



Darksiders: The Abomination Vault

By Ari Marmell

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Created in close collaboration with the Darksiders II teams at Vigil and THQ, *Darksiders: The Abomination Vault* gives an exciting look at the history and world of the Horsemen, shining a new light on the unbreakable bond between War and Death.

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Darksiders: The Abomination Vault By Ari Marmell Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #262447 in Books
- Published on: 2012-07-24
- Released on: 2012-07-24
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.19" h x .76" w x 5.50" l, .63 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 368 pages

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Ari Marmell is the author of *The Conqueror's Shadow* and *The Warlord's Legacy*. He has published a fair amount of shared-world fiction, including several short stories and *Agents of Artifice*, a Magic: The Gathering novel. Marmell lives in Austin, Texas, with his wife, George, and two cats.

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CHAPTER ONE

The ashes seemed to go on forever.

A thin layer at first, very much like a gentle coating of gray, clinging snow. Deep enough, if only just, to retain the imprints of passing feet--or would have, had there been any.

After barely a few finger widths, however, the fine particles began to compress, suddenly and swiftly. A light dusting became a shifting grit, then a sucking mire. And below even that, the ash had lain so deep, for so long, it had condensed into a layer as unyielding as any earthen crust. If this world even had a surface beyond the omnipresent dust and cinders, it was buried so utterly that it would never again appear to the living.

It filled the air as well, that ash, casting a constant veil across the face of the horizon. It diffused the light into perpetual dusk, blotting out the lingering embers of what had once been a sun. For those rare few unfortunate enough to pass through, it smelled of burnt oils and singed meats; clung to the nostrils and throat in an oily film. The wind was perpetual across the barren land, unimpeded by mountain or forest or wall, refusing to ever let the choking soot settle.

Equally constant, audible over the roaring winds only if one made the effort to listen, came the tolling of an impossible, and impossibly distant, bell. It could not exist, did not exist, anywhere in this blasted realm. Only a lingering echo of what once was, it sounded not so much in the ears as in the memory.

Not merely a dead world, this, but a murdered one. What wide and varied life had once thrived here was long since stripped away, leaving nothing behind but death.

And, more recently, Death.

He stood at the edge of a colorless dune, before a squat, rounded structure, little more than a blister in the ashes, browned and pitted with age. Even the windswept soot seemed unwilling to touch him, rushing around him in short, sharp flurries. The soles of his age-worn boots remained atop even the flimsiest layer of packed ash, as though he were weightless--or perhaps, again, it was merely that the ash wanted nothing to do with him.

Hair as black as a demon's shadow hung to his shoulders in matted, greasy locks. Below them, torn and stained streamers of bruise-violet fabric whipped and trailed from the back of his belt; perhaps the only remnants of what had once been a tunic or cloak, perhaps something more. The dark leathers and piecemeal armor he wore from the waist down, and the fraying strips that wrapped his palms and forearms, were equally grimy and unkempt. The skin of his exposed torso, shrunk tight over a wiry frame, was the dull gray

of a corpse even without the filth in the air.

Only the deeply scored mask hiding his face from all Creation still retained some semblance of cleanliness, of its original bone white. The gaping sockets--through which eyes of burning orange gleamed, unblinking--and the mask's general shape were enough to evoke a skull in any viewer's imagination. The lack of mouth, or most other features, somehow made it even worse.

No sentient being remained anywhere in this world to gaze upon him, and the ash-choked air would have made him almost impossible to see even if there were. And still he did not remove the mask; had not, in fact, even given thought to the possibility. It was a part of him now, an immutable barrier between who he was and who he once had been.

Death stood, his hands raised before him, his mask shuddering slightly as his mouth formed constant, silent chants. The magics of the oldest Horseman swept through the winds, delving deep into the ash, and where nothing lived, the ancient dead responded.

Bones, petrified by time and stained by soot, worked and wiggled like snakes on their way to the surface. They punched through to open air, rearing into a veritable thicket and slowly pressing themselves tightly together. They danced, however briefly, to an orchestra that only Death could hear.

Long since dried to flecks of powder, the blood of a thousand corpses transformed once more to liquid, sluicing and bubbling from the depths. Where the bones did not fit perfectly together, that blood surged into the gap, mixing with ambient ash to form a thick, viscous mortar. And where the macabre construction required more meticulous handling than the raw materials could manage, there appeared Death's helpers. Ghouls--the desiccated corpses of beings never native to this world--materialized from the ether, reanimated and drawn through the walls between realms by the Horseman's will. With mindless obedience but impossible precision, they arranged the jagged bones just so.

