

“A GRIPPING DARK FANTASY THAT IMMERSSES YOU IN A WORLD
OF DEADLY POWER POLITICS AND CORRUPTION.”

Richard Moriarty - The Sun

THE AMBER MENHIR



THE SHADOWS OF THE MONOLITH: BOOK ONE

JONATHAN N. PRUITT

SAMPLE

Prologue



CHESA CARESSED THE PUCKERED scar on her side and recoiled. Her mind wandered again. Though self-training like hers required one to maintain their focus, in that moment, she could not suppress a smile. It was a day to celebrate, after all, to let herself feel what happiness she could, so long as it didn't interfere with the task at hand. Her dark hair, cut short to accentuate her jawline, sat lacquered into wavelets pinned against her scalp and adorned with delta pearls. She clicked her nails against her marble tub perch. The window nearby provided few clues as to how long her mind had wandered. It remained dark out, chilly, and the sky was slathered with low-lying clouds that discouraged any hope of moonlight.

“A dark night for dark deeds.” She chuckled.

Chesa stole a glance at herself in the standing mirror across the bathing chamber. Her slight frame and ageless features were displayed to full advantage in her robes. Though the fabric hung loose around her legs, arms, and neckline, a grey sash was cinched around her waist to accentuate her modest breasts. The important parts remained featured, despite the middling fabric. One often needed to dull the lily to execute one's plans.

In a life that was rarely her own, Chesa embraced herself in that moment. But her moment of quiet celebration was interrupted too soon

by a soft spewing like a breaching whale, followed by a gurgle. She looked down into the steaming water at the naked man submerged there. Liam's nose pierced the water's surface and sucked in a breath before he slid back into his watery tomb. The generous veins upon his arms stood out, as though he were still struggling against an unseen force binding him. One side of Chesa's mouth quirked up. The many days he'd spent sculpting his virile physique would soon enough be wasted.

He arched his back with a gentle thud. The movement sent his body up to the water's surface like a sad, suffocating fish flopping through gelatin. Just before his nostrils breached the surface, Chesa pressed a finger to the tip of his nose with a throaty sigh, pushing him back to the bottom of the tub. Liam's leafy green eyes opened wide. Their gazes met, and the tension in his body relented. A trail of bubbles escaped his mouth in an aqueous sigh of defeat.

He'd been a brute in life, and a powerful adversary to many scholars. His perfect bone structure, imposing stature, and easy likability had made leadership an effortless inevitability. Staring down at him, Chesa wondered if Liam had ever worked hard for anything in his life. Men of privilege, like him, so rarely ever did. No doubt he had never suspected his end would come at the hands of a servant . . . but life in the Amber Menhir was full of surprises.

"Oh, don't look at me like that." Chesa clucked her tongue. "You've been riding this leopard for quite some time. Had it not been me, someone else would have come."

Liam's eyes drooped shut, and his body spasmed in a tedious attempt to steal more air. Chesa let out another little sigh. He acted like some brainless sea creature dragged onto a boat—one that failed to realize the inevitability of its situation. This time, his nose sucked in a bit of air.

Chesa rolled her eyes. "Can't you see?" she chided. "You have lost, dear scholar. Give up, my liege!"

Liam flexed his helpless form against Chesa's thaumaturgic bind-

ing. His strength of spirit was indeed undeniable. Most people so privileged broke under real adversity. At least, that had been Chesa's experience. But Liam's exception, however remarkable, remained irrelevant.

"Such a pity," Chesa purred, looking down at the scholar. "The one night you're actually imperiled, and your precious mau isn't here to protect you." Her tone turned flat, each word edged with ice. "What an unhappy coincidence for you."

Chesa sidled around the tub's perimeter, gliding her nails along its edge. She paused above a gilded table set to one side. Upon it sat an etched snifter containing a few drops of fortified wine.

"It is so convenient when one's prey thwarts itself with self-defeating vices. . . And what is this here?"

A glazed teacup sat a little away from the snifter. Chesa lifted it to her nose and inhaled. She dipped a fingertip into the tea and touched it to her tongue. Though sugar dominated the milieu, a metallic after-taste betrayed the tea's true nature. Chesa wiped her tongue on her sleeve. Even a few drops of such concoctions could incapacitate.

"So, the rumors were true?" she admonished. "The golden spawn of Lord Kensington had a dreamflower addiction. . . Not that I can chastise anyone for an overabundance of vices." She winked at the submerged scholar, and her expression hardened. "But what was someone like you running away from?"

Liam did not answer.

"Well, in the end, not every mystery gets solved, I suppose." She gazed down at Liam and took in two slow breaths. Her fingers flicked through a series of gestures with practiced precision, each held for just the appropriate measure of time. To the untrained observer, the sequence appeared as little more than chaos.

