

SHADOW'S
MASTER

SHADOW'S MASTER

JON
SPRUNK



an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2012 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

Shadow's Master. Copyright © 2012 by Jon Sprunk. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, digital, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or conveyed via the Internet or a website without prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Maps by Ed Bourelle.

Cover illustration © Michael Komarck.

Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr

59 John Glenn Drive

Amherst, New York 14228-2119

VOICE: 716-691-0133

FAX: 716-691-0137

WWW.PYRSE.COM

16 15 14 13 12 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sprunk, Jon, 1970-

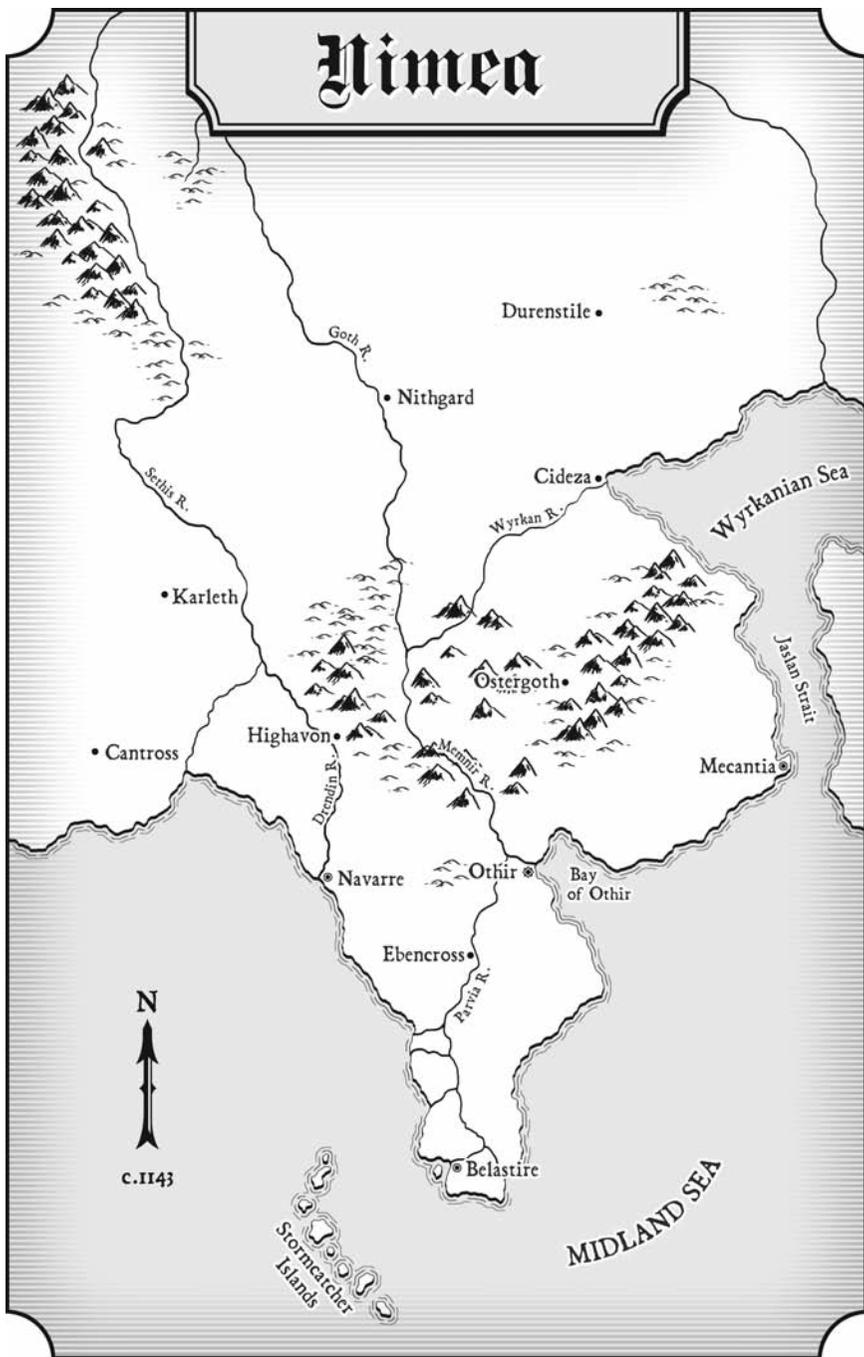
Shadow's master / by Jon Sprunk.

p. cm.

Printed in the United States of America

For too many reasons to name,
this book is dedicated to my wife, Jenny.

