



# THE WIZARD'S BANE

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# THE WIZARD'S BANE

BITTERGATE: BOOK TWO

Michael J. Allen



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## PROLOGUE

# Stillbirth

A chestnut centaur mare lay on her side beside a tranquil pond anything but at peace. Her breath wheezed in fits and starts. Her eyes squeezed tight with pain despite a healing aura clinging to her like a soft glowing sheen of sweat.

Two other centaur, both dressed in silver robes declaring them Shaman of the Path, bent over the laboring woman. On one side the bay roan's hands stroked the aura, swelling it where her fingertips brushed.

"You're almost done, Feilahdi U'Noa. Another push or two and it's all over," Midall E'Cru soothed.

Feilahdi U'Noa nodded behind clenched teeth, bore down and pushed.

Midall E'Cru caught the new foal. She blinked away the itch in her eyes.

"How is she?" Feilahdi U'Noa asked. "Why isn't she crying?"

"Patience," the other shaman wiped Feilahdi U'Noa's brow.

Midall E'Cru closed her eyes. Magic spread into the newborn foal, searching her for injury. She felt it circuit through the frail chestnut body. She met the searching gaze of the other shaman with a slight shake of her head.

Feilahdi U'Noa caught the gesture and wailed. "No!"

The other shaman pushed her down gently. "Midall E'Cru is very talented. She will do what she can."

Midall E'Cru sniffed. "There is nothing I can do. She is stillborn."

"But I felt her move," Feilahdi U'Noa cried.

A horn sounded in the distance. Both shaman ignored it at first, but its insistent fanfare drew their eye to the Mythela'Raemyn. Atop the ziggurat-style pyramid, a large centaur in moon-silver armor blew upon the horn once more. He glowed a brilliant silver to make the sunlit valley seem otherwise in twilight.

A soft rustle drew Midall E'Cru's attention back around. Silver light glistened on the foal's coat. She shifted, trying to rise only to fall again. Overlarge silver eyes blinked against the new light.

"Thank the Creator," Feilahdi U'Noa sobbed.

Midall E'Cru peered into the newborn filly's too alert eyes.

Terror filled the eyes, pursued by pain then replaced by sorrow. The filly keened, a moan of anguish foreign to a newborn foal. She folded around herself on the ground, eyes closing.



## CHAPTER ONE

# *Dia de lo Muerto Mago*

A cream-colored lounge chair hovered atop an open grave under a clear, blue late autumn sky. The scent of fresh cut marigolds floated in a soft breeze. A voluptuous woman lay beneath the warm rays, bronze skin shining and honey-brown hair fanned out like a halo. Her tiny white bikini hid as little flesh as possible. She'd have forgone the top, but going topless had produced disastrous distraction to her new apprentice.

Mauve raised her head, glancing around for the boy.

Around her the cemetery buzzed with activity, families cleaning graves, preparing altars and arranging offerings for the evening's festivities. Happy chatter and sung prayers overlaid the graveyard's usual hush. Despite the bustle, none of it encroached on her sunbathing island. Around them, frowning spirits stared forlorn at their activities.

A scowling bandito reached spectral hands toward a young woman.

"No." Mauve's sultry voice cracked like a whip. Every dead head shot up her direction, but no living soul seemed to hear. "Hands off the living."

The bandito narrowed his eyes and snatched a long knife from its belt.

"Don't sass me, Juan." She raised a warning finger his direction and scanned the crowd. "Kane?! Where is that boy?"

An adolescent boy slunk out of the crowd. Tiny for twelve and rail thin, black swathed his pale skin from his boots to a padre's hat he'd lifted from a preacher's tomb. He didn't look at her directly, though she could tell by the pinking of his cheeks when he snuck a glance her direction.

Stuffed cheeks garbled his words. "Yes, Mistress?"

"You're supposed to be minding the dead, not stealing candied pumpkin from the altars," Mauve said.

"I'm hungry," he said to her feet. "It's not like the dead can eat it."

"They eat its spirit...forget it. Stop stealing candy and deal with Juan."

Kane glanced toward the bandito. "Again?"

