

CONFRONTING
THE
DEMON

CIARA BALLINTYNE

Copyright © 2013 Ciara Ballintyne

All rights reserved.

This edition published in British English.

The right of Ciara Ballintyne to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth).

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by an information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the author.

Cataloguing-in-Publication details are available from the National Library of Australia www.librariesaustralia.nla.gov

ISBN-13: 978-0-9923466-0-7

Cover illustration by Nadica Boskovska
<http://theswanmaiden.deviantart.com/gallery/>

Edited by Dionne Lister
www.dionnelisterwriter.wordpress.com

Edited by Nerine Dorman www.nerinedorman.com

Edited by Suah Joo www.sirraedits.wordpress.com

Book formatting by eBook76.com

Published by Ciara Ballintyne www.ciaraballintyne.com

DEDICATION

For Dad, who showed me the way into the worlds of fantasy.
I've never come back out.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks go out to my beta readers, Melody Jones-Kauffman, M Andrew Patterson, Dee Solberg, and Melinda Chapman for their speedy turnaround and insightful comments; to my editors; Dionne Lister, for her attention to detail, her generosity, and her graciousness and thoughtfulness in explaining complex and obtuse grammatical rules in the face of my blank expression; to Nerine Dorman, for her ability to spot a plot hole at fifty spaces, for smacking my hand when random body parts go wandering around unchaperoned, and for not allowing me to get lazy with my writing; and Suah Joo, for stabbing me with her razor-sharp pen, and for her relentless pursuit of the perfect sentence; to my proofreaders, Robert Lumsden and Simone Nolan; and to my husband and daughters for tolerating all the hours I poured into this book between June and October this year

CONFRONTING THE DEMON

Alloran huddled in the shadows of the alley mouth across from the west gate, watching the guards search every man and woman leaving the city of Ehsan. He sweltered within the confines of his light dust cloak. The hood concealed his face, and a few days worth of stubble blurred the shape of his jaw. Anything to make him that much harder to recognise. Unfortunately, he couldn't hide his indigo wizard eyes from another wizard or a sorceress, though a spell concealed their colour from normal vision.

A queue of backed-up traffic wound out of sight along the Avenue of Falling Stars. Travellers, merchants, and farmers waited with resigned patience.

Seven hells, after three months, the delays were normal. Surely, they'd give up soon.

Will they? For such a heinous crime....

It was not a thought he liked to dwell on. He slouched to hide his unusual height, and squinted at the mailed guards. They represented a minor inconvenience. The quartet of three wizards and one sorceress, though, were entirely different. There'd be no escaping their notice, even though the soldiers might be fooled. Almost involuntarily, his gaze flicked to the castle—not the king's castle in the central district but the wizards'. Perched atop the mountain overshadowing the city, its turrets clawed the sky. Home, once. Now he hid from it like a beetle scuttling away from

the sun. Only enough luck to fill the seven celestial levels kept him safe.

The wizards stood as the guards inspected each traveller and allowed passage. One, in linen shirt and leather pants with a sword on his hip, spoke companionably to the guard nearest him. The silk-swathed sorceress gazed down the street towards Alloran, or perhaps past him, with eyes that were yellow or purple, the mark of a woman of power. Easing back into the shadows slowly enough to avoid attracting attention, he headed to the square where Dek and the unfinished statue would be waiting.

A peaceful lassitude crept over Alloran at the thought of the statue. Three months ago, the notion of hacking a statue out of a lump of rock would have been distasteful, to say the least. Now, the act of creation gave him a refuge that he couldn't find anywhere else.

Stripping off the cloak, he tramped through the back alleys, his boots squelching through something he didn't care to examine too closely. Summer heat left the narrow streets ripe with the stench of rotting garbage. The muck would take weeks to clean from his boots, assuming he wouldn't have to traipse through the same decomposing food tomorrow. But he knew better.

He heaved a sigh for the soft leather half-boots he'd favoured in another life. Of course, they'd be ruined even faster than the heavy work boots. *Oh for a clean street.*

In the past, he'd waded knee-deep through any kind of muck as long as an answer lay on the other side. Two lives ago, that had been. Now, he did it in the hope of prolonging his pathetic existence one more day.

A tangled pile of crates blocked most of the alley. When he squeezed between the stack and the alley wall, the splintered wood scratched the stiff canvas of his smock and snagged his stonemason's mallet. It was impossible to avoid the rubbish piled between wall and crates, and he wrinkled his nose at the stench.

