

# Commander of the Armies of the Four Winds

*by* Shawn J. Higgins

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*Excerpted from the forthcoming novel "Minion Web"*

San Diego Police Commander Daniel Bennett was suffering a bad dream, but it would provide him with the clues he would need later, as the true plot behind the theft of the Necromancer Artifact, which he was charged with recovering, became clearer to him. When he awoke, however, he would not remember most of the details, and even when he could recall them, he could not completely understand their significance.

It started when he thought he had awakened in the darkness, and lay watching the circulating overhead fan. He could hear light conversation and laughter, and as he sat up in bed he noticed that a warm, faint light was coming through their bedroom door. He got out of bed and walked across the bedroom. He could feel the heavy plush of the carpet beneath his feet as he stepped toward the light; and he was convinced now that this was no dream, that he was in fact awake, and he felt refreshed, as if he had slept through the entire night.

His immediate supervisor, Deputy Chief of Police Patrick "Cookie" Cooke, and his wife Veronica were sitting at the dining room table, talking about archaeology. Cookie was telling his wife about the Necromancer Artifact, about how it could be used to invoke an ancient race of extremely powerful beings. Veronica said the conversation was too creepy, and asked him to please stop talking about it; but Cookie continued anyway, his eyes growing livid and wild as he spilled out detail after detail. Veronica looked up and saw Daniel watching them ... and then screamed aloud. Her right hand

covered her mouth and she stood and rapidly left the room. Daniel wanted to pursue his wife to comfort her in her moment of terror, but he was held fast by the droning voice of Cookie and the hypnotic spell it seemed to cast over the room. He sat down at the table in the chair his wife had deserted, and listened with fascination as Cookie described ancient rituals of invocation. Before long his voice began to change, his face gradually melted, his neck appeared to be ripped apart as if by some wild animal, and he was speaking hollowly out of his throat. An odor akin to rotten meat emanated from the open hole in his throat from which the words emerged. It was impossible to discern them, but they sounded like: *"Bad dog Max, bad dog not to obey your Master, bad dog ..."*

Then Cookie gradually began to transform again, and soon Dan was looking not at Cookie but at his chief suspect in the larceny case he was investigating: museum curator Nathan Jasper. Jasper's face still bore the blank expression it had when Bennett interviewed him in his office earlier this morning; his legs crossed very professionally and business-like as he continued speaking at the point where Cookie had left off before he began scolding his dog. Jasper regaled Bennett once again with tales of the Necromancer Artifact, and began speaking of a rare, ancient volume which he referred to as the "Black Book." Jasper was claiming the book translated the mysterious inscriptions on the artifact; and then began to inform him of a race of primeval beings that could be invoked by using them together.

He suddenly felt terrified. He could recall that his wife had ran from the table in terror upon his approach, and bolted in the direction in which she had fled, toward the living room. He had a strong sensation that Jasper was looking for him and he tried desperately to escape. *The Black Book!* he thought. *Have to find it. Have to find it before ...*

*"Do you believe in God, Daniel?"* He heard those words and whirled around, expecting Seth Carpenter, the mysterious stranger who had accosted him with some kind of religious diatribe about the artifact yesterday. Instead, he saw Veronica standing near the door,

wearing her wedding dress. Her deep blue eyes were sparkling and radiant, her eyelashes batted together, her cheeks were rosy, her lips burgundy, her face was golden brown beneath the veil over her head. She was absolutely the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life. *"Turn away my love,"* she said to him, *"until the dawn comes, and the shadows flee away."* She read those words from a small black book she held open in her hands. She closed it and handed it to him. Believing it to be the "Black Book" Jasper had spoken of, Dan took it from his wife's hands, and then followed her as she stepped slowly out the front door of their house, and into a black, unknown wasteland that seemed to stretch out infinitely before them.

As he followed his wife outdoors, Bennett was dismayed to see no sign of his lovely bride, only Nathan Jasper standing directly in front of an enormous temple made of bricks that ascended far into the starless sky. The exterior of the temple was elaborately painted with rich colors, and decorated with the same symbols Bennett had observed on the artifact in the photos Jasper had given him in the curator's office. Overhead, a full moon shone brightly against the infinite dense blackness surrounding them. Venus glowed brightly over the moon. "Of course," the curator was saying, "there *is* a way out, but I know you. You're much too proud to accept it." Jasper began to laugh, deeply and soullessly.

As Jasper continued to laugh, Bennett detected that Jasper too was changing, transforming from the curator to someone very dark and ominous in appearance. He had seen this dark man before, although he did not know him and had indeed never met him; he recognized him as Basra Hazared; the man who had unearthed the artifact in ancient Babylon, and whose photos, Jasper informed him earlier, surrounded the artifact's empty display case. "Now we shall see," Hazared wailed, his voice taking on a nearly hysterical pitch, "who is truly deserving of the power of the Necromancer Artifact. *Yes, now we shall find the answer!"*

Bennett tried to tell him that he did not want the artifact or any of its hideous powers, but his throat locked up and he could not speak.

