

SHADOWS OF INSURRECTION

THE UNREMEMBERED KING: BOOK 1

A PATCHWORK UNIVERSE NOVEL
VANESSA MACLAREN-WRAY

SHADOWS
OF
INSURRECTION
THE UNREMEMBERED KING
BOOK ONE

VANESSA MACLAREN-WRAY

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

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G RADUALLY, TYMON LEARNED not to put himself right in the middle of the action. But he never understood the military. He never understood the need for control. While the borders of Jeska were secure enough to the east, with the Wall rising up between us and the redlands, the rest needed constant management.

To the west, the Inner Range rose dry and inhospitable, reasonable to traverse when necessary, but mostly open country, hard to hide an army in. Not many people wanted to live up in those dry canyons, so it made a useful, if porous, screen between us and the various peoples who traded their way up and down the long thin valleys in between that range and the Green Mountains off by the sea.

I saw the Green Mountains, once, from the top of one of the hills in the Inner Range. A thick grey cloud hung over those distant hills that day. My guide told me those hills were taller than they looked and that the cloud was really sea fog, flowing up and over them. While he was talking, I watched a finger of fog-cloud flow through a gap, like a waterfall on a river.

Shadows of Insurrection

Why couldn't Tymon make himself one of those runners that went back and forth over to the green-valley people, for trade deals and the occasional out-country marriage arrangement? Why did he have to traipse along with me? It was my job to secure our weak border in the north, protect the citizenry from bandits, and carry out the king's demands, but Tymon treated our patrols like holiday outings.

Eldennian often traveled with us, too, but that was different. Besides the fact we served as informal escorts for her, between festivals in various towns she worked for, I wanted her with me. She reminded me who I was, the smith's son from the lower levels of Jeskaryan. She didn't care about the past. She knew I wasn't that worthless boy any longer. She was equally unimpressed by my future, the plans that Yutek had for me. She saw the guardsman, the man who led his men to protect our country, and she reminded me to stay strong, to never waver, to take a little pain and turn it to action.

In the meantime, I hadn't ignored the potential threat posed by the snake-men. Yutek approved sending scouts up to the pass a few times a year, to keep an eye out for redlanders. That was the story I told. One of my Six would brief the scouts on what they were really watching for. I orchestrated a new guard post at Koresh, a standing squad. The town didn't like it, but the town didn't have a say. The longstanding rumors of redlanders wanting to come down over the pass gave me a good reason, snake-men or no snake-men.

It was getting late into fall, my third year as a captain, when we stopped by Koresh to bring the guard post a few relievers—replacements for men lost to stupidity, fights, and retirement. There hadn't been any incursions of redlanders (or snake-men) to contend with, and the local population was ready to see the troopers gone. I forced a discussion between the town elders and the young captain I'd placed at the head of the post, to settle their issues. I saw no reason these men couldn't live in the town and report to the post on their duty cycles, like men at the garrison in Jeskaryan. That would make them part of ordinary life—and maybe put an end to the fights and other pointless conflict between my men and the people they were supposed to be protecting.

Neither Captain Durek nor the chief elder, Semseh, liked my idea. Durek preferred his men right to hand, no matter how bored

they might be. Semseh held that the military had no place in her community. Durek countered that he'd had men turn in retirement requests, due to harassment from townspeople. Arnim showed up at our meeting with proof these retirements were men who'd landed marriage contracts in town. The proofs were attestations from their satisfied wives. I left Semseh and Durek arguing over the scarcity of available housing and the risks to civilians of soldiers carrying weapons when not on duty.

I'd quartered our group in the same inn we'd visited before, to take advantage of their hot springs, but this time we didn't avoid the public room. Eldennian and me, and my Six, we had just settled down to the fine spread the innkeeper and her daughter had laid out, when Tymon appeared in the doorway.

I pretended not to notice him, and listened to my gut. It was not helpful. There was too much food in front of me to distract my inner warning system.

