

The Night of the Swarm (Chathrand Voyage)

By Robert V. S. Redick



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Robert V. S. Redick brings his acclaimed fantasy series Chathrand Voyage to a triumphant close that merits comparison to the work of such masters as George R. R. Martin, Philip Pullman, and J.R.R. Tolkien himself. The evil sorcerer Arunis is dead, yet the danger has not ended. For as he fell, beheaded by the young warrior-woman Thasha Isiq, Arunis summoned the Swarm of Night, a demonic entity that feasts on death and grows like a plague. If the Swarm is not destroyed, the world of Alifros will become a vast graveyard. Now Thasha and her comrades—the tarboy Pazel Pathkendle and the mysterious wizard Ramachni—begin a quest that seems all but impossible. Yet there is hope: One person has the power to stand against the Swarm: the great mage Erithusmé. Long thought dead, Erithusmé lives, buried deep in Thasha's soul. But for the mage to live again, Thasha Isiq may have to die.



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Editorial Review

Review

"Robert Redick is an extraordinary talent."—Karen Miller, bestselling author of *The Innocent Mage*

"Robert V. S. Redick has developed into one of the most exciting young voices in fantasy today."—Fantasy Book Critic

"[Redick] pulls off epic fantasy with a great deal of style, giving his readers everything they want along with a big bag of surprises."—*Starburst Magazine*

"The Night of the Swarm is a nail-biting, non-stop action adventure that would thrill any fantasy novel reader!"—Tome Tender

"I raced through *The Night of the Swarm*. There is a ton of action, but also plenty of interaction between the many characters. There are new challenges as well as old problems to be dealt with. Not everything gets tidied up perfectly, which I feel is a strength, since that's how life is."—Books You Can Die in the Middle of

About the Author

Robert V. S. Redick, a former theater critic and international development researcher, was a finalist for the AWP/Thomas Dunne Novel Award for his unpublished first novel, Conquistadors.

Michael Page has been recording audiobooks since 1984 and has over two hundred audiobooks to his credit. He has won several AudioFile Earphones Awards, including for The Lies of Locke Lamora by Scott Lynch. A professional actor, Michael is currently a professor of theater at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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The Victors

11 Modobrin 941

240th day from Etherhorde

No sunrise in his life—and he has watched hundreds, being a tarboy—has ever made him sentimental, but now the tears flow fast and silent. He is standing in the river with the water to his knees. Voices from the clearing warn him not to take another step, but he cannot believe that anything will harm him now. The sun on his brown, bruised face declares him a survivor, one of the lucky ones, in fact so lucky it staggers the mind.

He can hear someone singing, haunted words about remembered mornings, fallen friends. He lifts a hand as though to touch the sun. Tears of gratitude, these. By rights they should be dead, all of them. Drowned in darkness, smothering darkness, the darkness of a tomb.

Footsteps in the shallows; then a hand touches his elbow. "That's far enough, mate," says a beloved voice.

Pazel Pathkendle gives a silent nod.

"Come on, will you? Ramachni has something to tell us. I don't think it can wait."

Pazel bends and splashes water on his face. Better not to show these tears. He is not ashamed; he could not care less about shame or valor or looking brave for Neeps Undrabust, as good a friend as he could ever hope for. But tears would make Neeps want to help, and Pazel the survivor is learning not to ask for help. Friends have just so much to give; when that is gone there's no hand on your elbow, no one left to pull you ashore.

He turned to Neeps and forced a smile. "You're a mess."

"Go to the Pits," said the smaller tarboy. "You didn't come through this any better. You look like a drowned raccoon."

"Wish I felt that good."

Neeps glanced down at Pazel's leg. "Credek, it's worse than ever, isn't it?"

"The cold water helps," said Pazel. But in fact his leg felt terrible. It wasn't the burn; that pain he could tolerate, or at least understand. But the incisions from the flame-troll's fangs had begun to throb, to itch, and the skin around them was an unhealthy green.

"Listen, mate, the fighting's over," said Neeps. "You show that leg to Ramachni. Not in an hour or two. Now."

"Who's that singing? Bolutu?"

Neeps sniffed; Pazel's dodge had not escaped him. "Bolutu and Lunja both," he said. "A praise-song to the daylight, they told us. I think the dlömu are all sun-worshippers, deep down."

"I'm joining them," said Pazel, his smile now sincere.

"Rin's truth!" said Neeps. "But right now I just wish I could thank the builders of the tower, whoever they were."

Pazel looked again at the massive ruin, and struggled as before to picture it intact. He could not do it; what he imagined was just too big. The absurdly gradual curve of the wall, the fitted stones large as carriages, the seven-hundred-foot fragment jutting into the sky: the tower would have dwarfed the greatest palaces of Arqual in the Northern world, along with everything he had yet seen in the South. And Neeps was right: it was the tower, as much as Ramachni's magic or Thasha's brilliance with a sword, that had saved their lives.

