

# The Committed

A Doskvol Story by Andrew Shields

*The Forgotten Gods are nonsense. For example, the Radiant Word is a 'god' referenced in the mad prophet Dyzask's third cycle. Scholars and mystics interpreted a passage to mean the Radiant Word was a herald who brought secrets back from Behind the Mirror. Later analysis of context, linguistic patterns, and translation idiosyncrasies proved that Dyzask was referring to his writing as the Radiant Word.*

*The faithful in several mystery cults dedicated to this false god solemnly swore that they had encountered the Radiant Word. It was real, it changed their lives, it told them secrets, and it granted them power. If these fools will go all in and double down on a god who was based on a translation error, then no spooky mask is too silly to attract a gullible cult.*

*From the Church of Ecstasy's lecture series "Let Us Pray" by Mother Eldeen*

**Chime Era Bookstore, Fogcrest, Silkshore.  
19<sup>th</sup> Kalivet, 849. Eleventh Hour past dawn.**

The ruddy-faced barman beamed a smile at the slim woman as she strolled up to the counter. "Steward Bel," he said, "I've readied booth six as you asked. Your nephew has not yet arrived."

"Alman, I've told you," the steward said with a bemused smile, "you can call me Nebs. I prefer it."

"I've noticed that just about everyone in the city prefers a nickname," Alman observed. "Seems a strange practice. I have always been comfortable with my name. Had I a title as prestigious as yours, I would certainly use it," he nodded.

A sardonic smile shadowed her narrow features. "I'm sure you would, *Alman*," she said. "This city's history rests on its legends, and both are full of people who are targeted by ghosts, rituals, and creditors. All of those are easier to dodge if you keep your real name tucked in."

"Sure," he grinned, bobbing his head. "I have noticed just about everyone in Doskvol has to deal with all three of those things as well." He put a saucer with her favorite nibbles on the counter, along with a small cup of very dark coffee. She took them with a nod, and headed for booth six.

The curtains were pulled back, so as she settled in she took in the side aisle with curtained booths, the public seating area, the bookstore section, and the frosted glass of the front door. Outside, the spring winds were raw and wet. The patrons who pushed in needed several moments to stow bumbershoots, shrug off oilcloths and greatcoats, manage their possessions on their persons and into the coatroom, and orient on their next steps. The Chime Era Bookstore's high ceiling resisted warming, making the fireplace at one end of the public seating very popular. Dusk weighed the shadows outside so they sunk out of the afternoon towards night.

A slim man wearing subtly expensive tailored clothes shouldered in out of the dimness outside, shedding his hat and coat with graceful ease and tossing them to the attendant as he unerringly closed in on the booths in the back. Nebs could not help but smile, and she rose from the booth to meet him.

"Kreeger," she said, almost sincere, "what a delight. Always happy to see one of my favorite nephews."

"One of?" he protested, eyebrow raised, before he gave her a brief hug and held her at arm's length. "Who is my competition?" he demanded.

"Regulus has three adorable children and an impossibly sweet gift with the harpsichord," Nebs reflected.

“Always Regulus,” Kreeger growled playfully, and he slid into the booth. Nebs took her position opposite him, interlaced her fingers, and leaned forward expectantly.

“Oh, just straight to business? I thought we’d have some more banter, smalltalk, you know,” Kreeger said, looking pale, sleek, and almost predatory in spite of the warming efforts of the booth table lamp.

“Hug, Regulus, we did that,” Nebs said crisply. “You want something and I’ve got my life to live, so let’s get this over with.”

“Sure,” Kreeger said, leaning back. “We want a blessing from the Wire Thicket.” He shrugged. “I ask you to go on our behalf to acquire it.”

“And what’s the Wire Thicket?” Nebs asked, examining the savory bits of fish, mushroom, and egg variously flavored on the small plate before her. She picked up a small two-tined fork, not looking at her nephew.

“It’s a cult,” Kreeger replied. “You must take a gift from us to the Hunter of the Fallows in an alley behind Forked Row somewhere; the locals can probably direct you. The Hunter sets the meet, then you represent us to the leader and get a blessing. Then bring it to me.” He shrugged. “You could do it in your sleep.”

