

THE DARK GARDEN

by Chris Rogers

For many in the Dark Garden, the cloister is a place of dread, which might surprise a stranger; if a stranger ever visited the Garden. The cloister sits in the very center of the garden, a small open courtyard surrounded on three of its four sides by a covered walkway, nestled between the high walls of the keep. Aside from a small, unadorned fountain burbling in the center of the courtyard, it is always silent. The lush black vines and roots of the Ink Tree twist up out from the halls and climbing up the walls, occasionally shedding petals from their indigo flowers. Pale dust floats in the sunlight, and sunlight is a rare commodity in the Dark Garden. It really is quite beautiful, a place that would invite reflection and contemplation in other circumstances. Instead it inspires a cold foreboding – because it is the place of *testing*.

The Dark Garden has no set course of studies. Once inside the high walls, initiates gather in the shadowy coves or the dim libraries of the Academy itself, and listen to the lessons of the Teachers as it suits them. Some Teachers, like Teacher Vathara, try to gather as many initiates to them as they can. Others, like Teacher Bhita, are just as likely to throw a manuscript at your head as explain anything on its pages. Initiates can spend their entire lives at the foot of one Teacher, or move between many. There is one simple, resolute rule that governs the Garden, however; every initiate must submit themselves to testing at the hands of the Inquisitors at least once every turn of the moon.

The tests are, of course, rigorous affairs – as befits the premiere Academy of our Raja – but they are somewhat unorthodox.

Buried in the eastern wall of the cloister are five small wooden doors, each crafted by master woodwrights of the Samula tribe. The doors are things of lacquered beauty, geometric patterns open suddenly into woodland scenes then resolve back into perfect, logical patterns again. Within the skein of tessellating shapes there are frolicking nymphs, marching golems, warriors succumbing to their wounds, and maidens wailing. Examined closely they are exquisite, nearly lifelike, yet from a distance all one can see is the patterns wrought in the door. The message is obvious for anyone with eyes to see and anything between their ears besides cotton.

Behind each door is a small room, or perhaps a booth, furnished with a chair. Opposite the door is an ornate screen crafted by those same woodwrights. And in the center of each screen is a hole, just wide enough for an initiate to slip in his or her hand. Once the hand is inside the hole, some mechanism – clever engineering or magic – traps the hand in a wooden vice. And then the test begins.

As I climb the final steps to the cloister, a spider – they are everywhere in the Garden – drops on to my shoulder; just one of the less poisonous blues. Its bite would make any of the uninitiated (or any spy trying to look in on the Garden) feverish and weak for a day. Those of us raised in the garden, however, have grown more or less immune to their bites. They will still raise a welt, though, and they itch like mad. I flick it away.

I am not alone here. One other stands near the fountain, clad in the heavy black robes and deep cowl of the academy. After years of living here, I can tell she is a woman from a few subtle clues. She does not move when I enter. She is standing next to the fountain, head bowed. My lips purse into a little smirk. Perhaps someone does come here for contemplation after all? More likely though, she is a tyro, a new initiate working up the will to enter one of the doors. The first time through the doors is the worst, I suppose, one simply does not know what to expect.

The test holds no power over me, of course. The truth is, even at my young age, I could have already made Teacher nearly twice over. Philosophy, Astronomy, Poetics, the tests have always come easy. What it takes others a week to understand I grasp the moment it escapes the Teacher's lips. Arithmetic? As a child, I could balance complex ledgers in my head while others struggled with simple sums. I know that Teacher Vathara is a fool who loves the sound of his voice and that Teacher Bhita is hardly any better. I have always marched into the cloister with a swagger.

Of course, that's only part of the reason I can face the doors so easily!

The real reason I have no fear of the doors is the biggest secret of all in an entire keep built on secrets. I can face the doors without flinching because I am *not an initiate of the Academy*. I am Zastrá the Blade, sworn vassal of the Lady Isyra, and the Captain of the Venom Company of the Black Widow regiment. We are the Raja's rumored assassins and thieves. We are dark spirits, anticipating our enemies' movements, outwitting them, waiting in ambush on our black golems. Hidden under my robes, strapped to my thighs, are my twin stilettos, each blessed by Abruvat-Juti. They are so hungry for blood that when I wield them I can feel them fluttering like moth's wings.

And my mind is a blade as well, there is nothing behind any door that frightens me.

And yet last night's sortie had not gone precisely according to plan. Perhaps I am making too much of it. I am not sure how much to share with the Inquisitor, how much to hold back. The first door, the door on the left, is white. It is known as the Door of Understanding. The final door on the right, the Door of Acceptance, is black. I stride across the courtyard to the red door, the heels of my boots clacking against the flagstones, toward the middle door, the Door of Will ... As always.