Trouble? Maybe. Or maybe just Tymon.

Arnim stood up, gave Tymon his place right across from me, and moved to a spot closer to the fire. I didn't blame him. It had started to rain that afternoon, and we were not looking forward to moving out in the morning. Best to be warm while we could.

The innkeeper herself leaned over Tymon's shoulder and placed a plate in front of him. He turned to give her that grin of his, then reached for the meat.

"So," he said. "You're still here. I thought you'd be gone by the time I got here."

"What important mission did you drop this time?" I fended off his reach towards the stew and scooped myself a serving.

Eldennian pressed herself close and snagged the spoon from me, then extended it to Tymon. "He means, what brings you here this fine evening, dear brother?"

I started to cut in, then glanced at her face. Her eyes sparkled in the firelight, and she gave me a long, slow wink. I nearly choked, couldn't help it, she had a way of making me laugh.

Tymon ladled himself two helpings and slid the spoon into its place beside the bowl.

He leaned back and shifted enough that he could rest his back against the nearest post.

"You two should get married," he said.

"Shht," Eldennian hissed. "Keep your notions in your head, runner."

I pulled her close.

To a man, the Six stopped eating and stared at Tymon. Kul, sitting next to him, gave Tymon an elbow in the side.

"What? What?" Tymon protested.

"Eat," Eldennian said. "Just eat, will you, the lot of you."

The brightness faded from her eyes, and she laid her head on my shoulder.

Was he really that out of touch with the world? Runners live in their safe little society, with its own relationship rules, but he'd grown up in the king's house, right alongside me. Did he imagine that I had any say whatever in that part of my future? One of these days, Yutek would attach me to the offspring of some high-value personage, maybe not even a woman of our own country, and that would be the end for Eldennian and me.

Tymon fell silent, dodging my gaze as he worked his way into that enormous pile of stew. About halfway through, he paused to reach for a hunk of bread and glanced up. His gaze fell on Eldennian, her fingers working away at a smaller piece of bread, tearing it apart grain by grain. Tymon's face colored, as he looked back and forth between me and my woman.

"Oh," he said.

"Oh, what?" I snarled.

"I'm the idiot today." He stood to lean over the table and lift the tormented fragment of bread from Eldennian's fingers, replacing it with the fresh piece. "I'm sorry."

She closed her hand around the bread and swung her feet over the bench. "I'm tired," she said, giving my ear a pinch. "Wake me when you come up, Corren. Or else."

I didn't turn around, so that I could imagine she was smiling at me. "Yes, ma'am."

When she had gone, I thumped my spoon down on the table and crossed my arms.

"What now?" Tymon wanted to know.

"You never answered our question."

"What question?"

Kul gave him another elbow jab. "Boss and the lady asked what ya came here for."

Tymon dropped his spoon into the nearly-empty bowl. "Oh, that."

"Well?" I prompted.

Still, he hesitated. The listening men wore various expressions of impatience. Except Arnim. He could hide his thoughts better than anyone.

I thumped a fist on the table. "Anything you have for me, my men need to hear it, too."

"Well ... there's odd news out of the ghost country." That explained his hesitation. He knew what I thought of ghost stories.

Arnim laughed. "There's no such thing as ghosts."

"Don't be so quick on it," Kul advised. "If Tymon says there's ghosts, I've a mind to listen."

I waved a hand to hush incoming commentary from the rest of the men. "What, exactly, are you talking about, Tymon? Everyone knows 'ghost country' is merely a nickname for the place. Because of the history."

Everyone sat silent for that moment, recalling the true story only the grimmest storytellers will drop into a performance.

