



Brightvarna **Red**  
and  
Other Tales



John WS Marvin and Connor W Marvin

Gods and Icons Fiction

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**Dread Unicorn  
Games**

# Brightvarna Red

by John WS Marvin

Glasyra, the Sanguine Hierophant, adjusted her robes and waited in the Imperial Library. The upper reading room was the perfect place for a meeting. The crimson shades were drawn. With only three others elsewhere in the library at this late hour, it was a private as you could get in the Emperor's palace. The Emperor himself was unlikely to appear. Not big on reading, Emperor Roland. He had people for that. Like her. Like the man she would rather not speak to, but whom she must convince.

She tucked again at her symbol, twin columns, one black, one white. A silver platter, looking out-of-place on the reading desk, held a cool stone carafe of water, an open bottle of Brightvarna Red and two glasses.

She heard a quick rap, the door opened, and in he marched: the last great reminder of fallen gods, the last defense against the incursions of hell, and the last man who would grant her a boon.

"Hierophant." He stood like the soldier he was. If only he would loosen up a little.

"Lord Ikal. Sit please. Water or wine?"

He sat stiffly opposite her and reached for the red.

"Allow me." She poured him a generous glass.

"No servants to pour the wine? Now I am worried. What do you want?" He took the crystal glass and raised an eyebrow.

So direct. "The people of Brightvarna are loyal subjects of the Empire. Release them and their town once you've done your work."

Ikal almost smiled. "My work?"

"Your good work. All the Empire thanks you, the



Lightbringers thank you, and I thank you."

"No. Those people are tainted. It was one of them who opened wide the Brightvarna Breach. A breach to hell. I have need of their labor to help my guardians close the breach."

Hierophant Glasyra squinted at the commander who closed hell-breaches. In truth he did save people from being overrun by devils, demons, and other terrors. But he often left in his wake a blasted and diseased chunk of the Empire that would take decades to heal.

"The monastery is mine."

"And the vineyards. All yours. Just not at the moment." He set his glass down pushed his chair back.

"What do you want, Lord Ikal?"

"To protect the Empire."

And so it went. She asked, he refused, all as she had suspected. Still negotiations had opened. The weeks flew by. Good people were trapped in Brightvarna, many from good families, friends of the church and all its works. Families that were calling on her for help.

At the Emperor's spring ball, she found him brooding on a balcony, overlooking the gardens. He was no more of a dancer than Roland was a reader. And he had her clerics stuck at the Brightvarna monastery.

"Congratulations Lord Ikal, on sealing another hell breach."

"You are welcome. From me, my army, and the Renarites. No—to what you are about to ask. Aren't you going to offer me one of those glasses?"

She held two, both filled with her dwindling supply of Brightvarna Red. She passed him one. "But I haven't asked for anything."

"You will. Those people have been corrupted. However, since you are so interested in them, I have spared



their lives. They may return to their homes, but must stay in Brightvarna."

"You hold them prisoner in their own ruined town. How many buildings still stand?"

"They can rebuild. The vineyards did get spared the worst of it."

She gave a nod at that. "You hold prisoner a dozen of my clergy. Bright clerics come and go when I say they can. I will speak to the Emperor."

"I spoke to the Emperor. No."

"All those troops and inquisitors must be frightfully expensive. I offer you 100 ingots of gold. I have it here."

"Here?"

"At the palace. I can have my guards transfer to your guards before we finish this fine wine."

"Brightvarna Red, I know." He stood. "The Emperor sees to our needs. Good evening."

Damn. What do you give a man like that? A lord of entirely the wrong religion who has the ear of the Emperor?

She worked on him from afar for a full moon, and now here he was in her territory, in the holiest cathedral of the Bright Church. And back in a library. Ikal would be the first Reknarite to see these books.

"I'm amazed I walked into Cathedral of the Holy Convergence without lightning bolts striking me dead. Your invitation got my interest." Tonight, he drank only water.

Glasyra hoped this was a good sign. "We have become quite ecumenical."

"Unlike in my great aunt's time."

"Hers was an ill-conceived rebellion."

Lord Ikal put his empty water-glass down with a thunk. "Met with an ill-conceived response."

"The past is past. Please, this library is open to you, whenever you have need."

Lord Ikal's eyes took in the stacks and stacks of books, scrolls, and tomes. "A generous offer. But you must realize I keep those people isolated for everyone's safety. What is this treasure you spoke of?"