Yet as I pass the woman I hear her say, or I think I hear her say, two little words. "*Be wary.*" It is a whisper without air. The faintest anyone could say anything, barely a breath. The

fountain is a roaring river compared to that whispered warning. I turn my head, straining to get a look under her cowl, but I can't quite see. Is it my Lady? *Impossible.*

Inside I take a seat and move my right hand toward the hole in the screen. I stop for just a moment. "Be wary," she had said. What silliness. A short report and then I can enjoy myself. A quick vault over the wall and a visit to the Castle town seems in order. For someone as quick and careful as I it is an easy thing to sneak out for an evening of rude entertainment. Cards, after all, are another thing that always came easy to me.

I push my hand through the hole and, with a sudden slice of air, the lock snaps shut around my wrist. I have to stifle a yelp as it pinches my skin. That has never happened before, the workers that maintain the Garden must be getting sloppy. *I wonder who I can bring that up with?*

From the other side of the screen I can hear a shuffle of robes, a settling. I can just make out the dark shape of a man from between the slats of the screen. Then the Inquisitor begins, "Explain what happened last night." His voice is flat.

"We were in position before the moonrise." My right hand rests on a small shelf on the other side of the screen. Inquisitors lead strange lives, staring at disembodied hands all day, asking them questions. I wonder if an Inquisitor learns to recognize people by their hands instead of their faces?

"We watched the Durani procession as it made its way out of the trees and onto the bridge. It was unusual for the Durani to be moving at night. They were being careful. The two Dervishes carrying the palanquin were escorted by three Sentinels, and one of their damned Preservers. At the bridge the captain ordered the sentinels to scout the far side while he remained at the near side to guard any approaches."

"The dervishes carrying the palanquin made their way across slowly while the rest of the company guarded the approaches. Careful, *pretty* well thought out, all in all. Of course it didn't do him any good when our forces attacked the palanquin on the bridge itself." I allow myself a little smile. Really, though, my hand was quite uncomfortable in the trap. I could feel pins and needles in my fingertips.

"My Sand Widow carried me up the trusses of the bridge with its usual speed. We were drawing blood before the guards could even turn around. The Lady Isyra crashed into one of the Dervishes with her Wildwood Widow and sent it and the palanquin spinning out of control. The Dervish and its knight went over the edge and the palanquin cracked to splinters. It was all a thing of beauty, I had the second Dervish in front of me and I knew—"

"Spare us the irrelevant details!"

Irrelevant details? In a field report? No Inquisitor had ever spoken to me in that tone before. I smiled and regained my composure in spite of the tight grip the trap held on my hand. I felt something wet on my wrist. *Was I bleeding?*

“As you wish, Inquisitor. Is there some part of the sortie *you* would like to me to focus on?” That came out a bit more tart than was strictly wise. “*Be wary*” echoed in my mind. There was no answer from the other side of the screen.

When I looked up, I saw a fat, red shape about the size of two of my hands crawling down the screen, blocking out the Inquisitor’s shape. Stumpy, fur covered legs picked at the screen in slow succession. It was moving slowly, but its aim was clear. I held my hand very still.

The spiders of the Dark Garden were the *true* teachers. If you failed the Inquisitor he would let a spider take a little nibble out of your trapped hand. Sometimes the Inquisitor let a new initiate off with a bite from a little Blue. Usually, though, the Inquisitor used the larger and more poisonous blacks, the *Daha Astipatha*. Their bite was only rarely fatal – but it burned in the veins like a fire for days. Initiates were often dragged wailing and insensate from the cloister to the infirmary. Of course, the poison never fully left the veins so each subsequent failure was far worse than the prior one. That was why even the most dedicated initiate dreaded the cloister.

Yet I had never heard of an Inquisitor using a Red. The lumbering *Astipatha Pramatha* never killed. Yet a single bite would, without fail, drive out a man’s wits forever and leave him helpless. It was the Spider of Madness. One came across its unlucky victims from time to time in alleys or wandering in the countryside, raving, angry, confused, and babbling, unable to control their most basic bodily functions ...

“I’ll tell you the *odd* bit – since you seem to know something of it, already,” I said, biting back the challenge in my voice. “After we had run the Durani off I dismounted and joined my Lady in searching the palanquin. We found our target in the wreckage ... even though he was dressed in Durani finery he was clearly a Zikia chief. Not just Zikia, but one of the wild Zikia from the deep forest tribes. He was light-skinned, with a thick, shaggy beard, his hair was pulled back in thick ropes. He looked as out of place in those robes as I might. More even. He still *smelled* like pine and peat.”

