

MUD



CHRONICLES OF THE THIRD REALM WAR



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A decorative horizontal line with a central circular ornament and flared ends.

E. J. Wenstrom

Praise for the
Works of E. J. Wenstrom

“Wenstrom’s debut is the catalyst for a planned series of fantasy war tales, kicked off with this thoroughly expanded retelling of the Orpheus myth...the clever use of weathered fantasy tropes and occasionally lovely turns of phrase will propel readers into book two.”

- *Publishers Weekly*

“MUD, I loved this book!! So unique so engaging, a Keeper and must read!!”

- *Nelsonville Public Library, Heather Bennett*

“I really like books about uncommon supernatural creatures, so, when I saw MUD had a golem as the protagonist, I jumped at the chance to read it. A well-written and enjoyable read.”

- *Metaphors and Moonlight, Kristen Burns*

“There's something primal in Mud. It's a reverent, mythical story of supernatural beings who justify desperate measures in their quest to feel complete. They struggle with emotions we all understand, even as they challenge the very rules that govern all of creation.”

- *Fantasy Author, Robert Wiesehan*

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Chronicles of the Third Realm War: Book 1
By
E. J. Wenstrom

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Published in the United States by City Owl Press.

www.cityowlpress.com

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Chapter 1

A STAIR CREAKS.

With the rain pounding down on the temple's rattling roof, the human may not have even heard the sound. But I do. It is too close, just outside the door of my tower. I look up from the Texts and listen.

There it is again.

A cold darkness tosses in my stomach.

Another stair creaks, and I know I'm about to kill again. The boiling thrill for blood rises within me and I know better than to bother suppressing it. It will happen anyway, no matter how much I try to bury the monster I really am.

Over the centuries, I've at least learned how to make it quick. My hand has already dug the box from the breast pocket of my cloak. I stride across my small room, my bare feet collecting dust. My back to the door, I lean on the mantle to lure the Hunter in. Then, I stare at the blank dusty wall and wait. The rustle of his cloak breaks the quiet with each step.

I want this over.

I hold the box high in my hand for him to see, as if I am inspecting it. So small, so delicate. It nestles easily against my palm, comfortable and sure. It knows I must serve it.

Padded steps lift from the wood and onto the worn rug. My spine prickles with anticipation. Dread, heavy and thick like a storm cloud, wells up inside me. Have they learned nothing from their many losses? So many I cannot count them anymore.

I lay the box on the mantle for him to reach. My fingers itch for the fight, but I will not destroy the human of my own will. He must bring it on himself. I step away from it, leave it there for the Hunter to set his fate.

A rustle of rushed steps, a grunt, and a blade slices through my back, cool and slick. They keep trying to hurt me as if I were human, as if I felt the pain as they do. I reach around and remove the blade from my back. The skin knits itself back together.

I turn to him. Rain beats at the window. Wild dilated eyes peer up at me from under a deep red hood. Young. The cloak slips at his neck, too large for his growing body. It is the same deep red cloak all the others wore. Rich, dark, velvety, with the same gold braided trim. My own cloak, worn and ripped, seems even worse next to it.

The boy is trembling inside it. Waiting.

Has he even experienced a true fight before? Why did they send someone so young? Guilt twists through me.

“It’s not too late. Leave.” My voice is rough with disuse.

I shift the knife in my hand, holding it away to show him I don’t mean him any harm, not if I can help it.

Like their cloaks, the Hunters’ blades are fine, an elaborate pattern carved into its handle. It seems out of place in my hand, even after so many times. I run my fingers over its familiar ridges and wait. My ears are hot with anticipation, with dread of what I know comes next.

He gapes up at me, my monstrosity. I fight the urge to drop my gaze to the ground and instead keep my eyes locked on his. I try to will him to turn away, to go back to wherever he came from.

But I already know he won't. They never do.

Instead, he gives himself a quick shake and recovers his warrior's front. "The Sworn will not rest until it is destroyed. Give me the box."

Courage glows in his eyes. Strong. Fresh. What a waste of a life.

The Sworn? What is the Sworn?

"I cannot."

If only I could. It would save both of us.

He reaches for the box on the mantle.

"Don't—"

His fingers wrap around it.

The box's force takes over and my arms reach for him. I wince as my hand slips the Hunter's own blade through his soft middle. In the back of my mind, years and years of all the others who came before him flash through my memory. My hands buzz with mad hunger for the fight.

But it's already over.

He gasps, clasps his hands to his open belly, trying to hold it in. Then he slumps to the floor, spilling his life across the wooden panels. He opens his mouth to gasp, but it comes out as more of a gurgle, blood rising in his throat.

Not much time left. I try to push down the throbbing anger, the monster in me that hungers for the fight. I kneel beside him, gripping his head urgently so he is looking at me.

I hold the box to his face. "What is in it? Why do you come for it? Who are the Sworn?"

A red line dribbles down his chin. He looks up at me, trembling, shakes his head side to side.

“You don’t know?”