“I don’t run errands for you,” she said quietly, still examining her plate. “If you think what you’re suggesting sounds simple then you really have no business pursuing a blessing.” She leaned back and looked him in the eye. “You say ‘we’ and ‘us’ pretty smoothly. Who is that exactly?”

He paused. “You know who I mean,” he said. “The family crew. The Silkworms.” He raised his eyebrows. “I’m a criminal fixer. My uncle is the boss. My cousin is a thief and a killer. We commit crimes and we manage a criminal enterprise.” He watched her for a moment. “I mean, is that what you were after? You wanted me to say it?”

“Yes,” she said shortly. “This family is still distinct from the activities of a few of our most notorious members.”

“If you say so,” Kreeger shrugged. “So, will you do it?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why don’t you do it? Or send one of your many agents? If they don’t like criminals, then I don’t want to pursue a blessing under false pretenses.” She cocked her head to the side. “Cults tend to cultivate unstable individuals who may not react well to being deceived, and I am not as well protected as you are.”

Kreeger looked her in the eye, weighing his response. “Cults also have their own esoteric rules,” he said. “The Wire Thicket is exclusively women, and they will only deal with women. I mean, sure, we have women; spies, adepts, even a Whisper. However, for the blessing to, you know, *count* somehow, it has to be given to someone who is in the same ‘stream of blood’ as the leader. And of all the various ladies in our family,” he shrugged, “you’re the one I trust for an errand like this.” He suppressed a quick smile. “Unless you think I should involve Regulus, see if one of his daughters is up for it.”

“You’ll leave them out of this,” Nebs said dismissively, not returning his smile. “I need to know why you’re after this blessing.”

“Better if you don’t,” Kreeger said, eyes shadowed and posture too precise.

“Circumstances are not ideal, then,” she replied sharply, “because I will not do it if you don’t tell me.”

“Right,” Kreeger murmured, glancing out of the booth, gauging earshot distance. “We are setting up some joint operations, sharing some operations with the Silver Stag casino. Helene, she’s famous, she’s the one who runs it.”

“Yes, I know her by reputation. Severosian royal line, right?” Nebs said, sardonic. “So mysterious.”

“Right, and she said she will do business with us if we can present a blessing from the Wire Thicket. I checked into what that required, and here we are. As for what we’re doing with the Silver Stag Casino,” he pressed on, forestalling any interruption, “that is seriously too far in for this discussion and it’s beside

the point. We want to work with them, and they require this blessing as credentials to qualify us. Nebs," he said, squaring off with her and looking her in the eyes, "will you do this?"

Calculations sped behind her eyes as she fixed him with a stare, and for a moment the two looked eerily alike. Then she looked away. "I will try. Give me the gift."

Without missing a beat, Kreeger put an iron-bound box the size of a fist on the table with a clack, and slid it to Nebs. She took it off the table, and shook her head.

"You owe me," she said in a low voice, almost a growl.

Kreeger's smile was slow, but genuine. He rose, bowed to her, then turned and walked away.

Nebs watched him go, then unfocused into the middle distance, feeling the weight of the box she now held.

### **Alley Behind Forked Row, Fogcrest, Silkshore.**

#### **19<sup>th</sup> Kalivet. Hour of Silver, three hours past dusk.**

Nebs stood by the archway, looking in from the filthy alleyway. The woodworking shop smelled of sawdust, rats, and damp. A large woman with rounded shoulders stood with her back to the doorless opening. A number of lamps glowing on their shelves over the workbench, spilling light down on where she rasped a file over wood in a vise.

"Looking for a harrowmaze?" the big woman demanded without turning. "Come on in." She turned, tugging her pouched face up into a smile, leaning slightly to the side so her lank hair swung out of the way. She beckoned with one thick callused hand. "Come on in, I don't bite." Her grin was almost a leer, and it was missing several teeth.

"Your craftsmanship is remarkable," Nebs admitted as she stepped into the workshop, eyes drawn to the wall where a harrowmaze was exposed. Twisting ramps, small corridors, choke points, and food drops dotted the vertical maze.

"Just built this last year," the carpenter said. "Sized for mice, this one; designed to handle about fifty of 'em. Reinforced veneer keeps the fluffers from chewing their way out, and if you put in one compressed pellet a day to feed 'em you can get three mice daily, just right for adding that little something to a stew or gravy. Monthly restock, if you run low. I have a free guide I include with tips for skinning 'em, and various recipes."

