

The
Necromancer's
Bones



Deby Fredericks

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Chapter One

The Chaos Moon

Out in the garden, something flashed. Shenza Waik of Tresmeer looked up as the flare of light caught her eye. Her pen stopped scratching across the scroll of cloth in front of her.

Shenza was kneeling beside a low table in her work room. A teakwood lamp hung above her head. Carved in the shape of a sea-whip, it cast a pool of light around her while the rest of the house lay dark. Shenza gazed through the open sides of the cottage, into a garden hinted by shadows. A light breeze made the treetops whisper like someone calling her name.

The night was warm in Chalsett, City of Gardens. It hummed with songs of crickets and frogs. Another soft breeze stirred the leafy garden and Shenza saw what had caught her attention. Instead of stars winking between the branches, a round, shining object rose in the sky.

Which moon was that? Shenza frowned thoughtfully. It was too small to be Prenuse, too pale to be Quaiss, too bright to be Meor. Perhaps it was nothing, yet the tenor of the night had changed. It suddenly felt as brittle and easily shattered as a fallen leaf.

Shenza put down her pen and leaned away from the table, arching her back to ease its stiffness. She rubbed her dark eyes and ran brown fingers through her loose black curls. Then she pushed back the inventory of spell ingredients she had been working on. Shenza was between investigations, an ideal time to replenish the talismans and amulets she had used up, yet she felt too restless to concentrate.

Glad of an excuse to stop, she gathered her purple robe and stood, strolling toward the porch. The mysterious moon was now hidden by trees. Shenza followed a gravel path toward the center of the garden, where she would have a better view. Insects and frogs fell silent as she passed.

The last time she had gone into a garden at night, she had met a stranger—one of the

Eleshi, a nature spirit. First in the form of a snake, and then something like a human. It had been like the sea, beautiful and wild and deadly. Shenza shivered, remembering its alien beauty.

That had been the first of several encounters, all of them in darkness or deep shadow. There was no reason to think another spirit was visiting her, yet still she felt tension in the air. She stopped, inhaling lightly. There had been a certain fragrance the spirit carried with it, like blooms of an unearthly flower. She didn't smell it now. A part of her relaxed.

Shenza continued forward, watching her step on the dark path. The cottage behind her was quiet and empty. Shenza shared the dwelling with Master Laraquies, her old teacher. Since her training was finished, she could have returned to her mother's house. Or, since Lord Aspace had chosen Laraquies as his Vizier, he could have claimed a grander residence in the first lord's estate. But the living arrangement was so comfortable, neither one had suggested it. Shenza, at least, benefitted from having access to her master's wise advice.

Tonight, Master Laraquies was up at the palace. Lord Aspace didn't entertain as much as his late brother, Lord Anges, but he still had banquets. Laraquies had to be there, observing the byplay of the nobles and sometimes intervening in their squabbles. Shenza had been invited, too, but she had declined. Although her rank as magister was respectable, she still felt like a lowly fisherman's daughter. It was easier to be alone than to deal with the nobles, who resented her intrusion into their elite circle.

Then Shenza smiled at herself for prowling through her garden in the dark. If inventory made her this restless, maybe she should have gone with Master Laraquies. She didn't like the nobles, but Lord Aspace was another story. She could enjoy his company if he ever stopped teasing her.

Not that someone like Shenza could ever have any hope with a man like Aspace. Maybe that was the real reason she avoided the palace. It hurt to like someone so much and know he could never be hers.

Shenza found a clear spot beside the brook that wound through the garden. When she looked up, what she saw threw all her petty complaints out of her mind.

Skall was in the sky. Skall, the moon of chaos! Shenza took a step backward, toward the house. It couldn't be. She felt a sense of unreality, as she had when the Eleshi came to her. Shenza squeezed her eyes tightly shut, then opened them again. The chaos moon was still there.

Now Shenza studied the heavens intently. Inkesh was just rising, its ruby crescent showing in patches through the treetops. Meor rode at its zenith, a gibbous lavender orb. The other two moons weren't visible.

The dim sky made Skall's glow all the brighter. It's face was vivid white marked with darker splotches. Skall was also the smallest moon. Shenza felt she could pluck it down from the sky and wear it, like a bead, but she didn't want to.

Like the other four moons, Skall represented a force in life -- chance and change, the whims of fate. While the other moons had regular movements which could be studied and predicted, Skall only appeared rarely. There was never a pattern. It seemed to come and go at its own whim.