It hadn't been that long ago, back in our grandfathers' time, when the chieftain of one of those little northern countries decided to make himself a big man by taking over that upriver valley. Back in the day, it was called the Well, first, because it was a valley that was like a deep hole in the mountains and second, because of the water in it: a big river that overflowed most years, a couple of lakes, and waterfalls all over the place. The people who lived there were soft, complacent. They had it good in the Well: expanses of flat ground for cultivating crops, with a river that dropped silt on the cropland, clean, fresh water year-round, plenty of game. They came down to the lowlands regularly, with furs and salted meat, and other trade goods.

Then this nameless chief—he's been erased from the histories for what he did—got this notion there was more to the Well. He heard rumors of obsidian mines, veins of gold ribboned in the rock, nuggets tumbling in the clear waters of their river. So he marched a little army up into the Well, and demanded the hillmen surrender their lands to him. But the people of the Well raised their empty hands and said, "No,

no, we don't have treasure here." He was not buying that answer, and determined to prove his strength, so he threatened to kill a few of them if they wouldn't surrender their mines.

They insisted there was no secret obsidian hoard, so he killed a couple of men.

They offered to teach him how to sift the silt in the river for flecks of gold, so he killed a couple of women. Yes, women. Some tellers will say he murdered elders, but elders are women. Why not be direct?

The Well people took up their farming tools and hunting axes and told him to leave.

Two of the chief's men lowered their weapons and said, "There's nothing here, Boss, let's go home."

And the chief killed them, too, with his own sword, and ordered his army to attack. They obeyed.

All but one. Seeing what had happened to his comrades, one man held his tongue and slipped away, turned his back on the carnage, and raced down the valley. The screams of the dying pursued him.

That's how the story goes, it's always told that way.

The screams of the dying pursued him.

At the time, the route to the Well passed through a narrow defile, a place where the hillmen, had they had any common sense, could have set an impenetrable defensive position. The valley narrowed to leave barely enough room for the river to plunge through. The strip of solid ground that ran alongside it twisted and turned with the river, and wove between giant boulders that narrowed the walkable space even further.

When the deserter emerged to where the valley opened up again, he stopped. He still heard the screams in his mind. Again, that's how the story goes. We're meant to understand that he was overtaken with shame. But no one really knows what the man felt. We only know what he reported in the end.

He decided to wait until his chief came out, then slip back up into the Well and see for himself what had befallen the people there, before he would report the story to others.

We don't know how long he waited. Different storytellers tell it differently.

Eventually, he heard voices approaching. He'd picked out a hiding place behind a growth of sagebrush sprouting from the loose, rocky soil. But as he headed that way, the earth trembled, and he lost his footing and tumbled to the ground. He brushed himself off and stood again, laughing at the earthquake, relieved it was such a small one.

The deserter looked up the valley, towards the narrow canyon, and saw the bright colors of the chief's banner caught in the light of the setting sun. Then the earth heaved, hurling him flat on his back. He knew the hillside above him was unstable, so he scrambled behind the nearest large boulder and held fast.

When the earth stopped moving and the river of gravel stopped flowing past his hiding place, the deserter crept from behind the rock, ready to meet the wrath of his chieftain. A cloud hung over the canyon where he'd seen the chief's banner. Nothing moved. A wind came up, and it blew the cloud of dust away.

Boulders filled the defile completely, obliterating the path, damming the river. Some water trickled through crevices in the rock pile, but the river flow had already fallen to nearly nothing.

The chief and his army lay somewhere under that wall of stone. None of the people of the valley ever emerged.

The river forced a way through the rocks, during the spring flooding the next year.

In the summer that followed, a few curious men climbed over the dam and made their way to the Well. They searched for signs of villages up and down the valley, but the Well people had favored tents and other movable houses, and those were swept away by the floods. They stumbled across heaps of bones in one corner of the valley, where the river had dropped them. They found no obsidian, no gold, no people.

When they camped at night, they heard strange noises up and down the valley, wails and sighs and sounds like music. When they went home, all they would say was, *At night, you can hear the ghosts calling for you.*

As I sat there with my men, full of good food and cider, warmed by the fire, the story seemed sad and distant. Tymon's spoon scraped at the bottom of his bowl.

