



DARREN SHAN

SONS OF DESTINY

THE SAGA OF DARREN SHAN

BOOK 12



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

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# CHAPTER ONE

Sitting on the stage. Gazing around the theatre. Remembering the thrilling show I saw the first time I came. Comparing it to tonight's warped 'entertainment'. Feeling very small and lonely.

Vancha didn't lose his head, even when Steve played his trump card. He kept going, picked his way through the pit of stakes to the stage, then raced down the tunnel which Steve, Gannen and R.V. had fled by. It led to the streets at the rear of the theatre. No way of telling which way they'd gone. He returned, cursing with fury. When he saw Shancus, lying dead on the stage like a bird with a broken neck, he stopped and sank to his knees.

Evra was next across, following Vancha's route through the stakes, crying out Shancus's name, screaming for him not to die, even though he must have known it was too late, that his son was already dead. We should have held him back – he fell

and pierced himself several times, and could easily have perished – but we were frozen with shock and horror.

Fortunately Evra made it to the stage without injuring himself too severely. Once there, he slumped beside Shancus, desperately checked for signs of life, then howled with loss. Sobbing and moaning with grief, he cradled the dead boy's head in his lap, tears dripping on to his son's motionless face. The rest of us watched from a distance. We were all crying bitterly, even the normally steel-faced Alice Burgess.

In time, Harkat also climbed through the stakes. There was a long plank on the stage. He and Vancha extended it over the pit, so that the rest of us could join them. I don't think anybody really wanted to go up there. For a long moment none of us moved. Then Debbie, sobbing with deep, wracking gulps, stumbled to the plank and hauled herself up.

Alice crossed the pit next. I brought up the rear. I was shaking uncontrollably. I wanted to turn and run. Earlier, I thought I knew how I'd feel if our gamble backfired and Steve killed Shancus. But I'd known nothing. I never truly expected Steve to murder the snake-boy. I'd let R.V. march the boy into Steve's den, certain no harm would come to my honorary godson.

Now that Steve had made a fool of me (yet again) and slaughtered Shancus, all I wanted was to be dead. I couldn't feel pain if I was dead. No shame. No guilt. I wouldn't have to look Evra in the eye, knowing I was responsible for his son's needless, shocking death.

We'd forgotten about Darius. I hadn't killed him — how

could I kill my own nephew? Following Steve's triumphant revelation, the hatred and anger which had filled me like a fire, drained away from me in an instant. I released Darius, having lost my murderous interest in him, and just left him on the far side of the pit.

Evanna was standing near the boy, idly picking at one of the ropes which encircled her body — she preferred ropes to ordinary clothes. It was clear from the witch's stance that she wouldn't interfere if Darius made a break for freedom. It would have been the simplest thing in the world for him to escape. But he didn't. He stood, sentry-like, trembling, waiting for us to summon him.

Finally Alice stumbled over to me, wiping tears from her face. "We should take them back to the Cirque Du Freak," she said, nodding at Evra and Shancus.

"In a while," I agreed, dreading the moment I'd have to face Evra. And what about Merla, Shancus's mother? Would *I* have to break the terrible news to her?

"No — now," Alice said firmly. "Harkat and Debbie can take them. We need to straighten some things out before we leave." She nodded at Darius, tiny and vulnerable under the glare of the lights.

"I don't want to talk about this," I groaned.

"I know," she said. "But we must. The boy might know where Steve is staying. If he does, this is the time to strike. They won't expect—"

"How can you even think about such things?" I hissed angrily. "Shancus is dead! Don't you care?"

She slapped my face. I blinked, stunned. “You’re not a child, Darren, so don’t act like one,” she said coldly. “Of course I care. But we can’t bring him back, and we’ll achieve nothing by standing around, moping. We need to act. Only in swift revenge can we maybe find a small sliver of comfort.”

She was right. Self-pity was a waste. Revenge was essential. As hard as it was, I dug myself out of my misery and set about sending Shancus’s body home. Harkat didn’t want to leave with Evra and Debbie. He wanted to stay and chase Steve with us. But somebody had to help carry Shancus. He accepted his task reluctantly, but made me promise we wouldn’t face Steve without him. “I’ve come too far with you to ... miss out now. I want to be there when you ... cut the demon down.”

Debbie threw her arms around me before leaving. “How could he do it?” she cried. “Even a monster couldn’t ... wouldn’t...”