Shenza's neck was tight from gazing upward. She shook her head, let out a breath, and forced herself to relax. There was no reason to panic. This was an omen, yes. Skall's appearance foretold an important event, but there was no way to know what it would be. She

could only watch, stay alert, and try to prepare.

She took another long look, and then turned back toward the house. Suddenly her inventory seemed much more urgent.



Morning came to Chalsett-port. Chimi Waik of Tresmeer met it in the market, where she had just opened her fish stall. She always had a ready smile, but now a frown marred her smooth brow.

A child was crying. It wasn't the whine of a brat who wanted his way, or the shrill demand of one who felt bored and left out. The low moaning went on without stopping, even through the noise of the busy marketplace.

From the time she was twelve until she turned sixteen, Chimi had spent her days watching the youngsters of her neighborhood. She could tell this was the sound of a child really hurt and afraid. How could any mother ignore such sobs?

"Is there some problem?" asked a woman's impatient voice.

"Oh! No, I'm sorry." Chimi bobbed a quick, apologetic bow to the customer she had been ignoring. She ducked down beneath the counter and straightened with a parcel of fresh fish wrapped in a banana leaf. "I heard a child crying."

"Let his mother worry about him," the woman advised as she turned away.

"Yes, matron," Chimi answered meekly.

The wailing went on. Now that her customer was gone, Chimi looked around for its source. Chimi was a short girl, slightly plump, with brown skin and bright dark eyes. Her hair fell below her shoulders in springy black curls. She would have liked to have it straightened, in the fashionable way, but she knew her mother would never allow it.

Her clothing, however, was as stylish as she could afford. Chimi wore a close-wrapped robe that left her shoulders bare but covered her body to the knees. The bold pattern of blue shells on natural cloth was matched by strands of wooden beads around her wrists and neck. On her head, a neatly wrapped headcloth completed the ensemble.

Still the child cried. It grated on Chimi's nerves.

"Where is it?" she murmured.

Her dark eyes roved, seeking the crying child. And, more importantly, the parents who should have been running to comfort their young one. She couldn't pick them out in the busy scene before her.

It was early morning and the central market was mostly in shadow, but that wouldn't last. Soon the sun would peer over the hills above Chalsett-port. Already the harbor's clear waters sparkled as the first rays struck them. Farther off, beyond the breakwater, the Jewel Sea rolled on without end. A salty breeze made the awning above her head rustle and snap.

The aisle before Chimi was crowded with brown-skinned citizens pushing by on their errands. Their bright robes made the scene a riot of lively colors. On the other side of the aisle, a low wall guarded the short drop to the lower level. Long ships crowded the piers below. Some had tall prows carved like sea-serpents or fishing birds. Crewmen swarmed about them, taking on cargo or unloading merchandise. It wasn't so long ago that the wharves had been closed during the investigation of First LordANGES' murder. The new ruler, his brother Aspace, was

well established by now. The renewed confidence in Chalsett-port meant that business was returning nicely—to Chimi's stall along with the others.

"Chimi!" whispered another voice.

She turned toward the tenant of the neighboring stall. Nakuri was a large woman, well fleshed, in a robe of bright green with a pattern of yellow lilies. A band of the same fabric held black, curly hair away from her face. A silver ring glinted in one nostril as she jerked her chin down the aisle.

Following her motion, Chimi glimpsed a tall, well favored young man strolling toward them. She smiled back at Nakuri and made a show of wiping her counter top with a rag. Rellad Offram of Melleen was a regular customer at her booth. He approached so casually now that Chimi knew he was faking. But that was all right. Rellad was the son of a weaver, an apprentice weaver himself. His family was rich. Chimi knew them because her mother, who grew feather-flowers, sold their silken thread to the Melleen workshop.

Not that Rellad was her only regular customer. Chimi had built a good clientele for the fresh mussels and fish she sold. The booth actually belonged to her family's friend, Byben of Cessill. Business had been miserable for the drunken old man, but with a girl as cute as Chimi, the situation had turned around. The old man was sweet, and besides, an elder should be resting, not working to make ends meet.

Usually a girl Chimi's age was kept at home, introduced only to men selected by their fathers or household elders. But Chimi's father was dead, long ago claimed by the sea. The burden of providing for their family fell upon Chimi's mother, but also partly on her older sister and brother. Now Chimi was old enough to work and contribute to the family's income. She ran Byben's stall, while he took her place tending the vines and spinning. It gave him a chance to get out of his empty, lonely house. Chimi received exactly the same benefit.