I cleared my throat. "So, what, are people hearing ghosts? Do you need me to send Arnim up there to lecture people about the nonexistence of ghosts?"

"It's not that." Tymon studied his empty bowl and twirled the spoon in his fingers. "Not exactly."

"Come on, man," Andus broke in. "We're tired, we have an early start tomorrow, what's your news?"

"Ay," Karthi echoed, a sidelong glance passing between the pair of them. "Some of us need a bit of time in the hot springs before bed." By way of response, Dramin caught up the cider jug and poured everyone refills, to raised voices and laughter.

"I think the snake-men may be up in the Well."

All the joking and jostling stopped. Arnim abandoned his spot by the fire and slid into Eldennian's seat. I held up a hand and cast my eyes over the room to see if any of the townsfolk might have heard. The innkeeper and her daughter had their heads together, strategizing about a group of men in the opposite corner, whose voices were rising over some disagreement. The girl ducked out of the room by the back passageway, the one that ran to the stairs that led to the stables. *Well*, I thought. *You've got seven guardsmen right here. Could have asked us for help, instead of your stable crew.*

Then again, the stableboys might leave their customers alive, to buy another round tomorrow.

To those around me, I said, "Looks like we'll be heading north, not south, in the morning."

We were all of us upstairs, and I was already nudging Eldennian awake, when the fight broke out downstairs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vanessa MacLaren-Wray writes science fiction and fantasy exploring the challenges of communication and attachment in a diverse, complex universe. She's the author of the Patchwork Universe series, including *All That Was Asked*, "The True Son", and "The Unremembered King". She's a member of the Truck Stop at the Center of the Galaxy consortium, with "Coke Machine" and *The Smugglers*. Her short fiction has appeared with Dragon Gems and in the award-winning anthology *Fault Zone: Reverse*. She hosts regular online open mics for the California Writers Club and acts as a guest host for the podcast Small Publishing in a Big Universe. She is also an active member of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA).

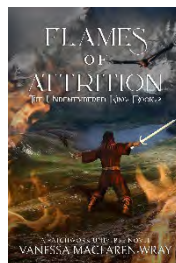
As an energy systems engineer, she has analyzed electric power systems, studied climate-safe technology, and written extensively on energy issues. The oddball robots she builds out of kids' toys and stray parts do not seek to destroy humans—instead, they brew tea and play music. Vanessa lives in farm country, where fields of strawberries and artichokes hold the developers at bay. When not arguing with her cats, she works on new stories, her email journal *Messages from the Oort Cloud*, and her website, *Cometary Tales* (cometarytales.com). Find all her connections at linktr.ee/Vanessa_MacLarenWray.

