



The Skull Throne: Book Four of The Demon Cycle

By Peter V. Brett

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY BUZZFEED

The first three novels in Peter V. Brett's groundbreaking Demon Cycle series—*The Warded Man*, *The Desert Spear*, and *The Daylight War*—set a new standard for heroic fantasy. The powerful saga of humans winnowed to the brink of extinction by night-stalking demons, and the survivors who fight back, has kept readers breathless as they eagerly turned the pages. Now the thrilling fourth volume, *The Skull Throne*, raises the stakes as it carries the action in shocking new directions.

The Skull Throne of Krasia stands empty.

Built from the skulls of fallen generals and demon princes, it is a seat of honor and ancient, powerful magic, keeping the demon corelings at bay. From atop the throne, Ahmann Jardir was meant to conquer the known world, forging its isolated peoples into a unified army to rise up and end the demon war once and for all.

But Arlen Bales, the Warded Man, stood against this course, challenging Jardir to a duel he could not in honor refuse. Rather than risk defeat, Arlen cast them both from a precipice, leaving the world without a savior, and opening a struggle for succession that threatens to tear the Free Cities of Thesa apart.

In the south, Inevera, Jardir's first wife, must find a way to keep their sons from killing one another and plunging their people into civil war as they strive for glory enough to make a claim on the throne.

In the north, Leesha Paper and Rojer Inn struggle to forge an alliance between the duchies of Angiers and Miln against the Krasians before it is too late.

Caught in the crossfire is the duchy of Lakton—rich and unprotected, ripe for conquest.

All the while, the corelings have been growing stronger, and without Arlen and Jardir there may be none strong enough to stop them. Only Renna Bales may know more about the fate of the missing men, but she, too, has disappeared. . . .

Look for Peter V. Brett's complete Demon Cycle:

THE WARDED MAN | THE DESERT SPEAR | THE DAYLIGHT WAR | THE SKULL THRONE | THE CORE (Coming soon!)

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

Peter V. Brett is the internationally bestselling author of *The Warded Man*, *The Desert Spear*, *The Daylight War*, and *The Skull Throne*. Raised on a steady diet of fantasy novels, comic books, and *Dungeons & Dragons*, Brett has been writing fantasy stories for as long as he can remember. He received a bachelor of arts degree in English literature and art history from the University at Buffalo in 1995, then spent more than a decade in pharmaceutical publishing before returning to his bliss. He lives in New York.

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Chapter 1 The Hunt 333 AR Autumn

Jardir woke at sunset, his mind thick with fog. He was lying in a Northern bed—one giant pillow instead of

many. The bedcloth was rough, nothing like the silk to which he had become accustomed. The room was circular, with warded glass windows all around. A tower of some sort. Untamed land spread into the twilight, but he recognized none of it.

Where in Ala am I?

Pain lanced through him as he stirred, but pain was an old companion, embraced and forgotten. He pulled himself into a sitting position, rigid legs scraping against each other. He pulled the blanket aside. Plaster casts running thigh-to-foot. His toes, swollen in red, purple, and yellow, peeked from the far ends, close, yet utterly out of reach. He flexed them experimentally, ignoring the pain, and was satisfied with the slight twitch that rewarded him.

It harkened back to the broken arm he'd suffered as a child, and the helplessness of his weeks of healing.

He reached immediately to the nightstand for the crown. Even in day, there was magic enough stored within to heal a few broken bones, especially ones already set.

His hands met empty air. Jardir turned and stared a long moment before the situation registered. It had been years since he had let himself be out of arm's reach of his crown and spear, but both were missing.

Memories came back to him in a rush. The fight atop the mountain with the Par'chin. How the son of Jeph had collapsed into smoke as Jardir struck, only to solidify an instant later, grabbing the spear shaft with inhuman strength and twisting it from his grasp.

And then the Par'chin turned and threw it from the cliff as if it were nothing more than a gnawed melon rind.

Jardir licked cracked lips. His mouth was dry and his bladder full, but both needs had been provided for. The water at his bedside was sweet, and with some effort he managed use of the chamber pot his searching fingers found on the floor just underneath the bed.

His chest was bound tightly, ribs grinding as he shifted. Over the bandages he was clad in a thin robe—tan, he noted. The Par'chin's idea of a joke, perhaps.

There was no door, simply a stair leading up into the room—as good as prison bars in his current state. There were no other exits, nor did the steps continue on. He was at the top of the tower. The room was sparsely furnished. A small table by the bedside. A single chair.

There was a sound in the stairwell. Jardir froze, listening. He might be bereft of his crown and spear, but years of absorbing magic through them had remade his body as close to Everam's image as a mortal form could be. He had the eyes of a hawk, the nose of a wolf, and the ears of a bat.

"Sure you can handle him?" the Par'chin's First Wife said. "Thought he was going to kill you out on that cliff."

"No worries, Ren," the Par'chin said. "He can't hurt me without the spear."

"Can in daylight," Renna said.

"Not with two broken legs," the Par'chin said. "Got this, Ren. Honest word."

