

Companion to Owls by Chris Roberson

Chris Roberson's first novel, *There & Everywhere*, was published by Pyr last year spring. In the fall, he edited an original anthology, *Adventure: Vol 1* for his small-press, MonkeyBrain Books. His next two novels, *The Voyage of Night Shining White* (PS Publishing) and *Paragaea: A Planetary Romance* (Pyr), will be out sometime this year. In addition, his short-fiction sales include stories to *Live Without a Net*, *The Many Faces of Van Helsing*, *FutureShocks*, and *Electric Velocipede*. The author's new tale about a strange expedition across the roof of an immense cathedral is his second story for *Asimov's*. You can visit Chris online at www.chrisroberson.net.

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His name was Steeplejack North, the former because a steeple jack was his profession, the latter because the northernmost Steeple of the Cathedral was his responsibility. No one knew his christening name. It was unclear whether he knew it himself.

The Cathedral, a hulking edifice, covered thousands of square miles, dominating the western extremities of the continent. The North Steeple, rising up above the Basilica of the Lost Matriarch, towered some miles into the air, its highest point breaking into the upper reaches of the atmosphere, piercing the firmament itself. When Steeplejack North was called upon to repair and maintain the highest reaches, pressure suits and breathing apparatuses were the order of the day.

North lived on the Roof, in a shack on the leeward side of the Basilica's western cupola. From his portico he could see the gentle slope as the Cathedral's ribs angled down towards the cornices and gargoyles which demarked the boundary between Roof and the Northern Wall. In amongst the sculpted grotesqueries and outcroppings fluttered the gonfalons, ensigns, and bannerets of a hundred dozen sects and cults, but one would have to be a hagiologist to be able to identify what each represented. North's father had been an adherent of Saint Osip, patron of Western Roofmen, while as a prentice in the steeple-jack trade his master had been a follower of the Holy Serpentine. North, for his part, was something of a pantheist, and if he worshiped anything, it was the sky, and the Roof, and the towering majesty of the North Steeple.

Steeplejack North spent most of his year alone. Occasionally he would pass a chimney-sweep, or a carillonneur, or prentice to some other steeple jack on his journeyman tour of the Roof's far reaches, but the vast majority of his days were spent alone. Alone, that is, if one discounted the owls that roosted in the Steeple's lower reaches, and the revenants.

Just as the architecture of the Cathedral tended to draw a supplicant's eyes and attention from their worldly concerns--up past the buttresses and arches, up to the steeples and spires, and finally to the heavens above, where so many gods and demiurges were said to reside--the architecture likewise had a tendency to ensnare the attentions of the recently deceased, like glittering baubles catching the black eyes of magpies, and as the shades of the dead drifted in their slow courses towards their eventual rewards, some found themselves snagged on the culverts and gutters, entangled by the exotic design of masonry and metalwork, and were caught, trapped between one world and the next, unable to go forward or back. These unfortunates were known as revenants, and they were the bane of a Roofman's existence.

It was fortunate for the men of the Roof that, on a biennial basis, a psychopomp arrived to address the problem. The psychopomp, conductor of the souls of the departed, followed his route through all the districts and provinces of the Cathedral, the circuit taking him two full years. Once every eight seasons he appeared at the outskirts of North's region of the Roof, and rid the steeple jack of the noisome revenants.

A psychopomp was always a pietist of some stripe, a mystes inducted into the inner knowledge of some mystery faith or another. The psychopomp who had visited North Steeple in his courses, these long

years, was a follower of the Cult of the Nameless--an ill-defined deity, the prayers to which were so general as to serve in virtually all circumstances. What induced the psychopomp to adhere to what was regarded as a distasteful faith, North never knew, nor did he care to ask. He and the psychopomp, though they had seen each other once every other year for over a decade, had never progressed beyond the most perfunctory of pleasantries. North fed the psychopomp from his own larder, and housed him within his shack, as custom demanded, and all he asked in return was that the howling, stinking shades be flushed out and away. The North Steeple would be left in silence for a season or two, at least until the concentration of revenants, eidolons, and ghosts of the dead ensnared by the architecture grew too dense again, and then North would soldier through in bitter silence until the psychopomp again appeared.