“Steve’s more than a monster,” I replied numbly. I wanted to return her embrace, but my arms wouldn’t work. Alice pried her away from me. She gave Debbie a handkerchief and whispered something to her. Debbie sniffed miserably, nodded, gave Alice a hug, then went to stand beside Evra.

I wanted to talk with Evra before he left, but I could think of nothing to say. If he’d confronted me, maybe I’d have responded, but he had eyes only for his lifeless son. Dead people often look like they’re sleeping. Shancus didn’t. He’d

been a vibrant, buzzing, active child. All that vitality was lost now. Nobody could have looked upon him and thought he was anything but dead.

I remained standing until Evra, Debbie and Harkat had departed, Harkat carrying Shancus's body tenderly in his thick, grey arms. Then I slid to the floor and sat there for ages, staring around in a daze, thinking about the past and my first visit here, using the theatre and my memories as a barrier between me and my grief.

Eventually Vancha and Alice approached. I don't know how long the pair had been talking together, but when they came to stand before me they'd wiped their faces clean of tears and looked ready for business.

"Will I talk to the boy or do you want to?" Vancha asked gruffly.

"I don't care," I sighed. Then, glancing at Darius, who still stood alone with Evanna in the vastness of the auditorium, I said, "I'll do it."

"Darius," Alice called. His head rose immediately. "Come here."

Darius went straight to the plank, climbed up and walked across. He had an excellent sense of balance. I found myself thinking that was probably a by-product of his vampaneze blood — Steve had pumped some of his own blood into his son, turning him into a half-vampaneze. Thinking that, I began to hate the boy again. My fingers twitched in anticipation of grabbing him by the throat and...

But then I recalled his face when he'd learnt he was my nephew – shock, terror, confusion, pain, remorse – and my hatred for the boy died away.

Darius walked directly up to us. If he was afraid – and he must have been – he masked it bravely. Stopping, he stared at Vancha, then at Alice, finally at me. Now that I studied him closely, I saw a certain family resemblance. Thinking about that, I frowned.

“You’re not the boy I saw before,” I said. Darius looked at me uncertainly. “I went to my old home when we first came to town,” I explained. “I watched from behind the fence. I saw Annie. She was bringing in laundry. Then you arrived and came out to help her. Except it wasn’t *you*. It was a chubby boy with fair hair.”

“Oggy Bas,” Darius said after a second’s thought. “My friend. I remember that day. He came home with me. I sent him out to help Mum while I was taking my shoes off. Oggy always does what I tell him.” Then, licking his lips nervously, he looked around at all of us again and said, “I didn’t know.” It wasn’t an apology, just a statement of fact. “Dad told me vampires were evil. He said you were the worst of the lot. Darren the cruel, Darren the mad, Darren the baby-killer.’ But he never mentioned your surname.”

Evanna had crossed the plank after Darius and was circling us, studying us as if we were chess pieces. I ignored her — there’d be time for the witch later.

“What did Steve tell you about the vampaneze?” I asked Darius.



“That they wanted to stop vampires killing humans. They broke away from the clan several hundred years ago and had battled to stop the slaughter of humans ever since. They drank only small amounts of blood when they fed, just enough to survive.”

“You believed him?” Vancha snorted.

“He was my dad,” Darius answered. “He was always kind to me. I never saw him like I saw him tonight. I’d no reason to doubt him.”

“But you doubt him now,” Alice noted wryly.

“Yes. He’s evil.” As soon as he said it, Darius burst into tears, his brave front collapsing. It can’t have been easy for a child to admit his father was evil. Even in the midst of my grief and fury, I felt pity for the boy.

“What about Annie?” I asked when Darius had recovered enough to speak again. “Did Steve feed her the same sort of lies?”

“She doesn’t know,” Darius said. “They haven’t spoken since before I was born. I never told her I was meeting him.”

I breathed a small sigh of relief. I’d had a sudden, terrifying flash of Annie as Steve’s consort, having grown up as bitter and twisted as him. It was good to know she wasn’t part of this dark insanity.

“Do you want to tell him the truth about vampires and vampaneze, or will I?” Vancha asked.

“First things first,” Alice interrupted. “Does he know where his father is?”

“No,” Darius said sadly. “I always met him here. This is

where he was based. If he has another hideout, I don't know about it."

"Damn!" Alice snarled.

"No ideas at all?" I asked. Darius thought for a moment, then shook his head. I glanced at Vancha. "Will you set him straight?"