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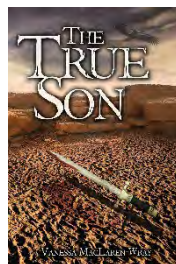
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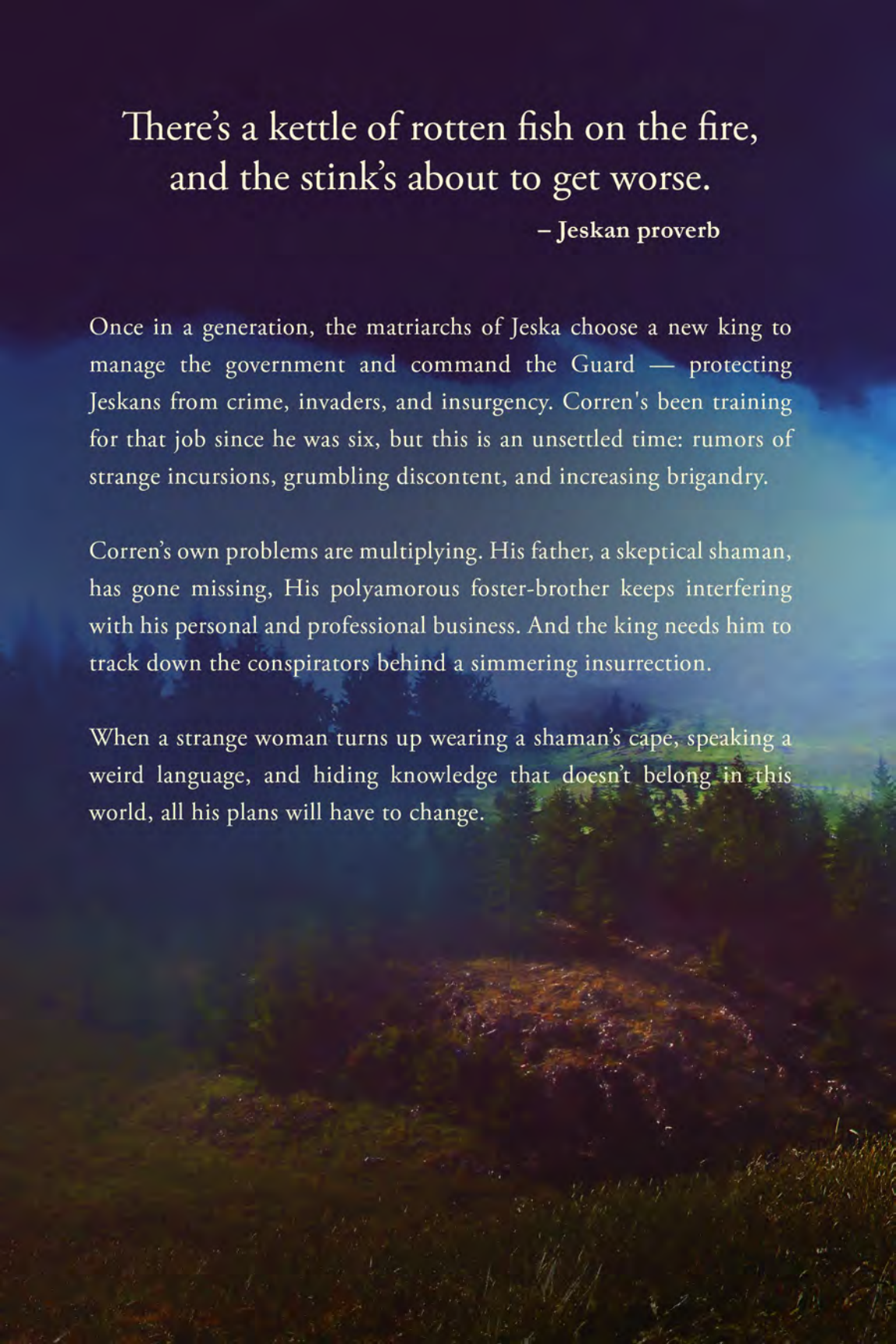
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The background of the text is a misty, forested landscape. A path or stream winds through the dense trees and foliage, leading the eye into the distance. The lighting is soft and atmospheric, with a mix of greens, browns, and blues, suggesting a dawn or dusk setting. The overall mood is mysterious and somewhat somber, fitting the tone of the text.

There's a kettle of rotten fish on the fire,
and the stink's about to get worse.

– Jeskan proverb

Once in a generation, the matriarchs of Jeska choose a new king to manage the government and command the Guard — protecting Jeskans from crime, invaders, and insurgency. Corren's been training for that job since he was six, but this is an unsettled time: rumors of strange incursions, grumbling discontent, and increasing brigandry.

Corren's own problems are multiplying. His father, a skeptical shaman, has gone missing. His polyamorous foster-brother keeps interfering with his personal and professional business. And the king needs him to track down the conspirators behind a simmering insurrection.

When a strange woman turns up wearing a shaman's cape, speaking a weird language, and hiding knowledge that doesn't belong in this world, all his plans will have to change.