For some of the shades, though, the prayers to the Nameless were insufficient. These persistent revenants were usually thought to be the shades of adherents to forgotten faiths, or those who worshiped discredited gods, or who in one way or another practiced singular rites. Whatever the reason, in those instances, a specialist was needed.

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It was just past the Winter Solstice, some weeks since the psychopomp last made his way to the North Steeple on his annual rounds. The psychopomp had taken only a fortnight to clear out the shades of the dead, ushering them on their way to whatever rewards awaited them, towards whatever sphere or plane or ancestral abode their faith promised them. After the psychopomp had gone, though, there were still revenants remaining. At least half a dozen, clinging tenaciously to this mortal sphere, refusing to relinquish their hold on the Steeple. One of the lingering revenants was the shade of a young woman. She had haunted this region of the Roof for nearly two years, and she disquieted Steeplejack North in ways he'd not before imagined.

North had caught a few glimpses of her, since the psychopomp departed. All of the other shades were noisome, foul creatures, rotting corpses hovering between solid and incorporeal states, trailing noxious odors, and howling their disquieting songs. The revenant of the young woman, though, seemed a shade of a different type. In her visitations, she appeared well formed and whole, and while the scent of her passing had the musty smell of mould and rot, it was nothing so offensive as that of the others. North had seen her most often in the upper reaches of the steeple, wrapped in veils that drifted around her like wispy cirrus clouds around the moon. She didn't howl like the others, but hummed some forgotten tune that North thought he might once have known, long before, when he was a babe in arms and bore another man's name.

In his small shack, on the leeward side of the western cupola, he sometimes dreamt about the young woman, and in his dreams her gauzy vestments were blown away by some ethereal wind, and she was left standing before him, unadorned and unblemished. Steeplejack North, who had never known the touch of a woman, or of a man for that matter, woke from these dreams with his undergarments cemented to his belly with seminal fluid, sticky like caulk or thin glue.

In his darker moments, his stomach full of quivers and his tongue thick in his mouth, North thought he wouldn't mind if the shade of the young woman were to tarry in his region, if only for the fleeting glimpses he was granted of her beauty. But the other half-dozen lingering revenants were the foulest that he'd yet encountered, shrieking fiends that came upon him while he dangled from a tether in the higher altitudes, or while he crept along a narrow ledge with trowel in hand, or was down on his hands and knees clearing a griffin's nest out of a storm drain. That he had so far escaped primarily unscathed from these encounters, and had not tumbled down to a messy death, thousands of feet below, could only be attributed to blind luck, or to the providence of some unknown god who took pity on the Lenten Roofman. But North could not count on luck, or the felicity of unknown gods, for much longer. He would need to call in a specialist.

North caught one of the homing owls that roosted near his shack, and affixed to its clawed foot a small canister containing his request for assistance. Then he fed the bird a special strain of millet, bred by the Sostren of the Vegetative Cloisters to compel flight to centralized message depots before returning home, and set the owl free in the mouth of an air-vent near the cupola's base.

A month later, while North was polishing a spar on the eastern face of the Steeple, the necromancer arrived.

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North welcomed the necromancer into his home, as he was accustomed to receiving the psychopomp. The necromancer was from downbelow, a native of Middle Floors, and had never before been up on the Roof. While North prepared a simple meal for them both, and endeavored to exchange what pleasantries seemed appropriate, the necromancer continuously glanced through the open door at the Roof beyond, blanching. He complained of the thin air and chill, when North inquired after his health, and retired to a cot in the corner of the shack as soon as the meal was concluded. North could not imagine why anyone would be disquieted by the peaceful open spaces of the Roof, especially one accustomed to the cramped, confined Middle Floors.

North had once traveled down below the rafters as far as the Middle Floors, when he was invested as a master steeple jack by the Castellan, but he hadn't felt at ease until he was back up on the Roof, with only the open sky above his head. He'd felt confined and claustrophobic below the rafters, even when he'd passed through chambers large enough to support their own micro-climates--he'd weathered a brutal storm in an immense gallery filled with statues, ikons, and votives, finding what shelter he could beneath a pew, passing the time in dismal conversation with a palmer on a pilgrimage from the far distant Basement, whose manner was inscrutable and strange.