"This is very well built," Nebs admitted, eyes lost in the maze.

"Or, if you want something that can move with you, I've got this table," the carpenter continued, moving over to a cylindrical table with a thick top. "All up and down the inside they have nests and tunnels. You put food here," she tapped the lever to open a hole in the center, "and the traps all empty from the sides. Set them with triggers under the tabletop when you're ready to harvest, and pop!" She pushed a hidden catch and a section of the tabletop pivoted open, revealing the pinch point where the mouse would be killed, exposing it for easy removal. "Rinse it with my special solution to wipe out the death smell and you're good to go, guaranteed one in ten catch per day. You can set your attrition and refill rates, the recipe book has formulas in the back." She paused. "If you need something bigger, I've got a rectangular table, it's good for rats."

"I did not come here to talk to a carpenter," Nebs confessed, finally looking the saleswoman in the eye. "I understand this is where I can talk to the Hunter of the Fallows."

The other woman waited, not reacting.

"Sanction sent me," Nebs continued. "I seek an audience with the Wire Thicket."

The Hunter stepped close to her, and sniffed deeply. For a moment her smell surrounded Nebs, and it was a dank rot, deep and secret and bloody, masked by sawdust and polish. For a disorienting moment Nebs viscerally felt all the disjointed pieces of the harrowmazes not yet assembled, and the deathtraps they would form in the future; corners and nests and cunning killpoints, pivoting harvest

chambers, compressed pellets of algae or mushroom gnawed in the darkness—endless winding darkness only lit by pinholes of light and the quick snap of death.

The Hunter of the Fallows withdrew, a frown creasing her face as her brows contracted. “You dare,” she snarled. “You come to me in this *costume*? You come to me in a *disguise* and you want a *meet*? No!” Her scowl was suddenly fierce. “No!” she shouted. “Get out! You think you can hide from *me*? Get out!” She snatched up a file, and Nebs was out the archway and around the corner before the tool clattered against the far wall of the alley.

“Don’t come back without your true face!” the Hunter of the Fallows shouted. She waited for a long moment, panting, then she roughly drew the back of her hand across her mouth and forced herself to calm down. She turned back to her work. Once again, the file rasped over the wood, smoothing it, tearing off flesh to give the body a new shape.

### **Chimewater Close, Silkshore.**

#### **19<sup>th</sup> Kalivet. Hour of Flame, five hours past dusk.**

Nebs battered the door again, then stood back, glaring around from the top of the stairs leading to the front door of the row house next to the gliding darkness of the river. Light shifted inside, and she set her jaw and pounded on the door again as the light approached the other side.

Locks snapped out of the way, and the door opened, revealing Kreeger in a dressing gown holding a heavy pistol. “Nebs?” he said cautiously.

She pushed past him, striding into his living room, then she pivoted to face him as he followed. “The Hunter of the Fallows attacked me,” she snapped. “She went completely berserk, she accused me of wearing a disguise. I’m not even wearing *makeup*,” Nebs yelled.

“You know how these cults are,” Kreeger replied. He paused. “I think you know what she meant,” he added, eyebrows raised.

Nebs stared at him. “Oh, you’re going to have to say this out loud,” she breathed, fury building.

“Okay, you want it out loud? Here we go,” Kreeger replied, his tone cool. “You spent over a decade as the leader of one of these mystery cults. You recruited, you made up rituals, you demanded sacrifices, you—”

“Who told you about that?” Nebs demanded.

“That hardly matters, there were a lot of people involved,” Kreeger replied, sharp. “You think you can dive into that kind of madness then walk away and pretend it never happened? You think that’s something you can hide? Sure, from someone like me, but for people who are already way over the line—you can’t hide from them,” he said, his voice louder than he intended. “I can walk through the Ministry and tell who is on the take. Somebody brings me a deal, I can tell when they’re lying. I can taste it,” he said with a rapid gesture towards his mouth. “So don’t get cranky with me when your history doesn’t wash off you. I didn’t tell you to run a cult.”

“No, but you involved me in this,” Nebs retorted. “I walked away from all that. Years ago. I had to.”