CONFRONTING THE DEMON

If only he could take the main streets, kept clean by an army of royal sweepers, but they'd be watching for him there and at the gates. No one at the citadel would expect to find him in this stinking back alley. No, not him. Not the man of silks and velvets.

As he slipped through the narrowest point, the crates shifted, allowing him a glimpse into the middle of the pile. An eye stared back at him. A fixed and glazed eye. He froze, clutching a box with one hand. Though he tried to peer through the tangle of crates, only the gleaming white of the eye was visible.

He uncurled his hand from the wood and pushed past into the street. Stopping, he stared at the stack and its hidden occupant.

A body. While not uncommon in these back alleys, it was a complication he didn't need. Bodies meant reports to the authorities. The authorities meant paperwork. Paperwork meant a trail. The last thing he wanted was a trail that led straight to his back door. The citadel would be watching, and so would Ladanyon.

Even odds who finds me first. Ladanyon used to be the one he relied on to help him out of a tight spot, even with an accusation such as treason and consorting with dark powers. But now, given the choice...he preferred the citadel.

Except at best, he'd be silenced. No more magic. Not ever. At worst? Death.

His palms sweated. He almost turned to go. But it wasn't right to leave a man dead in the street, buried beneath a pile of crates and sinking ignominiously into the muck. A man aspiring to even the lowest celestial level wouldn't behave so.

I shouldn't care about right or where my soul is going when I'm dead. I should care about not getting dead.

But he pulled the heavy gloves from his belt and drew them on. Still uncertain of what he'd do once he retrieved the body from beneath the fractured timber, he began unknotting the tangled puzzle of interlocking crates. The broken pieces came

free, and he set them aside. The work went slowly, but gradually he cleared the mess, creating a teetering stack of warped and cracked planks.

With half the job done, more of the corpse lay revealed. A woman. Her face pressed into the oozing mud, and death tinged her skin green. Cloudy eyes stared obliviously at a blue sky. The heat had done the woman no favours, and rot had set in. Alloran pushed one sleeve against his nose, breathing in stone dust embedded in the rough fibre to avoid the choking, putrid stink of wet death.

The body hadn't decomposed enough to hide all her features. In fact, she seemed familiar. A name tickled the distant reaches of memory. Evahna! A clerk at the scriptorium he used for his ink and other writing supplies. Though he hadn't known her well, he'd known her for a decade at least. A distant pang of grief touched him through the shock, bitter as hemlock.

His memory of an animated, golden-haired woman clanged dissonantly against the reality at his feet: her stomach sliced open, entrails spilled into the mud, and lying in a pool of her own rust-red blood. Something had gnawed on the intestines, something with a taste for blood and talons sharper than any blade forged by the hand of man.

Alloran leaned closer to examine the clean edge of the wounds and the way the skin appeared to have parted almost effortlessly. A protruding rib bore a deep gouge.

Reluctant, he opened himself to the mood of the alley, allowing himself to sense moments of great emotional energy that might have transpired in this place. Assault and robbery were common in these back alleys, though mostly he blocked out the feel of them. The residue passed quickly, lingering a bare day or two after the event, but it was such an oft-repeated crime that he could always sense them if he tried. Rape and the odd murder weren't unheard of, even beneath the protection of the citadel.

CONFRONTING THE DEMON

The oily presence oozing its way through his pores was worse than any murder. He caught his breath.

A minor demon of the seventh circle. But this unnatural being didn't belong here, and could only be here through the intervention of a wizard, one of two wizards, to be precise. And it wasn't him.

Heedless of the noxious substances squashed beneath his feet, Alloran backed away and wrapped his arms around himself. He tried to work some moisture back into his dry mouth. He couldn't be linked with a corpse gnawed on by a demon, especially the corpse of someone he knew. The city guards wouldn't know any different, but the wizards would. Reporting a body slain by a demon would be like lighting up the sky with the words '*Here I am*' and pointing a huge arrow his way. It wasn't an option.

With unnecessary force, he shoved the broken stack of timber over the corpse. The wood tumbled back into a tangle with a clatter and a thump. A barricade blocked the far end of the alley, preventing access to the square he worked in with Dek, his new business partner. Alloran vaulted over and strode into the blinding noonday sun, not once glancing back. Someone else would find the corpse sooner or later. *So long as that someone isn't me.*

The square lay deserted with each access street blocked to the public. In the centre, a half-completed statue stood surrounded by scaffolding. It depicted a king of legend, waving a sword and clutching a book to his chest. The sun glistened off Dek's red hair, pulled back from his face with a leather thong, as the mason scurried around the statue with a chisel in one hand and a mallet in the other. The upper half of the statue was exquisitely detailed, polished to near perfection. The lower half remained a largely shapeless lump of stone.