Juan sneered at him. An exaggerated sigh shifted Kane's slumped shoulders. He stomped toward the bandito, flexing his fingers. Juan retreated.

"Stand right there," Kane whined. "I'm not chasing you again."

Juan darted for cover.

“Stop,” a whisper of command invaded his whine. “Damn it, Juan, *stop*.”  
The specter froze.

Kane pointed to his shirt. Grimacing skulls and tormented spectral faces covered his black t-shirt. “In.”

“No,” Juan said.

Kane stomped across the intervening distance. Juan slashed his knife across Kane’s face. The blow dislodged his black, ring spectacles and left a white line on already white skin. He thrust both hands into the specter, hooking fingers into claws. “*In!*”

Juan screamed as Kane balled up his spectral body and shoved into the shirt. His cries joined other spirits crying out for release in the moment when Juan’s spirit rippled the imprisonment spell’s barrier plane.

Kane cradled his cheek and mumbled his way through a dozen curses. He looked up to see a little girl gaping at him. “Mind your own—”

“Kane,” Mauve snapped.

Kane shot her a dirty look, forced a smile onto his face and dug a piece candied pumpkin out of his pocket. He offered it to the little girl. Her expression grew more shocked. He dusted it off and offered it again. “Here?”  
“Mama!”

Kane watched her flee to a position behind her mother’s skirts.

Mauve rose, drawing his quickly retreating gaze. She swept hands down her body, replacing the white bikini with a curve-hugging silk dress. “It’s safe to look now, darling.”

Kane glanced up at her. Wide eyes shot back to the ground. “M-mistress, your...um, I can see...um...”

“Pay attention to your spell. You’ve got two about to escape your shoulder.”

She shook her head, using his distraction to conjure underwear beneath her attire. *How long must I coddle this awkwardness?*

A girl screamed, then another. More screams rent the air, and people fled toward them. Mauve craned to see what sent them into flight, expecting a ghoul or some other dead malcontent causing trouble to spite those celebrating life around it. Several dozen mounted figures galloped toward them.

“This isn’t the old west, boys,” Mauve said. “If you’re going to come around scaring people and stealing candy at least act like you live in this century.”

“Mistress?”

The concern in his voice felt sharper than normal. She looked again, noticing the double image of glamour hiding a band of heavily armed centaur. Movement flashed in her peripheral vision. A faun landed a gigantic leap just behind her. Another landed on the other side followed by two other before her. The four—half bare-chested teenage girl and half doe—circled her in a

flouncing skip. Each had hair of shoulder-length curls matching the soft coat that clothed their lower half. Softest flax colored two fauns' hair. The third shone honey-brown to match Mauve's own. Brindled hair covered the fourth's head and legs—the color of sand with clumps of honey brown. Reed pipes bounced between breasts too-ample for their short, lithe frames.

The first curtsyed, introducing herself in a high alto. "Jiji, Sorceress."

A girlish bosom-jiggling laugh accompanied the second's curtsy. "Kiki." Kane's red face shot to the ground.

Mauve slapped him upside his head, sending his hat flying. "Eyes up."

"But they're *naked*," Kane said.

Centaur's fanned out around them.

"I don't care if they're writhing around in an orgy, never look away from danger," Mauve said.

"But—"

The third cupped her bosom toward Kane, addressing him in a husky contralto. "Do you think Lili's breasts are dangerous little man?"

Kane responded with incoherent stammers.

The last faun curtsyed, her voice a sweet soprano. "Mimi, Lady Mauve."

"Quiet," the black mare said. "Mauve Cortez, I, Glent Se'Lailos, second elder of Wizard's Bane place you both under arrest for crimes against the Fey. Surrender or face summary execution."

Mauve laughed. "You're not High Tribe, even then I don't answer to Fey."

"Kill them," Glent Se'Lailos said.

The fauns' skip turned into a complicated dance, each raising their reed pipes. Grasses and flowers sprung up in a ring they wore into the grave dirt, the path laced with a braid of auras.

Mauve shoved Kane behind her, though she couldn't truly protect him from all angles. "Stay down and out of the way, Kane."

