

About the author

Hugh is an amateur fantasy writer living in Brisbane, Australia with his parents and siblings. Hugh's main character and writing style is based on the Malus Darkblade book series, of which Hugh is a big fan. Hugh writes so that he doesn't have to remember everything about his characters and setting.

Synopsis

This story is about Vivel, adopted daughter of Vivris, the Witch-Queen of Naggaroth, and elder sister to Devrus and Salris Volkhar, Vivris' biological children, who has been called back to her home city of Naggarond by her mother for unknown reasons.

Family Meeting

My eyes flickered open as I awakened from my slumber. I sat up in my bed as I performed my morning ritual of mentally reciting the first three lines of the 66th Tome of Hecate and simultaneously surveyed my chambers with both my eyes and my magic, in case anyone had sneaked in and left an unwelcome gift for me. Fortunately, no one had made such an attempt. I doubt it would have worked.

After I blinked the sleep out of my eyes, I rose from my bed and held my arms out at my sides as the Unseen Servants washed and clothed me. While they did this, I looked out my bedchambers balcony and beheld the sea beyond the shores of Naggarond.

“Why did she call me here?” I pondered as the Unseen Servants finished dressing me and faded away, waiting to be summoned again. Now fully clothed, I left my bedchambers through my boudoir and entered the stairwell of my personal tower. I had been in the jungle continent of Eswana leading a hunt for the beast Gargantulzan when I had received a message from Mother ordering me to return to the gates of Naggarond immediately. Reluctant as I was to abandon my hunt, I ultimately had no choice. One does not simply defy the Witch-Queen of Naggaroth, after all.

When I arrived, I was expecting to be greeted by Mother herself, only to be faced with Uncle Svangar, who, after giving me an almost bone-crushing hug, directed me to my childhood room in Castle Volkhar, which was exactly how I remember leaving it some-30 years ago, where I was meant to spend the night before meeting with Mother to discuss whatever it was she wanted me to return for.

As I reached the exit of the stairwell, I detected two presences waiting on the other side, and smiled as I recognised them.

“Vivel!” “Sister!” My little brothers Devrus and Salris exclaimed as they saw me walk through the stairwell's exit and opened my arms to accept the oncoming hugs from them. After my brothers released me from their embrace, I questioned them why they were waiting.

“Mother told us to escort you to the meeting room.” Devrus answered while absentmindedly grabbing Salris by the arm as his twin started to wander off. “Why, we have no idea, but you know how she is.”

I nodded at this, recalling my mothers habit of performing random acts seemingly for no reason other than whimsy, probably as a method to stave off insanity. One does not live as long as my Mother has without going at least slightly insane.

We walked through the winding hallways and stairwells of Castle Volkhar, making small talk and keeping Salris from getting distracted from our task and wandering off, until we reached the designated room Mother had told us to come to. Before any of us had a chance to announce our arrival, the door swung open on it's own, and we walked in, single file.

The room we entered wasn't anything special, being one of hundreds, possibly thousands of rooms that Mother had ordered to be left empty. This one had an oval shaped table, with three empty chairs at the end closest to the entrance, all of which had a magical signature denoting that all had been created by magic. Towards the other end was a throne-like chair facing away from us.

“Took you long enough.” Mother's voice sounded out from the head of the table. The chair turned around, revealing my mother sitting in it, not even looking up at us in favour of continuing to read her book. “Take a seat, children.”

Without a second thought, my brothers and I quickly sat down, only to immediately jump up in alarm as a loud flatulent sound abruptly echoed out from the chairs beneath us. I looked down and saw some *thing* that defied description on the chair. Out of the corners of my eyes I saw Dev and Sal doing the same, Devrus glaring at the object in question while Salris seemed interested in it, if his pressing his scaled hand against it was any indication.

“Amusing, aren't they?” Mother asked, briefly looking up at us before returning to her book. “I grabbed them while I was wandering the multiverse. You three wouldn't believe what else I found on that world. It is a mess.”

I thought on what she said for a moment before deciding that something that Mother considered “a mess” wasn't something good for my sanity. I sat back in my seat after removing the object Mother had placed on it as she started talking again.