Come the morning, the necromancer was ready to begin his journey up the Steeple, to exorcise the remaining revenants. North, eager to return to his regular rounds, was dismayed when the necromancer demanded that North accompany him on his ascent. The necromancer, unaccustomed as he was to these climes and altitudes, insisted that he would be unable to make the journey unaccompanied, and that if North did not agree to be his guide, he would return to downbelow immediately, leaving North and his lingering revenants to go hang.

North, seeing little choice, outfitted himself for the expedition.

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Their journey around the circumference of the Steeple took several days, slowing winding their way from the base to a point some thousands of feet above the Roof. Luckily for them, most revenants shied from the highest reaches, and so pressure suits and breathing apparatuses were not needed. Even so, the necromancer frequently complained about the thin air, and insisted that North carry along a store of bottled air for his frequent consumption.

The first night out, as they ate their simple meal, their backs to the soothing stones of a chimney, warmed by smoke carried up from hundreds of feet below, they caught sight of ercinee birds, whose feathers glow with a brilliant bioluminescence and whose cry is unsettlingly like that of human children. The necromancer drew strange symbols in the air in front of him, abjuring foul spirits, while North laughed behind a gloved hand. Like all Roofmen, North knew that it was an auspicious sign to catch sight of ercinee at the beginning of a journey; it meant that both weather and fortune would favor the traveler. To see an ercinee on the return trip, however, meant that bad news awaited the traveler back at home.

The next morning, working their way around the wide circumference of the Steeple, the necromancer startled a harpy in her nest, and nearly toppled from the path in fright of her immense raptor's body and

eerie woman's head. If North had not caught the back of his fuliginous robes, the necromancer would have fallen hundreds of feet to the Roof below. As it was, he and the necromancer could only weather the harpy's righteous caws of indignation, and edge their careful way around her territory. The necromancer offered North brusque thanks, and they continued on their way.

That afternoon, they passed a carillonneur rappelling down the side of the Steeple. He and North had encountered one another a time or two over the last decade, and were on friendly terms. The carillonneur had gone above to make repairs to a wheel high in the bell tower, and was on his way back down to his barrack, just a few miles to the south of North's own shack. The carillonneur, the necromancer, and North shared a meal together, in the shade of a buttress. The two Roofmen swapped stories and anecdotes of acquaintances they had in common, as men of the Roof always do on meeting--this being the only way that news travels in these high places--while the necromancer kept silent, sitting some distance away. When they had finished eating, the carillonneur refastened his harness to his line, and, with a wave and a brief word, dropped over the side of the ledge and out of sight. North and the necromancer continued on their way.

That night, the skies clear and the moon a sliver overhead, they could see the lights of a minaret atop the Chancel, far on the eastern extremity of the Cathedral. North had never met an Eastern Roofman, but he'd heard stories of their savagery, and of their strange customs and beliefs. In the East, it was said, it was forbidden for a Roofman to grow hair upon his face or head, and the flesh of the owl was taboo. They shared their women in common, the stories held, and no man knew who his father might be. Thinking to fill the silence with pleasant talk, North asked the necromancer if he knew these tales, and if he gave them any credit. The necromancer, however, knew nothing of the customs and traditions of the Roofman who dwelt directly above him all his life--North himself was as strange a creature as the Eastern Roofmen were to North--and so the conversation withered, and they passed the rest of the night in silence.

On the third day of their journey, they reached the territory favored by the first of the lingering revenants. The necromancer began his dread work.

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On the sixth day, they came upon a nest of yllerion birds, a mother and a clutch of eggs. While the necromancer did his unsettling rites--exorcising a revenant that stank of rotting flesh and offal, and which howled like a man on fire--North crept near the nest of the yllerion, and managed to prize away two eggs, narrowly escaping losing a finger to the wicked beak of the bird.

