

# Death of a Jackal

By J.D. Dresner

In Craggmoö, Corwyn's central continent, one can only find war. The Age of Thieves has come to an end, and with the emergence of a new age, so too must a new ruler arise.

A dark force has spread throughout the land, blanketing out the sun and blighting anything it touches. Deemed "The Shroud", it is both a malevolent aura and an undead army, intent on usurping The Breggin Empire. It's ruler, an unseen Shadow whose reputation is fueled by fear and rumor.

Jayna the Jackal is in the thick of it, fighting alongside a losing empire in Calládon's fields. This is her tale... her *final* tale.

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By the time I finish telling you this story, I'll be dead.

Yeah, sure... they say that one should never begin a tale by giving away the ending. They say it's about the journey, not the destination. Well, I don't know who *they* are, and if this is going to be my last story to tell... *they* can stick my sickle up their moon hole.

They call me The Jackal. Maybe it's 'cause I'm quick on my feet, or maybe it's 'cause I'm opportunistic (in the sense that I'll pretty much eat anything you put in front of me, and I'll never say no to making a few quick king's notes). If

you'd ask me what I preferred to be called, I would've chosen something like The Panther or The Puma. Something... feline. Jackals are ugly, and I don't think I'm ugly. I mean, I'm no Lady Margarete, but I'd like to think I could out-pretty your average princess.

Lying in a drenched puddle of mud, cheeks smeared, and dirt caked in just about every orifice I have, I press the magic ring on my finger tightly against my side. I don't know why I never thought to use the thing until now.

My sickle lays pointed-side-in. I can feel its sting with each breath I take. My own sickle, turned against me by some entitled spell-caster wearing a ridiculous coat and helm. I'll never forget how stupid he looked for as long as I live. I mean... who uses bleached orc skull to make a helmet? You kill one orc, and that's supposed to be menacing? And what about that umbrella looking cloak? Was he trying to hide his grasshopper thin legs with that thing? 'Cause if he was, he'd failed miserab—"Ouch!" The pain in my abdomen excruciatingly shoots up my spine, forcing me to pull back my head until the world appears upside-down.

The world is upside-down. How could it not be, when people would sooner go to war than meet to discuss a more peaceful solution?

The rain that hasn't stopped in weeks pelts my forehead and chin, and it's *derking* freezing!

In this upside-down world, I see a man being impaled with a blade by someone he once called a friend. Well, that *friend* died and was risen using some pretty dark necromancy, now a

mindless corpse whose sole purpose is to make others like him. Stab them with swords once used against The Shroud... bite into their necks until they bled out... do what must be done. That's what we're up against: bodies that should've stayed dead rose to their feet, changed allegiances. They now listen to Her. Yes, capital Her, for they say to use The Shadow's name aloud is to curse oneself. I suppose, if I'm to find something after this life, I wouldn't want to begin it with a curse on my head.

I can't see my ring any longer, but I can feel it working, recording life's last few moments. Maybe I shouldn't squander such a gift by describing how moronic that magician chose to dress. Maybe I should try to bring a little meaning to these last few memories. Someone's going to find this ring one day, and they're going to wonder why I had nothing profound to say. So, Jayna, say something profound! You've had a whole life's worth of experiences, and if you wanted to sum it up now, in a few wonderful sentences, you'd say...

You'd say...

What really is there to say? I'm going to die. The world doesn't belong to me anymore. Okay, whoever's listening to this: know that I was an upstanding individual who believed it was an honor to serve the empire in their fight against The Shroud, and though I was basically coerced into enlisting through gaslighting and false narratives, I would've enlisted on my own.

LIES. YOU NEVER WANTED TO JOIN. FOR ONE, THE MONEY WASN'T THAT GOOD.

Fine. Listener of the magic ring: tell my family I love them, and that I have a trust setup that will ensure they're all taken care of.

YOU DON'T HAVE A FAMILY. WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

Look, I didn't prepare for this. I get that in my line of work, death often precedes old age. I just didn't think...

I just... didn't think. That's what it comes down to.

