

SHADEBRINGER

BOOK TWO

EXCLUSIVE
PREVIEW

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CHAPTER 1:

BAD HABITS

You can go a long way with a smile.

You can go a lot farther with a smile and a gun.

—AL CAPONE

“SIR, WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?” I halted midstride and a wave of warm grob soup crested my bowl and splattered on the floor. The short eccentric colonel folded his arms and glanced up at me—an unmistakable, rosy, twitching face. The same black box frame glasses that clung to his bulbous nose on Earth adorned it here, but the white coat and scrubs were gone. His used patchwork twill attire looked about as good on him as it did on Keats, Daedrina rest his soul, and I certainly hoped a set of glasses weren’t *his* transition gift.

“I-I-I,” he sputtered and pushed the glasses up the bridge of his nose. “I did a foolish thing and this is my punishment. Punishment. Punishment.” He shook his head and stepped toward me. “I remember you well.” The cramped and drafty stone hallway accentuated his awkward proximity to me, and I had to fight the urge to push past him back to my quarters.

“I remember you too, Lieutenant Colonel Steiner.” And I did. The ruddy spitfuck pulled the plug on Claude and kicked off this entire

shitshow, and somehow ended up here himself. The questions spun in my head, but goddammit, I wanted my grob. My belly rumbled as thick tendrils of steam carried rich and creamy notes of walnut and nutmeg across my face.

“Let’s talk after dinner,” said Steiner. He nodded and sniffed at my bowl of grob. “Good stuff, good stuff—is the mess hall down there? There? There?” I nodded. “Good, tasty, excellent—we can chat later. I’m in Owl Dormitory.”

“Lion,” I said and continued back to my room.

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I pushed open the heavy wooden door and stepped into a room gushing with heat and light, flames dancing upward from a brilliant hearth. I set the lukewarm bowl of grob on my dining table and sat. The chill that clung to my bones vanished and I sighed as my muscles relaxed and softened in the warmth. What guilt that nipped at me for lounging in such luxurious accommodations also fled my body with the cold.

“Did you bring enough for both of us?” I jolted in my chair and toppled the grob onto the table. Miriam cackled and squeezed the back of my neck. “Always been a jumpy one, have ya?” She kissed my cheek and ran a finger through the pool of grob then stuck it in her mouth. She sneered. “This grob isn’t ripe.” She licked the last few drops away and sighed. “Harvests are getting thin.”

“Jumpy? Never. It’s not like an empire of cultish sickos is out to off me or anything.” I pulled a dollop of grob from the table and tasted it. Indeed, the delicious bouquet that had set my mouth to watering was a ruse—the taste was painfully mediocre. Thin. Bitter. Wholly unsatisfying. I looked back at Miriam. “If we’re eating this, what are the rest of the poor bastards in Junedale eating?”

“Very similarly, I’d surmise,” said Miriam and she shrugged. “Octavius clamped down hard on hoarding and restructured the central distribution facilities.”

“We’re all on course to starve like damn Bolsheviks then.” My belly rumbled. The table grob seemed less repulsive with every passing minute.

Miriam cocked her head and shrugged but let it pass as we often let one another’s temporal anecdotes pass. “Li’s words had great effect on Octavius. He hasn’t proffered a sacrifice since their little . . . *confrontation*.”

A minor comfort. But a comfort that struck the softest chords of my conscience, as human sacrifice for the sake of a full belly was a bridge too far. Our leader had made a deal with *literal devils* to keep the war effort afloat, and had little to show for it. At least nothing since our victory at Kir Sol about . . . two months ago? Three cycles? I still don’t understand these fucking water clocks. Regardless, supplies and food dwindled, and reports of high casualties on recent grob harvests had diminished recruitment drives.

“We’ll have to make do with this slimy grob gruel for now,” she said.

“What do we eat when the gruel runs out?” I smiled but couldn’t hide the concern.

“Each other, most likely.” She grinned and nipped my cheek. A sharp lance of pain spread out from her teeth but disappeared when she kissed me.

“You fucking savage.” My heartbeat deepened and I kissed her nose.

She ruffled my hair and stood, a rosy red painted her cheeks. “Time to get back to the Academy. I’ve got some new necromancy to test and the corpses won’t remain fresh forever.”

“Just promise you won’t reanimate me if I’m killed.”

She laughed and shook her head. “Neither your brain nor your dick would function if I did that—you’d be totally useless to me.”

“Solid priorities,” I said and shared a nervous laugh with her.

“Let us review such priorities this evening when I’ve completed my work.” She winked and left. I turned my attention back to the mess on the table, which had since spread over the edge and onto the floor.

Might as well go see Steiner. I swept another dollop of the grob into my palm and swallowed it. *I’ll get a few rolls next time.*

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“Colonel Steiner?” I tapped his door three times. The thin wood rectangle rattled on its hinges and a small owl scorched into the center rattled with it. Thin rays of light peeped out from the keyhole and tattered baseboard, though I had no idea why a metallic lock was even built into the thing—I could have easily booted it down.

“Enter. Enter. Enter.” His robotic staccato speech penetrated the wood just as easily and I pushed the door open.