Secretly, she reveled in the freedom her job gave her, and in the fact that her careworn mother was too busy to think about finding a wife for Chimi's brother, Sachakeen, let alone husbands for her two daughters.

Chimi was especially excited about Rellad, though. Unlike the others who bought from her, he was attractive, and not too old for her, and he had no senior wives. Not that there was anything wrong with being a secondary wife, but that wasn't the future Chimi wanted for herself.

Just as Chimi was pretending not to see Rellad, she did see the crying child. The urchin was about four or five, a boy by the cut of his short kilt. His mouth dragged down at the corners, his narrow chest heaved, and tears left gleaming tracks across his cheeks. Water dripped from the bottom of his garment and the curly ends of his wild, tangled hair. He seemed to be coming up from the quays. Had he fallen into the water, then?

Chimi hesitated. She didn't want to miss Rellad, but the little boy's sobbing tore at her heart. Once again she looked around the lively moil of the market. Where were his parents?

She couldn't stand it. "Oh, by the heavens!" she cried.

"What's that?" Nakuri turned in surprise as Chimi raised her counter with an agitated jerk.

"I'll be right back," Chimi said over her shoulder. She slipped through the narrow gap and dropped the counter back in place. "Don't let him leave."

"Where are you going?" Nakuri asked.

"I have to see what's wrong with that boy. Just don't let Rellad leave. Please? I'll be

right back!"

"But..." Nakuri's voice faded as Chimi darted after the small, retreating figure.

"Wait!" Chimi called.

No response. The boy kept crying, kept walking. Sandals slapping the cobblestones, Chimi wove through the throng. She called apologies when she didn't quite dodge some passing body.

"Wait for me!" Chimi cried.

The child didn't seem to hear her, but he wasn't moving very fast. Chimi dashed past him and spun, dropping to her knees in front of the boy.

"Wait, I said. What's wrong?" she demanded.

The boy shuffled toward her, bawling as though his heart was broken. Every footstep left a wet blot behind him. To keep the child from walking into her, Chimi grabbed his shoulder.

"Oh!" She drew her hand back with a startled jerk. The bony shoulder was *cold*, cold with the chill of deep sea water. The sensation ran up her arm and left her feeling numb. While she stared at him, the boy finally stopped howling.

"What—" Chimi stammered. She flexed her fingers and rubbed her arm to get the ache out of her shoulder. "Why are you crying?"

"I can't find my mommy." His lips made a trembling line of fear.

So he was lost. As the round, dark eyes fixed on her face, Chimi summoned a smile.

"Well, then, we'll find her. Don't worry. Let's go look for her. All right?"

He sniffled, rubbing his eyes with a small brown fist. "I want to find my mommy."

"Of course you do. What's your name?"

"I can't find my mommy."

Chimi sighed. She had forgotten how single-minded children could be at this age. "I know that, little brother, but what's your name? What can I call you?"

He had to think about it. "Yail."

"Good boy," Chimi said, to reassure him. "Now don't you worry, Yail. We'll go find your mommy." She offered her hand, cautiously this time, and was relieved that the cold wasn't as overpowering when his fingers touched hers.

"Chimi," Nakuri called.

Chimi looked around to see Rellad at her counter. He and Nakuri both watched her indulgently.

"Coming!"

She straightened, keeping slightly bent so she wouldn't yank on her companion's arm.

"Come with me, Yail. I'll only be a moment."

Yail resisted as she guided him through the crowd to her booth. "I want to find my mommy."

"We will, don't worry. I just need to help my customer. Then we can go."

So saying, she pressed her free hand to her chest and bowed to Rellad. His answering smile warmed the numbness in her shoulders and chest.

"Who's this?" Nakuri asked.

"His name is Yail. He says he's lost," Chimi said. Then she smiled up at Rellad. "Good morning. What can I do for you?"

After a questioning glance at Yail, Rellad replied, "Twenty of the small mussels. My mother really liked them last time."

"Of course," Chimi said. "I always save some for you."

"Lucky me," Rellad smiled back and tossed a mesh bag onto the counter top.

Yail whined as Chimi tried to lead him into her booth. The boy would probably wander off if she let go, so Chimi lifted him by the waist and set him on the edge of the counter.