With surprising rapidity, guided by Death's magic and servants both, a low building began to form over and around the smaller structure. Every so often, faces appeared briefly in the ash to study him as he worked his necromancies--phantoms, perhaps, of the world before, or maybe just tricks of the light.

He sensed the sudden surge of life, a creature appearing nearby where there had been none, at the same moment he heard a warning squawk from above. Wings beating rapidly against the wind, shedding mangy feathers, a hefty crow circled twice and settled on his shoulder.

"Yes, Dust." Death's voice was low, sonorous, a stale draft from a yawning sepulcher. "I feel it, too."

He raised a hand, and the weapon he'd casually laid aside heaved itself into his waiting grip. The scythe was enormous, taller than its wielder. Its blade was a hideous thing, jagged and crafted like the wing of some great beast, longer than Death's outstretched arms fingertip-to-fingertip. The ghouls ceased their labors and turned in unison, ready to march at the slightest thought.

Dust emitted a second piercing call and took to the air once more--partly to scout for enemies, yes, but also in part to remove himself from possible danger.

"Coward," Death said, though his tone was not unkind.

He squinted, peering into the soot-thickened wind, and made a swift decision. As quickly as he could think

it, his scythe flowed, fluid for less than the blink of an eye. Death was now holding two weapons where there had only been one: two crescent blades, thick and heavy, shaped like knives but larger than most swords. Blades that would be easier to swing and thrust through the violent gusts than the longer, broader scythe.

“I didn’t know you could do that.”

Death had never heard that voice, high and sneering, before. But between the sound and the silhouette appearing through the cloud, he recognized his visitor all the same.

“I am Death,” he said simply, without pomp or vanity, “and Harvester is bound to me. Whatever tools I require to serve my function, it can emulate. Hello, Panoptos.”

“You’ve heard of me! I’m flattered.”

The dusky figure that finally materialized was peculiar even by the Horseman’s standards. Gaunt, almost spindly, humanoid from the waist up, tapering off into semi-solid vapors below. Its arms and fingers were stretched and distended, its wings serrated and broad. Its oblong face, like Death’s mask, lacked anything resembling a mouth, though this didn’t stop it from speaking. Instead, it boasted an array of emerald eyes, shifting and flowing across a vaguely gelatinous surface. Nine of them, usually; though between the constant motion, and the fact that one or two would occasionally disappear, only to sprout anew, the number varied moment by moment.

“Don’t be. The Charred Council told me about you,” Death said. “My brothers told me more about you. Care to guess who I’m most likely to believe?”

“Aww . . .” The creature sniggered softly. “Surely you know better than to listen to rumor and gossip!”

“Depends who’s spreading the rumors.” Death allowed Harvester to return to its innate form, that of the single great scythe, and leaned it against the partial wall of bone. At his silent command, the ghouls resumed their labors.

“So,” Panoptos said, flitting this way and that, untouched by the wailing winds. “Welcome back. Such a lovely home you’ve chosen. Very . . . you.” Already concealed beneath the newer walls of bone, the older, inner structure had apparently escaped his notice.

It wasn’t an oversight Death felt compelled to correct. “I enjoy the view.”

“Heh. Strife said you were a sarcastic bastard.”

“What do you want, Panoptos?”

Clearly, the creature had no interest in answering Death’s question, at least not yet. “Where have you been these past centuries, anyway?”

“I wouldn’t tell the Charred Council when they asked. What makes you think I’ll tell you?”

Again that irritating little laugh. “Why, as a gesture of friendship! I so want us to be friends.”

“It’s good to have goals. Keeps us motivated,” Death told him. “But I wouldn’t wager anything you can’t do

without, were I you.”

“How unkind! We’ve only just met!”

“And I already despise you. Imagine how much greater my loathing will become when I have gotten to know you.”

Panoptos might have had a retort for that, or not, but Dust chose that moment to decide the newcomer was safe after all. He dropped from above to settle comfortably on Death’s shoulder, puffing out his feathers and shaking off the worst of the soot.

Every one of Panoptos’s eyes blinked in unison. “Where did the bird come from?” he screeched.

“His name is Dust,” the Horseman said.

“That is not what I asked!”

“And yet, it’s the answer you got. The universe works in mysterious ways.”

“Hmph!” Panoptos darted upward, apparently for no other reason than so he could look down on Death.