For they were still within the tomb—a living tomb, a tomb made of trees. Days ago, hunting the sorcerer Arunis, they had found themselves standing above it: a crater so vast it would have taken them days to walk around, if they had not known that Arunis waited somewhere in its depths. A crater that they at first mistook for an enormous, weed-covered lake. But it was no lake. What they had at first taken for the scummed-over surface was in fact a lid of leaves: the huge, flat, rubbery leaves of the Infernal Forest. Pazel had been reminded of lily pads blanketing a millpond, but these pads were fused, branch to branch, tree to tree, all the way to the crater's edge.

The entire forest lay sealed beneath this skin. Beneath four such skins, as they had found on descending: for there were older leaf-layers beneath the topmost, all supported by the straight, stony pillars of the trees. Like the decks of a ship, each layer was darker than that above. Below the fourth level their descent had continued for several hundred feet, until at last they reached the forest floor.

Not a drop of rain or beam of sunlight could ever touch that floor. It was a hell of darkness they had wandered in. Seven of their party had fallen in that hot, dripping maze, where giant fungi exhaled mindattacking spores, and bats smothered torches, and the trees themselves lowered tendrils, stealthy as pythons, strong enough to tear a man limb from limb.

The Infernal Forest. Did any place in Alifros better deserve its name?

But here in the forest's very heart was a refuge, an oasis of light. The ruins held the trees at bay, and the standing wall cut through the leaf-layers to open sky. Moonlight had been dazzling enough after so much blindness. The sun was pure, exquisite joy.

"Of course there's plenty of thanks to go around," said Neeps. "Old Fiffengurt, to start with, for giving you the blackjack. And Hercól for the fighting lessons."

"You fought like a tiger, mate," said Pazel.

"Rubbish, I didn't. I meant the lessons he gave Thasha, all those years. Did you see her, Pazel? The timing of it? The way she pivoted under Arunis, the way she swung?"

"I didn't see her kill him."

"It was beautiful," said Neeps. "That's an ugly thing to say, maybe. But Pitfire! It was like she was born for that moment."

"She wasn't, though, was she?"

Neeps shot him a dark look. "That's enough about that, for Rin's sake."

They walked in silence to the foot of the broken stairs where the others were clustered, listening to the dlömu sing. Thasha, who had made love to him for the first time just days ago—a lifetime ago—stood before him in rags. Her skin a portrait of all they'd passed through. Bites and gashes from the summoned creatures they'd fought here at the tower's foot. Scars where she'd torn off leeches as big around as his arm. Blisters from the touch of flame-trolls. And blood (dry, half dry, oozing, rust-red, black) mixed with every foul substance imaginable, smeared and splattered from her feet to her golden hair. She caught his eye. She was smiling, happy. You're beautiful, he thought, feeling a fool.

This was love, all right: wondrous, intoxicating. And at the same time harrowing, a torment more severe than any wound. For Pazel knew that Thasha, in a sense quite different from the others, should no longer be standing before him.

Fourteen left alive: just half of those who had set out from the city of Masalym and stormed into the heart of this deadly peninsula in a single furious week. Pazel looked at them, the victors, the sorcerer-slayers. It would have been hard to imagine a more crushed and beaten company. Split lips, bloodshot eyes. Ferocious grins bordering on the deranged. Most had lost their weapons; some had lost their shoes. Yet the victory was

real; the great enemy lay dead. And given what the fight had taken from them it was a wonder that madness only flickered in their smiles.

Hercól Stanapeth had almost literally been crushed, beneath an enormous stone hurled by Arunis. He was on his feet, though: crouching over a pile of tinder, spinning a stick between his palms in an effort to start a fire. Pazel's sister Neda was helping, scraping bark and twigs together with her bloodied hands. Beside them, the two black-skinned, silver-eyed dlömu were bringing their song to an end.

Another hour, another day, let our unworthy kind

Feel Thy returning light and say that yet within the mind

We guard the long-remembered joys, too sudden then for song

The fire of youth that time destroys: in Thee it blazes on.

"Well sung indeed," said Ramachni. "And fitting words for a day of healing."

"Is it to be such a day?" asked Bolutu.

"That is more than I can promise," said Ramachni, "but not more than I hope for."

Ramachni was a mink. Slender, coal-black, with very white fangs, and eyes that seemed to grow when they fixed on you. Like all of them he carried fresh wounds. A red welt crossed his chest like a sash, where the fur had been singed away.

It was a borrowed body: Ramachni was in fact a great mage from another world altogether, a world he declined to name. Arunis had been his mortal enemy, and yet it was Arunis who had clumsily opened the door between worlds that let Ramachni return, just hours ago, at the moment of their greatest need. He had taken bear-form during the fight, and matched Arunis spell for spell. But Arunis' power, though crude, was also infinite, for he had had the Nilstone to draw upon. In the end Ramachni had been reduced to shielding them from the other's attacks, and the shield had nearly broken. What was left of his strength? He had told them he would return more powerful than ever before, and so he clearly had. But he had not come to do battle with the Nilstone. Had this battle drained him, like the fight on the deck of the Chathrand? Would he have to leave them again?