“So you don’t have a shrine in your attic?” Kreeger said, then he abruptly stopped as he saw the color drain from Nebs’ face, replaced by something much harder.

“You know too much.”

“And you used to kill people who knew too much, didn’t you,” Kreeger pressed. “What are you going to do now? Give up because your feelings are hurt? Or finish the damn job?”

“Don’t get confused!” she shouted. She squared off with him. “Don’t think because we have a relationship that you’ve bought me, because you haven’t! I don’t belong to you, and I don’t have to follow your orders. I said I’d help, and I made a good faith effort. I’m done!” She hurled the iron box to the floor, banging it off the carpet.

“Think about why you are angry,” Kreeger said, his energy not escalating with hers. “You don’t like being reminded of who you are.”

“Oh, really?” she said, stepping in closer. He did not step back. “You don’t know what I bought, or what I sold. You don’t even know what *you* bought, or what *you* sold.”

“Hey, I never—” Kreeger began before Nebs cut him off.

“First time you killed a man, first time you lied for money, first time you arranged a hit, you changed inside. You did it for power, and for money, but most of all because it was *expedient*. You are a *practical* man. So don’t you dare look down on me, because what you do, what you will always do, is follow the most pragmatic path. That path will empty you faster than anything else can.”

“How is this about me?” Kreeger replied, struggling to keep his tone mild. “You are the one—”

“Listen to me,” Nebs snapped. “I want to say this out loud, so you can hear it even if you can’t understand it.” She paused, giving him every chance, and he didn’t take it. She nodded, curt, and ran her hands through her hair, clasping the back of her neck. “You can sell yourself, your integrity and identity, pursuing money and power and security. Take the most practical path every time and it will drain you every time. Part of what I did—part of what I am—is to take the less practical path. Waste time, waste resources, waste relationships, pursuing things that do not appear valuable to worldly eyes.” She let her hands fall to her sides, and stared at Kreeger. “You see power in money, resources, authority. What you have never been able to see is the power in transcending the need for money, in healing people, in—accepting death.” She took a deep breath. “What is inside us, who we are, can ever be bought. It can only be sold. You’ve made your choices and I made mine.”

“We are still making them,” Kreeger said, solemn.

“When you open yourself up,” Nebs said, the fury ebbed from her voice, “your idea of what is real gets altered. Your trust in the energy you feel, in your instincts, in what your senses are trying to tell you that you cannot defend outside a mystic worldview... all that resets. And you let it. You *make* it change, you focus to increase your sensitivity to senses you cannot explain to nonbelievers. Only the purest talents can succeed there and also still live in the same world as the rest of us. To say a believer goes mad is gentle, compared to... what can happen.” She swallowed hard, and crossed the drawing room to the closed balcony doors. She looked down at the river. “I chose this world,” she said quietly, “and it cost me dearly.”

“Nebs,” Kreeger said, and she scowled at the angles she heard in his voice.

“Shut up,” she snapped, her back to him. “Just... leave it for a moment. What I have to do to run this little errand for you is to inhabit an identity that—that I shed a long time ago. I understand that’s easy for a professional liar like you.” She let that stand between them.

Eventually, she turned, and walked over to the iron box laying on the floor. She picked it up, and looked Kreeger in the eye.

Then she left.

**Nebs’ Quarters, Chime Era Bookstore, Fogcrest, Silkshore.  
19<sup>th</sup> Kalivet. Hour of Wine, eight hours past dusk.**

Spring rains spattered against the wall and windows as Nebs pushed the trap door to the attic open, ignoring the puff of dust the door slammed off the floor. She climbed up into the narrow tented space, and approached the crate at the far end. Tugging a specific place on the front panel, she loosened it and the panel fell out of the way, revealing a squat wooden altar book stand. As its rich, ancient smell reached her, she paused to savor the moment. Then she crouched before it in the dimness, lit only by the algae glowing in the sphere she wore on a necklace. She pulled a box out of the altar, and opened it, revealing greasepaint, pencils, and pigment tubes.

Nebs could barely make out her features in the mirror, the light was so dim, but with the strange momentum of long practice, she twirled the greasepaint jar lid off.