The ring squeezes twice, telling me it's at half capacity. Soon, it'll stop recording. I grew up alone. That's the truth of it. At a young age I had to fend for myself. I lived on both sides of the law, and yeah, I saw some pretty wondrous things. I love being in style, and I crave adventure. I spent a year alone in The Impassible Alps, I traveled to other realms, and I competed in The Common Games. I pick my nose, even when I know someone's watching me, and I like making fun of other peoples' art. I don't have any family, and since I enjoy lying to myself, I generally call the few acquaintances I've made my 'friends'. That's me, I suppose.

Me.

It's unnerving to think that, of all my quirks and ticks and the things that make me 'me', only the slightest bit of it'll be remembered. Thousands of moments and experiences, all absorbed, summarized, generalized... the details, lost. And if you have no one to pass all your life lessons onto...

Funny, isn't it? You pass on one iota of knowledge that positively affects one person, and your life has meaning. Your memory stays with them. You become a saint in their eyes. But if you can't pass on what you have learned to anyone...

well, you may as well have never existed. Am I right?

*Ugh...* it feels like my stomach acids are burning through my intestines whenever I breathe. And the blood pooling around my betraying sickle is so wet and sticky. My feet have gone numb, but the rest of me feels like I'm about to combust. I want to cry. I want to join the screaming others on this battlefield. It's all just so intolerable, feeling this, lying here... waiting.

An arrow pierces my side, jostling my body and thrusting my line of sight to the right. As if dying slowly in the muddy fields of Calládon by my own blade wasn't enough; someone had to release an arrowhead into my ribcage, just to be sure.

Oh Death... *Death, Death, Death.* I can feel it approaching. I can sense the pestilence accompanying it. With every step Death takes toward me, I feel less of my own body. I see the ear-to-ear grin and the flowing hooded robe, but I am mistaken; it isn't Death that approaches, it's that predacious wizard. I mistook that horrible ore-skull helm for Death's head. That man's already finished me, so why won't he leave me alone?

The ring squeezes my finger. That's it then—it's reached its capacity, the magic, wasted on the dilapidated ramblings of a dying jackal. When this battle is over... when my carcass has been picked clean by the vultures and thieves, someone will place my ring on their finger and hear the echoes of a confused, dying woman who couldn't impart even one secret... one piece of advice to change the course of their life. They'll listen to my inconsequential story, my attempt to sum up my life in a few short sentences, and they'll laugh. And then

they'll forget me.

This is it. Say goodbye to Jayna the Jackal.

White.

Black.

Shadows.

Whispers.

Everyone wants to know what death feels like. I wouldn't be able to describe it if I tried, but I can tell you this: *returning* from the dead is an odd sensation. You regain feeling in your feet first, then your legs, your torso and arms... the last thing you become aware of is your head, and your mind, and your... self. But something's missing. Your feet may be moving, your eyes can see, yet...

There's something about this state that feels un-whole, unholy perhaps. I look down. My sickle has completely sliced through my abdomen. There's no longer life in this body, and it should've fallen apart by now. Yet I can feel a magical hand holding me together, animating my body like a puppet, forcing me upright. It's Her hand—the one whose name I still cannot utter aloud, even in death.

A staggering corpse beside me bangs its shoulder into mine as it drags forward, weapon raised to attack a defenseless Steel Guard soldier. I remove the bloody sickle from my body, thinking little about the consequences. With an arch, I slice the corpse's arm clean from its body. I follow through to behead the vile thing. The frightened soldier looks up at me, then at my exposed innards. He vomits, but once he gains control of his heaving chest, he says, "You're dead?"

"Yes," I manage to say.

“But you still know who you are.” I take in his words, look around. Every other animated sack of failed organs is fighting for The Shadow in hordes, a thousand strong, and somehow, I’m the only one who’s blurred the lines between the living and the dead.

I feel a squeeze against my finger. THEY CALL ME THE JACKAL. I feel another squeeze. JAYNA THE JACKAL. The blood-soaked ring is repeating everything it recorded. THE WORLD DOESN’T BELONG TO ME ANYMORE...