“I'm sure you're all wondering why I've called you here.” She began, and I subconsciously leaned forward in my seat, eager for the answer to the question that had been plaguing my mind since yesterday. “The reason I've summoned you, is...” She paused, likely to increase the tension that permeated the room. Out of the corner of my eyes I saw that even Dev and Sal were leaning forwards as well. Mother gave a small smile, revelling in the spotlight. “... because I felt like it.”

All at once all the tension in the room dissipated, I even noticed Salris fall out of his chair, Devrus managing to stop himself by gripping the table.

“That's it?” I asked incredulously. “That's the reason you called us back? Because you felt like it?!” I started shouting. “I was in the middle of hunting down Gargantulzan! Do you know how much time and effort I invested, time and effort that has now been wasted because of your whims?!” I stood up as I prepared to continue my tirade, before the temperature of the room dropped so low I could see my own breath.

“Watch yourself, Vivel.” My Mother's gaze was ice-cold, and I fell back into my seat, feeling like I was eight years old again. “I don't care how much you *think* you've lost, I could easily just give you a hunting army to bring down the beast. I could even hunt it down myself if I felt inclined to.” She rose from her seat, and began stalking around the table towards me, looking more like some predator than the whimsical mother she had been portraying herself as during the meeting. This, I reminded myself, was the woman who raised me; a woman who had conquered empires, enslaved titanic beasts, wielded magic from an age long forgotten, and had seen wonders that most could only dream of.

This was also the woman I had just yelled at. I stared at the ground, my rage replaced with terror. “I'm sorry Mama.” I whispered in a small voice.

I felt a cold hand being placed on my shoulder before another one cupped my chin and raised my face so that I was looking at my Mother's face, which now had a beneficent smile on it. “I forgive you, of course.” She said while looking down at me. “Your anger is justified and I will see to it that you are properly compensated for any losses incurred by my calling you back here. Besides,” her gaze turned towards Devrus, “yours is not the greatest slight any of you have committed against me.” She began walking towards my younger brother. “Um,” Devrus looked appropriately nervous, “I'm afraid I don't know what you're-”

“Don't lie to me, *boy*.” I couldn't see Mother's face but it wouldn't surprise me if her eyes became slits. “I raised you, I know how you think, I know how you plot, I know more

about you and your capabilities than you do.” Having reached him, Mother began to lean forward, causing Dev to lean back to keep their faces apart. “You're planning to go to the Temple of Tharid, on the Trenbiens Chain, yes? Let me guess, you're going to let yourself and your retinue get captured by the natives and let yourselves be carried to the temple, thereby bypassing the magic dome protecting it from invaders. Once there, you will break free, either by your own strength or by being freed by Cekhil, who I assume will be hiding in your shadow, meaning that he will be able to avoid being 'captured', and you and your retainers will then slaughter the natives, and plunder the temple's riches, correct?”

She didn't wait for him to answer before she started again, “I'm assuming you won't be bringing all of your retainers, yes? I doubt the tribespeople would think they could take Valzire captive, not that he would let them anyway. That's the thing with Draegloths, they tend to be too aggressive to convincingly pretend to be captured. That's the same reason you won't be bringing that redhead you like, what was her name? Æsa, was it? Anyway, odds are her pride as a warrior wouldn't allow her to be captured, so you'll be leaving them both behind, but I digress.” With this, she straightened, and turned away from Devrus. “The point of the matter is, that you're planning to go to the temple, despite the fact that I can distinctly recall **forbidding** you from going there.” She turned back to him with a glare. “So, Devrus, is there anything you'd like to say in your defence?”

Looking down, my brother could only mutter a quiet apology. Mother sighed. “Fortunately for you, I've decided to be lenient. I will allow you to continue with you're undertaking, but I must set an example of what happens to those who defy me.” With this, she leaned in again. “Don't worry, it will be quick.”

Before I could even blink, Mother's hand shot forward into Devrus' eye socket, then she kicked him in the chest. Devrus screamed as he fell back out of his chair, his hands desperately trying to stop the flow of acidic blood pouring from his empty eye socket, before curling up into a fetal position on the floor. Mother stood dispassionately, Devrus' eyeball still in her hand as she watched her son trembling in a whimpering pile before casually popping it in her mouth and swallowing.

“Now,” she turned her gaze upon Salris and I, “let this be a warning to both of you.” With this, she spun on her heel and strode out of the meeting room without a second glance.