Nimea

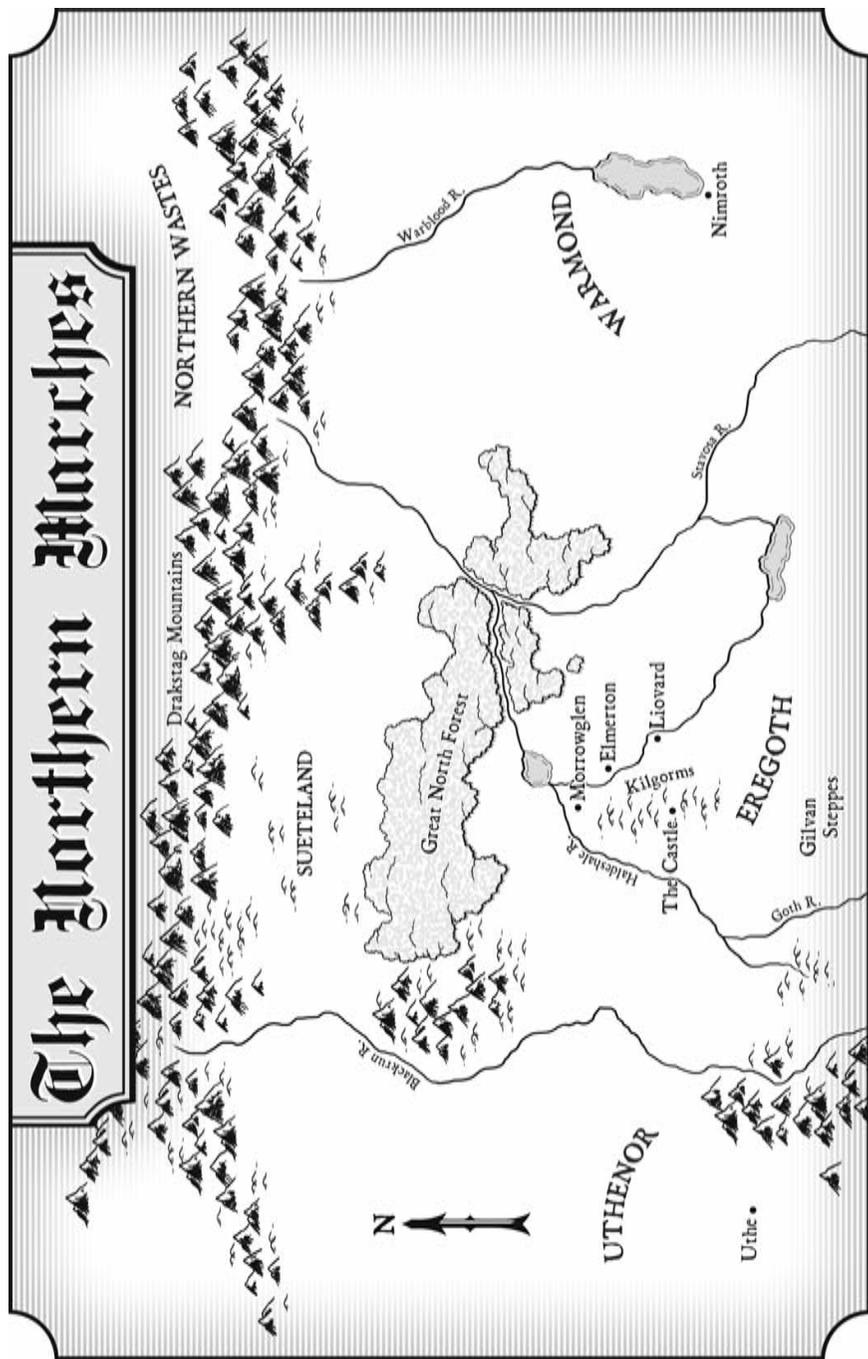


N
↑
c. 1143

Stormcatcher
Islands

MIDLAND SEA

The Northern Marches



I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.

— J. Robert Oppenheimer

CHAPTER ONE

Shadows pooled on the floor of the broken temple and seeped into the cracks between the stones as he stepped out of the portal.

Splintered ends of charred wooden beams protruded from the mounds of shattered masonry, which had fallen from the ceiling and now gaped open to the night sky. Ashes rustled as the gateway closed with a quiet whisper. Outside, chaos reigned over the fallen city. Shouts and despondent cries wafted in from the street along with the stench of burning flesh as Lord Talus's soldiers slaked their lusts on Liovard's hapless survivors. But inside the sanctuary another presence lingered, reeking of death.

Balaam walked around an overturned sarcophagus, its ancient stone surface riddled with cracks. He stopped beside a long smudge on the floor beside a hollow scrying pool. The power he'd felt radiated from the stain. Balaam knelt and traced the spot with his fingers. Here. This was where she had met her end.