"There," said Hercól, as a wisp of smoke rose from the grass.

"What good is a fire," said Lunja, the dlömic soldier, her face still turned to the sun, "unless we have something to cook on it?"

"Don't even mention food," said Neeps. "I'm so hungry I'm starting to fancy those mushrooms."

"We must eat nothing spawned in that forest," said the other dlömu, Mr. Bolutu, "yet I do need flame, Lunja, to sterilize our knives." He looked pointedly at Pazel's leg. Bolutu was a veterinarian: the only sort of doctor they had.

"We will have something to cook," said Hercól. "Cayer Vispek will see to that."

The sfvantskor warrior-priest nodded absently. Neda, his disciple sfvantskor, glanced at her master with furtive pride. "We eating goose," she said.

"There you go again," said the old Turach marine. He frowned at Neda, his wide mouth indignant. "You call that Arquali? 'We eating,' indeed. How do you expect us to understand you?"

"Enough, Corporal Mandric," said Bolutu. But the Turach paid no attention.

"Listen, girl: We will eat, someday. We ate, long ago. We would eat, if we had a blary morsel. Which one do you mean? In a civilized language you've got to specify."

"Yes," said Neda, "we eating goose."

She pointed at the river. On the far side, eight or ten plump gray birds were drifting in the shallows. Cayer Vispek's eyes narrowed, studying them. Neda glanced at Pazel. Switching to Mzithrini, she said, "My master can hit anything with a stone. I have seen him kill birds on the wing."

In the same tongue, Pazel said, "You saw him almost kill me with a stone, remember?"

She looked at him as only a sister could. "No," she said, "I'd forgotten all about it."

Neda spoke with bitter sarcasm. Years ago their mother had changed them both with a great, flawed spell: the only one she had ever cast, to Pazel's knowledge at least. It had nearly killed them, and had plagued them with side effects that persisted to this day. But it had also made Pazel a language savant, and given Neda a memory that appeared to have no bounds.

Pazel doubted that Neda could control her gift any better than he could his own. But he was certain she recalled that night when they were at last reunited, and the violence that had erupted minutes later.

"Did you expect my master to kill you?" she asked suddenly.

"I don't know," said Pazel. "Yes, I suppose."

"Because we're monsters?"

"Oh, Neda—"

"Heartless creatures with their barbaric language, barbaric ways. Your Arquali friends will tell you all about it."

"Next you'll be calling me Arquali again," said Pazel.

To his surprise, Neda did not rise to the bait. She looked furtively at Thasha, as though ashamed of herself. "I have said too much already," she said. "We of the Faith do not speak against our betters, and this morning I swore kinship with her."

"That doesn't make Thasha your better, does it?"

His question only made things worse. Neda flushed crimson. "I could not have struck that blow," she said.

Pazel's anger vanished; he found himself wishing he could take her hand. They had left home barely six years ago, but at times it felt like sixty. Neda had gone to the Mzithrin Empire and become a warrior- priest: she was Neda Pathkendle no longer; they called her Neda Ygraël, Neda Phoenix-Flame. But Pazel had been captured by men of Arqual, the other great empire of the North, and the Mzithrin's enemy. It was Arqual that had invaded their home country, broken up what remained of their family. Arqual that had made him a tarboy, the lowest kind of shipboard servant. Arqual that had sent the soldiers who dragged Neda, screaming, into a barn.

Becoming a tarboy had been merely the best of the awful choices before him. It was not clear whether Neda understood that choice, or could forgive it. But something had changed in the last few days. Her glances, even the sharpest ones, had a little less of the sfvantskor in them, and a little more the elder sister.

"When do we march, Hercól?" asked Neeps abruptly. "Tell me it won't be sooner than tomorrow."

"When's just one of the questions," added Big Skip Sunderling, the blacksmith's mate from the Chathrand. "I'm more worried about how. Some of us ain't fit to march."

"We will do as Ramachni commands," said Hercól. "You have followed me thus far, but make no mistake: he is our leader now."

"I would be a poor leader if I drove you on without rest," said Ramachni. "We need food as well, and Bolutu and I must do what we can for the wounded. And for all of us there remains one grim task before we depart."

"Do not speak of it just yet, pray," said a high, clear voice.

It was Ensyl, with Myett close behind her, scrambling down the broken staircase. At eight inches, neither ixchel woman stood as tall as a single step, but they descended with cat-like grace, copper skin bright in the sun, eyes of the same color gleaming like coals. Each carried a bulging sack, fashioned from bits of cloth, over her shoulder.

Users Review

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