"Follow me." Hierophant Glasyra twisted a blood-stone pedestal, opening a trapdoor in the floor and revealing a spiral staircase.

Lord Ikal reached for his sword. "You bring me to the dungeon that took Lady Ikal?"

Glasyra froze. "Forgive me. But this treasure is a prisoner. I take a great risk giving him to you, so that you may take the risk of letting my village go. Please follow."

They descended until they came to an iron door with glowing runes upon it. Runes of vast power. "You fear this prisoner?"

The Hierophant nodded. "And you should too." She opened the little viewport in the door. "Lord Ikal, meet Lord Tenebras Noctem."

*What?* "Arch-devil Noctem?"

Noctem lounged on a couch, picking at a plate of grapes. Shadows swirled about him, but even so, he

had a mesmerizing effect on his guests. Lesser people would have swooned. Lord Ikal, however, was used to dealing with the power of hell.

Hierophant Glasyra slid the viewport shut. "Do we have a deal?"

Ikal leaned against a wall and nodded. "Of course, and you shock me, I don't know what to say. Brightvarna is yours. I will need to prepare the proper bindings for transport. And I have so many questions."

"Naturally. Let's ascend out of this place. I have what I believe is the last bottle of Brightvarna Red."

Glasyra turned her face away to hide a smile. Brightvarna was hers again, and Noctem would be a bigger handful than Ikal could ever imagine.

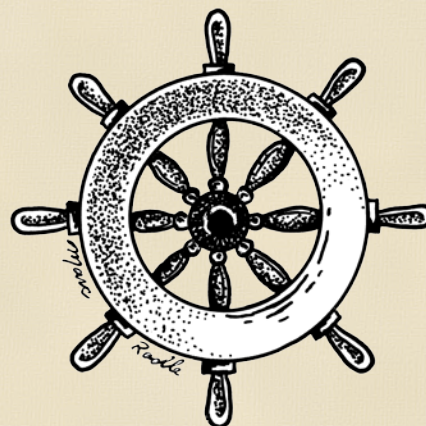


# One Hazy Midnight on the Paxbellum Pier

by Connor W Marvin

You are alive, maybe  
    hustling your lantern high  
and hugging rigging rope while  
    the shades of the dead visit you.  
The etheric plane is filled with  
    the Voices, those who  
failed to pass peaceably and instead  
    instruct you of their  
disgruntled pities and flies.  
    Death is a tricky slip-slide,  
    a riderless or wheelless ship careening  
down eternity's hallway, and not  
every Drowned has enough lubricant  
    to squeeze out the pinhole  
at the far wall of the universe.  
They don't prepare people for  
    it (Death), not anymore,  
not  
    like they used to. There must be  
a guide, Laval or Shok and Yniris, and pompous as  
they may  
    be, a trust placed in it like a  
coin in a palm is a must.  
    The dust of a quick passage  
weighs out on our bubbles  
hic! the drunkship of cobblers down the cobble-  
stone  
    cattywalk, they holler and  
scold on the eves of a wintry sigh.  
    Belching out the shutters they come,  
visiting you, dear, and bray  
    the way only a someone who  
shuffled off this coiled snake can. A snake  
maybe used to have legs, long time ago,  
like the Drowned used to have legs,  
and bodies, and  
wives and lovers and all the thoughts  
    in the head that  
now have no  
cavern to call  
home. And the immateria is disgruntled,  
sometimes. Unpleasant company. Makes  
    a salt of sense that they'd come calling  
wassailing and jingling their foot-bells  
at your nightcap, poor old one.

You, you've seen the far places,  
    on a schooner made of shoe-wax,  
a beehive built on solid water, you shimmied  
across the Sea of Tears with the brine in your eyes  
and  
fish in your hair. Fingers you have, stubby and  
paunch,  
calloused from the ropes and darkened by the sun,  
    you're leaning into the darktime mist  
with your fingers gripping a lantern,  
peering through your furrowed and bushy brow,  
the dinging of dinghys and galleons swaying  
slosh in the midnight. But you heard them,  
    you'll tell Alawn Gwydd in the White  
Dragon  
Tavern tomorrow, over a frothy glass,  
    not a glass but a flagon, handle and all  
for your thick, calloused fingers.  
    You'll tell them all how  
you heard the dead, and they'll  
    scarce believe you.  
Who wants to think  
    they just wait around after,  
instead of ding! flying off up  
into eternity's coffer  
like a coin  
    into a well on the ceiling.