..IT’S ALL JUST SO INTOLERABLE...

...YOU PASS ON ONE IOTA OF KNOWLEDGE  
THAT POSITIVELY AFFECTS ONE PERSON, AND YOUR  
LIFE HAS MEANING...

This ring saved me! It let me remember my previous life. It protected me from Her dark magic, I mean... partially. These other walking cadavers aren’t so privileged. They’re just shells of their old selves.

So, Jayna, what are you going to do with your new gift? You have your second chance; are you going to use it, or waste it?

Death stares me in the face, but it’s a false death. It’s the inelegant necromancer, wearing his cheap attire.

I know what I must do.

I had said if you can’t pass on what you’ve learned, you may as well have not existed (or something along those lines), but there’s another option, another reason to exist. They also say if you cannot teach, then do.

The sickle in my hand begs for one last kill. Question is,

will the necromancer realize I'm not on his side before I reach him? Well, this'll go one of two ways: He'll see me for what I am, and then he'll burn me to cinders with his magic, or, I'll find the soft spot between his absurd helm and that pelican-frilled coat of his, and with one slice I'll ensure he never hurts anyone else.

I drag my feet, one and then the next, but I'm swimming against the tide, crashing through a horde of others not-so-like-me to get to the necromancer. We lock eyes. He knows I'm not what I should be. A spell forms between his hands, his impractical coat getting in the way of his movements, and I can feel a kind of tugging at my being. The man is trying to turn me—reset my consciousness so that I'll conform to this repugnant army's mandate. But the ring protects me.

...I GREW UP ALONE...

...AT A YOUNG AGE I HAD TO FEND FOR MYSELF...

I'm close now.

The necromancer must have realized something's preventing him from gaining control of my being. He must've figured, if I can't turn her, I'll have to destroy her instead, because he conjured a ball of black smoke and hurled it at my chest. It began to eat away at me, dissolving my flesh like acid. Though I cannot feel the burn, I know that it'll be my undoing... my second undoing.

There isn't much time. I ready my sickle to carry out one last deed... one last attempt to prove my life was worth having. Insides falling out and squishing beneath my feet as I run for the grinning spell-caster, I pull my sickle as far behind me as



I can, readying it for one, final swing before I—

He impaled me, his magic staff piercing the already burning hole in my chest as it pokes out my backside. I falter, one knee on the ground as I ponder how poorly I'd timed this whole endeavor. He retracts his staff and spears me again, causing my heart to fall out my backside. Meanwhile, the acid's reached my lungs and the lower part of my neck. He thrusts his staff into me a third time, and with my free hand I take hold of it, pull him in with a jolt. I don't consciously remember doing it; I just know that if I'm going to die, so too must this necromancer. My hand grips his cloak, tears at his collar. We're nose to nose as my sickle reaches around his neck. I begin to saw.

Horrified and wide-eyed, the necromancer yells and spits into my face. His hands claw at my arms. They poke at my eye until it's out of its socket. They tear at my ear and hair. His legs, kicking at the ground, at me... at anything. The acid has reached the bottom of my throat, and I can no longer feel most of me, but I continue to saw. In one last (and utterly vain) attempt to free himself, the necromancer takes a bite out of my nose and cheek, but then I hear a *Crunch!* and his jaw relaxes... his body relaxes. Reflexively, he coughs blood out his gaping mouth. But the clawing and the kicking have stopped.

It is done.

Without adrenaline to fuel my fervent sawing, I leave the sickle where it is, rooted three-fourths into his cleaved neck, and I rest. My mutilated head lies upon the necromancer's

torso, my arm wrapped around him. I can still hear the screams of the dying; my deed will now ensure there are fewer of them.

I only have precious seconds now, for the burning acid has crept its way up my chin and is now devouring my mouth, but before the magic can take away my ruby lips, I smile, one last time. I may never get the chance to pass on what I've learned. Others will never know the pain I suffered or of the trials I underwent. But my life has meaning. By killing the necromancer, I've given others the chance to live.

The acid reaches my brain, but I am happy.