Despite superior numbers, the centaur held fire while the four fauns wove around her. Jedediah might've tried to reason with them, but Mauve lived by the simple creed of doing unto others before they get a chance to do unto you. She reached out to the dead filled cemetery and felt her reach blocked at the dancing circle. She altered her reach, but the thoughts commanding her power waded through a rising fog.

Mauve cursed. "Cover your ears, boy."

"I've heard that kind of language before," Kane said.

"Block out the music, child."

The four faun stopped, extending hands as if commanding them to stay. A different colored magic pulsed in each upraised palms. Mauve's thoughts took a split second to catch up before four energy bolts streaked toward them.

Mauve drove Kane to the ground just ahead of the coursing magic. The scent of ozone filled the air, accompanied by freshly turned soil, new rain and singed hair. Mauve pushed herself up, brushing dirt from her gown.

“You girls are talented,” Mauve said, “but you know what all of those elements share in common? Death.”

She threw her hands forward, a fan of light-sucking violet power knocking two fauns from their feet. She reached downward before they could recover and sent her will into the grave soil.

“There’s a reason I have to watch this place on the Day of the Dead.” Mauve lifted her hands as if dragging an enormous weight from the earth. “They’ve buried a lot of really bad boys here.”

Skeletal hands thrust from the ground around them, sending up a shower of dirt as the fleshless undead crawled from their graves. Ghouls clawed up in their wake, wild-eyed monsters wearing the tattered remains of their former clothes and shredded flesh from their last victims caught in jagged piranha teeth. One ghoul lashed out at the honey brown faun, Jiji, hamstringing her. It brought back a bloodied claw to its mouth, licking it clean with a two-foot tongue.

The centaur opened fire.

The first volley tore through the rising skeletons, shattering skulls and splintering bone if only by sheer volume. Mauve threw a scythe of flame around the circle’s interior, gutting the second volley and forcing the fauns back.

Kane rushed past a ghoul, snatching up two jagged femurs and slashed at the downed Jiji. A blast of electricity slammed into him, driving him back but not before he added another pair of jagged cuts.

“Stay down so I can protect you, boy,” Mauve gestured at the ghouls.

As a man, ghouls each snatched up a fallen skeleton spine. The attached ribs vibrated, shifting together and unfolding into skeletal shields which thickened without respect to the amount of bone consumed. Bones jiggled across the ground, assembling into jagged spears and presenting themselves to the ghouls.

Mauve pirouetted on the spot, hands waving like a conductor pulling a hundred puppet strings.

A shard of stone lanced up from beneath her feet. She sidestepped, feinting forward and jogging right as two others followed the first. Lili rushed to Jiji’s side, setting a rippling blue aura over the wounds already stinking of rot.

“The fauns have failed, first flank charge,” Glent Se’Lailos said.

“We have not.” A deep melody exited Mimi’s pipes ahead of rumbling earth.

Lightning slashed out from Kiki’s hands, blackening rib-bone shields and filling the air with static.

Arrows lead the charge, followed close by a dozen centaurs with lances tipped with serrated blades. The ghouls positioned spear butts on the ground, receiving the charge like pikeman. Against normal horseman, it would’ve

proven deadly, but centaur differed from men atop simple steeds. They jogged to the side of the spears, cutting them in angles, leaping their tips and making a path for their brothers. Three still fell to the spears, writhing and screaming as the ghouls discarded defense to fall upon them with eternal hunger.

Kane stood at Mauve's back, hands outstretched. His voice cracked halfway through his shout. "Kill them for your freedom."

The collective, imprisoned dead flooded out of his shirt in a mad horde. In moments a wedge of centaur disappeared under the wave of ravening spirits.

"Jiji!" Kiki shrieked.

Mauve ripped the souls from dying centaur and forced them back into their former bodies regardless of their condition. Her centaur soldiers waded into their former comrades with twice their earlier ferocity.

Jiji wobbled to her feet beside Kane. "Here, sister."

Kane stared, an odd expression on his face.

Kiki fought her way forward, throwing a wave of ice shards at Kane. "Get away from her, monster boy."

Mauve appeared over the boy in a moment, two shield bearing ghouls rushing to protect their flank.