'Hol!' Dek waved one hand. 'Are you never gonna stop skulking aroun' those alleys?'

Alloran shrugged and clambered up on to the scaffolding. 'Don't like crowds.'

He put his left glove away and ran his hand over the stone, looking for tiny flaws. New calluses on his fingers scraped over a rough spot. His new identity as a mason had meant learning fast—faster than was possible without the assistance of magic.

'You see anything?' Dek waved his mallet towards the alley Alloran had emerged from. 'There's a damn awful stink.'

'Nothin'. You gonna dilly dally all day? This thing won't finish itself an' I'll be blowed if I do it all myself.' The words came out sharper than intended, sharper than a man might talk to his new business partner. No taking them back now. Alloran kept his eyes on the rough patch of stone and pulled a tiny chisel from his tool belt.

Dek only grinned. 'You work like a demon, man.'

Alloran flinched, knuckles whitening as he clenched the chisel. 'Ill-advised words,' he said. His voice dropped so low it almost became inaudible. 'For the times.'

Dek's pale blue gaze skipped up to the black citadel, clinging to the side of the cliff like a dark, creeping vine. No visible path led to its door. The mason's voice dropped to a whisper. 'Have they found 'im yet?'

Alloran jerked his head then bent back to work, a curtain of hair screening his face. 'He's gone.' He couldn't keep the shiver from his voice. It didn't matter, all the locals talked that way about the demon-summoning. Dek had no way of knowing it was more personal for Alloran. How had the news even made it down to the city? Servants, most likely, listening to the wizards. Even wizards wouldn't be able to keep their tongues still for a demon.

'Yeah? Says you, huh?'

'Has to be gone, if the wizards 'aven't found 'im yet. It's been more 'an three months.' Alloran drew a leather thong from his belt pouch and began pulling his hair back into a ponytail,

CONFRONTING THE DEMON

steadfastly ignoring the citadel looming over the stuccoed houses of the city. ‘Long gone if he’s smart.’ *I wish—if only it were that easy.*

With both the gates and the harbour watched night and day, he needed someone he could trust with an alternative escape route, but he had no one.

Dek pursed his lips. ‘I heard as how he killed six wizards. One of them was the lord wizard’s daughter.’

Alloran stopped with his hair half bound. ‘Yeah? I heard it was a demon that killed them, and the lord wizard’s daughter ain’t dead. And it *wasn’t* ’im as summoned it.’

Hunching his thick shoulders, Dek scowled under bushy red brows. ‘What would you know ’bout it anyway? You’ve hardly been here that long. You came up from Maldav, what, just after it happened?’ He stepped back to the statue and paused, looking towards the shadowed alley. ‘What if he’s still killin’?’

‘What if he is?’ An idea started to take hold, a way to see the dead woman decently buried without attaching his name or face to the matter. Ehvana had a family; they deserved to know her fate. ‘He wouldn’t be interested in the likes o’ you an’ me.’

‘Nah.’ Dek nodded. ‘But it sure smells bad over that way this morning. What if it’s a dead man as is making all that stink?’

‘Easy fixed then, innit? Report it, and they take ’im away. And it’s all roses again.’

Dek swung down from the scaffolding so fast that he caught Alloran flat-footed. By the time he climbed down, Dek was halfway across the square. Alloran broke into a trot, catching up as Dek squeezed around the barricade and headed down the alley.

Alloran climbed over the barrier and landed on the ground. Something gave under his foot, and the stench of overripe tomato wafted to his nose. He curled his lip. While he tried to shake tomato juice and seeds from his boot, he knocked over a small pile of rubbish.

He forgot about the rotting fruit on his boot. Curled up in the shadow of the wall, beneath the pile of disturbed garbage, lay something that looked like a cat—if cats came from the seventh hell. Slightly larger than a housecat, it was black and hairless with tendons cording its lean body. Ribs protruded along its flank as if it had starved to death. Oversized teeth jutted from its mouth, and the front feet appeared a little too human. Dead as last week's fish. Goosebumps spread along his arms. Nothing in this world looked like that.