# Orex's Eyes

by John WS Marvin

Orex the Illuminated looked up from his workbench at the unfamiliar girl standing before him. "Are you the new servant?" The help had developed a frightful habit of vanishing and requiring replacement. If this one lasted a fortnight, he might bother to learn her name.

"Aye, my lord. Amu's my name, and I'm trained in the ways of serving a wizard."

Right, Kalit had been the girl's master, before the wizard vanished. First servants, now masters. The empire would be depopulated before long. "Fine, fine. Tell the cook I want lark, and not to cut it open, but cook it whole. I find the guts of a lark pleasantly sweet."

"Aye, my lord. It is because they eat only pebbles and sand."

"You're well-learned for a young girl. Now go and instruct the cook." Orex kept his wizard's workshop at the bottom of his tower, near the fire and his deservedly famous kitchen. He turned his attention back to his tricky project. If he could manage to find the right enchantment for these magical spectacles, he should be able to see Rark's spirit, and maybe be able to communicate with his dead lover.

Orex slid the spectacles on and peered into the ghost-cage. Once again, nothing. Why wouldn't the lenses work?

He was no wiser the next day as he poured over *Seeing the Unseen*, its forward by no less a mage than Thrice-Wise Mercurius. Again Orex cast his spell and donned the spectacles to look at the ghost-cage with the invisible spirit within, but all he saw was a shadowy blur. With a snap, the lenses cracked. He threw them off before a shard of glass could enter his eyes. He was no further along than when he started.

He knew the ghost-cage still held Rark, but still no visible sign met his eye.

"Dinner, my lord," said the girl. "Hedgehog pasty with wild duck sauce."

"What? Oh yes, put it there. And fetch me *The Unblinking Eye* from the library; it's the red one, thin with silver binding."

The girl nodded. "If I may, my Lord, I have some books given to me by my previous employer, perhaps they would be of help. *The Untrickable Orb*, *The...*"

"I don't need a servant's books. I require my own, recommended by Thrice-Wise himself! Now fetch."

As soon as she left, he slipped on his latest creation. The lenses flashed hot white, and burned his eyes. He shrieked and tore them off. Was it his imagination, or was Rark's spirit laughing at him?

The girl entered with the book. "My lord, are you—" "Silence. Draw the curtain and leave."

The darkness eased the pain in his eyes. He hoped they would recover by the next day, but they did not. So Orex worked by the light of a single candle, with all the drapes drawn over the windows.

Hours went by in that fashion. When the girl brought in dinner, Orex still squinted at his books. A lesser mage would have given up and freed Rark to depart for wherever unbound spirits traveled.

"Maybe I should be a lesser mage," he mused.

"My lord?"

Orex sniffed suspiciously at the pasty with wild duck sauce. "Left over hedgehog?"

"Oh no, my lord. Squirrel, and very fresh." She placed a stack of books beside the platter. "Just in case. My former master did find these useful."

"Hmmm." The girl left. Orex tried to focus on his previous tomes. But those she had laid on the table called to him. He ventured to see what they held.

Shockingly, the girl's books were a cornucopia of forbidden wisdom. Had she given them to a lesser mage, who knows what harm she might have caused? One opened to a map of the roads between the worlds. Another included a complete history of the blind seers. Orex had to force himself to put aside a folio of the secret lives of homunculi, written by an imp (assuming one could believe the notes in the margin). An imp with a rather ribald style. One large volume turned out to be a study of optics and spirits. Perfect, especially since the knowledge came from summoned spirits themselves.



The following day all that had gone wrong before became golden with success. The girl's books had been of help after all. It took every ounce of concentration and resolve Orex had and more, but finally he managed to summon spirits of light and shadow and bind them into the spectacles. Looking through the enchanted lenses, he saw his old lover, changed, but still Rark.

Orex called out "Come girl! I see him! Rark is here."

Rark, pale and haggard, strained against the mystic bonds of the ghost-cage. Those eyes that once shown with love for Orex now burned with rage. The spirit squirmed like a trapped animal and bared its teeth. Orex felt his heart break at such a pitiable sight, but wouldn't it break even further if he let the spirit go?

Perhaps Rark would find comfort if he were placed in a new body. The beagle was about to give birth, and Rark had so loved dogs...