*A page no longer blank, I bear your secrets,* she whispered in Hadrathi, the slither of words tugging her skin tight, raising her hair. *Scribe upon me, so that open I may be read and closed I may protect secrets.* She gathered her hair back out of the way, refusing to notice she instinctively kept it short enough to fit in the black gambeson she pulled on, adjusting the padding around the oval of her face.

Nebs slid the white greasepaint over her features, evenly coating with half-forgotten expertise. She carved the ancient introductory prayer in vertical lines of Hadrathi characters, spelling them out across her features, inking the cuts in the paint with red dye. Her eye sockets were crimson and black, and a vow of secrets cut its way above and below her lips. She pulled on the shroud and took up the athame, its blade still keen. She tucked the knife into her sleeve sheath and rose, surrounded by the whispering shadow of dark fabric; lightning flashed outside, and she saw the painted mask of secrets flicker in her reflection. She left the attic with soundless steps, habits piling back on her as though they had been stored in the fabric.

Broad hat, thick veil, then back door, noisome alleys. The homeless shrank from her approaching shadow and refused to watch her retreat.

Then the alley behind Forked Row.

She stood before the carpentry shop of the Hunter of the Fallows.

"I have come with my true face," she murmured.

The Hunter of the Fallows was seated facing the alley, a low flame in a lamp by her side. "I have been waiting for you," she said, serious. "Who comes to me looking to meet with the Wire Thicket?"

"I am the Codex of the Radiant Word," Nebs intoned in Hadrathi.

The Hunter of the Fallows nodded. "Your truest face is never your flesh," she replied. She rose to her feet, crossed the workroom, and opened a cabinet, pulling out a battered and rusty lantern. "Follow me," she said, solemn.

They crossed several streets, then descended to a deeper alley than the one they had left, standing before the locked entry to a mushroom cave. The Hunter of the Fallows produced an iron key and unlocked the sally port, opening the way, and the women stepped into the stifling darkness, adrift in a simmering mist of spores.

The door clanged shut behind them, and they walked down the crooked path between the broken slats trying to box up earthen beds for the mushrooms. Giant centipedes slithered in the darkness, some of them the length of an adult's arm, and beady eyes from a whole ecosystem of predators glinted at them from the shadows as the Hunter of the Fallows lit the battered lantern and held it aloft.

In the shadows, the rock wall at the back of the cave was solid. In the peculiar bluish light of the lantern, a door was revealed.

"You may go in," the Hunter of the Fallows murmured. The Codex of the Radiant Word nodded, and stepped over to the door. When she touched it she felt her energies shift, attuning to the out-of-synch reality of the door. Tugging it open, she ducked through, and the ghost door slipped away to nothing behind her as she moved into the otherworldly space beyond.

The lights flickered orange, casting blue shadows across the uneven stone of the cave walls. Five women were seated around the throne, which was made of a mass of antlers; the entire back wall of the spectral cavern was interwoven antlers like a massive hedge of thorns.

The woman on the antler throne wore a golden mask made from a stag's skull, twelve points rising majestic above the long face and the dark sockets flanking it.

"I am Thorn," the masked figure on the throne said clearly. "Who are you, and what do you seek?"

"I am the Codex of the Radiant Word," she replied. "I have come seeking a blessing for the Silkworms, that they might do business with Helene of the Silver Stag."

"You have brought a gift," Thorn observed.

The Codex drew the iron box out of her robes, and lowered herself to one knee, offering up the box. One of the five women came forward, her face behind a golden mask etched with interlocking antlers. She took the box, opened it, and plucked something like a big piece of black gravel out. Pivoting, she carried it to Thorn, and knelt, offering it up.

Thorn took the gift and slowly turned it before her mask, observing it. "You have brought me a gift from the Dark Tooth," she breathed. "This is part of a tooth one lodged in the jaw of a Leviathan. Some fleck of its core yet lives."

"I bring you life," the Codex said in Hadrathi, "from beyond our world."

"Power I take," echoed Thorn, completing the ancient exchange. "Power I give."

The Codex rose to her feet, regarding the uncompromising darkness of the eye holes of Thorn's mask. She waited.

"Your gift is... complicated," Thorn observed. "While a blessing may never be earned, there is yet an incompleteness that I would see addressed before I bestow the favor of the Golden Stag. Socket, stand forth."