Nothing, not even a squeak, would come out of his mouth. He wanted to scream because the figure before him was transforming itself once again. Hazared was becoming something black and sinister, a monster that had terrified him for years when he was a child, a giant with strong, muscular arms that reached out for him from underneath the massive, outstretched wings of a raven. He stood helplessly as the monster grabbed him by the arms and began pulling him downward into a darkened chasm that opened up beneath of them. The monster opened its mouth and spoke words that were deep and utterly soulless, completely without emotion:

*"...I am Ru Ach, Commander of the Armies of the Four Winds ... you will join my service as the great high priest of my sanctuary at the New Shinar ..."*

Alone and isolated, with no company save for the apparition before him, the most horrifying fear overwhelmed him, coupled with an unmentionable thought: *he would spend eternity here, with no hope of escape*. His mind was still intact, still capable of the same reason and analysis, yet there would be nothing for him to reason or analyze down in this isolated black abyss, with only the hideous bird monster now before him to keep him company there.

*"NOOOOOO!"* Daniel Bennett screamed at last. He turned around and ran as fast as he could ... and then he stopped.

A lone, frail-looking figure stood at the top of a hill, gazing at him with a kind of strength the commander had never seen in the eyes of anyone. Blood dripped down from the stranger's hands, and formed two small streams flowing downhill, which in turn fed into a larger river running down the hill and into Bennett's feet. Dan fell to his knees and wept at the feet of the gentle stranger before him. "I'm sorry," he wailed.

*"When an unclean spirit goes out of a man,"* the soft voice of the figure before him said, *"it goes about, searching dry places in which to reside; and finding nothing, it says to itself: 'I will return to the house from which I came.' And finding it swept and put in order, it takes with it seven spirits more wicked than itself, and the last state of that man is worse than the first."*

There was silence for a moment, and Bennett felt distressed again. Although he understood nothing of which this gentle ghost of a man spoke, he felt comforted in the sound of his voice, and in the warmth of his light, which chased away the choking shadows that engulfed him.

*“When a heavily-armed, strong man guards his home, everything he owns is safe,”* the gentle stranger continued in his soft voice, *“but if one who is stronger than he overcomes him, and overpowers him, his weapons can be taken from him, and dealt out to others.”*

Bennett continued to weep and apologize—for what, he was uncertain. The voice continued to speak to him: *“How can anyone enter a heavily-armed strong man’s house and rob him, unless the strong man is first restrained by the one who is stronger? Only then can his goods be taken and dealt out to others.”*

Bennett stopped sobbing long enough to look up at the figure, awed by the power he saw in those eyes, enough power to vanquish any evil foe. *“He who seeks to gain his life will lose it, and he who seeks to lose his life for my sake will find it. He who is not with me is against me,”* the voice concluded, *“and he who does not gather with me scatters.”*

The figure began to fade from his vision, and in his place Bennett could see the slowly rising sun piercing through the darkness behind the remains of his silhouette. He remembered the book he had been given by Veronica and glanced at the cover, still expecting to find the “Black Book” Jasper had spoken of. Instead the embossed golden script across the cover read: *HOLY BIBLE*.

Bells began to ring. The chiming of bells stirred up a pleasant memory from his childhood, recalling the days when his parents took he and his younger brother to a small church somewhere in the hills of Redlands, California. On this particular day, a warm wind was blowing from the south although it was autumn; the sun was just beginning to peek through a cleft in the overhead sky above. The pastor stood on the doorstep of the chapel, greeting the parishioners as they stepped from the sanctuary of the church into the cool and gentle autumn wind. The pastor glanced down at young

Daniel Bennett, and there was a curious look of apprehension on the pastor's face, which frightened the small boy. The pastor grasped the boy's shoulders firmly, turned young Daniel Bennett to face him, and said: *"You'll have to learn how to step on snakes and scorpions, Daniel."*

The boy looked up at the pastor, frightened and confused. His parents seemed not to notice, and young Daniel Bennett felt alone with whatever cryptic message the preacher had just delivered to him. As he gazed into the eyes of the pastor, he began to see beyond the man before him—inside of him—wherein a bright light nearly shrouded a single word emblazoned in gold. The word, which would remain hidden within the recesses of his subconscious mind until later, was **"DOMINION."** His tender mind could not grasp the significance of the word he saw at the time of the revelation; only that it was a crucial message. The memory had been buried in his mind for decades, until the gentle stranger had spoken to him of binding a strong man, and gathering and scattering ... and until these warm church bells rang and broke him out of the terrifying nightmare world he had been stranded in. He opened his eyes to find the overhead fan circling over his head, daylight coming through the window, the telephone ringing beside the bed, and his lovely bride Veronica still sleeping next to him ...