That night, for their evening meal, North prepared the eggs while the necromancer tested the air using a powder he'd fashioned in retort and alembic. By the time the eggs were fit for consumption, the necromancer had determined that only a single lingering revenant remained. Another day, and their work would be done.

They'd not yet encountered the young woman's shade, which haunted North's dreams. This last, he knew, would be hers. North slept fitfully that night, on the narrow shelf, the towering Steeple to one side and the open maw of empty air on the other.

The next morning, they turned a curve in the path spiraling up the Steeple, and caught sight of an enormous serpent, drowsing in the shade of an overhanging bartizan. North had never seen the like, but the necromancer identified it as a lindworm. It was a massive thing, larger than any creature North had ever seen, larger even than the roc he'd once sighted alighting on the West Steeple. The lindworm lay coiled around an outcropping of spars and spires, hundreds of feet in length, its scaly skin an unsettling milky white shade, a crest of red rising on its narrow, diamond-shaped head. Its eyelids were closed, and even from a distance of some yards, North could see the steady rise and fall of its long ribcage as the

serpent drew steady breath.

North grabbed the necromancer by the back of his dark robe, and dragged him to safety beyond the curve of the Steeple. They would need to find another route to the next level, perhaps by entering the body of the Steeple itself through a service conduit, and ascending from within.

The necromancer, though, had other ideas. He had hit upon a plan. He outlined it, in brief, and it was the most North had ever heard him speak.

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The necromancer asked North whether he knew of the Draconce, or dragon-stone, and North allowed that he did. The Draconce, a white stone found within the skulls of still living dragons, was a prize rarer than rubies, more valuable than chalcedony, beryl, or chrysoprase. The Draconce was said to resonate with the thoughts of the serpent, and if removed before the beast's mind had gone dim, it retained the elemental power of those deep, ancient thoughts. Dragon-stones were prized not only for their beauty--which was considerable--but also for more arcane and occult properties of their nature, proving useful in augury, divination, and summonings.

If North and the necromancer were to subdue the lindworm and retrieve the Draconce from its still-living mind, the necromancer held, they could sell it to a thaumaturge for a pocket full of specie. They would be wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice for the balance of their days.

As North mulled this over in his thoughts, considering the risks and benefits, the necromancer's ambition outpaced his words. Suppose, the necromancer suggested, the pair of them were to keep the Draconce for themselves? The autarchs of the eastern continent, he had heard it said, wear Draconces as jewelry, which both mark their immense wealth, but also safeguard their position and power, through some agency. If two such humble men as the necromancer and North were to come into possession of such a precious jewel, just think how their positions in life might change. Just think, the necromancer said, of the heights they might reach.

North looked up at the spires of the North Steeple, disappearing into the thin reaches of the high atmosphere overhead. He knew of no greater heights.

North was for following a different route to the upper reaches or, better yet, ending their expedition there and then, returning to the roof and leaving the single remaining revenant for some other time--the Roofman did not mention his unsettling affection for the shade of the young woman. The necromancer was adamant, though, and inveigled North with his honeyed words. He promised wealth, and position, and power. In the end, North agreed to the necromancer's scheme, if only to stop the barrage of entreaties. This course, at least, would keep the young woman's shade safe, for the time being.

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Once the necromancer had convinced North of the need to retrieve the Draconce, it fell to the Roofman to contrive a way to accomplish this end. North considered their options, and devised a suitable plan.

They would capture one of the yllerion birds whose nest they'd passed, tether it, and use it as bait to lure the lindworm out from under the bartizan. Once the serpent was in the open air, they could use North's implements of work to bash the lindworm's skull in, and then retrieve the Draconce from its still-living mind before its last thought had fled.

They captured the yllerion, though the necromancer was little help in the task, leaving the steeple jack to brave the mother-bird's beak and claws--North's face and arms were covered with scratches and beak-marks before they were through. They lashed its vicious beak closed, and then tethered its feet to a long length of rappelling cable. Then they ascended the innards of the steeple for the distance of a half a

league, making their slow and steady way up through the scaffolding and spiraling stairwells that made up the skeleton of the spire. They emerged in the thin air--they could still breathe, but were high enough that their lungs worked double to keep their blood fueled with oxygen--where the wind was so cold that their fingers cramped into gnarled claws at their sides, even within their heavy down-lined leather gloves. They then descended the Steeple until they reached the bartizan beneath which the lindworm slumbered.