Jiji extended her arms toward Kiki. "I thought you were hurt."

"No, you got...how are you're standing," Kiki said.

Jiji's smile grew piranha teeth. Jiji's entire body seemed to slither in a thousand directions at once. Her hands thrust out, gouging a chunk of flesh from Kiki's gut and shoving it into her mouth. Mimi and Lili appeared at her side, blasting the ghoul backward with stone and wind.

Mauve lent Kane heat stolen from an animated centaur, tapping the last lingering life as she made it her slave.

Despite her seizure of the centaur dead, her defense crumbled under their onslaught. She taxed her energies to their limits. The number of dead within the fauns' warded circle dwindled. Without the boy to protect she might have a chance, but as long as he remained, she suffered a disadvantage.

Kane stirred as the heat finally won out over the ice spell. Mauve grabbed the boy and shoved him into the arms of her newest convert. "Take him to Jedediah. Warn Jed, boy, tell him what's happened."

"But Mistress—"

"Do as you're told." She shoved all the energy she could into the centaur corpse. "You'll have to sustain him when he starts to crumble. You can do it."

"M-mistress you're—"

"Sexy as hell and just as mad, now get going."

Mauve slapped the centaur's rump, feeling stupid for unnecessarily encouraging it to bolt. Kane disappeared through the press, his mount's face,

buying enough confusion for him to win clear. Mauve turned back to the centaur. She scooped up a pair of bones, pushing energy into them to reshape them into short, sharp blades.

She twirled her bone swords. “Okay, mules, Mama’s ready to mamba...”

Ghouls and dead centaur flourished their weapons.

The centaur swarmed her.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Wow. We survived another Bittergate adventure. Thank you for joining me on this journey. It was dark and heart wrenching—for me at least—and filled with surprises. It left a lot up in the air. I hope you enjoyed 'The Wizard's Bane' anyway. I only feel a little guilty about this ending. It isn't as if we won't suffer together between now and when I write the next one. What little I know about Bittergate 3 guarantees it's going to be a doozy.

This one had a very sparse team, though I know they worked hard to keep me and the story on the straight and narrow. My proofreaders, editors, fellow writers—and especially my readers—all help me strive for the best stories I can offer you. I love them for it, and you for reading them.

Special thanks go out to Scott R. Jason, Justin, Bryan, Trint and of course B, B, & J. Also thanks to Sarah's little Joslyn for bringing a some pixyish giggling into my world—hers, not mine. I don't giggle.

Drake and Jordan, wow, guys, just wow. Glad to have you back Jedediah, you had me worried there a while. Mason...well, I hope you've got some trick up your sleeves boy. I'll see you all in a few months once Scion 3 is done.

If you enjoyed this book, try out my SCION series:

Intergalactic foes clash over Earth's atmosphere. Welorin victors invade Earth, subjugating its people. His people, past and memory stolen by the invasion, a teen boy, Alaric, struggles to survive in ruined wastes. He escapes Earth's solar system with the help of a ship's computer fed up with serving pirate crews. Intent to return to Earth, he sets out to gather resources, repair the ship, and return to free planet and friends from the invaders. He finds a strange universe filled with exotic species, pirates, bureaucrats, rivals and slavers arrayed to stop him. Betrayed, Alaric is forced to decide what he truly holds dear and just how far he's willing to go to achieve his goals.



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## ABOUT THE SCRIBBLER



*(Photo credit: Jim Cawthorne)*

Originally from Oregon, Michael J. Allen is a pluviophile masquerading as a vampire IT professional in rural Georgia. Warped from youth by the likes of Jerry Lewis, Robin Williams, Gene Wilder and Danny Kay, his sense of humor leads to occasional surrender, communicable insanity, a sweet tooth and periodic launch into nonsensical song. He loves books, movies, the occasional video game, playing with his Labradors—Myth and Majesty. He knows almost nothing about music.

A recovering Game Master, he gave up running RPG's for writing because the players didn't play out the story in his head like book characters would—we know how that worked out.

Suddenly fresh out of teenagers, his days are spent writing in restaurants, people watching and warring over keyboard control with the voices in his head.

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