Dek hunted down the alleyway, sniffing as if it were possible to smell anything in amongst all the muck. He took a turn down a side alley. Alloran left him alone and squatted down to examine the cat-thing.

Hellcat. Had to be. There'd never been one seen in this world—at least not that the citadel recorded. There'd never been any kind of demon, except that one imp. He wrapped his arms around his knees, hunched his shoulders, and suppressed a shiver. The imp was an accident. He'd bet everything he owned, which wasn't much more than the clothes on his back; this hellcat had been brought here intentionally.

Dek's muffled voice drifted down the alleyway. Cursing, by the sound of it. Alloran glanced up, but the stonemason remained out of sight. The stack of crates hiding the corpse sat undisturbed.

He poked the cat corpse. It slid an inch or two through the muck. With one finger, he turned it carefully. The wizards had spied on the hells in the past, peering through the veil, if not crossing it, so a reasonable catalogue of the denizens of the seven hells existed. This corpse matched all the features of hellcats.

Dek stomped out of the side alley. He thrust his head into another alleyway before turning his attention to the stacked crates. Focused on the hellcat, Alloran ignored him.

It matched all the physical features. While repulsive, the hellcat didn't look particularly frightening. Its most horrifying features lay

CONFRONTING THE DEMON

in its nature, not its appearance, an insatiable hunger and the teeth to chew through bone and even metal in an endless quest to sate its appetite. A hide impervious to edged weapons. Resistance to magic. This one, insignificant-looking demon could potentially chew its way through an entire regiment.

So why didn't it? Fresh chills ran through his body as Alloran settled back on his heels. *A demon with direction?* The notion was almost unthinkable. Except if he'd thought it, at least one other must have too. That cast a new light on all the deaths at the citadel. What if...

'Got a corpse here.' Dek hauled the shattered crates apart with one great heave and an explosion of sound. 'Told you he's still killin'!'

Alloran jerked backwards, slamming his head against the opposite wall. Rubbing the pain away, he dimly registered Dek turning back around. *What would Ladanyon be doing with a demon that didn't involve me? And has he figured out how to control them?*

'What's that?' Dek closed in. He was squat and muscled, and he barely came to Alloran's chin, but he took up most of the available space with his stonemason shoulders.

'Cat.' Alloran came to life and kicked the corpse under a pile of rotting garbage. A crumpled piece of paper fluttered across the ground in the wake of his passing boot.

'Didn't look like no cat I ever saw.'

'Just a cat.' Alloran caught and held Dek's eyes.

'Stop fooling around with some dead cat.' Dek turned away. 'We got us a corpse to report.'

A flash of guilt stabbed Alloran for the use of magic on the mason. Entirely necessary. Faking the stonemason credentials from Maldav had been necessary too. 'You report it. I don't feel well.' His gaze drifted back towards the cat-like corpse hidden under the rubbish, and his gorge rose.

The paper stirred again in the wind of Dek's departure, and Alloran stooped to pick it up. Smoothing the creases out revealed familiar script. Though the once-elegant loops of letters were jagged in places, as if penned by an erratic hand, he recognised Ladanyon's handwriting.

How do I surpass you? Let us examine the matter... I have explored every facet of human existence including the ultimate journey, death.

Chilled to the bone beneath the blazing heat of a summer sun, Alloran crumpled the note into his pocket. It had no salutation, but he knew it was intended for him anyway.

What to make of it?



Alloran went straight home, using a complicated route of back alleys he'd never traversed before. Why make himself easy to find by retracing his steps?

Home—such as it was. The small villa was crammed cheek by jowl with similar structures. The stucco flaked from the walls, and the building badly needed repairs. Alloran resisted the urge to look at the citadel. In the lengthening shadows of late afternoon, it verged on invisibility against the rocky crag. At twilight, the castle lit up like a million fireflies in a tree. Inside, wizards and sorceresses would dine on exquisite meals prepared by the finest chefs in Ehsan, if not the whole of the kingdom. Tomorrow night was the weekly ball with dancing and music and....

His mouth watered. He shoved the door open, heedless of the crooked way it hung on its hinges, and slammed it behind him. Tonight's dinner would be mutton, tough enough to make his jaw ache, and wizened potatoes. It was pointless to dream about banquets, never mind dancing.

The chair at the scarred table was too rickety for him to throw himself into it. Dissatisfied, he retrieved his journal from a moth-eaten armchair and sat carefully. The chair wobbled but held.