The necromancer loosened the bindings around the yllerion's beak, and then dangled the bird over the promontory of the bartizan. The yllerion, making up in its tempestuous calls and squawks the time lost in silence, drew the attention of the lindworm, which slowly began to uncoil from its shaded sanctuary, its diamond-shaped head gradually snaking out into the bright sunlight, angling towards the bird. The yllerion's black eyes seemed to reflect the death it saw coming for it, and it redoubled its squawking and flapping. The lindworm lunged forward, catching the bird in its powerful jaws, and just as its diamond head had cleared the overhanging bartizan, North stabbed downwards with a metal stave as tall as himself, piercing the lindworm's body just behind the head, impaling it. The lindworm thrashed like a fish on a hook, but North kept his hold on the stave, his teeth gritted. Just when North felt he could hold out no longer, the lindworm thrashed once with a final shudder, and then went still.

The necromancer and Steeplejack North descended carefully to the level where they had lowered the body of the lindworm. The necromancer, red-faced and sputtering, accused North of killing the lindworm, of ruining the dragon-stone within its mind and losing them a fortune in the balance. North cautioned the necromancer to bide awhile, and laid a gloved hand on the thick, scaly hide of the great serpent. It still rose and fell, slowly. There was life within, but it was faint. The beast was paralyzed and stunned, bleeding out its life blood, but it was not dead. Not yet.

The necromancer was no help--again--in the next stage. North used a heavy spanner to crack the thick skull of the beast, then applied clippers and a pruning hook to cut away the epidermis and the thick, grey matter of the lindworm's still-living brain. North didn't know what thoughts might still be coursing through the serpent's mind that his knife was interrupting. He preferred not to know. Finally, the innards of the lindworm's skull steaming in the chill air, he plunged his hands within, and pulled out a white, translucent gem the size of a child's fist.

North looked up, the Draconce in his hands, and found the necromancer aiming a silver-filigreed pistol at him. The necromancer, teeth bared and eyes widened, stared down the barrel of the firearm at the Roofman, crazed with greed.

The necromancer told North to hand over the Draconce, or he would shoot. North refused, and said that the necromancer would shoot him anyway, as soon as he handed over the dragon-stone. The only reason North was still standing was that if the necromancer shot now, North might tumble over the side of the Steeple and fall thousands of feet below, and the Draconce would be lost.

The necromancer would not discuss matters further. He thumbed back the hammer on the pistol, and told North that he was willing to take the chance, if need be. If North did not hand over the Draconce immediately, the necromancer would fire, and they would both be forced to deal with the consequences.

North tensed, unwilling to hand over his own leverage, unsure whether the necromancer was as desperate as he seemed. His thoughts raced, trying to find a way out of his predicament.

The necromancer seemed to tense, and his finger tightened on the pistol's trigger. Before the hammer fell, though, his eyes suddenly went wide, and he screamed like one of the revenants he'd exorcised over the previous days; an inhuman, primal howl. He staggered to one side, arms flailing before him, and fell over the side of the ledge, tumbling down to the Roof, hundreds and hundreds of feet below. He disappeared from view into a foggy haze, as clouds passed below.

North was still on his knees, the Draconce still in his gore-coated hands, and he could not imagine what had come over the necromancer. What had saved the Roofman, in the last instant--fortune, or the providence of unknown gods? Then his nostrils caught a musty scent of mould and rot, and he could hear on the thin wind a tune he thought he might have known, when he was very young, and bore another man's name. Wispy cirrus clouds, almost like veils, passed by the corner of his eye, and then he was left alone.

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North descended to the Roof, a slow journey of days, back to his shack on the leeward side of the western cupola. He cleaned and polished the Draconce, and set it up on the mantle over his stove. He watched it, in the flickering light of the guttering candles, and that night, he dreamt of the woman of the high steeple in her gauzy veils, and, for a brief time, at least, he wasn't alone. m

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