His words come out in a hoarse whisper. He is shaking all over now in a struggle for his life. He opens his mouth again, tries to push out more. But the dark puddle grows fast below him, and it is over before it begins. Again, I am alone in the heavy dark of the temple tower.

The Hunter’s eyes are cold and dead and open wide.

Watching, judging, condemning.

And they should. They have seen what I am.

I used to tell myself I would get used to it. I got used to snapping bones, last cries, pools of blood. But the eyes. The eyes freeze in an echo of their final panic and pain. When they realize these are their last breaths. Paled. Filmed. Hollow.

The Hunter’s eyes stare up at me and I can’t bear it.

I step out onto the balcony to escape them. Try to clear my head, still buzzing and grainy from the kill. Rain squeezes out of the sky like teardrops over the cobblestone streets in the marketplace below, over the thin rotted roofs of the laborers’ quarters beyond it, over the wall that traps them within the city’s borders. Even over the city center, where Epoh’s elite rest, safe and dry. It pounds down on me, drop, by drop, by drop.

So close, yet again.

I set the box next to me on the railing, finger the curves of the delicate patterns painted over it. Such beauty. But it’s what’s inside that the

Hunters come for, die for. That much I know. If only it would open. If only I knew what my body betrayed me for, why my hands are covered in blood yet again.

They will send another. They always do. I will be waiting. It goes without end, back further than I can remember. Centuries. Years trudge by, bodies pile up, the weight grows heavier.

I cling to my new clue. *The Sworn*. The phrase is meaningless to me, but it's a little more than I had before. Next time, maybe I can learn even more, if they keep sending their young and untested.

Already the dark sky is lightening toward a troubled gray. Another weary day is here in the city of Epoch.

Which means I'll be stuck with the Hunter's cold stare all day. There's no time to move the body now. Soon Epoch's Silencers will be out, the city's guards who keep the order with fear and clubs. Ever since they burned down the Holy District and all the Texts so many years ago, anything related to the Three Gods makes them jump. Any sign of movement from a temple like this would trigger a full search of the grounds. Then where would I go? There's nothing else left beyond Epoch's walls. Nowhere else to go.

It wasn't always like this. The realm was happy once. There were tons of other cities like Epoch, and they were thriving. But something shifted in the Second Realm War.

Some say the Three saw the destruction and anger and hate that spread throughout the realm of Terath in the Second Realm War and abandoned it. Others say the Three themselves were on the battlefield, and They came with Their soldiers to beat at Epoch's wall, begging to

be let in and shown a little of kindness—care for wounds, a drink of water—but the people would not let them in for fear of the rebels, and They gave up on us. Others say the Gods simply saw how few men dared fight for Them and turned away.

Whatever it was, the Gods are gone, and the people won't dare invoke Them for anything, afraid of Their wrath. The realm is in ruins. Only the Gods know what lies beyond Epoh's high walls. If They care enough to look.

That's why I hide here, in the temple. I keep to where the humans don't dare wander. The Gods don't worry me. They forgot this realm long ago.

I force myself back inside and quickly step toward the body. I drag my fingers over the grayed lids, closing them. I untie his cloak and pull it from under him to mop up the congealing blood from the floor. With his eyes off of me, my entire body finally begins to relax again.

It must be such great relief, knowing you can end. I envy them that, the humans. But not like this. Not before your time. Not alone, with no chance.

When I'm done with the floor, I lay the cloak over the body. His legs jut out at the end, the hand still pushing against the sliced organs. A grotesque empty shell.

The eyes still haunt me through the cloth. But there's no time to do anything more.

I pick up the Texts from the mantle and move quickly past the body to the window, trying to push the Hunter out of my thoughts. Below my feet the ornate rug, once rich and brilliant, is worn so deep I can

feel the wood's grain under my toes. Decades of standing in the same place day after day after day. Here, I am in the shadows. A human peering in from the streets would not see me. But I can see out.

I watch them. Completely alone, silent, still, there is nothing else to do.

My temple tower rears up against what's left of the holy district, tall and tired, leering over the market. I watch each day play out on its wide streets and small carts. Behind it, the expired grandeur of the aged towers rises, a rotted reminder of a lost past.

There was a time when Epoh was Terath's shining jewel. Its streets bustled with life at all hours. But the Second Realm War changed everything. The First Creatures tore through the realm like it was paper, their battles destroying men's cities, homes, the land itself. And the men, they took part. Some stood up and fought for their Gods. But others turned away from them in anger. Others' loyalty was easily bought with magic, jewels, or promises of safety after it all ended. Still others ran, cowered, and just waited for it to end.

I'd never, in all my years, seen such destruction.

This is when Zevach arrived at Epoh, with his flock trailing behind him, desperate to believe his promises of protection and hope. Then Zevach told his followers if they wanted the city, they must take it for themselves. Desperate and scared, they fought their way in and destroyed most of its people.

They should have known then what he would become, that this is the city's fate. I should have.

The sky turns from pitch black to a troubled gray. The rays of light touch over the battered city. Silencers' boots tap against the pavement. Another weary day in Epoh is here.