“Good evening, sir, how are you?” Pungent, stale wood like any European pub hit me followed by mold, body odor, and grain alcohol. A small fire crackled in a fireplace. Steiner sat at his diminutive wooden table with his back to the flames and pushed a spoon around in his bowl of grob. Obvious disappointment wracked his face. “The grob is kind of shitty as of late.”

He nodded. “I heard about our s-s-supply chain issues. Issues.”

“Yea, yea, we have some problems but that’s for another day. I want to know how you got here.”

“W-w-well.” He flipped a spoon into the soup and reclined in his chair. “One night before bed, I opened up a bottle of Turkey and drank. And drank...” His eyes drifted down and his voice softened. “And drank.”

Suicide? That didn’t seem like Steiner’s bag. I was also under the impression that suicides had automatically punched their first-class tickets to Hell with the act.

“It was quite the mistake. An accident. Thankfully, I woke up nearby and the Junedalians picked me up on the plains. Plains. Plains.” He interjected quickly, which saved me the awkward question. “I kind of like it here though. Though.”

I glanced about the threadbare stone room. A thin mattress with a gray pauper’s blanket strewn across it sat in a corner. Steiner’s few belongings were piled in the opposite corner. The Spartan living conditions made his words all the more depressing. I can hardly imagine what kind of life he led among the living. “Good, we always need good motivated doctors.” I forced the words out.

He raised his head and smiled. “Good?” A glimmer of happiness.

“Yea, your skills are well known around here. You were pretty good in Nam too.”

“A-a-at least here I know what I’m fighting for.” He stood from the table and raised a finger. “This calls for a celebration.” He turned and rifled through the mound of junk in the corner until a bottle clinked and sloshed in his grip.

“Get the fuck outta here.” I brushed a hand over my jaw and snorted.

“Time for some bird. Bird. Bird.” He set the bottle down and popped the cork out.

“Is that your gift? How is *that* supposed to ensure your salvation?” Not that I particularly cared at that point as my mouth watered. It had been ages since I had some good firewater.

“Hell if I know,” he said and handed me the prize. “But you d-d-don’t stare a gift turkey in the m-m-m-outh. Mouth. Mouth.” He beamed and his crimson complexion deepened.

“Doctor’s orders,” I said and tilted the bottle back.

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I awoke shivering on the floor. A menacing cold penetrated my spine and flanks and my head throbbed with every breath. I stood, a wave of nausea rolling up my throat, and braced against the rickety table. A few dim coals cast a red pall against the four walls of the small room, further sinking Steiner’s quarters into a depressing morass. The bottle of whiskey glimmered faintly in the light, most of its oaken brown nectar dragged to the very bottom of the bottle.

“This is all your fault.” I projected my gravelly voice at the bottle but Steiner’s buzz saw snoring drowned it out. I glanced down at the gray lump on the mattress. His bare feet stuck into the cool air from beneath the blanket—a rather pathetic thing unable even to cover the diminutive doctor.

Stick to the pilsner. Keats’s voice reminded me. *Or maybe* not. And how I wished it was real. Sadness stabbed into my heart but I shook

it off and left Steiner's room hoping Dionysus was kinder to him than he was to me.

Sparse, wall-mounted torches lit the stone corridor from Owl back to Lion. I stumbled along the passage, occasionally stopping to warm the nape of my neck beneath a torch, until I reached the T-intersection of the VIP quarters. To my left, Lion; to my right, Bear. Doors occasionally creaked open and shut but the silence otherwise indicated it was sleeping hours. A massive portrait of Ai loomed before me, his erudite gaze cast into the dark hall behind.

Why do these wise motherfuckers always have bushy eyebrows? Veritable hedges of gray hair sat across his brow, which served to accentuate a quizzical look. Probably not one for conversation either—the genius types rarely are.

Click. The metal lock gave way and, to my left, a custodial door creaked open in the shadows. A subtle unease set into my stomach and I narrowed my eyes, trying to see past the veil. “Who’s there?” I called into the dark. An inky figure struck away from the door and down the Lion corridor, footfalls barely audible. My muscles tightened. *Nobody’s mopping floors at this hour.* I inhaled to scream.

“Halt!” A guard’s voice echoed down the stone. “Wait, stop! What are you doing here?”

“FOR EK MARAINE!” A shrill and desperate cry of vengeance drowned the guard’s voice and a momentary flash of light as bright as my hearth illuminated every slab of stone. Thunder followed a ball of fire that surged down the hall and slammed me to the ground and singed my brows and flesh. Stones, metal brackets, and torch fragments mixed in a lethal tumult above me, sparking against the wall and shredding the portrait of Ai. A wave of excruciating pain bounded through my ears directly into my head as a roiling wave of smoke filled the hall. My eyes burned and I coughed. That old familiar stench of human flesh and cloth set aflame assailed my senses, and Vietnam returned for a moment.

“Check the Shadebringer!” An unfamiliar voice cried out.

“He must live!” shouted another.

And immediately I knew. *Oh, god, Miriam!* Adrenaline surged into every muscle and I stood and shambled down the hall to my room. *Please, not her.* Guards coalesced near my shattered room. Blood and fragments of meat painted the scorched rubble. The roof had been blown away in a jagged drapery of stone, splintered rafters, and twisted metal. Irgendwo's cool air descended on us and dozens of small fires flickered and danced in its grasp.