He called to the shadows. While they spun a connection between worlds, he stood and took a deep breath. An image formed in the air, a picture of this chamber as it had been on a night two moons ago. In the picture much of the rubble was gone, although some debris littered the floor. The surface of the scrying pool glistened as Lady Sybelle lay against it. Blood streaked her aristocratic features; her black dress was ripped and powdered with dust. A man in southern garb entered the frame. He was not overly large or intimidating, but Lady Sybelle stiffened as he approached.

"Where is she?" the man asked. His voice was low and coarse, like two river stones scraping together.

When she did not answer, the man grabbed her with both hands. "Tell me where she is!"

Lady Sybelle looked up at him. No, beyond him. Northward. “You have her eyes,” she whispered.

The man shook her back and forth. “Where is . . . ?”

Her eyes took on a sudden clarity and focused on his face. “Find Erebus. Your moth—”

The man jerked back as streamers of smoke rose from her body. Flames lit up the sanctum, highlighting the cracks running through the walls. Lady Sybelle was burning, but Balaam studied her foe. *So this is the scion.*

There was nothing remarkable about the man on the surface. But Balaam looked into the man’s eyes and saw his own reflection in their flat surfaces.

Balaam brushed the detritus from his gloves. Lady Sybelle’s demise was unfortunate, but far worse was her infidelity at the end. She had betrayed her liege, her people, and her family. He couldn’t understand why she would do such a thing. It went against everything he lived for: there was no self, only duty. Balaam glanced around at the destruction. So much potential lost. So much time wasted.

A sliding footstep stirred the dust behind him. Balaam turned to meet his contact. The man was short. Loose folds of skin around his eyes and under his chin hinted he had once been pudgier, but no doubt the last few weeks had been hard on him. After Sybelle’s fall, her favored priests found few allies in the new regime. But they had reemerged from the shadows since Lord Talus’s victory like maggots spilling from a rotten corpse.

“I am Willich, second archaract of the high fane.” His pale lips twitched as he nodded. “What message has the Master for me?”

His tone was sharp, almost insolent. Balaam made no movement, except to touch the pommel of his *kalishi* sword with the small finger of his right hand. The gesture was enough to make the priest gulp. His tiny eyes retreated farther into their nests of puckered skin.

“How did this happen?” Balaam didn’t look down, but he made it clear what he meant.

The priest licked his lips, which continued to wriggle like two albino worms. “The Dark Mother was overcome by a stranger who came in the night. He made some trouble with the duke’s son, and then the people rose up. My brothers and I tried to help—”

“Tried? Where were you when the scion came for her? Where were your brothers? You who swore to give your lives at her whim. No. You ran.”

“No!”

“You hid in some dank hole like a rat.”

“No!” The priest clutched the robe at his chest where the black amulet of his faith swung. “How dare you question me, Talon? I have met the new Master. Lord Talus has every confidence in my loyalty.”

A sad statement of these times. Talus had a reputation for expediency. As ruthless as he was successful, he had been waging a winning campaign in the west before this. Now he was shoring up the losses from Lady Sybelle’s failure, and who knew what delays that would mean.

The priest was still blustering. “I shall be on the council that rules Liovard when the new Master departs.”

Balaam curled his fingers around the sword hilt. The warlord’s plans were none of his concern. Unfortunately, the priest kept talking, faster with every word as if to prove his value.

“He has announced he will punish those responsible. Everyone knows this menace came from the south. From Nimea, the old whore. The new Master will punish her—”

The priest gasped and put a hand to his loose belly. Balaam held himself rigid, arm extended. “You failed Lady Sybelle,” he said. “And failed the one and *only* Master.”

Balaam retracted his sword. The priest sighed as the black blade left his body; then he toppled to the floor. Balaam swept the *kalisbi* sword in a half-circle to clear the gore, wiped it on the priest’s wide back, and slid it back into the scabbard. The blood called to him, but he resisted, sickened by the idea of feeding from this slug.

Finished here, Balaam left the temple through a fissure in the leaning walls. The sky was laden with heavy black clouds, but the city was awash in darting yellow-and-red light as the fires spread. Bodies sprawled on the cobblestones seeped in blood and ash. None escaped the wrath of Lord Talus, none except the city’s former ruler, whom Balaam heard had escaped during the assault. Now entire wards of Liovard burned while soldiers searched for the missing sovereign.

This is how the world will be remade. By fire and shadow. The Master foresaw it, and now it comes to pass.

A shadow floated down to settle on his shoulder. Balaam listened to its message before sending it off. The trail in Liovard was cold. If he had been summoned sooner . . . but there was no use dwelling on that.

Calling upon the darkness, he turned his back on Lady Sybelle's failed experiment and stepped though the forming portal.