As the girl entered, Orex grinned. Rark silently wept. He didn't seem to understand that all this work was for him, but no matter. Orex turned to the girl. "Thank you. Your former master knew a thing or two, now didn't he?"

"Indeed my lord. And I can fetch more such books."

"Where? How?" Orex tried to keep the excitement out of his voice, but the girl seemed to sense it.

"If you would but stare into the fire with those lenses, and tell me what you see."

"What?" Orex felt a tremor of doubt. Still he followed the girl's instruction. And he did see. "No! No! It can't be!" Slowly, a shadowy form in the flames resolved into the shape of a lady with wings. Not the wings of a dove, but those of a wretched beast, part bat, and part demon. Snake like growths twisted and twirled out of her back. On her short tunic was a device, an eye in flames, and on her head, horns.

The girl stepped back to the fire, and knelt down on one knee before the vision. "You see her, don't you?"

"Lady Akuma!" The icon of hell.

"Such libraries she has. Libraries without end. Don't believe all the stories, she can be helpful."

Orex grabbed his chair to still his trembling hands. "I have heard she does some good now and then."

"You see?"

The shadowy vision of the icon of hell vanished. Orex turned. Rark's spirit form curled into a ball. The girl smiled at the ghost-cage.



Orex turned to her. "This is madness. But..."

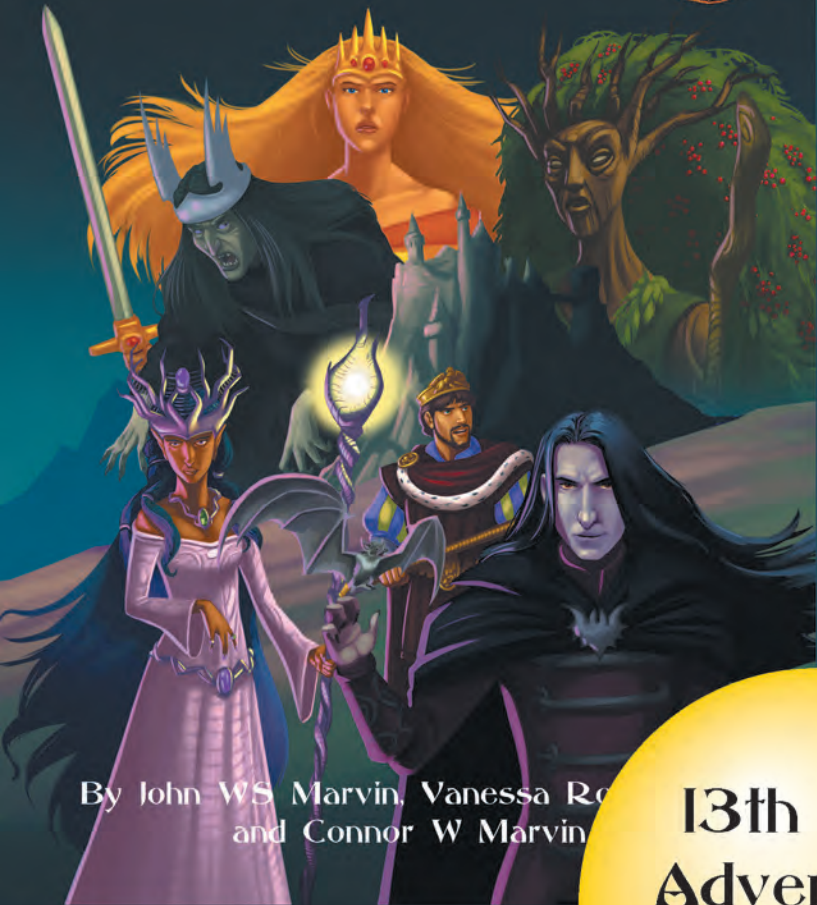
"Yes?"

"Libraries without end?"

Rark's mouth opened in a scream, but there was no sound.



# Gods and Icons



By John WS Marvin, Vanessa Rose  
and Connor W Marvin

# Icons and Conditions



Gods and Icons Deck  
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# Factions & Condition Cards



## Blinded

You can't see and automatically fail any ability check that requires sight.

Attack rolls against you have advantage, and your attack rolls have disadvantage.



Burning Cycle

5



9

Burning Cycle

Brotherhood of the Scythe

6



5

Brotherhood of the Scythe



# Dread Unicorn Games

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By John WS Marvin  
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