"Stay here for a second," she said, trying to sound more patient than she felt.

"I want to find my mommy!"

"We will," she reassured him. "We will."

More of her attention was on Rellad, who leaned a little closer as she brushed past to get behind her counter. Still smiling at him, she knelt beside the basketry bins, which were woven with magic symbols to keep the food inside from spoiling. With quick fingers she counted twenty of the shellfish in their tight black husks. Her fingers felt clumsy with cold.

On the counter above, Yail began to whimper again.

"I didn't know you like kids," Rellad said.

"Oh, they're great." Chimi wasn't in any hurry to start a family, but she didn't want him to know that just yet. Better if he thought her a likely choice for a wife. "I used to watch them all the time in my neighborhood."

"I'll bet you did a good job."

"It was fun." Chimi straightened and set the bag of mussels on the counter. Since Rellad often purchased the same amount, he had his rukh ready. She glanced at the small squares of copper and swept them into her hand. Not wanting him to leave so soon, she asked, "How is your family?"

Rellad leaned one elbow on the counter. "Doing fine. Father just got a big order in from Amethan, City of Fountains. He'll be needing a few rolls of feather-flower thread."

"Really?" Chimi dropped the coins into a leather pouch hanging from the counter. "I'll be sure to tell my mother."

"You should."

Yail went back to his whining. "Mommy!"

"Oh, don't cry." Chimi leaned over to hug him, trying to ignore the chill as he tried to climb over the counter into her arms. The boy was heavy, and she struggled momentarily.

"We'll find her. Come on, don't cry."

Yail responded by bawling, "I want to find my mommy!"

Nakuri came out of her booth, an odd frown on her face. "Chimi?"

She could hardly hear through the sobs next to her ear.

"All right, all right," Chimi murmured. "We'll go find your mommy."

"My mommy!"

Nakuri reached out to lay her meaty hand across his forehead. She drew it back with a startled expression and blurted, "Chimi, I think he's a ghost!"

"What?" Chimi gasped.

There was a shocked silence. Even Yail stopped crying. Chimi fought the impulse to drop the boy and back away. Rellad, who wasn't encumbered, took a long step backward.

Everyone knew about ghosts. Chimi had never seen one before. Like most people, she

hoped not to. She remembered some kind of lessons in general school, but she hadn't paid much attention. Spiritualism didn't interest her. So she stood for a moment, with the dead boy growing heavier and colder in her arms.

"What—what should I do?" she stammered to Nakuri. Rellad's disgusted expression was too hard to face.

"Find a necromancer, and hurry," the older woman said. "They can lay a haunting spirit to rest."

"Right. Can you watch my stall?" Chimi fumbled with the counter and felt a pang as Nakuri, not Rellad, helped her raise it and pass through. The young man didn't even reach for his mussels. Chimi started to hurry away, but quickly turned back. "Where is one?"

"There used to be one..." Nakuri hesitated. "Lelldour. Lelldour of -- never mind. He's on the fourth tier, above the ship builders and behind the town shrine. You'll see a red lamp at the gate. Hurry now, and get this little one home."

Take him home -- but not the way Chimi had been planning. She had expected a happy reunion with frantic parents. Feeling numb all over, Chimi nodded and turned away. She didn't want to see Rellad shuffling, practically backing up to the sea wall. He didn't meet her gaze, and she felt the cold eating a hole in her heart.

Sunlight was just beginning to warm the morning air. Chimi's path led her back the hills, deeper into shadow. She left the fish market and went under the arbors, which were covered with vines to shade the rest of the market from the full heat of day. There was plenty of foot traffic, and shopkeepers calling their wares with loud abandon, but no one spared Chimi a second glance. She wished someone would offer to help her.

Once she started walking, Yail's moaning trailed off. He rested his head on her shoulder, as if he slept. It would have been a touching, trusting gesture except that she couldn't feel him breathing. Chimi had the uncomfortable sense that she was walking away from the normal world, toward some strange land of eternal dusk. Since she didn't want to stay in twilight forever, she went as fast as she could without bouncing him.

It wasn't fair, Chimi thought with gnawing anxiety. A part of her said that Yail was already dead, so there was nothing she could do to help him. She should just put him down and get back to work. Nakuri couldn't handle both shops forever. And she wanted Rellad to smile at her again. Yet she couldn't bring herself to push away the frigid little body next to hers. Alive or dead, he was still a lost child. What kind of person would turn her back on him?

