you a cohort of soldiers to make sure you don't get attacked again."

The music master coughed uncomfortably, not quite brave enough to speak.

"It's alright," the king assured him. "They will build their barracks outside your sacred ground."

At this point a young monk arrived with a large teapot. The king waved him away.

"Have you nothing stronger?"

The scripture master nodded to the monk who returned with a flagon of wine from the cellar. This proved to be more acceptable.

"Is there anything else you need, besides protection?" the king asked the scripture master.

"Our grain has been taken and all our hay burned."

“Take note, Emish,” the king said to his son. “I may not remember all I am told if this wine is as good as it tastes.”

“It is our best vintage,” the scripture master said.

“Anything else you need?” asked the king.

“Merciful Harg spared our kitchen stores,” said the scripture master.

He went on to describe the attack, which had come at night.

“We think it started with lighted arrows sent into the hay stack. It was burning fiercely before anyone awoke. We think burning hay must have wafted up onto the roof where the mattouk’s quarters were housed. Two monks went up to get him out, but they did not return. The fire was too fierce, or perhaps they were suffocated by the smoke. The rest of us drew buckets of water from the well and passed them along a line. Two brave young fellows climbed up onto the roof of the meditation hall and threw water down onto the mattouk’s quarters. They succeeded in quelling the flames eventually, but not before the three inside had perished. It was not until morning that we found the grain store empty and arrowheads in the yard. We did not realise that the fire had been the result of a raid until it was all over.”

“You can rest assured your mattouk’s death will not go unanswered,” the king said grimly.

Neither monk spoke to remind the king that a peace-loving mattouk of a community which did not allow its members to bear arms, nor even allow arms to be born within its gates, would not want his death to be avenged. They shifted uncomfortably in their seats, both thinking the same thought, but neither opening his mouth. This was, after all, a family matter for the king and neither dared to comment on it.

“Well, thank you for your hospitality,” said the king after his second flagon of wine. “I will leave four of my guards to

stay with you until the soldiers get here. Would it be possible to house them within your walls?”

“If they continue to leave their arms outside, as they have done today,” answered the scripture master.

“Master,” the king said, fixing the old man solemnly in his gaze. “I want to appoint you temporary mattouk to take charge until my nephew returns.”

The scripture master shook his head energetically. “No, no, Your Majesty. I am too old.”

“Then it must be you, music master,” the king said, turning to the other senior cleric.

He also shook his head. “I am not worthy of that task, your majesty.”

“Then you will have to decide by vote. Let each monk in the community write down the name of the man he would follow. Let no man write down his own name. Count the votes for each name. Announce the results. Repeat the process until one man has the votes of more than half your community and let that be a binding decision. You must have a leader by the time I send your soldiers, for their captain must know which of you to answer to.”

In the courtyard one of the king’s men brought an arrowhead to show him and spoke to him in the Morthern language.

“Your Majesty, these arrows are barbed like the Cweel arrowheads,” he said. “I’ll warrant these were islander marauders.”

“That’s as maybe,” said the king, “but you can be sure who put them up to it. I heard the Xouthan snake has betrothed his daughter to that obnoxious chieftan’s son, Thrull of the Southern Isles, the one who goes round calling himself the Prince of Benethan. That’s where this attack has come from, make no mistake. The Xouthan emperor wants the Morthern monks turned off the Sacred Mountain and access denied to

all Mortherners, as it was before the last war. We will have to put a stop to his ambitions before they go any further. I want a plan that we can put into action by the first bud of spring. Emish, my son, we have some talking to do.”

The seacrow watched the king and his son leave the monastery and ride northwards across the lowlands, bowing their heads against the sleety rain. They followed their standard bearer, but had four fewer soldiers with them. The crow came down from the roof to glean what he could from the scuffed-up earth of the courtyard. He then flew up to the roof again to spend the night against the monastery’s kitchen chimney. He crouched up against the south side sheltering from the wind. He was disappointed to find the weather almost as bad at Khoulan as it had been in Enaha.

The next morning he set off to fly south for Xoutha, where the winters were always milder.

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THE DEBUT NOVEL BY HASELEY HINTON

# Shadow of the Seacrow

The deeply spiritual peoples of Morth and Xoutha are divided by their beliefs in different gods. But they both lay claim to the Sacred Mountain and to the mysterious Ship Prophet who has lived there for generations. Now, as a new war for the mountain threatens to erupt, the Ship Prophet sets a task for two young pilgrims. A trainee Xouthan priestess and a Morthern monk must journey together to reveal a truth that could change their world forever.

*Shadow of the Seacrow* is a compelling coming of age story set in a hauntingly realised mythical world. Hinton's extraordinary debut novel is both richly imaginative and profoundly human in scope.



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ISBN: 978-0-9561135-0-4



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£7.99

Printed on  
recycled paper