One of the women flanking the throne rose to her feet and stood on the hard-packed earth before the antler throne. She removed her skull mask and clipped it to the back of her belt, and impassively faced the Codex. She was young, strong-limbed, and graceful.

Thorn rose to her feet, easily balancing the heft of her golden stag mask. "Codex of the Radiant Word," she intoned, "you must draw blood from Socket before I will bestow a blessing."

The Codex regarded her for a long moment, and in that moment Nebs felt her blood pressure rising, she felt the weirdness and surreal overtones of the moment, she felt disconnected like an observer watching from the back of the room. Then her athame was in her hand, and she stepped forward.

She thrust the dagger at Socket, who easily leaned out of the way. Grounding herself, Nebs swiped a wide cut at Socket, only to have the blow blocked as Socket parried her forearm and redirected the strike. She lashed out with an overhand stab, and her fist was slapped off course. She backed up, taking stock, and Socket fractionally raised one eyebrow, the rest of her face expressionless.

"You have to want it," Thorn murmured. "You have to want the blood, if you are going to take it. Did you come here dressed in a memory? Did you hide yourself in an ill-fitting past to humor me? Or are you the Codex of the Radiant Word?"

Nebs found herself standing at the edge of the endlessly dark water, looking down into it, remembering the buoyancy and shapeless strength of it. Everything she needed was there. Her inhibitions, the hitch in her shoulder, the weariness in her bones; these were weights the water would carry away. She could become a part of something, blurring the lines between them, and all things would be in reach.

Shivering, she felt sweat gain enough weight to streak down the small of her back, and her fist was bloodless with the pressure of her grip on the athame.

The friction of her lungs within her ribs intensified, her blood thickened, she felt the heat, she felt the very leading edge of a consuming flame that would flow into her if she relaxed her resistance to it. She felt the connection between Thorn's concentration and the eldritch construction of this place, only loosely stitched to the ghost door connecting it to the world on the other side of the Mirror. She felt the smolder streaking through ashes starved out within her as fresh fuel breathed in.

As the pressure crested, she felt the tiniest voice within. *There is no one left to protect.*

The Codex of the Radiant Word extended her hand, and a thin bright line of crimson flicked across Socket's torso even as she began to pivot.

The Codex of the Radiant Word once again felt the impossible buoyance, the weightless top of the arc, the belled sails of a ship propelled by a storm front.

“It seems you have received a blessing from your god,” Thorn intoned. “Now take one from mine.” She pulled a wire from the wild curling mane of the mask, and gave it to Socket, who in turn presented it to the Codex of the Radiant Word.

No thanks were needed, none were offered. Moments later, the Codex was gone, stone was again solid and unassailable, and the taste of blood was blurred somewhere between memory and imagination.

**Chime Era Bookstore, Fogcrest, Silkshore.  
20<sup>th</sup> Kalivet. Fifth Hour past dawn.**

“You work fast,” Kreeger said with a guarded smile as he approached where Nebs leaned casually against the bar at the back of the bookstore.

“Here is your blessing,” Nebs replied, expressionless as she offered the curled wire. It looked like a broken viol string, completely unremarkable.

“Is it?” Kreeger asked, eyebrows raised as he took the wire.

“I promise,” she replied. “It was a ‘hair’ from the golden stag mask that Thorn, their leader, wore. I earned it.” Her mouth closed to a thin line.

Kreeger nodded, tucking the wire away. “Thank you, Nebs,” he said sincerely. “I understand this wasn’t easy, but you really came through for us.” He paused. “Look, I—I’m sorry.”

“Too soon for that,” she replied, a coldness behind the cool of her tone. “You got what you wanted, and you chose that over me.” She looked him in the eye. “Leave.”

Kreeger nodded. “We can talk later,” he said. “I owe you one. That means sooner or later you’ll be happy to see me.” He offered her a sardonic echo of a smile, then turned, filtering out of the book shop and into the city’s congestion.

Alman warily approached her end of the bar. “Steward Nebs?” he asked, hesitant. “Can I get you something?”

She turned abruptly, through the door to the back, up the tight spiral staircase to her apartment above. Flinging off most of her clothes, she hurled herself into her bed, clutching the coverlet tight.

For the first time in a long, long time, her dreams breathed cosmic fire.