

## —MOURNING WITH THE BONES OF THE DEAD

by Gerard Houarner

Albins looked small in his clothes, as if he'd shrunk in the time between diagnosis and his arrival at the hospice. Flesh had melted from his cheeks, revealing the bone beneath and giving him a stronger resemblance to his father, Bernhard, who paid the taxi as the family got out of the car. The boy looked wrong, too much like a miniature version of his grandfather, who still lived in the old country and supported himself with his little garden and as a guide for foreign tourists and movie location scouts. When he'd been healthy, Albins had looked more like his mother, Gizela, with a cherubic face and thick limbs the bullies at school had learned to respect. Albins looked wrong because he was closer to death than Bernhard's father had ever been.

"Come on, Daddy," Albins said, holding out a hand for his father to grab. Gizela already had the other one. "I don't want to be late for my appointment."

His son's cheerful voice, strong and loud against the car engine's purr, skewered Bernhard. He took a breath, snorted at the engine fumes, straightened his sagging shoulders, paid the driver and joined the rest of his family on the steps to the old townhouse on the block of desolate urban wilderness. Gizela led them quickly into the building, as she was already fading under the harsh summer sun. The loss of children always hit mothers harder, Bernhard thought as he shut the front door behind them. He could spend hours in the heat if he had to, though he was relieved the rumble of buses and trucks, the honking of horns and gunning of engines was behind him. Familiar scents greeted him in the tiny vestibule. His ears pricked to the faint sound of crunching. Candles burned along the banister of a dusty set of stairs ahead of them.

In the gloom, his son's skin still glowed unnaturally from his exposure to daylight; the boy could have stayed outdoors forever.

"Are both of you going to stay with me?" Albins asked as two attendants emerged from opposing open doorways in the hallway that led from the vestibule. They smelled like freshly turned earth.

"Yes, love," Gizela said, cupping her baby's head as the attendants stopped before them. Their teeth chattered, their blind eyes gazed past mother, father, son, through the steel door that had opened for the three after each had whispered the name they found in their mother's womb.

Albins giggled at them, but he wouldn't let go of his parents' hands.

"You have to go with them," Bernhard said, pulling his arm up. "They'll take care

of you. We'll see you in a little while."

"No!" Albins cried out, and his voice echoed up the stairwell, through doorways, in rooms with bricked-up windows. Dust rained down on them from the cracked ceiling. "You just want to leave me here and get away and never come back."

"What do you want?" Gizela asked, her voice quavering as she ran her fingers through his thin black hair

"Don't leave," Albins answered, with determination.

"We won't," said Bernhard. "There's a place for us to wait?" he asked the attendants.

"Upstairs," a woman's voice croaked in the stillness. Beyond the left hand doorway, a flame came to life in a pool of oil contained in the hollow of an upturned skull on the floor. An old woman in rags leaned into the flickering light, pointed upstairs, grinned toothlessly. "That's where we all end up." She cackled, showing gaps in her rows of teeth.

She reminded Bernhard of his mother, in the madness of her later years.

Albins moaned as if his illness was suddenly too much for him. But the healers had said there'd be no pain. At least, no physical discomfort. Bernhard recognized the sign, and understood. The change was upon the boy. He was reacting to the old woman, to the attendants. He was frightened.

"We'll be close by," Bernhard said, going down on one knee to talk directly to his son. "You can come to us, when you're ready. If you want to."

"You won't leave, like you did before?"

Bernhard opened his mouth to say something, closed it, feeling Gizela move, sensing her warning. Don't argue with the boy. Don't explain. Don't make excuses.

"No."

"You'll stay with Mom?"

"Yes."

"And you'll both be there if I need you?"

"Yes."

Reluctantly, Albins released his grip on Bernhard's hand, and his mother's. He went between the attendants, but they did not offer their bony, claw-like appendages and the boy did not take hold of them. When they turned and walked down the hall to the back of the building, Albins followed, a step behind. He never looked back.

"He's so brave," Gizela said.

*And I'm not?* he almost answered. But that was an old argument, from another time and place. He'd left that all behind, proved to himself and her and anyone and anything that cared that he was as strong and brave as any. He had the skulls to prove it, and the gratitude of those who'd needed the blood and meat and bones he'd provided. Of course, Gizela would say something like, too bad you couldn't do all of that for us, when it mattered.

Those were old arguments. Dead ones. He was back for Albins. They were here for Albins. Blood called its children out of the wilderness. And death.

"Yes," he said, at last. "He's a brave one."

They went up creaking stairs to the first floor, flickering candles giving way to strings of naked bulbs hung across the ceiling. A young man in a bloody surgical gown emerged from a doorway, nearly ran into them. His startled expression settled quickly