Chimi passed through the center of the marketplace, where a huge fig tree grew in a broad plaza. The terraces of the town rose before her. Marble retaining walls were draped with the lush greenery that gave Chalsett-port its name, City of Gardens.

On the other side of the plaza was the main stairway that gave access to the whole city. The stairs were of marble, pale flights flanked by hand rails and the occasional statue. The white stone looked ghostly against the shadowed hillside. Chimi's legs ached as she climbed the steep risers.

Behind the town shrine, Nakuri had said. That was on the eastern promontory above the harbor. You reached it from the third level. The necromancer, Lelldour, must live on the fourth tier. Chimi turned right after topping two flights of stairs. Her breath came hard as she made her

way down the narrow street. The road was paved with large cobblestones. At regular intervals, shallow channels caught water from the islands daily rains and diverted it into household cisterns. On either side, low walls of marble or bamboo screened the homes from prying eyes.

What Chimi could see of them hinted at modest dwellings, round huts topped with roofs of thatch. Occasionally she heard the splash of a fountain or distant voices of families at work or play. A pall of smoke from cooking fires hung in the air. Trees grew everywhere, ferns with shaggy trunks and lacy leaves, conifers with dark needles and pointed tops.

Yail must have lived in this kind of neighborhood. Somewhere, his family must be waiting for him, not knowing what had happened. How could a small child have been left on his own to drown? Chimi hugged her small passenger tighter, ignoring the fatigue in her arms.

She hurried on. The road curved to the right. Confronting a fork in the road, Chimi hesitated.

"Which way?" she asked. Yail didn't answer her.

She took the right hand way and continued on, looking for the red lantern Nakuri had mentioned. She saw a pair of green posts, marking a curomancer's house, but no death-colored ones. Another intersection. The main road curved back west and a lesser way continued east. A gap in the trees showed her the sea, its calm surface studded with tiny coral isles.

The shrine was still farther east, so Chimi went that direction. The road curved sharply, following the shape of the hillside that loomed before them. Her arms throbbed as she continued past a third intersection.

"I hope it's not much farther," Chimi groaned. After some resistance, Yail let her shift him to the other side. While she did that, she nearly missed a bit of dull red on her left.

Even when she stopped and stared, it was hard to see the faded color against a background of vines and shadows. Chimi turned back and approached the gate doubtfully. The wall was of field stones, so covered with moss that she could hardly see their original color. There was a sturdy plinth, and the wooden lantern with its top peaked like the roof of a house. It had been red once, but the paint was mostly gone. Chimi supposed it could have been an advertisement for the necromancer. Maybe it had once given light to visitors. It obviously hadn't been used in a long time. Chimi peered uncertainly into the dusk beneath a dense canopy of trees.

Inside the wall was the most neglected yard she had ever seen. Fallen leaves lay in a thick matt over every surface. As she watched, a single leaf spiraled down to join the rest. Even without going in, she could smell the moldy odor of decayed vegetation. Young trees sprouted from the leaf bed, but they were lanky and pale, starved for light beneath the taller trees.

The round, dark bulk of a house loomed at the end of a level stretch. There must be a walkway under all the leaves. The building had a shaggy look, like thatched construction. No light shone inside it, and no smoke from a cooking fire.

Maybe the necromancer had gone out for the day? After all, Chimi had never heard of necromancy as a money-making trade. He might have to work for a living. Maybe that was why he had no time for keeping up his yard. Chimi shivered at the thought. Lelldour couldn't be gone. She needed his help. He had to be here!

Jogging anxiously in place, she looked around again. There should have been a bell or gong beside the gate. She didn't see one, though she shifted the vines to look for it. Chimi did

glimpse a shadow beneath the foliage. She leaned forward to read the carved letters: Salloo.

That was a clan name, and it seemed right. There weren't many necromancers, even in a city the size of Chalsett-port. Everyone knew their names. Well, people who listened to gossip did, and Chimi listened to gossip. Lelldour of Salloo sounded familiar. Of course, that didn't tell her if he really lived here. Still, there was the lantern.

"Good morning!" Chimi called toward the house. Her voice was shrill in the hush of the street. The neighborhood seemed unusually quiet for this time of day. There weren't even any birds singing, and such big trees should have been full of them. Chimi shivered again and shifted Yail back to her other hip.

"Hello!" It was an emergency, so she yelled more loudly. "Hello! May I come in?"