"Sure." Vancha quickly filled Darius in on the truth. He told him that the vampaneze were the ones who killed when they drank, though he was careful to describe their ways in detail — they kept part of a person's spirit alive within themselves when they drained a human dry, so they didn't look upon it as murder. They were noble. They never lied. They weren't deliberately evil.

"Then your father came along," Vancha said, and explained about the Lord of the Vampaneze, the War of the Scars, Mr Tiny's prediction and our part in it.

"I don't understand," Darius said at the end, forehead creased. "If the vampaneze don't lie, how come Dad lied all the time? And he taught me how to use an arrow-gun, but you said they can't use such weapons."

"They're not supposed to," Vancha said. "I haven't seen or heard of any others breaking those rules. But their Lord's above such laws. They worship him so much — or fear what will happen if they disobey him — that they don't care what he does, as long as he leads them to victory over the vampires."

Darius thought about that in silence for a long time. He was only ten years old, but he had the expression and manner of someone much older.

“I wouldn’t have helped if I’d known,” he said in the end. “I grew up thinking vampires were evil, like in the movies. When Dad came to me a few years ago and said he was on a mission to stop them, I thought it was a great adventure. I thought he was a hero. I was proud to be his son. I’d have done anything for him. I *did*...”

He looked like he was about to cry again. But then his jaw firmed and he stared at me. “But how did *you* get involved in this?” he asked. “Mum told me you died. She said you broke your neck.”

“I faked my death,” I said, and gave him a very brief rundown of my early life as a vampire’s assistant, sacrificing everything I held dear to save Steve’s life.

“But why does he hate you if you saved him?” Darius shouted. “That’s crazy!”

“Steve sees things differently,” I shrugged. “He believes it was his destiny to become a vampire. He thinks I stole his rightful place. He’s determined to make me pay.”

Darius shook his head, confused. “I can’t understand that,” he said.

“You’re young,” I smiled sadly. “You’ve a lot to learn about people and how they operate.” I fell silent, thinking that those were some of the many things poor Shancus would never learn.

“So,” Darius said a while later, breaking the silence. “What happens now?”

“Go home,” I sighed. “Forget about this. Put it behind you.”

“But what about the vampaneze?” Darius cried. “Dad’s still out there. I want to help you find him.”

“Really?” I looked at him icily. “You want to help us kill him? You’d lead us to your own father and watch while we cut his rotten heart out?”

Darius shifted uneasily. “He’s evil,” he whispered.

“Yes,” I agreed. “But he’s still your father. You’re better off out of this.”

“And Mum?” Darius asked. “What do I tell her?”

“Nothing,” I said. “She thinks I’m dead. Let her go on thinking that. Say nothing of this. The world I live in isn’t a fit world for children — and as a child who’s lived in it, I should know! Take back your ordinary life. Try not to dwell on what’s happened. In time you might be able to dismiss all this as a horrible dream.” I placed my hands on his shoulders and smiled warmly. “Go home, Darius. Be good to Annie. Make her happy.”

Darius wasn’t pleased, but I could see him making up his mind to accept my advice. Then Vancha spoke. “It’s not that easy.”

“What?” I frowned.

“He’s in. He can’t opt out.”

“Of course he can!” I snapped.

Vancha shook his head stubbornly. “He was blooded. The vampaneze blood is thin in him, but it will thicken. He won’t age like normal children, and in a few decades the purge will strike and he’ll become a full-vampaneze.” Vancha sighed. “But his real problems will start long before then.”

“What do you mean?” I croaked, though I sensed what he was getting at.

“*Feeding*,” Vancha said. He turned his gaze on Darius. “You’ll need to drink blood to survive.”

Darius stiffened, then grinned shakily. “So I’ll drink like you guys,” he said. “A drop here, a drop there. I don’t mind. It’ll be kind of cool, in a way. Maybe I’ll drink from my teachers and—”

“No,” Vancha growled. “You can’t drink like us. In the beginning, vampaneze were the same as vampires, except in their customs. But they’ve changed. The centuries have altered them physically. Now a vampaneze *must* kill when he feeds. They’re driven to it. They have no choice or control. I was once a half-vampaneze, so I know what I’m speaking about.”

Vancha drew himself up straight and spoke sadly but firmly. “In a few months the hunger will grow within you. You won’t be able to resist. You’ll drink blood because you have to, and when you drink, because you’re a half-vampaneze — you’ll *kill!*”