

WOLFGANG HOHLBEIN



THE TREE DEMON

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What is The Hexer from Salem?

The Hexer from Salem, a novel series in the vein of H.P. Lovecraft, was created and written almost entirely by Wolfgang Hohlbein. The epic began in 1984 in a pulp-fiction series: Ghost-Thrillers from Bastei Publishing and later as a stand-alone series under *The Hexer from Salem*, before it finally became available in paperback and collectors editions.

The story takes place primarily in nineteenth century London, following the chilling adventures of The Hexer, Robert Craven and, later on, his son as they encounter the Great Aged — godlike creatures hostile to humans — and their representatives on earth.

The Author

Wolfgang Hohlbein is a phenomenon: With more than 200 books selling over 40 million copies worldwide, he is one of Germany's most prolific fantasy writers. Hohlbein is well-known for his young adult books and above all his novel series, *The Hexer from Salem*.

Wolfgang Hohlbein



Episode 7: The Tree Demon

Translated by William Glucroft

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The Tree Demon

“Quiet!”

Howard put a finger to his lips and pressed himself closer to the wall, waiting with bated breath until the voices and steps drew closer and then faded. Only then did he judge it safe enough to emerge from the shadows and make his way to us carefully, crouching the entire way. He squatted between Rolf and me, the halting, nervous movement revealing his exhaustion more than anything. Wiping the back of his hand across his brow, he pointed behind him with his thumb.

“I think we can risk it,” he murmured. “It’s just a few blocks and it’s getting dark.”

He was speaking even faster and more clipped than normal, and his fatigue was clearly visible even in the dimming gray light of dusk. He moved rigidly and uncertainly, as if his arms were tied to strings held by an invisible puppeteer.

Tired myself, I looked to where he was pointing. The arched entry gate seemed to me like a foreboding cave entrance. The street and houses beyond were mere flickering specters revealing the occasional, fleeting light depending on how the wind blew, ripping open the veils of rain which were ceaselessly pouring down on the town. The harbor was still burning.

Howard bent forward, steadying himself with his left hand on the edge of one of the barrels we’d taken refuge behind he reached for Rolf’s shoulder with his right. Rolf groaned. His eyelids opened wider, but the eyes behind them were cloudy, their gaze empty and dull. His face was

shiny, and in the gray light the burn blisters dotting his face looked like pockmarks. His sweat smelled sour and foul.

Howard had found this abandoned courtyard six or seven hours earlier, and we'd been hiding here ever since like rats being chased by cats, hiding under refuse, shivering from cold and fear. We were being hunted more mercilessly than animals. Rolf had already lost consciousness more than once in this time. He came to every time, but the gap between him being at least partially lucid to feverish and frantic — he kicked and screamed so much we had to forcibly hold him down and silence him — was shrinking rapidly.

Seeing this stung me. I'd known this looming, brash and constantly irritated man for three months, but it was only in the last few hours that I realized how much I liked him. Meanwhile, I sat there freezing and shaking in terror, waiting until it was finally dark, watching helplessly as his condition worsened.

"He needs a doctor," I said. Howard looked up briefly, silently watching me for a moment before nodding his head in a way that made it clear he both agreed and that it just wasn't possible.

"I know," he said. "But he needs to hold out until we get to Bettyhill. If we're spotted by just one person here ..."

He said nothing further, nor did he have to. We weren't hiding out like common criminals in backyards and trash heaps for fun. An icy anger was rising within me as I thought back to the events of the last few days, which now felt like years.

We were just normal visitors when we first arrived in Durness — city folk. But the locals of this northern Scottish harbor town looked down on us, smiling indulgently with the arrogance common in the Scottish people. They despised us as outsiders and perhaps found us secretly amusing as long as we spent our money in their stores and pubs. Now they were calling for our heads.