The Red was now only the span of my arm from my trapped hand. My free hand snaked down to loose a stiletto. Could I hack through the screen in time? Could I kill it before it bit me? No and no ... I caught myself. *Why the theatrics? Why not kill me outright?* This wasn’t a field report, and yet it wasn’t an assassination either ... It was a test. The best way out now was the same way as it always was before: I simply needed to answer correctly. Then what was the correct answer? Hells, what was the *question*?

I didn't need the blade on my hip, I needed the blade of my mind.

"Are you sure he was Zikia? Not Durani?" The spider marched down the screen. I could see its hair poking through the slats in the screen as it lowered its body slowly down the screen.

"Yes, Inquisitor, quite sure. He had the look and he was muttering in that birdsong language of the Zikia. But that wasn't all. He staggered up out of the wreckage holding a splintered board like a club. He was dazed from the attack, of course, and badly hurt. But when he saw the Lady Isyra he just froze. He recognized her. I am sure of it."

"Mmm." The spider was moving slowly but it was already about a quarter of the distance down the screen. I had very little time before it reached my hand.

"His eyes went wide, he dropped his makeshift weapon and held his arms open. "You!" he said, whether joyfully, or angrily I could not tell. He spit blood either way."

"And?"

I raised my eyebrows. "And ... Nothing, Inquisitor. I slipped behind the target and killed him before the Durani could regroup."

"Hmm, and what of the Lady Isyra?"

"Inquisitor?"

"How did the Lady Isyra react to these ... *events*?"

"I did not see, Inquisitor. *I* was focused on the man I was slicing apart."

"Mmm." The spider continued its plodding walk down the screen. I felt I still had plenty of time to pass the test.

Then the spider lost its footing, slipped off the screen, and landed on its back next to my trapped hand with a dull thump.

I could feel its soft legs brushing against my hand as it tried to right itself. Focus. Its feet squirmed in rapid wriggles for purchase, its back arched and spasmed. Answer the riddle. My mind was a dagger slashing at the problem.

How was it possible that the wild Zikia man would know the Lady Isyra? She who keeps her face covered in a black mask on all of our raids? She who rarely leaves the Academy except on the business of the Widows? She who had been raised since her third year in the Garden, the cherished ward of our Raja Rudatha, after he had rescued her, the last survivor, from the total destruction of her tribe? Hells, I am one of her most trusted Captains and I only rarely see her. How could some old Zikia barbarian wrapped up in Durani politics recognize her as he was dying? Isyra is part Zikia, of course, from one of the Deepwoods

tribes, in fact. But if her tribe was wiped out then no one would be left to recognize her from before her time in the Garden ... unless...

"You are certain the man was not Durani?" the Inquisitor asked. Two of the spider's legs caught on the screen and it began to lift its bulbous body up slowly. The man had been Zikia, I was sure of it. What was going on here? And then the blade of my mind began to cut away at the riddle.

Suppose the Lady Isyra's tribe had not been wiped out? Suppose there were some that could still recognize her even years later? Members of her tribe ... But that would mean she had not been rescued from the total destruction of her tribe. In fact it might mean that she had not been rescued at all! Just how had the Raja come across the child Isyra?

Be wary indeed!

"I am sorry Inquisitor, I've made a terrible mistake. The man was not Zikia," I said, even as the Spider pulled its heavy body up on to the screen and began turning its fangs toward my hand. "He clearly was Durani, it must have been a trick of the lingering spell fires that made him seem so pale. As for why he stopped and looked at our Lady, who knows?" I shrugged, "probably he recognized her as his Death, come to meet him."

"Hmm... Yes," said the Inquisitor, "This account makes more sense." One of the spider's forelegs rested on the soft meat between my thumb and finger. "Do not speak of this to anyone."

The trap holding my hand popped open and I ripped my hand out so quickly that the spider spilled out too and landed on the floor in front of me. My nose wrinkled, the slow-moving thing was of no danger now.

I rubbed the blood back into my gray hand, it had been an even tighter grip than I had guessed. I asked, under my breath, so he wouldn't hear, "*Who are you?*" An impertinent question to ask in the Dark Garden in any circumstance – outright foolish in this case.

The figure on the other side of the screen stopped and held still for a moment, then after what seemed like an eternity he answered, "You will also cease your nightly errands over the walls of the garden immediately. If you leave again without permission you will face ... very unpleasant consequences." Then he was gone.

Outside the door, the woman was gone, but there was a new initiate steeling himself for the test. With a friendly smile in my voice I said, "I would choose some door other than the Door of Will, today. Tough Inquisitor in there." My voice sounded surprisingly loud, too loud, in the cloister.

"Be wary young one." I thought, "*Be very wary.*"