Liam's body convulsed, but then his lulling mind betrayed him. His fists became placid open palms. The bulging veins in his arms, shoulders, and chest receded into his flesh. His face went slack, and his

pupils grew wide. Only the tiniest coronas of his green eyes remained visible. Finally, Liam's shoulders sagged, and his body curled up like a giant man-fetus. His lips parted in unknowing relaxation. A faint burbling of air from Liam's stupefied features was all that breached their shared moment of silence.

Chesa continued her flurry of hand motions. "Anything worth doing is worth overdoing," she reminded herself aloud.

Liam drifted in reply.

With her tidy work complete, Chesa rose. She straightened her meager garments and flexed her aching hand. Taking stock of the bathing mirror, she examined herself one last time, then slapped the snifter off the table. It fell between the table and the tub and shattered, sending tiny shards spinning in every direction. She took the emptied wine bottle, turned it on its side, and rested it on the table. Finally, she lifted her grey servant's cowl and slithered into his bedchamber.

Chesa paused in the doorway, glancing back at the steaming soup that contained Liam's corpse. "A sad waste of well-cultivated man flesh," she admitted.

In the bedchamber, Chesa whipped the scholar's linens from his bed with a snap of fabric and assessed the scene's believability. In her mind's eye, she could see the spectre of Liam's drunken form stumbling from bedchamber to bath. His penchants for dreamflower and wine made her job almost too easy. Almost.

Chesa scanned his room and frowned at the gilded, swirling inlays that riddled Liam's furnishings. She approached the cherrywood door leading out and pressed her ear against it. Though she deemed it unlikely that anyone would be out this late, delicate work required every precaution, and some scholars kept odd hours.

The hallway beyond stood silent. She slipped from the room, carefully closing the door behind her. Glass oil lamps illuminated the pale grey walls of the towering hall beyond. A biting autumn draft sent her

skin rippling with gooseflesh. Or perhaps it was the scholars who called these halls their home? The Delves' quarters always made Chesa feel small, as though something watched her. She shuddered. Then she pulled herself upright and fled, keeping her eyes low as she did.

She took care not to seem rushed as she moved. It was imperative that no one discover Liam's fate for at least a few hours. With luck, someone would not discover him until morning. By then, Chesa hoped, his body would be a bloated, rotting wreck. The visage and smell might cause whoever discovered him to panic and compromise any lingering evidence. If the gods were good, they would make it so.

Chesa's trek back to her quarters passed without disturbance. She glided through the vacant halls to the servants' quarters adjacent to those of the Delves of the Mind. Entering her bedroom, she sighed as she closed the door behind her. She took a seat on the room's only stool before a chipped washbasin and mirror. Undoing her oceanic finery took more time than she liked. She lifted a comb to her hair as a voice rose from behind her.

"Have you accomplished your task?" the voice growled and echoed.

She flinched, sending a pearl tumbling from her hair into the basin with a clink. As she glanced into her standing mirror, the room appeared empty. But when she turned, her gaze fell on an entity she had never imagined seeing. A tumbling pool of shadow where no such shadow should exist writhed, seeming to appraise her as it did.

Chesa gave a start. "I did. The Delves will be staggering soon," she explained. "It will appear that he drowned. I don't know how he had managed to broker the relationships with the other noble factions, especially the Weavers, but that's all over now. A dead Primara cannot broker anything. The Delves will be clamoring over one another for the chance to be his successor, as is their way."

"Well done. A fractious menhir is less dangerous for all," the shadow replied. The vaguest impression of a smile touched the undifferentiated

swirling mists near the center of the nexus. “Your instincts continue to improve.” As it spoke, the edges of the figure’s form writhed, producing tiny streams of smoke.

“What’s next?” asked Chesa.

“Though we may hope,” the shadow intoned, “that the union between the Delves and Weavers was the foretold unification, we cannot know. Watch the Primaras closely, Chesa, and ensure that they scramble over the Harvest. We must take care that another unification does not spawn in this one’s wake, and we must remain ever vigilant for a Blurred Keystone. I feel the pulse of change before us. We will not be the only ones looking.”

Chesa’s eyes widened. “Watch the Primara? The Keystone? Does this mean I’ve made it?”

“You have done well,” the shadow replied, its tone cautious. “Your work will help us forge the siege engine that demolishes the world before us and ushers in a new dawn. For now, though, sift through the wreckage of the crumbled alliance, and keep your ear to the ground.”

“But I’ve made it?” Chesa insisted, surprised by her own insolence. Various pleasure centers in her brain ignited in a heady rush. Or maybe that was her envy of Liam’s dreamflower?

“I predict that even your greatest detractors among the Disciples will now be mollified by your deeds.”

A thousand questions blossomed all at once in Chesa’s mind. But then, faster than it arrived, the figure vanished, sliding back into the corner of the room like black water through an unseen crack.

A moment later, Chesa found herself gazing into her standing mirror, frozen in the midst of combing her hair. The click of another pearl as it landed in her washbasin drew her attention. She reached in to pick it up, but it was gone. Startled, she counted her pearls once, and then again to be sure. Not one, but two were missing.

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