We shall see, Par'chin.

There was a smacking of lips as the son of Jeph kissed his jiwah's remaining protests away. "Need you back in the Hollow keepin' an eye on things. Now, 'fore they get suspicious."

"Leesha Paper's already suspicious," Renna said. "Her guesses ent far from the mark."

"Don't matter, long as they stay guesses," the Par'chin said. "You just keep playin' dim, no matter what she says or does."

Renna gave a stunted laugh. "Ay, that won't be a problem. Like makin' her want to spit."

"Don't waste too much time on it," the Par'chin said. "Need you to protect the Hollow, but keep a low profile. Strengthen the folk, but let them carry the weight. I'll skate in when I can, but only to see you. No one else can know I'm alive."

"Don't like it," Renna said. "Man and wife shouldn't be apart like this."

The Par'chin sighed. "Ent nothin' for it, Ren. Bettin' the farm on this throw. Can't afford to lose. I'll see you soon enough."

"Ay," Renna said.

"Love you, Arlen Bales." "Love you, Renna Bales," the Par'chin said. They kissed again, and Jardir heard rapid footsteps as she descended the tower. The Par'chin, however, began to climb.

For a moment Jardir thought to feign sleep. Perhaps he might learn something; gain the element of surprise.

He shook his head. I am Shar'Dama Ka. It is beneath me to hide. I will meet the Par'chin's eyes and see what remains of the man I knew.

He propped himself up, embracing the roar of pain in his legs. His face was serene as the Par'chin entered. He wore plain clothes, much as he had when they first met, a cotton shirt of faded white and worn denim trousers with a leather Messenger satchel slung over one shoulder. His feet were bare, pant and shirt cuffs rolled to show the wards he had inked into his skin. His sand-colored hair was shaved away, and the face Jardir remembered was barely recognizable under all the markings.

Even without his crown, Jardir could sense the power of those symbols, but the strength came with a heavy price. The Par'chin looked more like a page from one of the holy scrolls of warding than a man.

"What have you done to yourself, old friend?" He had not meant to speak the words aloud, but something pushed him.

"Got a lot of nerve callin' me that, after what you did," the Par'chin said. "Din't do this to myself. You did this to me."

"I?" Jardir asked. "I took ink and profaned your body with it?"

The Par'chin shook his head. "You left me to die in the desert, without weapon or succor, and knew I'd be

corespawnd before I let the alagai have me. My body was the only thing you left me to ward.”

With those words, all Jardir’s questions about how the Par’chin had survived were answered. In his mind’s eye he saw his friend alone in the desert, parched and bloodied as he beat alagai to death with his bare hands.

It was glorious.

The Evejah forbade the tattooing of flesh, but it forbade many things Jardir had since permitted for the sake of Sharak Ka. He wanted to condemn the Par’chin, but his throat tightened at the truth of the man’s words.

Jardir shivered as a chill of doubt touched his center. No thing happened, but that Everam willed it. It was inevera that the Par’chin should live to meet him again. The dice said each of them might be the Deliverer. Jardir had dedicated his life to being worthy of that title. He was proud of his accomplishments, but could not deny that his ajin’pal, the brave outsider, might have greater honor in Everam’s eyes.

“You play at rituals you do not understand, Par’chin,” he said. “Domin Sharum is to the death, and victory was yours. Why did you not take it and claim your place at the lead of the First War?”

The Par’chin sighed. “There’s no victory in your death, Ahmann.”

“Then you admit I am the Deliverer?” Jardir asked. “If that is so, then return my spear and crown to me, put your head to the floor, and have done. All will be forgiven, and we can face Nie side by side once more.”

The Par’chin snorted. He set his satchel on the table, reaching inside. The Crown of Kaji gleamed even in the growing darkness, its nine gems glittering. Jardir could not deny the desire the item stirred in him. If he’d had legs to stand, he would have leapt for it.

“Crown’s right here.” The Par’chin spun the pointed circlet on a finger like a child’s hoop toy. “But the spear ent yours. Least, not ’less I decide to give it to you. Hidden where you can never get it, even if your legs wern’t casted.”

“The holy items belong together,” Jardir said.

The Par’chin sighed again. “Nothing’s holy, Ahmann. Told you once before Heaven was a lie. You threatened to kill me over the words, but that doesn’t make ’em any less true.”

Jardir opened his mouth to reply, angry words forming on his lips, but the Par’chin cut him off, catching the spinning crown in a firm grip and holding it up. As he did, the wards on his skin throbbed briefly with light, and those on the crown began to glow.

“This,” the Par’chin said of the crown, “is a thin band of mind demon skull and nine horns, coated in a warded alloy of silver and gold, focused by gemstones. It is a masterwork of wardcraft, but nothing more.”

He smiled. “Much as your earring was.”

Jardir started, raising his hand to touch the bare lobe his wedding ring had once pierced. “Do you mean to steal my First Wife, as well as my throne?”

The Par’chin laughed, a genuine sound Jardir had not heard in years. A sound he could not deny he had

missed.