“Does the Crowfather know you’ve absconded with one of his creatures?” he asked petulantly.

The Council’s errand boy doesn’t care for surprises. Could be a useful thing to know. “What do you want, Panoptos?” he repeated. “I have work to do.”

“Indeed you do. I’m here on behalf of the Council.”

Death just looked at him.

“Ah, well . . . Yes, I suppose you guessed as much. Listen well, then. A phalanx of the White City’s finest soldiers was ambushed recently, by an unknown enemy. The Charred Council wishes you to learn who and why, and to--”

“No.”

Four or five of the creature’s eyes threatened to pop from his face. “What do you mean, no?”

“I wasn’t aware the word had multiple meanings,” Death said.

“When you returned,” Panoptos growled, “after half a millennium, you told the Council you were finally ready to assume your duties!”

“And I am, when necessary. But I’m not required for this. Angels under attack? That’s hardly the Council’s affair at all, unless it represents a violation of the treaties with Hell. Assign one of the others; War and Fury are always eager to--”

“The Council sent for you,” Panoptos said. His voice had gone so cold, frost practically formed along the edges of the words.

"I'm busy trying to make a home for myself." Death began to turn back to his endeavors.

"You'll want to look into this yourself, Death."

"Oddly, I don't."

"Oh. Did I neglect to mention that this happened at the borders of Eden?"

Death spun back quickly enough to dislodge Dust from his shoulder. The crow offered an offended caw and fluttered over to perch, sulking, on the half-built structure.

Even without a mouth, Panoptos gave the impression of a sly grin. "I suppose I probably ought to have mentioned that first thing, shouldn't I?"

The Horseman's fist were clenched around the haft of Harvester; he didn't even remember summoning it back to him. Had Panoptos been nearer, it might well have been his throat in the weapon's place.

"What were the angels doing there? Did anyone breach the garden? Did the assailants get in?"

"I don't know." Perhaps realizing he'd pushed a bit further than was safe, Panoptos rose even higher, and his tone softened a touch. "Honestly, I don't. The Council's only now hearing first reports of the engagement."

"Anything else you've neglected to mention?" Death rasped up at him.

"Only that the Council wants your report the instant you have an idea of what's happening. They need to know if this is just another random skirmish at the edges of the treaty, or if something larger is underway."

Without another word, Death began striding across the desert of ash, leaving the ghouls to finish the work on his home-to-be. A whistle pierced the air, shrill and painful, one as much spiritual as physical.

And something both spiritual and physical answered the call.

If the reek of decay and the crushing weight of hopelessness took physical form, they would have been the same putrid green as the mist that billowed out of nothing a dozen paces distant. A growing staccato beating resolved itself into the sound of hooves.

Other than the grubby mane and tail, the horse that finally appeared was hairless. Its skin was nearly the same corpse gray as Death's, and hung open in ragged tears, displaying bone and rotting muscle. From those wounds, from its nostrils and between its broken teeth, and from cracks in its hooves, that mist seeped in constant clouds. The saddle was black leather, worn and tattered; the bridle, a rusted chain.

Death hauled himself into that saddle with a single smooth motion. Harvester, despite its length, never once impeded him. Scarcely had he settled when Dust landed once more on his shoulder. Death nodded once to the crow, a second time to his mount. The horse broke into a gallop that should have been impossible on the soft and shifting surface.

For the first time in five hundred years, the eldest of the Horsemen rode out into Creation to do the bidding of the Charred Council.

Before them, the walls of reality parted, as ephemeral as cobweb and just as readily swept aside. The barren world on which Death had made his home fell away, less palpable than a forgotten dream, and they were elsewhere.

Or, more accurately, nowhere.

Above and all around them were swirling currents of white. Not white mist, or cloud, or haze; just white. Calling it “nothing” lacked accuracy, as this was no absence, but a presence. It just happened to be the presence of emptiness made manifest.

The only real substance wound below them, a snaking trail of reality on which the beast’s hooves trod without sound. Held steady and solid by the power of the Horseman’s will alone, it was quite literally a path between worlds. The rolling whiteness around them muffled sound, offered little sensation of motion--but here, distance had no meaning anyway. The journey from one reality to the next would take as long as it took, and not even Death truly knew why.

The tedium afforded him the opportunity to think on what had happened. It wasn’t necessarily an advantage.

Eden. He could have gladly gone until the end of time without ever again hearing the name Eden.

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