“Not sure which would be the greater burden,” the Par’chin said. “I want neither. I have a wife, and among my people one is more’n enough.”

Jardir felt a smile tug at his lips, and he let it show. “A worthy Jiwah Ka is both support and burden, Par’chin. They challenge us to be better men, and that is ever a struggle.”

The Par’chin nodded. “Honest word.”

“Then why have you stolen my ring?” Jardir demanded.

“Just holding on to it while you’re under my roof,” the Par’chin said. “Can’t have you calling for help.”

“Eh?” Jardir said.

The Par’chin tilted his head at him, and Jardir could feel the son of Jeph’s gaze reaching into his soul, much as Jardir did when he had the gift of crownsight. How did the Par’chin do it without the crown at his brow?

“You don’t know,” the Par’chin said after a moment. He barked a laugh. “Giving me marriage advice while your own wife spies on you!”

The derision in his tone angered Jardir, and his brows drew tight despite his desire to keep his face calm. “What is that supposed to mean?”

The Par’chin reached into his pocket, producing the earring. It was a simple hoop of gold with a delicate warded ball hanging from it. “There’s a broken piece of demon bone in here, with its opposite half in your wife’s ear. Lets her hear everything you do.”

Suddenly so many mysteries became clear to Jardir. How his wife seemed to know his every plan and secret. Much of her information came from the dice, but the alagai hora spoke in riddles as oft as not. He should have known cunning Inevera would not rely on her castings alone.

“So she knows you’ve kidnapped me?” Jardir asked.

The Par’chin shook his head. “Blocked its power. She won’t be able to find you before we’re finished here.”

Jardir crossed his arms. “Finished with what? You will not follow me, and I will not follow you. We stand at the same impasse we found five years ago in the Maze.”

The Par’chin nodded. “You couldn’t bring yourself to kill me then, and it forced me to change how I see the world. Offering you the same.” With that, he tossed the crown across the room.

Instinctively, Jardir caught it. “Why return it to me? Won’t this heal my wounds? You may have difficulty holding me without them.”

The Par’chin shrugged. “Don’t think you’ll leave without the spear, but I’ve drained the crown in any event. Not a lot of magic venting from the Core makes it this high,” he waved his hand at the windows circling the room on all sides, “and the sun cleans out this room each morning. It’ll give you crownsight, but not much

else until it's recharged.”

“So why return it to me?” Jardir asked again.

“Thought we might have a talk,” the Par'chin said. “And I want you to see my aura while we do. Want you to see the truth of my words, the strength of my convictions, written on my very soul. Perhaps then, you'll come to see.”

“Come to see what?” Jardir asked. “That Heaven is a lie? Nothing written on your soul can do that, Par'chin.” Nevertheless, he slipped the crown onto his head. Immediately the darkened room came alive with crownsight, and Jardir breathed deep in relief, like the blind man in the Evejah, given his sight back by Kaji.

Through the windows, land that had been nothing but shadows and vague shapes a moment ago became sharply defined, lit with the magic that vented from Ala. All living things held a spark of power at their core, and Jardir could see strength glowing in the trunks of trees, the moss that clung to them, and every animal that lived within their branches and bark. It ran through the grasses of the plains and, most of all, in the demons that stalked the land and rode the winds. The alagai shone like beacons, waking a primal desire in him to hunt and kill.

As the Par'chin had warned, his cell was dimmer. Small tendrils of power drifted up the tower walls, Drawn to the wards etched into the glass windows. They flickered to life, a shield against the alagai.

But though the room was dim, the Par'chin shone brighter than a demon. So bright it should be difficult to look at him. But it was not. Quite the contrary, the magic was glorious to behold, rich and tempting. Jardir reached out through the crown, attempting to Draw a touch of it to himself. Not so much the Par'chin might sense the drain, but perhaps enough to speed his healing. A wisp of power snaked through the air toward him like incense smoke.

The Par'chin had shaved his brows, but the wards above his left eye lifted in an unmistakable expression. His aura shifted, showing more bemusement than offense. “Ah-ah. Get your own.” Abruptly, the magic reversed its flow and was Drawn back into him.

Jardir kept his face calm, though he doubted it made a difference. The Par'chin was right. He could read the man's aura, seeing his every feeling, and had no doubt his old friend could do the same. The Par'chin was calm, centered, and meant Jardir no harm. There was no deception in him. Only weariness, and fear Jardir would be too rigid to give his words fair consideration.

“Tell me again why I am here, Par'chin,” Jardir said. “If your goal is truly as you have always said, to rid the world of alagai, then why do you oppose me? I am close to fulfilling your dream.”

“Not as close as you think,” the Par'chin said. “And the way you're doing it disgusts me. You choke and threaten humanity to its own salvation, not caring the cost. Know you Krasians like to dress in black and white, but the world ent so simple. There's color, and more than a fair share of gray.”

“I am not a fool, Par'chin,” Jardir said.

“Sometimes I wonder,” the Par'chin said, and his aura agreed. It was a bitter tea that his old friend, whom he had taught so much and always respected, should think so little of him.

From the Hardcover edition.

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